

5.2 million young children in US growing up in poverty

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5.2 million young children in the US, nearly one out of every four children under six years old, are growing up in families whose income falls below the federal poverty line, according to a report issued by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) last week. The report found that poverty among young children has declined from the all-time high of 6.4 million children in 1993, but still remains 50 percent higher than the average two decades ago. Overall the young child poverty rate (YCPR) is 22 percent.

The findings, entitled “Young Children in Poverty—a Statistical Update,” follows upon a series of studies done by the NCCP at Columbia University during the past several years including “One in Four: America's Youngest Poor.” The report is based on an analysis of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, conducted in March 1998, and contains data for 1997, the most recent figures available.

In 1997 the poverty threshold for a family of three was \$12,802. The YCPR measures the percentage of children under six who are living in families that earn even less than this meager amount. Young children have the highest poverty rates of any age group. They are followed by children ages 6 through 17, who have a poverty rate of 18.4 percent. The YCPR is more than double the rate for adults and the elderly.

The impact of poverty on the physical and mental development of a young child is severe. Neil Bennett, one of the authors of the report and director for Demographic Research and Analysis at the center, told the WSWs, “The effects of poverty start at birth and stay with a child throughout his or her life. A child born in poverty is more likely to have low birth weight, which leads to a whole range of health problems. These children are less likely to graduate from high school, more likely to be unemployed.” The NCCP has also

compiled research on the psychological impact of poverty on children, detailing its negative effects on the emotional and cognitive development of children.

In addition to looking at the overall poverty rates for children, the report also looks at the children living in “extreme poverty,” “quite poor” and those living in “near poverty.” Two and a half million children are living in families whose income is less than half the poverty level. In other words, one out of every ten young children are growing up in families where income is less than \$6,400 a year or \$123 a week. Such families would either live in government subsidized housing, share a home with another family or be homeless.

Another 2.7 million children live in quite poor families, which earn 50 to 100 percent of the poverty level. Another 4.7 million live in families earning 100 to 185 percent of the poverty level. In all, nearly 10 million young children, or 43 percent of all children, live near or below the poverty level.

Overall more white children grow up in poverty, although the poverty rates for black and Hispanic children remain about three times as high, at nearly 40 percent. The fastest growth in the YCPR is taking place in the suburbs. The suburbs now account for over 37 percent of young children in poverty. YCPR is nearly 40 percent in urban centers and 23 percent in rural communities.

The report documents the growth of the so-called working poor. While the overall number of young children in poverty has gone down since 1993, the percentage of children in families with at least one parent working full- or part-time has shot up to 65 percent, a 20 percent increase from the 1993 level.

The rapid growth in the number of the working poor reflects the decline in wages for the poorest section of

the population, the growth of part-time and temporary employment and the sharp reduction in the welfare rolls since 1993. Most of those who lost their benefits under President Bill Clinton's "welfare reform" program have ended up in the lowest paying jobs.

"Working, playing by the rules is no longer a guarantee that a family will not be in poverty," says Neil Bennett. "As more and more people leave welfare to work, what we are seeing is that working does not mean that they are leaving living in poverty. There are a large percentage of people who are working full-time who are not succeeding in keeping their families out of poverty."

Bennett continued, "At the same time the official poverty rate does not take into account the expense of going back to work, such as the cost of child care, transportation, state, local and federal taxes, as well as out-of-pocket expenses like work clothes. The real income of many people returning to work is even lower. In addition there is the psychological impact on parents who, doing what they are told they are supposed to, still do not have the means to support their family."

Just as a job is no longer a guarantee against poverty, neither is a high school degree. Nearly 30 percent of families in which the better-educated parent has a high school degree were living in poverty, an increase of 77 percent from the 1975-79 period. For families whose better-educated parent had some college, the YCPR had gone up to 15.2 percent, a 78 percent increase from the earlier period.

The impact of welfare reform upon children living in poverty has been dramatic. Since 1993, the proportion of families receiving public assistance has fallen from 53 percent to 36 percent in 1997. Two-thirds of all people receiving public assistance are children. Single parents with children, mostly mothers, make up the majority of families on public assistance. This group has made up the majority of those being forced from welfare, yet they face some of the greatest obstacles in finding work, such as finding child care and medical care. Nearly 60 percent of young children in "mother-only" households grow up in poverty, and if the mother lacks a high school degree, the rate climbs to over 80 percent.

Politicians have hailed welfare reform as a great success because the nation's welfare rolls have fallen 42

percent since 1993, and some states' welfare roles have been slashed by over 80 percent.

However, if the success of welfare reform is judged by the reduction of poverty a very different picture emerges. The small drop in the official poverty rate over the past few years is primarily due to the decline in unemployment. A change in the economic situation will leave millions of unemployed people without the slightest social safety net. Further increasing the difficulties of poor families is the fact that in many states families that have been cut off welfare have also been cut off from food stamps and Medicaid.

Nearly three years since the gutting of the federal welfare program the government has still not conducted a comprehensive study of its effects. Even the requirement, under the welfare reform act, that states provide data on childhood poverty was waved in May 1998.

While there have been no national surveys, local and state studies have documented an increase in extreme poverty among children and the very poor. In Wisconsin, a state that has cut its welfare rolls by 87 percent since 1993, the number of families in poverty more than doubled from 1989 through 1997, according to a report from the Institute of Wisconsin's Future. The report also found that the proportion of food stamp recipients with incomes below half of the poverty level rose from 10 percent to 32 percent during that same period.

The NCCP study can be obtained from their web site at: <http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp/>



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