

Mid Shore State of the Child: 1999

Prepared for

Caroline County Human Service Council
Dorchester County Office Child & Family Services
Kent County Board for Children's and Family Services
Queen Anne's County Partnerships for Children
Talbot County Family Network

by

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Executive Summary

The Local Management Boards of Caroline County, Dorchester County, Kent County, Queen Anne's County and Talbot County commissioned this report to provide a background for planning how best to serve children and their families, to document aspects of past program implementation, and to provide a baseline for evaluating programs in the future. The five counties are collectively known as the "Mid Shore" and are homes to 4% of Maryland's population. All five counties are expected to grow through 2020, although the number of children and youth less than 20 years of age is projected to decrease slightly.

One focus of a Local Management Board is that babies start life healthy. Reduction in the percent of births less than 5.5 is a national goal, but neither Maryland nor four of the five Mid Shore counties has experienced this goal during the past decade. The one Mid Shore county in which the percent of low weight births declined was substantially higher than the other counties and the Maryland average until 1997. Lower birth rates to adolescent women and lower rates of infant deaths are also indicators of healthy babies, and these rates declined in four of the Mid Shore counties during the past decade. Another positive indicator is the increase in first-trimester prenatal care in all five counties.

Healthy children are the next focus. The death rates of children in all of the Mid Shore counties were about the same as the Maryland average in 1997. This followed a decade-long decline in four of the counties from child death rates that were almost double the average of the state. About 6-8 children per 1,000 required hospitalization for injuries in each of the Mid Shore counties, a rate at or above the state average. Many substances children use can harm their health and many are illegal for them. However, alcohol is widely consumed by children who frequently binge drink, and cigarette smoking is common. Almost as many students use marijuana as cigarettes, and a few use cocaine. In general, substance use increases with age after grade six. There are indications that substance use is starting earlier in children's lives, but also hints that maximum use may be occurring at slightly earlier ages. Medical care, when needed, improves the health of children, and one indicator of access to medical care is the percent of children enrolled in Medicaid. Medicaid enrollment for children has increased in the Mid Shore counties following the trend in Maryland as a whole, although substantial differences occur between the counties in the percent of enrollment. Sexually transmitted disease appears to have declined in the Mid Shore counties as they have in Maryland over all, but Chlamydia may have infected as many as 3% of older adolescent girls in 1998.

Preschool experiences may help children enter school ready to learn. Most formal child care occurs in homes licensed for 6-8 children, although this capacity varies greatly among the Mid Shore counties. There is also great variation in the capacity of licensed centers for school age children, and few licensed child care centers take infants.

School is an important part of children's lives. The past decade has seen general improvement in the percent of Mid Shore students scoring satisfactory on various tests, but not all the news is good. Reading at a satisfactory level appears to decline following fifth grade. Students are

absent from Mid Shore public schools about the same or less often than in Maryland as a whole, but the rate of absence has declined in only one county. Suspensions of students from school because of their behavior has been increasing for Maryland as a whole and in two of the Mid Shore counties. Even those counties where suspensions have not increased are still as frequent or more frequent than in Maryland as a whole.

Dropping out of high school seems to be an increasing problem for Caroline, Dorchester, Kent and Queen Anne's counties, and those who do graduate are less likely than Maryland students in general to meet the minimum course requirements for entering the University of Maryland System. Only Talbot County appears to be following the Maryland trend of lower dropout rates and is at the Maryland average for course completion. All five counties were above the Maryland average in 1990 in the percent of adults without a high school diploma.

Another focus is on violence to or by children and the indicators of child abuse in the Mid Shore are mixed. The indicated rates of abuse or neglect are higher in some counties than the state average, and lower in others. The rates of abuse or neglect have increased, stayed the same, or decreased depending upon the county. The indicator of domestic violence suggests that Mid Shore children are twice as likely as the average Maryland child to witness violence in the home. Child deaths due to accidents are one-and-a-half to three times as likely in the Mid Shore counties as in Maryland. The juvenile arrest rate for violent offenses increased over the decade in all five counties, and all but one were above the Maryland average by 1997. Arrests for nonviolent crimes also increased in four counties and were higher than the Maryland average by 1997.

Indicators of stable and economically independent families vary among the five counties. Families in Dorchester and Kent counties consistently experience more unemployment, have lower incomes, and have greater need for free or reduced price school lunches than the Maryland average. Queen Anne's County is generally at or better than the Maryland average. Caroline and Talbot counties vary in the comparison with the Maryland average depending upon the indicator. Four of the Mid Shore counties record less homelessness than the Maryland average, and all of them are less likely than the Maryland average to place children in foster homes. This does not necessarily mean stable families, however, as the same or a greater percent of children in the Mid Shore counties have orders for support from an absent parent than in Maryland.

Local Management Boards are charged with the responsibility of planning, coordinating and prioritizing services for their respective counties. The programs and data they choose to emphasize vary. Data are provided for one, some, or all five counties on pregnancy prevention services, health start services, family support services, migrant services, and park and recreational programs.