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Kids in need an 'invisible' scourge

By Megan Diskin TRIBUNE REGIONAL STAFF

06/09/2004

One out of every three children in Lackawanna County lives in poverty, according to a report released today by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

"In our area, you don't see it, it's not visible," Michael Hanley, director of the United Neighborhood Centers said Tuesday. "But people in our line of work see it every day."

The nonprofit advocacy organization for children based in Harrisburg also suggests poverty is a more far-reaching problem -- stretching beyond the boundaries of cities.

"Today, too many children in rural, urban and even supposedly comfortable suburban areas of Pennsylvania have the odds stacked against them before they even enter school," PPC President and CEO Joan L. Benso said.

In Scranton, nearly half of all children are considered low-income -- at income levels of \$37,300 for a family of four, according to the report.

The PPC issues the report every two years -- based on data gathered from agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau as well as the state departments of Health, Education, and Public Welfare -- in an effort to identify the challenges facing Pennsylvania children and families.

More work is necessary to provide children with better access to health-care coverage, early childhood education, more high-quality basic education, family supports, after-school programs, and youth development, Ms. Benso said.

Both Mr. Hanley and Gary Drapek, director of the United Way of Lackawanna County, have noticed an increase in need over the last year.

Mr. Hanley said the number of families requesting aid from the United Way's food pantry has gone from 500 to 1,000 over the last two years.

Mr. Drapek said those labeled as poor don't always fit the profile. In fact, he said many are working families -- sometimes with both parents employed -- struggling to pay the mortgage.

"It's not that they're living under a bridge," Mr. Drapek said. "They just need a little help."

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When both parents work, Mr. Drapek said children require an educational focus -- especially when they are young -- such as that provided by the United Way's Success by 6 Program.



Mr. Drapek said the program, launched last October, aims to meet the educational needs of children up to age 6.



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