

Child poverty rises in city

Census ranks Rochester 7th in the U.S.

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ALBANY — A majority of children in three upstate cities lived in poverty in 2011, with Rochester ranking seventh in the nation for its percentage of poor children, U.S. census data released Thursday showed.

Rochester had 54 percent of its youth under age 18 living in poverty, putting it in a class with Flint, Mich.; Camden, N.J.; Reading, Pa; and Cleveland. Gary, Ind., led the nation in childhood poverty at 69 percent, the data showed.

Other large New York cities saw major increases in the number of people and children living in poverty between 2010 and 2011. The poverty level in Yonkers, the state's fourth largest city, grew the most — a remarkable 44 percent, from 24,030 residents to 34,601 residents, representing about 18 percent of the city's total population.

Poverty "becomes a death spiral for the cities," said Mark Dunlea, executive director of the Hunger Action Network of NYS. He said poverty strains government services and leads people to move to the suburbs.

Among the top 13 large cities for childhood poverty, Ohio had four and New York had three — the most of any other state. Syracuse ranked 10th with 53 percent of its children in poverty, the census data showed, and Schenectady ranked 13 at 51 percent.

In 2010, Rochester ranked 14th in the nation, with a childhood poverty rate of 51 percent. The number of children

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living below the poverty level in the city grew from 26,151 children in 2010 to 27,028 children in 2011. Rochester is the state's third largest city with about 200,000 people. By comparison, the similarly sized Richmond, Va., was 71st in the nation with 15,039 children living in poverty, or about 39.5 percent. Fremont, Calif., near San Jose, was the best municipality in the 200,000-population range in terms of childhood poverty, at 7.5 percent.

"These numbers do not reflect the way Rochester wants to talk about itself. But there are some very, very serious problems here," said James Norman, president of Action For A Better Community, a city organization that helps low-income families.

Poverty is another battle upstate cities are facing amid declining populations and troubled government finances.

In Schenectady, a city of about 63,000, the percentage of people living in poverty rose 34 percent between 2010 and 2011. The data generally included only cities with populations of more than 65,000 people.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Thursday that the troubled state of cities would be a focus of his administration. Syracuse and Rochester leaders have warned of potential bankruptcy without help from state leaders. Buffalo, where childhood poverty ranked 27th in the nation at 47 percent, is already under a state control board that oversees its budget.

"We understand the situation that the upstate cities have terrible, in some cases, financial pressures, and we understand that, and we're looking at a number of approaches on how we can help them," Cuomo told reporters.

Statewide, the number of people living in poverty grew 7 percent between 2010 and 2011, reaching more than 3 million people, or 16 percent of its population, according the U.S. census.

Nationwide, the percentage was on par with New York: about 16 percent of the U.S. population had income below the poverty level,

which is 125 percent of a state's poverty threshold. According to the state Department of Labor, the poverty level for a family of four in New York last year was an annual income of \$22,350.

In a report Thursday, the state Business Council said it sees the economy slowly improving. The Tax Foundation, a national group based in Washington, D.C., ranked New York this year 49th in the nation in business tax climate. The Business Council said New York ranked 39th in population growth over the past five years. The Business Council said the state has taken steps this year to improve the economic climate, such as limiting the growth in taxes and spending. "Although they have dealt with a difficult recovery and a slowly improving business environment in New York, our members believe their businesses will grow and their bottom lines will improve over the next 18 months," Heather Briccetti, the group's president, said in a statement.

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