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Census: Most Schenectady kids live in poverty

Despite reports of Schenectady's resurgence, U.S. census statistics show that most of the city's children live in poverty

By [Lauren Stanforth](#) Updated 6:58 am, Monday, October 8, 2012



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Braydin Holzschuh, 3, waits with his mother Amanda Seyboth for her food at the Schenectady Inner City Mission in Schenectady, N.Y. Sept. 26, 2012. (Skip Dickstein/Times Union)

SCHENECTADY — The latest U.S. census figures show an alarming statistic — 50.8 percent of Schenectady's children reportedly live below the poverty line.

For a family of four, that means a yearly income of less than \$22,350. That number, provided as part of the 2011 American Community Survey, puts Schenectady 13th in the nation for highest childhood poverty rate among cities over 65,000 in population, behind Syracuse and Rochester — which ranked in the top 10. Albany, the only other local city surveyed, ranked 91st.

For about the last five years, Schenectady's leaders have touted the city's rebirth, as empty storefronts downtown have been replaced by restaurants and businesses that complement the renovated and expanded **Proctors Theatre**. But celebration over State Street's success, along with General Electric Co.'s renewed commitment to its

birthplace with 350 jobs at its new battery plant, overlooks a harsher reality — that life is getting worse for Schenectady's poor only a few block's beyond the city's showpiece.

More Information

Highest rates of childhood poverty in the U.S.

Gary, Ind. 69.1%

Flint, Mich. 59.7%

Canton, Ohio 57.6%

Detroit, Mich. 57.3%

Camden, N.J. 56.7%

Reading, Pa. 54.8% Rochester 53.9%

Cleveland 53.9%

South Bend, Ind. 53.2%

Syracuse 53%

*13. Schenectady 50.8%

*91. Albany 37%

2011 American Community Survey, cities over 65,000 population. Percentage of people under 18 who live below the poverty line.

Amanda Seyboth, a 25-year-old single mother of two, is one face of that Schenectady.

Last week, she waited in line with her 3-year-old son, Braydin, and 100 other people for a bag of canned vegetables, tuna and soup at **Schenectady Inner City Ministry's** pantry. In September, Seyboth said, she was laid off from her job as a dental assistant at Aspen Dental. Her cupboard will likely go bare before her unemployment check arrives, she said. Her children's father helps Seyboth when he can, but he lives 70 miles away and is often laid off from his construction jobs.

Seyboth was at the pantry to make sure she had enough food in the house to make lunch for her 5-year-old daughter, Angelina, who attends kindergarten.

"Every food pantry I've been to has been packed," said Seyboth, a **Saratoga Springs High School** graduate who lives in the Mont Pleasant neighborhood. In 2009, statistics showed that the neighborhood had the third-highest percentage of residential vacancies in the state. Housing is one of Schenectady's biggest challenges. The city, which once had a population of 100,000, now has 66,000 people and is crushed under the

weight of abandoned and blighted properties.

But the poverty rate is about more than just the unemployed, said **Phillip Grigsby**, executive director of Schenectady Inner City Ministry.

"The growth of what we're seeing is underemployment, part-time jobs, no benefits. I know moms who are working two or three of those jobs," he said.

SICM's free summer lunch program has expanded from two outreach sites in 1996 to 16 this year. And since moving its emergency food pantry to a larger location in 2007, visits to pick up food, which averaged 4,000 a month, topped 5,000 in August, said **Gail Van Valkenburgh**, food program director.

Deb Schimpf, executive director of Schenectady Community Action Program, said the waiting list for her nonprofit group's Head Start program is well past the 321 slots the federal government funds. The program provides free care for 3- to 5-year-olds.

"As wages continue to stay flat or people are getting their hours reduced or their working low-wage jobs," Schimpf said, "more and more people are coming through our door."

Rocco Ferraro, executive director of the **Capital District Regional Planning Commission**, said Schenectady's poor have fewer choices because the city doesn't have the employment base of state government in Albany — where lower-paying jobs exist alongside those of \$100,000-plus administrators.

Crystal Gonzalez, 23, said she was let go at **ShopRite** in Niskayuna when she was pregnant with her now 11-month-old daughter, Ivelis. She has another daughter, age 4, in their Mont Pleasant home in addition to letting her 17-year-old cousin and her baby stay there. Her cousin, who dropped out of **Schenectady High School**, is unemployed, too.

"I've been looking for a job for 4½ months," Gonzalez said while waiting at the food pantry last week. She said most of her rent is covered by government assistance, but there's little money left to pay the utility bills. "I'm here now because we're running low."

Schenectady is ahead of Capital Region cities in other poverty indicators. For those with populations above 25,000, Schenectady moved last year into fifth place from seventh in 2006 in violent crimes per capita statewide, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report. Schenectady County also has the highest rate of teen pregnancy outside of New York City.

The state **Health Department** doesn't break out the numbers by municipality, but it's believed that most of those teens live in the city of Schenectady.

For children in the city's public schools, the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch has risen, from 61 percent five years ago to 67 percent in 2010-11.

But not all statistics are created equal. The **National Center for Children in Poverty** at **Columbia University** urges caution when using the American Community Survey's numbers because they're derived from a mailed-in survey and the sample size is small. Census spokesman **Robert Bernstein**, however, looked closely at Schenectady's data and said the city's leap in one year from just above one-third of children living in poverty to just over half last year is a troublesome sign — even if the number might not be as high as 50.8 percent.

Ferraro doubts that one in two children in Schenectady lives in poverty. He said the combined data from five years reveal a truer picture. The 2006-2010 survey shows Schenectady's childhood poverty rate was 31.3 percent — which is actually lower than Albany's 35.6 percent. Troy's five-year statistic was the highest, at 40.2 percent.

"There are middle-class neighborhoods in Schenectady," Ferraro said, adding that city leaders have been "successful in some ways, but it takes time."

He is referring to downtown's revitalization since the **Schenectady Metroplex Development Authority** was created in 1998. The authority is a publicly funded quasi-government organization that has funneled sales tax revenue into redoing State Street buildings and redeveloping **American Locomotive Co.**'s blighted property along the Mohawk River. But the city counts heavily on the refurbishment of Proctors — which has a robust schedule of Broadway favorites, celebrity appearances and other shows — and the dining and other nightlife that have emerged around it.

Some thought that success would benefit the neighborhoods. That has not happened.

Judy Atchinson, executive director of Quest, which serves free dinners five nights a week to teenagers at its location in the Central State Street neighborhood, said she meets children in the most difficult situations: teens who have parents in jail or who are drug users, and turn to roving gangs for money and companionship.

"What does the city do to specifically address these issues?" she said.

Mayor **Gary McCarthy** said the empty storefronts on State Street had to be attacked first before attention swung to the neighborhoods. Now, he said, his program to partner with contractors to redevelop abandoned properties is one way to address the poverty plaguing once- vibrant working class enclaves.

McCarthy has also been working with city schools Superintendent Larry Spring on a grant application to Bloomberg Philanthropies in hopes of getting \$5 million to start a mentorship program for preschoolers and up.

"We still have a long way to go," the mayor said. "But I don't believe we're continuing to decline."

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