

One in seven Wisconsin kids lives in poverty, report says

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By [Bill Glauber](#) and [Ben Poston](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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One in seven children in Wisconsin and nearly 11% of the state's population - more than a half-million people - lived in poverty in 2007, according to a [University of Wisconsin-Madison report](#) released Monday (The First Wisconsin Poverty Report).

The numbers are particularly ominous because they measure poverty before the economic recession took hold, said Timothy Smeeding, director of the Institute for Research on Poverty, which authored the report. With the state's unemployment rate doubling in the past year, the rate today likely is worse. The 2007 poverty numbers are already an increase of more than 2 percentage points since the 2000 U.S. Census, from 8.7% to 10.8%.

Further, food stamp enrollment has increased across the state in the past two years, with some counties showing 50% increases, the report says.

"Yes, central Milwaukee is in trouble. We know that," Smeeding said. "Rock County is in trouble. The Superior area is in trouble. Those are places where we have high poverty and growing food stamp enrollment."

The report used the most recent census data available for poverty levels statewide and enrollment data in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for low-income residents.

Food stamps are a leading indicator of poverty because they "go to people who are needy, you have to apply and it is a major safety-net program," Smeeding said.

Since 2007, Wisconsin SNAP enrollments rose substantially as economic conditions worsened, the report found. Enrollments statewide grew by 37% through March, rising in every county and demographic category, the report says.

"The big thing that struck me is how fast need is growing across the state," Smeeding said.

Highest rate

According to the report, the three areas with the highest poverty rates for all individuals were Milwaukee County (17.3%); a 10-county region in northwestern Wisconsin near Lake Superior (14.4%); and Rock County (12.8%). Meanwhile, Waukesha County had the lowest poverty rate with 3.7%.

Milwaukee County showed a wide variation in poverty rates, ranging from 40% in Milwaukee's central city to 5.4% around Brown Deer and Whitefish Bay.

Wisconsin's child poverty rate of 14.4% ranked 37th nationally, according to the report. Compared with neighboring states, the child poverty rate here is below Michigan's (19.4%) and Illinois' (16.6%), but higher than Minnesota's (12%) and Iowa's (13.6%).

The United Way of Greater Milwaukee created an initiative in 2005 called "Breaking the Cycle of Poverty," aimed at doing just that. It focuses on five components: early childhood education,

job training, homeownership, post-secondary education and teen pregnancy prevention.

In the past year, the United Way spent almost \$1.1 million to fund seven employment agencies and five early education programs as part of the initiative, said Nicole Angresano, the United Way's vice president of community impact.

Nearly one in four residents in the city of Milwaukee lived in poverty in 2007, according to census data. The city had the seventh-highest poverty rate - 24.4% - among places with a population of more than 250,000 that year.

Angresano said the goal is to get Milwaukee off the top-10 list for the nation's most impoverished cities.

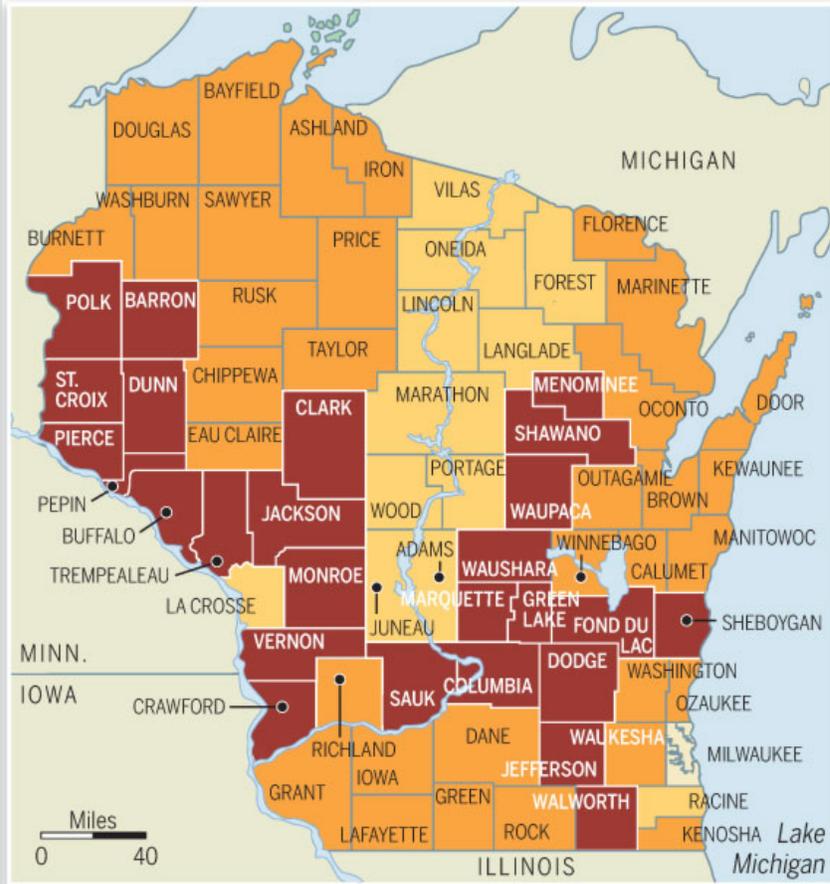
"We are seeing so many new cases of poverty," she said. "People who had an income that carried them above the poverty line may not have that income anymore. As a community, we need a comprehensive anti-poverty initiative."

Food assistance program grows

Since 2007, Wisconsin Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program enrollments have risen substantially, according to the Wisconsin Poverty Report. Enrollments for the low-income food assistance program grew by 37% statewide through March, rising in every county and demographic category.

Increase in SNAP recipients from January – March 2007 to January – March 2009

20 – 30%
 30 – 40%
 40 – 50%
 MORE THAN 50%



Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty

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