

# Efforts to Rescue Children from Poverty in the United States

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## Introduction

Most people would agree that the protection of our children is a priority for citizens of all countries. Those children living in poverty will need even more protection. According to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), "nearly 13 million children live in poverty" across the wealthiest country in the world, the United States of America" (CDF 2008). This analysis will look at the trends and data on children who are caught in this web of misery and how it affects us as a society and answer the question: Are we making progress in our efforts to reduce child poverty in our own country? Also, we will consider how poverty is affecting another economic superpower, Japan which has the image of a country with a society that is middle class in nature and not prone to suffering the strain of poverty in its own backyard. The CDF uses information provided by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) to provide basic facts on the numbers of children who are currently living in low income families.

The implications of this problem will be discussed with consideration given to the affect on both countries, the implications for the future and on a personal level, the significance for the writer, working in higher education in Japan as those children who become young adults struggle to find the resources to attend university which will help them to make a better life for themselves than their parents.

According to current figures there are over 73 million children living in the United States. Of these children 61% are living above the low income level while 39% are living at the federal poverty level (FPL). Of this 39% the FPL calculates that 28.8 million children live in "low-income families" while another 13.2 million children live in "poor families". The FPL as of 2008 is defined as an income of \$21,200 or less for a family of four, \$17,600 for a family of three and \$14,000 for a family of two. The research provided by the CDF suggests that the poverty level income provides only half of what a typical family requires to meet its most basic needs. Currently the CDF refers to the following family groups as being at the low income level:

**\$42,400 for a family of 4.**

**\$35,200 for a family of 3**

**\$28,000 for a family of 2**

The figures provided above approximate the average minimum income but this does not show that actual expenses will vary by locality.

#### **How have the numbers of low-income families changed over time?**

<b>Year</b>	<b>% of children living in low-income families</b>
2007	39.1%
2006	39.1%
2005	39.0%
2004	39.2%
2003	39.0%
2002	38.2%
2001	38.1%
2000	37.5%
1999	38.7%
1998	40.0%
1997	41.3%

The NCCP estimates that after a decade of decline, from 1990 the proportion of children living in low-income families is increasing again, a trend that began in 2000.

#### **Regional Trends in child poverty**

The U.S. Census Bureau keeps statistics on poverty and income in the United States. State by state trends show that 26 states saw an increase in the percentage of children living in poverty from 2006 to 2007 with another three states holding steady on the number. Of these states nine of them saw increases in poverty in both of the last two years. The state with the biggest increase in child poverty was South Carolina which saw an increase from 15.6% to 21% . Some of the largest states such as New York, Texas and Ohio had child poverty rates higher than the national average as of 2007. The state with the highest poverty rate for children was Mississippi with 32.8% of children living below the poverty level and while the percentage is four points better than the previous year Mississippi was also the state with the highest child poverty rate in 2006. The state with the lowest poverty rate, New Hampshire, was unchanged from 2006 to 2007 although it has had an increase of about one percent in those two years. A First Focus report on children in poverty summarized regional trends in this way: "States in the South tend to have higher rates of poverty than the rest of the country. As we have seen above, Mississippi tops the list followed by Texas. Indeed, among the ten states with the highest rates of child poverty, all but one is south of the Ohio River (the exception being Missouri). Furthermore, only Florida and Virginia

have the distinction of being southern states with child poverty rates lower than the national rate. On the other hand, the states with the lowest poverty rates are much less clustered. New Hampshire and Vermont both enjoy child poverty rates below 11% , but so do Alaska and New Jersey” (First Focus:1). States that have had a consistent high poverty rate among children need to have more resources allotted to them to allow them to help the children escape the poverty that has been forced upon them.

#### The Poverty Status of People by Age and Race (U.S Census Bureau)

All races (numbers in thousands)

Year	All people under 18	Number Below the Poverty Level	%
2008	74,068	14,068	19%
2007	73,966	13,324	18%
2006	73,727	12,827	17.4%
2005	73,285	12,896	17.6%
2004	73,241	13,041	17.8%
2003	72,999	12,866	17.6%
2002	72,696	12,133	16.7%
2001	72,021	11,733	16.3%
2000	71,741	11,587	16.2%
1999	71,685	12,280	17.1%

The above figures provided by the United States Census Bureau show a dramatic increase in the last ten years in the percentage of those children who are living below the poverty level. These figures correspond with those provided by the Children’s Defense Fund. We can see that the numbers take a slight drop in 2000-2001 but then begin a steady climb to over 14 million children in the year 2008. The figures given by the Census Bureau confirm the findings of the CDF and go on to provide an even more grim view as we are able to view more than just percentage points but actual numbers which we must remember are actual children not just statistics. The trend toward an increase in these numbers will mean that more resources will need to be provided to help these children and families in need. As we see the steady climb in the number of children in need it leaves us to question how successful we are being in efforts to raise these children out of poverty in into a more comfortable living situation where they can become more successful and happier individuals in the society.

#### What are the family characteristics of low-income children?

Figures from 2007 show that 55% (15.7 million) of children in low income families have at least one parent who works full time, while 26% (7.6 million) have at least one parent who works part-time, full-time or part-year, and 19% (5.5 million) do not have

an employed parent. Of those children in low-income families the percentage of those in single-parent situations is greater than those where both parents are present by 54% to 46%. Also, a disproportionate number of young children under the age of 6 (43%) live in low income families.

In terms of ethnicity, the largest group of children who are in low income families are 26% of white children (10.9 million) with 61% of Latino children (9.4), 60% of black children (6.5 million), 30% of Asian children (0.9) and 57% of American Indian children (0.3). The white children make up the largest group of low-income children but from these statistics we can clearly see that American Indian, Latino and Black children make up a disproportionately high number in these groups. In relation to ethnicity an important consideration must be whether the child has been born in America. Of the children in low-income families, 58% are children of immigrant parents (7.4 million) while 35% are children of native born parents (20.2 million). Therefore while the percentage is highest for the children of immigrant parents the highest numbers are for those children who have parents who were born in the United States.

The location of where these children live has also been examined and results show that 43% of children (11.7 million) in the south live in low-income families, while 39% of children (7.0 million) in the west do so, 35% of children in the northeast (4.3 million) and 36% of children in the Midwest (5.8 million) are living in low-income families. These children are not limited to one type of area as 49% of low income children (9.7 million) live in urban areas, with 31% living in suburban areas (9.8 million) and 46% of children living in rural areas (5.2 million)

These statistics show that the plight of children can not be limited to any one geographical area, urban or suburban living situations or parentage of the children under the scourge of poverty.

### Health and Welfare

We have seen here two sets of figures on the state of child poverty in America. We have seen that there is a clear difference in the numbers of children in poverty depending upon location and ethnicity. According to *An Atlas of Poverty in America: One Nation Pulling Apart* by Glasmeier the above figures can be confirmed. "Although children of color are more likely to live in poverty, the largest number of poor children are non-Hispanic white and their numbers are growing" (Glasmeier 2006:6). Glasmeier points out one glaring fact not indicated on any figures above. "For children, being poor often means lacking access to basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter and health care.

One in seven children in the United States does not have health care. Almost 25% of children in Texas and New Mexico are not covered by health care. Children living in poverty more likely to lack the required childhood vaccinations compared with non-

poor children” (Glasmeier 2006:6). This is in stark contrast to the country I reside in, Japan. In Japan government implemented health insurance helps provide health care to all citizens (and non-citizens as well) which of course would include all children. The health insurance program in Japan requires that patients pay 20% of their health costs with the rest being paid through the insurance system. There is also a “High Cost Medical Care Benefit” which provides the balance when health care costs exceed ¥63,000 (about \$630). (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs). This makes the current situation in such states as Texas all the more disturbing. It may be recommended that the insurance scheme of Japan be investigated by American states so that successful aspects of the program can be instituted by states suffering from these problems.

Welfare and welfare reform has also had its influence on these numbers. “The Reagan administration did not have a mandate to cut federal social programs but there was one program the voters disliked almost as much as the conservatives did: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The number of families on welfare climbed 40% in the 1970’s but since the size of welfare families shrank, the number of people on the rolls increased by 10%. Still, 11 million people on welfare were too much for some” (Stricker 2007:193). Government action or inaction will also have an influence on the numbers we have seen above. Children who are forced into the welfare ranks along with their parents.

## Conclusion

The results retrieved here show a disturbing trend of greatly increased child poverty in the United States. An increase of almost two million children added to the list of those in poverty can be seen in the ten year period beginning in 1999 and ending in 2008. While a decrease in the numbers was seen in the years 1999-2000, the number began rising again the following year. Adding to this misery is the lack of adequate health care which is available to all children in Japan but is greatly lacking in complete coverage of children in America. The implications of these results are that the country as a whole will be supporting more and more children who will not be able to take advantage of educational opportunities that their more wealthy countrymen receive. This leads to a cycle of poverty within communities that will continue unabated unless something more is done to protect these children and the parents who are struggling to care for them.

The significance to the work of the writer still exists but has changed over the thirty years. In the first year of work experience at a Head Start Center in the city of Boston, it was quite clear how the poor were struggling to help their children go on to lead happier and better lives. Children were able to benefit from early childhood education and the meals that were provided while attending kindergarten at that inner-city school. Children were sometimes dropped off at school only to be left there until

early in the evening because parents were unable to leave work which they desperately needed. The children under the care of the Head Start program experienced long days which usually began with being dropped off by their overly stressed parents at 7:00am. The long day of 7:00 to 5:00 was followed by waiting for those parents to come to take their children home. Teachers at the school were often left to wait with the children, trying to keep them entertained until someone came to bring them home.

Two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer on the island of Ponape in the Eastern Caroline Islands (Micronesia) served as an awareness check for a young person who had not lived within such poverty but was able to experience it first hand. Fortunately, we all know that this is just a temporary experience of two years and that after that it becomes a memory that stays with you the rest of your life. In this instance, however poverty is a difficult term to define. By western standards the majority of people on the island of Ponape appeared to be in poverty but in actual fact the people whom this writer encountered experienced very little of what we might call poverty by our western standards. People lived with no electricity (except in the center main city of Kolonia, which while having electricity, it was unreliable). This meant keeping food fresh in extremely hot and humid conditions, which was next to impossible. Awareness of the plight of the people of Micronesia was something of a mystery. Although, the United States was trying to help the people, there seemed to be an incredible lack of awareness of the conditions that the average Ponapean was living in. An American government official speaking on a flight from Honolulu to Guam told me of his difficult task of getting food to the starving people of Ponape. In the two years that was spent on the island I never encountered people who I thought were starving. Indeed, the parents in the family I lived with weighed well in excess of two hundred pounds. Food was quite plentiful as a variety of fruits and vegetables grew naturally in the hot conditions. Fishing was easy enough for anyone on the island to do. The greatest mystery however, was that while brown rice easily grew on the island, most people would not eat it as they were conditioned to eat white rice that was provided by the United States Government. This example shows how attitudes can interfere with the assistance provided to people who may be in need.

In the present working environment of a Japanese university, the students who struggle to make tuition payments as scholarships become harder to come by in a weaker economy helps all to realize that other superpowers have their own poverty issues to deal with even if they may not be as grim as those in the developing countries. Also, at work we, as language teachers try to introduce global issues to Japanese young people who are often unaware or greatly misinformed of the suffering of others. One such effort in Japan is through the Global Issues Special Interest Group in the Japan Association of Language Teachers which helps teachers to present such issues to students to stimulate their interest and hopefully their future activity in promoting such

global awareness. If the language teachers of Japan can help to make their students more aware of the children living in poverty in the world it will be helpful in spreading the understanding of the problem from Japan to elsewhere around the world.

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