



Press Release
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Contact:
Whitney Neal
502-895-8167 x121
wneal@kyyouth.org

Census Data Reveals Striking Poverty Rates in Kentucky Counties Full Impact of Recession Not Yet Reflected in the Data

Louisville, KY – Today the Census Bureau released poverty data on Kentucky counties with populations of 20,000 or more. Of these 55 counties, 41 have higher rates of poverty than the national average of 13.2 percent. Of these 41 counties, 27 have higher rates of poverty than the state average of 17.3 percent. Of the 44 counties with child populations over 20,000, three have child poverty rates higher than 40 percent: Floyd, Harlan, and Perry. These geographic variations within the state display the need for continued support and intervention for struggling individuals and families.

“There is not common wealth in the Commonwealth,” said Terry Brooks, Executive Director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “These numbers remind us of the disparities within Kentucky. We as a people cannot continue to tolerate a kind of economic apartheid based on zip code.”

The county-level rates represent a three-year average for the years 2006-2008 providing a snapshot of poverty levels across Kentucky before the recession hit. While the county-level poverty numbers reflect pre-recession conditions, the following unemployment and food stamp participation rates provide up-to-date information about the current effects of the recession on Kentucky’s poorest counties.

All three Kentucky counties with the highest poverty rates, Clay, Bell, and Knox County, show significant increases in unemployment and food stamp participation rates in the last year. Of the Kentucky counties included in the data, Clay County has the highest total poverty rate at 36.3 percent. The unemployment rate for the county increased from 9.7 percent in September 2008 to 13.5 percent in September 2009. Likewise, the food stamp participation rate increased

in Clay County, now providing assistance to an additional 223 people compared to the number served in January 2009.

Similar stories unfold for Bell County, with a poverty rate of 30 percent, and Knox County with a poverty rate of 35.9 percent. Both counties have unemployment rates that significantly increased from 8.8 and 7.3, respectively in September 2008 – to 12.5 and 11.5 in September 2009. Likewise, we find a corresponding increase in food stamp participation rates of approximately 5% in both Bell and Knox County, extending assistance to an additional 448 individuals in Bell County and 546 individuals in Knox County.

“The unemployment numbers and food stamp participation levels challenge the easy way out being advocated by many state leaders in Frankfort,” said Brooks. “This is not a time for inaction. Rather, this is a moment to act on behalf of Kentucky’s hard-working families when public supports are nothing less than a lifeline.”

There are specific solutions available to support individuals and families in Kentucky. Policymakers can do the following: modernize Kentucky’s unemployment benefit model to make accessibility to benefits a reality; immediately protect Kentucky families from predatory lending practices by enacting a 36 percent rate cap; and address real tax reform that provides adequate state revenues now and for the future viability of the state.

While fundamental tax reform is not an easy proposition, it is becoming increasingly clear that such reform will be a necessary part of responsible governing in today’s economy.

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Kentucky Youth Advocates is the home of Kentucky’s Tax and Budget Initiative, a member of the nationwide State Fiscal Analysis Initiative.