

Individual Retirement Account

The sooner you start, the better.

Learn More

Bank of America
Investment Service
Bank of America



THE BUFFALO NEWS

Is the American dream still possible for poor kids in Buffalo?

Day One: For today's children, a different kind of poverty

Is the American dream still possible for Buffalo's poor children?

By Charity Vogel / NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Updated: 10/30/07 9:56 AM

Poverty in Buffalo used to be a story of possibility. Think about the people who built this city years ago: immigrants who arrived with nothing in their pockets. Many of them found decent jobs in a growing city, worked hard and carved out a little slice of the American Dream.

That's not the way poverty in Buffalo works anymore. Today, the city is diminished, and opportunities are, too. The story of poverty in Buffalo has become one of hopelessness. And children have become its biggest victims.

[Click here for Ntare Ali Gault's performance of "In This Life," on the streets of Buffalo.](#)

New census figures, showing Buffalo to be one of the poorest major cities in the United States, put hard numbers to the situation: Poverty here is severe. It's pervasive. And it's devastating.

Nearly one in three adults in the city is poor. Among children, the rate is nearly 43 percent.

Of the very smallest children in the city – those under 5 – fully half are now growing up poor.

And, 22 percent of Buffalo's children are surviving in what is called "extreme poverty" – a standard of living so low it is half of the federal poverty level. Or about \$10,000 a year, for a family of four.



Over the next three days, The Buffalo News will take a closer look at child poverty in the city.

Today, these children worry about getting a meal or sneakers for school. Tomorrow, they'll have a tough time finishing high school, getting a job, staying out of jail, owning a home. In other words: achieving the basic American Dream that built this city.

"It's really hard to dream when the nightmare is your reality," said Emma Jordan-Simpson, director of the Children's Defense Fund of New York. "A lot of kids now – poverty is their nightmare."

Ultimately, these kids will struggle to raise children of their own who will not be poor.

And that will shape the future of Buffalo for decades to come.

Their story, then, is our story.

No way out

Poverty, in 2007, is redefining what it means to have an American childhood. The American Dream – that golden ideal of hard work and success – has been pushed so far out of the picture for today's poor children that they don't even know it exists.

Some of them live in a world so desolate they have not a single person to look up to.

"My dad doesn't answer my phone calls," said Gabrielle Barrett, 10, a fifth-grader in South Buffalo. "I never see him. He lives somewhere by the Thruway."

These kids don't know it, of course, but the Buffalo area has changed dramatically since their grandparents grew up. Jobs have disappeared, or moved out to the suburbs, taking much of the middle class – black and white – with it. The city's population is half what it was 50 years ago.

"Years ago, there was a sense of community – people could help. Today, people live lives of alienation," said Jordan-Simpson. "The traditional supports people would have had to raise their kids are gone."

Because poverty is everywhere, and because it runs so deep, it has created a culture that -- especially for children -- is very hard to escape.

"There's a despair among young people now. They have no future – so they live for today," said Judy Tutuska, who oversees food stamps for Erie County. "I'm a city person. I grew up in the city. And I've seen a world of change."

Where poverty lives

Time was, most blocks in the city had a poor family or two. In those days, local and national poverty experts said, families used to turn inward to solve crises: to relatives, churches and ethnic communities.

Today, in some neighborhoods, poverty affects almost every house.

Drive down some streets and you'll see this kind of widespread poverty, signified in blighted storefronts, boarded-up homes, rusted-out cars and tacked-up sheets fluttering at broken windows.

One city resident, living on a cashier's income, said she feels overwhelmed by the signs of poverty she sees all around her. She defined prosperity this way: Gutters on houses. Because there aren't any, on the homes on her street.

You can see Buffalo's poverty in other ways, too.

The number of food stamp households in Erie County in which the families are working poor or other nonwelfare recipients has skyrocketed 64 percent since 2000, to more than 40,000 households, county data shows.

Meanwhile, the family-based social fabric has frayed, in some neighborhoods to the point of disintegration.

In Erie County, among 4,550 families with children who get temporary assistance checks from the Social Services Department, county data shows that just 550 are headed by two parents.

Among the 621 homeless families who turned to Erie County for help between January and October of this year, only 25 had two parents.

And, at the T.J. Dulski Community Center on the East Side, dozens of children gather each night for a hot dinner because they have nowhere else to go.

"Nobody's home for these kids," said Linda Hansen, a director at the Lewis Street center. "These kids move in, they move out, they stay with relatives; we do have two of them that are homeless..."

She stopped, to wipe away a few tears of frustration. "I'm sorry – it's just, that kind of social condition – you know it exists, but when you see it, it's hard."

Shanay Johnson, 17, said she sees that social dysfunction all around her.

A senior at Bennett High School, Johnson lives with her mom, whom she calls her biggest influence, along with her grandma. Her dad is in jail; she hasn't heard from him in ages.

"None of my friends – none of them have fathers that live in the same household," said Johnson. "I guess it's accepted."

"But I think it matters," she said. "I wish I had my dad."

That dissolving family fabric has been replaced, for many poor residents, by an array of government services, charity centers and socialservice agencies.

Those outfits try to fill all the services needed, but it's a daunting task.

The job problem

Poverty in Buffalo is a bigger issue today than it was even a decade or two ago, officials said, because of the scope and depth of the problems some poor families have.

Those who want to work have trouble finding jobs when employment opportunities are steadily shrinking. Many available jobs don't pay well, or they require degrees and training that the poor often

don't have and can't afford. Then there's the problem of getting to and from work when, as in many poor households, there's no car.

Add to that: addictions to alcohol and drugs, domestic violence, child abuse, truancy, food and nutrition problems, chronic illness and homelessness – people in the trenches in the battle against poverty in Buffalo see all these issues every day.

“You have a generation of young people out there whose parents might outlive them,” said Catherine Lewis-Smith, director of a West Side medical office, who sees poverty-related health problems like obesity, heart disease and diabetes in many of her patients. “That's frightening.”

Many days, those who deal with the city's poor cringe at the magnitude – and complexity – of the problem.

“Kids now are worse off,” said Michael Weiner, commissioner of Erie County's Social Services Department. “When you have pockets of deep poverty, like we do in certain neighborhoods in the city, you're going to have problems with crime. You're going to have high unemployment. You're going to have more abuse of children. You're going to have all kinds of other problems.”

Still, even today, many people don't realize how different poverty is in 2007.

A poll of Erie County voters that Zogby International did for The Buffalo News in early October shows that most people – 69 percent – believe the American Dream is still within reach for poor kids in Buffalo.

Two steps behind

When a community, like Buffalo, starts to tilt dangerously into poverty levels that are extremely deep, what happens is a reordering of the city's economic future, experts said.

“What we have is an alternative game of Monopoly,” said Dr. Mark R. Rank, a nationally known poverty expert at Washington University in St. Louis. “If you grow up in a household in poverty, you wind up not having the opportunities of kids growing up in middle-class households. These kids are at a disadvantage in the job market.

“We like to think everything is fair – that everyone starts with equal opportunities. But given those prior advantages, who do you think is going to win or lose? That's what we have now, in this country – which is supposed to be a land of opportunity.”

Because of that, young people like Shanay Johnson are in the minority.

She completed an internship at Lewis-Smith's medical office on the West Side last summer and has since landed a job at Victoria's Secret. She feels like she's getting ahead, a little bit, against the odds – but she knows many of her friends aren't. “If you want to get out of poverty, you've got to work hard at it,” Johnson said.

Antanette Cotton, too, is trying to become one of the lucky ones. She's an unusual case: Her mom and dad are married, and they both work – at lower-paying but steady jobs. Though they don't make much, they plan to buy a house someday in the city.

For them, that's the American Dream – and they are raising Antanette to want the same thing.

“Kids who are born in the ghetto, they stay there,” said Antanette, 15, who dreams of opening her own hair shop someday. “You have to want more for yourself.”

A new study by a panel of poverty experts this spring estimated the cost of children living in poverty in America to be \$500 billion each year.

At Georgetown University, one of the authors of the research, Dr. Harry J. Holzer, said this factors in the costs that continue into adulthood.

“With kids, you know they grow up in this environment that affects them,” said Holzer. “It reduces their earnings later in life. They're more likely to engage in crime. And they're more likely to have bad health. All of those things cost money.”

One at a time

The scope of child poverty can seem daunting and frightening.

Those who work with poor kids say that sometimes the best way to help kids is to try to touch them, one at a time, with care and attention. That's what Linda Hansen thinks.

When she goes home at night, satisfied, after feeding 40 hungry kids, she realizes this one-on-one attention is the best gift she can give them.

“There is some hope,” she said. “There are still kids trying to finish their education. I like to have conversations with the kids where I ask them, ‘What's your plan?’

“What's really troubling to me is when they say, ‘I don't know.’ ”

For more on this story, or to comment, [go to Inside the News, 'The word on the street'](#)

Read more by The Buffalo News:

- [Growing up in a world without fathers](#)
- [Day in, day out, trying to fill the emptiness](#) with an accompanying slideshow, [of a day at the South Buffalo Food Pantry.](#)

cvogel@buffnews.com

Find this article at:

<http://www.buffalonews.com/341/story/193858.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2007 The Buffalo News.