More than half of Buffalo children live in poverty, new census figures show

By 2015, childhood poverty in the city of Buffalo had climbed to 54 percent.

By Jay Rey
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More than half of the children in Buffalo – 54 percent – lived in poverty in 2015, up 7 percentage points from the year before, according to new census estimates from the federal government.

The figure comes as no surprise to those who see the faces of these children every day in Buffalo Public Schools. Too many of Buffalo's poor show up to classrooms each morning without decent clothes to wear. They haven't eaten a proper breakfast. And they lack basic personal hygiene.
“Of course, this impacts their learning,” said Eve Shippens, a Buffalo teacher for 15 years. “They’re definitely capable of doing well, but there are these obstacles in their way that they’re dealing with. They come to school and their minds are focused on survival.”

Nearly 32,000 Buffalo children are poor, almost enough to sell out the downtown KeyBank Center – twice.

A year ago, when the child poverty rate dropped slightly to under 50 percent, it seemed like Buffalo had taken a small step toward curbing child poverty.

“The data from a couple years ago indicated the rate had stabilized,” said Dennis Walczak, chief executive officer for Catholic Charities of Buffalo, which provides services to the poor. “To see this latest data was very surprising – and very disturbing.”

What stands out among the numbers is how poverty has gradually increased for those under 18 over the past 10 years, up from 37.5 percent in 2005.

The numbers on childhood poverty are a reflection of the larger Buffalo population – which despite the city’s renaissance along the waterfront, on the medical campus and in certain neighborhoods – has a higher overall poverty rate than it did 10 years ago.

A third of Buffalo’s residents are now considered poor, compared to one-quarter of the population a decade ago.

Only Detroit and Cleveland recorded higher poverty rates than Buffalo among the nation’s largest cities.

“Can you call it a renaissance when it leaves that many people behind?” asked Sam Magavern, co-director of the Partnership for the Public Good. “You can call it a partial renaissance – and it’s very welcome – but for most of the people living in the city of Buffalo, that’s not making a big change in the quality of their lives.”

Rust Belt poverty

The Census Bureau each year releases estimates on poverty based on its surveys. To be considered poor, a family of four must have a household income of $24,300 a year or less. The estimates come with margins of error, so extent of poverty may be slightly better – or worse – than what the government reported.

- Poverty across the United States and New York State dipped in 2015, to 14.7 percent for the nation and 15.4 percent for the state. Poverty fell by less than 1 percentage point for the country and state compared to 2014. Across New York State, Rochester also had a poverty rate of 33 percent; followed by Syracuse, 31 percent; and Albany, 23 percent.

- In the Buffalo Niagara region, nearly 16 percent of residents live below the poverty line, an increase of nearly 1 percentage point from 2014.

- In Buffalo, the poverty rate is twice as high as the rest of the region. More than a third of its residents were considered poor in 2015, an increase from 31 percent the year before.

Buffalo ranks as the third-poorest city in the nation, behind Detroit and Cleveland, among cities of at least 250,000. Laredo, Texas; Newark, N.J.; Fresno, Calif.; Cincinnati; Milwaukee; Miami and Toledo round out the 10 cities with the biggest poverty rates.
• The poverty rate for Hispanics and Asians in Buffalo topped 45 percent – the highest among the city's minorities. But poverty dropped for Hispanics last year – down nearly 11 percentage points – and shot up for Asians, increasing nearly 8 points. The poverty rate for blacks, meanwhile, rose to 41 percent, an increase from 36 percent the prior year. Poverty for whites in the city held steady at nearly 20 percent.

• For the first time, the Census Bureau calculated poverty rates for children under 5 and found that 58 percent of them in Buffalo live in poverty. Only Detroit was worse.

Academics suffer

“Poverty shows itself in the classroom in many ways,” said Shippens, the Buffalo teacher, who serves as co-chair of the Buffalo Parent-Teacher Organization.

It may mean students can’t afford essentials, like notebooks, binders, pens and pencils, Shippens said. It might be difficult reaching or involving parents, many of whom may be transient or working more than one job or don’t have the means to get back and forth to school.

Personal hygiene can be an issue, she said, as household money runs out for items like laundry detergent, soap or deodorant. Ultimately, she said, it can result in a student staying home from school to avoid embarrassment.

“If you’re a student and you’re coming to school hungry, don’t have the proper clothing and need medical care, then your math and English homework just isn’t important,” said David Rust, executive director for Say Yes to Education Buffalo.

Say Yes, a nonprofit, partners with Buffalo schools to provide food, clothing and other services to some 1,200 families.

In fact, a big piece of Superintendent Kriner Cash’s plan to reform city schools is to provide services for the district’s neediest families. The district designated 13 “community schools” this year to provide wrap-around services and extended hours for families to get the help they need.

“In our schools we have to deal with the emotional and psychological support before we can deal with the academic side of things,” Cash said.

“Parents are doing the best they can, in most cases, but when you’re in high poverty, parents are forced to work two or three jobs and that nurturing from adults oftentimes suffers,” Cash said.

“That’s what makes our work such a heavy lift. It’s not easy, and sometimes when you take one step forward you’re going to take two steps back.”

Lacking good jobs

Service providers, advocates for the poor and academics say a number of factors contribute to Buffalo’s climbing poverty rate.

Poverty is tied closely to education levels, although the city has been making progress in the percentage of people attaining a higher level of schooling, said Julie Anna Golebiewski, assistant professor of economics and finance at Canisius College.

The region also has taken a hit in the number of manufacturing sector jobs over the years, but those job losses have slowed compared to the early half of the last decade, she said.
What census figures do show, however, is a growth in the number of foreign born in recent years, Golebiewski said. That population tends to have a disproportionate number that live below the poverty line, she said.

“That might be some of it,” Golebiewski said.

There’s also a decrease in the numbers participating in the labor force, which means people who had been looking for jobs stopped and are no longer counted among the unemployed – a phenomenon seen both nationally and in Buffalo.

“It could be what we saw during the recession, that people were looking for a particular type of job, and when they weren’t finding that they had exited the labor force,” Golebiewski said.

People are having a hard time finding good jobs, Magavern said.

“The job quality for really the bottom half of jobs has been declining,” he said, “especially the lower you go on the job ladder.”

“Pay has stagnated, benefits have been cut and schedules have become more and more erratic, so it’s harder and harder for people to put together 40-hour weeks,” Magavern said. “That’s really a national issue, but we certainly see it very strongly in Western New York.”

There are jobs available, Walczak said, but the poor often face other obstacles like training and transportation.

At the same time, the city is still highly segregated by race and income and there are dense neighborhood pockets of extreme poverty where it’s hard to break that cycle from one generation to the next, Walczak and Magavern said.

Magavern and Walczak, however, say local leaders increasingly are aware of this “Tale of Two Cities,” and they’re discussing how to deal with it, such as through targeted hiring by companies.

Observers point to the more widespread strategies from the Western New York Regional Economic Development Council – from employment training to connecting jobs to bus routes to improving high school graduation rates.

Say Yes, which began promising free college tuition to Buffalo high school graduates in 2012, hopes to lower Buffalo’s poverty by helping more students gain a college degree.

But, Rust said, it’s going to take a long time before we know the full effect of Say Yes.

“We're probably not going to see the outcomes of this for 10 to 20 years,” Rust said.

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Overall poverty rates in Upstate New York, 2015

Rochester: 33.2%
Buffalo: 33.0%
Syracuse: 31.0%
Albany: 23.4%

Source: American Community Survey, 1-year estimates

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