National Center for Children in Poverty reports

One in four US children under six live in poverty

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A report issued by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), comparing the five-year periods 1979-83 and 1992-96, reveals that the number of children under six living in poverty grew over that time by 1,456,284 to a yearly average of 5.9 million. The study, entitled "Young Child Poverty in the States--Wide Variation and Significant Change," is based on an analysis of census data and compares the average poverty rates of young children on a state-by-state basis.

The report's authors found that overall child poverty rose by 12 percent during this period to a record 24.7 percent. They also report a wide variation between states. Fifteen states saw their poverty rates go up by more than 20 percent. Louisiana, West Virginia and Washington, DC have the highest rate of young children living in poverty, nearly 40 percent and higher. Utah, New Jersey and Vermont are on the low end with "only" slightly more than one in ten children living in poverty.

The three largest states, California, New York and Texas, have both the largest numbers of children living in poverty and experienced the largest increases. The combined number of young children living in poverty rose in these three states from an average of 1.2 million during the years 1979-1983 to an average of 2.0 million during the years 1979 to 1983.

In addition to "Young Child Poverty in the States," the NCCP released "Young Children in Poverty--A Statistical Update" in March of this year. This is an update of its 1996 report "One in Four: America's Youngest Poor." Taken together these reports provide a devastating picture of the conditions of young children growing up in America.

Jamie Hickner, a spokesperson for the NCCP, told the *WSWS*: "Young children have the highest poverty rate of any age group. There has been ample research that shows that poverty hurts young children the most. Poverty on children is devastating; it has an enormous impact on their psychological and physiological development. Childhood poverty has been very strongly correlated to high infant mortality, to the likelihood of experiencing violence during childhood and suffering from domestic violence, and to difficulties obtaining full-time employment. It is very depressing to think that this is well known and well documented, yet the problem still persists."

The NCCP was established in 1989 at the School of Public Health, Columbia University, with core support from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The Center defines its mission as identifying and promoting strategies that reduce the number of young children living in poverty and improve their chances in life.

Living in extreme poverty, poverty and near poverty are defined as living at 50, 100 and 185 percent of the federal poverty line, respectively. In 1996 the official poverty line for a family of three was $12,516. The young child poverty rate (YCPR) is defined as the percentage of children living in families earning below the official poverty line.

10.3 million or 43 percent of young children are growing up in families living in poverty or near poverty. Nearly half (2.3 million) of all poor young children and more than one in ten of all young children live in extreme poverty. Extreme poverty for a family of three means living on less than $6,258 a year.

For blacks and other minorities the conditions are

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even worse. While white children living in poverty make up the largest category in absolute numbers, the YCPR for black children is over 43 percent and for Hispanic children more than 42 percent.

The working poor

These reports further substantiate the existence of the social group known as the working poor. The NCCP statistics reveal a startling growth in the number of families with one parent working and yet still living in poverty. In 1996, for example, 63 percent of poor young children lived in families with at least one parent holding either a part- or full-time job. This represents a 15 percent increase in the number of poor children in such families in just three years. For two-parent families with the father employed full-time, the YCPR rose from 5 percent in 1983 to 14.2 percent in 1996, a rate slightly below that of families headed by single mothers who work full-time (16.8 percent).

Neil Bennett, author of the report, told the *WSWS*, "Despite a very robust economy, and a very significant increases in the number of people working, we have not seen the drop in childhood poverty that we would hope to see. Today a full-time job is not a guarantee that a family will be raised out of poverty. A single mother who is working full-time and raising one child will earn below the federal poverty line.

"The United States has the highest childhood poverty rates of any industrial country. The rate in the United Kingdom is 19 percent, in Canada 14 percent, in Spain 11 percent; Finland has the lowest at just 2 percent."

The reports are based on data gathered before the elimination of federal government welfare programs by Congress and President Clinton. The data does, however, reflect the impact of welfare reform measures that were instituted at the state level. Prior to Congress passing the 1996 welfare reform act, 43 states had taken measures to slash welfare rolls. By comparing the decline in poverty between families with children and those without children, of which only 3 percent received any type of public assistance, the NCCP determined "there is little evidence that welfare reform contributed significantly to lower young child poverty rates."

Neil Bennett continued, "The data for childhood poverty rates are not yet available for the period since the welfare reform went into effect. What we want to see is that the success of welfare reform is not measured by the number of people receiving welfare. After all it would be easy to just kick everyone off of welfare. Rather, one of the criteria for judging welfare reform must be how well young children are doing."

On May 31 the individual states were supposed to submit reports to the federal government detailing poverty among children and the effects of the welfare cuts on childhood poverty rates. However, on May 29 the government waived this requirement pending the development of a method and standard by which the states might prepare these reports. The NCCP expects the figures by October and will analyze them by year's end.

http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp

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