

US child poverty surged in 2011

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The number of children living in families with incomes below the official poverty level rose to 16.4 million in 2011, according to the annual Kids Count report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation released this month. This is an increase of one full percentage point in one year, up to 23 percent from 22 percent (15.7 million) in 2010. More than one in four children under five—26 percent—were officially poor in 2011.

The increase of 700,000 children in poverty in the US between 2010 and 2011 was almost as high as the one million increase the year before.

Data from the foundation's report last year indicated child poverty had already soared upward by nearly 30 percent from 2000 to 2010. The number of children living in poverty in the US went up by 4.2 million between 2000 and 2011.

"Kids Count Databook 2013" compares the change in several factors of child well being between 2005 and 2011 in order to compare pre- and post-Great Recession measures. Between 2005 and 2011 child poverty increased by 3 million children.

The official poverty level of \$22,811 for a family of two adults and two children leaves out nearly half the families that suffer from deprivation. According to the foundation: "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, 45 percent, live in low-income families that earn less than twice the poverty threshold.

The increases in child poverty continued well after the Obama administration officially declared that the recession had ended. The recession officially lasted for a year and a half, from December 2007 to June 2009. But after a similar period of eighteen months of "recovery" child poverty was still climbing rapidly.

This was so even as the national unemployment rate registered a gradual decline. The report ties lack of family income to two related economic indicators 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, up from 27 percent in 2008. Part of this is due to the growing trend of replacing full-time jobs with part-time work.

The authors also note in the 2013 report: "Although the overall unemployment rate continues to decline, five years after the crisis, unemployment remains high, at 7.5 percent, with almost 12 million Americans out of work. Furthermore, long-term unemployment is increasingly a problem: A total of 4.5 million workers were unemployed for more than six months, and more than 3 million were without work for a year or more."

Nationally, over forty percent of children live in households that spend more than the benchmark of affordability for housing each month of 30 percent of household income. This is up from 37 percent in 2005.

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 revealed a dramatic increase in economic stress on children. National and statewide data were compared to previous years and states were compared to each other.

One important finding in the report is the vast regional inequality between states. They write: "States in the Southeast, Southwest and Appalachia—where the poorest states are located—populate the bottom of the overall rankings. In fact, with the exception of California, the 17 lowest-ranked states are located in these regions. For the first time, New Mexico ranked worst among states for overall child well being in this year's KIDS COUNT Data Book. Along with Nevada and Arizona, states in the Southwest now occupy three of the five lowest rankings for child well-being."

Detailed data for each state is available. The difference between the top- and bottom-ranked states is quite large in most categories. For example, twelve percent of children in New Hampshire live in poverty, as compared to one in

three in Mississippi.

The data was also broken down for other categories such as married-couple and single-parent households and African-American and Hispanic households. The percentage of children living in single-parent families continued to climb. In 2011 more than one-third (35 percent) of all children lived in a single-parent household, as did 37 percent of infants and toddlers.

A comment in the report indicates the primary difficulty for children in single-parent families is poverty. They comment: “Such children are at higher risk of negative outcomes later in life because they typically have fewer economic and emotional resources than children growing up in two-parent families.”

Overall 8.6 million children or 12 percent lived in high poverty areas—communities where more than 30 percent of the population is under the poverty line. This is up by 2.3 million or 9 percent of all US children in 2000.

For minority populations, the measures of well being were worse than the average. Half of African-American and American Indians—more than double the national average—and almost forty percent of Hispanic and mixed-race children lived in families where no parent had stable employment year-round compared to 25 percent of non-Hispanic white children. Thirty-nine percent of black children live in poverty; 34 percent of Latino children are in poverty.

Again this year 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.”

The report focuses on early childhood education, stating that “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.”

However, cutbacks through the federal sequester, not mentioned in the report, have already adversely affected programs like these for low-income pre-school children that are connected to Head Start.

The report does not offer solutions to the devastating economic and social conditions. In his introduction to this year’s Kids Count report Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, endorses the falsehood that underlies the Obama Administration’s assault on social programs. He asserts: “Given the

consensus on the need to reduce the country’s long-term debt, simply adding more public dollars to existing strategies is neither wise nor feasible.”

The gutting of existing assistance programs has exacerbated the alarming decline in well being for children. For example the foundation’s Michigan affiliate has released figures for the decline in welfare support to children in poor families since welfare cuts began. Then-president Clinton abolished welfare entitlement nationwide in 1996.

Peter Ruark from the Michigan League for Public Policy reported in May that the Family Independence Program (FIP) caseload dropped to 45,236—its lowest level ever. In May 2013 the number of cases dropped again.

He noted: “Twenty years ago, in April 1993, there were 232,795 Michigan households receiving cash assistance through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. Ten years later, in April 2003, there were 74,851 households receiving cash assistance through the Family Independence Program, which replaced AFDC in Michigan.

“The March unemployment rate was 8.5 percent and the FIP caseload dropped below 50,000 for the first time. The last time Michigan had an unemployment rate of 8.5 percent, in August 2008, there were more than 69,000 families receiving assistance, but the caseload hardly budged over the following year as unemployment jumped to 14.2 percent. In fact, from 2007 to 2010, caseloads dropped consistently as the unemployment rate rose.”

The League attributes the cuts in support not to a decline in unemployment in the state, but to new sanctions and lifetime time limits imposed by Michigan lawmakers as well as policy changes at the Department of Human Services that imposed stringent application paperwork and reporting requirements.

The entire Kids Count 2013 report, along with links data and sites for Michigan and other states, can be found at Kids Count 2013 Report



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