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Metro Detroit schools see surge in number of kids living in poverty

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Salem High School National Honor Society members Maggie Sneiderman, 16, left, Lauren Seroka, 17, and Emily Sneiderman, 16, gather donated school supplies last month at the Salvation Army Plymouth Corps for a back-to-school effort that collected backpacks and supplies for Plymouth-Canton, Belleville and Northville students. / REGINA H. BOONE/Detroit Free Press

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BY LORI HIGGINS

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More of the children attending schools in metro Detroit are living in poverty, a trend pronounced not just in urban areas but also in some of the tri-county's wealthier areas. Between 2006 and 2010 -- a period marked by a recession that rocked Michigan more than most states -- 19 school districts in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties saw increases of more than 100% in the number of poor children.

Some of it can be tied to low-income families moving into wealthier districts as they look for better schools. But mostly, school officials say, it's homegrown, with local parents falling into poverty after losing jobs or dealing with pay cuts.

The districts saw hundreds -- even thousands -- more students eligible for a federal subsidized lunch program, a reliable barometer of poverty in schools. Utica Community Schools saw a 103% increase. In Birmingham Public Schools, it was 212%. In the Troy School District, it was 195%.

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Database: Growth in poor students qualifying for free lunch in Wayne, Oakland, Macomb schools

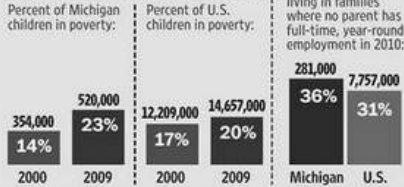
Michigan is getting poorer, Census shows

More children need lunch programs

There were 19 school districts in metro Detroit where the number of children living in poverty increased more than 100% from 2006-10. Here are the districts and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced cost lunch and the increases.

SCHOOL DISTRICT	Students eligible for lunch programs 2006	2010	Percentage increase from '06 to '10	Percentage of 2010 total district population eligible for reduced cost lunch programs
Dearborn Heights	248	1,918	673%	64%
Novi	191	596	212%	10%
Birmingham	208	649	212%	8%
Troy	524	1,545	195%	13%
Armada	148	392	165%	20%
Bloomfield Hills	221	573	159%	10%
Lakeview	511	1,294	153%	37%
Brandon	503	1,210	141%	36%
Oxford	500	1,142	128%	24%
Trenton	310	668	115%	24%
Grosse Ile	71	152	114%	8%
Clintondale	1,052	2,164	106%	60%
Avondale	539	1,099	104%	30%
Berkley	566	1,148	103%	25%
Utica	3,349	6,801	103%	24%
West Bloomfield	728	1,473	102%	22%
Warren Woods	834	1,670	100%	49%
Fraser	1,077	2,149	100%	42%
Northville	240	479	100%	7%

CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY



Sources: Kids Count 2011; Michigan Center for Educational Performance and Information

MARTHA THIERRY/Detroit Free Press

ZOOM

Getting and giving help

Some community agencies in metro Detroit that provide assistance:

- Macomb County Community Services Agency: For those who live in northern Macomb, call 586-749-5146; in central Macomb, call 586-469-6964; in southern Macomb, call 586-759-9150.
- Lighthouse of Oakland County: 248-920-6000; for emergency services, call 248-920-6100.
- Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency: 248-209-2600.
- Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency: 734-284-6999.
- Cass Community Social Services: 313-883-2277.

To find out how you can help children directly, call your local school district.

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The surge and its geography indicate that the recession didn't affect only poor, urban areas, said demographer Kurt Metzger, director of the nonprofit Data Driven Detroit.

"It hit everybody."

Metro Detroit school districts work to ease fears, help newly poor families get assistance

A year ago, life was moving along smoothly for Nicholle Timmons and her two teen sons. She was earning a steady paycheck and had purchased a home she remodeled with \$25,000 in savings.

But within weeks of her January layoff, Timmons was applying for unemployment for the first time. And her two sons, students at Southfield-Lathrup High School in Oakland County, became eligible for a free or reduced-price school lunch.

It's become a common plight across metro Detroit as the sons and daughters of newly poor families increasingly face school life in need. In addition to being eligible for subsidized lunch -- a commonly used gauge of poverty in schools -- more students are arriving to school hungry, without proper supplies and unable to pay mandatory school fees.

The increases in the number of students in poverty are especially dramatic in many of metro Detroit's wealthier districts, including Birmingham Public Schools, Bloomfield Hills Schools, Utica Community Schools and the Troy School District. In Utica, for example, the number of students eligible for subsidized lunch increased from 3,349 during the 2006-07 school year to 6,801 last year.

A homegrown issue

Some of the increase in wealthier districts is from already poor families moving into the area in search of better schools. But most, school officials say, are homegrown like the Timmons family -- already living in the district when they fell into poverty because of a layoff or reduction in pay.

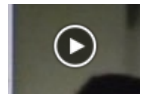
Overall, 19 of the 87 school districts in Macomb, Oakland and Wayne counties had increases of more than 100% from 2006-10. More than half saw increases of more than 50%. The average number of students eligible for subsidized lunch



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across the region is about 15%.

Some districts are resorting to novel methods, such as prize giveaways, to encourage newly eligible families to overcome the perceived stigma they feel and sign up for subsidized lunch. Area charities and other groups that help poor students with backpacks and other supplies say the numbers in need have gone up. They also have intensified efforts this year.

The goal is to help the students fit in, said Jeremy Hughes, interim superintendent of Plymouth-Canton Community Schools. "Going back to school in the fall and seeing what other people are wearing and what other gadgets everyone has ... can be a pretty defeating experience for someone who has very little."

Timmons said she appreciates that school lunch is one less budget worry for her. But she said applying for unemployment and other assistance has been difficult and humiliating.

"That's not the type of person I am, and the home I grew up in. We didn't go out and get assistance from anyone."

For Timmons, it has been a difficult financial fall for the single-parent household. She has gone from bringing home about \$3,000 every two weeks in the health care field to receiving \$724 every two weeks in unemployment. She continues to work toward a master's degree from the University of Phoenix. And she's actively looking for employment.

"You couldn't have told me I was going to be out of a job as long as I have," she said. "I have the education. I have the experience. But I'm having a hard time finding a job."

The same is true for a Clarkston woman who lost her full-time job as an office administrator in 2007 and has been able to find only part-time employment since then. In the meantime, the woman -- who asked that her name not be used -- has relied on a host of assistance programs including one that provided money to buy school supplies for her son. That money -- about \$130 -- came out of the blue.

"I didn't know where I was going to get it from this year," she said.

At the Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency, a significant number of people coming in for assistance have never needed it before, said Dayna Swindell, associate director for welcome center services.

"I had a man who sat there with his wife and he cried. He said, 'I've never had to ask for help.' He was so embarrassed. He felt like a bad father and husband," Swindell said.

About a third of the people coming to the Lighthouse of Oakland County for assistance have similar tales, said John Ziraldo, CEO of the nonprofit human services agency. He called it a striking trend.

"They're coming from neighborhoods and communities that traditionally have provided food for our pantry and sometimes even cash support."

School officials have been working on responding to the increase in the number of needy children.

Letitia Tappin, principal at Eastover Elementary in Bloomfield Hills, now sends information about applying for free or reduced-price lunch home with each child. That information used to go in newsletters, requiring interested parents to call the school -- something newly poor parents were reluctant to do.

"If you put it in their hands and if they could just turn it in, it's a lot easier," said Tappin, whose district has seen the number of students eligible for subsidized lunch grow from 221 in the 2006-07 school year to 573 in 2010-11.

The Plymouth-Canton district was heavily involved in the Salvation Army Plymouth Corps effort last month that collected backpacks and supplies to give to students in the Plymouth-Canton, Belleville and Northville school districts.

Laurie Aren, director of family and community ministries for the corps, said the annual backpack effort has grown from serving 113 kids in 2007 to 320 kids this year.

The district works with Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan to send some needy kids home on Fridays with a backpack full of food, district spokesman Frank Ruggirello said.

Ruggirello said working so closely with the agencies wasn't so common when he began working in Plymouth-Canton in 2002.

"There wasn't really a necessity for it. Now, I have a close relationship because the need continues to increase. We see it every single year."

Reaching out to families

The Dearborn Heights School District No. 7 had the largest percentage increase in the tri-county area -- 673%. It has been noticeable in the schools, said Angela Rudolph, business manager for the district.

"In the last few years there have been a lot of families in our district who have lost their jobs and lost their homes," she said. Many, she said, were connected to the auto industry.

The district has tried several efforts to encourage parents to apply for a free or reduced-price lunch, including giving away prizes, reaching out to families who were having financial difficulty and calling homes with prerecorded messages, she said.

Utica Community Schools has experienced a similar trend with once dual-income families now reduced to a single income. There, the number of poor students has risen 103%.

Superintendent Christine Johns said the increase is happening across the district, in all schools.

"Yes, our families are going through some hardship, but there is still a strong value placed on education," she said.

In the weeks of the new school year, the district will be identifying students in need and working with the Kiwanis Club to provide those kids with backpacks full of supplies, Johns said.

Susan Boyne, director of food services for the Utica district, said that many parents whose children are newly eligible for subsidized

lunch "don't feel very good about it. You get a sense of pride from the families. This is the first time something like this has ever happened to their family."

Contact Lori Higgins: 313-222-6651 or lhiggins@freepress.com

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