



Md.'s Working Families Claim Second-Richest of the Poor

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WASHINGTON (Oct. 14, 2008) -- While many working families nationwide continue dropping below the poverty level, Maryland's families fare better than those of most states, according to a study by the Working Poor Families Project.

Only 16 percent of the state's working families with children are considered low-income, ranking second best in the United States, tying Connecticut and falling behind New Hampshire. The study considers a family low-income if it earns less than 200 percent of the poverty threshold defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, which in 2006 was \$41,228 for a family of four.

"Maryland is one of the most affluent states in the country, so that's the first thing I think we have to keep in mind, and that affluence is largely driven by a very educated group of adults who typically have not only just college degrees but graduate degrees and beyond, and that helps really drive the economy here," said Brandon Roberts, the project's director and one of the report's authors, in a conference call Tuesday.

The Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that supports state non-profit groups' efforts to strengthen work force development, including the Jobs Opportunities Task Force in Maryland.

But University of Maryland sociology Professor Bart Landry said 16 percent is still a lot of working poor families.

"Even though they're working full-time, they still don't manage to get out of poverty," Landry said. "It seems to me a serious issue and one that, even though they did relatively better than some states, it's still not a very good record for the state. That any percentage that's that high among people who are working is pretty bad."

With the country embroiled in an economic crisis, the problem is likely to get worse, said Penn State sociology and demography Professor John Iceland.

"There are two things that might be at work here," he said. "For one, certainly hard economic times might cause some people to lose their jobs, and they might have to look for lower-wage jobs, so that could, on the one hand, serve to increase the proportions of all families that are working and poor, or it could just increase the number of people are not working and poor as well."

For those working Maryland families, the problem extends beyond their low wages. Many face higher housing costs, can't afford health insurance and do not have a high school or college degree.

"We do find, however, when you look behind the numbers and look at some of the issues affecting Maryland that there are some policy areas that really could be strengthened," Roberts said.

The report ranks Maryland the 40th worst state for the target group's housing costs -- 69 percent have housing costs greater than one-third of their income -- and 32nd worst for health coverage -- 39 percent of families have adults without health insurance.

Education is also a major problem for low-income families, Roberts said. One quarter of Maryland's low-income working families have a parent without a high school diploma or equivalent, and more than half have a parent without postsecondary education.

"The state in the past has not committed very significant resources to dealing with one of the problems I cited earlier, and that is adults without a high school degree," Roberts said. "Fortunately, in the last couple years, they've started giving some attention to that issue, additional resources, and they are making some efforts to strengthen the program."

Maryland also has poverty-assistance programs, such as a housing program that pays a significant portion of poor families' rents, Landry said. But the programs can't help everyone.

"Certainly, it does some good," Landry said. "The problem usually is that there isn't enough money in these programs to cover everyone who needs it and would qualify."

Capital News Service contributed to this report.