



Posted on Mon, Jun. 21, 2004

A BLOOD-STAINED REPORT CARD

VIOLENCE AND DEATH MAR LIFE OF PHILLY KIDS

IT'S REPORT CARD time again - not only for individual children in Philadelphia, but for the struggle to help kids be born healthy and grow up strong and safe.

In the past few weeks, separate annual reports from the national (Annie E. Casey Foundation), state (Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children) and local (Safe and Sound) levels tell us that Philly's kids continue to struggle, and that their lives are impacted terribly by poverty.

Most troubling, from the Safe and Sound report card, is the news that - while fewer kids are dying in infancy, or overall - 67 percent more kids from 7 to 17 were victims of homicide in 2003, the highest rate since 1997.

Guns and drugs are the suspects. About 90 percent of the homicides involve guns. While juvenile arrests for drug-related offenses are down slightly, arrests for major crime offenses are up, and drugs likely play a part in that.

The reports also showcased this fact: When we as a community dedicate effort, creativity and money to kids' problems, things get better.

One stellar example was reported by Safe and Sound, which is funded with city, corporate and nonprofit money. The number of lead poisoning cases in Philadelphia has been reduced by an amazing 78 percent since 1996. An across-the-board effort by government and the nonprofit sector has made the life-saving difference. In a relatively short period, Philadelphia has gone from having one of the worst lead poisoning problems in the nation to having one of the best records.

The reports also show that, as a community, we have begun to craft effective solutions for the problems of younger children, and are seeing the results: lower infant mortality rates, more first graders getting promoted, child abuse going down.

We haven't done enough for kids 14 and over - and we're seeing the results of that, too: one of four 9th graders drops out of high school, marijuana use is up, and the incidence of sexually-transmitted diseases is dangerously high.

The archvillain of this story is, of course, poverty. It haunts a vast majority of the city's children - 71 percent of public school students, for example, are eligible for reduced-price lunches.

Yet evidence shows that smart, creative efforts - backed up by a commitment of dollars - do make a difference.

© 2004 Philadelphia Daily News and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.philly.com>