

The Face of Poverty in the Coulee Region

Poverty has many faces and those affected by poverty encounter a wide range of barriers. Too often, people in poverty are invisible to us. We live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same schools and parishes, but are unaware of each other's struggles. Since 1966, Couleecap, a local community action agency, has been fighting poverty and promoting self-sufficiency for residents of the Coulee Region.

In 2008, the federal government classifies a family of four as "living in poverty" if its gross cash income is less than \$21,200; for a family of three, \$17,600; for a family of two, \$14,000; and for an individual, \$10,400. The biggest obstacle to opportunity is poverty. Despite hard work, too many Wisconsin families do not have access to jobs that pay enough to rise above the poverty line. They do not have sufficient access to key supports like affordable housing and healthcare. All families deserve a chance at the American dream - work that pays a living wage, safe and healthy communities in which to raise their children, and access to affordable, high-quality health and childcare.

Children and Poverty

According to the 2006 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 13.5 million children in the United States—18.3% of all children—live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. In Wisconsin, approximately 196,000 children (14.9%) live in poverty.

In Couleecap's four-county service area, (Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties), more than 8,300 children (17.5%) under the age of 18, live at or below the poverty line. The following table lists U.S. Census Bureau 2005 Estimates poverty data for Crawford, Monroe, and Vernon counties, as well as the 2006 American Community Survey data for La Crosse County. All of the percentages are based on the total population of each county.

	Crawford	La Crosse	Monroe	Vernon	Total Area
Number of Persons in Poverty	1,866 (11.4%)	14,770 (14.1%)	4,582 (11.0%)	4,494 (15.8%)	25,712 (12.9%)
Number of Children under 18 in Poverty	614 (16.2%)	4,032 (17.2%)	1,838 (17.3%)	1,818 (25.5%)	8,302 (17.5%)

Impact of Poverty on Children

Children in poverty face extreme disadvantages. Living in poverty can impede a child's ability to learn and can also contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and those who experience long-term poverty. Childhood poverty has both immediate and lasting negative effects. Children in low-income families fare less well than children in more affluent families, especially in the areas of economic security, health, and education. Children living in poverty are more likely to live in inadequate, crowded, or costly housing; they are more likely to experience hunger and/or have a poor diet; and they are more likely to have limited or no access to health insurance or regular health care, as compared to children who live in more affluent families.

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to a child's well-being. Reducing poverty must be a priority for Wisconsin and for our region. Effective public policies—to increase wages for working parents and to provide quality early care and learning experiences for their children—can make a difference.

Fewer children in poverty will mean more children entering school ready to learn and improved academic achievement, better child health and less strain on hospitals and public health systems, less stress on the juvenile justice system, and less child hunger and malnutrition. The Wisconsin Vision 2020 campaign is one initiative that is making a difference in the lives of children and families living in poverty.

Vision 2020

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF), the Wisconsin Head Start Association, and the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association (WISCAP) have joined forces for one common mission, one shared hope: the end of child poverty by 2020. The Vision 2020 campaign is designed to call attention to housing, health care, education, and economic issues that affect low-income families. There are four goals to the campaign:

- Ensuring access to health care, including dental and mental health care, which are much more difficult to get because of insurance caps on mental health care and reimbursement for dentists that is so low most dentists don't provide care for patients on state medical assistance.
- Ensuring quality early childhood education, including child care and after-school programs.
- Expanding access to affordable and safe housing including the creation of a statewide housing trust to support initiatives throughout the state to expand the amount of affordable housing available.
- Promoting worker skills and creating jobs that support families.

Locally, the Poverty Council in La Crosse County is working with the Vision 2020 campaign. Couleecap's Executive Director, Grace Jones, and one of Couleecap's La Crosse County Board members, Jill Billings, serve on this council, along with many other key community representatives.

Each of us has the power to help people rise out of poverty. Here are some ways you can get involved in your community:

- Make a donation to Couleecap's People Helping People Initiative. Your donation will be used to help low-income families buy: gas to get to work, books and supplies for school, as well as food and household necessities.
- Increase affordable housing by joining a local housing coalition.
- Help preschool children by assisting in a Head Start classroom.
- Support and vote for local elected officials who care about poverty issues.
- Educate yourself about poverty issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some informative websites include: Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP) – www.wiscap.org; Couleecap – www.couleecap.org; Institute for Research on Poverty – www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp; Wisconsin Vision 2020 – www.2020wi.org; and National Center for Children in Poverty – www.nccp.org.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage, more assistance for child care, more assistance with healthcare costs, and more assistance with transportation costs, so working families can get out of poverty.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency for people in the Coulee Region. Our four-county service area includes Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. For more than 42 years, we have been helping low-income people build on their strengths and become more self-sufficient. We currently operate over 40 programs regarding housing, family and youth services, and emergency services. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 10,000 people work towards self-sufficiency. For more information about our People Helping People Initiative or to make a donation, contact Couleecap's Development Coordinator, Kadie Brueggen, at 608-634-7363 or Kadie.Brueggen@couleecap.org.

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