

Report documents growth of extreme poverty in Rochester, New York

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A recent report documents the growth of extreme poverty in Rochester, New York. Published by the Rochester Area Community Foundation and using US Census data, the report is entitled “Benchmarking Rochester’s Poverty: A 2015 Update and Deeper Analysis of Poverty in the City of Rochester.” According to the report, 16.2 percent of the city’s population now live in extreme poverty, placing Rochester first among mid-sized cities in levels of extreme poverty. Rochester was followed by Hartford, Connecticut, nearby Buffalo, New York, Richmond, Virginia, and Birmingham, Alabama, all mid-sized American cities with concentrations of extreme poverty above 13 percent.

A person is considered to be in extreme poverty if he or she is living at half the federal poverty income thresholds. For instance, under federal poverty guidelines, a family of four are considered to be below the poverty threshold with an income of \$23,850, while a family of four would be considered living in “extreme” poverty if they are living on an income of less than \$11,925, or each member of the family survives on approximately \$3,000 for the entire year. The average cost of a two-bedroom apartment in Rochester is currently \$931, and that cost alone would reach \$11,172, or nearly the entire income of a four-member family living in extreme poverty.

The report also ranked Rochester high among major metropolitan areas in levels of childhood poverty and overall poverty. Some 32.9 percent of metropolitan Rochester’s population are living below the federal poverty line. Only four US metropolitan areas ranked poorer. They include Detroit, Cleveland, Dayton and Hartford, all of which have poverty rates approaching 40 percent. Only Detroit, Cleveland and Dayton rank higher in child poverty, with rates of more than 50

percent.

The statistics starkly demonstrate that the United States’ supposed economic recovery has had no measurable effect on the living standards of the working class. In fact, the impoverishment of the working class has accelerated. From 2013 to 2015, Rochester’s poverty rate increased from 31.0 percent to 32.9 percent. The childhood poverty also increased from 46 percent to 50 percent. According to the report, Rochester “is the only city of comparable size in the nation where more than half the children live in poverty.”

The report also demonstrated that poverty affects the population across all racial categories in Rochester disproportionately compared to national levels. Twenty-three percent of Rochester’s white population live in poverty compared to approximately 10 percent nationwide, while 40 percent of Rochester’s black population live in poverty compared to 27 percent nationally. Poverty among Rochester’s Hispanic population was the most disproportionate, with 44 percent in poverty compared to 24 percent nationally. Of all measured US Census racial categories, the poverty rate for biracial or multiracial workers in Rochester was the highest, with approximately 50 percent of those identifying themselves as belonging to two or more racial categories currently living in poverty.

Rochester’s statistics also showed that poverty does not discriminate based on nationality. While nationally, the poverty rate for foreign-born workers is higher compared to workers born in the US (18 percent vs. 15 percent), in Rochester the opposite is the case. While both groups are significantly higher than national levels, 28.6 percent of Rochester’s immigrants live in poverty while 33 percent of native residents live in

poverty.

In addition, Rochester's poor were affected by a lack of long-term full-time employment opportunities. Some 57.3 percent of Rochester's poor were classified as "not in the workforce." Among the 42.7 percent "in the workforce," also known as the "working poor," 76.9 percent were only able to work part-time jobs or work in seasonal temporary jobs. Only 13.6 percent of Rochester's poor were employed full-time.

Several community and non-profit organizations have used the report's statistics to hold discussions and forums on poverty where the growth of a concentrated impoverished population is framed as a moralistic failing on the part of individuals in the immediate regional area, rather than as objective failure of the capitalist system that plagues cities and towns across the both United States and the entire world.

In 2014, the city won a \$1.9 million grant from the Bloomberg Philanthropies to achieve the goal of driving down the poverty rate in one neighborhood by 1 percent. According to city leaders, the funds will be used to create "market-driven" solutions to open cooperative businesses in poor neighborhoods. They have not attempted to explain how the same "market driven" forces that have driven down wages, cut benefits, and laid off thousands of workers across the region from the ranks of the employed will somehow now be transformed into doing just the opposite.

Furthermore, \$1.9 million is a totally insufficient amount compared to the scale of the social crisis, with more than 160,000 people living in poverty in the nine-county metropolitan area. Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City and founder of Bloomberg Philanthropies, alone has an estimated net worth of \$36.2 billion.



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