

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child Poverty in West Virginia: A Growing and Persistent Problem

We are failing our kids in West Virginia. But we do not have to.

Each generation is supposed to have it better than the one that came before. That's not true for my one year-old son's generation. His generation faces historically high rates of divorce, addiction, and incarceration among its parents. In 2011, we were the only state where the teen pregnancy rate was rising. And in just the last seven years, the rate of kids being raised by a grandparent has increased by 25 percent. At the root of it all is poverty, which continues to rise among children and families. This report outlines the problem, dispels some powerful myths, and sets the table for a long-term effort to change the future for our kids.

Here are 6 key findings:

1. Living at or near poverty is the norm for kids in West Virginia. 1 in 4 kids live below the poverty line and 52 percent live below the "self-sufficiency standard," the income level where a family has enough to get by without outside assistance. This problem is not about trying to rescue a few kids and families who live at the margins; it's about fixing an entire system where working parents can no longer afford to support their kids.

2. Poverty is crueler than it used to be. Not only are child poverty rates the highest in two generations, the experience of poverty is also tougher because families are now contending with historically high rates of addiction, incarceration, divorce, kids being raised by adults other than their parents, and historically low rates of social capital – church, union, and social club participation.

3. Poverty is not inevitable. Just ask our seniors. West Virginia slashed its population of poor seniors from 39 percent to 10 percent in the last generation. Now we must make the same commitment for our kids.

4. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. For every \$1 we spend on quality early childhood education and care, we get back at least \$7 in savings from future crime, unemployment, and poor health.

5. The solutions are simple, but hard. There are only 3 ways society can fix child poverty. One, increase the income and benefits that go to working families. Two, reduce the basic costs of life – food, clothing, rent, health care, etc. Three, invest in human development – so the next generation fairs better. The challenge we have is to generate the political and social will to do those things. Just as seniors organized locally and nationally, so must we all organize to make our most vulnerable kids a priority in our communities, in our private sector, and in our government. It will not happen overnight.

6. Parents are the solution, not the problem. We just completed a campaign of community meetings about child poverty (with business groups, faith leaders, social workers, kids, prison administrators, and so on). Parents now have lower wages, higher costs (especially health care and child care), fewer adults in the home, more unstable jobs, and fewer supporting institutions than they did 40 years ago – but they were by far the most resourceful groups we spoke to. No one matched their creativity or their commitment to their kids. History teaches us the same thing: the times when child poverty has been the lowest were the times when poor and working parents were the most organized and engaged.

That is why this report is part of a community-based campaign to engage parents and kids, business and labor leaders, ministers, social workers, and educators. We have held 48 community meetings and over 200 stakeholder meetings across the state, to begin to identify leaders and issues we can begin to make a difference on. The project is called "Our Children, Our Future," and it is just beginning. We need more people like you.

To read the full report, visit www.wvpolicy.org.

To lend a hand, contact Stephen Smith at ssmith@wvhealthykids.org.