

About 4,100 families below poverty line

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The struggling economy has pushed more Jackson County families with young children below the poverty line, according to recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Of the estimated 42,388 families in

Jackson County in 2009, 9.7 percent — or 4,131 — of them were living below the poverty level, according to the 2009 American Community Survey released by the bureau.

Of those families, 31.2 percent only had children younger than 5, compared to 13.3 percent in 2008. “We’re seeing a lot of families who are struggling economically,” said Keri Keck, executive director of the Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. “They’re still struggling and trying to figure out what to do.”

Experts say the national recession and high unemployment are to blame. The unemployment rate for Jackson County was 12.8 percent in August. Programs aimed to help those in poverty are struggling to keep up with the need.

Jackson County’s Head Start is a national, federally funded child-development program that serves children ages 3 to 5 from primarily low-income families, helping them get a jump on the basics before kindergarten. The program is serving more than 500 children and has 300 more on a waiting list.

“So many of our parents with kids that young don’t have employment,” See **POVERTY**, on A2

Poverty on the rise

Continued from A1

said: “Kate Martin, community development planning director at the Community Action Agency, which runs the Head Start program.

Overall, poverty in Jackson County hit 13.4 percent, representing more than 21,000 people, up from 12.2 percent — or about 19,500 people — in 2008. The state average in 2009 was 16.2 percent.

“We know the situation will only get worse without a strong effort to meet the needs of struggling families,” Sharon Parks, president and CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services, said in a statement. “This means a bal-

anced approach that includes revenues instead of cuts to vital services at the time when Michigan families need them most.”

In August, more than 31,000 Jackson County residents received one of five welfare programs, including cash food, medical, state disability or child development and care assistance according to the state Department of Human Services.

“We’re seeing many more families just surviving on SSI (Supplemental Security Income),” said Mary DeLuca, director of children’s services at the Community Action Agency. “They’re really depleting all their resources.”