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New Census Bureau Data Show Families Continuing to Struggle Coordinated Approach Needed to Reverse Trend

Madison – Wisconsin’s poverty rate remains considerably higher than it was in 2000, and showed no significant improvement in 2007, according to data released today by the US Census Bureau. The typical Wisconsin working family’s income, when adjusted for inflation, has declined during that interval.

“The frightening thing is that this data does not reflect the impact of the current economic downturn,” said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. “Too many families were being left behind even when the economy was relatively strong, and the situation has certainly worsened since this data was collected.”

Newly released data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey show that Wisconsin’s overall poverty rate declined slightly from 11.0 percent in 2006 to 10.8 percent in 2007, a change that is not statistically significant. The child poverty rate dropped from 14.9 percent in 2006 to 14.4 percent in 2007, also a non-statistically significant change. Overall, more than 588,000 Wisconsin residents (including 187,000 children) lived in poverty in 2007. Wisconsin’s overall and child poverty rates remain substantially better than the national rates, but by less of a margin than in 2000 and earlier. Nationally, the 2007 overall poverty rate was 12.5 percent, and the child poverty rate was 18.0 percent; both are similar to the previous year’s figures. The federal poverty level for a family of four in 2007 was \$20,650.

“These figures should be a wake-up call for policy makers,” said WCCF Executive Director Charity Eleson. “The effects of poverty are devastating for children and for our communities. Wisconsin has many strengths, but we could be doing much more to help kids and families escape from the poverty trap.”

Median household income in Wisconsin was \$50,578 in 2007, compared to \$50,821 in 2000. During that period, the share of families with children in Wisconsin living in poverty grew significantly from 8.8 percent to 12.0 percent.

Educational attainment has long been a powerful indicator of family success. Nearly 30 percent of those with a high school education or less live in poverty; only 3 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree or more are poor.

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“We know that access to quality early care and education, adequately funded K-12 schools, and opportunities for low-income parents to qualify for good-paying jobs by pursuing higher education and skills training are all critically important in moving families out of poverty,” Eelson said. “These are areas we must focus on as we make decisions about how to invest public resources in Wisconsin’s future.”

The Census Bureau figures illustrate that health care is an area in which Wisconsin continues to be a national leader. Based on a three-year average from 2005 to 2007, 8.8 percent of Wisconsin residents were uninsured for all or part of the year; only three other states had a lower percentage of uninsured. However, that still left nearly half a million Wisconsinites without coverage. Since the collection of the data released today, more than 76,000 children and parents have enrolled in the highly successful BadgerCare Plus program, thereby reducing the number of uninsured people in Wisconsin.

“We are edging closer to the ultimate goal of insuring every kid in Wisconsin,” Eelson said. “If we continue to make health care coverage a priority and fill the few remaining gaps in our system of programs, we can achieve that goal in the foreseeable future.”

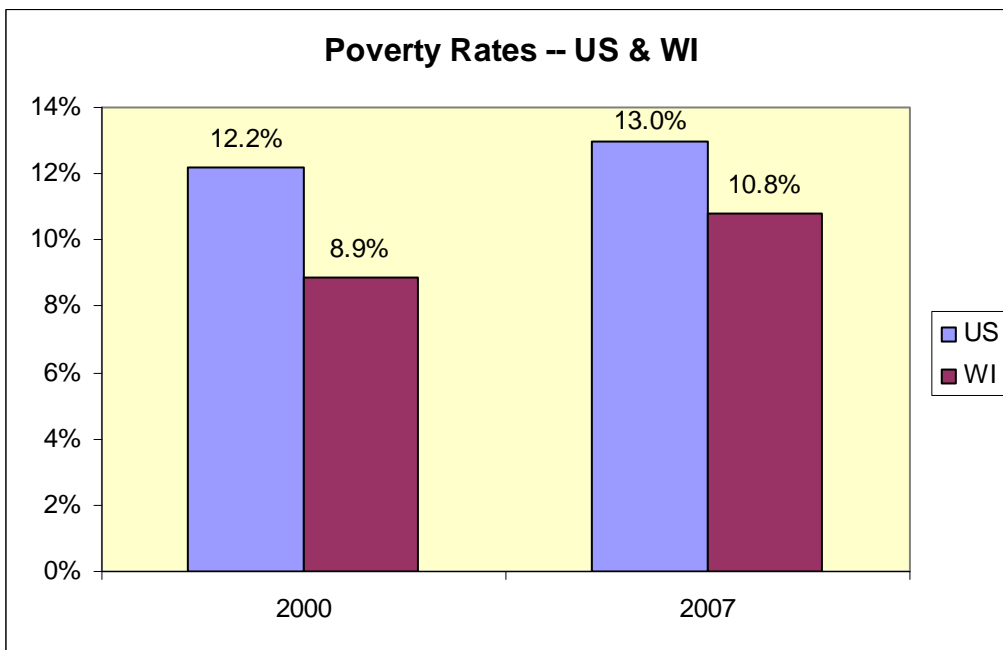
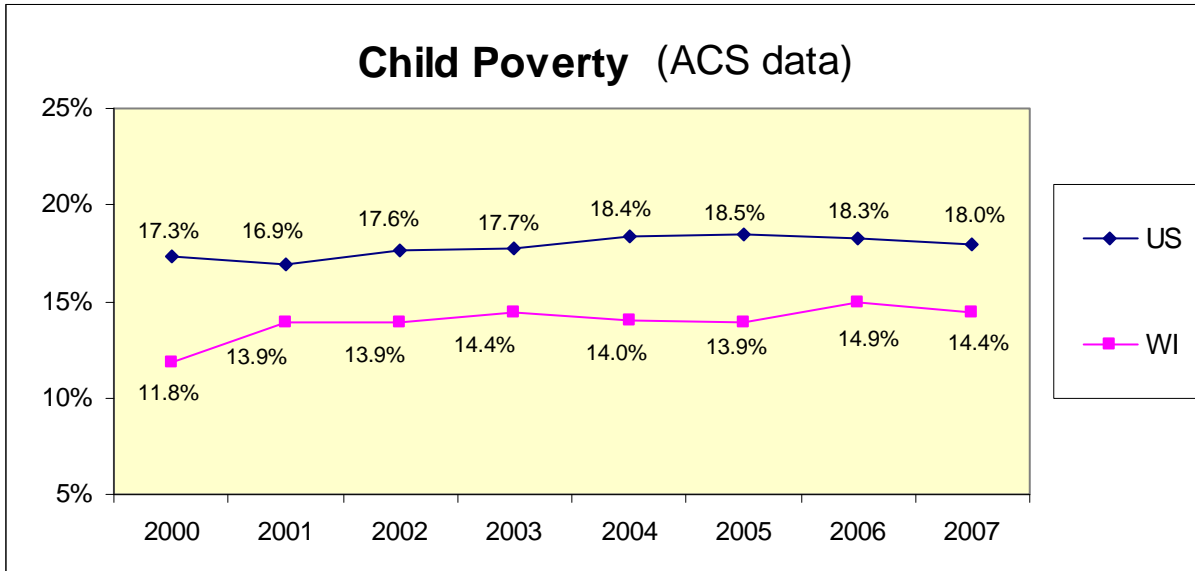
WCCF, in partnership with the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association and the Wisconsin Head Start Association, has launched a campaign to end child poverty in our state. The campaign, called Vision 2020 (www.2020wi.org), represents a systemic approach to battling poverty that is both visionary and practical, focusing on concrete solutions grounded in public policy. Vision 2020 addresses poverty on four key fronts: family-supporting jobs; access to high-quality early care and education; health care; and safe and affordable housing. Eighty-five organizations and 900 individuals have signed on to the campaign to date.

“The Census Bureau data make it clear that we need a coordinated, strategic plan to end child poverty in Wisconsin,” Eelson said. “The Vision 2020 campaign is a way for public officials, citizens and organizations to get involved in a tangible, focused way. Poverty need not be something we just accept as inevitable. We can address these issues, and Vision 2020 provides a roadmap for doing so.”

Recommendations:

- Education and training that meets the needs of both Wisconsin families and employers by providing targeted training and financial aid to workers seeking to improve their skills and credentials.
- Improve the effectiveness of the state’s economic development incentives to ensure that public investments made in businesses are producing family-supporting jobs.
- Preserve and bolster BadgerCare Plus, and continue to find ways to reach the more than 400,000 people in Wisconsin who are still uninsured.
- Support and improve policies that help mitigate the effects of poverty on children, specifically quality early education opportunities for every child in Wisconsin.
- Maintain Wisconsin’s critical income support programs, including child care tuition assistance, the refundable Earned Income Tax Credit, the Homestead Tax Credit, and food security programs.

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The following people are available for comment on local poverty trends in their areas of the state:

La Crosse County:

Gerald R. Huber, Director, La Crosse County Human Services Dept., 608-785-6095.

Rock County:

Community Action Inc., Lisa Furseth, Executive Director, 608-755-2472; or Marc Perry, Director of Planning & Development, 755-2279.

Milwaukee:

David Riemer, Director of Policy and Planning, Community Advocates, 414-617-9148.

Madison/Dane Co.:

Community Action Coalition for South Central WI, Greta Hansen, Executive Director, 608-246-4730, ext. 217; or Nichelle Nichols, Director of Development. & Community Relations, ext. 216.

Eau Claire:

Nancy Coffey, WI Nutrition Education Program Coordinator, Eau Claire County UW-Extension, 715-839-4712.

Kenosha/Racine:

Pam Halbach, Racine/Kenosha Community Action Agency, 262-657-0840 ext. 15.

Complete US Census Data is available at www.census.gov.

For more information about Vision 2020, visit www.2020wi.org.