

One in four Michigan children live in poverty

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Nearly one in four Michigan children lived in families with incomes below the official poverty line in 2013, according to an analysis by the Michigan League for Public Policy (MLPP) released last week. This is well above the rate of 22 percent recorded in Michigan in 2008.

The rise in child poverty to nearly one in four children is up dramatically from one in five in 2008. The 24 percent of children officially in poverty in the state exceeds the deplorable current national average of 22 percent. Children living in poor families in Michigan increased by nearly 80,000 over just seven years, from 445,000 in 2006 to 524,000 children in 2013.

Historical records show Michigan children living in poverty had increased by over 126,000 in the 20-year period between 1979 and 1998. The child poverty rate was about 15 percent, or 440,000 children, at the beginning of the 21st century.

MLPP is the Michigan affiliate for Kids Count, the national foundation that presents reports each year on the social condition of children in the US. The 2015 Kids Count Data Book for all 50 states showed three million more children in the US were living in poverty than at the height of the 2008 financial crisis. The MLPP press release noted the persistence of the current high child poverty rate with the observation that “More Michigan kids live in poverty now than during the Great Recession.”

In reality, the recession never ended for most of the population in Michigan and the rest of the US states as wage growth stagnates and income inequality has continued to widen. Income gains since the financial crisis have gone almost exclusively to the richest section of the population, while low wages and drastic cuts in social programs have devastated working class communities across the country.

A 2013 report from the Great Start Collaborative-

Wayne County, which advocates for early childhood issues, reported that median household income in the county dropped 30 percent from 2000 to 2011. Wayne County is the state’s most populous county and contains all of the city of Detroit. Overall, Michigan’s median household income dropped 22.3 percent, almost three times the national average.

The 2013 assessment of Wayne County’s childhood issues pointed to the massive loss of manufacturing jobs that accompanied this drop. Manufacturing jobs decreased by more than half (51 percent) between 2000 and 2011, falling from 149,306 to 73,467. The small increase in manufacturing jobs between 2009 and 2011 was a fraction of those lost, just 8,000. The majority were 4,600 auto-related jobs tied to two-tiered labor agreements which drastically slashed pay for new hires.

Official unemployment dropped by 10 percentage points in the state since the recent peak of 15.4 percent in 2009. Still, MLPP reports the number of children in Michigan families where no parent has full-time employment is higher than it was in 2008. The number of children in single-parent families jumped from 32 percent in 2008 to 36 percent in 2013, with 767,000 children in single-parent homes.

The MLPP reported half of all African American children and nearly a third of Latino children in the state live in poverty. Children living in high-poverty neighborhoods—where poverty rates are more than 30 percent—also increased in the state, from 14 percent in 2006-10 to 17 percent in 2009-13.

This is the second year in a row Michigan’s rank for overall child wellbeing has declined in the Kids Count Data Book state by state rankings. Michigan is now in 33rd place among the 50 US states for economic wellbeing—which relies heavily on child poverty to inform the rankings—as well as for overall wellbeing, which includes economic, health, family, community and education as factors.

The state's rank in overall child wellbeing fell for the second year in a row, leaving it behind all of its Great Lakes neighbors: Minnesota (1st), Wisconsin (13th), Illinois (20th), Ohio (23rd) and Indiana (32nd).

The official federal poverty level was \$23,624 for a family of two adults and two children in 2013, the data year on which this year's national Kids Count Data Book was based. This artificial measure of absolute poverty is calculated in such a way that, as social science experts note, it can provide only about half the income actually required for basic needs for a family in the US.

Thus, as noted in the Kids Count report, the real scope of urgent economic and social deprivation for children is much higher. A more accurate report would include as impoverished a family income anywhere under 200 percent of the official poverty level.

To more fully comprehend what happens to half a million poor children on a day to day basis in Michigan, requires considering also the depth of each family's poverty. The Michigan Kids Count report released in February revealed that fully a quarter of a million families in the state actually lived in extreme poverty, with annual income below half the federal poverty level. A large portion of those families are, in fact, effectively destitute with an annual income of even less. They try to survive on one-fourth of official poverty income, which is an income less than \$4,500 annually for a family of three.

Even worse than the poverty ranking, was the dismal rank for education for the state. Michigan has dropped to 37th among US states in the comprehensive indicators for education assessment used in the report.

The MLPP report notes that preschool attendance and fourth-grade reading proficiency dropped since 2008. More than half, 54 percent of Michigan children did not attend pre-school at all in 2011-2012, up one percentage point from 2007-2010.



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