

# Poverty rate declines for R.I. children

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The child poverty rate in Rhode Island decreased significantly from 2005 to 2006, according to data released yesterday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Among Rhode Island children last year, 15.1 percent lived in households with income below the poverty level — defined by the federal government as \$16,242 for a family of three. The rate was 19.5 percent the previous year. The number of children living in poverty decreased by a quarter, from 46,894 to 35,456, the Census Bureau found.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count, was quick to hail the findings as “good news for Rhode Island families.”

The new numbers show Rhode Island beating the national average of 18.3 percent of children living in poverty. Also, Rhode Island no longer has the highest child poverty rate in New England. Maine’s rate is 17.6 percent, according to yesterday’s report. Rates in the other New England states were lower, ranging from 9.6 percent to 13.2 percent.

The improvement moves Rhode Island from 35th to 17th among states with the lowest incidence of child poverty.

The findings were part of a broad array of data on income, poverty and health-insurance coverage released by the Census Bureau yesterday.

The elderly in Rhode Island were also less likely than the national average to be living in poverty — 8.9 percent in Rhode Island, versus 9.9 percent nationally.

Among Rhode Islanders of all ages, the poverty rate was 11.1 percent, down from 12.3 percent the previous year — a difference that is not statistically significant, the Census Bureau said.

The national average for 2006 was 13.3 percent. Still, Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, called the Rhode Island numbers “unacceptably high” and said they “don’t tell the whole story.”

“The reality is that the federal definition of poverty is an inadequate measure of the number of Rhode Islanders who are unable to meet their basic needs,” Brewster said. She said the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Rhode Island — \$965 a month — would eat up nearly 60 percent of the income of a family of four living at the poverty level — \$20,650 for a family of that size.

Black and Hispanic Rhode Islanders were more likely to live in poverty: for both of those groups, the rate was 26 percent.

At \$51,814, Rhode Island's median household income was higher than the national median of \$48,451, but lower than median income in three other New England states: Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Hampshire.

In the realm of health insurance, too, Rhode Island did significantly better than the national average — 10.2 percent of Rhode Islanders lack health insurance, compared with 15.3 percent of all U.S. residents. Among states, Texas had the highest uninsured rate at 24.1 percent, and Minnesota had the lowest, 8.5 percent.

AMONG CHILDREN in Rhode Island, the percentage lacking health insurance remained at 6.4 percent, about half the national average of 11.7 percent.

Advocates used the data to bolster their calls to beef up state assistance programs for low-income residents.

“Rhode Island is clearly making progress,” said Burke Bryant of Kids Count. “We must continue to invest in quality childcare, early education and affordable health care for low-income families.”

Burke Bryant and Brewster praised Governor Carcieri and the General Assembly for increasing financing of adult-education and job-training programs, but criticized cuts to the childcare assistance program for low-income working parents. “Government work-support programs are a lifeline to making ends meet,” Brewster said.

Carcieri spokesman Jeff Neal echoed their support for adult education, but warned that the state's bleak fiscal prognosis may preclude expanding social-service programs, or even avoiding further cuts. With a projected deficit in the neighborhood of \$300 million if the state does not cut spending or raise taxes, the governor has already begun talks with his department heads about how to close that gap.

“Unfortunately, the state is facing yet another very difficult budget year,” Neal said. “Our primary challenge is to find ways to reduce state spending while continuing to protect our most vulnerable citizens.”

A new federal policy may also make it harder for Rhode Island to expand at least one social-service program.

The Bush administration notified state officials last week that they must get 95 percent of eligible children enrolled in what's known as the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or S-CHIP, a pool of federal money that finances states' programs — in Rhode Island's case, RItE Care.

RIte Care covers the state's poorest children with a different pot of federal money — Medicaid — “a program for people at the very lowest echelons of income,” says Mary Kahn, spokeswoman for the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. S-CHIP, in turn, “targets working families whose income is too high for Medicaid but not high enough to afford private-sector coverage,” Kahn said.

Under the new policy, states that fail to reach 95-percent enrollment will be barred from extending eligibility above 250 percent of the poverty level, or \$42,925 for a family of three. Kahn said that would affect 12 states — including New Jersey, where people can make up to 350 percent of poverty, or \$60,095 for a family of three, and still qualify for government-sponsored health insurance — but not Rhode Island, which cuts off eligibility at 250 percent.

A bill introduced by Senate Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva Weed this year would have expanded eligibility to 300 percent of poverty and allowed families to buy insurance for their children through the program regardless of income level. “We’re hopeful that will be introduced again next year,” said Kids Count deputy director Catherine Boisvert Walsh.

Before implementing such a change, Rhode Island would need to boost enrollment. Among children eligible for RIte Care, 87 percent are enrolled, according to Walsh. Rhode Island is closer to the goal than the national average of 72 percent, but still not there, and getting there will be “challenging,” she said.

For one thing, families at the upper end of RIte Care’s eligible income range have to pay a share of their premiums, and they may opt out for that reason.

Rhode Island’s system is relatively simple, with a single program that is well publicized, but “you’ll always have some number who choose not to enroll,” Walsh said.

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