



Mercer County, North Dakota, Close Up 2002

County Seat: Stanton - Planning Region: VII



Population: Active involvement by communities will help to ensure that families have access to the resources they need to safeguard every child's successful journey to adulthood.

- *Mercer County ranked 15th in state population with 8,644 people in 2000.*
- *The number of children ages 0 to 5 in Mercer County decreased 52% between 1990 and 2000.*
- *Population density in Mercer County was 8.3 persons per square mile in 2000 compared to the state average of 9.3 persons per square mile.*
- *The median age of people residing in Mercer County in 2000 was 40.1, compared to 36.2 years statewide.*

Family Composition: Families, regardless of their structure or where they live, need resources to ensure their children will thrive. The majority of North Dakota children are growing up in two-parent families (76%). However, North Dakota children headed by single parents increased 24% in the past 10 years. In addition, the proportion of North Dakota women with children ages 0 to 17 who are in the labor force was the 2nd highest in the nation (81%) in 2000. Nationally, 69% of mothers with children ages 0 to 17 were working.

- *According to the 2000 Census, 77% of Mercer County women with children ages 0 to 17 were in the labor force. This proportion is up from 65% in 1990.*
- *The proportion of children living in single-parent homes in Mercer County rose from 8.2% in 1990 to 11.9% in 2000.*

Economic Condition: There is no single factor that dramatically affects a child's life chances as much as poverty. The absence of community support networks, isolation from larger population centers, and lack of employment opportunities mean that many families face an uphill climb to achieve the economic security they deserve. Policies designed specifically for agricultural-based communities are needed to benefit the counties in greatest need. One of the biggest obstacles to income security is the lack of employment possibilities offering wages that can adequately support families with children.

- *In 2000, 8.7% of Mercer County children lived in near-poor families (between 100% and 149% of poverty) and 1% of children lived in extreme poverty (less than 50% of poverty).*
- *The median income of families with children under the age of 18 in Mercer County was \$55,707 in 2000, significantly higher than the state median of \$44,640.*
- *In Mercer County, 13% of children enrolled in school participated in the free/reduced-price school lunch program during the 2000-01 academic year, an increase from 11% in 1998-1999.*

Early Care and Education: Early education cannot be separated from early care received – it is all about the child's critical years of learning and development. Relationships formed with parents and other people influence the child's language, social skills, relationships with others, and self-perception. One of the more frustrating obstacles to employment for rural parents is the lack of high quality and affordable child care. Parents are being required to work, but there is no place to assure their child receives even minimal standards of care. When there is serious concern about the quality of care available to their children, parents experience stress, which may influence job retention and satisfaction and more importantly how they interact with their child/ren. The situation becomes more complicated for families when children have special needs and when child care is needed during nontraditional hours.

- *In 2000, children ages 0 to 13 totaled 1,717 in Mercer County.*
- *There were 13 licensed child care providers in Mercer County with the capacity to serve 217 children or 13% of the child population ages 0 to 13 in 2001.*

Child Health: In order to ensure the healthy growth and development of every North Dakota child, it is important to tailor health care resources to the unique needs of families with different economic circumstances. Access to health care professionals is a serious challenge for families with children living in most counties of North Dakota, but particularly for those living in rural areas.

- *The percentage of low-weight births to Mercer County mothers was 14.9% in 2000, compared to 6.5% statewide.*
- *The rate of participants ages 0 to 20 receiving both AFDC/TANF Grant and Medicaid in Mercer County was 2.4% in 2000, compared to 5.9% statewide.*

Education: A strong commitment to the educational needs of children reflects a community's commitment to its own future. North Dakota's educational investments continue to rise while enrollment continues to decline in rural areas. Many rural families with limited time and financial resources point to the need for easily accessible, supervised after-school programs to ensure their school-age children are involved in positive activities. Many parents living in rural areas struggle with the distance their children need to travel to attend school.

- *In Mercer County, 11.8% of students enrolled in public schools were enrolled in special education in 2000, compared to 12.5% statewide.*
- *There were 1,021 school age children ages 6 to 12 in Mercer County in 2000.*
- *In Mercer County, 60% of Head Start eligible children were enrolled in Head Start in 2001.*
- *There were five reported high school dropouts in Mercer County in academic year 2000-01 (0.7% of all high school students). Statewide, 2% of high school students dropped out.*
- *Average expenditures per pupil in Mercer County totaled \$4,484 in academic year 2000-01, compared to \$5,270 statewide.*

Children At Risk: Children living in families are considered "high risk" if a child has at least three of the following characteristics: 1) is impoverished; 2) lives with a single parent; 3) has no parent working full-time year-round; or 4) lives with a household head who is a high school dropout. Alcohol use among middle school and high school students has rural parents concerned about the need for after-school and recreation programs for youth in rural communities and mentoring support.

- *During 2000, there were 59 reported child abuse and neglect victims in Mercer County.*
- *Approximately 5% of Mercer County juveniles ages 10 to 17 were referred to Juvenile Court in 2000, compared to 7.7% statewide.*
- *Slightly more than 27% of all juvenile offenses in Mercer County were alcohol related in 2000, compared to 21% statewide.*

Unless otherwise noted, the above mentioned data can be found in the 2002 North Dakota KIDS COUNT! Fact Book, an annual publication providing a picture of issues affecting children in North Dakota, its regions, and its counties. Current and historical versions of the Fact Book are available online at the URL below.

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