US child poverty rate soars to 20 percent

Kate Randall
19 August 2011

One in five US children lives in poverty, according to a new report. As families suffer under the weight of joblessness, low wages and the housing crisis, it is the youngest members of American society who are most affected. The latest “Kids Count” report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows that child poverty grew in 38 of 50 US states over the past decade.

Laura Speer of the Casey Foundation, a non-profit child advocacy group, commented on the report’s publication: “The recent recession has wiped out many of the economic gains for children that occurred in the late 1990s.” She added, “Nearly 8 million children lived with at least one parent who was actively seeking employment but was unemployed in 2010,” double the number in 2007.

As child poverty is widely regarded as a barometer of a society’s well-being, the report’s findings are an indictment of conditions in the US in which the chasm between the super-rich and the vast majority of the population continues to widen. With proposed budget cuts at both the state and federal level, the conditions confronting America’s children and youth will indubitably worsen in the coming period.

In 2009, 20 percent of US children—about 14.7 million—were poor, up from 17 percent in 2000. This means that about 2.5 million more children were living in poverty in 2009 than in 2000. This contrasts to the period from 1994 to 2000, when the child poverty rate fell by nearly 30 percent.

Poverty rates are highest in the South, Southwest and Appalachia. In Mississippi, the worst-affected state, 31 percent of children live in poverty. While New England states fared somewhat better, New Hampshire, with the lowest rate, still had 11 percent of children living in poverty.

The highest rates of child poverty were seen among African-Americans (36 percent), American Indian and Alaskan Natives (35 percent), and Hispanics (31 percent). Asian Americans were the only group to see a drop in child poverty over the past decade.

The official 2009 poverty line was $21,756 for a family of two adults and two children, an abysmally low level of income. As this guideline is based on a methodology unchanged since the 1960s, real poverty figures are much higher. The current federal poverty measurement equals only 30 percent of median household income. By contrast, in the 1960s the poverty level was nearly 50 percent of the median.

Families with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of the poverty level—up to $44,700 for a family of four in 2011—still struggle to meet basic needs. The report notes that “missed rent payments, utility shutoffs, inadequate access to health care, unstable child care arrangements, and food insecurity are experiences common among families” in this income range, defined by the report as low-income.

In 2009, nearly half of all children under the age of three—some 6 million infants and toddlers—were living in low-income families. Poverty poses the greatest risk to children in this formative age group. According to the “Kids Count,” report, “Children’s brains are developing rapidly, and the quality of their early relationships and environments can have lasting effects on their later development.”

Child poverty has increased as a direct result of the growth of joblessness in the recession. Long-term unemployment in particular has grown dramatically. While at the beginning of the recession the long-term unemployed accounted for 17 percent of those out of work, today they comprise 45 percent of the jobless.

With manufacturing jobs being largely replaced by low-wage service jobs, the report states, “It now takes two incomes to maintain the same standard of living that a unionized blue-collar worker with only a high school diploma provided for his family a generation ago.”

Children of low-income and poor families see their most basic needs unmet. Parents who are either unemployed or working for poverty wages struggle to provide food, decent housing, medical care and childcare. Developmental tools such as books, toys and enriching activities are often in short supply. The strain of economic uncertainty also leads to increased levels of stress, which can be manifested in depression and anxiety for parents and children alike, as well as increased risk of substance abuse and domestic violence.

Poor children are also more likely to live in families with no health insurance coverage. In 2008, nearly 12 million parents with children under the age of 18 lacked health insurance. This translates into a lack of regular medical care for millions of children.

Data produced by “Kids Count” indicates that more than 5.3 million children have been affected by foreclosures since 2007. In Nevada, which has been devastated by the housing crisis, ranks as the state with the highest rate of children affected—13 percent. Nevada is followed by Florida, Arizona, California and Michigan, all states with record numbers of foreclosures.

Housing costs are particularly burdensome for low-income families, whether they own or rent their homes. In 2009, nearly 21 million—67 percent—of low-income children lived in households where housing costs account for more than 30 percent of income. This means that disproportionate sums spent on housing are not available for food, transportation, childcare and medical expenses.

Another key measure of the conditions of children is low birthweight. Newborns weighing less than 2,500 grams (about 5.5 pounds) have a higher probability of experiencing developmental problems and disabilities and are at greater risk of dying within the first year of life. While the rate of low-birthweight babies born in 2008 fell slightly from its four-decade high of 8.3 percent in 2006, the 2008 rate of 8.2 percent is still well above the rate in 2000.

In 2009, the US also ranked 28th among 32 industrialized countries in infant mortality. In 2009, 6.6 out of every 1,000 live births ended in death before the first year. Pre-term birth, low birthweight, congenital malformations and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) are the leading causes of infant deaths.

The “Kids Count” report proposes a series of measures for reversing the growth of poverty for America’s children. These include preventing foreclosures, strengthening the food stamp program, making health care more affordable, and extending unemployment insurance for the long-term unemployed.

Contrary to the intentions of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, however, the proposals read like a checklist of programs that have been targeted for the budget axe in states across the country and nationwide.

Extended unemployment benefits will expire at the end of this year without congressional action. The implementation of the Obama-sponsored health care overhaul will force individuals and families to purchase insurance or pay a fine, but will not control what the insurance industry can charge for premiums.

And as millions more families seek assistance through the SNAP food stamp program, Medicaid and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, they will see services and availability slashed as states wrestle with growing budget deficits and the Obama administration and Congress push ahead with trillion-dollar deficit reduction plans.