

# The Newport Daily News

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NEWPORT

## Child abuse rate reaches high in state

By James J. Gillis, Staff writer

Newport has the highest rate of child abuse and child neglect victims in the state.

The city recorded child abuse and neglect cases at a rate of 32 children per 1,000 in 2011, according to the 18th annual Kids Count Factbook. That statistic is based on incidents reported to the state Department of Children, Youth and Families.

“This is a very disturbing piece of information, to say the least,” School Superintendent John H. Ambrogi said Tuesday. “It makes me wonder about the relationship between the economic situation and the numbers. You wonder if people take out their frustrations on their kids.”

Newport’s ranking is considerably higher than the state average for child abuse and child neglect, which is 14 victims per 1,000. Trailing Newport are West Warwick (29.8), Woonsocket (27.4), Central Falls (23.4) and Pawtucket (21.7). The Newport School Department has a must-report policy, Ambrogi said, that requires school employees to disclose any suspicious situation.

“It’s something we keep an eye on,” he said. “It usually comes through the school nurses, with nurses being specifically trained on what to look for in these cases.”

Kids Count issues an annual report on Rhode Island social and educational issues. The organization recently presented its report to local organizations, collaborating with the Newport Partnership for Families at the Newport Public Library.

Newport is linked with Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls and Woonsocket as core cities in Rhode Island, with close to 15 percent of children living in poverty.

Newport’s rate is listed at 14.4 percent, with Middletown at 12.2 percent and Portsmouth at 5.6 percent. The state number is 16 percent.

Ambrogi said there is a correlation between poverty and school success. Newport’s chronic absenteeism rate, 18 or more days missed, from grades K-3 — the grades surveyed — was 16 percent, with the state average at 12 percent.

Newport’s high school graduation rate, however, jumped from 60 percent in 2007 to 81 percent in 2011. Ambrogi said he is happy about the improvement but more work is needed.

“There are a lot of kids who come from poverty and tough households,” he said. “Unfortunately they’re not always able to concentrate on school. For someone to say poverty makes no

difference in performance is like ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes.’” Keith Tavares is vice president for institutional advancement at Child and Family, a social services agency based in Middletown. He said he is concerned about the child abuse and neglect figures reported in Newport.

“That’s alarming,” he said. “I was shocked when I heard that. I know it’s something that we will be discussing in meetings, we’ll be discussing strategies. It’s something we’re definitely going to address.”

In a prepared statement, Kids Count Executive Director Elizabeth Burke Bryant echoed Ambogi’s viewpoint. “Child abuse and neglect can cause children to feel isolated, fearful and unable to trust, and this is connected to impaired cognition and low academic performance during the teen years,” Bryant said. “Parents at risk of abusing and/or neglecting their children often lack basic parenting skills and are struggling with a combination of social and economic factors.”

The Kids Count Factbook is available online at [rikidscount.org](http://rikidscount.org).

[Gillis@NewportRI.com](mailto:Gillis@NewportRI.com)