



Officials wary poverty data not reflective of conditions

by John Howell
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Is the worst yet to come?

Those working for The Poverty Institute fear that could be the case after reviewing U.S. Census Bureau data released Tuesday. According to the bureau's American Community Survey, 11.7 percent of Rhode Islanders were living in poverty for 2008. That percentage reflecting almost 120,000 Rhode Islanders remains statistically unchanged from 2007. In Kent County 11,918 people or 7.17 percent of the population were recorded with income less than the poverty level. That is an increase from 5.7 percent in 2007.

"We expect the numbers will go up next year," said Rachel Flum, institute policy analyst. Flum and institute executive director Kate Brewster visited Beacon Communications Tuesday to discuss survey findings and to advocate for a more educated workforce.

KIDS COUNT, a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children, also closely watches the bureau's data.

"The drop in Rhode Island's child poverty rate is good news for Rhode Island," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director.

Census data indicate that the total number of Rhode Island children living in poverty decreased from 40,468 children under age 18 in 2007 to 34,816 children in 2008.

In a release issued by KIDS COUNT, Bryant said, "Given the current economy, it is important to note that the number of families living on the borderline of poverty has increased. These are families with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold who struggle to make ends meet. It is critical that as a state and as a nation we ensure that all families get the help they need to meet their children's basic needs during these difficult financial times."

The percentage of children living in families between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold in Rhode Island was 18.8 percent in 2008, an increase from 16.4 percent in 2007.

Brewster attributed extended unemployment benefits as enabling people who would otherwise fall into poverty to stay afloat. Yet, she warned those benefits will come to an end for 4,000 Rhode Islanders unless extended in December.

Federal recovery funds have also served to stabilize conditions, Flum said. She said that more than \$650 million is being distributed directly to Rhode Islanders in the form of food stamps, tax credits and other benefits.

Even should unemployment benefits be extended, Flum points to other indicators that more people are having difficulty getting ends to meet. She said that the use of food stamps has increased 25 percent statewide; that calls to United Way's 211 information line has experienced an increase in inquiries as how to apply for public benefits and that the Rhode Island Community Food Bank has seen an increase in demand.

Mayor Scott Avedisian doesn't expect a quick turn around in the levels of those living in poverty.

"I don't think we'll climb out of it for a while," he said yesterday. He notes that there has been a rise in the demand for food stamps, but adds because of the stigma attached to the program many elderly are not taking advantage of it. As a minimum, he said, every resident living in the city's housing for the elderly is eligible to receive \$10 in stamps a week.

But, he added, "It's hard to convince people that this is a nutrition program, not a poverty based program."

The Census Bureau data shows that the numbers of people living in poverty dropped about 2 percent to 14 percent in Providence County while increasing about 3 percent in Washington County to 8.2 percent. Rhode Island ranks 31st in the nation (with 1 being the worst) at 11.7 percent of poverty for 2008. The national percent of poverty is 13.2 percent.

Brewster believes the Rhode Island numbers are deceiving because of the high cost of living in the state. According to the institute's Rhode Island Standard of Need, which uses the costs of housing, food transportation, health care, child care and other basic necessities it costs a single parent \$47,352 to raise two children a year. The parent's earnings would need to be more than \$52,800 or nearly 300 percent of the federal poverty level. A two-parent household would need to earn \$58,300 to similarly meet a bare bones budget.

Brewster sees education as the means to reducing poverty levels.

"We really need to skill up workers," she said. Brewster said there are 150,000 people in the state in need of adult basic education. Addressing that issue she said would require an adequate funding formula for schools.