

US has highest childhood poverty rate of industrialized countries

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The United States, with more than one in five children living in poverty, has the highest rate of childhood poverty among the nations that comprise the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Twelve million American children live in poverty.

These findings are reported in the book *Child Well-Being, Child Poverty and Child Policy in Modern Nations*, which is the product of 45 authors from three continents that make up the Luxembourg Income Study. It is the first time that child poverty levels have been measured taking into account taxes and benefits for individual US states, which allows direct comparisons between US states and other nations.

New York state has the highest rate of child poverty, with 26.3 percent of its children living in poverty. California ranks second with a 25.7 percent rate. There are 14 states—including Texas, Florida, Massachusetts and Illinois—where childhood poverty is above 20 percent.

“These numbers are startling and worrisome,” said Timothy Smeeding, coeditor of the book and professor of public policy at Syracuse University. “Despite high rates of economic growth and improvements in the standard of living in industrialized nations throughout the twentieth century, a significant percentage of our children are still living in families that are so poor that normal health and growth are at risk.”

A majority of poor children have at least one parent who works full- or part-time. “Let's face it. Having a minimum wage or low-wage job is not going to pull someone out of poverty,” said Julian Palmer, director for communications and publications at the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) located in New York City. “Single women with children cannot afford rent, pay for child care, pay for gas, phone and electric

bills, and buy food even on \$8.00 or \$9.00 an hour, let alone having to live off of a part-time job at the minimum wage,” he commented.

Palmer continued, “The stock market has gone up, unemployment is way down, yet childhood poverty is still as severe as it was a generation ago. The United States as a whole and New York in particular has some of the greatest income inequalities of anywhere in the world. New York has some of the richest people in the world, yet there is still massive poverty. All one has to do is walk down 5th Avenue from 125th Street to 90th Street to see the full range.”

Lisa Ellibe lives in Pennsylvania, where the childhood poverty rate is 18.4 percent. She lives in a shelter with her 15-month-old baby, but it does not provide meals. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Lisa at a soup kitchen in McKeesport, Pennsylvania where she had come to pick up food for herself and her baby. Lisa's daughter is one of the four million US children in families, mostly headed by single woman, who are living on less than \$7,000 a year.

Lisa told the WWS, “I have no job or steady income. I work day labor whenever they call me. Our food stamps last only two weeks and we spend the rest of the time going to soup kitchens, food banks or wherever else I have to go to get food.”

“The only work experience I have is flipping burgers, so how am I supposed to get a decent job? Many people don't have the job skills to get a decent paying job. I can't just make the minimum wage. I would bring home maybe \$400 a month. You can't make ends meet on minimum wage. Rent is \$350 a month. How can you pay your rent and your other bills and still have money left over to buy food? If you have a kid, full-time child care costs more than what you will earn.”

Lisa was forced off welfare because she failed to

attend 40 hours a week of classroom training: “Last Thanksgiving, the school was closed. They said we had to come to class on Saturday to make our 40 hours. I could not find a babysitter so they cut me off of welfare.”

Lisa is classified as one of the extreme poor, meaning she lives on less than half of the official poverty income level. During the past five years welfare rolls have been cut by nearly one half as state welfare officials have implemented strict time limits and forced recipients to take any low-paying job or face termination.

Lisa continued, “On the corner from where I live there are people selling drugs, running numbers and loan sharks. I worry every time we go out. I can't afford a day care center, so when I go to the day labor office I have to leave my baby with different people. What else can I do? It is the only place that will hire me.

“I will go to the Labor Ready office at 5:30 or 6:00 in the morning and wait until 9:30 or 10 before they will ask me if I want to go out on a job,” Lisa said. “Then they will say it only pays \$5.00 an hour. Of course you take it, you have already wasted the whole day. You work the whole day and end up with just \$30.”

The impact of childhood poverty is well documented. Children who grow up in poverty tend to have more health problems, are exposed to greater risks of violence, go to poorer schools and are more likely to end up in prison. They are less likely to find a job, and when they do, more likely to earn less than those who grow up in families with a decent standard of living.

During the past few years US poverty rates have fallen slightly from their highs in 1993, according to the NCCP. However they remain substantially above their 1979 levels. Child poverty in New York is 6 percent higher than it was in 1979; in California it is 10 percent higher. Furthermore, due to cuts in welfare and food stamps, those who are living in poverty are poorer today than those at the beginning of the 1990s.

The Luxembourg study found that several European countries have child poverty rates rivaling US levels. Italy has the second-highest rate in the OECD, 19.5 percent, the United Kingdom, 16.2 percent, and Poland, 12.7 percent. In Sweden, Finland and Norway fewer than 4 percent of children live in poverty, according to the study. These countries offer some form of health insurance, child care support, paid parental leave, and

tax cuts or child allowances for parents. However, European governments are coming under increasing pressure to carry out cuts in these social programs along the lines of the US.



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