



Seizing the Moment

STATE GOVERNMENTS and THE NEW COMMITMENT TO REDUCE POVERTY IN AMERICA

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The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national nonprofit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

CLASP has played a key role in the re-emergence of poverty and opportunity in recent public discourse. In 2006 CLASP published "Targeting Poverty: Taking Aim at A Bull's Eye" which telescoped the potential for a new political climate toward those struggling to make ends meet. In addition to tracking developments around the nation, CLASP provides technical assistance related to raising the political profile of poverty and opportunity. Look for CLASP audio conferences and issue briefs on a range of topics such as: Poverty-Reduction Targets: What State Legislators Aim to Do; Poverty Ruler: Toward a Better Measurement Tool; Target Practice: Lessons from Targets that Hit at Air Quality and Homelessness; Developed Nation: What and Why Poverty Targets are Policy in Ireland, Canada, France, the UK and More.

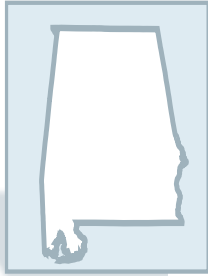
Please contact Jodie Levin-Epstein at jodie@clasp.org for the schedule of audio conferences and to share developments in your community or state.

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State-by-State Narratives



ALABAMA

Initiative: House Task Force on Poverty (2007).

A pending bill would establish a permanent commission on the Reduction of Poverty (2008).

In early 2008, the Alabama House Task Force on Poverty issued its report. While its work is done, a pending bill would establish a permanent legislative commission.

The 14-person House Task Force was made up of a bipartisan group of legislators, along with representatives of state anti-poverty nonprofits. It was chaired by Representative Patricia Todd (D-Birmingham), a tireless anti-poverty advocate whose earlier efforts to form a joint House and Senate task force died in the Senate.⁴¹ Starting in October 2007, the group held three meetings that brought together more than 100 people and 34 organizations.

According to Rep. Todd, the task force's overarching goal was to develop "realistic legislative priorities."⁴² Four subcommittees (human/social capital, housing and community development, education and workforce development, and tax/regulatory) identified the top issues, and the task force agreed that individual members would introduce related legislation in 2008.⁴³ The priorities included:

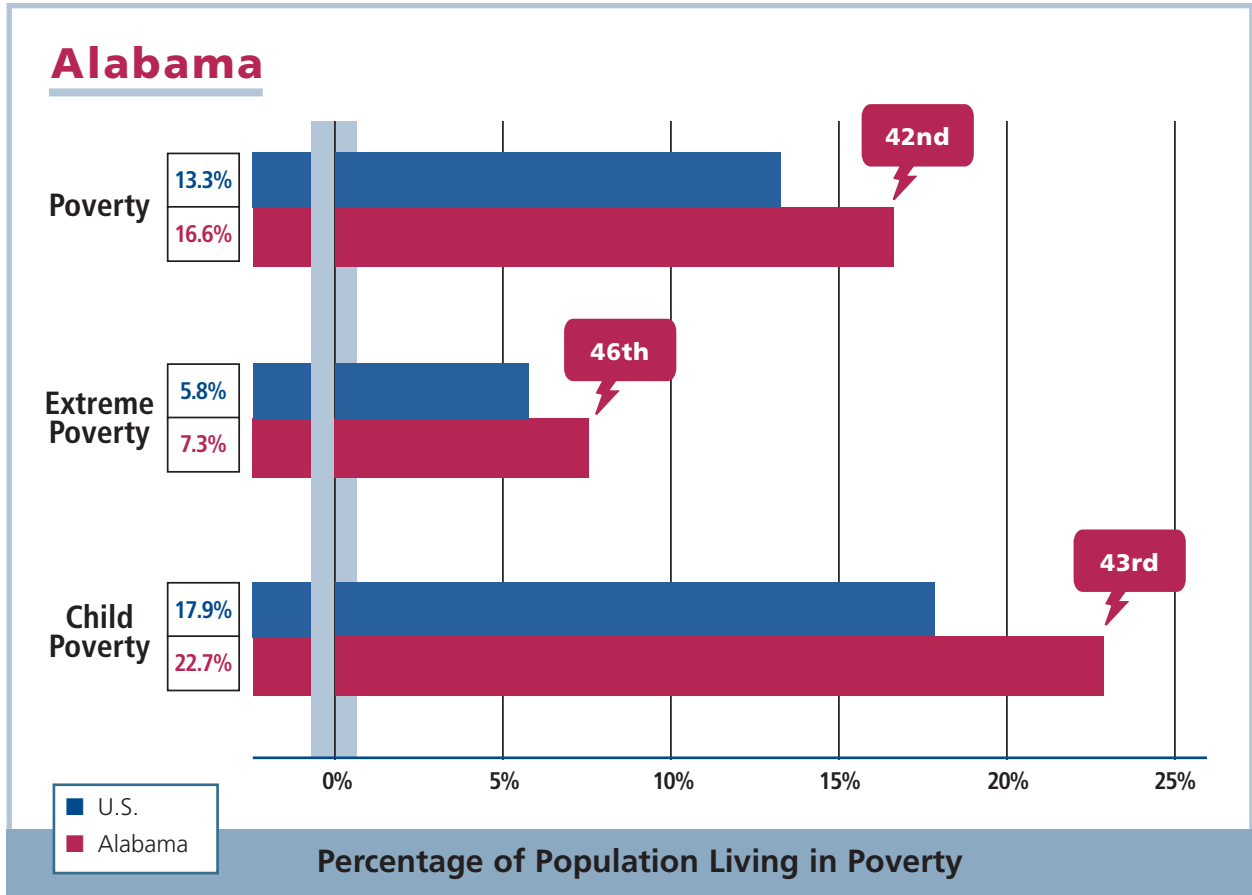
- ◆ Requiring businesses that receive economic incentives to pay a wage equal to the area median-income level,
- ◆ Providing additional funds to Head Start until there is no waiting list,
- ◆ Eliminating sales tax on groceries and food, and
- ◆ Raising the income-tax threshold to the poverty level.

Task force members made a variety of observations about their mission. A legislator from one of Alabama's poorest counties asserted that "people do get lost and think they can't do better,"⁴⁴ and the Republican vice-chairman observed that investment in education is a key solution, because "one of the biggest reasons people stay in poverty is ignorance."⁴⁵

If the permanent commission were established, it would meet at least quarterly and provide the legislature with an annual assessment of current programs, along with proposed policies to address poverty.

"The Task Force has had overwhelming support for principles in both parties," Rep. Todd observed. "Our challenge is that many things we strive for will cost money. With a general budget that is being

cut, proposals that cost money are not going to fly, so we have to get creative—and we will. The pending commission could prove important as a focal point for bringing together disparate perspectives on how to meet this challenge. I am hopeful that Alabama, which has lots of room for improvement, will be able to move forward in the years ahead.”⁴⁶



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.



COLORADO

Initiative: Common Good Caucus (2007).

A new bipartisan, bicameral legislative forum has been created to bring together “legislators interested in addressing poverty through public-policy and private-sector solutions that promote self-sufficiency, family well-being, community development, and the common good.”⁴⁷

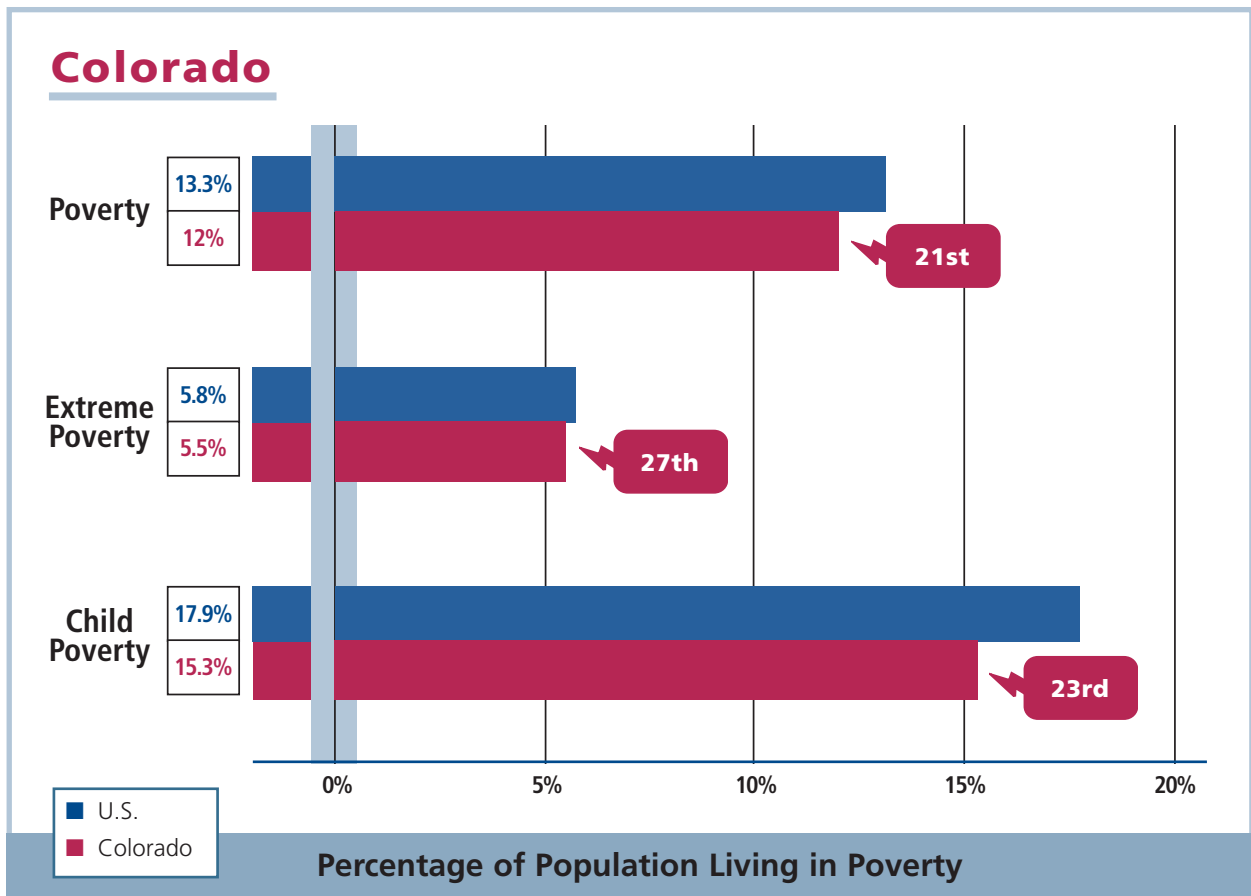
Spearheaded by Representative John Kefalas (D-Ft. Collins), the Common Good Caucus, in collaboration with the “Paycheck Away” Coalition,⁴⁸ participated in a statewide series of community forums.

Beginning in September 2007, the group held town hall meetings “to hear people’s stories about making ends meet and to engage legislators and citizens in the solutions.”⁴⁹ A DVD of the “Paycheck Away” statewide tour was then delivered to every member of the state legislature.

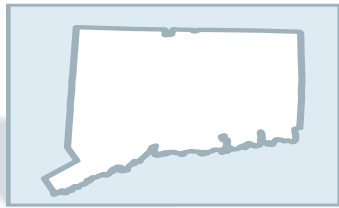
At a December 2007 caucus meeting, the governor’s office presented an anti-poverty budget request, which included increases of \$213.5 million for programs targeted at those living on a shoestring—programs such as workforce centers, higher education, and health care.

The caucus’s search for solutions is guided by an appreciation that poverty impacts “educational outcomes, workforce training, and retention” and has “social and economic costs on society as a whole,” Rep. Kefalas said. Going forward, one of the caucus’s goals will be developing a legislative agenda for the 2009 session, and Rep. Kefalas believes this should focus on health-care reform and access to early childhood and higher education. “The Common Good Caucus will have achieved a lot if we can get a law to cut poverty in half, along with specific strategies to accomplish the goal,” he said.⁵⁰

Long term, the legislators of the Common Good Caucus will strive to develop expertise on poverty issues and to become a cohesive caucus to which colleagues can turn. “Legislators need to both learn the subject matter and learn to trust each other. The caucus is a place where both can happen,” Rep. Kefalas said.⁵¹



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.



CONNECTICUT

Initiative: A target to cut child poverty in half by 2014 is overseen by the Child Poverty and Prevention Council (2004).

In 2004, Connecticut became the first state in the nation to enact a law setting a poverty target. Spurred by a small group of legislators, the target has brought disparate state agencies together to work toward a common goal.

While the United Kingdom had announced a similar effort five years earlier, the Connecticut initiative was homegrown. Its impetus came from a brainstorming session by a handful of legislators wanting to gain real political focus around child poverty, according to Elaine Zimmerman, executive director of the Connecticut Commission on Children. Zimmerman noted that the target “really energized us all; it was about accountability that came as a package with a vision.”⁵²

The measure was signed into law in 2004 by Governor John G. Rowland (R), and in 2006, under Governor Jodi Rell (R), the Child Poverty Council and the state’s Prevention Council merged into the Child Poverty and Prevention Council.

Pat Wilson-Coker, who was director of the Department of Social Services when the law went into effect, observed that a target “brings a lot of people to the table. When the state takes on a public policy like ending child poverty or just reducing it by half, all of the various departments within the state...have a role.”⁵³

The council reports annually on progress toward the goal of cutting child poverty in half; it focuses on the governor’s budget, as well as on poverty and prevention reports from other state agencies. The council also advises the governor and legislature on ways to realign the state’s budget to ensure that it is compatible with reducing child poverty.

One of the challenges the council faced early on was that 67 recommendations, too many to take on at once, were included in the first report.

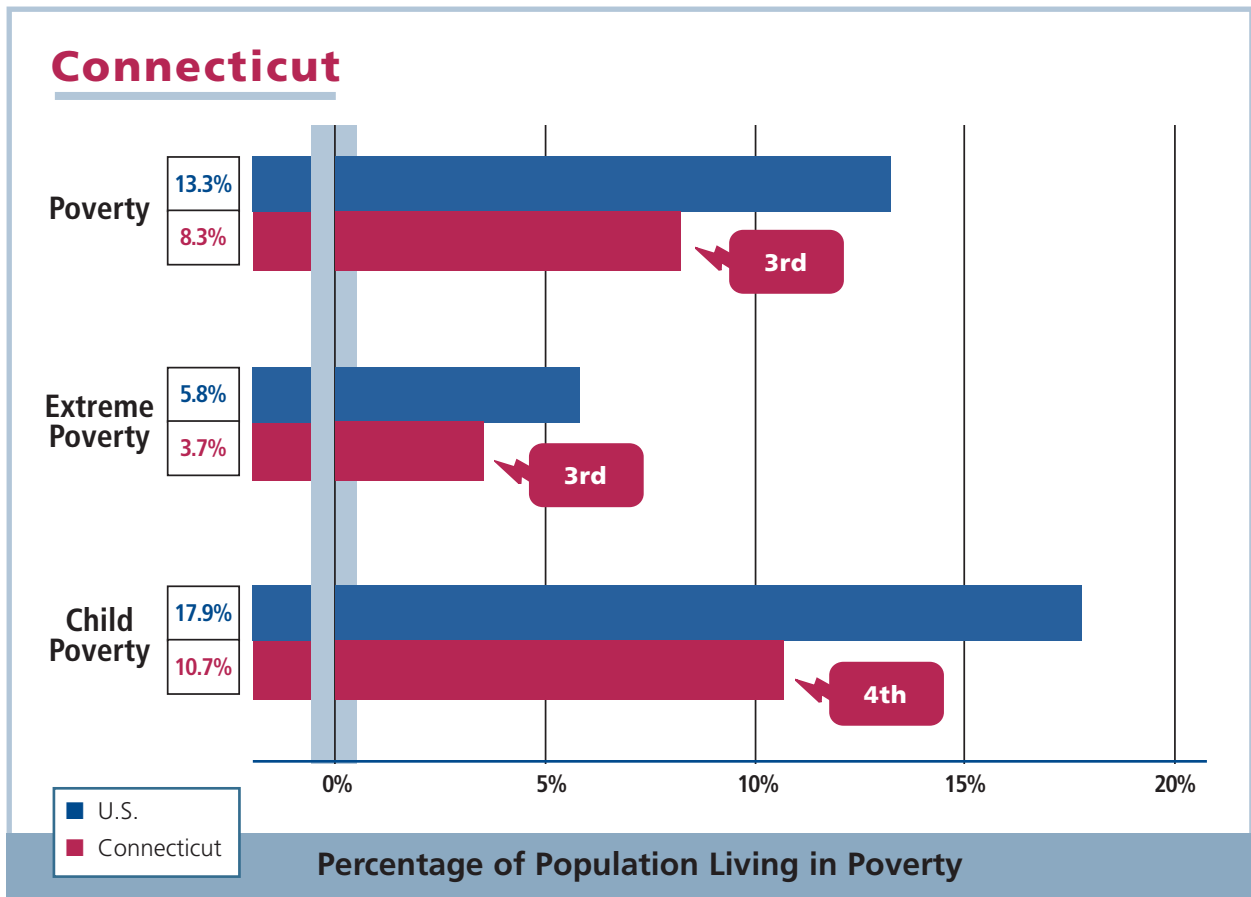
To help establish priorities, the council recently invited a nonpartisan panel of experts to review the 67 recommendations and offer suggestions. In December, the experts picked 13 specific priorities that “have a sufficiently strong evidence base to support their potential effectiveness in reducing child poverty.”⁵⁴ Their criteria also included cost-effectiveness and the timeframe for impact. The priorities included income supports such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and child-care subsidies made available to all low-income families at least up to 200 percent of poverty. They also included education investments in areas such as teacher quality and early childhood and postsecondary education, as well as family-structure supports (*e.g.*, programs related to teen pregnancy prevention).⁵⁵

The panel also noted that the current federal poverty measure is inadequate, urging the council to utilize methods proposed by the National Academy of Sciences in 1995 and other measures, such as student progress and health status. The council’s progress reports track the status of child poverty using both 100 and 200 percent of poverty.

The Child Poverty and Prevention Council’s January 2008 progress report identifies additional steps it plans to take toward refining the effort, such as economic modeling that will allow the state to forecast which of the alternative recommendations would result in a 25- to 30-percent reduction in child poverty.⁵⁶ In addition, the General Assembly’s Human Services Committee raised several bills in March that address priorities recommended by the expert panel.⁵⁷

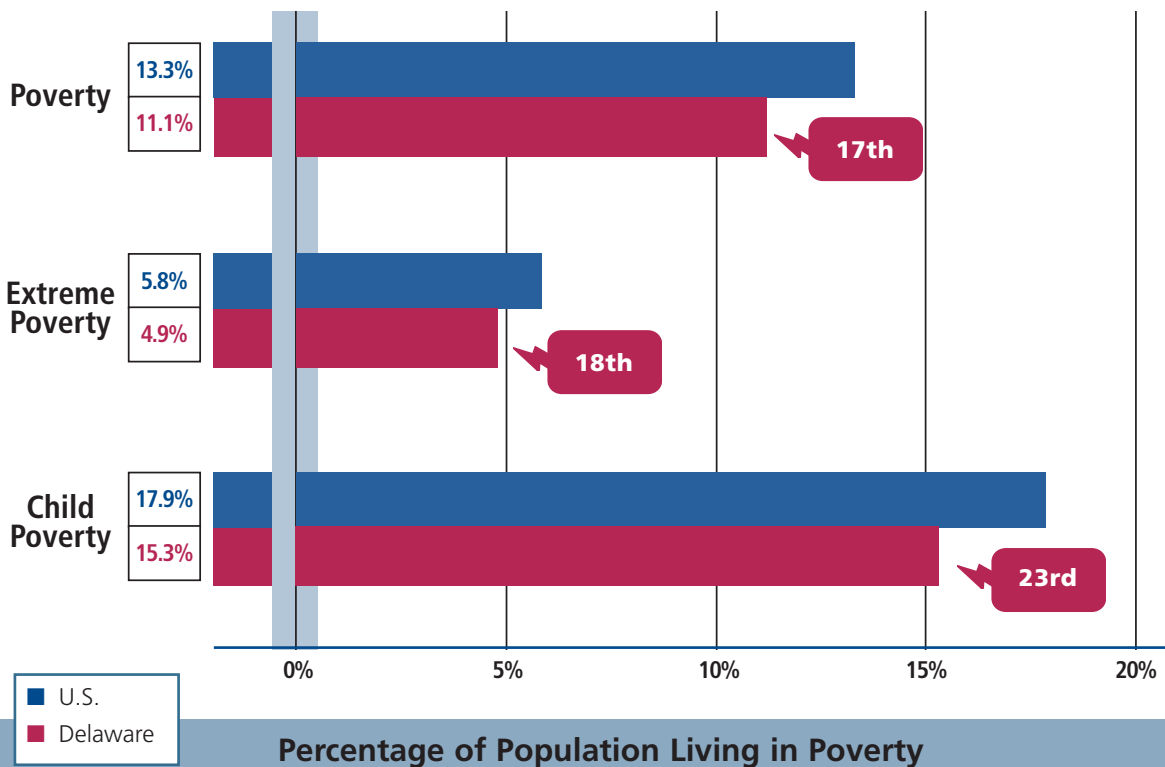
The focus on the anticipated impact of alternative policies on child poverty is particularly salient for Connecticut politics, where proposals for a refundable state EITC have, to date, been rejected by the governor, whose budget director chairs the council. Because the EITC provides income for working families, it can bring immediate improvements to economic well-being.

Business leaders have increasingly been speaking out about the need to address poverty. The most recent KIDS COUNT report by the Connecticut Association for Human Services⁵⁸ led Thomas Phillips, president of Capital Workforce Partners, to note that poverty has ripple effects throughout the community and its workforce. “This is no longer a social-only discussion; this is now an economic-competitiveness discussion,” Phillips said. Liberty Bank President Chandler Howard observed, “Every business wants to operate in a healthy economy. When you have a segment of the community mired in poverty, it pulls everyone down.”⁵⁹



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

Delaware



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.



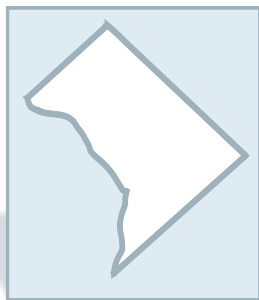
DELAWARE

Initiative: A target to cut child poverty in half by 2017 was established by Executive Order and is overseen by the Child Poverty Task Force (2007).

Governor Ruth Ann Minner (D) issued an executive order in August 2007 to establish the Child Poverty Task Force.⁶⁰ This followed on the heels of a legislative session that ended before a bill to legislate a poverty target could gain full consideration. That legislation was sponsored by Representative Terry Schooley (D-Newark), also the director of KIDS COUNT in Delaware, who now chairs the task force.

The 25-member task force plans to spend 2008 collecting information from experts, hearing from communities, and determining its recommendations. The work plan for this one-year planning phase includes three work teams focused on data and research, public outreach, and agency inventory. One of the task force's first meetings included a presentation from the Vermont state senator who serves as co-chair of the Vermont Child Poverty Council. Along with its public meetings, the task force plans to operate a Web site to facilitate public access to its deliberations and findings.

“There has been incredible buy-in from the agency heads and others who have come to the Task Force meetings,” said Schooley. “The target has helped galvanize lots of us who have long worked on these issues. We want to recognize what we have done right and build upon that with a few key priorities. To get the job done, our plan will include action steps designed to sustain both public interest and political will over the next decade.”⁶¹ The plan is due to the governor by August 2008.



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Initiative: D.C. Poverty Commission (2006).

The Commission on Poverty was established by the City Council in June 2006 “to evaluate programs designed to help District residents break the cycle of poverty; to make recommendations to improve the economic, educational, healthcare, and housing status of District residents living in poverty; and to focus on efforts aimed at reducing the rates of concentrated poverty and childhood poverty in the District.”⁶² The commission was originally scheduled to sunset in 2008, but is expected to be extended.

After a 2003 Brookings Institution study found that concentrated poverty (*i.e.*, more than 40 percent of the people in a given community fall below the poverty line) had risen significantly in the District, discussions began to circle around the creation of the D.C. Commission on Poverty, which was to focus on individuals who had lived below poverty at some point within the previous two years.⁶³

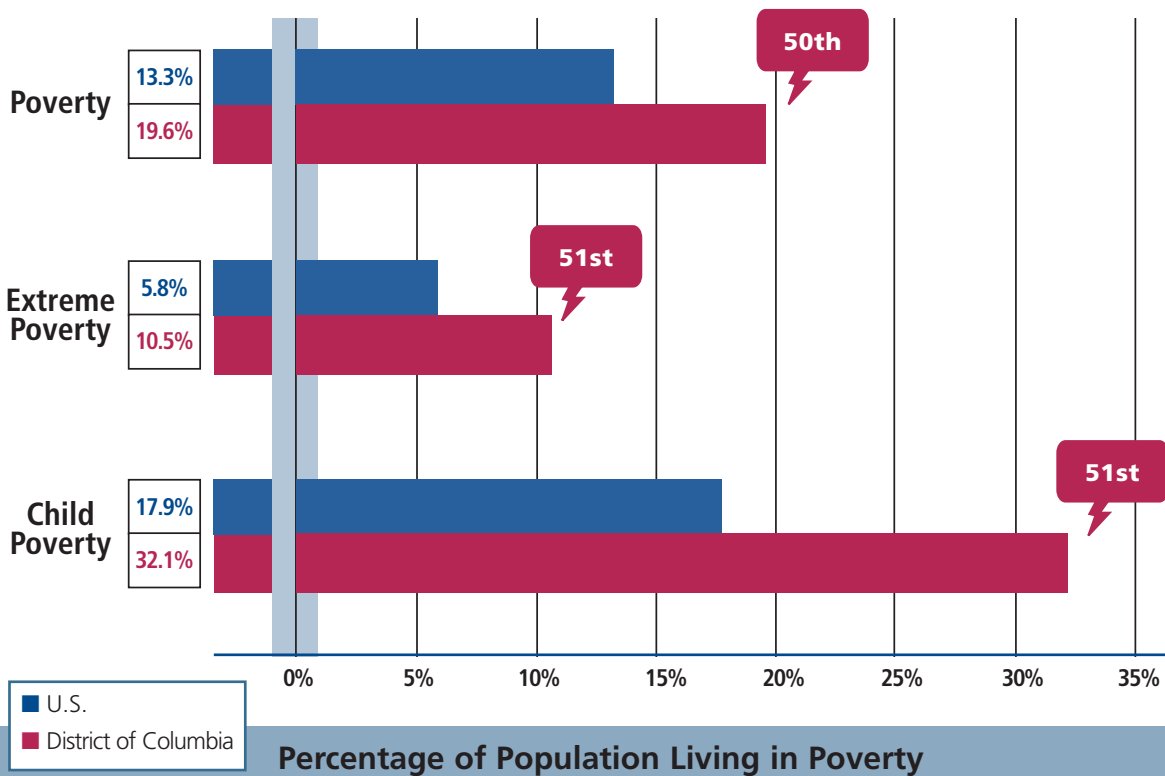
A 2005 commission bill was successfully shepherded by then-councilmember, now Mayor Adrian Fenty,⁶⁴ who acknowledged the “need to bridge the gap between rich and poor” and noted that the city’s leaders were “ready to implement solid programs for poor and working-class people.”⁶⁵

Advocates are stressing that poverty is more than a moral issue. The D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute’s executive director observed, “Much of the city’s biggest budget expenses—public safety, foster care, special education—is tied at least in part to our high poverty rate.”⁶⁶

More than a year after its creation, the commission is not yet fully staffed. The mayor has submitted nominees for nine of the 21 commissioners; the commission has yet to meet. But it is anticipated that both staffing and seating of commissioners will soon take place and the 2008 sunset date will be extended.

In the meantime, poverty has grabbed the current D.C. council’s attention. At a two-day Roundtable on Poverty in January 2008, more than 120 people signed up to testify in front of council members.⁶⁷ In a packed hearing room, women suffering from domestic violence, fathers who couldn’t find living-wage work, disabled and homeless veterans fighting to keep their shelters open, and elderly individuals whose landlords were taking advantage of their poverty shared their personal tragedies and pleaded for help. Advocates backed up these testimonies with striking figures and similar calls for action.

District of Columbia



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

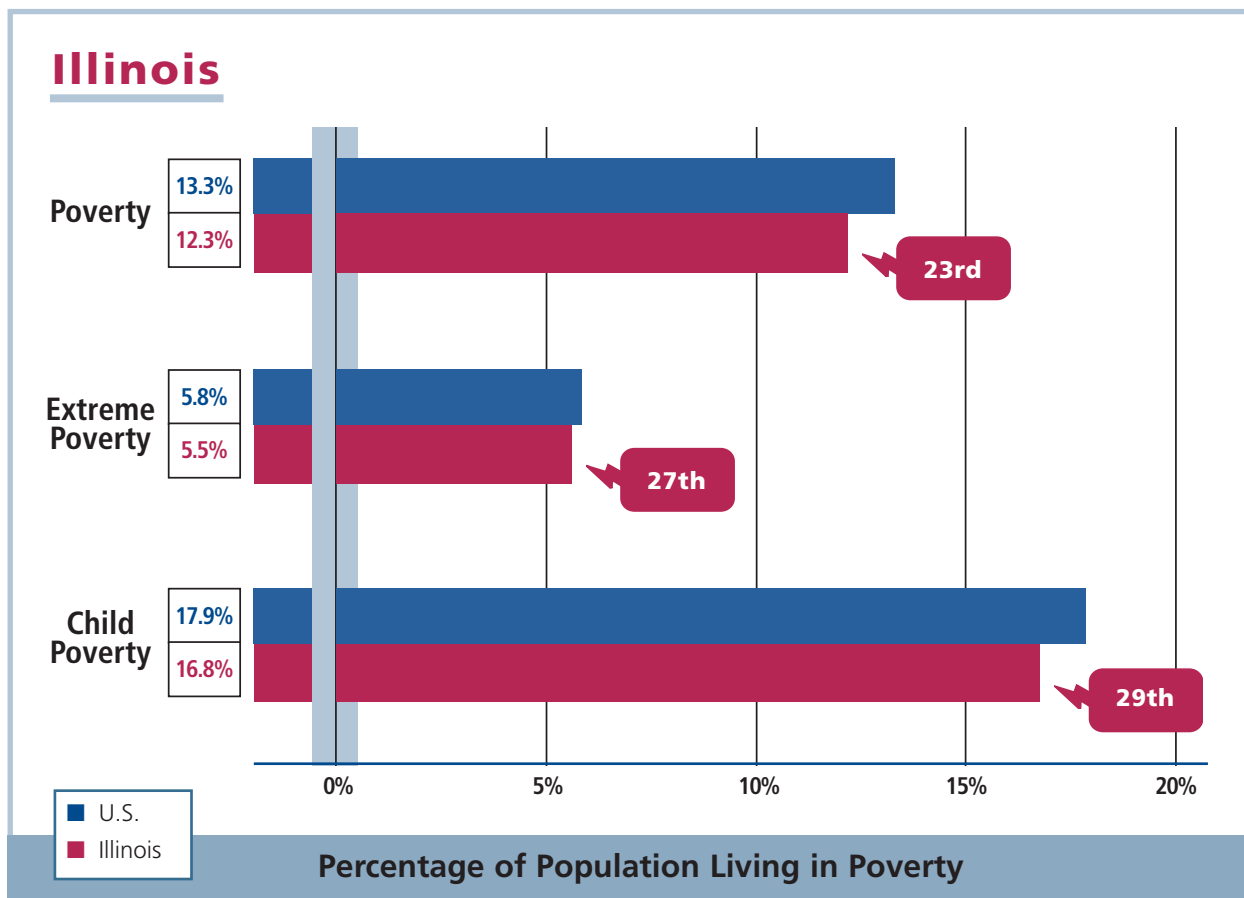
The next month, Council-member Marion Barry, the roundtable’s sponsor, held a National Poverty Summit aimed at “producing concrete policy and budget recommendations for the FY 09 cycle.”⁶⁸ Council Chairman Vincent Gray underscored the value of summits and the renewed conversation around poverty, calling it “arguably the most important issue we face in the District. We’ve lived with the problem so long, you can become callous. We need this catalyst.”⁶⁹



Illinois

Initiative: A pending bill would set a target to cut extreme poverty in half by 2015, to be overseen by a commission (2008).

The preamble to the Illinois constitution names the elimination of poverty as a fundamental goal of the state government. A pending bill, introduced in early 2008, would set a target to cut extreme poverty—defined as living below 50 percent of the poverty line—in half by 2015.⁷⁰ A Commission on Poverty Elimination would be charged with developing a comprehensive plan “consistent with international human-rights standards.”



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

The House unanimously approved the bill on April 9th, the governor is on record in support, and the Senate is next to act.

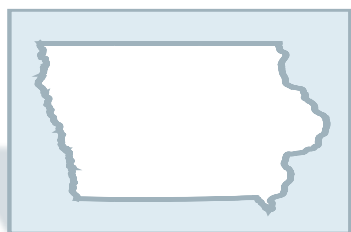
The bill’s House sponsor, Representative Karen A. Yarbrough (D-Maywood), asserts, “Freedom from poverty is a human right, and we as a state have the capacity to ensure our citizens do not live in such hunger and hardship. People who are working but still living in poverty are an important part of our economy. This commission will help provide the economic stimulus so these hardworking Illinoisans can not just get by, but get ahead.”⁷¹

The commission’s strategic plan is to offer specific policy and fiscal recommendations, each of which will include an implementation timeline and measures for the actual or potential impact. The commission also has the discretion to review and comment on existing and proposed policy that could have an impact on poverty in the state.

The legislation is a key goal of a statewide advocacy effort, the From Poverty to Opportunity Campaign. The campaign is a project of the Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, which held 20 forums across Illinois in 2007⁷² and has released a report of conversations with more than 700 people across the state.⁷³ As the Senate sponsor, Senator Michael Frerichs (D-Champaign), observed, “People from

every legislative district across the state have come together with a renewed passion to tackle poverty in Illinois. This is not a partisan issue. And it's not solely an urban, rural, or suburban issue. It's a people issue. We must remove the roadblocks to opportunity so more people can achieve economic stability."⁷⁴

The From Poverty to Opportunity Campaign is also urging the governor to include \$450,000 in the next budget to fund the commission's work.



Iowa

Initiative: Successful Families Caucus (2007).

The newly formed Successful Families Caucus aims to “chang[e] the way Iowa legislators think about poverty, moving the discussion beyond just the traditional human services committee work. Just as poverty touches every community in Iowa, so must solutions be generated and coordinated across all committees in the General Assembly.”⁷⁵

It all started with a conversation among a bipartisan group of just four legislators. By the time the caucus formally launched in February 2007, support from the Northwest Area Foundation enabled the group to expand and develop initiatives. One-fifth of the General Assembly is now part of the caucus, which gets staffing assistance through the State Public Policy Group, a consulting firm.

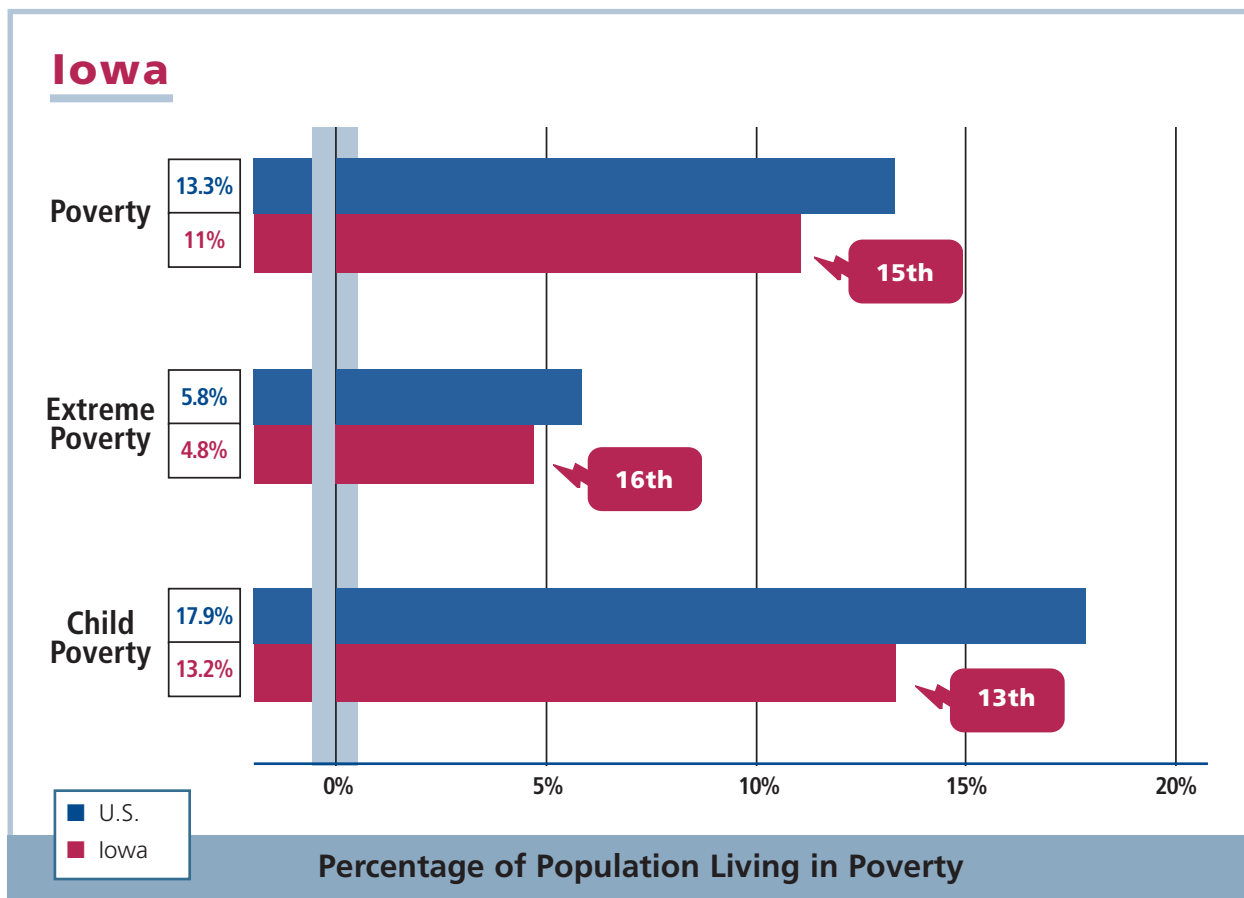
The top three goals of the caucus are:⁷⁶

- ◆ To create and sustain a bipartisan and constructive environment in the General Assembly to discuss issues and policy solutions for Iowa's poorest families and communities.
- ◆ To explore atypical and innovative poverty-reduction solutions and initiatives that could serve as models for communities in Iowa.
- ◆ To create a state policy environment in which to engage families, communities, and institutions in developing comprehensive policy solutions for Iowa's struggling communities and families.

The caucus has identified several key legislative priority areas for the 2008 session:⁷⁷

- ◆ *Health care.* Covering all children in the state through Medicaid, SCHIP, or private insurance.
- ◆ *Workforce.* Improving outreach and collaboration among state agencies and improving community-level partnerships with organizations such as local social services agencies, health clinics, and schools to improve information-sharing and referrals to workforce services.
- ◆ *Education.* Requiring schools to provide comprehensive financial literacy for K-12.
- ◆ *Financial consumer protection.*
- ◆ *Asset development.* Increasing the EITC from 7 to 10 percent of the federal level.

The caucus can turn to a variety of nonprofit organizations in the state for ideas and data on alternative approaches to addressing poverty. For example, in 2006, Iowa's Child and Family Policy Center issued



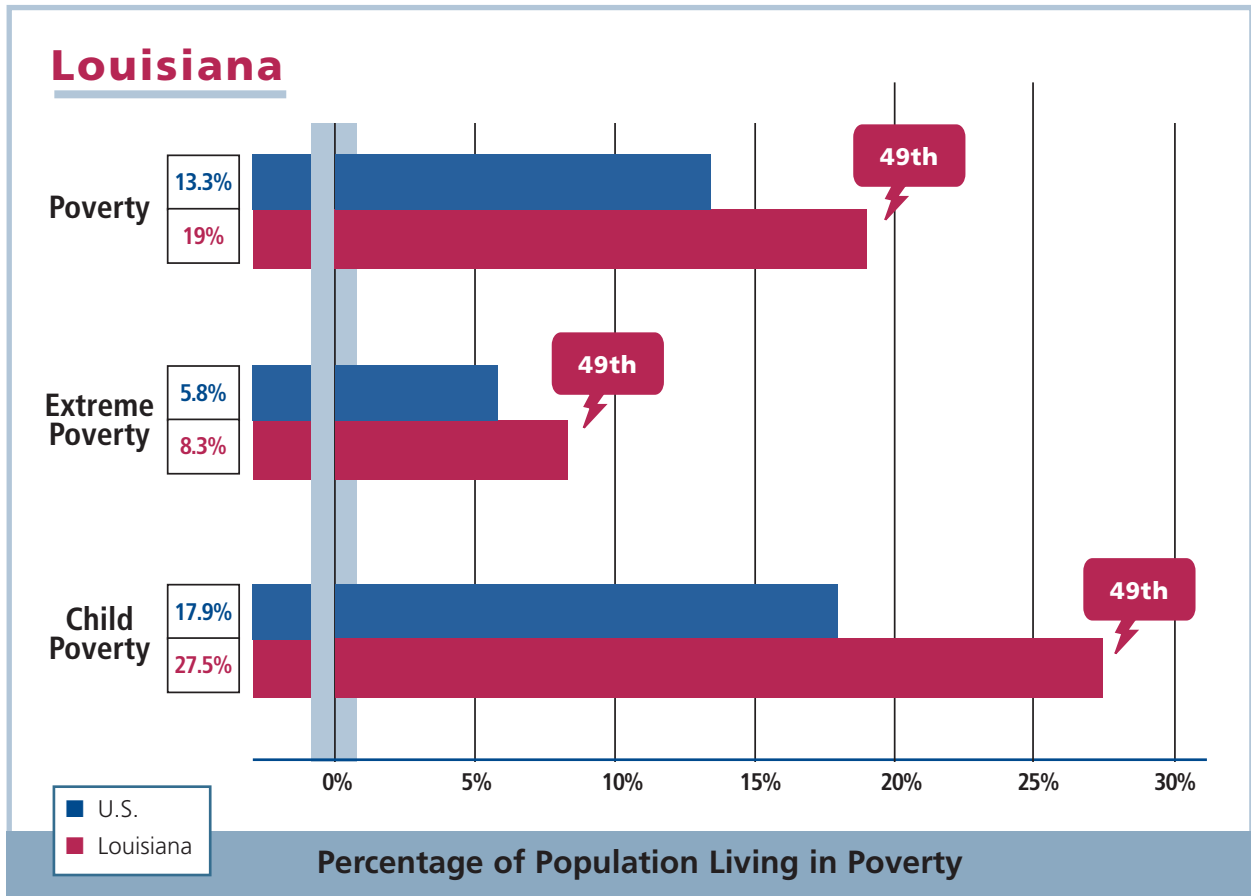
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

a report, *The Challenges of Getting By and Getting Ahead*, and it now tracks how the legislature addresses programs and policies in five areas:⁷⁸

- ◆ making work pay;
- ◆ providing needed work supports;
- ◆ investing in education, skill development, and entrepreneurship;
- ◆ promoting savings and addressing debt; and
- ◆ welcoming new workers.

An effective caucus provides an intangible value. “A caucus just doesn’t happen,” one state senator explained. “A caucus develops when you make the time and space for relationships to grow across parties, across chambers, and across committees.”⁷⁹

As Chairman and Representative McKinley Bailey (D–Webster City) noted, “This caucus provides a way to make a meaningful impact in a bipartisan way for Iowa families that need opportunities to improve their lives. The initial priorities identified by the Successful Families Caucus are focused on making this happen by proposing real solutions to real problems.”⁸⁰



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.



Louisiana

Initiative: A pending bill would cut child poverty in half by 2018 and would establish a Child Poverty Prevention Fund. The Child Poverty Prevention Council would implement the effort (2008).

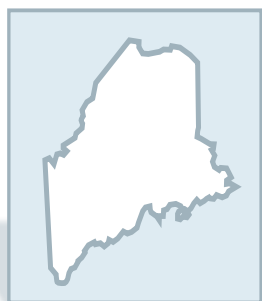
The pending bill would create a poverty council with the mission of disbursing grants directly to parishes to meet the goal of halving child poverty within a decade. Louisiana’s Child Poverty Council would be created within the state’s Department of Social Services. These features would distinguish the council as, to date, other states’ councils tend to be housed outside of a state agency and have a primarily advisory role.

Sponsored by business-owner and chairman of the Senate Labor and Industrial Relations Committee, Senator Ben Nevers (D-Bogalusa), the measure is expected to be considered in the 2008 regular session, sometime after March 31. The council would be comprised of representatives from six state departments: Social Services, Economic Development, Revenue, Education, Labor, and the Workforce

Commission. In pursuing its stated purpose of cutting child poverty in half, the council would be expected to prioritize support for parishes with the highest child poverty rates.

The pending bill would also create a “Child Poverty Prevention Fund.” The source of its monies would be broad and could include funding from state appropriations, federal funds, public or private donations, and gifts from individuals. The council would be charged with growing the fund.

Adren Wilson, assistant secretary of the Department of Social Services, notes, “This bill seeks to push us hard and fast to cut child poverty and that is appropriate. We know that poverty is too expensive. There are the obvious remediation and social-service costs. But also of concern is what’s less apparent—the more poverty we sustain, the more we lose out on the talents of those who are poor and the more likely those who are well-off will leave our state. The department stands ready to take on this task.”⁸¹



Maine

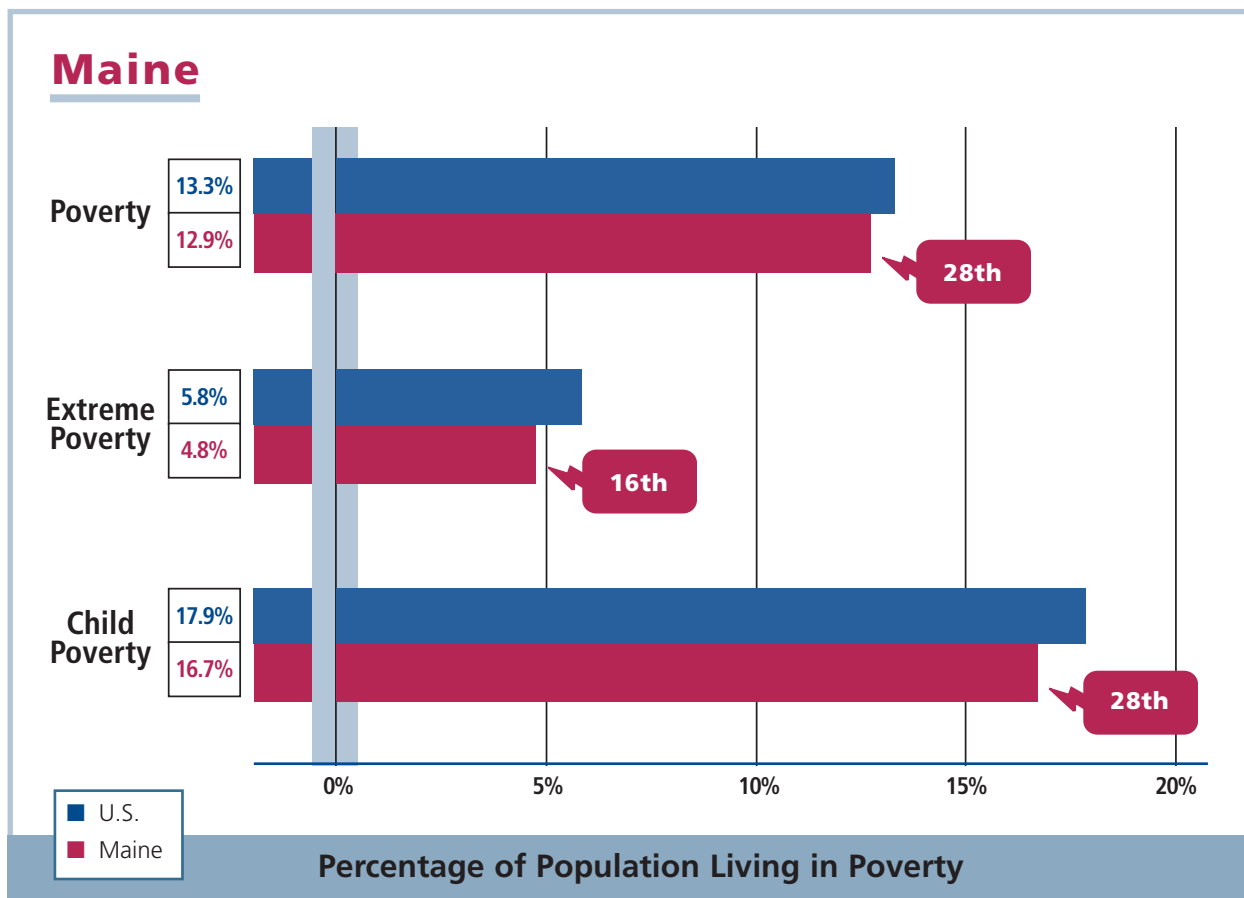
Initiative: A pending bill calls for a target to cut overall poverty to be set by a Council on Poverty and Economic Security (2007).

In 2007, a bill to establish the Maine Council on Poverty and Economic Security was introduced by the president of the Senate. A measure passed unanimously in committee in March 2008.⁸² The council is intended to “to advise the governor on ending poverty and providing economic security to disadvantaged citizens in the State.” The council is expected to make recommendations to the governor every two years.

The bill’s sponsor, Senate President Beth Edmonds (D-Freeport), may ask the committee to amend the bill to include a provision instructing the council to establish measurable benchmarks for the elimination of poverty in Maine. The council would set percentage reductions in the number of people living in or near poverty in the next five, 10, and 20 years.

Media coverage of poverty in Maine gained prominence in 2007 through a front-page, seven-part series in the *Kennebec Journal*. Later that year, the First Annual Symposium on Poverty and Economic Security was sponsored by a number of statewide advocacy organizations. The symposium identified a range of concerns, among them the implications of poverty on state productivity.

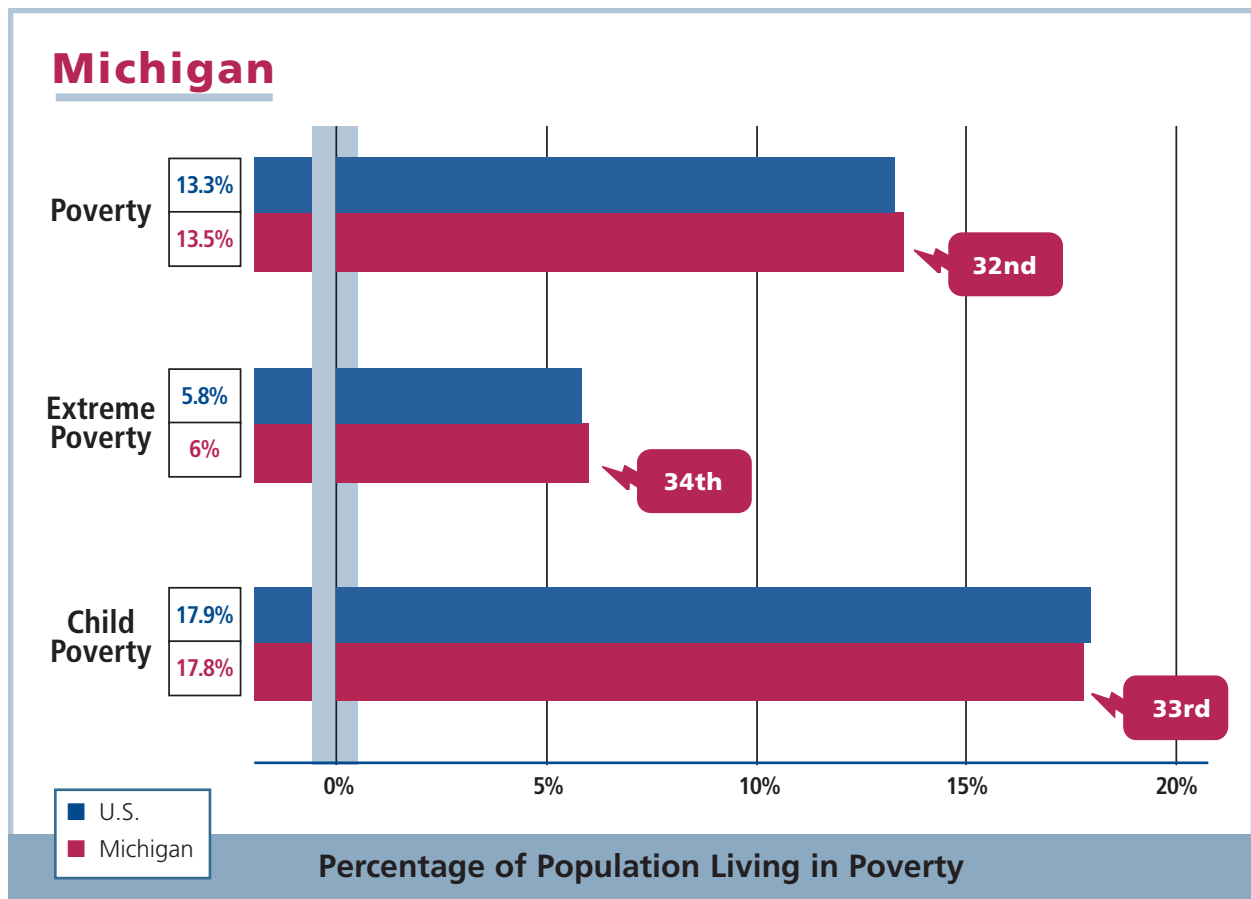
Each year, Maine loses about \$260 million in health care, metals manufacturing, and construction alone due to jobs that go unfilled for lack of qualified candidates. Most of these jobs—as a drywall installer, plumber, electrician, lab technician, nurse, dietician, or machinist—require a two-year degree.⁸³ The Maine-specific analysis demonstrated that investments in education could improve not only individual incomes but also the state’s overall productivity. The advocacy organizations expect to hold a symposium each year that zeroes in on the progress being made to reduce poverty and near-poverty in the state.



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

Recently, Governor John Baldacci (D) expressed concern about increased poverty among Maine’s children. As reported in the KIDS COUNT 2008 data book, 20 percent of the state’s preschool children live under the poverty line. Gov. Baldacci has pressed for federal action, noting that, “With the current budget shortfall in Augusta, we know that we face enormous challenges just to maintain our support. Once again, it shows that we need changed policies in Washington, and a renewed commitment to helping those in need.”⁸⁴

Sen. Edmonds is hopeful that the measure to establish the council will pass and that it will make a difference. “We need to acknowledge that poverty affects all of us, and that the solutions for raising people out of poverty come from a variety of sources,” she said. “The council proposed in my legislation would bring together representatives of the business community, faith-based organizations, advocacy organizations, as well as government-agency staff to propose, implement, and evaluate tools for reducing the prevalence of poverty. Government plays an important role in this task, but not the only one; we need to engage the whole community.”⁸⁵



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.



Michigan

Initiative: State-sponsored poverty summit (2008).

“Unless Michigan confronts its poverty head-on, economic recovery is impossible,” contends a *Detroit Free Press* columnist.⁸⁶

To tackle what Department of Human Services Director Ismael Ahmed says “has quietly become the most important question of our time,”⁸⁷ Michigan will hold its first state-sponsored poverty summit on November 13, 2008. Leading up to the summit, the Michigan Commission on Community Action and Economic Opportunity will hold six forums across the state.

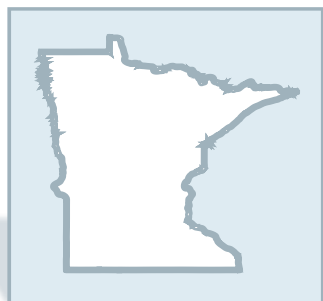
“We have to raise the profile of poverty, show people what’s at stake,” said Ahmed.⁸⁸

The forums are central to collecting good ideas. “We want to find out what works at the grass-roots level, what programs are innovative in helping people move out of poverty,” Commission Chairwoman

Sonia Harb said. “We think it is vitally important that we hear the stories and experiences of people who deal with poverty every day.”⁸⁹

The state plans to invite and engage a large number of low-income individuals, which Commission-member Daniel Piepszowski expects will make the summit a unique event. “The commission will be looking at not just at the gaps in services low-income individuals face but also how to maximize the obvious strengths of low-income individuals who show time and time again the fortitude and ingenuity necessary to navigate state systems. We have a lot to learn and a lot to do,” Piepszowski said.⁹⁰

The commission is supported by the Department of Human Services’ Bureau of Community Action and Economic Opportunity. Established by Governor Jennifer Granholm (D) in 2003, the bureau is charged with advancing state policies and programs to reduce poverty and to address the needs and concerns of low-income people.



Minnesota

Initiative: A target to eliminate poverty⁹¹ is part of the mission of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020, which is due to issue recommendations this year (2006).

A three-year Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020 is composed of 18 legislators and two non-voting members appointed by the governor. A February 2008 interim report to the legislature will be followed by an exploration of promising policies to solve poverty, with a final report due in December 2008.

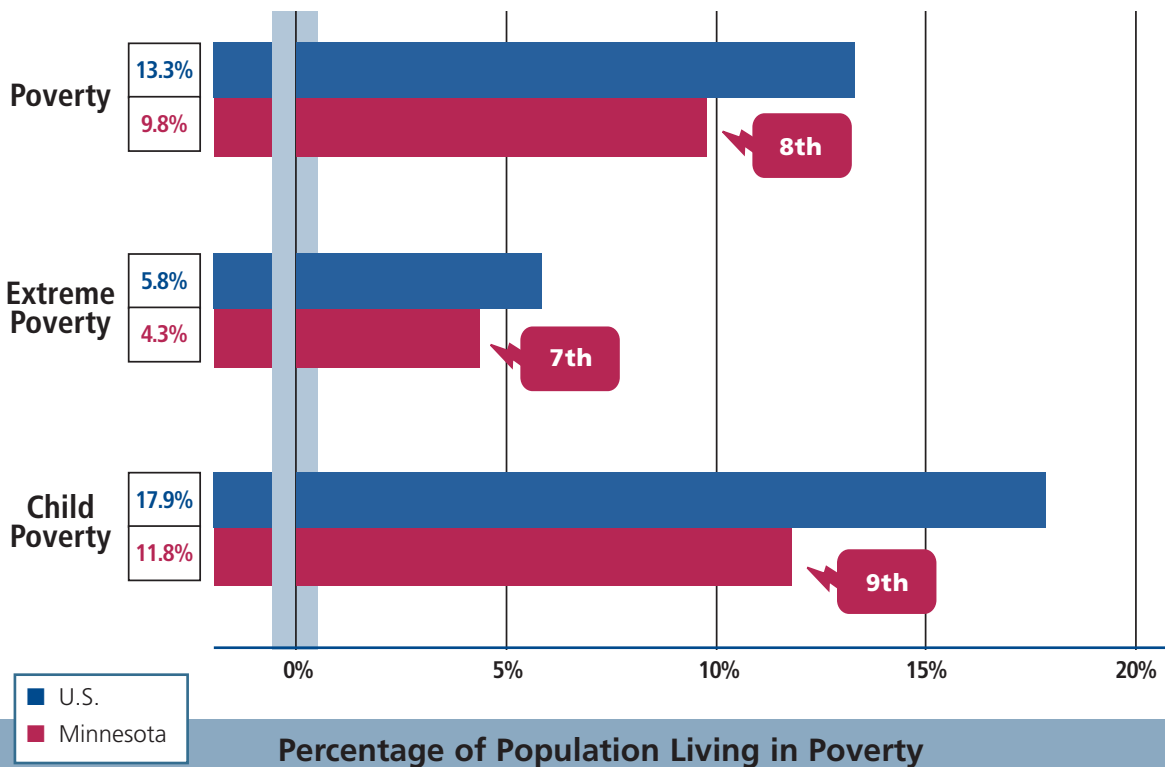
Governor Tim Pawlenty (R) authorized the commission when he signed into law a bill championed by outgoing state Senator John C. Hottinger (DFL-St. Peter), who was moved to act following two poverty summits held by state religious leaders in 2004 and 2005.

The Minnesota legislature appropriated \$250,000 for the commission’s operation, enabling it to hire staff and maintain a Web site, which archives audio and video of commission sessions, agendas from visits around the state, and related resources.⁹² The funds also allowed the commissioners to hold formal monthly hearings in the capitol and to travel across the state to see first-hand the struggles of people and communities.

As one reporter noted, “Almost from the start, poverty slapped [the commissioners] in the face.”⁹³ Their trips have included meals in soup kitchens; home visits; rides on mass transit; small group conversations with youth, seniors, and working-age adults; and visits to schools, homeless shelters, and workforce centers.

Advocates are also collaborating with the commission, providing support for regional meetings. Affirmative Options, a statewide coalition of more than 50 organizations, and the Joint Religious

Minnesota



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

Legislative Coalition have partnered in mobilizing advocates. They circulated tips on planning and hosting commission meetings, including how to set up an intimate “circle” in which residents could tell their personal stories directly to the commissioners.⁹⁴ As many as 200 people have attended such conversations, and the commission has been open to such input.

Affirmative Options advocates policy changes to improve Minnesota’s economy and to create opportunities for low-income people, while the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition mobilizes religious communities to influence public policy in Minnesota. In communicating the state’s effort to end poverty, the coalitions have focused on key themes:

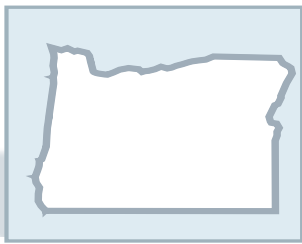
- ◆ **“It’s about all of us:** Our schools, our sense of safety, our communities and our economy’s productivity are all better off when poverty does not divert our resources and rob us of our best potential.
- ◆ **“It’s time:** Minnesota continues to have a strong economy and a strong foundation from which to challenge poverty. But we also see trends we want to change as soon as possible:

the highest food-shelf growth [is] happening in the suburbs, wages are falling behind the cost of living, the numbers of children in deep poverty have increased steeply in the last couple years, and our state's unemployment numbers no longer are lower than most other states.

- ◆ **“It’s possible:** This nation ended the widespread destitution of our elderly only a couple of generations ago. We have improved the conditions of the labor market with minimum wages, work–place safety regulations, and the prohibition of child labor. We build from a strong base and a rich legacy in Minnesota.”⁹⁵

Gregory Gray, the commission’s director, has begun to consider how to develop recommendations for the final report. These will include not just legislative proposals but also, as required by the law, proposals aimed at a full range of other sectors and stakeholders.

While there is a great deal of work remaining to be done, Gray believes the commission has already heralded change: “As a former state legislator, I am familiar with skepticism around social issues,” he said. “What has been striking about the commission is that it has clearly opened up the minds of many legislators—not just those on the commission. There is now a sense that we can make a difference if we want to. And legislators now realize that there is a groundswell of constituent support for action in districts both poor and wealthy.”⁹⁶



Oregon

Initiative: A benchmark calls for poverty to drop to 10 percent by 2010 from 2004’s 12.1 percent (1989).

The Oregon Progress Board is required by law to report annually if the state is making progress according to its 91 benchmarks. The 1989 law created the board as an independent state agency that oversees its systems of “indicators chosen by Oregonians as fair, efficient ways to measure economic, social, and environmental progress.”⁹⁷

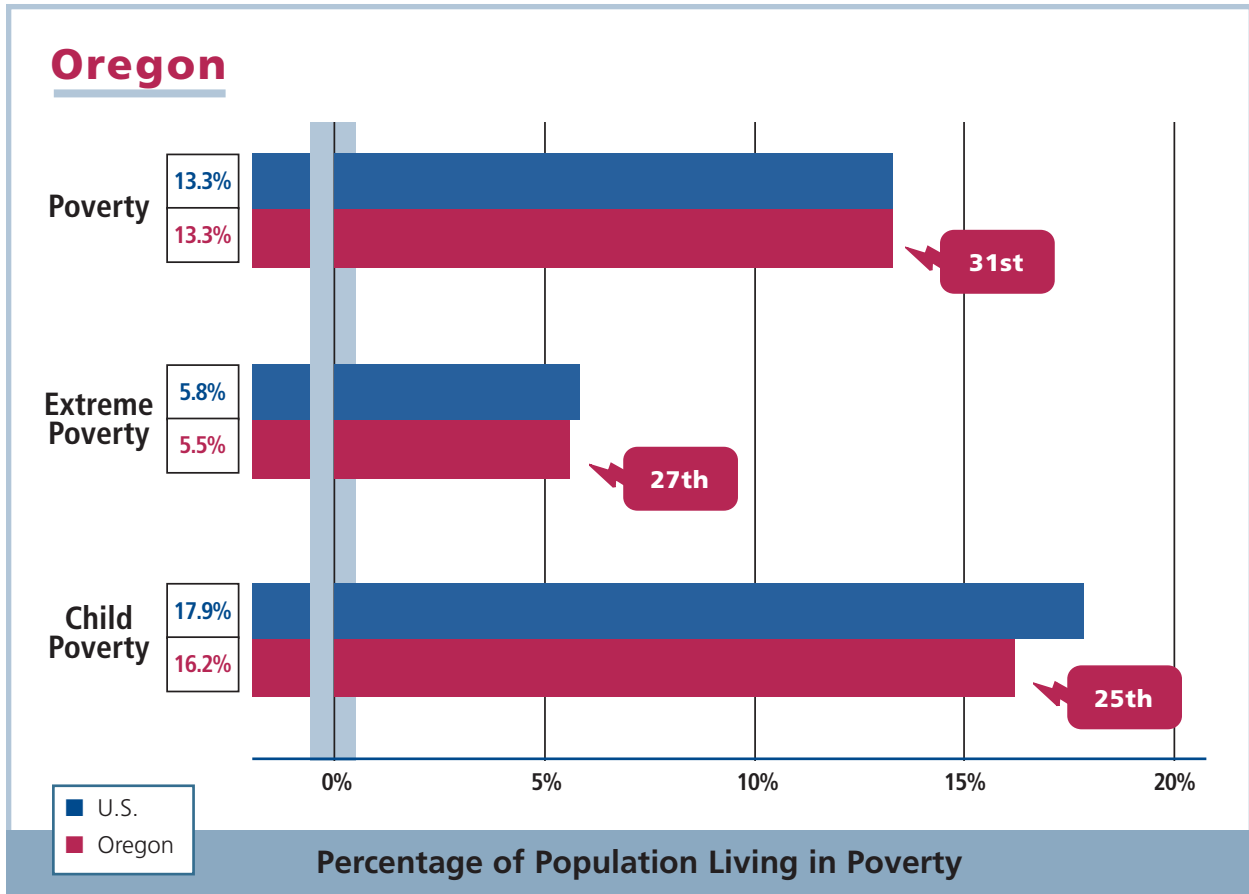
Benchmark 54 reports on the status of poverty in the state and establishes a target: by 2010, no more than 10 percent of the state’s population should be living in poverty. If achieved, this would represent a cut in poverty of nearly 17 percent in the six-year period between 2004 and 2010. Oregon pairs goal-setting with a deadline, which sets it apart from many other states with benchmark systems.

As the governor’s Human Services policy advisor noted in the 2007 Progress Report, “Investments that target family economic stability, prevention, and early intervention aren’t just the most fiscally efficient investments we can make—they’re also the investments that will make the biggest differences in our ability to improve the health and safety of our communities and the educational outcomes of our children.”⁹⁸ The report established that “the most telling benchmark, personal income as a percent of the U.S. [average], is near its lowest level in 20 years. Only one Oregon worker in three is at or above 150 percent of poverty for a family of four.”⁹⁹

In Oregon, benchmarks informed Oregonians that their state had particularly bad hunger levels. Governor Theodore Kulongoski acknowledged this in his 2003 State-of-the-State address, shortly after his inauguration.¹⁰⁰ He set out to make hunger a priority issue. To sustain public attention, in 2007 Gov. Kulongoski and his wife lived on a food budget of \$21 per person for a week—the average for Food-Stamp participants.

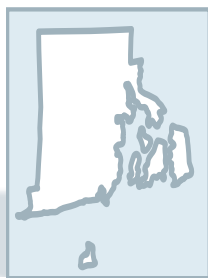
As he explained, one of the governor’s top priorities since he took office “has been to put the issue of hunger into the lap of every Oregonian.” He also asserts that “the solution to Oregon’s hunger problem is creating opportunity for good, living-wage jobs.”¹⁰¹

Oregon Thrives, a partnership of five nonprofit organizations and the state’s Housing and Community Services Department, reiterates the governor’s theme to look beyond one particular program or problem. Oregon Thrives seeks to demonstrate “how all efforts are interrelated, and how one investment reduces the need for other investments. For example, if you increase worker training and stabilize housing, people get better jobs and will not need food boxes or help paying their energy bill.”¹⁰²



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

The governor took the Food-Stamp challenge to build further public awareness of the intersection of hunger and income. He went further and challenged “all of you to consider taking the Food-Stamp challenge—if not this week, than maybe another one— and put yourselves at least part-way in the shoes of a family struggling to make ends meet. Challenge your friends and neighbors to do the same—or just have a conversation with them about what it means to be hungry in Oregon. Help them to understand that hunger is an income problem—that most Oregonians who are hungry are also working, but aren’t making enough to afford the basics that most of us take for granted.”¹⁰³ By 2004, Oregon had gone from the state with the worst rank (50th) on hunger to 26th in the nation.¹⁰⁴



Rhode Island

Initiative: Commission on Family Income and Asset-Building (2007).

The Joint Resolution, enacted in 2007, calls for a bicameral and bipartisan legislative commission.¹⁰⁵ The kickoff will feature the recommendations from Providence Mayor David Cicilline's (D) Poverty Work and Opportunity Task Force. In addition, the commission will hear about developments in other states and discuss skills-

building, work supports, predatory lending, and financial literacy.

The original measure called for a report in January 2008, but the deadline has been extended to June. The commission has at least eight sessions planned before then.

The commission’s purposes include identifying programs and legislation that already exist and new laws and programs necessary to:

- ◆ Build income and assets for families
- ◆ Promote financial education, literacy, and counseling
- ◆ Protect families from predatory and abusive financial services

It is expected that the commission will “work with charitable foundations, local government, community-based organizations, policy and research organizations, advocacy organizations, and other entities as may be appropriate to advance the financial security and viability of families.”¹⁰⁶

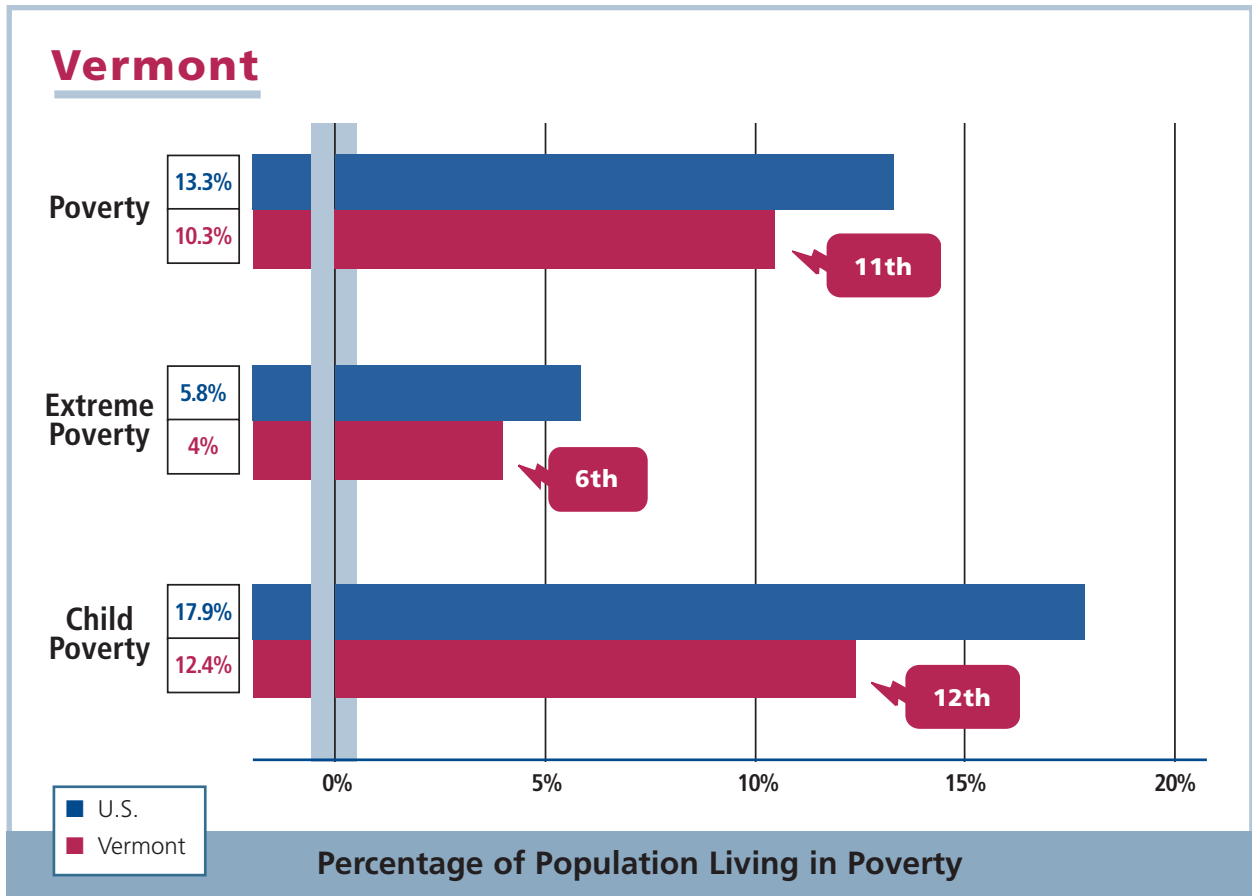
Poverty Institute Director Linda Katz observes that “the budget crisis that Rhode Island is facing makes the commission’s work all the more critical. Coordinating public and private strategies to help parents get family-sustaining jobs with health benefits is not only vital to the families’ economic well-being but is part of the solution to the deficit as more people pay taxes and rely less on publicly funded programs.”¹⁰⁷

Rhode Island



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

As Commission-member and Senator Juan Pichardo (D-Providence) notes, “This commission is tackling new problems—unscrupulous financial practices that can set anybody back, but it’s worse when you are already struggling and have no cushion to provide for your loved ones. How money is handled is one thing; making enough of it is another focus. We need to find ways to ensure our workers can get the skills they need for the ever-changing job market. We need to dig in—not just to find solutions for the state but to build the political will for those solutions.”¹⁰⁸



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.



Vermont

Initiative: A target to cut child poverty in half by 2017 is overseen by the Child Poverty Council (2007).

On June 5, 2007, the Vermont legislature passed a bill establishing the Child Poverty Council.¹⁰⁹ The measure is similar but not identical to the 2004 Connecticut child-poverty-target legislation. Notably, the council is to identify “priorities for implementing strategies” along with “biannual benchmarks” toward achieving at least a 50-percent reduction in child poverty in Vermont by 2017.¹¹⁰ Annually, the council is to report on the progress in meeting the biannual benchmarks. It is made up of six legislators, four state department commissioners, and four others representing various constituencies.

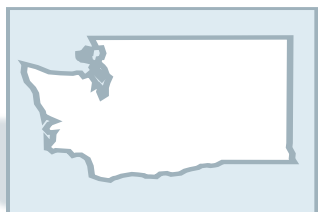
The bill was introduced by Senator Doug Racine (D-Chittenden), the chair of the Committee on Health and Welfare and a former lieutenant governor. For Racine, the impetus was simple: “We’re seeing growing income inequality here. We’re seeing more and more families with children showing up at homeless shelters and food shelves...Children who are in poverty are not doing nearly as well in school as the other children. It’s time to do something about it.”¹¹¹

To date, the council has pursued two broad missions. First, as required by the law, it hosted public hearings in each of the state's 14 counties in 2007. As the council co-chair and social worker, Representative Ann Pugh (D-South Burlington), noted, "We stayed away from Montpelier and got out around the state... We could hear directly from people who never could get to the capitol. So we heard a lot from those who are struggling to make ends meet. And we heard good ideas along the way."¹¹²

Sen. Racine, the council's other co-chair, added, "One of the important results of going around the state is that local media covered the hearings. Since part of our mission is to make sure all Vermonters understand what it means to be poor and near-poor in our state today, getting the newspapers and other media to cover the stories of working families wrestling with the realities of getting by helps a lot."¹¹³

The council also heard from experts. At one session, advice was offered by Anne Foley, a senior advisor in Connecticut's Office of Policy Management, the lead agency for that state's council and poverty target. She urged the Vermont council to "avoid too many recommendations," noting that a shorter set contributes to a better focus. Foley also urged the council to consider and make decisions on which measures of poverty would be utilized. In Connecticut, both the official poverty line and 200 percent of poverty are taken into account.¹¹⁴

The next mission of the council is to develop and issue its report, and then it will follow up on its recommendations.



Washington

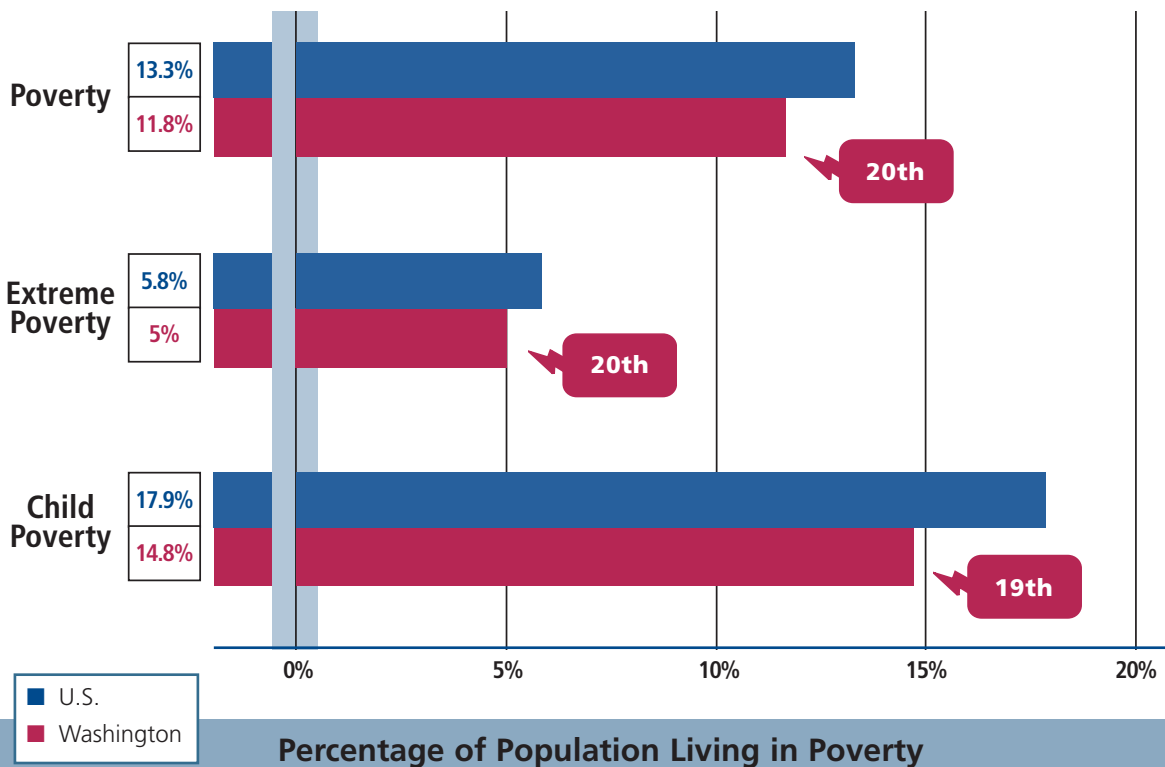
Initiative: Poverty Advisory Committee (2006).

Washington's Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED) established the Poverty Advisory Committee, which included leaders from state agencies and advocacy groups. In formulating its set of recommendations, the committee added its expertise to the perspectives of citizens who participated in a set of community forums that preceded the Advisory Committee's deliberations.¹¹⁵

The community forums helped to identify the issues crucial to moving families out of poverty. Family-wage jobs, housing, healthcare, mental-health services, and transportation surfaced as major issues. The committee took stakeholder opinions—including those of the nearly 500 individuals who participated in the community forums—into account when it formulated its recommendations, issued in May of 2007.

A key reason for gaining local insights was the fact that, as noted in the committee's report, "Washington's prosperity needs to reach all parts of our state and improve the lives of all of our residents. To make permanent, effective improvements, poverty needs to be fought at the local level where solutions are crafted that fit the unique character of each of our cities and counties."¹¹⁶

Washington



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey, R1701-02 and Table 9. The lowest poverty level is in the state ranked 1st.

The Advisory Committee recommendations are grouped as follows:

- ◆ Basic Needs: housing, food, transportation, health
- ◆ Challenging Poverty: moving families and individuals out of poverty
- ◆ System Improvements: improve services, streamline administration

Among the recommendations are: companies that receive CTED funds should report and get incentives for hiring low-income workers, education foundations and state agencies should be encouraged to expand financial literacy, and local developers should be encouraged to use innovative state incentives related to affordable housing.¹¹⁷

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