

31,000 public schoolchildren in Kentucky are homeless

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Kentucky leads the US in the rate of child homelessness, according to 2013-14 data from the federal Department of Education. Over 31,000 children, nearly 5 percent of the state's public school students, are living in a homeless shelter, motel or campground, car, outside, or staying with relatives or friends.

The number is far higher than the 17,716 homeless Kentucky children reported in the 2006-07 school year, and parallels national trends in the years since the 2008 recession.

Across the US, some 2.5 million children were homeless at some point in 2013, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness—nearly double the number counted by the Education Department in 2006-07.

In Eastern Kentucky the rate is far higher, with five counties registering child homelessness rates of 20 percent or more. Harlan County, once a major coal mining center, reports a child homelessness rate of over 26 percent. (A county-by-county interactive map is available via the *Lexington Herald-Leader* special report, “School of hardest knocks: Kentucky has more than 30,000 homeless students”).

Of Harlan County's 4,788 students, 1,255 have no permanent home. The county's per capita income is \$16,257, according to the latest available Census Bureau data, and the official poverty rate is 31.3 percent.

Rowan County, while relatively better off due to the presence of Morehead State University and a large medical center, bears many of the same economic problems as the former “hardwood capital” of the US. Per capita income stands at \$17,094, and 28.6 percent of people live in poverty. Student homelessness is over 24 percent. Last week, the county's district undertook a food drive to combat growing hunger among students

and supply the local soup kitchen, located just a few hundred yards from the public school complex.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count report found 24 percent of Kentucky children lived in “food insecure” households, meaning they faced an uncertainty of having enough food for all the members of the family over the course of the year.

Nearly one in three (32 percent) Kentucky children lived in poverty last year, according to federal data. It is the worst rate in the nation, with pockets of poverty exceeding a rate of 50 percent in eastern counties. More than one in 10 children live in extreme poverty, or half the official poverty threshold (about \$11,812 a year for a family of four). Rates of premature death, infant mortality, and other measures of social conditions in the coalfields region are among the worst in the industrialized world.

Even for children not classified as homeless, housing can be tenuous due to poor home construction, inadequate plumbing and heating, and overcrowding. A series of devastating floods in the spring and summer compounded the crisis, sweeping away mobile homes and triggering mudslides in deforested and mined areas. At least four people were killed in early July flooding, and several others remain unaccounted for. Federal Emergency Management Agency funds for temporary shelter only became available in late August.

As homelessness has skyrocketed, resources to meet needs have stagnated for years. Kentucky receives a paltry \$1 million annually from the federal Education Department through the McKinney-Vento grant for public school student homelessness. The grant is divided among only 17 of the state's 172 school systems, leaving the rest to cobble together charitable donations. In many cases, teachers and guidance counselors themselves foot the bill for their students'

basic hygiene, clothing and school supplies.

While every district has a designated staff member to work with homeless students, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* reports that only four districts statewide have full-time homeless education coordinators. Those include Jessamine County—part of the Lexington metropolitan area—and Jefferson County, encompassing Louisville. In Eastern Kentucky, Greenup County (Ashland) and Pike County (Pikeville) have a full-time employee devoted to homeless children.

Homelessness contributes to developmental delays, difficulty performing in school and reaching graduation, and significant emotional and mental problems in children. They miss many more days of school, are far more likely to fail general courses and perform poorly on standardized tests and, according to a 2014 report by America's Promise Alliance, are 87 percent more likely to drop out of school. These hardships have a lifelong impact on a person's economic situation, mental health, and life expectancy.

The causes for the increase in child homelessness are multifaceted. Above all, the collapse in the coal industry in Central Appalachia has driven thousands of families who have long struggled in poverty over the economic precipice. In fact, as homelessness doubled, the number of Eastern Kentucky coal miners fell by nearly half, from 14,412 in 2008 to 7,287 in 2014. As of the first quarter of 2015, the state hit the lowest coal mining employment rate since 1927, when recordkeeping began.

The closure of many old underground mines across the region has precipitated a cascade of layoffs in trucking, retail, and other industries. Seventeen power plants announced closure at the end of 2015, according to an April report from the state Energy and Environment Cabinet, and another seven plants will shutter by 2017. Official unemployment in many eastern counties has remained in the double digits, and the labor force participation rate is little more than 50 percent.

In the wake of job losses, a scourge of drug addiction has devastated families throughout Eastern Kentucky. Many children have suffered the loss of one or both parents and are raised by grandparents or other relatives in so-called "kinship care." Statewide, 7 percent of children, 70,000 kids, are living with neither parent, according to Kids Count data—the highest rate in the

country.

"We have so many students who move around, and they are no longer living with their parents but with family members," Harlan County Schools Superintendent T. Michael Howard told the *Herald-Leader* August 29. "This is a poor, poor part of the state. We have kids who are living in campers, and that meets the definition of homelessness."

In Knott County, where child homelessness stands at 25 percent, Superintendent Kimberly King reported the same phenomenon following the collapse of the coal industry. "We have a lot of grandparents who are taking care of or raising grandchildren. The poverty issues here are horrible because of the loss of coal jobs." King noted that children were "being bounced from relative to relative" due to drug problems.

Answers to Pike County schools' homelessness questionnaire, quoted by the *Herald-Leader*, reveal the social crisis: "Mom is in jail. Dad's whereabouts aren't known." "Don't know where Mom is." "Faced multiple evictions after I lost my job." "Both parents are dead."



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