

New report shows rising US child poverty

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A new report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “Kids Count Databook 2012” [PDF], reveals a sharp decline in economic well-being for children in the United States over the past few years.

Among the report’s more stark figures, the number of children living in poverty increased by 1 million between 2010 and 2011. This is an astounding increase for a single year. It is particularly telling given that such a drastic increase in poverty continued well after the Obama administration officially declared that the recession had ended.

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of children living in poverty soared upward by nearly 30 percent, from 12.2 million to 15.7 million. “The additional 3.5 million children living in poverty is nearly equivalent to the entire population of the city of Los Angeles,” the report notes.

The report gathered data from various government agencies to rate each state on 16 different criteria. The criteria were split into four different categories: economic well-being, family and community, health, and education. All four indicators reveal a dramatic increase in economic stress on children.

A full 22 percent of all children in the US now live below the poverty line, which was a meager \$22,113 for a family of four in 2010. The artificially low poverty cutoff leaves out many families that suffer from deprivation. According to the report, “families need an income of roughly twice the official poverty level to meet their basic needs, including housing, food, transportation, health care and child care.” Nearly half of all children, 44 percent, live in low income families that earn less than twice the poverty threshold.

The lack of family income is tied to two related economic indicators that have been exacerbated by the continuing economic crisis: the availability of regular employment and housing costs.

One-third of American children live in households

without secure employment, i.e., no parent has full-time, year-round employment. That constitutes a 22 percent increase from 2008 and is reflected in the growing trend of replacing full-time jobs with part-time work.

Employment for teens is also increasingly tenuous. The report shows 9 percent of teens were neither working nor in school. Only 16 percent of youth who graduated from high school after 2008 have full-time work.

Nationally, 41 percent of children live in households that spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. This is up from 37 percent in 2005. Unsurprisingly, the states with the highest percent of such households were also the ones hardest hit by the foreclosure crisis. California topped the list, with 54 percent of all children living under a high housing cost burden, followed by New Jersey, Nevada, and Florida.

In total, these economic indicators paint a bleak picture for children after the 2008 recession. The indicators for education showed improvement in graduation rate and test scores, by contrast, and among the health indicators were a decline in teen drug abuse, and child and teen mortality.

On the other hand, rates of childhood obesity and diabetes—serious health conditions, associated with diets consisting of cheap “filler foods,” that almost exclusively afflict the poorest families—are on the rise. Measurements of childhood mental health, juvenile justice involvement, and child abuse are not included in the report.

The family and community indicators were mixed, with a small decline in teen pregnancy and more household heads having a high school diploma.

Overall, there are 1.6 million more children living in high poverty areas—communities where more than 30 percent of the population is under the poverty line—than in 2000. All of the indicators reflect a widening

disparity in living conditions between children across income groups, exacerbated by budgetary assaults from the federal level down.

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For minority populations, the measures of well-being were worse than the average. The report notes that black children are nine times as likely as their white counterparts to live in high-poverty census tracts—most in the rural South or distressed industrial cities. Thirty-eight percent of black children live in poverty; 32 percent of Latino children are in poverty.

In its introduction, the report cites a recent Stanford University study that found “the gap in standardized test scores between affluent and low-income students has grown by about 40 percent since the 1960s, and is now double the testing gap between African American and non-Hispanic whites, which declined over the same period.” In early childhood education, “only a small percentage of poor children participate in programs of sufficient quality and intensity to overcome the developmental deficits associated with chronic economic hardship and low levels of parental education.”

One important finding in the report is the vast regional inequality between states. The Southeast, Southwest, and Appalachian regions of the country lag far behind the Midwest, and Northeast in every category. The difference between the top and bottom ranked states is quite large in most categories. For example, only 10 percent of children in New Hampshire live in poverty, as compared to 33 percent of Mississippi children.

The lowest ranked state was Mississippi, which is both the poorest state by median income and had the third highest income inequality of all the states in 2008, according to the Economic Policy Institute. By many measures—life expectancy, infant mortality rates, chronic conditions—Mississippi is equivalent to the developing world. Across the South and Appalachia, populations suffer living conditions on par with countries in Africa or Eastern Europe.

As the economic crisis continues, the circumstances facing children and youth will continue to deteriorate. In his introduction to the report, Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, describes the dangers of a generation raised

impoverished in purely nationalist terms. He is afraid that these youth will be “less able to compete and thrive in the global economy,” thus hurting “the strength of our nation.” In a global ranking of 31 developed countries, the US ranked 27th in measures of economic opportunity and equality.

However, childhood poverty is not a national issue but a global one. According to UNICEF over a billion children worldwide live in poverty. The worldwide effects of the economic crises in the US and Europe amply demonstrate that the social and economic issues in the US cannot be solved within the framework of international competition.



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