

Community Action Network

Frequently Asked Questions About

Basic Needs: A Focus on Childhood Poverty

January 2010



The Basic Needs Coalition devotes its efforts to heightening the Austin and Central Texas communities' understanding of the breadth and depth of poverty. In this FAQ we focus on the effects of poverty on children and youth and how this will ultimately impact the future of Austin and Travis County.

WHY CHILDREN?

- In 2008 nearly one in five children and youth in Travis County were living in poverty.¹
- Texas has the fastest growing child population in the country and the Central Texas child population is growing at twice the state rate.²
- The low income student population is growing at twice the rate of the overall Central Texas student population.³



WHAT IS THE FACE OF CHILDHOOD POVERTY IN TRAVIS COUNTY?

The poor children in Travis County are our neighbors and our children's classmates. They are of every race and live in every school district.

Nearly one in five children and youth in Travis County are living in poverty. Their future is the future of our community.

In 2008 nearly one in five children and youth in Travis County were living in poverty and approximately 41,000 children under the age of 18 in Travis County were confronted with food insecurity everyday.^{4,5} Food insecurity means that a child has limited access to nutritionally adequate and safe foods.⁶ Sixty-three percent of school age students in the seven Travis County school districts qualified for free or reduced price lunches.⁷ In October 2009, children under the age of eighteen accounted for 56% of all food stamp recipients.⁸ Texas is the second hungriest state in the nation with 16% of our population suffering from food insecurity.⁹ Hunger creates health issues for children including obesity. Many children face the dual challenges of hunger and obesity as low-cost food is often calorie-dense and high in fats and sugars.¹⁰

Populations of children most vulnerable to poverty are those under the age of five who are born to single mothers. More than 40% of children under the age of five born to single mothers are living in poverty.¹¹

- **Children Under the Age of Five:** In 2008, 22% of children under the age of five were living in poverty.¹² Texas has the fastest growing child population in the country and the Central Texas child population is growing at twice the state rate. The low income student population is growing at twice the rate of the overall Central Texas student population.¹³
- **Children Born to Single Mothers:** In 2008, 30% of all children and youths in single mother households were living in poverty.¹⁴ Teen mothers, who tend to also be single parents, gave birth to approximately 1,730 children in Travis County in 2006.¹⁵

The poverty rate does not immediately reflect the effects of a recession and so our community can expect the number of children and youth in poverty to increase over the next few years.¹⁶

One in three children raised in poverty remain in poverty as adults.¹⁷

WHAT ARE THE FUTURE CONSEQUENCES FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY?

- Boys raised in poverty are twice as likely to be arrested and three times as likely to be incarcerated.
- Girls raised in poverty are five times as likely to bear a child out of wedlock prior to the age of twenty-one.
- As adults they complete two fewer years of schooling.
- As adults they earn half as much as children raised in non-poor households.
- As adults they are more than twice as likely to report poor overall health and high levels of psychological distress.¹⁸



Boys raised in poverty are three times more likely to be incarcerated as adults and girls raised in poverty are five times more likely to bear a child out of wedlock prior to the age of 21.

Additionally, children who fall into poverty temporarily during a recession can potentially face these same poor outcomes. They are at risk of earning lower overall incomes, achieving lower levels of education, reporting poorer health, and will have a greater chance of falling back into poverty later in their lives.¹⁹

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES THAT AFFECT CHILDREN IN POVERTY?

Stressful life events or chronic strains brought on by poverty can result in parenting practices that negatively affect children's development.²⁰ To ensure healthy development for children in poverty, families must have access to resources that reduce stressors and allow them to create nurturing environments.²¹

- **Food:** Infants and children living in poor households are more likely to experience food insecurity. Food insecurity includes not having enough to eat, having a diet that is inadequate, and having parents who worry about being able to afford the amount and type of food that a household needs.^{22, 23} There would be less food insecurity if people were aware of the resources available to them. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program are supports that provide families with electronic benefits that can be used at grocery stores to purchase food.²⁴ Families enrolled in SNAP and/or WIC are better equipped to move from relying on welfare to achieving self-sufficiency through work incomes.²⁵
- **Housing:** Housing costs in Austin have risen by 85% in the past ten years. A City of Austin housing market study showed that there is a shortage of 37,600 affordable housing units. Furthermore, just one in six renters earning less than \$20,000 can find affordable housing in Austin.²⁶ Housing that costs more than the household can afford threatens stability, exposing the household to the possibility of foreclosure or eviction in the worst case and inability to pay for other necessities in the best case. Housing instability results in frequent moves. This means that children move from one school to another and must change teachers, curricula, and schoolmates. They are more likely to have to repeat grades, to not receive needed special education services, and to do less well on standardized tests than students with stable housing.²⁷
- **Education:** Poor children are more likely than more affluent peers to be raised by parents who have completed fewer years of education, and to grow up in households that are less cognitively stimulating, which can negatively affect children's cognitive and academic attainment.²⁸ Quality early education programming can improve their school readiness and subsequent chances for school success, financial independence, and social stability.²⁹

In Texas, childhood poverty costs \$57.5 billion dollars annually.³⁰

- **Transportation:** Many families in our community are burdened by combined housing and transportation costs. In their search for lower cost housing, working families often live far from their place of work, dramatically increasing their transportation costs and commute times.³¹

- **Healthcare:** In 2008, approximately 18% of children and youth under the age of 18 in Travis County were uninsured.³² Uninsured children and youth are:

- ◊ four times more likely to delay seeking care when it is needed;
- ◊ five times more likely to use the emergency room as a regular source of care; and
- ◊ six times less likely to have a prescription filled because of cost.³³



Even poor children who have insurance through either CHIP or Medicaid may not receive the dental and health screenings that can prevent or reduce future problems.³⁴

Families in poverty can benefit greatly if they have adequate access to supports such as transportation, healthcare, and childcare.

- **Childcare:** Work-related expenses such as child care typically consume a large proportion of household income among working poor families, leaving few resources for other expenses such as food, housing, and health care.³⁵ One study found that 40% of single working mothers with children spent at least half of their income on child care expenses.³⁶ Childcare costs continue to rise: between 2005 and 2006 the average cost of full-time care for children from birth to three years old rose by nearly \$300, to \$636 a month in Travis County.³⁷

- **Living Wages:** Working families in Texas that do not earn enough money to cover their basic expenses are called the working poor. In 2007, approximately 2.4 million Texas children lived in working poor families where their caretakers often worked for low wages.³⁸ Since most people living in poverty have some income, it is logical that many can be lifted out of poverty if their wage equaled or exceeded the living wage for their community.³⁹ The Austin-Round Rock Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is the third-most expensive area in Texas based on monthly expenses that families pay on necessities such as transportation, childcare, food, and housing. Families must typically earn double what the federal government deems a poverty income to meet their cost of living.⁴⁰

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

- **General Community Members**
 - ◊ **Share this information with people you know.** To find out more about the effects of poverty on children, visit the National Center for Children in Poverty at <http://www.nccp.org>.
 - ◊ **Donate to a local organization that serves poor children and youth.** Visit the Basic Needs Coalition at www.basicneedscoalition.org or I Live Here, I Give Here at www.ilivehereigivehere.org to find an organization that matches your interests.
 - ◊ **Volunteer with an organization that serves children and youth in poverty.** Hands on Central Texas at www.handsoncentraltexas.org can help connect you with a volunteer opportunity.
- **Policy Makers**
 - ◊ **Develop a work support system that enables working families to meet their basic needs.** Texas should examine its work support policies to ensure that families remain eligible for assistance until they earn enough to meet their basic needs. The state should expand Medicaid coverage for low-income working parents, eliminate waiting lists for subsidized child care, and take immediate actions to address the affordable housing crisis in Texas.⁴¹
 - ◊ **Use economic development incentives to increase workers' skills and raise wages.** As an incentive for employers to offer higher-paying jobs, Texas should link its workforce development and economic development efforts. State and local tax abatements should be tied directly to employment and wage policies that require family-supporting wages and benefits.⁴² For more information, visit the Center for Public Policy Priorities at www.cppp.org.

REFERENCES

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- 2 [E³ Alliance](#), 2009
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Hyperlinks to all reports are available when you access this document electronically at www.caction.org.



The mission of the Basic Needs Coalition of Central Texas is to lead the community in creating solutions that secure the basic resources of our neighbors in need. Visit their website at www.basicneedscoalition.org.

BASIC NEEDS COALITION MEMBER AGENCIES: 2-1-1 Texas • A [New Entry] Inc. • AIDS Services of Austin • Any Baby Can • Arc of the Capital Area • Austin Stand Down • Austin Tenants Council • Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department • Austin Travis County Integral Care • Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable • Blackland Community Center • Capital Area Food Bank • Caritas of Austin • Catholic Charities of Central Texas • Communities in Schools • Community Action Network • El Buen Samaritano • Family Connections • Family Eldercare • Foundation Communities • Foundation for the Homeless • Front Steps • Gateway Church • Goodwill Industries of Central Texas • Housing Authority of the City of Austin • Mary House Catholic Worker of Austin, Inc. • Marywood Children and Family Services • Meals on Wheels and More • Micah 6 • Project Hope, Manor ISD • SafePlace • Saheli for Asian Families • Salvation Army • St. Louis Parish Social Ministries • Sustainable Food Center • Texas Interagency Interfaith Disaster Response • Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid • The Care Communities • The Wright House Wellness Center • Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service Department • Trinity Center • United Way Capital Area • Volunteer Legal Services of Central Texas • Workforce Solutions-Capital Area



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