

Reports expose desperate conditions of Illinois youth

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22 February 2012

Two recent reports highlight the increasingly dire circumstances confronting children and young people in Illinois.

The first study, “Illinois Kids Count 2012,” revealed that one in five children in the state lived in poverty as of 2010. Moreover, nearly 50 percent of students enrolled in state public schools came from families classified as low-income (that is, making less than twice the federal poverty standard). Some areas of the state were affected more severely than others: the public school system in the economically devastated city of East St. Louis, for example, reported that fully 96 percent of students were low-income.

The federal poverty limit, however, which in 2010 was an income of no more than \$22,113 for a family of four, relies upon a method of calculation dating from the 1960s that fails to take into account the rapid rise in prices of necessities such as health care and education over the last few decades. It is a woefully inadequate measure of poverty in any meaningful sense of the term.

The “Kids Count” study found that 33,000 students were homeless in Illinois, more than any other Midwestern state. The rate of student homelessness has increased nearly 30 percent since the start of the recession. As bad as those figures are, advocates have cautioned that there are countless other youth whose homelessness has yet to be identified and whose living conditions are more difficult to track.

Lawmakers from both major parties are increasingly attacking the budgets of social programs and agencies that have provided a meager safety net for children and families over the last few years. The budget for after-school programs, which aid at-risk youth, has been slashed by more than 50 percent since the start of the recession. Nearly 18,000 children have lost access to

preschool because of budget cuts and late payments by the state. Budget cuts and delays in disbursement of state funds to social welfare agencies have led to either the reduction of much-needed services or, such as in the case of Chicago’s historic Hull House, the shuttering of the institution altogether (see “Chicago’s Hull House closes after 120 years of service”).

Many children have had their living conditions modestly protected by federal food aid known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Approximately 758,000 children were able to receive aid from SNAP benefits from 2009 to 2010, a 25 percent increase from two years before. Of those receiving SNAP benefits in Illinois, nearly 50 percent were under the age of 18. The “Kids Count” study revealed that aid from federal programs kept nearly 200,000 children out of poverty.

Many media commentators have drawn attention to one “bright spot” in the report: the fact that more children now have access to health care through extension of the Medicaid program. However, Illinois officials led by Democratic governor Pat Quinn are already moving forward with plans to attack health care aid for the poor and disabled, both by severely tightening standards for application to Medicaid and by cutting the state’s funding for the program by at least \$2 billion (out of a total outlay of only \$14 billion). In an interview with the Associated Press, Maryjane Wurth, chief of the Illinois Hospital Association (IHA), said that cuts in Medicaid payments to hospitals will most likely lead to the closure of struggling facilities in areas already lacking in medical provision, creating “health care deserts.” “This isn’t a haircut, this is a scalp,” Wurth said.

Despite such protestations, the IHA and other industry groups—along with trade unions across all

sectors—are not in fundamental disagreement over the need to make the working class pay for the state’s budgetary crisis, indicated by support legislative proposals to raise revenue through regressive “sin” tax increases on items such as junk food and cigarettes. Such measures will only serve to increase the burden on working people already under severe financial strain.

The second report on youth, released last month by Northeastern Illinois University, revealed that teen employment in Illinois has reached its lowest recorded level since such figures were first collected 42 years ago. Over the last decade, employment among teens has dropped precipitously, from a high near 50 percent in 1999, to 36 percent in 2007, to 27.5 percent today. This represents a decline of almost 50 percent in 10 years. Notably, teens in Chicago fared much worse than the rest of the state, with an employment rate of only 16 percent in 2011.

The report revealed that youth from low-income families faced much higher levels of unemployment than those from relatively wealthier backgrounds. The employment figures for African-American youth were especially bleak: only 9 to 10 percent of black teens from families making less than \$40,000 were able to find employment.

“Early work experience for kids, for middle- and low-income (teens) especially, is really kind of a predictor of how well they’ll do in their early- and mid-20s,” noted Andrew Sum, one of the co-authors of the report, to the *Chicago Tribune*. “You could only classify this in one way: it’s a massive depression in the labor market for teens.”

The ability of young people to find a job has grown increasingly difficult since the onset of the recession as older workers, who have either been laid off or are taking on second and third jobs in order to make ends meet, are forced into taking the low-wage, entry-level positions that teens previously filled.

A recent Pew Research study found “a widespread belief among all adults that young people today are having a harder time reaching many basic financial goals their parents may have taken for granted. Eighty-two percent of those surveyed say that finding a job is harder for young adults today than it was for their parents’ generation. Three quarters believe it is harder now to save for the future (75 percent), buy a home (69

percent), or pay for college (71 percent)” (see “Young adults hardest hit by recession, US study shows”).

Around the world, millions of young people are confronted by a social and economic system—capitalism—that has nothing to offer but ever-increasing misery and deprivation. The vast wealth produced by the working class must be liberated from the stranglehold of the financial aristocracy, so that a truly egalitarian and decent society may be constructed. That is the fight for socialism, which alone presents a way forward.



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