

Recession piles on single moms

49.5% are in state's poverty ranks

Story by [Chad Day](#)

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LITTLE ROCK — Single mothers with young children in Arkansas were hit especially hard by the recession last year as the proportion of those living in poverty rose to more than three in five, census numbers released this week show.

More than 61 percent of single mothers with only “related” children under 5 in the household were living in poverty in 2009, an increase of more than 4.5 percentage points from the year before and more than 15 percentage points higher than the same category of single-mother households nationwide, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.

In addition, nearly half (49.5 percent) of the 96,000 Arkansas families headed by a woman without a husband and with “related” children under 18 were living in poverty, the figures show. A year earlier, 47.2 percent were in poverty. Numbers for “related children” are tracked using income reported by heads of households.

Nationally, 38.2 percent of families led by single mothers with children under 18 were living in poverty last year when the poverty level was \$21,954 a year for a family of four, according to government calculations that include cash income before tax deductions. The level doesn’t include noncash assistance such as food stamps.

The poverty numbers were part of a wide-ranging amount of government data released Tuesday by the Census Bureau documenting the impact of the recession that economists say ended in June of last year.

The data held sobering news for Arkansas children: More than one-quarter were living in poverty.

The state ranked third in the nation behind Mississippi and the District of Columbia with 26.9 percent of “related children” living in poverty, a near-10 percent increase from the previous year and 13 percent from 2006.

The American Community Survey reported the number was 19.7 percent nationwide.

The survey relies on responses taken during the 2009 calendar year. It covers geographic areas with populations of 65,000 or more and is one of the surveys used as “the basis for allocating more than \$400 billion in federal funds to state, local and tribal governments,” according to the Census Bureau. The survey provides estimates that are subject to sampling margins of error.

Economist Kathy Deck said the rise in poor single mothers and young children in poverty has “enormous implications” for each child’s ability to succeed in school and as adults.

“It’s hard to overstate just how destructive economically growing up in poverty is,” said Deck, the director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

Children who live in poverty at any time have a “reduced scope of opportunity” and are particularly vulnerable to being unprepared for kindergarten, “an amazingly accurate indicator of future academic success and future economic success,” Deck said.

Along with the increase in poverty among all single mothers, the census numbers showed an increase in the percentage of households with children under 6 where both parents work - a jump of 3 percentage points to 66 percent.

The increase, which Deck said underscores the importance of affordable child care, occurred while federal stimulus funds helped thousands of Arkansas’ low-income families send their children to day care.

Arkansas children in poverty

New figures from the Census Bureau show Arkansas continues to have a higher percentage of single moms at poverty* than the nation as a whole. Of Arkansas' approximately 325,000 families with children under 18, more than 96,000 were headed by a woman without a husband present.

Percentage of single-mother households below poverty level with only children under 5		
Arkansas	U.S.	
2009	41.1%	43.0%
2008	56.5%	45.3%

Percentage of single-mother households below poverty level with children under 18		
Arkansas	U.S.	
2009	49.5%	38.2%
2008	47.2%	36.5%

Family poverty (all families with related children under 18)		
Arkansas	U.S.	
2009	23.4%	16.5%
2008	21.0%	15.2%

* In 2008, the poverty level was \$21,954 a year for a family of four, according to government calculations that include cash income before tax deductions. The level doesn't include noncash assistance such as food stamps.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2009

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Arkansas children in poverty [+ Enlarge](#)

That funding ran out this summer, and now, a waiting list for low-income child-care assistance that was once at “zero,” has ballooned, said Julie Munsell, a spokesman for the Arkansas Department of Human Services. Beginning in March 2009, the program helped more than 5,275 families.

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As of Wednesday, more than 11,000 children were on waiting lists to receive taxpayer-funded child-care assistance, which requires parents to either be employed or going to school full time, Munsell said. The program has a five-year cap.

“It’s frustrating first and foremost for the families who are trying to work and obviously make ends meet. That’s clear that they are in a very difficult position and must rely on community and family support in order to meet their child-care needs,” Munsell said.

To try to alleviate the demand, the Department of Human Services has tried to place many children of low income families in the state’s pre-kindergarten education program for 3- and 4-year olds known as Arkansas Better Chance, Munsell said.

But, Munsell said, some low-income parents must choose between working and caring for their children.

And Tuesday’s census numbers show many parents will be making that decision alone. A third of the state’s more than 335,000 families with children under 18 were headed by single parents in 2009.

Furthermore, a survey conducted in 2009 by the Virginia-based National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies found the cost of child care had increased twice as fast since 2000 as had the median income of families with children.

That doesn’t bode well for the state’s low-income working families already struggling to pay for child care, Deck said.

It also means this year’s numbers could be worse.

“It’s going to hit a couple of things; it’ll hit income, it’ll hit poverty rates. Because [low-income child care] programs aren’t available, you’ll see perhaps that percentage with both parents [working] go down,” Deck said.

“The reason these programs exist and the reason these vouchers were available at any point in time is because there was a recognition that if you want to get folks out into the labor force there’s some basic needs that have to be met first, and affordable child care is one of them.”

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