

Voices for Virginia's Children

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Virginia child poverty rate continues to rise: for first time, number of VA kids in poverty exceeds quarter million

Newly released 2009 Census figures confirm earlier warnings of recession-induced rise in child poverty; potential for long-term harm to children, families, businesses and the economy; policy makers called upon to continue to preserve safety net for distressed families.

RICHMOND –The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the number of Virginia children living in poverty increased by almost 11 per cent over the past two years. In 2009, primarily as a result of the recession, approximately 25,000 additional Virginia children were growing up in poverty, bringing the total number of poor children to 256,000. The figures also indicate that children bear a disproportionate share of the recession's damaging effects, as the 2009 child poverty rate of 13.9 per cent exceeded the overall state poverty rate of 10.5 per cent.

“Virginia's numbers, though somewhat better than in many other states, are troubling nonetheless”, according to John Morgan, Executive Director at Voices for Virginia's Children. For the first time, Virginia has more than a quarter million children in poverty. “We know that children thrown into poverty by the recession are likely to stay poor for at least several years, long enough to suffer long-term consequences. The recession may be over, but not for these kids or for the thousands who were poor even before the recession.”

The child poverty figures for states and larger localities were released Tuesday from the Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey (ACS). While Virginia's 13.9 per cent child poverty rate compares favorably to the national rate of 20 per cent, the overall numbers mask alarmingly higher rates in a number of Virginia localities. Seven of Virginia's largest cities have child poverty rates exceeding 20%, led by Richmond with a rate of 38.2 per cent. By contrast, the Richmond suburban locales Chesterfield (8.0) and Hanover (3.7) have drastically lower rates – a pattern seen throughout Virginia.

This is troubling news for Virginia's families, as research shows that child poverty can have prolonged harmful effects. Children who spend significant time in poverty are:

- More likely to get sick, develop chronic health problems and be absent from school
- Less likely to succeed in school and more likely to drop out
- More likely to have low-paying jobs as adults

- More likely to have criminal justice involvement

What's worse, the recession's impact on child poverty has not yet peaked. The Economic Policy Institute predicts that, despite the official end of the recession, the poverty rate is likely to continue rising well into 2011. This will mean additional families in severe financial distress and even more children exposed to the risks associated with poverty. "There are long-term consequences not just for children and families, but for Virginia's future workforce, for her businesses which increasingly depend on finding highly competent workers, and ultimately for Virginia's economy and prosperity", according to Hayley Cleary, director of the Kids Count data and research program at Voices. "Poverty reduces child potential – plain and simple. It's bad for kids – and for Virginia."

These troubling numbers at least make the public policy case extremely clear – and urgent. So far during the recession, lawmakers have avoided drastic cuts to most safety net programs that help distressed families during tough times. "But these poverty numbers mean the alarm bell is still sounding loudly – the crisis for families and their children is not over", according to Morgan. "Virginia must continue to preserve safety net programs which help families cope with and eventually escape from poverty. It's the right thing to do. It makes families – and Virginia – stronger. "

About Voices for Virginia's Children

Voices for Virginia's Children is a statewide, privately funded, nonpartisan awareness and advocacy organization that builds support for practical public policies to improve the lives of children. A recognized leader in child advocacy, Voices mobilizes support for initiatives by conducting research, developing policies, building coalitions, and helping people articulate their support for children.

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