

# Children facing dire times, study shows

By Dennis Sadowski  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — When the economy tanks, as the country has experienced for the last 18 months, children bear some of the toughest burdens because of increased family stress and cuts in programs that help children thrive, according to an annual study of child well-being.

The Child and Youth Well-Being Index, compiled each year since 1975 by Kenneth Land, professor of sociology at Duke University, shows that the quality of life for children has dropped significantly since its peak in 2000 and is expected to decline further as long as the economy continues its tailspin.

How long the decline will continue is anyone's guess. Most economists and business analysts believe the economy will continue to falter through the end of the year before beginning a slow comeback in 2010.

That, Land told a recent Washington briefing for family advocates and public policy

analysts, does not bode well for children.

Land said that by the time the recession begins to turn around, his measurements indicate that children overall will have lost virtually all of the gains they had made since he first started tracking their well-being 34 years ago.

Land's latest study is based on statistics gathered through 2006, the last year for which data about the lives of young people is available. He said his projections for the recessionary years of 2008-10 are based on what has happened during past recessions and what has happened since the current recession began in December 2007.

To put Land's projection in perspective, a look at the index throughout its history is required.

In his first index, Land assigned a random value of 100 in seven categories involving 28 different social indicators, such as child mortality, child health, teen pregnancy, high school graduation rates, exposure to

illicit drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, youth unemployment, suicide rates, religious service attendance and violence against children, particularly peer violence.

The index has fluctuated as the economy has had its ups and downs. The index bottomed out in 1984 at 90, thanks in large part to the 1981-82 recession. It recovered through 1989, rising to 101, but again declined to just below 95 in 1994 after another recessionary period.

In 2000, the index peaked at 113 as the economy was booming. It fell to 108 by 2003 and stayed at that level through 2006 because of the war in Iraq and a steady, if not growing, economy.

With a recession in full force, Land expects the index to fall rapidly through 2010 and projects it to bottom out at 101, slightly better than when he first started studying the well-being of youth.

"This (index) alerts us to the potential for a variety of negative consequences for the current

year and next year in particular," Land said. "It's important that we as citizens, parents, residents of local communities and in particular political leaders be aware of these things ... so actions can be taken to ameliorate them at all levels of society."

Local Catholic Charities agencies are seeing what Land has said they should be seeing. From rising homelessness because of home foreclosures to worsening health as parents substitute cheaper, less healthy food for more expensive natural foods, children are bearing a heavier burden in what is turning out to be the deepest economic recession since the Great Depression.

"It certainly has a negative impact on children to have all that turmoil going on in the family," said Mercy Sister Mary Ann LoGiudice, director of Community Maternity Services for Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Albany, N.Y. "Just the taking on of all the stress that comes in those kinds of situations.

"Obviously it affects children if they lose their home and have to get into a shelter. It obviously disrupts their lives in lost friends, lost routines," she said in an interview with Catholic News Service.

Pat Ulmer, director of parish community services for Catholic Charities programs in Norwalk, Ohio, in the Toledo Diocese, said no one should be surprised by the difficulties children are facing because of the recession.

"Adults hopefully have developed some healthy coping habits, but our children haven't," she said. "So when they see a parent who is home all the time because they've had a job loss, maybe that parent is trying to

keep a stiff upper lip but stress is leaking out all over that family."

In the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, Okla., the stability of families is taking precedence. Nancy Largent, director of administration for the diocese's Catholic Charities operation, said demand for rent assistance is up and the waiting list for government-subsidized housing is long.

Largent told CNS her program is working with families to help them stay in their homes. On June 17 alone, Largent signed 100 checks to help people with rent or utility payments. The money came from a grant provided by a local foundation, but she knows the money won't last forever.

Answers to the problems facing children and their families are not easy. Still, they must become a priority and the Catholic Church must lead the way, said Robert Gorman, executive director of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodeaux, La.

"They say the way to get out of poverty is to reduce the high school dropout rate and increase literacy, get people jobs with health insurance and reduce single-parent families. Those are the areas we should be focusing on," Gorman said, noting that Louisiana ranks 49th in the country in child development.

"I would like to see the church across the country really focus on child poverty as an issue," Gorman added. "Of all the things, that's such a scandal, that in this country we rank so far behind other industrialized countries" in child poverty.

"It's an issue we can't fail to address if we are to have any fidelity to Catholic social teaching, the call of Scripture," he said.

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