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## Quarter of West Virginians live in poverty, study says

Census figures won't show whole picture, analysts say

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- About a quarter of West Virginians are now or will soon be living in poverty -- and the situation is even worse for children in the Mountain State, according to a [new report](#).

The recession could increase the number of children living below the poverty line by more than a third, to 34 percent, say analysts at the [West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy](#). Economists define the poverty line as a household income of \$21,910 or less for a family of four.

On Thursday, the U.S. [Census Bureau](#) released data showing that 13.2 percent of Americans lived in poverty in 2008 -- the most since 1997. State and local figures are set to come out Sept. 22.

But "this data that's coming out ... is not going to really reflect the reality of West Virginia today," said Paul Miller, a policy analyst at the center. "The worst is still on the horizon for West Virginia's children."

That's because West Virginia entered the recession later than most states, he said. The U.S. Census poverty rates are based on data from last year -- when only 4.5 percent of West Virginians were unemployed. This July, the state's unemployment rate was 8.6 percent, according to [Workforce West Virginia's](#) latest data.

The state's poverty rates were high even before the recession hit. About one in five West Virginians lived below the poverty line, and one in four children did, Miller said.

Applications for public assistance are also growing at a staggering rate as more West Virginians turn to programs like the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps.

Between November 2008 and June 2009, food-stamp caseloads grew 20 percent, according to data the state [Department of Health and Human Resources](#) gave to Miller. In the 22 months before that, cases had grown only 6 percent.

Today, about 300,000 state residents receive food stamps.

DHHR spokesman John Law said officials also expect a possible increase in applications for cash assistance as people exhaust their unemployment benefits.

When people talk about the recession, they usually focus on job loss, Miller said.

"The neglected discussion is the effects of unemployment on poverty and child poverty," he said.

Every time unemployment climbs a percentage point, 8,000 more children fall into poverty, he said.

And the effects can last a lifetime for some people, Miller said. Studies show that poor children are more likely to have health problems, difficulties in school, and lower wages when they grow up, Miller said.

"People that enter poverty even for brief periods suffer long-term effects," Miller said.

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