

Child poverty in US among the highest in developed world

By Nick Barrickman
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A recent report by the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) details the growing levels of poverty facing children in the major capitalist countries.

Compiled with information taken in the final two years of last decade (2009-2010), the report reveals a staggering level of child poverty in the "developed" world, with the standards of living in the United States, which has the highest gross domestic product, ranking near the bottom on all metrics.

Entitled "Child Well-Being in Rich Countries," the study measures living conditions faced by children in major capitalist countries of North America, Europe, Oceania, and parts of Asia. The countries are ranked by several criteria: material well-being, education, health and safety, behaviors and risks, and housing and environment.

Roughly one in seven children within the United States currently lives in poverty. According to the overall metric, the US ranks 26 out of 29, behind Greece and just above Lithuania, Latvia and Romania. On the education metric, it comes in 27, while on the material well-being metric it comes in at 26.

The report notes that the United States, which has the world's highest gross domestic product, has remained at the bottom of the list throughout the past decade.

In the areas of material well-being, the report focuses on individual countries' poverty rates and the relative gap between the median income and children classified as poor. In the United States, the average child in poverty was an estimated 36 percent below the official poverty line, ranking with nations such as Italy and Greece.

The official poverty line is taken to be 50 percent of the median income level of any particular country. This is itself absurdly low, with many families above the poverty line still living in extremely difficult

circumstances.

The report briefly outlines the importance of child well-being, stating that "failure to protect and promote the well-being of children is associated with increased risk across a wide range of later-life outcomes... From impaired cognitive development to lower levels of school achievement, from reduced skills and expectations to lower productivity and earnings."

Of particular note is the infant mortality rate, included in the "health and safety" section of the report. The findings single out the United States, Great Britain and Canada, three of the world's wealthiest nations, all of which fall into the lowest rankings for preventing infant deaths. Results were similar in remaining categories, with the United States possessing homicide rates of nearly eight deaths per 100,000 individuals, higher than Libya in 2008 (the last year in which statistics are available).

The nations with the highest levels of childhood well-being were concentrated within Nordic countries and Western Europe, which still retain relatively more developed social reforms, though these are under relentless attack. Finland had less than 5 percent child poverty.

The majority of the findings are constructed from data collected in 2009-2010, the most recent period available for all relevant criteria. Noting the apparent inadequacy of this due to the economic crisis' continuing impact, the report mentions that such information would prove difficult to come by "in the best of times," adding that the past few years have been "far from the best of times."

Poverty has soared in Europe since the data in this report was recorded. The past three years have seen a series of ever more brutal austerity measures as a condition for bank bailouts organized by the European

Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank.

According to the assessment of education in the most developed countries, including the percentage of youth enrolled in preschool, the US is again one of only several countries whose child population falls below 80 percent in this category.

In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama touted an initiative toward the expansion of the federal Head Start program, stating his intention to make “high-quality preschool available to every child in America.” This is empty demagoguery. In fact, the Obama administration is presiding over an historic attack on public education, with hundreds of schools shut down and hundreds of thousands of teachers laid off over the past four years.

The conditions of young people in the United States constitute a devastating indictment of American capitalism and the two big business parties. Over the past four decades, social inequality has soared to levels not seen since before the Great Depression of the 1930s. The rise of a financial aristocracy has been accompanied by a relentless attack on jobs, wages and social programs. The United States in turn has become a model for ruling classes all over the world.

Since the onset of the world economic crisis in 2008, the attack on the working class has only intensified. Trillions of dollars have been handed to the banks, while the Obama administration is now spearheading a drive to slash hundreds of billions from core social programs, including Social Security and Medicare. The consequences for child poverty and many other metrics of social inequality and distress are not hard to predict.

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