

Prove that kids indeed count

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This year's edition of Maine Kids Count was recently presented at the State House. The 15th annual report has a lot of data about children, their health, education and behavior, and particularly about the effects of state and federal policy on their lives. But along with the numbers there are many stories for which those data provide clues. One of those stories that doesn't make for pleasant reading is about children living in poverty. As of 2006, the latest information available, and well before the current economic slump, more than one in five of Maine's youngest children lived in poverty.

That was already the highest number in many years, and things have surely grown worse since then. As millions of Americans and thousands of Mainers lose their jobs, we know that poverty is increasing, and that it's now even harder for children to get a good start in life.

The message we want to deliver about this disturbing trend is simple: We know which programs help kids, and how we can provide some basic guarantees for them, whatever the circumstances their families find themselves in, often through no fault of their own. For the most part, children's programs aren't particularly expensive. Health insurance for children seems reasonable by comparison to what it costs for adults. Early childhood programs and child care stipends are quite a small proportion of the federal budget.

Yet it's also clear that we've neglected these programs and made them available to fewer and fewer children each year. The results show up in the Kids Count numbers, and they give us all reason for concern.

Amid the deepening economic crisis, we must think clearly about our priorities, both immediate and long-term. We reduced poverty in our country and our state when we decided we had to do something about it in the mid-1960s. The war on poverty worked, it just was discontinued and poverty began to rise again. When we implemented policies to defeat poverty we created a more just and a more prosperous society. The two are not in conflict. They have worked together before, and they can again.

In her remarks about Kids Count, Senate President Elizabeth Mitchell had this to say: "A decade from now I hope to look at the 2019 Kids Count report and see that we have reduced the poverty level to zero, I would like to see that our state's per-capita income has increased and that children from across the state have a greater opportunity to succeed."

Sen. Mitchell also said, "Times of great crisis present us with opportunity for great progress."

We agree. It is in such times that we plant the seeds of progress and hope that they will bear fruit in the years to come. Focusing on the basics of life — and for children that means good health, a secure place to live, good child care and early education programs — will repay our state and our nation many times over in the years ahead.

The Maine Children's Alliance is pleased that the recent stimulus bill devoted substantial resources to improving the lives of children and families in the form of increased funding for Head Start and child care, as well as tax credits that will make working families' dollars go further.

The federal budget proposal that Congress will soon consider provides additional help, and suggests that some of the initiatives included in the stimulus bill will become long-term parts of federal policy.

At the state level, temporary increases in funding for MaineCare will ensure that some damaging cuts in services do not take place, and will provide some stability in the lives of those adults who now face joblessness, and the children who depend on them.

This might not seem like the ideal moment to focus on reducing child poverty in Maine. Yet it is such a moment, because in a crisis we are much more aware of how dependent we are on each other, and how our children must depend on us.