

Utah Child Abuse Rising, Report Says

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Cases of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect continue to increase in Utah, according to an annual report that tracks the health and well-being of the state's children.

More than 9,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect during fiscal 2001, an increase of nearly 600 from fiscal 2000, according to the Measures of Child Well-Being, released Thursday by the advocacy group Utah Children as part of its Utah Kids Count project.

Those figures point to the need to fund the state's child welfare system so it can handle an increasing caseload, said Terry Haven, Kids Count coordinator for Utah Children.

"This is not the time to cut budgets dealing with children."

From 1999 to 2000, domestic violence cases in Utah district courts increased by 1,300, reaching 5,361. And while the number of Utah children living in poverty compares favorably with the rest of the nation, as of 1998, they numbered more than 92,000.

"That's enough to fill the Delta Center four and a half times," Haven said.

The report did point to some positives. In 1996, 30 percent of Utah's 6- to 8-year-olds had untreated tooth decay; by 2000, that had improved to 22 percent.

Haven said the drop could largely be credited to the Children's Health Insurance Program, which began during that time. But the program has run out of money, closed its enrollment and slashed dental benefits as lawmakers struggle to cut state budgets.

"Kids don't vote, they don't have phone trees, and they don't hire lobbyists," said Karen Crompton, executive director of Utah Children.

Also, the number of violent juvenile crime offenses in Utah dropped for the fifth straight year. And while the percentage of Utah mothers receiving prenatal care in the first trimester has been sliding since 1994, it improved marginally between 1999 and 2000.

Child advocates urged policymakers to study the data and use it to fuel policy decisions. "Life is a lot more complicated than statistics," Haven allowed. "We need to make sure children's needs are put first."

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