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Upsurge in childhood poverty hits as assistance dwindles

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Melissa Hadden picks her daughter up from a bus stop. She and her three children live in a motel room as she studies to be a nursing assistant and hunts for jobs without a car.

John DeSanto/Times Herald-Record

By Steve Israel

Times Herald-Record

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• They are the littlest victims ... In a tiny voice, a 4-year-old boy asks his mother, "Mommy, why are we eating dinner in the car again?" His mother can't bear tell him that the car, a 1996 two-door Nissan Ultima, is the only home they have now that she has lost her nursing job and apartment. So, parked on a side street or near the woods of Sullivan County, she explains they're having yet another picnic.

Six little kids live in a motel with their mom. The toilet is overflowing. The shower is stopped up. The seeping sewage is an inch deep.

Then there's the little boy in Orange County who's lucky enough to have a home ... at least for now. But like too many kids, he doesn't have a quarter for his reduced-price lunch. Too embarrassed to go to the cafeteria and not eat, he asks the teacher if he can sit in the school office.

These are a just a few of the tens of thousands of local children who are the victims of poverty and homelessness, mainly thanks to an economy that seems as rotten as the sewage seeping in that dingy motel room. Their suffering comes at a time when the programs that could help them are being cut.

Area has record homelessness

A record number of 2,348 schoolchildren in Sullivan, Orange and Ulster counties are homeless, according to the most recent state records for the 2009-2010 school year, a number that's sure to "be significantly higher" when the newest figures are tallied, a state official said.

That's an increase of some 15 percent — or 300 children — over the previous year for kids counted as homeless because they don't have a permanent place to live.

They're little kids, like that 4-year-old, who sleep in the back seat of cars or in unheated trailers. They're grammar school students like those six children who cram into motels with so many roaches that the carpet "looks like it's moving," said one mom. They're teens who "couch-surf" at a different friend or relative's home according to the night of the week. And, as is the case of at least two families, they're 12 or 13 kids and assorted adults who cram into a two-room apartment that's "pretty nice," according to one mom.

How to Volunteer to Help in Our Area

If you'd like to volunteer to help the record number of people in need in our region, here are some of the organizations that serve residents of Ulster, Orange and Sullivan Counties. Many offer other services.

• Food Bank of the Hudson Valley can put you in touch with any of the 370 food pantries and soup kitchens it serves in the region: 534-5344.

• The United Way helps dozens of local organizations:

Orange County: 457-4774

Sullivan County: 794-1771

Ulster County: 331-4199

• American Red Cross in Greater New York helps people affected by disasters:

Orange, Sullivan: 294-9785

Ulster County: 338-7020

• The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programs of Orange, Ulster and Sullivan counties are looking for volunteers age 55 and older to help people in a variety of ways:

Orange: 615-3728

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That number of homeless kids — up from 1,500 in 2007-2008 — is surely higher since it doesn't even count the tiniest victims, babies who aren't old enough for school and often spend their days and nights in these squalid places.

Even if they're not officially homeless — without a fixed place to live, according to the federal McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act — tens of thousands of mid-Hudson children are living in poverty, which means a family of four is earning less than \$22,113 per year.

One-third of all Sullivan children, or nearly 6,000 under 18, are impoverished, according to the latest census estimates. Some of those children are so poor that kids in one family wouldn't go to school on certain days, because they didn't have enough shoes for all the siblings, says Kim Conway, a student support specialist for Academic Support for Kids, a Sullivan County Board of Cooperative Education Services program that aims to help kids like them.

Nearly 20 percent of Orange County children, some 23,000, are at the poverty level, according to a study by the Center for Governmental Research commissioned by such local nonprofits as United Way and the Community Foundation. Some are so desperate that they'll only eat half a sandwich at lunch in order to bring the other half home to feed their families, said Pine Bush High School Principal Aaron Hopmayer.

In Ulster County, the 16 percent of children who live in poverty, about 6,300 kids, is still above the state average and includes a child who told the school nurse his mother went without food the night before so that he could eat.

"They're the real victims," says Conway.

Aid is cut as need deepens

To make an awful situation worse, the historic increase in the number of hurting kids comes at a time of cuts in the programs to help them. Local organizations that provide food to needy families have just lost hundreds of thousands of dollars in state and federal funding.

The Sullivan County Federation for the Homeless lost \$120,000 in state grants, but it now serves 180 meals per day, up from 150 a year ago. Even with a private donation and a recent state grant, it's had to cut back on its food pantry that serves families, from once a week to once a month.

"And that really hurts," says the Federation's new director, Stacey Bresky, who added, "I knew there was poverty here, but I didn't know it was this bad."

Cuts in the same program have hit one of the region's oldest soup kitchens, Guild of St. Margaret in Middletown, and an Orange County Cornell Cooperative Extension program that gives local fresh produce to needy families, although both just got temporary assistance from the state.

Perhaps most importantly, the food bank that supplies local pantries and soup kitchens in Orange, Sullivan and Ulster counties has been hit hard, losing about 14 percent of its federal money at a time when it and other food pantries are already pressured by increased poverty and homelessness, along with the disasters of Hurricane Irene and summer flooding.

"We're down about 800,000 pounds of food," said Ron VanWarmer of the Food Bank of the Hudson Valley. "It seems like they're cutting these programs now when we need them the most."

This is why the food pantry Emergency Housing Group in Middletown, which hasn't had an open bed for families in years, was recently so bare that all that was left was dried spaghetti and cans of corn.

"And that flew out of here," said Anne McKenna, supervisor of case management for Emergency Housing, who sees babies born homeless.

Parents struggle to break the cycle

Even programs that try to help needy parents break the cycle of poverty have lost funds.

Sullivan BOCES' Academic Support for Kids allowed a single mom, Renee Pegram, to take classes every day so that she could train for a job as a security guard. Another program allowed her 2-year-old son to go to a learning care program where he learned shapes and colors. But when that preschool program was cut, Pegram's son had to stay in the motel room they call home. Now, Renee's 26-year-old brother

Sullivan: 807-0251

Ulster: 339-2181

- The Salvation Army provides a variety of services:

Middletown: 343-0821

Port Jervis: 856-3214

Newburgh: 562-0413

Kingston: 331-1803

- The Sullivan County Community Action Commission to Help the Economy (CACHE) provides help for needs ranging from hunger to domestic violence: 292-5821.

- Newburgh Ministry provides shelter, food and education for adults and children: 561-0070.

- Family of Woodstock provides services in the Ulster County area for such needs as hunger and domestic violence:

Kingston: 331-7080

Ellenville: 647-2443

New Paltz: 255-8801

Woodstock: 679-2485

- The Sullivan County Federation for the Homeless offers a food pantry, soup kitchen and other services: 794-2604

- Queens Galley, Kingston, serves 9,500 meals per month - breakfast, lunch and dinner - to the needy: 338-3468.

- Jewish Family Service of Orange County provides a range of services, from counseling to economic help:

Middletown: 341-1173

Newburgh: 562-8372

OTHER WAYS TO HELP

You can also contact the following:

- Churches or synagogues, which can direct you to ecumenical food pantries in your community

- Local schools, which now have food pantries

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babysits the boy, who watches cartoons all day.

As the number of homeless kids grows and state aid to schools decreases, the has state mandated that school personnel who help and count homeless kids must spend less time assisting them and more time with administrative tasks such as budgeting.

"I can't keep up," said Sullivan BOCES student support specialist Jamie Latimer, who tries to find ways for homeless families to do things like cleaning their clothes or getting transportation to the few jobs they're lucky to find.

The lack of basic necessities like transportation and care for kids in rural places like Sullivan can be a real obstacle for homeless job-seeking parents like Melissa Hadden, a mother of three, who are 11, 12 and 14. They all live in a motel room with two beds, a refrigerator, a sink and a TV attached to the wall. Hadden, who's studying to be a certified nursing assistant in that Sullivan BOCES program, has been searching for work without a car ever since she moved from the state of Florida a few years ago.

"It's not easy being a single parent in my situation," she said.

Stats offer glimpse into harsh impact

While some impoverished kids might not realize what they're missing — with moms like Hadden and Pegram hosting Thanksgiving dinners or Halloween parties in motel rooms for other homeless families — educators and health and social workers know that the impact of child poverty is devastating.

"If your basic physical needs aren't met, you can't learn," said Hopmayer in the Pine Hill Central School District, which fed 200 families with its Thanksgiving food drive, up from 150 last year.

This is why only one-quarter of all homeless children graduate from high school.

It's also why homeless kids are at least three times more likely to get sick emotionally and physically than those with homes, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness.

You certainly don't need statistics to tell you how some impoverished kids feel inside; you just have to see the child with sad eyes and a growling stomach who, on a Friday, asks the school nurse for food to eat at home on the weekend.


In fact, life is so fragile for these littlest victims, an emergency that would be devastating for the rest of us would be almost unthinkable bad for them.


Even though she's only 22, Renee Pegram has a cancerous liver tumor. If she has to have surgery to remove it, she's afraid, she might lose the benefits that allow her to stay in a motel with her 3-year-old son.


"Where would we go then?" she asks. "Where would he go?"

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 **Bobbieann Hassan**
 I read this article and it breaks my heart, something more has to be done to help..I know things are really bad, but these are children and they don't deserve to live this way and their parents must feel so worried and sick inside and scared. I really feel for them. I really think those who are very wealthy should kick in their fair share based on what they make because the middle class is so strapped now many of us could end up in the same situation..very scary and very heart breaking and very very wrong. If the shoes were on their rich foot, they would hope there was something that could be done to help them live and get back on their feet too and feed ans shelter their kids.We need to take care of these kids.
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 **blueheron**
 This is what happens when the feds/states pass along those "initiatives" to DSS and local agencies; the agencies get richer (managing people, or so they say) while DSS pays for hotel rooms but not an apartment (an apt would be less expensive, more stable, better for the kids). We are a management top-heavy state, burdened with initiatives (experiments, really) and this is the result - no direct services, Medicaid spend-downs that destabilize a household to the point of homelessness; and each county "does its own thing" (home rule state).