Much of the data contained in the book is alarming, even though it doesn’t reflect the full, ongoing impact of the current recession. There are significant data here that really help to inform communities, organizations and state leaders who make policy decisions.”

—Sue Swisher, Quad-Cities Child Abuse Council

“We know these are tough economic times and we know that they aren’t going to get better. There are generations of children standing behind us, depending on us to come together individually and collectively and share ideas and resources and impact the lives of others to help them be successful. It’s not a matter of can we do it—it’s a matter of will we do it.”

—Theresa Saunders, East St. Louis school superintendent

“Child poverty is increasing and it will get worse in the years to come, even after the economy improves. We need to maintain strong public policy investments to help kids and families through the recession and beyond.”

—Craig Beintema, Stephenson County health administrator
Essentially what our report is about is the need for investment—investment in the future of children and families and investment in the future of the state itself,” Voices President Kathy Ryg told enthusiastic attendees at a press conference in Springfield on February 11. “There is no argument: it is effective for parents, communities and the state to help children when they are young to develop their social-emotional and cognitive skills. If we fail to help children during those critical years of their development, we will have to deal with the negative and far more costly consequences for years—perhaps for their lifetimes.”


Sharing stories and statistics about the pain felt by families in their communities, these child advocates sounded an alarm and called others to join them in speaking up for kids. “A sour economy is no time to bail on kids,” said Sue Swisher of the Quad-Cities Child Abuse Council, “When families are struggling, children are struggling.”

The Voices for Illinois Children report supports advocates’ call to action, documenting the impact of the Great Recession on children, families and communities. It details long-term trends in family social and economic well-being and dramatic changes in recent years. Numerous charts and graphs, as well as essays and anecdotes, highlight data in six areas: employment and earnings, income and poverty, economic security programs, housing, health, and education.

Even before the recession, there were disturbing trends for hard-pressed families, as over the past decade good-paying jobs were lost in Illinois and incomes flatlined—even falling in several counties. The data for the past two years show sharp, devastating increases in unemployment and foreclosures. The trends reported are unfortunately just the tip of the iceberg, since most available data do not yet reflect the full impact of the economic crisis on families or the results of 2009 state budget cuts on vital services.

Along with the fiscal crisis in the state budget, the economic downturn has put the brakes on Illinois’ progress in critical policy areas for children and pushed many children and families into poverty and many child-serving agencies to the brink of insolvency. Children are particularly vulnerable during a severe recession—and the effects may last for generations. It is estimated that by 2012, even as the economy and employment recover, one in five Illinois children will remain in poverty.

“A sense of urgency was conveyed by speakers at the 2010 Kids Count symposium held in Chicago on March 5. As Ryg commented, “Kids don’t have the luxury of starting over.”

Keynote speaker Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, talked of ways that activist citizens and other stakeholders can strengthen advocacy for children and families in tough fiscal times. He emphasized the need to change the nature of the policy dialogue and context: “We need a sufficiently powerful narrative to help people look beyond the present and think about what is best for our children and grandchildren. We have to have an adult conversation that moves toward a commonsense consensus and a decision-making process that is not prone to paralysis. And we have to be strong enough so that children, especially poor children, stop being voiceless victims.”

Members of a panel considered the question, “What Is Illinois Doing to Help Children and Families in a Time of Economic Crisis?”—or perhaps more realistically, what should state
government be doing and what can it do when facing a deficit of over $13 billion?

Rick Mattoon, senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, painted a grim picture, pointing out that Illinois has been piling up debt for some time and that the actual long-term debt, including mandated pension costs and other unfunded obligations, is $130 billion—$25,000 for every household in the state. He stressed that new revenue is needed but that it won’t be enough: “Even with $6 billion in new revenue, we will have to roll back spending to 2007 levels.” The situation requires getting back to basic questions, he said, “What do we expect government to do and who should do it? How do we pay for it?”

Rosanna Márquez, president and CEO of the Eleanor Foundation, spoke about the challenges faced by single mothers, 90 percent earning under $40,000 and 95 percent receiving no public benefits or services. Severely burdened by housing costs, they end up moving often, so that their children’s schooling and relationships are disrupted. Yet, Márquez pointed out, “Single moms will not allow themselves to be passive victims of this recession.” They are enrolling in community colleges and economic self-sufficiency programs in record numbers. Investing in the single mothers of one million Illinois children is sensible economic and social policy.

John Bouman, president of the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, spoke of solutions to the current fiscal crisis. He commented on the need for “honest and forthright leadership that gets the job done and a balanced approach that includes new revenue. Work supports, child care, health care, the state Earned Income Tax Credit, investments in education, student aid—these are all important accomplishments. But they are all built on a fragile foundation.”

Michelle Saddler, secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS), discussed the challenges of responding to increased need in a time of scarce resources. DHS is implementing new strategies to deal with a surge of applications for food stamps when budget cuts have decreased the number of caseworkers. The department’s broader efforts are being built on partnerships and data-driven program evaluation and improvement.

The 250 attendees in the room shared the panel’s sense of urgency and frustration, expressed by Bouman, “The enemy is the conventional political wisdom that solutions can’t be found in an election year. Our elected officials have to step up.”


Special thanks for the generous support of the Kids Count project to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and Bank of America.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Stay informed about the issues affecting children and families and our state’s future. Read our Budget and Tax Policy Initiative analyses of the fiscal crisis, the Governor’s proposed state budget and legislators’ response.
- Sign up for Voices e-alerts and conference calls to stay on top of the budget process.
- Contact your legislators and ask them to take the courageous steps needed now.
- Join or start a Voices Leadership Committee. VLC members are volunteers who work in their communities to support the Voices for Illinois Children’s mission of improving the lives of all children in our state.
- Watch the Voices web site for the dates of gubernatorial and legislative forums to be held in the summer and fall. Attend and ask question about the issues that matter to kids and families.
- Go to www.voices4kids.org to find out more.
"We’re in it for the kids.”

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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS
OF FOSTER PARENTS

"In it for the kids” is this year’s mes-
sage of the Foster Kids Are Our
Kids campaign. It features foster
parents, Norma and Jose, Treena,
and George and Norma—ordinary
people who provide extraordinary
parenting for children in need.

Norma and Jose have been foster parents for five years. “Our children came to
our home emotionally damaged and hurt. Today they are happy, and one of
their favorite activities is a family group hug.” Treena, a single mother of a
biological daughter and five foster children, says, “I want to be the vehicle for
change in the lives of biological parents and their children who are separated.”
George and Norma became foster parents after their two biological boys grew
up. “We believe that children learn by example, so hopefully we are providing
them with the tools they need to become good parents themselves someday.”

This is the fourth year of the Foster Kids Are Our Kids campaign. While the
campaign messages have changed each year, the goal remains the same: to
improve the general public’s perceptions surrounding foster care and provide
more support for children and families in foster care. Voices leads this cam-
paign together with 60 child welfare agencies across the state. “In it for the
kids” commercials can be seen on WGN-TV, on YouTube and at
www.fosterkidsareourkids.org.

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