



The Connection between Poverty and Child Abuse

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According to South Carolina's Employment Security Commission, the state's jobless rate climbed to 11 percent in February, second-worst in the nation. It's a daunting statistic and one that is often remarked on by lawmakers who continue to battle budget shortfalls and shrinking revenues. However, a second number must be considered in any decision on state spending, one that is harder to quantify and often overlooked. It's the increase in child physical and sexual abuse that often accompanies poverty and economic hardship. Hope Haven of the Lowcountry, a Beaufort Child Advocacy Center, saw a 64 percent increase in cases as compared to last year, a startling change that many attribute to the worsening economy.

For many, the toll of an economic downturn is measured in foreclosed homes, soup kitchen meals, or the rising cost of unemployment benefits. These statistics are helpful in quantifying the overall condition of the state, but they fail to assess the wellbeing of more than one million of South Carolina's residents: young people under the age of 18. South Carolina lawmakers need to consider this population now more than ever because there is strong evidence to suggest a correlation between poverty and child abuse.

To be clear, the research does not suggest that poverty *causes* child abuse. Millions of Americans have lost their jobs and faced difficult circumstances without harming the ones they love. However, the effects of poverty often influence other risk factors, including depression, substance abuse, and domestic violence. These behavior patterns, in turn, predispose parents or guardians to violent behavior toward their children.

Still legally under the care of adults, children are absent from most recession debates in Columbia because they do not appear on unemployment rolls or credit default lists. Yet the ripple effect of these "grown-up" problems almost always reaches a young person, sometimes with disastrous effect. In addition to hunger, lack of medical treatment and inconsistent school attendance, children in economically disadvantaged homes are at an increased risk for physical and sexual abuse.

And today, poverty is on the rise. In Beaufort, Jasper, Colleton, Hampton and Allendale counties, where Hope Haven operates, it is estimated that more than 20 percent of all young people are living below the poverty line. As jobs evaporate and demand for social services increases, the circumstances in hard-hit counties and communities can become desperate.

Across the state, advocacy organizations like Hope Haven have felt the effects of the recent economic crisis in two ways: increased demand for services couple with reduced financial support from state and private sources. At a time when child abuse risk is increasing, non-profits are forced to seek additional volunteer help, scale back pay for staff and make do with less.

State lawmakers need to consider the true cost of social services that protect South Carolina's young people. While the upfront dollar amounts may be difficult to find in a shrinking budget, they are far smaller than the lifetime expense of an abused child that is left to suffer and therefore more likely to repeat the cycle of abuse and neglect. Prisons, homeless shelters and welfare offices in South Carolina are

often populated with abuse survivors who never received the care they needed. Emotionally and psychologically damaged from the trauma, their lives take a tragic course as a result.

Here at Hope Haven, we see the faces of those affected by the state's economic crisis every day. It's a difficult responsibility, but one that is absolutely essential to Beaufort and the surrounding area. Part of our work is to remind others about the statistic we often overlook – the record of abuse and neglect among young people. In order for South Carolina to experience a true recovery, we can't neglect our children at a time when they need us the most.

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