

Michigan families face rising poverty, hunger and homelessness

Helen Halyard

30 November 2010

The continuing economic crisis is pushing an increasing number of families in Michigan into poverty and homelessness, with children disproportionately affected.

According to the Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness, there are more than 86,000 people homeless in the state. More 50 percent are families and one in three are children. The average age of a homeless child is seven years. The Detroit metropolitan has the highest homeless population in Michigan, with over 35,000 reported homeless, but the number of homeless has grown in every region

Unemployment in Michigan stands at 12.8 percent, second highest in the US, and there are now 1.9 million families in the state receiving food stamps. According to the most recent US Census Bureau figures, based on a totally inadequate income of \$22,000 for a family of four, 1.4 million people in the state lived in poverty in 2009. This was an increase of 100,000 from 2008. At the same time the number of children living in poverty in Michigan rose to over 500,000 in 2009, or 22.1 percent, up from 19.4 percent in 2008. The situation facing children age four or younger is even more catastrophic, with 26.9 percent living in poverty statewide.

These conditions are going to worsen, with some 168,000 jobless workers in Michigan set to lose their extended unemployment benefits over the coming months due to the failure of Congress to pass an extension.

Conditions in Pontiac, a former center of General Motors manufacturing operations north of Detroit, are particularly dire. WSWS reporters recently conducted a series of interviews with staff, volunteers and residents of Grace Centers of Hope, one of the major homeless and food shelters in Pontiac, Michigan, about conditions in the city.

Pontiac, population 65,000, is the seat of Oakland County, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. Like many former industrial cities in Michigan, it

has been devastated by the collapse of the auto industry. Unemployment in the city has nearly doubled in the past two years, currently standing at over 30 percent.

In 2009, General Motors shut down Pontiac East Assembly, its last remaining assembly plant in the city, after the Obama administration forced the giant auto manufacturer into bankruptcy. Some 1,100 workers employed at the plant lost their jobs, along with those of many people employed at businesses in the surrounding community. In December, the Pontiac Stamping plant will be idled, eliminating an additional 1,100 workers.

The Michigan League for Human Services reports that nearly half of children in Pontiac age four or younger, 49.8 percent, are living in poverty and 31.6 percent of families in the city have incomes below the poverty line, compared with 9.7 percent in Oakland County and 16.2 in Michigan overall.

According to Sharon Parks, president and CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services, median family income for Pontiac residents is \$33,207, compared to \$62,308 for the county and \$45,255 for the state.

Michelle Atwell, director of development at Grace Centers of Hope, organized a sleep-out November 19 to raise awareness of the conditions facing the homeless. She explained, “We organized this sleep-out during National Homeless and Hunger Week to bring attention to the problems of growing homelessness. This is the first time that we have done this. We felt our center needed to be on the frontline of a struggle against this growing problem. People are really hurting.

“We have seen a situation develop over the past year which is frightening and speaks to what is happening. Many of the people who used to donate money to assist the shelter have been laid off and are themselves in need of help. In the city of Pontiac, there is a high level of foreclosure and in 2009 our center had to turn away 3,500 mothers and children who came to us for help because we

didn't have any space. We are now in the middle of renovating our center so that we can accommodate more people this year."

Many of those who came to participate simulated what it was like to sleep outside, putting up makeshift cardboard boxes. Most of these were young people from Pontiac and surrounding communities.

Joey and Pete, who live in a more affluent community, told us why they were participating. "The main reason we are out here," one of them said, "is because this is becoming an issue that is starting to affect everyone and we see that it is only getting worse. It is hitting people in every area, not just poorer cities.

"In Bloomfield Hills, the two high schools, Andover and Lahser, will be consolidated because people are moving out of the city to find work. Last year our high school had 1,200 students and we are now down to 800. The economy is terrible and even where we live, there are foreclosures and people losing their houses."

The WSWS returned to the center on Thanksgiving Day as meals were distributed to workers and families. Darin Weiss, the chief operating officer of the Grace Center of Hope in Pontiac, spoke to the WSWS about the program he helps direct.

"We have thousands of volunteers who come out each week," he said. "They want to come out and help."

"We are the oldest and largest homeless shelter in Michigan. We serve 250 men, women and children on a daily basis through shelter, food, clothing and other services."

Darin said the goal of the program was to help homeless to a position of self-sufficiency.

"It is difficult to get figures on the number of homeless people," he added. "We try to track the last known address. Was the person sleeping on a couch? The figures can vary depending on how you define homelessness. It depends on who is doing the counting."

"There is definitely an increase in the number of homeless families with children. There is always a waiting list. We see more couples homeless. We are seeing people who just can't get jobs, who are staying unemployed.

"The majority of the homeless population are addicted or have some kind of mental diagnosis. But underlying it is definitely the economy. They can't find a job to sustain themselves. One injury, one accident, one paycheck...

"Some people say, quit whining, 'get a job.' They lack understanding of the complex and horrible situations people can find themselves in. There are thousands of

kids who are homeless. They didn't make a wrong decision.

"You talk to some of the people about their situations and you say to yourself, 'How can you not use drugs?'"

The WSWS spoke with several residents of the Grace Center in Pontiac. Dan said, "I am a previous graduate of the program and I came back five weeks ago because the conditions changed where I was living.

"I was born and raised in Indiana and moved to Michigan as a teenager. I am a machinist by trade. The manufacturing industry has taken a big hit. It's not just auto; it is all tier 1 and tier 2 industries.

"The job situation is beyond bleak. I have been on a good number of interviews over the last several weeks. I've heard a lot of, 'I'll get back to you after the holidays.'

"Since I was laid off in 2007, I have worked only once briefly, just a fill-in job making parts for Corvettes. The machining industry has shrunk and I don't see it coming back."

Angie told the WSWS, "I grew up in Detroit. I was a truck driver, an 18-wheeler.

"There aren't many shelters here that will take whole families. So families that want to stay together are often staying out in the cold."

"I've been here a few months. I have been looking for employment. It is hard.

"I have members of my family that have businesses and they are being affected. They are struggling to pay utilities."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact