

The pockets of children living in poverty are getting deeper in Johnson County. They are the next generation—our grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

According to the “2006 Poverty Trends in Johnson County,” produced by United Community Services of Johnson County, one in 16 children in the county now lives in poverty. That’s up from one in 24 in 1990. In the first six years of the 21st century, the number of poor children in the county increased by 91 percent.

The report also reveals:

- The number of children receiving free or reduced-price school lunches is on the rise. One in seven students in Johnson County public schools received a free or reduced-cost lunch in the 2006–07 school year. That’s up 71 percent from 2001–02.
- Nearly three-fourths of poor children live with a single parent. The number of Johnson County families headed by single women increased 61 percent between 2000 and 2006.

Those trends are alarming, because poverty can affect all aspects of a child’s life, including health, nutrition, schooling, and housing.

To be sure, parents bear a heavy responsibility for ensuring the welfare of their children. Yet few people in Johnson County, or anywhere else, *choose* to be poor.

Overwhelming evidence shows that growing up in poverty—especially deep and sustained poverty—compromises children’s health, dims their educational prospects, increases their risk of future arrest and incarceration, lowers their options for success, and often leads to low wages as adults (a key factor that continues the poverty cycle for another generation).

It is unacceptable, in a county as affluent as ours, that more and more children are growing up below the poverty level. It is sad that anyone, at any age, should be made to live in poverty.

Johnson County has long been a great community of choice in which to live, work, and raise a family. Reducing the number of children living in poverty is one of the best long-term investments and commitments Johnson County can make. Ensuring that children grow up in a decent, affordable home with enough to eat, and in a safe setting, is the starting point that increases the odds of their success in school and later in life.

With a 2008 theme of “Protecting Our Children,” Johnson County, in partnership with the National Association of Counties, will celebrate National County Government Week April 6–12. The observance is important this year because it recognizes the fact that ensuring children’s well-being and keeping them safe is *everybody’s* business, and that one child living in harm’s way or in poverty is one child too many in Johnson County.

Breaking the expanding cycle of childhood poverty and protecting the next generation should be a *community* concern. Finding community solutions is in everyone’s best interest—our grandchildren and great-grandchildren first of all.

The late Mahatma Gandhi once noted, “The measure of a country’s greatness should be based on how well it cares for its most vulnerable populations.”

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