For decades, the Texas counties bordering Mexico have experienced some of the nation’s severest hardship and deprivation. In recent years, however, the border emerged as one of the most dynamic parts of Texas and attention has turned to the region’s vast economic, social, and cultural potential. Border economic and demographic trends show the region’s great promise, revealing the future not only of Texas, but of the entire nation as well.

**Child Population**

From 2000 to 2007, Texas’ child population grew nine percent to more than 6.4 million children ages 0-17. Much of that growth occurred along the border, which grew 12 percent to more than 757,000 children in the same time period. The child population change in Texas’ border counties varies dramatically, however, ranging from a 39-percent decline in Terrell County to a 21-percent increase in Hidalgo County. Counties experiencing dramatic swings in their child population will face important planning questions regarding their economies, physical infrastructure, and demand for social supports.

**Portrait of Immigrant Families**

Immigrant families tend to live near communities of other families from their home countries, easing the adjustment to a new culture. Surprisingly, even though Texas’ border counties are the gateway to Mexico, fewer than one of every five children living in those counties lives in an immigrant family.
family. Of those children in immigrant families, 88 percent were born in the U.S. Nearly 94 percent of all children living along the Texas-Mexico border are citizens by birthright or naturalization.

**Family Economic Security**

Children’s fate largely depends on their parents’ economic security. Family economic security is critical for connecting families to adequate medical care, nutrition, and housing, which contribute to children’s cognitive development and school achievement. Unfortunately, financial challenges interfere with border families’ ability to address their basic needs.

**Median Income**

Median household income reflects a region’s economic strength and, over time, economic stability. Like most of Texas, the median income along the border rose over the last several years, from just more than $27,000 in 2000 to nearly $32,000 in 2007. Unfortunately, the median income in border counties remains substantially lower than even the rural non-border counties. And, when adjusted for inflation, border families purchasing power (i.e., how much their dollars can buy) fell by nearly $400.

**Unemployment**

The current unemployment rate can estimate a region’s economic pain, measuring the number of people lacking jobs, looking for jobs, and available for work as a percentage of the entire labor force. Over the past several years, border counties consistently experienced economic neglect, depressed wages, and low labor force participation. As of February 2009, Starr County had the state’s highest unemployment rate (16.9 percent), followed closely by Maverick (16.4 percent), Zavala (15.6 percent), and Presidio (15.1 percent) Counties. Although Texas urban border counties have not experienced unemployment rate increases similar to the rest of the state, Cameron (9.3 percent) and Hidalgo (9.6 percent) retain the highest unemployment rates in Texas’ urban areas.
Poverty Despite Work

The U.S. government developed the federal poverty guidelines4 to assess deprivation for individuals and families and set income eligibility cutoffs for work support programs like Medicaid and Food Stamps. The vast majority of Texas kids live with at least one parent who works (83 percent on border; 91 percent non-border). Still, child poverty in Texas, and especially along the border, remains high. Although child poverty rates have improved in Texas’ border counties, they are still the highest in Texas and the U.S.

After peaking in 2005 with nearly one of every two border children living in poverty, the child poverty rate declined slightly in 2006 (the most current data available for all Texas counties). The border child poverty rate will likely increase when the data catches up with the recent economic downturn.

Despite longstanding difficulties, Texas border counties offer a glimpse of the state’s potential promise—and of the eventual consequences of current policy choices. If the historic inequities so evident on the Texas border remain unaddressed, we can expect a less-healthy, less-educated, poorer population in greater need of social services with fewer resources to provide them. On the other hand, we have the unique opportunity now to implement public policies that will fortify the physical, social, emotional, and educational development of children living on the Texas-Mexico border—a choice almost certain to yield a better-prepared, more competitive workforce, increased private- and public-sector resources, and an enhanced quality of life for all Texans.
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Endnotes

1 For this report, the border counties include: Brewster, Brooks, Cameron, Culberson, Dimmit, El Paso, Hidalgo, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, Jim Hogg, Kinney, Maverick, Presidio, Starr, Terrell, Val Verde, Webb, Willacy, Zapata, and Zavala. These counties were included based on border community feedback during listening sessions held by Texas KIDS COUNT in 2008.


4 The 2009 Federal Poverty Guideline for a family of four is $22,050 annually.

Center for Public Policy Priorities

The Center for Public Policy Priorities is a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy institute committed to improving public policies to better the economic and social conditions of low- and moderate-income Texans. CPPP is home to the Texas KIDS COUNT project. To learn more about CPPP or the Texas KIDS COUNT Project, visit http://www.cppp.org.

Principal Authors

Frances Deviney, Ph.D., Texas KIDS COUNT Director

Florencia Gutierrez, Texas KIDS COUNT Intern

Graphic Design

Sharee’ Allison, Square Foot Studio

www.squarefootstudio.com