



# Our Earliest Promise

**A Status Report concerning the Welfare of St. Joseph County's Youngest Children Ages Birth to Five**

**AUGUST 2007**

## A Great Start for All Children!

*Safe, Healthy, and Ready to Succeed in School and in Life.*

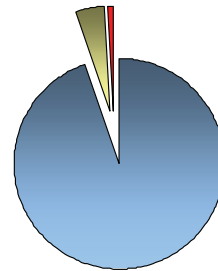
St. Joseph County is on the move. An important part of our county's promising future lies with our youngest children - those yet to enter their school years.

St. Joseph County's Great Start Collaborative was initiated in 2006 by the St. Joseph County Human Services Commission as part of a statewide effort to promote the formation of community-based comprehensive early childhood development systems. Issues regarding a child's healthy birth and upbringing, quality and affordable child care and pre-school, economic security, parent and family supports, special needs, and safety all contribute to the welfare of our youngest residents. Building a strong foundation for our youngest children is a noble promise, one which benefits all who call St. Joseph County home.

Data presented in this publication is meant to spur a discussion concerning the current well-being of St. Joseph County's children. Most importantly, this report can serve as a genesis for future action. The numbers highlight both accomplishments and needs. One thing statistics cannot portray is St. Joseph County's excellent reputation for collaborating to better our community. By having all community members working together under a common mission - parents, extended family, youth, business, schools, faith-based organizations, government, political leadership, philanthropy, human service agencies, and many others - St. Joseph County can accomplish much for its children.

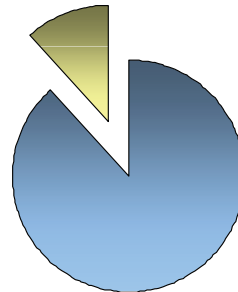
All children are born to learn; what happens in a child's earliest years is a significant determinant of achievement later in life. We encourage you to join us in striving toward the goal of ensuring that all St. Joseph County children will enter kindergarten safe, healthy, and ready to succeed in school and in life!

**Total County Population Under 5 by Race**  
US Census Bureau, 2005 ACS



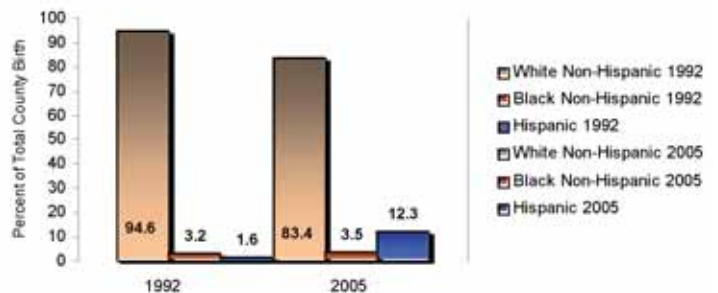
- Caucasian 4,370 (95%)
- African-American 212 (4.5%)
- Other Races 35 (.5%)

**Total County Population Under 5 by Ethnicity**  
US Census Bureau, 2005 ACS



- Non-Hispanic 4,075 (88%)
- Hispanic 542 (12%)

**Percent of Births by Ethnicity 1992-2005**



# Economic Security

Economic security is essential for families of young children. Gaps in child development start young, and economics play a significant role. The promise of St. Joseph County's youngest generation ultimately rests in a healthy and vibrant economy.

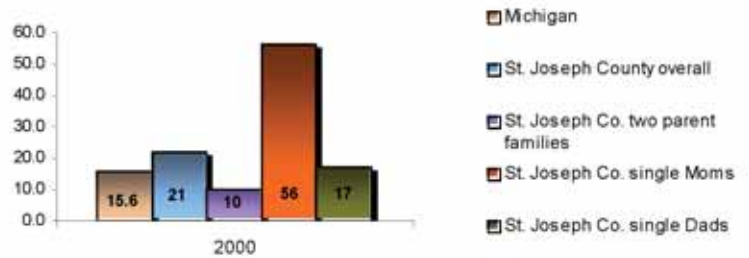
Research demonstrates that economic standing in our society profoundly influences the development of young children. The child Trends Data Bank analyzed a wide range of research, including data from the National Center for Education Statistics, and concluded the following: "Very young children living in poverty are much less likely to be able to recognize the letters of the alphabet, count to 20 or higher, write their name, read or pretend to read." Research also shows that once a child falls behind in these fundamental skills he or she often fails to catch up.

There exists little doubt that early childhood issues and the economy are inextricably connected. The Emergence of a new economy in St. Joseph County and the growth that results from economic development efforts will directly impact the lives of St. Joseph County families and young children.

# Early Care & Education

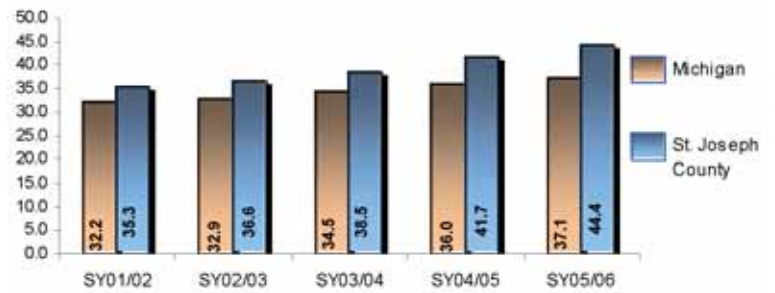
Quality, affordable, and accessible child care and preschool are vital early childhood development services. Several national studies, including research by Nobel Laureate and economist Dr. James Heckman, conclude that investing in early education and care pays great dividends throughout a child's life. In fact, these studies show that society's economic return on investing in high-quality early education ranges from \$4 - \$17 for ever \$1 invested. In the highly-competitive economy of the 21st century, establishing a solid foundation in early education for all our children will be a key for communities seeking to develop a successful workforce.

Percent of Children Under Age 5 Living in Poverty



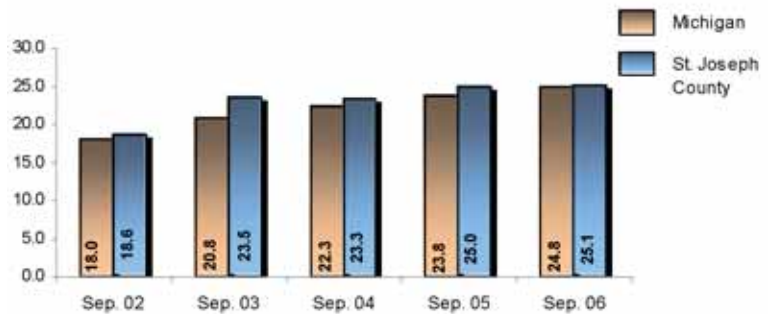
Source: US Census 2000

Percent of K-12 Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunch



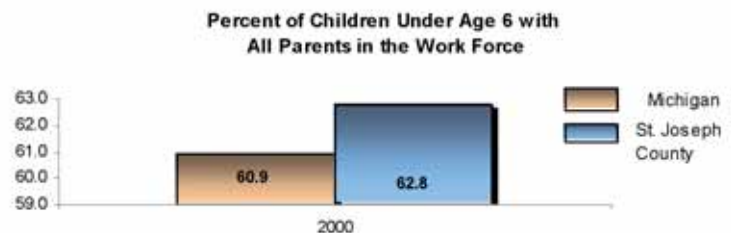
Source: MI Center for Educational Performance and Information

Children ages 0-5 Receiving Food Assistance Program



Source: MI Department of Human Services

Parents of Children Under Age 6 with All Parents in the Work Force

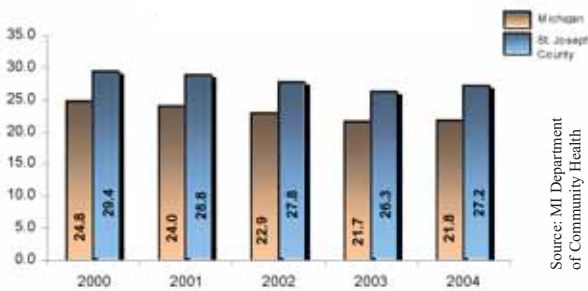


Source: US Census 2000

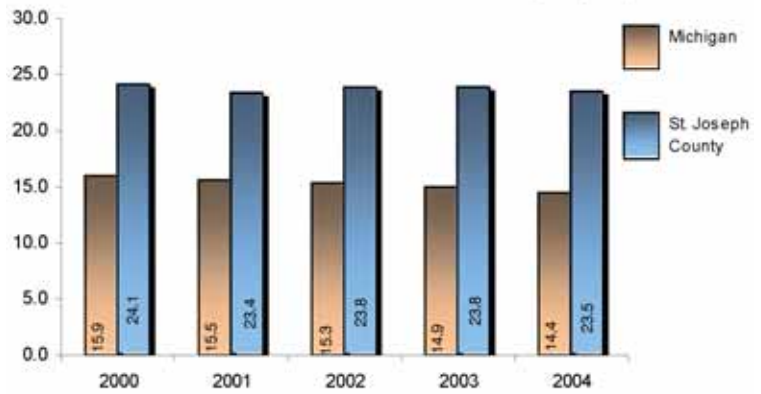
# Health Care

A healthy beginning in life for all children is an essential part of a healthy community. Learning begins at birth. Studies show that nearly 25 percent of a baby's brain connections are formed at birth and nearly 90 percent by age three. Nurturing the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development of children in the earliest of years is critical to a child's growth. Investing in health care for infants and toddlers prevents later health problems and supports optimal learning outcomes for children. In St. Joseph County, significant investment has occurred in the community's health care infrastructure. This is particularly true for services dedicated to lower-income children. The promise of our youngest generation can be realized only if our children receive a health start in life.

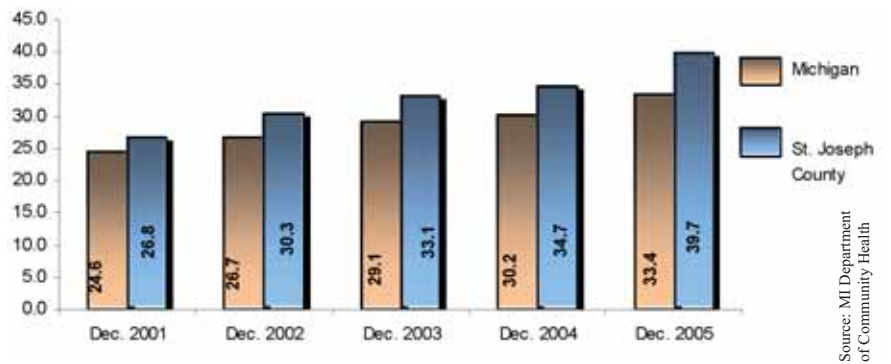
**Percent of Live Births to Women with Less Than Adequate Prenatal Care**



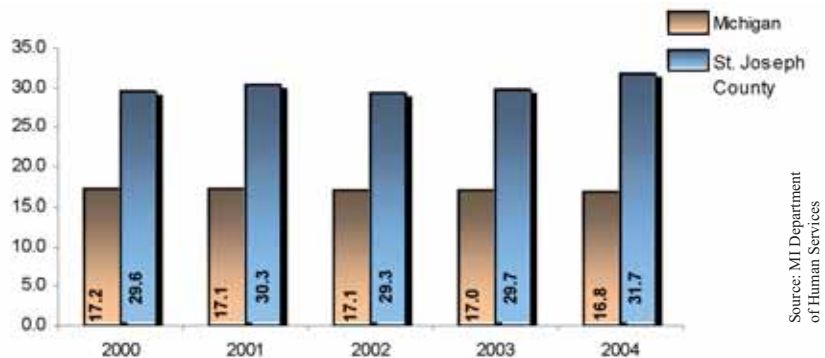
**Percent of Live Births to Women Who Smoked During Pregnancy**



**Percent of Children 0-18 Insured by Medicaid or MICHild**



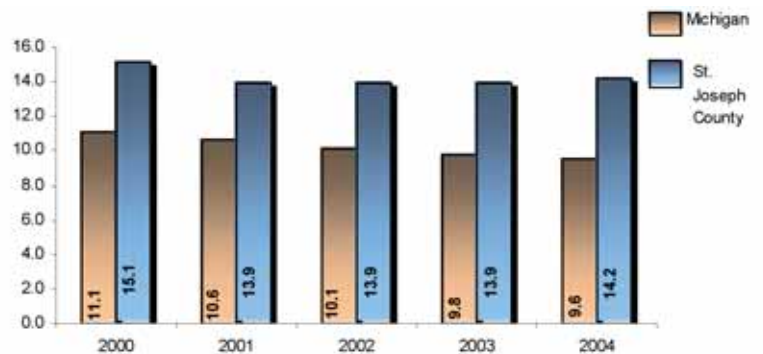
**Percent of Births to Mothers without a High School Diploma**



# Parenting, Family Support

Families are the core of the promise of St. Joseph County's youngest children. Parents and other family members provide the enriched environment necessary to support the critical early learning of infants and toddlers. A safe, nurturing, and stable home environment impacts the development of young children long before most children ever set foot in a school building, making parents a child's ultimate "teacher." Learning truly begins at home, as does the success of St. Joseph County's youngest generation.

**Percent of Births to Teens Under 20**

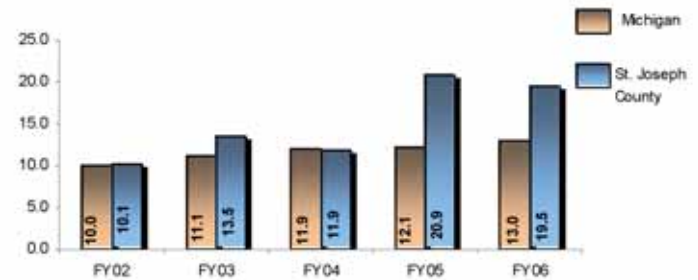




## Child Safety

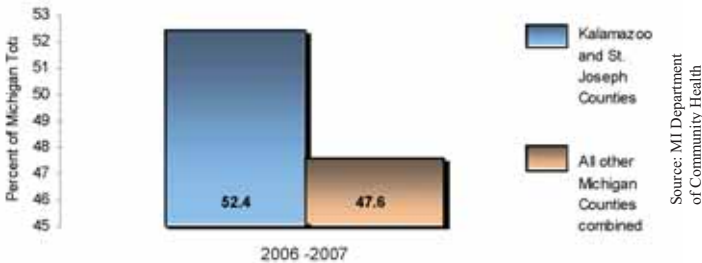
Young children need a stable, safe and secure family environment in order to flourish. Family stress can come from many sources. Unemployment, depression, and substance abuse can all lead to neglect of a child's needs, or to physical or emotional assaults on children. In St. Joseph County, rates of confirmed abuse and neglect have risen at alarming rates over the past five years.

Substantiated Victims of Neglect Ages 0-5 (rate per 1,000)



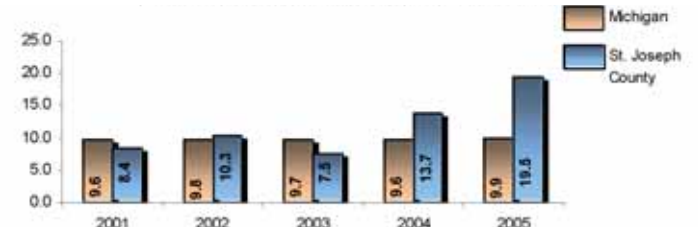
Source: MI Department of Human Services

Methamphetamine Lab Locations



Source: MI Department of Community Health

Children Ages 0-5 in Foster Care (rate per 1,000)



Source: MI Department of Human Services

## St. Joseph County's Great Start Collaborative

These conditions and many more exist right here in our own community, placing young children at risk for a life-time of poverty, failure, and dependence on an over-burdened system. The St. Joseph Great Start Collaborative has been convened to create a comprehensive system of support, which joins public and private funds to wrap our arms around young children.

The Collaborative is comprised of human service professionals, parents, elected officials, and leaders from the business and faith communities. Together, we seek to understand the social and economic forces which shape the future of our children and our community. From this knowledge base, we seek to create systems that insure that ***ALL St. Joseph County's children begin life safe, healthy, and ready to succeed in school and in life.***



This report was based with permission on a report authored by Stuart Jones and Chandra Dease of the Muskegon County Great Start Collaborative, and published under a grant awarded by Michigan's Early Childhood Investment Corporation. The St. Joseph County Collaborative is an initiative of the St. Joseph County Human Services Commission.

For further information, please contact Julia Emanuel, Great Start Collaborative Coordinator, at 269-467-1112.

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