



The Increase in Childhood Poverty in Wisconsin: An Alarming Trend

During 2002, approximately 32 million Americans will live in poverty, with children suffering the highest rate of any age group. Almost 12 million of our children will experience hunger this year. In the world's most materially prosperous nation, a decade-long trend continues. The rich are getting richer and the poor (many of whom are children) are slipping further into poverty. For a family of three, gross income below \$15,000 meets the federal poverty guidelines.

There are approximately 1,351,044 children, under the age of 18, living in the State of Wisconsin. Of those children, approximately 13.9%, or 187,795 children, live in poverty.

- In 1977, 4.6% of working families with children lived in poverty, however in 1997, 8.9% of working families with children lived in poverty.
- In 1979, the state's child poverty rate was fifth lowest among all states, while a decade later it ranked 22nd.
- Between 1979 and 1997, the poverty rate for children in Wisconsin increased 50%, exceeding the national average.
- From 1988 to 1998, Wisconsin is the only state among the six midwestern states that posted an increase in poverty.
- In 1990, Wisconsin children were one and half times more likely to be poor than Wisconsin adults.
- The poverty rate for Wisconsin's Asian American children is the highest in the nation while the state's rate for poverty among African American children is exceeded only by the poverty rate for African American children in Louisiana. Wisconsin has the worst poverty rate in the nation for African American children under the age of five.
- In 1990, 9.8% of the state's white children were living in poverty. In contrast, 32.6% of the state's Hispanic American children, 44.6% of the state's American Indian children, 48.1% of the state's Asian American children, and 54.1% of the state's African American children were living in poverty at that time.

Poverty is not only a problem of the city; it exists and remains largely hidden in rural Wisconsin. There are approximately 48,655 children, under the age of 18, living in Coulee CAP's four-county service area (Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon Counties). Of those children, approximately 15.73% live in poverty. The following chart shows a break down of the percent of children living in poverty in each of those counties:

County	Total County Population	Total Population of Children (under age 18)	Percent of Children (under age 18) Living in Poverty	Total Number of Children (under age 18) Living in Poverty
Crawford	17,243	4,681	15.8%	740
La Crosse	107,120	25,200	13.7%	3,452
Monroe	40,899	11,432	15.8%	1,806
Vernon	28,056	7,342	17.6%	1,292
Total	193,318	48,655	15.73% average	7,290

Children in poverty face extreme disadvantages. Poor children are more likely to die before their first birthday, experience behavior and emotional problems, suffer from poor health, drop out of school, engage in substance abuse, become a teen parent, and experience higher unemployment.

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 food insecurity with hunger and have a poor diet; and they are more likely to not have access to health insurance or regular health care, as compared to children who live in more affluent families.

A growing population of children living in poverty is threatening our state's future. Reducing poverty must be a priority for the State and for our region. 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, less child hunger and malnutrition, and other important advances.

If enough of us allow compassion to guide our decisions, we can begin turning this trend around. It doesn't require great individual sacrifices. Here are some things you and your family can do to help decrease the number of children living in poverty:

- Support government policies and private efforts that attempt to realize the inherent purpose of a society – to care for all its members.
- Contact your local politicians with your concerns regarding children living in poverty.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage so working families can get out of poverty. For instance, according to the US Department of Labor, if minimum wage had been increased to account for inflation from 1970, it should now be \$7.10 instead of \$5.15.
- Advocate for improving Badger Care enrollment and eligibility requirements.
- If you are fortunate, spend less on your own luxuries and give more to meet the basic needs of others, whether that giving comes as money or time.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.
- Sponsor a family living in poverty in your community through a local non-profit organization.
- Volunteer for an organization that operates child/youth programs so you can make a difference in a child's life.

Author: Shelly Teadt, Coulee CAP Planner

References

Chard, Philip, 2002. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

Child Poverty in Wisconsin, 2002. National Center for Children in Poverty.

Child Well-Being in Wisconsin, 1996. Wisconsin Education Association Council.

Dresser, L. and Rogers, J., 2000. *The State of Working Wisconsin*. University of Wisconsin Madison: Center on Wisconsin Strategy.

Minimum Wage Statistics, 2001. US Department of Labor.

US Census Bureau, 1990 and 2000.

Wisconsin Community Action Program Association, 2001.

WISKIDS Count Data Books, 2000 and 2001. Annie E. Casey Foundation.