



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

Embargoed until 12:01 a.m., EDT, September 25, 2013

Contact:
Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst
401.351.9400, ext. 11 / sgeller@rikidscount.org

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents:

Woonsocket Data in Your Backyard

More than one in three (35.8%) Woonsocket children live in poverty

Education outcomes showing slow but steady improvement

Restoring full-day kindergarten, increasing school breakfast participation, and addressing high rates of chronic absence could help improve education outcomes

Woonsocket, RI, (September 25, 2013) - Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst, Stephanie Geller, EdM, presented data from the *2013 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to an audience of community leaders and policy makers. The *Woonsocket Data in Your Backyard* presentation included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Woonsocket. After the presentation, audience members discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for children in Woonsocket. The presentation was brought to the community in partnership with Connecting for Children and Families and was held on **Wednesday, September 25th from 9:00am – 10:30am at Connecting for Children and Families at The Chaplin-Perez Center, 37 Center Street, Woonsocket, RI.**

Geller welcomed participants, saying “Today’s event highlights how community groups can come together and work to improve child outcomes in health, family economic well-being, safety, and education.”

Woonsocket has high rates of poverty and extreme poverty among children

Although childhood poverty exists in every Rhode Island community, it is particularly concentrated in the four core cities of Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket. In 2012, the federal poverty level was \$18,498 for a family of three and \$23,283 for a family of four. More than one in three (35.8% or 3,572) children in Woonsocket lives in poverty. Of these, 1,583 children live in extreme poverty (15.9% of all children in Woonsocket and 44.3% of poor children). A family is considered to be in extreme poverty if its income is less than half the poverty threshold (\$9,249 for a family of three). Children in poverty are more likely to have health problems, experience difficulty in school, become teen parents, earn less and be unemployed as adults.

Reading, Math Skills Showing Progress

- *Reading and Math Skills:* Early reading difficulties have an impact on academic achievement and future employment success. Students who do not read proficiently by fourth grade have a much more difficult time with literacy and language development than their peers. Between 2005 and 2012, the percentage of fourth grade students in Woonsocket public schools who were proficient in reading increased from 46% to 56%, however, progress has slowed since 2008. Eighth grade reading proficiency has seen even larger gains, increasing from 28% in 2005 to 56% in 2012.

- *Math Skills:* The ability to understand math is critical for performing many important daily activities of adulthood. Between 2005 and 2012, the percentage of fourth grade students in Woonsocket public schools who were proficient in math increased from 41% to 56%. Eleventh grade proficiency has also improved from 11% in 2005 to 21% in 2012, but still remains well below the state rate of 34%.

Strategies to Increase Education Outcomes

- *Programs Targeting Young Children:* Woonsocket has new resources to provide young children with a good start, including home visiting programs targeting the most vulnerable infants and their mothers, an increasing number of high-quality early childhood programs, and a new state Pre-K program operated by Woonsocket Head Start. However, Woonsocket could give more students a good start by restoring its full-day kindergarten program, which was reduced to just one classroom in the 2010-2011 school year due to budgetary cuts. New funds available from the state through the Full-Day Kindergarten Accessibility Act and from a recent state appropriation to Woonsocket Public Schools could help to restore this important program.
- *The School Breakfast Program:* Research shows that hunger and lack of regular access to sufficient food are linked to serious health, psychological, emotional and academic problems in children and can impede their healthy growth and development. The School Breakfast Program offers nutritious meals and can help support academic success and improved attendance, behavior, and health. Woonsocket offers the Universal School Breakfast Program, which provides free breakfasts to all students regardless of income. Offering breakfast in the classroom itself could help increase Woonsocket school breakfast participation rate from 35% of low-income students participating to a rate comparable to Central Falls (43%) and Providence (56%), where they already offer in-classroom breakfast.
- *Chronic Absence:* In Woonsocket, 25% of children in grades K-3 were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10% or more of the school year. This is the highest rate in the state. Children who are chronically absent in the early grades miss critical opportunities to learn basic skills and show lower levels of achievement in math, reading, and general knowledge.

“Schools can reduce chronic absence by monitoring attendance and notifying parents as soon as troubling patterns appear and by working with families and the community to address barriers to attendance related to health issues, parents’ work schedules, or transportation problems,” said Geller.

Highest Rate of Child Abuse and Neglect in the State

In 2012, there were 272 Woonsocket children who were victims of child abuse and neglect, a rate of 27.5 victims per 1,000 children ages birth to 18. The child abuse and neglect rate for Woonsocket was the highest in the state and almost double the state rate of 13.9 victims per 1,000 children.

Infant Outcomes Need Improvement

- *High Teen Birth Rate:* Babies born to teen mothers are at increased risk for low birthweight, prematurity, and death in infancy. Woonsocket’s teen birth rate for girls ages 15-19 is the second highest in the state, second only to Central Falls.
- *Low Birthweight:* An infant’s birthweight is a key indicator of newborn health, and low birthweight infants are at greater risk for physical and developmental problems than infants of normal weight. At 10.1%, the percentage of infants born low birthweight in Woonsocket is the highest in the state.
- *Other Infant Indicators:* Woonsocket’s rate of preterm births (12.5%) is second highest in the state, after Providence (13.0%); and Woonsocket’s infant mortality rate (7.1 deaths per 1,000 births) is higher than the rate for the state as a whole (6.5 deaths per 1,000 births).

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, closed the meeting saying, “This Data in Your Backyard event is another example of Woonsocket using the best available data and information to inform its policy decisions for children and families.”

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.