

LIFE study focuses on children's issues

Katherine Lynn, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 6:08 p.m. CDT June 21, 2016



(Photo: File photo)

Leaders issued a call of action Tuesday to focus on the community's children.

Community leaders, who met the previous day to get a sneak peek of data from the 2016 Fox Cities LIFE Study and select priorities, found statistics on youth suicide and bullying to be sobering.

"Clearly we can do better," said Curt Detjen, CEO of the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region. "We have a lot more work to do."

Proficiency levels for reading — 40 percent — and math — 50 percent — also stuck out to leaders. Shannon Full, president of the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce, linked the issue to the need for a skilled workforce.

Here are eight key points from the LIFE study. The data is compiled by an Ohio research firm, which uses multiple years of data on demographics, the economy, and the social and health well-being of community members.

- Only seven of 10 Fox Cities households can afford housing and transportation, according to an [index](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/economy/07/) (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/economy/07/>) that takes into account residential affordability. Speakers at a press conference on Tuesday also highlighted the working poor, who may not meet the threshold for the definition of poverty but nevertheless struggle to afford rent as housing costs increase and low-income housing remains a commodity in the Fox Cities. "We simply don't have enough low-income housing," said Tony Gonzalez, vice president for community development at United Way.
- [Violent crime grew](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/safety/06/) (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/safety/06/>) in the Fox Cities, even though it dropped nationally. This is partly due to an increase in aggravated assaults.
- The poverty rate for single mothers in the Fox Cities [is eight times higher](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/basic-needs/02/) (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/basic-needs/02/>) than the poverty rate for married couples with children, according to 2010-2014 data.
- High-schoolers are [binge-drinking less](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/health-wellness/07/) (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/health-wellness/07/>). It's still too high, Detjen said Tuesday.
- Twelve percent of high-schoolers [have attempted suicide](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/health-wellness/09/) (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/health-wellness/09/>). That's compared to 6 percent of high-schoolers statewide and 8 percent nationally according to the most recent data.
- [Drug arrests dropped](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/safety/08/) (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/safety/08/>) from 2012 to 2014. Most are for marijuana.
- Only [40 percent](http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/education-learning/05/) of Fox Cities students have reading proficiency (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/education-learning/05/>), and

slightly over 50 percent are proficient at math.

- More Fox Cities students are bullied (<http://www.foxcitieslifestudy.org/indicators/safety/01/>) than state and national averages: 27 percent of high schoolers face bullying in school, and 18 percent deal with it online. Here's another example of intersectionality — United Way CEO Peter Kelly said bullying often plays into the suicide among teens.

Poverty is a recurrent theme in the data cited on Tuesday.

"It should not be any surprise to any of us that community leaders consider poverty to be a very significant issue that requires continued action," Detjen said. "It trends though most of the themes that we talked about today."

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The study data is online for the first time this year, allowing it to be updated more frequently. Community leaders met Monday to go through hundreds of demographic, economic, social and health indicators about life in the Fox Cities, and to decide where to go from here.

The purpose of the study has always been to spark action, based on a deep understanding of where the community stands, Kelly said.

Until now, the study was done every five years, which seemed like too long between studies, United Way spokeswoman Nanci Micke said. The community changed faster than that. Previous LIFE studies highlighted gaps have led to projects like the Tri-County Dental Clinic, Catalpa, United Way's PATH program and the Community Early Learning Center.

Tuesday, Kelly called on those involved in the study debriefing, and the community as a whole, to take the data and run with it.

"Each of us, each one of us, each on of our organizations, needs to take ownership of this," Kelly said.

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