

## **Editorial: A mostly glum report for state's families**

### **No gains in measures of poverty or income.**

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The skeptics snickered last year when Minnesota lawmakers created the Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020. History suggests that eradicating poverty is quite beyond the American grasp, and in any case the topic has been studied to death since the publication of Michael Harrington's great work, "The Other America," in 1962.

But a report released Tuesday, the U.S. Census Bureau's annual update on poverty and income, contains enough bad news for Minnesota to show that the commission has an important task ahead.

In a document that contained glimmers of good news for the nation as a whole, the results for Minnesota were mostly glum. The state's poverty rate is stuck where it was in the recession year of 2001 -- 8.1 percent -- despite five years of economic growth and despite a modest drop in the national poverty measure.

Worse, the state's child poverty rate climbed sharply between 2001 and 2006 -- reaching 11.8 percent last year, or 145,000 children -- which means it is higher today than it was before the economic recovery began. The median Minnesota household was no better off in 2006 than in 2005, and has actually lost ground, when inflation is counted, since 2001.

On the bright side, Minnesota's poverty rate is still below the national average, which fell to 12.3 percent last year. But Minnesota's lead is shrinking across the board -- on poverty, on child poverty, on household income, on health insurance coverage -- which raises grave questions about the state's long legacy of protecting the most vulnerable families and bringing marginalized citizens into the economic mainstream.

"What it means is 145,000 children in Minnesota who will be less than they could have been -- and less than what we need," says Jim Koppel, director of the Children's Defense Fund Minnesota affiliate.

Ever since President Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty in 1964, experts have debated the effectiveness of government antipoverty programs. But most analysts agree that a strong economy and a robust job market are the most powerful tools to cut poverty. Which is why it's troubling that the Minnesota economy seems to be doing so poorly now for low- and middle-income residents.

It could be the well-documented slowdown in Minnesota job creation compared with the 1980s and 1990s. Or it could be a shift in the state's demographic mix; the labor force

now includes more refugee and immigrant workers who come to Minnesota with fewer skill advantages.

These are worthy questions for the poverty commission. But the state cannot afford an economy that leaves so many of its families behind, and it should not accept a drift toward depressing national averages.

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