

Report says many of the South's children still poor

Special to Sentinel-Voice

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The percentage of Southern children living in poverty is about the same as it was in 1969, even though most states in the region have robust economies and budget surpluses, the Children's Defense Fund said Monday.

"Equally disturbing is the fact that the rest of the nation is catching up with the South," said Marian Wright Edelman, president of the defense fund, a Washington-based nonprofit child advocacy group.

In 1996, the West matched the South in the percentage of poor children — 22.9 percent — the first time another region equaled the South in child poverty, the group said in a report issued at the beginning of a two-day strategy

meeting.

The defense fund placed the poverty line at \$12,516 for a family of three and \$16,036 for a family of four.

The organization said that in 1996, 5.5 million children living in the 16-state South, including Washington, D.C., were poor and 2.6 million lived in extreme poverty, with incomes of about \$120 a week for a family of three.

In 1969, 22.3 percent of children in families in the South were poor. In 1996, 22.9 percent of all Southern children — including those in foster care, living on their own, or with a non-relative adult — were living in poverty.

The Midwest had the lowest percentage of impoverished children among the four regions, 11.5 percent, followed by the Northeast with

19.2 percent.

Since 1969, the South has seen a slight rise in the percentage of poor white children — 13 percent to 16 percent — and a decline in the percentage of poor black children from 49 percent to 40 percent.

Nationally, 20.5 percent of children, or almost 14.5 million, were classified as poor in 1996. That's up from 14 percent in 1969.

The defense fund and other child advocacy groups are gearing up for a new push for more federal and state help to reduce child poverty. They want a commitment from Congress for \$20 billion in the next five years for early childhood education, child care and other such programs.

"The majority of these children live in

working families, so ending welfare as we know it, which has been the political cry in this country, will not help them," Edelman said.

The children can be helped, she said, if their families can get decent jobs, health care and child care.

The defense fund found 84 of the 100 counties with the highest percentages of children in poverty are in the South. At the top of the list is Owsley County, Ky., where 65 percent of children lived below the federal poverty level in 1993, the latest year available for county figures.

Shannon County, S.D., was the only non-Southern county among the 10 worst counties, coming in at No. 7, with a child poverty rate of 58.7 percent.

Affirmative Action

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not planning to re-introduce the legislation that they pushed weakly last year.

Missouri state Senator Peter Kinder, R-Cape Girardeau, said that he did not even press for a hearing of his bill (SJR 3) because he "knew it wasn't going to go anywhere." He does not see similar legislation being enacted in the "foreseeable future."

Oklahoma state Rep. Bill Graves, R-Oklahoma City, and sponsor of HJR 1010, asserted that affirmative action is "probably pretty safe in Oklahoma."

In Michigan, Representatives Michelle McManus, R-Lake Leelanau, and David Jaye, R-Washington Township, collectively introduced three pieces of legislation in 1997, all of which were held in committee.

An aide to Representative McManus explained that they were encouraged to move last year because the Republicans controlled the House, but this year, with Democrats in control, they feel it "would be fruitless" to press further.

Affirmative action is probably secure in the Northeast as well. While representatives in New York and New Jersey are planning to re-introduce legislation in the next session, they are not expecting the bills to go forward.

When controversy heated up in New Jersey in 1997, sponsors of Assembly Bill 2533 lost some support when fellow Republican Kevin O'Toole of Cedar Grove backed into a "mend it, don't end it" position. O'Toole then proposed his own compromise bill, Assembly Bill 2748, which would give preference to the "economically disadvantaged." Even this more liberal bill was held in committee.

Battleground issues await affirmative action proponents in Ohio, Washington State, and the Carolinas, but recent events in Arizona and Georgia indicate defeat is not inevitable.

In North Carolina, Rep. Edwin Hardy, R-Beaufort, is ready to re-introduce his anti-

affirmative action referendum, HB 981, in 1999, if he gets re-elected in 1998. As a referendum, Hardy hopes that the legislature will let it through so "the people can decide." If the fate of affirmative action were left to public vote, Hardy thinks it would be repealed.

Despite his optimism, representative Howard Hunter, a Democrat from Conway and former chair of the state Legislative Black Caucus, called Hardy's bill "a dead deal," adding that affirmative action is "a battle we are going to have to fight, but it won't be that bill."

In South Carolina, the situation is more complex but no more hopeful for affirmative action detractors.

After a racially divisive debate, the South Carolina House voted 74-37 on Feb. 19 in favor of a bill that would force state government agencies to drop affirmative action programs, including admissions and scholarship programs at public colleges.

The bill is currently in the Senate Judiciary Committee, but few believe it will ever pass the majority-Democratic Senate. Rep. James McGee III, R-Florence, who replaced the bill's author Representative Hunter Limbaugh last November, says, "I can tell you right now it's going to be killed in the Senate."

With this knowledge, House Republicans have continued to push the issue, attempting unsuccessfully to attach an anti-affirmative action measure to the state budget on March 4.

"This time was different because the Black Caucus had an opportunity to tie the bill up," said Rep. Joe E. Brown, D-Richland County. "We [the Black Caucus] don't have enough power to pass something, but we do have enough to stop some things."

After the March 4 defeat, the chances look slim for opponents of affirmative action this year. "The only chance that this measure would pass the Senate would be if it had

Affirmative action opponents find themselves in the curious position of claiming that public opinion is on their side, and that the majority of Americans no longer want affirmative action, while their legislative and initiative efforts are thwarted due to lack of support or concern from voters, business and community leaders, and even fellow conservatives.

been tacked onto the budget bill," said Michael Sponhour, who has been covering the issue for *The State* newspaper in Columbia.

In Arizona, three anti-affirmative action bills were introduced in the 1997 session, two conventional bills and one referendum. Like his North Carolina counterpart, the sponsor of the referendum, Tom Horne, R-Phoenix, is certain that had his bill passed the legislature, the people of Arizona would have voted to repeal affirmative action.

In 1997 as a freshman representative, he backed away from the bill because he did not have support from either Republican Governor Fife Symington or other Republicans in the legislature. With Republican Governor Jane Hull now in office following the indictment and mid-term resignation of Symington,

Horne reintroduced his bill in 1998. Horne's measure was defeated 11 to 19 in the Arizona Senate on Feb. 25, with seven Republicans joining all 12 Democrats.

Anti-affirmative action bills were more successful in Colorado, with one passing the House before being postponed indefinitely. The first, HB 1299, sponsored by representative Vicki Agler, R-Littleton, was held by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Rep. Mark Paschall, R-Jefferson County, subsequently withdrew his bill, HB 1336, from Senate consideration because he knew he could not battle it through, and if he did, Gov. Romer would veto it.

In the 1999 session, however, Paschall plans to introduce a referendum, which would both bypass a governor's veto and not require a two-thirds majority. Agler, however, believes this statute will fail as well because of the lack of support in the senate.

Most recently, in Ohio, Representative Mike Wise, R-Broadview Heights, and state Sen. Gene Watts, R-Galloway, introduced two resolutions modeled after Proposition 209 which would place a Constitutional amendment repealing affirmative action on

the November 1998 ballot. These resolutions are unlikely to pass.

Mark Potts, a legislative aide in Watts' office, is "not overly optimistic." Watts' bill would need a two-thirds majority, and while there are 66 Republicans in a House of 99 representatives, at least two or three Republicans have already come out against the bill.

House Speaker, Jo Ann Davidson, R-Reynoldsberg, is quoted as saying, "I would be very surprised to see that resolution come out of committee." Republicans lack consensus.

The situation in Ohio and Arizona is representative: bills are stalling because there is not a Republican consensus. In every instance in 1997, anti-affirmative action legislation never made it out of committees, not only because Democratic members voted these bills down, but certain Republicans have as well. In North Carolina, for instance, Hardy's bill was held up in the

Judiciary Committee by a tie vote cast by a Republican.

Even if brought to a floor vote, these bills would need unanimous Republican support to pass, which they do not have, as evidenced by 1998 votes in the Arizona and Georgia legislatures. Eleven Republicans voted for a Democratic-sponsored substitute to defeat a Republican-led repeal of affirmative action programs in Georgia.

Those working to eradicate affirmative action in the states explain Republican legislators' reluctance to come out strongly behind such legislation as a matter of political expediency rather than a disavowal in principle.

According to Ann Kramer of the American Civil Rights Institute, a curiously named national anti-affirmative action organization based in Sacramento, Calif., "legislators do not have the courage to stand up for this issue."

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