Millions more US children in poverty

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The "Great Recession" of 2008 and 2009 has spread poverty to millions more US children, according to a recent report by the Brookings Institute. The report, "The Effects of the Recession on Child Poverty," estimates that a large number of states witnessed marked increases in child poverty in 2009.

In 2008, one in five US children under age 18 lived in families below the official poverty level, according to Census Bureau data released in September 2009. The figure now is significantly higher, according to Brookings researcher Julia B. Isaacs. The census poverty statistics for 2008 "lag considerably behind current economic conditions," Isaacs writes. "Job losses and wage reductions occurring in 2009 were obviously not captured. In addition, many adverse events in 2008 were only partially captured."

The report's estimates are based on the rapid increase in the use of food stamps, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is taken as a fairly accurate predictor of poverty growth.

Between August 2008 and August 2009, food stamp use increased by a staggering 24 percent, and monthly caseloads increased by 7 million—from 29.5 million to 36.5 million people—a 24 percent increase. "This extraordinary increase means that roughly 3.4 million more children were receiving SNAP benefits in August 2009 than a year earlier," according to Isaacs.

The report states that eight states were likely to have experienced a "particularly high risk" of poverty in 2009, "reflecting a combination of high child poverty in 2008 and very high increases in use of nutrition assistance between 2008 and 2009." These states, all in the US South or Southwest, already had child poverty rates greater than 20 percent in 2008, even prior to the surge in food stamp use. They are: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. The report warns that both "public agencies and private charities" will "face significant strain" in providing aid to these children in the near future.

The "very high" increase in poverty in these states spells Depression-level misery for their populations. In Mississippi, for example, the child poverty rate was 30.4 percent in 2008, or nearly one in three children. The Brookings report also relies on low federally-determined official poverty levels. In 2008 this meant an annual income of $22,000 for a family of four. A more reasonable measure would doubtless show that the majority of children in states like Mississippi live in poverty.

Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Montana, Oklahoma, and West Virginia also had child poverty rates greater than 20 percent in 2008, and saw "high" increases in food stamp use in 2009. Florida, Idaho, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, and Oregon had child poverty rates of 15 to 20 percent, plus a "very high" increase in food stamp use. Washington, Wisconsin, and Vermont had child poverty rates of below 15 percent, but also saw "very high" increases in SNAP use.

Twenty other states, including the populous states of California, New York, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, had child poverty rates of 15 to 20 percent prior to 2009, but saw "high" increases in food stamp use.

"There is little doubt that poverty is on the increase," Isaacs writes, citing a study demonstrating the "particularly strong impact" of unemployment on child poverty rates.

Isaacs told the *World Socialist Web Site* that if the current recession follows the pattern of other recent recessions, the child poverty rate will increase for several years. Another Brookings study released earlier in the year estimated that the national child poverty rate could climb as high as 25 percent, or one in four, by 2012.

"Such predictions are sobering," Isaacs concludes, "since child poverty rates were higher in the United States than in most other rich nations even before the onset of the recession." Isaacs was referring to a UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) report that found the US next to last—ahead of only the United Kingdom—in a ranking of child well-being, falling behind countries such as Hungary, Poland, Portugal, and Greece.

There had already been a dramatic increase in poverty among US children even prior to the economic collapse of 2008 and 2009. This is confirmed by a new report, "Kids Count," on living conditions among children in Michigan, once one of the wealthier US states.

The report, compiled by the Michigan League of Human Services (MLHS), includes data up until 2007 and 2008. Among other findings, it shows that in 2008 more than 40 percent of Michigan public school children came from families whose income was low enough to qualify them for reduced-cost federal lunches, an increase from 30.7 percent just seven years earlier.

Statewide, 19.3 percent, or about one in five children was poor in 2007, in line with the US national average and an increase from 18.3 percent in 2005. The increase in childhood poverty took place statewide. In Wayne County, the child poverty rate rose to 31 percent in 2008. In Saginaw County, 25.8 percent of children were poor. In sparsely populated Baraga County on the Upper Peninsula, the child poverty rate increased to 21.3 percent. Even in suburban Oakland County, the wealthiest county in the state, the childhood poverty rate increased to 11 percent in 2007 from 8.6 percent in 2005.

Increasing poverty correlates to an increase in both confirmed and investigated cases of abuse and neglect of children, according to the report, noting a deterioration of 16 percent in confirmed cases of neglect and abuse in Michigan between 2000 and 2008.

"Kids in Michigan are bearing the brunt of our economic crisis," Judy Putnam of the MLHS told the *WSWS*. "We know this is only going to go worse as the data becomes available," citing the rapid increase in unemployment in Michigan beginning in 2008.

Putnam noted that the state government is pushing its fiscal burden onto children at a moment of acute need. "We're cutting funding from education, preschool, and mental health right when children need the most help," she said.

Putnam fears that in the coming years social services in Michigan could face drastic funding cuts after stopgap funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act expires. "The funding cliff is in 2011, and it doesn't look at all certain that Congress will make new money available" to the states, she said.