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**Child Poverty in Arkansas**

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Abstract

This report investigates childhood poverty among the state of Arkansas. The population in Arkansas has steadily been increasing, and with that a decrease in resources to take care of everyone; therefore, someone must suffer. The easiest target would be the ones who cannot take care of themselves, children. The areas most affected by poverty within the state are recognized in this report, along with where Arkansas stands against the other states in the country. The idea that food insecurity and nationality play into the possibility of poverty is mentioned, as well as how status and education are deciding factors of an individual's overall well-being. Current strategies such as social awareness, making people knowledgeable of the fact that poverty is an issue and people in their own home towns could be victims suffering in silence, and programs like the Backpack Ministry are being utilized to help these children who are in these dreadful situations, but more needs to be done for these children.

Introduction

The circumstances that have caused impoverishment for entire generations of people in Arkansas go all the way back to early statehood for some. African Americans were forced to engage in slave labor, and after the civil war, slavery was replaced by the sharecropping and tenant farming systems. Sharecropping caused many poor farmers to go further into debt with wealthier landowners, and as a result many were forced into unreasonable contracts, because of poverty or the threat of violence. A combination of exploitative practices on the part of landowners, racial discrimination, decreased demand for cotton, and falling cotton prices helped to create more generations of poor black and white Arkansans in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This had a particularly devastating effect on the eastern part of the state in the upper and lower delta region, and the poverty rates in this area still reflect these dark times.

Lack of educational reform during the 20th century also contributed to the persistent poverty that has plagued the natural state for well over a century. From the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture, a study conducted in the 1920s revealed that “Arkansas’s children received an education that put them at a distinct disadvantage in the modern world.” Advances in education that might have been made were further impeded by the Great Depression and religious opposition (Maher, 2018).

The renewed industrialization and mechanization of the agricultural sector of the economy after World War 2 further diminished the need for manual labor. Legislation passed during this time was liberating for some and marked the end of institutionalized racism, but it also conscripted workers to menial labor for generations to come. Pro-business legislation like the state’s “right-to-work” laws effectively silenced union voices and the rise of non-union corporations like Wal-Mart and J.B. Hunt during the 1960s helped to create an increasing number of working poor (Maher, 2018). This implication is backed up if economic data is examined, because the poverty rate is much higher than the unemployment rate. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists the Arkansas unemployment rate at 3.8% for 2018, but the poverty rate for that same year is nearly five times that number. Other economic titans, Tyson Foods and O.K. Foods, operate with low-wage employees and attract and exploit immigrants, who are willing to labor under difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances for very little compensation (Maher, 2018).

The U.S. poverty rate in 1960 was about 22%, when the Census Bureau began measuring poverty in the country. Arkansas fared far worse with a poverty rate of over 47% (stlouisfed.org, 2014). As of 2017, and according to a report by 24/7 Wall St, Arkansas is still the third poorest state in America and has the sixth highest poverty rate Economic conditions in Arkansas are improving. From 2015 to 2017 the poverty rate in Arkansas fell nearly 2%. As of 2018, it is 17.2% (4029tv.com, 2018). Unfortunately, Arkansans still have a long way to go to fix this problem. The generational poverty that has plagued the natural state’s residents for the majority of its history is continuing to hinder the success and development of one of our most vulnerable populations, children.

Problem

Arkansas has some of the highest child poverty rates in the country. The national average in 2015 was 22% but the natural state came in higher at 26%, as shown in the chart below. These problems are considerably worse for the state’s diverse populations. Child impoverishment rates are substantially higher for both African Americans and Hispanic children also. Poverty is higher in the rural regions of Arkansas, especially in the north and south east parts of the state. Rates can be more than twice as high as the state average in these areas.

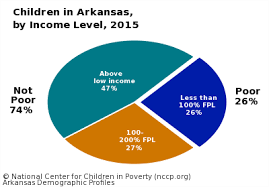


Figure 1

The state has one of the highest childhood hunger rates in the nation and many children go to school without breakfast, struggle to eat after school, and face the same burdens when school is out for summer vacation. Arkansas also has one of the worst rankings in the country regarding children’s economic well-being with nearly one in every four children living in poverty. This can be linked to the fact that the median household income in Arkansas is one of the lowest in the country.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the conditions and causes of childhood impoverishment in Arkansas, and to not only bring awareness to the issue, but to also offer effective solutions for addressing the issue.

Scope

This report will examine areas in Arkansas that are the most affected by poverty, populations that are disproportionately harmed by impoverishment, the state’s health care status, and Arkansas poverty rates in comparison to other states. Further, the report will explore food insecurity in the state’s youth population, economic conditions that cause families to be impoverished and current strategies for dealing with poverty.

Discussion

The Effects of Poverty on Children

Poverty in children can impact their educational, health, social and emotional development resulting them in being more likely to live in poverty as adults. As a state, we must look at ways to help children in poverty to succeed. It is imperative that we make sure that these children have the best opportunity of receiving an education that will allow them to break the cycle. We can also push for balancing out the inequality in household incomes so that the basic needs of families are being met without long-term detriment to the children. Poverty is not a new problem, but statics show that we are doing it much more inadequately than others states.

Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience poverty as adults. Poverty can result in lifelong poor health and chronic illness. There is a correlation between poverty and poor health. There is a higher frequency of mental distress and fewer dental visits health screenings to maintain one's overall general health. This is not to say that Arkansas does not have strengths and does well with the low popularity in excessive drinking, the number of Healthcare Associated Infection Policies that help society and the use of hospice care at a high percentage to maintain and safeguard health. If we take care of our children, they will be grow into adults and seniors that are able to beat the poverty statistics that Arkansas and the nation is currently faced with. Arkansas has a high poverty rate, so something is not working the way that it should or can work. Other states are doing much better than Arkansas on this task.

A Comparison of Arkansas and Other States

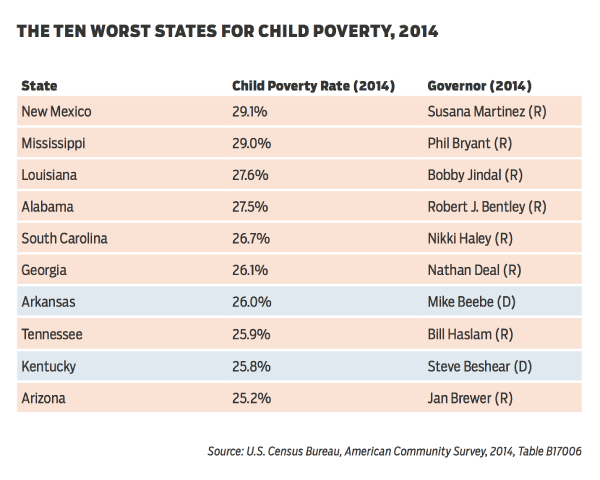
The poverty data outline above paragraph shows the devastation in certain areas in Arkansas. The information found on KARK.com indicates “For the first time in a decade, a non-New England state ranks number one for overall child well-being. Minnesota holds the top spot, followed by New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Iowa, and Vermont. Arizona, Nevada, Louisiana, New Mexico and Mississippi rank lowest” (“Report: More than 200,000 Arkansas Children live in Poverty”, 2015, July 21). This data puts into perspective how impoverished the children in Arkansas are in comparison to children in other states. Most of the illustrated data reflects on young adults or adults, but if the stability of the adult population is not maintained then our children suffer. The cause of poverty is multifaceted and can be caused from a lack of education, job skills and geographic location such as small town vs. a larger community which would provide more opportunities. There may be a lack of support in the community resulting in no chance to improve the situation. Poverty impacts the entire state of Arkansas but there are certain pockets of concentration such as in the Delta. The structure of the family itself may prevent the wage earners to make enough money to support themselves such as an inequality of income or that a parent might be incarcerated.

Figure 2

Food Insecurity

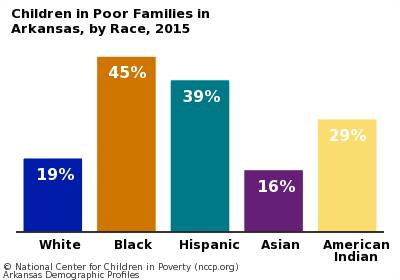
As of 2018 there were more than 164,000 or 24% children at risk of hunger in Arkansas. The state ranks ninth in the nation on food hardship with 18% of families struggling in 2015 to put food on the table. This is about a 5.4% improvement from 2017 (arhungeralliance.org, 2018). This is particularly alarming considering that children who do not receive proper nutrition are more apt to have health problems, behavioral issues, and will have difficulty learning in the classroom.

Areas Most Affected

“There are ten top areas in Arkansas in 2018 that suffer from the highest levels of poverty: (1.) Helena (42.8% poverty rate), (2.) Osceola (39.0 poverty rate), (3.) Monticello (36.3% poverty rate), (4.) Hope (34.1% poverty rate), (5.) Newport (37.3% poverty rate), (6.)Camden (34.0% poverty rate), (7.) Warren (32.3% poverty rate), (8.) Pine Bluff (32.5% poverty rate) (9.) West Memphis (31.3% poverty rate) and (10.) Forrest City (30.1% poverty rate)” (“These are the 10 Poorest Cities In Arkansas”, 2017).The factors that determine this list are the unemployment rate, poverty level and median household income adjusted for the cost of living. There is much talk about income inequality, but these areas of Arkansas are really struggling.

Diverse Groups are Impacted the Most

The two largest multicultural populations of children in Arkansas are African American and Hispanic, and child poverty has a disproportionate effect on both groups. Non-Hispanic, white children make up the largest group at 83, 097 that live in poor families. There are 54, 983 African American children and 29,730 Hispanic kids living in families under impoverished conditions (nccp.org, 2015). As shown in the graph below, child impoverishment rates are more than twice as high for African American children, and nearly twice as high for Hispanic kids than for non-Hispanic white children. Also, areas that are the most concentrated in diverse populations seem to have the highest number of impoverished children, which could be easily associated with Arkansas’ discriminatory history.

 Figure 3

Arkansas Healthcare Status and Influence on Well-being

If an individual has no health care coverage, then there is a lack of access to care. The cost of care is a barrier for those that are uninsured and one in five go without care because of this reason. If they do seek care, then the cost for the uninsured individual can be overwhelming. “The family income for the nonelderly insured in Arkansas in 2016 was 100-199 FPL (Federal Poverty Level)-25%. In 2016, the uninsured rates among the non-elderly in Arkansas was 7-12% which compares to a total of 28 states in the United States” (“Key Facts about the Uninsured Population”, *Medline*, 2017). If more individuals are insured then health care coverage would be more affordable among the entire low-income population Individuals that are below the poverty level are at the greatest risk of being uninsured. Individuals living in the South and the West are more likely to be uninsured. If an individual gains healthcare, their overall health is more likely to improve.

Uninsured rate among the non-elderly by state, 2013-2016

Arkansas was one of the Expansion States



Arkansas 17.8% 9.1% -8.7% -206,013

Figure 4

Source: (2017). Key Facts about the Uninsured Population. *MedlinePlus*. Retrieved June 24, 2018, from http://files.kff.org/attachment/Fact-Sheet-Key-Facts-about-the-Uninsured-Population

Economic and Educational Factors

One of the biggest contributors to child impoverishment in Arkansas is jobs that do not pay a living wage. More than two-thirds of the jobs in Arkansas only require a high school diploma, and this increases the likelihood that the job will provide little compensation. As a matter of fact, 87% of jobs that require no more than individuals to be high school graduates do not pay family supporting wages. Also, half of the children living in impoverished families in Arkansas have parents who did not graduate high school. Even parents who do have at least a high school education and are able to gain full-time employment still work for poverty wages. The state cannot hope to help impoverished children without first giving their parents the resources they need to take care of their kids. A good start would be to bring higher paying jobs into the state, and provide job training services to fill the positions. Another way to deal with this situation would be to offer a supplemental tax credit on the state level for poor working families (aradvocates.org, 2016).

Current Strategies

Two of the best ways to assist individuals in poverty is to increase awareness in

communities and to provide people with comprehensive services that are linked through a series of partnerships. Susan Millerd, who is a social work instructor at National Park College in Hot Springs, Arkansas, says, “A big problem with poverty in Hot Springs and elsewhere is a lack of awareness on the community’s part of the seriousness of this issue, and we need to step up our outreach efforts.” As far as offering advice on the use of comprehensive services she added, “one of the best things that Garland County has done is that all providers are in the same room, through an umbrella company called Cooperative Christian Ministries and Clinic.” One of the programs, Bridges Out of Poverty, supplies some of the most basic skills that impoverished people will need to be successful, such as keeping appointments, interviewing skills, and money management. CCMC also provides medical, dental, and vision services and partners of CCMC offer utility bill assistance, food and shelter resources, transportation, and education (Millerd).

Another great strategy and resource to help individuals with poverty situations is The Backpack Ministry at Midtown church in Benton, Arkansas. They provide meals to school aged children on weekends and holidays that would normally go without. They have been serving the schools for five years now. The food is kid friendly and ready-to-eat when it is dropped off at the local participating schools. This program doesn’t cost the family or school any money. This is strictly based off of displayed needs of the child either through educational, physical or emotional needs at school due to hunger from home. The ministry typically feeds 335 kid’s each week, spreading over 10 different schools. Usually packaged for the children are four main meals, two breakfast items and four snacks. While interviewing volunteer, Tabetha Washok, about this ministry she shared that every Wednesday night during the school year that there is a group of individuals that simply sack all the food and get it organized for the upcoming drop off at the schools. Some of the church’s Wednesday night children’s classes take turns helping sack the food every week. The sacks are given out to the schools (counselors) for the kids to pick up each Thursday or Friday. This is a great resource for the kids and their families who need extra help in providing food (see Appendix A for more information).

Conclusion

Arkansas has historically been a state with low wages, decreased economic opportunities, a large population stuck in poverty, and with lawmakers that have passed legislation that heavily favored large corporations at the expense of the working poor. Times seem to be changing for the better, but the state still has long way to go to ensure that all citizens have a fair opportunity for success. Arkansas still ranks poorly when compared to other states when it comes to overall child well-being. Child poverty needs to be addressed aggressively, because of the negative physical, social, and economic consequences that it has on children’s lives and the lives of all Arkansans. There is evidence that impoverishment is far more detrimental to the state’s African American and Hispanic communities. The best way to address this problem is to simultaneously help children and parents by providing them with the resources, training, and skills that they need to be successful. Outreach efforts in the more impoverished areas of Arkansas like the upper and lower delta regions need to be more concentrated. Big strides have been made in the last few years in reducing the overall poverty in the natural state, and if these positive trends continue, then there is a real reason to believe that the quality of life for all Arkansans can be improved.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made based on the conclusions in this report, and also based on the report from the senior policy analyst of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Eleanor Wheeler. These suggestions are the most current and efficient solutions for addressing child impoverishment in Arkansas.

1. Use a two generation approach (Wheeler, 9).
2. Focus on supports for both children and their families. For example, an

advocacy group in Utah uses a combination of early childhood education for children, while providing employment training, social capital, and economic resources for parents. Health-related services for children and their families are also needed (Wheeler, 9).

1. Coordinate existing public programs by creating partnerships that link early childhood supports like home-visiting services and adult resources like community colleges or employment training (Wheeler, 9).
2. Supplement Federal Earned Income Tax Credit with an Arkansas Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This tool has proven to be successful in several other states in pulling people out of poverty (Wheeler, 9).
3. Increase awareness and outreach for services and programs, especially in areas of the state that are the most affected (Millerd).

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