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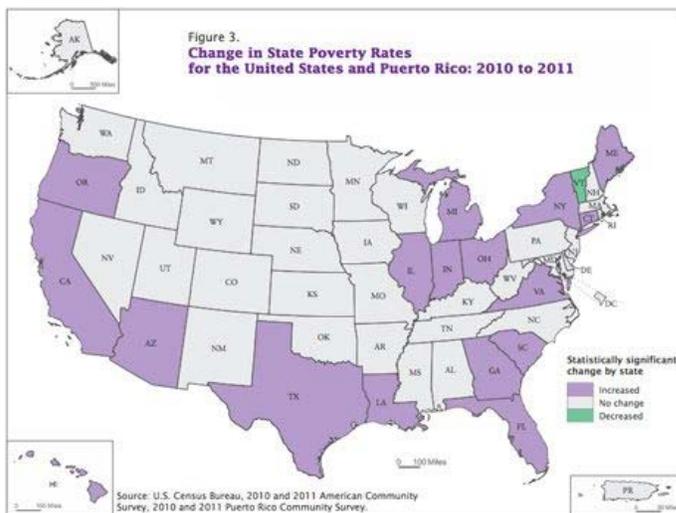
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## As poverty rises, Norwalk remains committed to its children

Brittany Lyte and Nicole Rivard

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Nearly 28,000 Connecticut residents -- many of them children -- fell into poverty in 2011, raising the state poverty rate from 10.1 to 10.9 percent, according to new figures released by the [Census Bureau](#).

The percentage of children living in poverty in Bridgeport, Danbury and Stamford shot up dramatically in the last year to 39.9 percent, 17.9 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively. However in

Norwalk the percentage of children living in poverty decreased from 11.4 percent in 2010 to 7.7 percent in 2011. The child poverty rate was 18.9 percent in Norwalk back in 2009 and 16.9 percent in 2008.

The Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey illustrates Connecticut's economic climate as slowing, if not stagnant. The report shows a \$130 drop in Connecticut's median household income to \$65,753 and a rise in the unemployment rate by a tenth of a percentage point to 7.2 percent.

And while Fairfield County showed signs of pulling out of the recession, Bridgeport lagged. In 2011, Bridgeport's unemployment rate rose from 10 percent to 13.6 percent, the median household income dropped 9 percent to \$35,379 and the percentage of children living in poverty rose 8.7 percentage points to 39.9 -- an increase of nearly 29 percent. Meanwhile, the median household income climbed 13 percent to \$75,454 in Stamford and nearly 12 percent to \$64,974 in Danbury.

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"What happens when you look at county-wide data is that it masks the issues in a city like Bridgeport, which has been deeply impacted by this most recent recession and job loss," said [Barbara Edinberg](#), director of research for the [Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition](#).

"Norwalk kind of straddles both lines. You've got pockets of affluence and you have pockets of poverty."

She said one of the factors that may be contributing to the decrease in the number of children in poverty in Norwalk is the decline in the city's unemployment rate, which was 7.5 in 2011, down from 7.8 in 2010.

While the data shows a decrease in children living in poverty in Norwalk, "It's still an issue," says Edinberg.

"We know the consequences for any children living in poverty," Edinberg said. "They are more likely to be in poor health, have poor academic performance and be more vulnerable to violence, abuse and homelessness. So it's important that we maintain state safety net services for families such as food stamps and the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#), housing vouchers and childcare assistance to help parents ensure that their children thrive and have some financial security."

In response to the findings, [Connecticut Voices for Children](#), a research-based think tank, pointed to Connecticut's new state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) as a measure that could pull many working families out of poverty. "The new state EITC will put more money directly into the hands of low-income people working hard to reach the middle class," said [Wade Gibson](#), Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children. "We need to make sure that eligible families know about both the state and federal tax credits."

For families struggling in Norwalk they have on their side a number of human service agencies, like Norwalk Economic Opportunity Now, Family and Children's Agency and the [Human Services Council](#), as well as community health centers. "It's a matter of making sure that families who need them are connected to the resources," Edinberg said.

[David Kennedy](#), chief operating officer, United Way of Coastal Fairfield County, was not surprised to hear Norwalk is heading in the right direction in relation to child poverty. "One of the things that makes Norwalk special is it has made a commitment to its kids," said Kennedy, who is also co-chair of the city's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness with Norwalk Mayor [Richard Moccia](#).

"There are a number of youth organizations in the city. Norwalk ACTS for Children has really come together to focus on young children. And I am impressed with what the [Norwalk Housing Authority](#) does by focusing on the education of children."

Kennedy pointed out that for the third year in a row, Norwalk has been selected as one of the America's [Promise Alliance](#) 2012 "100 Best Communities for Young People" presented by ING, a national competition to recognize local communities' programs aimed at supporting youth and ending the high school dropout crisis. "The award evaluates communities on five promises that it makes to kids," Kennedy explained. "The five promises are providing caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education and opportunities to help others."

Kennedy said that there is of course still work to be done. "That there is a decrease in child poverty is good news," Kennedy said. "That 7.7 percent still means that there are almost 6,600 kids in poverty in Norwalk. That is a lot of kids. And each one of them struggles."

Children across the region are struggling. In Danbury, nearly 18 percent of youths under 18 are living in poverty -- an 80 percent jump in the city's year-over-year poverty rate, and nearly double the overall rate of poverty in Fairfield County. The poverty rate among children in Stamford is 17.5 percent, a 47 percent increase over the 11.9 percent rate in 2010.

"Part of why we're seeing so many kids in poverty and homelessness is at the end of the day this is a very expensive part of the world and the country to live in," said [Jason Shaplen](#), CEO of Inspirica of Stamford, one of the largest providers of services to the homeless in the state.

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"Homelessness is already at record highs and with poverty numbers (as they are) it's clear we are going to see many more people fall into poverty before the economy turns around," he said.

Danbury Deputy Superintendent of Schools William Glass said about 32 percent of the district's student body was enrolled in the free or reduced lunch program two years ago. Today, more than 50 percent of the district's students are enrolled in the program. "It's dramatic and very disconcerting," Glass said of the rising poverty rate.

Almost 40 percent of children in Bridgeport are living in poverty. Perhaps more startling is the staggering amount by which the city's poverty rate advanced over the last year, climbing nine percentage points. That represents a 29 percent change.

"That's a huge, enormous increase. That means if you walk down the street and you see three children -- at least one of them is living in poverty," said Edinberg.

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