



State of the States Report 2015

Poverty and Opportunity in the States:
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By Rachel West and Jackie Odum February 2016

Introduction and summary

In 2014, more than one in seven Americans—46.7 million people—lived below the official federal poverty level of less than \$24,000 per year for a family of four.¹ While the U.S. economy has gradually improved in the aftermath of the recession, far too many families continue to struggle to make ends meet, much less get ahead.

Each year, the Center for American Progress releases its “State of the States” report, which evaluates progress toward cutting poverty and increasing opportunity by tracking 15 key indicators in each state. These indicators can help state policymakers better understand the areas in which states are improving the situation of struggling families, as well as the areas in which they must do more to promote families’ well-being. The report ranks states according to how successfully they are reducing poverty and inequality, improving the quality of jobs and education, promoting family stability and strength, and ensuring family economic security.

As this report underscores, *policy matters* when it comes to addressing poverty and improving economic opportunity. State policymakers have a host of tools at their disposal to bring about change that makes a meaningful difference in the lives of American families.

This year’s report highlights examples of commendable and innovative steps that states have recently taken to support and strengthen families. Even as national progress has been stalled by a gridlocked Congress, many states have forged ahead—raising wages for low-paid workers, creating family-friendly work environments through paid leave policies, reducing barriers to employment and public assistance for families involved in the justice system, and connecting youth to high-quality work opportunities through apprenticeships, to name just a few examples.

But while policy can vastly improve lives, policy decisions can also shut the doors of opportunity or reverse families' hard-earned gains altogether. In addition to commending states' strides to combat poverty and to promote opportunity, this report also shines a light on recent actions by policymakers that may hinder or harm already-struggling families in their states.

Developments in the states over the past year—the good, the bad, and the ugly—demonstrate how far-reaching and consequential state-level policymaking can be. By taking a hard look at where their state is succeeding and where it is falling short, advocates, lawmakers, and residents can prioritize future action that would dramatically reduce poverty and increase well-being in their backyard and beyond.

Endnotes

- 1 Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, "Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014" (Washington: Bureau of the Census, 2015), available at <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf>.

Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

