

Report highlights shocking growth of poverty among US infants during the pandemic

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Childhood advocacy organization Zero to Three recently released its annual *State of Babies Yearbook: 2021*. The report paints a grim picture of how most of America's infants fared in 2020, both prior to and during the pandemic.

State of Babies Yearbook: 2021 opens with a clear and vitally important statement: "Telling the story of America's babies is more important than ever... even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the littlest among us did not have the supports they need to thrive."

The statistics are jarring. Twenty-one percent of babies now live in households where there is no working parent. More than 40 percent of babies in the US now live in households near or below the federal poverty line (FPL). The report notes, "Infants and toddlers represent only 3.5 percent of the nation's population [...] but 6 percent of those in poverty."

The precarious welfare of American babies begins before birth; nationwide, 6.2 percent of mothers either receive no prenatal care or receive it late in their pregnancy. In some states, that rate nearly doubles. In New Mexico, for example, the rate is 11.3 percent.

During the time examined by Zero to Three, the United States continued to lead the industrialized world in maternal mortality rates, with 17.4 deaths per 100,000 mothers. Given that many US states do not provide extensive maternal mortality data, this rate could be much higher. Infant mortality has remained unchanged in the US with 5.7 deaths per 1,000 live births. Like the prenatal care rates, the infant mortality rate varies widely between states; in Mississippi, it rises to a shocking 8.3 deaths per 1,000 live births.

The vast wealth of the American ruling class has not produced better living conditions for the country's smallest and most vulnerable residents. According to the report, the US ranked 33rd for childhood poverty

among 37 wealthy countries between 2018-19.

While Zero to Three clarifies that households with infants struggled prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, its 2021 yearbook shows a precipitous drop in most measures of infant health and well-being, with the sharpest losses experienced by low-income families.

The pandemic interrupted the availability of food and caused the rate of food insecurity to spike. Fifteen percent of US families reported high food insecurity prior to the pandemic, increasing to 26.8 percent in the past year. Food insecurity for low income families rose from 29.2 percent pre-pandemic to a staggering 45.4 percent today.

Widespread unemployment increased the numbers of families eligible for programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs. At the same time, WIC participation by eligible families fell from 85.9 percent to 79.3 percent during the pandemic.

The pandemic has also disrupted health care for low-income families, with the percentage that missed well-baby or well-child visits more than tripling to 37.8 percent during the pandemic. This has resulted in 18.1 percent of families reporting missed vaccines for their children.

Before the pandemic, access to affordable, quality child care eluded most American families, particularly low-income families. Since the pandemic, closure of child care facilities has made access even more scarce. This has, in turn, affected employment. Fifty percent of parents who had not returned to the workforce by October cited lack of child care. According to Zero to Three's data, 82.6 percent of such families were denied unemployment benefits.

Parents who work from home often care for an infant

or toddler while working. In many cases, they also oversee older children's online schooling. As a result, the report claims, "parents are forced to prioritize financial responsibilities and basic needs over engaging their young child in activities that boost early childhood learning and cognitive development."

State of Babies Yearbook's admirable work is weakened by its insistence upon a racist analysis and conclusions. "Simply stated," they write, "race matters." According to them, maternal and infant mortality and morbidity variations can "only" be understood through the lens of race. In fact, the disparities cited correlate more strongly with wealth, with poor states and rural populations over-represented in maternal and infant mortality.

The alarming statistics facing American infants can only be understood properly as the product of the accelerated decay of capitalism. Racism certainly exists in the United States, but it exists in service to capitalism, not vice-versa.

The bourgeoisie inevitably use such racist formulations to triage social spending under a pretense of progressivism. Instead of policies that further social equality, the bourgeoisie instead creates an equity of poverty among American workers.

The Biden administration's American Rescue Plan (ARP), signed into law on March 11, is one such feint. In a statement on the White House's website, the Biden administration shamelessly panders to identity politics, claiming that the exodus of women from the labor force due to child care deficiencies is "undoing decades of progress improving women's labor force participation rate."

These "decades of progress" benefited the upper layers of the middle class and the bourgeoisie at the expense of workers. In 1996, Biden voted for the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which forced hundreds of thousands of poor women to either stop working or to work for poverty wages without child care.

The ARP has been hailed by the pseudo-left and liberal press because it contains \$39 billion in one-time funding for child care supports, in addition to other short-term stimulus programs. This funding, totally inadequate to address the immense crisis detailed in the *State of Babies* report, is itself a theatrical flourish. These funds will be pared down to laughable amounts,

which Biden knows and counts upon. The proposed credits for child care will primarily benefit the more well-off layers of the middle class, who can afford to pay for child care up front, instead of the many poorly-paid "essential workers" who were forced out of the labor pool by lack of child care.

As the *State of Babies* report demonstrates, America's smallest and most helpless are in increasingly precarious straits. This will not be remedied by social programs that prioritize race in the name of equity, and it will not be remedied by Biden's grandstanding. The lives and well-being of children worldwide depend upon the unified intervention of the only revolutionary force in society—the international working class—fighting for the socialist overturn of society and the achievement of genuine social equality on a world scale.



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