



For immediate release
August 26, 2004

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New Census Bureau Data Show Disturbing Trends for Wisconsin

New data on income, poverty and health insurance coverage released today by the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that the first few years of the 21st century have been tough ones for Wisconsin's working families.

Between the years 2000 and 2003, overall poverty and child poverty increased substantially in Wisconsin, and the state's median income has stagnated. In addition, the number of people without health insurance has risen sharply.

"Wisconsin's experience is consistent with nationwide trends," said Jon Peacock, research director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. "And like most other states with economies reliant on manufacturing, we have fared a bit worse than the nation as a whole."

In inflation-adjusted terms, the median income in Wisconsin in 2002-03 was \$2,674 less than it had been three years earlier, a drop of 5.4 percent. Nationally, median income declined by 3.4 percent during that period.

The number of Wisconsin families living below the federal poverty line rose from 74,930 in 2000 to 101,140 in 2003, according to data from the American Community Survey, one of two surveys on which the newly released data was based. During that span, the state's child poverty rate rose from 11.1 percent to 13.9 percent. 179,472 Wisconsin children were poor in 2003, an increase of 24 percent since 2000. That is about 35,000 more children living in poverty. Not surprisingly, this coincides with a worsening of the state's affordable housing crises. The percentage of renter families paying more than 35 percent of their income for rent increased from about 30 percent in 2002 to 35 percent in 2003.

"These numbers are real eye-openers," Peacock said. "They cannot be written off as one-year quirks. These are multi-year trends, and they are quite disturbing."

According to the Current Population Survey, the number of uninsured people in Wisconsin has risen from 386,000 in 2000 to 593,000 in 2003, an increase of more than 50 percent. This increase has taken place despite rapidly growing enrollment in Medicaid and BadgerCare.

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"Compared to other states, Wisconsin has generally done an excellent job of providing health insurance for its citizens, but we're losing ground. This frightening trend is evidence of a shift in our economy from solid manufacturing jobs, which typically provide insurance and other benefits, to lower-paying service sector jobs that are less likely to provide health care coverage," said Peacock.

"The upshot is that Wisconsin's economy continued to sag in 2003," said Peacock. "Instead of waiting around for conditions to improve, we urge elected officials and other policy makers to pursue creative ideas to assure that children and families have access to the supports and services they need in order to get by until a real recovery takes place."

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