

Poverty and Income inequality: The Devastating Social Conditions of American Children

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The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) has released a report detailing the significant deterioration in the social conditions of children in the US since the onset of the recession. Focusing primarily on the years 2008-2010, "[The State of America's Children: 2011](#)," examines in depth the social calamity facing the youngest segment of society in all aspects of life.

These conditions are the result of a tremendous growth of social inequality, combined with a governmental assault on social programs in recent decades by politicians of both big-business parties. For society's youngest members, this finds expression in the growth of poverty and hunger, attacks on education and welfare programs, and an increase in violence and abuse.

The CDF report presents stark indices in various areas of social life. To cite one example: infant mortality rates for minority children in the United States rank behind the overall infant mortality rates in countries such as Costa Rica and Thailand; low infant birth weight occurrences happen more often in the US than in Nigeria and Kazakhstan.

The report draws the conclusion that families "have become more fragile as jobs are lost, unemployment compensation has been reduced, public assistance and public health programs restrict access, housing foreclosures continue and affordable housing becomes scarcer."

Poverty, income inequality, unemployment

The CDF report notes the tremendous growth of social inequality in America. Since the late 1970s, the incomes of the bottom 90 percent of the population have stagnated or declined, while the incomes of the top one percent in particular—the ultra-rich—have soared.

In 2008, the average income for the bottom 90 percent of US households was at its lowest level in more than a decade. In the face of this growth of poverty, however, income assistance programs have been slashed and are ill-equipped to deal with the serious rise in social need.

One in five children—or 15.5 million—officially lived in poverty in 2009. Almost half of these children, 6.9 million, live in conditions of extreme poverty, described as an annual income of less than half of the poverty level (\$11,025 for a family of four).

Benefits provided by the federal block grant program TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) leave many poor families and children destitute. TANF, signed into law under the

Democratic administration of Bill Clinton in 1997, replaced the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, which was originally created as part of the New Deal in 1935.

Clinton's pledge at the time that TANF would end "welfare as we know it" has been borne out in the form of increased poverty and suffering. According to the CDF report, in nearly two-thirds of US states, TANF benefits in 2009 were less than half the 1970 AFDC real dollar amount.

A recent Center for Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) report detailed the systematic erosion of the TANF program. Due to inflation, a person receiving benefits today can only purchase 58 percent of what he or she could when the program was first adopted.

The same CBPP report noted that since the onset of the 2008 recession the number of cases adopted by the program has been disproportionate to need. Whereas programs such as food stamps have increased caseloads by nearly 45 percent since 2007, TANF caseloads have risen by only about 10 percent in the same time period.

"The State of America's Children" also shows that with general unemployment rates remaining high at more than 9 percent, youth are unemployed in record numbers. African-American youth ages 16-19 suffered the highest unemployment numbers at roughly 43 percent. Even this number is likely an underestimation, as many jobless young people go uncounted.

Child health and medical care

Among the 30 most industrially advanced countries, the United States finished second to last in terms of infant mortality rates, as well as in occurrences of low birth weight. Out of every 1,000 child births, an estimated 7 children die, a figure that places the US in the company of states in Eastern Europe with virtually collapsed economies.

Hunger and poor nutrition are cited as the leading causes of low birth weight and infant mortality. The effect this has on the quality of life for children is extensive, leading to mental defects and poor education performance, among other problems.

The unavailability of nutritious foods and/or the inability to purchase them have also led to record levels of overweight and obese children. Nearly a third of all US children are considered either overweight or obese. Black and Hispanic children ages 6 to 19 are nearly 26 percent more likely to be either overweight or obese than children overall.

The study shows that American Indian and Hispanic children are the most likely to be uninsured medically: 18.3 percent for American Indians, 17.5 for Hispanics. The concentration of these populations in Southwestern states like California and Texas cause these states to have the highest ratios of uninsured children.

Hunger and nutritional support

One in seven Americans receives food stamp benefits (SNAP). Three-quarters of these recipients are families with children. In 2009, an estimated 15.6 million children received food stamps each month, an increase of 65 percent in only a decade.

In 2010, nearly 32 million children received free or reduced price lunches through the National School Lunch Program. However, only one in nine poor children who participate in the lunch program during the school year is reached by the Summer Food Service Program.

Almost 9 million women and children participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). While the number of participants has increased by 800,000 since the start of the recession, this program is now targeted for cutbacks in state budgets across the country.

Access to quality childcare and education

About 70 percent of mothers with children under the age of six are in the workforce, but access to affordable, quality childcare and early childhood care is extremely limited. For example, in 33 states and Washington DC, the annual cost of center-based childcare for a four-year-old child is more than the annual cost of in-state tuition at a public four-year university.

Among the 30 countries studied by CDF, the US ranked 24th in overall educational achievement for 15-year-olds. One indication of the low premium government authorities place on the education of its young people is the following statistic: the US spends almost two and a half times as much per prisoner in prisons and jails across the country than per public school pupil.

Child abuse, violence and youth incarceration

According to the Children's Defense Fund, a child is abused or neglected in America every 42 seconds, a further expression of the consequences of poverty and lack of social programs. An estimated 1,161 children enter foster care each day, remaining there for more than two years on average. In 2009, more than 29,000 youth aged out of foster care at age 18 or older.

Each night, an estimated 87,000 youth are housed in facilities ranging from community-based juvenile youth homes to long-term youth prisons. An additional 10,000 youth are in adult prisons or jails serving sentences or awaiting trial. Minority youth make up about two-thirds of the youth in the juvenile justice system.

The CDF report notes: "The 3,042 deaths of children and teens from gunfire in 2007 alone nearly equaled the total number of US combat deaths in Iraq through July 2011 (3,480)."

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