

Michigan Kids Count report shows drastic rise in child poverty over last decade

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28 March 2016

Child poverty and officially reported cases of abuse and neglect have risen drastically in recent years in the state of Michigan, according to the 2016 Kids Count report released last week by the Michigan League for Public Policy.

The annual report shows that child poverty has increased in 80 of Michigan's 83 counties over the period 2006-2014. Statewide, child poverty increased by 23 percent, and child abuse and neglect by a shocking 29 percent. Nearly one quarter of Michigan's children now live in official poverty.

Michigan's child poverty rate of 22.6 percent (492,257 children) is slightly worse than national rate of 22 percent. The latter figure represents 16 million children nationwide who live below the official poverty line. The definition of poverty used by the Kids Count report is the US Federal Poverty Level, which is set at \$24,250 per year for a family of four, a grossly inadequate amount of money.

The report's authors note that the most "startling" statewide child well-being figures include the following:

- Child poverty is even higher among minority groups: Forty-seven percent of Michigan's African-American children and 32 of Hispanic children live in poverty.
- Thirty-two percent of children live in households where no one has secure employment.
- Sixty-seven percent of children aged 0-5 years have both parents in the workforce.
- On average, child care expenses represent 40 percent of minimum wage earnings.

The authors also note that 17 percent of children in Michigan live in high-poverty neighborhoods, including more than half (55 percent) of African-American children, and nearly a third (30 percent) of

Hispanic children.

The report ranks Michigan's 83 counties by "Overall Child Well-Being"—a term which includes poverty strictly-defined, but also things like food security, infant/child mortality, child abuse/neglect, and proficiency of school-children in English and math. It finds that the seven lowest-ranking counties are rural counties where the vast majority of residents are white. Eighth-worst is Genesee County, where the city of Flint is located, which has been the focus of national attention for the ongoing lead in water crisis.

The Kids Count data shows how closely child abuse and neglect correlate to child poverty. Over the period 2006-2014, Michigan saw a 52 percent increase in child abuse and neglect investigations, resulting in a confirmed abuse/neglect rate increase of 29 percent. Thirty-three-thousand children were confirmed abused or neglected in 2014 alone.

The report defines neglect as "a child not receiving basic needs such as food, clothing or shelter; or not being protected from harm." School teachers are required by law to report signs of child neglect, so a family that is homeless, living out of a vehicle, or unable to afford enough good food and clothing is at risk of being investigated.

The rate of children aged 0-5 years who are eligible for SNAP benefits (food stamps), and the rate of school-children eligible for free or reduced price school lunches, each also increased by 29 percent (to 31.9 percent, and 46.7 percent, respectively) over the same period—the exact same percentage increase as for child neglect. A separate study by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) published earlier this month shows that nearly one third of US households receiving SNAP benefits still cannot afford enough food and must rely on food pantries.

Parents can also be reported to the authorities if they fail to pay electric, heat or water bills. Michigan has some of the highest water and utility rates in the country. Indeed, another report published in February of this year shows that the city of Flint, Michigan has the absolute highest water rate in the country, even as its water supply continues to be systematically contaminated with lead. The average Flint household pays between \$864 and \$1680 annually for water. Genessee County, where Flint is located, has a child poverty rate of 33 percent.

The Kids Count data for Detroit, America's poorest big city for more than a decade, are staggering. In 2014, 57.1 percent of Detroit children officially lived in poverty, an increase of 29 percent over 2006. Eighty-one percent lived in high-poverty neighborhoods. Ninety-four percent were insured by Medicaid, meaning they live in households with annual incomes less than 133 percent of the poverty level (\$32,252 for a family of four). Detroit's confirmed victims of child neglect and abuse rose 42 percent between 2006 and 2014.

The year 2014 saw the conclusion of the Detroit bankruptcy, the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, in which the pensions of city workers were looted, and city assets and services were hived off and privatized in order to pay back the banks and wealthy bond holders who control the city. These cuts were rolled out as the Kids Count study concluded and their effects are not yet reflected in the data. Future Kids Count reports for Detroit will no doubt show even more devastating child impoverishment and well-being figures.

The central economic event in the period of 2006-2014 was the financial crash of 2008. In the years since, 95 percent of income gains nationally have gone to the richest one percent of the population, while most of the population has not recovered from the "Great Recession," which officially ended in 2009. Late last year the labor-force participation rate fell to a 38-year low of 62.4 percent.

Democratic President Barack Obama, in office for six of the eight years covered by the study, has pursued a program that includes multi-trillion-dollar bail outs for the banks and financial institutions coupled with devastating attacks on the wages, pensions, health care, and billions in cuts to social programs for the working

class and poor.

Obama has been aided by the trade unions, which have fought to stifle working class opposition to attacks on their living standards, particularly in Michigan, a historic center of auto manufacturing. In 2009, as a condition of the auto bailout Obama cut the wages of Big Three new-hires in half, and in 2015 the UAW resorted to ballot-stuffing, breaking their own by-laws, and hiring a public relations firm to impose another sellout contract upon autoworkers.



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