

More US children in poverty and poor health

Naomi Spencer
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On July 27, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released its *Kids Count* data book, an annual study that monitors the well-being of children in the US. Half of the statistics used to determine trends are federal and state data from 2002, and the other half are from the Census Bureau's 2003 American Community Survey. This data, while not an exact picture of conditions in 2005, still provides a more accurate representation of the current situation facing children than does the decennial census data from 2000.

Ten indicators are recorded by the study, including family structure and employment, high school dropout rates, death rates for three age groups, and teen birth rates. Five of the ten indicators registered worsening conditions from 2000. This is in contrast to last year's *Kids Count*, which suggested general improvement from 1996 through 2001 in eight of the ten key indicators.

The AECF estimates that 4 million US children currently live with parents who struggle with long-term, "persistent" unemployment, over a million more than in 2000. This figure accounts only for low-income families where no adult worked for a year prior to the survey, and does not include children living in group homes or institutions.

The number of children living in poverty increased by 6 percent from 2000 to 2003. In 2003, the federal poverty threshold for a household consisting of two adults and two children was \$18,660. The term "low-income" refers to families within twice the poverty threshold, which is considered the minimum income necessary to meet the most basic needs.

The AECF made note of another 24 million children, a third of all US children, who are living in households where no adults have full-time, year-round employment. In the South, the percentage of children lacking secure parental employment was as high as 41 percent, but in no state was the rate lower than 23

percent.

In addition to the annual data book, the AECF maintains a database of 75 indicators of child well-being in education, health and basic demographics at the state-level. One statistic that is tracked by state advocates but not included in the 2005 Kids Count data book measures the prevalence of overcrowded housing. Fourteen percent of US children in 2003 lived in households in which there are more residents than rooms in the housing unit. In Hawaii, more than a third of children live in such conditions. California, New York, Texas and other urbanized areas or regions were substantially higher than the national average as well. Nevertheless, budgets for subsidized public housing programs have been repeatedly reduced, leaving waiting lists in some states that are years long.

AECF data on Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama indicates that one in six children in the Deep South live in extreme poverty, defined as half the federal poverty threshold—in 2003, earning less than \$8,730. Overall, extreme poverty in the US has risen slightly since 2000, but worsened conspicuously in the South. This region was industrialized in the 1970s by manufacturing and textile industries relocating from the more unionized North, and largely abandoned in the latest recession for cheaper foreign labor.

Two indicators in the data book, low birth-weight and the infant mortality rate, track the health of babies born into poverty. In the US as a whole, 7.8 percent of babies born in 2002 weighed less than five-and-a-half pounds (2,500 grams), putting them at a much higher risk of health complications or death before the age of one than babies of average weight. This figure is up by 3 percent from 2000, worsening in all but nine states.

At 11.2 percent, Mississippi ranked worst in the percentage of children with low birth-weight, and the state was tied with Louisiana in having the highest infant mortality rate in the nation. In the Deep South,

more than 10 babies per 1,000 live births died before their first birthdays. Nationally, infant mortality is on the rise as well, despite an overall improvement in access to early prenatal care for low-income pregnant women.

The death rate for children less than one year old rose in 2002 for the first time since 1957. The *Kids Count* data book reported that more than 28,000 infants died in 2002. Two-thirds of infants who died were low birth-weight babies, disproportionately born into poverty conditions.

The clear differentiation between the North and South in many of the indicators maps the economic disparity between the geographic regions. Inequality in the southern US has been especially intensified by the recent recession coupled with cavalier legislation bent on enriching the top tax bracket. However, the conditions in many regions of the North are just as bad. Particularly in urban areas, low-income and poverty conditions are the rule rather than the exception, sharpened by lack of jobs and cuts to social infrastructure.

In Michigan, approximately one-third of children now live in poverty, most of them in Detroit. According to the state Department of Human Services, the number of Michigan households dependent on Food Stamps has increased 87 percent since late 2000. The AECF ranked Michigan overall in the middle, although recent regional data for selected cities placed Detroit last, on par with the poorest rural areas of Mississippi. More and more families in Washington DC, New York and other large cities are in comparable positions, contending with low wages, lack of transportation and high housing costs.

The conditions facing children are being exacerbated by government policy. Cuts in welfare during the 1990s forced millions of poor families into financial uncertainty. Now the legislative chopping block is loaded with the programs that former welfare recipients and other working poor turned to for relief. The living standards of average Americans have eroded as the ruling class seeks to place the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people.

The National Governors Association has recommended adopting a restructuring of federal guidelines on cost-sharing which would allow states to “establish any form of premium, deductible or co-pay”

for previously exempt Medicaid recipients, including poor pregnant women and children. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the recommendations are reckless in the face of “compelling evidence that imposing higher co-payments on people with low incomes reduces their access to essential health care, with adverse consequences for their health status, and that imposing premiums on low-income people lowers enrollment in public health insurance programs and increases the ranks of the uninsured.”

The obvious aim of such “reform” is not to improve the existing social safety net, but to dismantle it. A federal commission has recently been formed to determine areas in the Medicaid program for cuts totaling \$10 billion in the next five years. Coinciding with this is a plan to cut \$3 billion from the Department of Agriculture, primarily targeting Food Stamps, even as a USDA survey indicated that in 2003, 12.6 million households, approximately 13 million children, experienced hunger and increased incidence of malnutrition.



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