Poverty rate soars among S. Florida kids

By Donna Gehrke-White, Dana Williams and Cara Fitzpatrick, Staff writers

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The poverty rate for school-age children skyrocketed in South Florida from 2007 to 2010 with thousands of parents thrown out of work during the Great Recession.

In Broward and Palm Beach counties, about one in five children ages 5 to 17 live in poverty, the Census Bureau reported Tuesday. In Miami-Dade, nearly one in four children fall below the poverty level.

The huge increase in poverty among school-aged children places the three South Florida counties in the nation's top 20 percent of counties experiencing the steepest jump in child poverty, according to the Census Bureau data.

In the short term, an increase in the number of poor families means children struggle to keep up academically in school, experts say. If the economic hard times persist, some predict higher dropout rates.

"It's due to the collapse of the economy" in South Florida, said William B. Stronge, an economics professor emeritus at Florida Atlantic University and a senior fellow at the Economic Development Research Institute in West Palm Beach.

A family of one adult and two children is living in poverty if the household income is $17,568 or less; for a family of two adults and two children, it's an income of $22,113.

Since 2007, thousands of South Floridians have lost their jobs. Earlier this fall, unemployment rates stood at 9.5 percent in Broward, 11 percent in Palm Beach County and more than 12 percent in Miami-Dade, the lowest levels in about two years but well above those in 2007.

For those without jobs, unemployment benefits help a little, but max out at $275 a week or $14,300 a year, said Jorge Salazar-Carrillo, an economics professor who directs the Center of Economic Research at Florida International University.

Families living in poverty tend to move more often as parents lose jobs or homes, said Robert Runcie, superintendent of Broward Schools. That can disrupt children's studies, he said.

"You need to have common standards and institutional practices, otherwise you have a kid go from one school to the next, and it's different," he said.

Students living in poverty also tend to have "a lot more challenges" academically, Runcie said.
Studies have shown that children in wealthier homes, by age 3, have vocabularies five times larger than children in poor homes. The size of a child's vocabulary strongly relates to how well they understand what they read and how well they do in school overall.

Young students have a good chance to catch up, he said, but it gets tougher as they grow older.

The district needs to work with social service organizations and child-care providers to invest in early childhood education, he said.

Stronge, the economist, points out that, "Social services are already strained, trying to help people at the bottom."

At the same time, the public school system is struggling. Runcie said the recent budget cuts have left the schools with less money and fewer supplies.

Many parents – even if they are working – also are hurting and can't be expected to make up for the shortfall, the superintendent said.

If the bad times continue, South Florida's school dropout rate could increase because many kids may face pressure to bring home a paycheck, Stronge said.

"If you are in poverty you may not have a choice," he said.

That could mean "a less skilled workforce" as South Florida competes for jobs, Stronge said. "These things have consequences."

The Census Bureau estimates were compiled using data from administrative records, population counts, and American Community Survey estimates.

The data released Tuesday represents "the only current, single-year income and poverty estimates available for all sizes of counties and school districts," in the United States, according to the Census Bureau. Although the estimates are released annually, the bureau chose 2007 as a comparison year because it was before the recession. Search incomes across the U.S.

**Poverty rates among children ages 5-17**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2007</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broward</td>
<td>18.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palm Beach</td>
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<td>Miami-Dade</td>
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<td>Florida</td>
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*SOURCE: Census Bureau*