Kids Count report: Extreme poverty doubles in Michigan

Debra Watson
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One in four children in Michigan lives in a family with an income below the official US poverty threshold, according to the annual Kids Count In Michigan Data Book 2011, released last week by the Michigan League for Human Services (MILHS).

The non-profit child advocacy group reported that the percentage of children in poverty in Michigan more than doubled, rising 64 percent from the beginning of the last decade through 2009. Children living in families with incomes below the poverty level rose from 14 to 23 percent.

During the same period, the percentage of children in families in extreme poverty surged. One in 10 children in Michigan lived in extreme poverty at the end of the last decade, with the percentage more than doubling, from 5 to 11 percent, since 2000.

These families have incomes less than one half the poverty level. Extreme poverty is really destitution, denoting income under $8,000 a year for a family of three. The agency's report cites one example of the consequence of extreme poverty: a family in such dire straits cannot afford the average cost of shelter in most Michigan counties.

The report as a whole centers on health outcomes and relates growing poverty indices to poor health among children. For example, "Roughly one in 14 third-graders in Michigan have immediate dental care needs as evidenced by pain, infection or swelling, and more than one in four have untreated dental disease."

Michigan was hit by the protracted decline of industrial jobs in the US, especially auto and auto-related. The effects of the 2008 recession on jobs accelerated the impoverishment of more layers of society. From 2005 to 2009, the child poverty rate in Michigan jumped from 18 to 22 percent and more than half a million Michigan children lived below the poverty level in 2009.

The rate of destitution is surely higher now, in 2012, as the agency estimates that the families of 11,000 children have been thrown off the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) welfare program since Michigan governor Rick Snyder imposed punitive time limits on aid last year.

Half of Michigan are impoverished

Poverty in America is officially measured on the basis of an archaic formula, related to food costs as a percentage of a family budget, first estimated in the 1960s.

A more realistic threshold would be twice the official poverty level, $35,136 for a single parent with two children or $44,226 for a family of four in 2010. Nearly half—45 percent—of all Michigan children were in families in this low-income bracket, up from one third in 2000.

Three quarters of a million children qualified for free or reduced-price school lunch, one in two students in the public school system. Families must have an income less than 185 percent of the poverty level to qualify for the lunch program.

One in three, or 760,000 children in the state, were eligible for Food Stamps under Michigan's Food Assistance Program (FAP). This program requires a family be near the official poverty threshold and provides on average only $125 a month per person for food.

Persistent joblessness

In the Kids Count report, the non-profit advocacy group

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zeroes in on rising unemployment as a primary cause of the staggering increases in child poverty. While unemployment tripled in the state as a whole over a decade, in four counties the rate quadrupled.

It notes that two of the wealthiest counties were among those with quadrupling unemployment figures. Notably Oakland County, north of Detroit, and Ottawa County, in the western part of the state, led in increased unemployment. Livingston County, which borders Oakland, and Allegan, just south of Ottawa, also saw their unemployment rates rise by this much.

Half of the unemployed in the state had been out of work for 26 weeks or more. This persistent unemployment accompanied a fall in income for those parents able to find a job. The Kids Count report states: "Many workers accepted part-time jobs or employment well below their skill level to maintain some household income."

Wages were hit hard. By 2010, a minimum wage full-time job paid $6,700 less per year than the dollar amount needed to bring a family of four with two parents in the household above the poverty line.

Recession's impact on Detroit

The report breaks down the figures by county and includes a special report on the city of Detroit. Already hard hit by the decline in the auto industry, Detroit has been staggered by the recession.

The number of children aged 0-17 that resided in Detroit dropped by more than a third, 35.2 percent, over the decade ending 2010, from 293,531 to 190,347. The largest drop, 46.5 percent, was the population of children aged 5-9. This demographic, children of elementary school age, declined from 92,683 in 2000 to 49,550 in 2010.

The total population of the city fell by about a quarter overall, or 250,000 over the decade. Michigan's population declined by 54,000, a 0.6 percent decrease, reflecting the state's economic distress. Over the same period, the US population as a whole *grew* 10 percent.

Detroit has an official population of 713,777 and an official unemployment rate of 22.7 percent. The median income in the city is just $26,098.

Most measures of child wellbeing in Detroit are much worse than the already alarming statewide indices. Detroit's large population also means the problems are larger in absolute terms than in other areas. Children living in poverty in Detroit went from 45 percent to 51 percent in five years. Between 2005 and 2010, the total in poverty rose from 115,000 to 122,500.

Health outcomes showed devastating figures for the state as a whole and even graver numbers for Detroit. Sixty-seven percent of Detroit children were insured by Medicaid or MIChild (for very low-income families), compared to 42 percent statewide.

Over the three-year period from 2007 to 2009, the number of Detroit children ages 1–14 hospitalized for asthma averaged three times the statewide rate. The rate of severely disabled children in Detroit was more than twice the statewide average, 43 per 1,000 compared to 19 per 1,000, respectively.

It is significant that certain indices that sociologists have long zeroed in on as major causes of poverty have actually improved dramatically in Detroit, even as the indices of poverty and ill-health were rising steeply.

Over the decade, births to Detroit teens, aged 15-19, fell from 2,832 (82 per 1,000) to 2,378 (70 per 1,000). The high school dropout rate went from 3,536, or 30.7 percent, to 2,021, or 20.7 percent.

Child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect figures went up by 34 percent in Michigan over the decade. In 2010, a total of 32,500 children in the state were confirmed as victims. More than four of every five suffered from some form of neglect.

The vast majority of charges are for neglect and related to cases that are not expected to occur again. Jane Zehnder-Merrell of MILHS told the press, "Over 80 percent of those cases involve neglect, which is closely aligned to poverty and people not being able to meet the basic needs of their kids."

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