

Voices for Vermont's Children

Promoting public policy that enhances the lives of children and youth in Vermont



Vermont Child Economic Well-Being

We must move children to the centre of the world's agenda. We must rewrite strategies to reduce poverty so that investments in children are given priority... Any country, any society, which does not care for its children is no nation at all.

- Nelson Mandela

There are so many Vermonters who are living in poverty or just kind of teetering on the brink. When you're going from paycheck to paycheck, anything can happen to disrupt whatever financial stability you have, and you're extremely vulnerable.

- Mary Carlson,
Food & Nutrition Programs,
Vt. Department of Children and Families

The signs are everywhere that child poverty is on the rise in Vermont:

- Emergency Food Shelf use by children increased by 7% between 2005 and 2008. Half of the people benefiting from food shelves are kids.
- Vermont matches the national average for the percent of children in low-income households that pay over 30% of income for housing.
- Home heating fuel, gasoline, health care and health insurance costs continue to rise.
- About 80 percent of uninsured children are eligible for Dr. Dynasaur, or more than 3,000.¹
- Vermont households have experienced a nearly threefold increase in the severest forms of hunger, where children are going to bed hungry. "Food insecurity with hunger" rose from 1.6% to 4.6%, from 2000 to 2007.²

Short on cash, out of gas, car needs repairs, kids are sick, boss takes no excuses, more month than money and too many mouths to feed, not enough to get by, pay the bills you can and hope the rent doesn't go up again. A lot of wishes, few dreams, and too much hopelessness. Too many of our children grow up in this kind of situation.

Fifteen years ago, Voices for Vermont's Children issued its first report on child poverty. Now, in a new century, as a weak economy, state budget crises, federal budget cuts and a growing deficit threaten programs for children and families —children and youth are even more at risk of poverty.

Children are the poorest age group in Vermont

A greater percentage of the child population lives below the poverty line compared to other Vermont age groups. In fact, the younger the person, the more likely he or she is to be living in poverty. 10% of adults aged 18-64 lived in poverty; 8% of adults 65 and older were poor; but over 12% of children under age 18 and nearly 16% of children under age five lived in poverty.

Selected Measures of Child Well-Being

		2007		
Child Population ³	% of Population	21.1%		
	Number	131,353		
Children under age 18 living in poverty. ⁴	Rate	12.4%		
	Number	15,894		
Children under age five living in poverty. ⁴	Rate	15.8%		
	Number	5,049		
Low-income children (below 200% of poverty). ⁴	Rate	32%		
	Number	41,000		
Children under age 18 participating in the Summer Food Program. ²	Rate	12.5%		
	Number	3,625		
2006				
2007				
Children receiving TANF (Reach-Up) benefits. ⁵	Rate	6.1%	6.4%	
	Number	8,174	8,024	
Children receiving Food Stamp benefits. ⁵	Rate	13.7%	14.6%	
	Number	18,409	19,356	
Children in low-income households where housing costs exceed 30% of income ⁴	Rate	66%	NA	
	Number	28,000	NA	
Children participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program. ²	Rate	21%	NA	
		2005	2006	2007
Children receiving Medicaid/Dr. Dynasaur benefits. ⁵	Rate	43.5%	43.6%	43.4%
	Number	59,247	58,647	57,608

What is “Poverty”?

Poverty is perhaps the single most powerful factor that can negatively influence brain development.

- National Center for
Children in Poverty

“Poverty” is generally understood to mean that a family income is not enough to cover basic living costs and needs.

The official federal poverty threshold, first established in 1964, is based on 1950’s family budget research that found families spent about one-third of their income on food. The federal government still calculates the basic living standard by multiplying the cost of an economy food budget by three, adjusting for size of household and annual changes in the cost of living.

Many researchers and policy analysts believe that standard is outdated. Food no longer takes up such a large proportion of a family budget, because other expenses have risen even faster — such as insurance, housing, fuel, and child care.

Vermont’s Basic Needs Budget, estimated for the legislature, found that food represented 16% of monthly expenses in 2008 — about half the 33% used in the federal calculation.

All data except Poverty, Homeless counts, Summer Food and Child and Adult Care Food Program, Child Care represent three-year averages.

Sources:

- 1 Vermont Department of Banking, Insurance, Securities, and Health Care Administration, 2008 VT Household Health Insurance Survey.
- 2 Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger.
- 3 Vermont Department of Health.
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates.
- 5 Vermont Agency of Human Services (AHS), Department of Children and Families.
- 6 AHS/Department of Children and Families. 2003, 2005, 2008 Surveys of Vermont Food Shelves and Community Kitchens.
- 7 AHS, Office of Economic Opportunity.
- 8 Vermont Department of Education.

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	2003	2005	2008
Children benefiting from Emergency Food Shelves monthly ⁶	9,451	11,437	12,287
Families with children benefiting from Food Shelves monthly ⁶	4,141	5,317	6,181
* Homeless children as % of homeless (FY08) ⁷		Rate	22.3%
		Number	773
School Meals Enrollment: Free & Reduced Participation. ⁸		Rate	30.9%
		Number	29,496

* The total number of homeless people is unknown; estimates show only a portion of the number. Recent Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) reports have found that people are staying in shelters longer, therefore, the actual head count of total people sheltered has declined, although the number of people needing shelter has not.

Rural Poverty

Poverty is not evenly distributed in Vermont. Although no child is immune from it, rural children are far more likely to live in poverty than children in more populated parts of the state. Vermont’s rural places are those that retain the best elements of our Green Mountain State—its independence, beauty, and strong family ties. But they also may show how isolation, and lack of access to good jobs, affordable and quality child care, social services, and medical care can create long-standing poverty. As the most rural region, the Northeast Kingdom consistently has the highest rates of child poverty, unemployment, low-wage jobs, and low educational achievement. More populated areas that have poverty rates nearly as high include Burlington, Winooski, and Bennington County.

*For every talent that poverty has stimulated,
it has blighted a hundred.*

-John W. Gardner

It doesn’t take long before even a young child knows that she or he is different because of their family income. Other kids see it in their clothes, the lunches they eat at school, their family’s car, the condition of their home, the part of town they live in. They might also see it in the way teachers and other adults relate to them. Kids can also figure it out from the stress they feel when their parents talk about bills, groceries, and toys and other things the kids want.

Poverty affects nearly every aspect of a child’s life, and through all the stages of their lives, if they remain in poverty. The earlier a child is affected by poverty, the more severe the effects.

Some of the more common effects of childhood poverty:

- Poor early health care (including lack of prenatal care) can lead to low

birthweight, premature birth, and malnourishment. Infants born with these conditions are at greater risk of failure to thrive, motor and cognitive delays, general poor health, and development of more serious health conditions.

- Lack of regular, good quality food can add to cognitive delays, lack of attention in school and behavior problems. It can also increase the risk of more frequent colds and other illnesses, as well as can be a contributor to anemia and other more serious medical problems.

- As children reach school age, they may be less able to meet the challenges of school if they are hungry and have less energy, miss school due to illnesses, and also may be depressed due to family financial worries or frequent moves and related school changes, due to lack of affordable housing.