

Report documents growth of poverty in Detroit suburbs

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Poverty in metro Detroit suburbs has increased sharply in recent years, according to a report released last week by Lighthouse of Oakland County.

The report, “Combating Poverty in Oakland County,” describes Oakland County as “a community that is home to some of Michigan’s wealthiest citizens and increasingly home to many families who are struggling to meet their basic needs.” The report provides extensive documentation of a “seismic shift” in social conditions throughout Oakland County and Southeast Michigan. (See also, “Interview with John Ziraldo, CEO of Lighthouse of Oakland County, on Detroit suburban poverty”)

While Oakland County is the wealthiest county in Michigan, 118,000 people live in poverty. This is the product of a 77 percent increase in the number of poor people between 2005 and 2012, according to the report.

A previous report published in 2013 by the Brookings Institution showed that poverty in US suburbs nationwide grew by more than 64 percent between 2000-2011 (see, “Poverty skyrockets in US suburbs”).

Out of metro Detroiters living in poverty, 58 percent now reside in the suburban communities of the tri-county area (Oakland, Wayne, and Macomb counties). Almost one in ten families in Oakland County have incomes below the federal poverty line, which, at \$19,530 for a family of three, is far below what is needed to meet basic costs.

The Michigan League for Public Policy estimates that a family of three living in Oakland County would require \$46,944 to meet basic needs, or 240 percent of the official poverty line.

The overwhelming majority of those found to be living in poverty are currently employed, with many working multiple jobs. The report also highlighted the high number of impoverished residents with college

degrees.

“Poverty rates do remain higher in cities and rural communities than elsewhere. But for three decades the poor population has grown fastest in suburbs. The especially rapid pace of growth in the 2000s saw suburbs ultimately outstrip other types of communities so that they now account for the largest poor population in the country,” the report states.

Among the other statistics for Oakland County (total population 1.2 million) highlighted in the report are:

37,184 children under 18 are in poverty
71,012 adults 18-64 are in poverty
10,750 senior citizens over the age of 65 are in poverty
11,571 people with Bachelor’s Degrees are in poverty
20,024 people with high school degrees are in poverty
There are 27,579 working adults with incomes below the official poverty line

The Lighthouse report cites the loss of manufacturing jobs as a main cause in the growth of poverty, including the destruction of 27,000 manufacturing jobs since 2008.

While sections of the Democratic Party and its supporters seek to frame Detroit poverty as a racial issue, the report showed that poverty is rampant in both predominantly white and black areas. Of those living in poverty in Oakland County, the report found that 58.4 percent (70,702) were white, while 23.8 percent (28,788) were black.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited the Lighthouse facility in Pontiac and spoke with Chief Development Officer Priscilla Perkins. Perkins described the disastrous social conditions facing Oakland’s working class and poor population.

“Starting in November with the food stamp cuts, we’ve had 700-1,000 people a day coming to us, desperate for food aid. We are only able to give them 3

days worth of food, when most of these families are coming up short by the third week of the month,” Perkins said.

“The food with nutritional value is gone before you know it. We can’t keep beans on the shelf,” she said.

In Oakland County, Perkins said, one in four children are “food-challenged,” meaning they often receive less than three full meals a day. “For these families, it is a matter of ‘more month than money,’” i.e., food assistance programs do not cover an entire month’s worth of food.

“Unemployment has gone through the roof in this county since 2008,” Perkins said. “The jobs have gone. There used to be two major GM facilities right near here. Both have gone. We’ve seen a huge growth of part-time, low-income service jobs. People are working, and they still need social benefits to survive. What’s more, if they take any time off to seek access to the benefits system, they are liable to get fired, as there are always five unemployed people waiting to take their job.

“In the first six weeks of 2014, we had hundreds of families coming in who never needed charity before, mostly as a direct result of the end to long-term unemployment benefits passed by Congress.

“We also stock nonfood necessities that people cannot buy with EBT, such as soap, toothpaste, laundry detergent, diapers and first aid supplies. People are balancing between food and these items, deciding whether to eat or to keep themselves and their children clean,” Perkins said. “Try going on a job interview without being washed,” she added.

Speaking about the psychological impact of poverty, Perkins noted that visitors to the Lighthouse center show signs of “extreme stress and hopelessness. The men look hurt and embarrassed. As fathers, they feel they have failed. They are experiencing profound sadness and pain, and are at wit’s end. The stress increases their vulnerability to disease, which is rampant among low-income groups. This is not the American Dream.

“We are in the middle of a food desert here. Fresh produce and other nutritionally dense foods are not accessible to the mass of people here, even though we are two miles away from one of the wealthiest communities in the country, where you can buy any type of exotic, organic food imaginable.

“I’m not very political, but the contempt shown for the poor by Congress is astonishing,” Perkins added. “Cutting food stamps, in the middle of this brutal recession? It boggles my mind.”



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