



October 16, 2017

Poverty in West Virginia: Lack of Progress and New Threats Ahead

Sustained economic gains and strong federal and state programs have led to welcome progress in the fight against poverty in the U.S. Nationwide poverty rates have dropped for several years in a row; this is good news. But West Virginia isn't sharing in the national progress, as poverty here remains stagnant. And actions from Congress and the Trump administration threaten to increase poverty even further.

Data released in September by the Census Bureau show that the poverty rate in West Virginia was 17.9 percent, unchanged from 2015 and statistically flat from 2007, before the Great Recession. Nationally, the poverty rate declined to 14.0 percent in 2016, down from 14.7 percent in 2015 and from a high of 15.9 percent in 2012.¹ Additional data from the Census Bureau and other sources show the ways we are making progress nationwide in the fight against poverty. Some poor and near-poor families have been lifted out of poverty by a stronger economy and an increase in incomes and the number of jobs, as well as by federal programs and policies that lift them up. In fact, the new Census Bureau data also show that effective anti-poverty programs like housing assistance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), low-income tax credits, and assistance for people with disabilities lift millions out of poverty. After nine years, our nation has finally reduced poverty levels down to roughly the rates before the Great Recession. But progress in poverty reduction is not being shared in West Virginia. With job growth continuing and with strong federal and state programs for low-income West Virginians, we ought to be able to take steps to reduce poverty to below pre-recession levels.

More than 319,000 West Virginians are suffering under poverty's weight, and the limited progress we have made among some groups is threatened by proposals from Congress and the Trump administration that would cut programs that have lifted millions out of poverty. Proposed budgets and spending bills from leadership in the House, Senate, and White House would slash billions from these very programs. Such cuts would surely cause millions more Americans to suffer in poverty and near poverty.

The State of Being Poor in West Virginia

In most other states across the country, poverty rates increased – in some cases dramatically – during and shortly after the Great Recession. Many states have poverty rates that are just now beginning to return to levels comparable to those before the recession, while other states have poverty rates still above those in 2007. As noted above, the overall poverty rate in

Poverty Rates in West Virginia			
	2016	2015	2007
Overall Poverty	17.9	17.9	16.9
Senior Poverty	9.5	8.5	10.4
Child Poverty	24.0	25.2	22.8
Poverty for people with Disabilities	24.0	22.8	25.5
*Note: None of the changes over time are statistically significant (that is, the differences are small enough that they could be due to chance)			

West Virginia has remained relatively flat since 2007. West Virginians aged 65 and older also saw their poverty rates remain flat from 2007 through 2016. The percentage of people with disabilities who live in poverty remains nearly one in four. This too was relatively flat from 2015 to 2016, but it did experience a drop from 2012; it was statistically unchanged from 2007.

For a family of four in 2016, the official poverty line was \$24,563. According to the Census Bureau, 141,500 West Virginians live in deep poverty, meaning they live below half of the poverty line. That's flat from the previous year, and it's unfortunately higher than in 2007, before the Great Recession. Roughly 41,000 children are this deeply poor. The number of near-poor West Virginians – living below twice the poverty line – was nearly 699,800 in 2016. While this is flat from 2015, the good news is that this is down from both 2014 and 2011 when the number of people living near poverty was about 725,000. The number of near-poor has returned to pre-recession levels.

Communities of color saw poverty rates remain relatively flat as well: 27.1 percent of African Americans and 22.8 percent of Latinos in West Virginia were poor in 2016, statistically unchanged from 2015 levels and from 2007 levels. These communities have seen falling poverty rates nationally, but here too, progress is stalled for these groups in West Virginia. They still remain disproportionately affected by poverty; the poverty rate among non-Hispanic whites in 2016 was 17.4 percent. Still, it is important to note that all racial/ethnic groups are poorer in West Virginia than in the U.S. overall, and that poverty among West Virginia non-Hispanic whites is nearly double the national average for that group.

West Virginia has made progress in reducing child poverty over the last several years. The child poverty rate in 2016 was 24.0 percent which, while flat from 2015, is a decrease from 2013, when it stood at 27.0 percent. Tragically, children remain more likely to be poor in America than any other age group. However, with nearly one in four West Virginia children poor, the state remains worse off than the nearly one in five poverty rate for children nationwide (19.5 percent). As with adults, children of color experience poverty at much higher rates than their white peers. In fact, African American and Latino children are more than twice as likely to be poor than white children nationwide (poverty data by race/ethnicity for children in West Virginia is not available because the sample size is too small). In 2016, 11.7 percent of non-Hispanic white children in the U.S. lived in poverty, while 34.3 percent of African American and 28.4 percent of Latino children were poor. Across the country, children are still at higher rates of poverty than before the Great Recession, while child poverty rates in West Virginia have stayed as high as they were before the recession.

West Virginia and the nation have made progress in increasing the number of people with health insurance, thanks to the Affordable Care Act and the states' option under the law to use federal dollars available to them to expand Medicaid coverage to low-income adults. In 2016, the nationwide uninsured rate stood at 8.6 percent, down from 9.4 percent in 2015. In West Virginia, which did expand Medicaid coverage, 5.3 percent of people are uninsured, down 8.7 percentage points from 2013.² This is the fifth largest drop in the percentage of uninsured among all states.

The number of American households that are food insecure has continued a downward trend. While 12.3 percent of American households weren't always able to provide enough food for all family members in 2016, that number is down from 14.0 percent in 2014 and down from a high of 14.9 percent in 2011. However, the proportion of Americans struggling with food insecurity is still higher than the pre-recession level of 11.1 percent.³ Low-income families (with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty line) were far more likely to be food insecure (31.6 percent). In West Virginia, 14.9 percent of

households were food insecure between 2014 and 2016, on average. This is flat from 2011-2013 but higher than 2004-2006 averages.

Effective Programs Reduce Poverty and Speed Up Progress

The Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) is a more accurate measure of poverty and its changes over time than the official poverty rate noted above. This is because, unlike the official poverty rate, the SPM counts income sources such as federal tax credits and food and housing assistance as well as expenses like out-of-pocket medical costs. The SPM shows that federal programs increase incomes for millions of Americans, lifting them out of poverty and reducing the burdens of poverty for millions more. After accounting for underreporting of benefits, safety net programs were shown to have lifted 46 million Americans, including 12 million children, out of poverty each year between 2009 and 2012, on average. In West Virginia, 380,000 people, including 70,000 children, were lifted out of poverty by basic living standard programs each year between 2009 and 2012, on average. Supplemental Security Income (SSI), federal support for people with very limited resources who are elderly or with disabilities, or families caring for children with severe disabilities, lifted 65,000 out of poverty; 74,000 fewer were poor because of SNAP. Low-income tax credits lifted 38,000 people out of poverty each year between 2011-2013, on average.⁴ Nationally, more than 8.1 million people were lifted out of poverty by low-income refundable tax credits in 2016; 3.1 million fewer were poor because of housing subsidies and 3.6 million fewer were poor because of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SSI lifted 3.4 million people out of poverty, and the school lunch program did the same for 1.3 million people. The Census data show that 10.5 million more people would be in poverty if out-of-pocket medical costs were taken into account, showing the importance of quality, affordable health insurance.⁵

In fact, programs that help provide basic living standards play a major – and increasingly important – role in the reduction of poverty that has occurred since the 1960s. Researchers using the Supplemental Poverty Measure and other data, including adjusting poverty thresholds for costs of living and different housing situations, found that poverty has actually decreased by more than one-third since 1967. According to this analysis, government programs reduced the national poverty rate by 12.0 percentage points in 2014⁶ and lifted more than 50 million people above the SPM poverty line that year.⁷ In West Virginia, the poverty rate would have been 19.9 percentage points higher in 2014 without government programs. Child poverty would have been 13.7 percentage points higher, and poverty among the elderly would have been 46.0 percentage points higher.⁸

Programs that help our neighbors achieve basic living standards do more than lift people out of poverty. Medicaid allows low-income individuals to address health issues and live healthier lives, even improving health outcomes across generations. A recent study found that the grown children of women who had received Medicaid during their pregnancies were more likely to have healthier babies.⁹ Housing vouchers sharply reduce housing instability and homelessness, as well as other hardships like food insecurity, domestic violence and child separation, for recipients, 68 percent of whom are seniors, children, or people with disabilities.¹⁰ SNAP is our nation's largest child nutrition program – one in four children in the U.S. lives in families that receive SNAP benefits. SNAP improves the health and educational outcomes of children in the near- and long-term and improves the health of their parents. Families participating in SNAP are also 28 percent more likely to be able to pay for medical expenses without forgoing basic necessities like food, rent and utilities.¹¹ In addition, SNAP is an economy booster:

economists estimate that in a weak economy, \$1 in SNAP benefits expands the economy by about \$1.70.¹²

Federal assistance programs also help people get and keep good jobs. Child care subsidies, for example, allow parents to go to work or school and provide children with quality educational experiences in the critical early years. Single mothers were more likely to be employed, more likely to be employed full time, and more likely to have stable employment when receiving child care subsidies.¹³

But many of these effective anti-poverty programs do not reach enough of the people they are designed to help, and others, like SNAP, could do more good if their benefits were higher. Nearly 16 million American households are food insecure, and the average SNAP benefit in West Virginia is only \$1.29 per person per meal.¹⁴ Only one in four qualifying renters receives rental assistance because Congress has not provided enough funding.¹⁵ Between 2004 and 2015, the number of families with children receiving rental vouchers dropped by 250,000 – a 13 percent decline.¹⁶ This is despite the fact that the Census data show that 46 percent of West Virginia households with income less than \$20,000 a year spend more than half of their income on housing.¹⁷

More than 28 million Americans, including 96,000 West Virginians, remain uninsured, despite the state's above-average successes in health coverage. Low-income adults in the 20 states that refused to expand access to Medicaid to their low-income residents are uninsured at nearly twice the rates of those in states that have taken this step to expand coverage,¹⁸ leaving them at even greater risk for overwhelming medical costs and, too often, forcing them to forgo necessary medical treatments. The lack of child care holds back working parents. Only one out of seven children eligible to receive federal child care assistance is getting any help, and more than 373,000 children in need have lost access to child care since 2006, including 1,100 children in West Virginia, leaving families to struggle to pay for care or forgo jobs to stay home and provide care.¹⁹

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), an extremely effective anti-poverty and pro-work tax credit, provides far less help to low-income workers who aren't raising children. This group has an unenviable distinction as the only group of Americans who are taxed into poverty. Expanding the EITC to these workers would benefit up to 16.2 million people.²⁰ Similarly, families with children earning less than \$3,000 a year are excluded from claiming the Child Tax Credit (CTC), denying help to children because their parents, despite working, are too poor. Expanding the CTC to these poorest children and families would benefit millions every year.

The Trump Administration and Congress Would Make West Virginia Poorer

Proposals from President Trump and leadership in Congress to cut successful anti-poverty programs like Medicaid, SNAP, housing assistance, and other programs would harm individuals and families and would turn back the progress we've made in reducing poverty.

For example, the Fiscal Year 2018 budget passed by the House in early October would slash programs serving low- and moderate-income people by \$2.9 trillion over a decade, gutting them by 36 percent in 2027 alone.²¹ Even with the ACA remaining in place, the House budget would still slash Medicaid by \$110 billion by adding a harmful work requirement for recipients. Despite the legislative repeal's failure, the Trump administration has announced it will allow inadequate insurance plans that do not assure protections for people with pre-existing conditions or expensive medical needs. The administration will

stop making payments to insurance companies for low-income policy-holders, all aimed at further weakening the law. In addition, the Trump administration has been undermining the ACA by refusing to advertise open enrollment or to approve requests by states to improve their programs. The House-passed budget continues to call for a cap restricting Medicaid spending, which would significantly undo the progress made in reducing the number of uninsured West Virginians by 159,000 since 2013. The Senate Budget Committee proposal leaves room for another try at ACA repeal, and assumes close to \$4.3 trillion in cuts over ten years that could only be achieved with substantial reductions in programs such as Medicaid, Medicare, SNAP/food stamps, assistance for people with disabilities, or low-income tax credits. The House budget plan also includes \$150 billion in cuts to SNAP, and roughly \$500 billion in cuts to other low-income federal income support programs such as the school meals program, SSI, and low-income tax credits. The House budget blueprint also includes more than \$90 billion in cuts to educational and social services programs and roughly \$300 billion in cuts to other low-income programs, leaving vital services like rental assistance and job training on the potential chopping block.²² The Senate plan calls for \$800 billion in cuts to domestic appropriations, threatening further cuts to housing, education, and substance abuse treatment, to name just a few. While not all of the cuts in these budgets are expected to become law, they show the vision of the House and Senate leadership – to drastically reduce critical programs for low-income families. Cuts in President Trump’s budget are extremely harsh, including \$4.3 trillion in cuts to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, education, and other programs and services that help working families get by and get ahead. If just three of President Trump’s proposed budget cuts had been in effect in 2015, an additional 2.3 million Americans would have been in poverty that year.²³

In addition to these threats, passage of a budget in both the House and Senate would allow Congress to use special rules known as reconciliation to fast-track huge tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, and perhaps to expedite cuts to safety net programs as well, and to do so with only a simple majority in the Senate. The House and Senate budget proposals, in fact, are intended mainly to set up such tax cuts. The Senate budget as now drafted would allow Congress to increase the deficit by \$1.5 trillion over 10 years to give tax cuts to those with the highest incomes. The House budget assumes unrealistic economic growth and increases revenues to offset some of the tax cuts’ costs; both House and Senate assume trillions in spending cuts over a decade to pay for the trillions in tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit the rich and corporations. Whether or not an increasing deficit is assumed, the loss of this revenue would inevitably hurt low- and middle-income Americans, either because services they need are slated for cuts at the outset, or because a ballooning debt will eventually increase pressure to cut programs people rely on.

Spending bills passed by the House in July and September for Fiscal Year 2018 would also continue and worsen years of cuts, totaling more than \$8 billion to non-defense programs. This includes slashing or eliminating multiple education programs, apprenticeship and employment services, low-income housing, community development programs, mental health and substance abuse treatment, programs to remove lead and other harmful toxins from homes, and other programs vital to low-income communities. The House spending package fails to renew nearly 140,000 housing vouchers in use this year, including nearly 850 vouchers in West Virginia, increasing homelessness and housing instability.²⁴ In total, the House spending package cuts critical non-defense programs \$5 billion below the already austere sequestration-level spending caps for FY18.

As the House and Senate have not yet actually agreed upon detailed spending bills for FY2018, which began October 1, most government programs are operating with funding levels that are flat from 2017. While this avoids disastrous cuts to critical low-income programs in the short term, inflation continues

to erode them, and it also denies them the additional investments they need to be able to expand to help more people. Before the current stop-gap spending bill expires in December, Congress needs to agree on a bipartisan deal to lift the harmful sequester spending limits on domestic discretionary (annually-appropriated) programs for FY18 and future years that will allow for these necessary investments.

As mentioned above, Congressional leadership and President Trump are proposing devastating cuts to human needs programs while also trying to fast-track massive tax cuts for the rich and for corporations. A tax cut framework devised by House and Senate leaders and the Trump administration and released in September would largely benefit those at the top. Estimates suggest that, under the framework, taxpayers in the top 1 percent would receive roughly 50 percent of the plan's net tax cuts in 2018, with taxpayers in the top 0.1 percent receiving roughly 30 percent of the plan's net tax cuts. By 2028, those at the top would receive even more, with the top 1 percent getting 80 percent of the total benefit, and those in the top .01 percent getting 40 percent of the total benefit. Taxpayers in the bottom 80 percent would only receive 13 percent of the benefit. All told, the framework would lead to revenue losses of \$2.4 trillion over 10 years, taking away money that could instead be invested in improving the lives of low- and middle-income Americans.²⁵ An earlier tax plan released by President Trump in May would give up to \$4.8 trillion in tax cuts over the next 10 years, and similar to the newer tax cut outline, would give more than half of the total tax cuts to the richest 1 percent.²⁶ The roughly \$3 trillion tax cut plan released last year by Speaker of the House Paul Ryan would give 99 percent its tax cuts to the top 1 percent.²⁷ Numerous studies have shown that tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations create few jobs or economic growth, despite the fact that these claims are often used as excuses for such cuts.²⁸

President Trump's decision to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program threatens to strip from 800,000 young adults – including roughly 100 in West Virginia²⁹ – the ability to work legally and, in some states, the ability to drive legally and attend college to better their lives. Forcing these individuals, more than 90 percent of whom have jobs, and who are more likely than the general population to start their own businesses,³⁰ to again live in the shadows or be deported will surely not decrease poverty in our nation. In fact, a prominent economist has estimated that five years after a repeal of DACA, the nation's gross domestic product would be \$105 billion less than it would be if the program stays in place.³¹

Additional proposals in Congress that would add work requirements to SNAP or Medicaid would hurt individuals and our nation, not help them. Studies have shown that work requirements don't cut poverty, and in some cases actually increase it.³² Work requirements tied to Medicaid would likely increase the number of uninsured and leave individuals without coverage who can't work because they are caring for a family member, have a mental health issue, are without access to child care or transportation, or are working but do not have enough hours.³³ Adding work requirements to SNAP is also misguided, as the vast majority of SNAP recipients are either already working, are looking for work, are unable to work, or are not expected to work (children or the elderly). More than 50 percent of households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult worked while receiving SNAP, with more than 80 percent working in the year prior to or after receiving SNAP. In families with children, more than 60 percent of recipients work while receiving SNAP, with almost 90 percent working in the year prior to or after receiving benefits.³⁴ The Census Bureau data also show that in more than half of poor families in West Virginia, at least one person worked at least part time or part of the year.

In addition to the human toll poverty takes, it is also expensive for our nation. Child poverty alone has been estimated to cost the U.S. economy 3.8 percent of our gross domestic product (GDP), or \$672

billion in 2015.³⁵ Child poverty results in a less-educated workforce, which reduces productivity and economic output years later, and higher physical and mental health costs. Unstable housing among families with children will cost the nation as estimated \$111 billion in health and education expenditures over the next ten years.³⁶

If our elected leaders really want to boost our economy and create jobs and a highly-skilled labor force, they would invest in programs that lift millions of children out of poverty, not cut these programs. Pushing more children into poverty will cost our economy billions of dollars. They would invest in programs that allow parents to find and keep good paying jobs, like training programs, scheduling and paid leave protections, and child care. And they would require the wealthy and big corporations to pay their fair share, so we can increase these investments.

We Can – and Must – Make Progress for the Millions Still Struggling

We can – and should – do more to further reduce poverty for the millions of Americans still struggling. **To achieve this goal, the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy and the Coalition on Human Needs recommend the following actions for Congress and President Trump:**

- ❖ **Reject cuts to proven anti-poverty programs; instead protect and expand funding for programs including SNAP, Medicaid, housing subsidies and others.**
- ❖ **Reject tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations that will lead to further cuts in domestic programs.** Paying for tax cuts for the rich while cutting programs for the poor, infrastructure investments and public health protections is simply wrong. Corporations and the wealthy need to pay their fair share.
- ❖ **Lift sequester caps for domestic discretionary programs to boost investments in education and many other programs.** A bipartisan deal, similar to those reached in past years, is needed to lift the austere sequester-level spending caps for FY18 and beyond.
- ❖ **Increase federal funding for housing subsidies and child care subsidies.** As Congress continues its FY18 appropriations process, it should increase funding to provide millions more low-income Americans in need with access to safe, stable housing and quality, affordable child care.
- ❖ **Expand the Earned Income Tax Credit to workers not raising children and expand the Child Tax Credit to families making less than \$3,000 a year.** A bipartisan group of members of Congress have previously shown support for expanding the EITC, so helping workers without dependent children should be a top priority for Congress. Congress should also act to ensure all low-income children benefit from the CTC.
- ❖ **Reject harsh time limits and work requirements for SNAP, Medicaid, and subsidized housing recipients.** Congress should end the harsh time limits on SNAP benefits for certain jobless adults willing to work.
- ❖ **Congress should once and for all abandon efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act and instead stabilize the law's insurance markets. States that haven't yet expanded health coverage to low-income Americans by drawing down federal Medicaid dollars should do so.** Governors of states that have continued to deny health coverage to low-income residents should end this costly failure to take advantage of federal dollars on the table to provide necessary health care to those who can least afford it.

- ❖ **Congress should enact the Dream Act, providing legal status and a path to citizenship for the young people brought to this country as children.** Their freedom to work, learn, and serve in the armed services contributes to economic growth.

Reducing poverty clearly should be a top priority for our nation. The evidence shows that proven anti-poverty programs like SNAP, housing assistance, and low-income tax credits are effective at lifting millions of people out poverty and building family economic security. We have made progress in reducing poverty nationally. Now is not the time to turn back this progress, and it is never the time to cut programs for those who need help the most to give giant tax cuts to those who most certainly do not need it. Instead, Congress and the Trump administration must build on and accelerate the progress we've made by investing more in proven anti-poverty programs to speed up this progress and extend it to more of our neighbors.

This report was prepared by the [West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy](#) and the [Coalition on Human Needs](#).

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⁴ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <http://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/impact-of-the-safety-net-state-fact-sheets>

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