

Kids Count director: Rising poverty and mental health cuts spawn child abuse and neglect

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Jane Zehnder-Merrell, project director for Kids Count of Michigan, spoke with the WSWs about the fate of Michigan's most vulnerable population, its children, and the drastic impact of social inequality in the state.

While she couldn't speak to the case of Michelle Blair in particular, Zehnder-Merrell pointed to the huge increase in child abuse and neglect as a result of Michigan's growth of poverty.

Detroit has more children living in extreme poverty than any of the nation's 50 largest cities, according to a recent national report released by Kids Count. Over one-third of children (35 percent) in this state live in a family where no parent had a full-time, year-round job.

Zehnder-Merrell said there was a staggering 77 percent increase in cases of abuse or neglect in Detroit between 2006-2013, and cited the corollary development—the city's child poverty rate has increased to 59.4 percent. (The grossly inadequate federal poverty level is pegged at an income of \$23,300 for a family of four.)

The vast majority of Detroit children, 82 percent live below 200 percent of poverty, a level of income considered "economically insecure." And 36 percent of Detroit children live in the relatively new category of "extreme poverty," that is, less than 50 percent of the federal poverty level.

Zehnder-Merrell said that the numbers give a glimpse of the dreadful situation facing families in Detroit, Michigan and nationally. "A lot more families are economically insecure, and we have a much less robust safety net. When you don't provide solutions that help people on one end"—she said, referring to the cuts in welfare—"it shifts to another agency... It is sort of like what we did with mental health and prisons. We cut

back a lot on mental health services, and now we have a lot of mentally ill people in our prisons."

Zehnder-Merrell emphasized that, "when you see escalations in these numbers you also see escalations in abuse."

When the Kids Count report was issued, Zehnder-Merrell called the "steep cuts to social services that coincided with the recession" a "double whammy." She said, "First you have this recession, and then at the same time you cut social services that used to help people get through the hard times. [Michigan's] response has been to cut services to families."

Speaking to the WSWs, she gave the example of Michigan's Roscommon County. "41.5 out of every 1,000 children have suffered abuse or neglect in the county, which has a poverty rate of 22.2 percent." Similarly, the northern counties of Roscommon and Lake have the largest rate of participation in the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) in the state, with roughly three of every five children in the federal food program.

Between 2006 and 2012, the official number of cases of abuse or neglect of children in Michigan increased from 158,000 to 207,000, according to Zehnder-Merrell and Kids Count. This is the highest number of cases in the last 22 years.

"Neglect" is defined as a child not receiving basic needs such as food, clothing or shelter, or not being protected from harm.

"The rate of children in a family investigated for abuse or neglect rose by 41 percent between fiscal years 2005 and 2012—jumping from 64 children of every 1,000 to 90 children among every 1,000," the 2012 report states. In only two Michigan counties did

the rates decline, but in roughly a dozen the rate at least doubled over that period.

“(For) a family that is struggling from one day to the next to keep food on the table, to keep their home warm, to keep a roof over their head even though it leaks, making sure a child develops developmentally is a lower priority,” said Dr. Herman Gray, vice president of pediatric services at the Detroit Medical Center, in comments to the *Detroit News*.

“First and foremost, they’re fighting for survival. We also see abuse, both physical and non-physical maltreatment, when you have a family living under extreme stress due to poverty—they are more likely to lash out against their children.”

Zehnder-Merrell pointed out an astounding statistic to the WSWs. She said that Medicaid now covers a full half of the state’s live births. (Medicaid eligibility is 185 percent of the national poverty level.) In fact, this trend tracks the national drop in income in the wake of the 2008 economic crash. George Washington University of Public Health recently reported that Medicaid births nationally increased from 40 percent in 2008 to 48 percent in 2010.

Moreover, Zehnder-Merrell continued, “The data shows that half of the women (who gave birth using Medicaid) have symptoms of depression, and 10 percent have severe depression.

“They really need therapy of some kind. And we know that kids who live in situations where the parents are depressed, this has a tremendous impact on them because they don’t get the feedback that is needed in order to have appropriate brain development.”

The Kids Count director also spoke about how poverty, mental illness and sexual abuse compound one another. She mentioned several studies on how sexual abuse leads to severe health and psychological problems, including the California Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, which found that adults who experienced ACE had severe health problems.

Traumatic childhood problems lead to an accumulation of risk factors. Such children are more likely to abuse substances, suffer depression and/or become ill, Zehnder-Merrell said.

Three-quarters of Michigan’s state psychiatric hospitals were closed between 1987 and 2003. Today, as Zehnder-Merrell said, the mentally ill are largely housed in prisons. A 2010 study by the University of

Michigan found that more than 20 percent of the state’s prisoners—roughly 10,000 out of 45,000 inmates—had severe mental disabilities.



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