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County Unveils Results from Research on Local Children & Teens, Information on Suicide, Fitness, and Poverty

SAN JOSE, CALIF.—Today, the County of Santa Clara presented the findings of important research about local children and teens. The Santa Clara County Children's Report: "Key Indicators of Well-Being" 2005 report, was compiled from survey results of nearly 25,000 7th, 9th and 11th graders from public schools in Santa Clara County. The report examines the welfare of local children by measuring how they and their families are fairing within five quality of life domains: Physical Health, Social and Emotional Well-Being, Family Stability, School Success and Community Supports.

The purpose of the 2005 Children's Report is to heighten awareness of important children's issues and provide a record of the community needs and disparities for policymakers, funders, service providers and community residents so that this information is available for strategic planning, resource allocation, policy development, and coalition building.

"There are a number of alarming findings," said Supervisor Liz Kniss, Chair of the County of Santa Clara Board of Supervisors. "The Report gives us a good handle on where we need to focus our attention and our efforts."

Three major themes emerge from the 2005 Children's Report: Hispanic children are faring poorly; economic disparities exist that create vastly different standards of living for the "have" and "have-nots;" and obesity is a growing problem of local children and teens.

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“It should be of great concern to us all that this valley is marked by a deep divide that separates the ‘Haves and Have-nots,’” said Supervisor Blanca Alvarado, County of Santa Clara Board of Supervisors. “These children are the future of this valley that is known for its innovation and wealth.”

The findings revealed that thirty-eight thousand children---or 9% of all kids under the age of 18--- are living below the Federal Poverty Level, a number equivalent to the population of Campbell. In 2003, the Federal Poverty Level was defined as an income of \$18,400 for a family of four. Hispanic children represent one third of the area’s total youth population and they represent a staggering 55% of the children living in poverty in Santa Clara County.

“Government, schools, and agencies, like First Five of Santa Clara County, are the great equalizers and we need our community partners, including business that benefits from an educated, healthy and successful workforce, to join us in leveling the playing field for poor and at-risk children,” Alvarado continued.

In the fall of this year, First Five will be unveiling a number of initiatives to improve some of these conditions including increasing third grade reading proficiency and addressing the by-products of poverty in the county.

The last major theme of the Report is that an alarming number of Santa Clara County children are overweight, which mirrors state and national trends. In 2003, more than one in five children ages 5-19 in Santa Clara County was overweight.

“Overweight children are victims of large portion sizes, eating too much fast food, drinking too many high sugar drinks, not having access to healthy food, and not enough physical activity such as walking, biking, skating, or even common housework,” said Guadalupe Olivas, Ph.D., Director of the Santa Clara County Public Health Department.

As with the other health indicators, there are ethnic disparities. The highest percentage of overweight children in this age range was Caucasian and Hispanic children, where, in each case, about one in four is overweight. In fact, twice as many Caucasian and Hispanic children were overweight compared to Asian children.

One area reviewed was the Physical Fitness Standards set forth by the Department of Education. They measure how children perform at fitness standards aimed at measuring aerobic capacity, body composition, abdominal strength, trunk strength, upper body strength and overall flexibility. Nearly three fourths of Asian students achieved at least 5 of 6 fitness standards while not even half of Hispanic students achieved those same standards. This may be a direct consequence from Hispanics having the highest percentage of overweight children, while Asian are less likely to be overweight.

Other key findings in the report include Teenage Pregnancy, Student Performance, and Self-Inflicted Injury.

“There is good news and some bad news when it comes to teen pregnancy,” said Bill Green, Board Chair, Kids in Common. “The good news is that the rate of births to teenagers has steadily declined over the past five years – and the rate in Santa Clara County is consistently lower than the state and nation.”

At 26 births per 1000 teens, we are well below the Healthy People 2010 objective of 43 births to 1,000 teens.

Green continued, “The bad news is that among Hispanic teens the rate is 69.1 births per 1,000. This disparity is the same disparity we have seen across many indicators of child well-being.”

Teen pregnancy is linked to premature births and low birth weight and the Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy indicates that children born to teens are 50% more likely to repeat a grade and are less likely to complete high school.

The 2005 Children’s Report also examined the social and emotional well-being of children. The rate of self-inflicted injury is a key indicator.

Santa Clara County ranks 54th out of California’s 58 counties (with 58 being the worst) in the rate of adolescent self-inflicted injury (93 per 100,000). In 2004, 9.5% of 9th grade students reported having attempted suicide at least one time in the prior 12 months. Injury hospitalization rates for suicide attempts for youth ages 13-20 were higher in the county than in the state from 2000 to 2002.

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“The news we have all heard can be characterized as an early warning. It is shocking that the County has one of the highest rates of adolescent self-inflicted injury. We also are concerned that 38,000 of our youngsters live in households that fall below the Federal poverty level,” Kniss said.

“The task ahead of us is enormous, but it is one that can be accomplished. We will use this information in our policy decisions,” Kniss continued. “I am sounding a call to everyone in our community to get involved in creating viable alternatives and solutions to address these issues. There are many people in our county who have the time and the resources to begin to make a difference in the lives of our children.”

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