

The Face of Poverty in the Coulee Region

In 2015, the federal government classifies a family of four as “poor” if its gross cash income is less than \$24,250; for a family of three, \$20,090; for a family of two, \$15,930; and for an individual, \$11,770.¹⁰ Too often, people in poverty are invisible to us. We may live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same schools and parishes, yet are unaware of each other’s financial struggles.

More than 29,000 people live at or below the poverty line in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties.

More than 65,000 people struggle to make ends meet in these counties.

The following table lists data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2009-2013 American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates for Couleecap’s four-county service area. All of the percentages are based on the total population of each county.⁸

	Crawford	La Crosse	Monroe	Vernon	Total Area
Total Persons Living Below 100% of Poverty Level (%)	2,089 (12.6)	16,159 (14.0)	6,473 (14.4)	4,350 (14.5)	29,071
Children, under 18, Living Below 100% of Poverty Level (%)	578 (16.0)	3,208 (13.2)	2,593 (22.3)	1,682 (21.3)	8,061
Adults, 65 and older, Living Below 100% of Poverty Level (%)	345 (10.9)	1,298 (8.2)	703 (10.8)	534 (10.3)	2,880
Total Families Living Below 100% of Poverty Level (%)	357 (8.2)	1,837 (6.6)	1,307 (11.0)	780 (9.8)	4,281
Total Persons Living Below 200% of Poverty Level (%)	5,716 (34.5)	34,386 (29.8)	14,652 (32.6)	11,081 (36.9)	65,835

Startling Economic Factors Impacting Low-Income Households in Our Area:

- **Fact:** The current minimum wage in Wisconsin is \$7.25.⁵
 The federal poverty level for a family of two is \$15,930.¹⁰ A person working 40 hours per week at minimum wage earns \$15,080 a year. If the minimum wage had kept pace with productivity growth it would be at least \$16.54 today – not \$7.25.² And, it’s important to note that this is a very conservative measure of productivity growth. At the current rate of \$7.25/hour, it is very difficult for someone to pay the rent, have a car, buy groceries, and meet other needs.
- **Fact:** Fair market rent for a two bedroom apartment in Vernon County is \$643.¹¹
 A general recommendation is that no more than 30% of a household’s income should go for housing, however more than 1/3 of renters in Vernon County pay more than 30% of their income for rent. To be able to afford this apartment and not pay more than 30% of income for rent, a single parent with one child must earn \$12.37 per hour, working 40 hours per week. A single parent earning \$7.25/hour (minimum wage) would have to work 68.5 hours per week to be able to afford a two-bedroom apartment and not pay more than 30% of income for rent.

- Fact: The median value of a house in the City of La Crosse is \$127,800.⁸
Housing prices have increased at a much higher rate than the average household income, which makes it difficult for low-income households to afford a home of their own. A home costing \$127,800 with a 30 year mortgage at 5%, including property taxes and insurance, costs an estimated \$966 a month.⁴ To be able to afford this house and not pay more than 30% of income on housing costs, a household must earn \$38,641 annually. Families today can purchase a home with no down-payment from a multitude of mortgage companies, however these companies charge interest rates that are 2-3% higher than the prime interest rate and they also charge higher closing fees.
- Fact: The average annual cost of family health insurance in Wisconsin is \$16,665.⁶
In Couleecap's four-county area, approximately 12% of people were uninsured in 2013.⁸ The average charge for an emergency room visit is \$500; the average charge for a primary care visit at a clinic or physician office ranges from \$100 - \$150.³ Whether someone has health insurance or not can make the difference between getting medical care or going without. Affording dental care is very difficult for low-income families as well.
- Fact: The average annual cost to operate and maintain a small car is \$6,729.¹
Transportation is a critical element for most people to get to work and reach needed services. In La Crosse County, there is a bus service but it does not cover all areas and does not run all hours of the day. Cab service is available in La Crosse County and in a few communities in our rural counties, but this can be difficult for low-income households to afford. Low-income people who do have a car, often have older, unreliable cars and struggle to properly maintain their vehicle.
- Fact: Annual tuition at Western Technical College is approximately \$3,852¹³; at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse it is \$8,962⁷ and at Viterbo University it is \$24,360.¹²
Attaining a post-secondary degree or certificate has become increasingly important for securing opportunities to get higher paying jobs in the U.S. in the 21st century. However, someone living in poverty struggles to meet their basic needs let alone have the ability to pay for further education.
- Fact: The average annual cost of food for a family of four ranges from \$7,805 - \$15,506.⁹
Currently 17.5 million Americans are considered to be food insecure.⁹ Often, after low-income households have paid their bills, there is little to no money left for food. In Couleecap's four-county area, more than 19,000 people received emergency food assistance through 11 TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) supported food pantries last year to help meet their food needs.

Making a Difference

As part of the War on Poverty, community action agencies were created across the nation to help people get out of poverty and on the road to self-sufficiency. Couleecap, a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966, is one of these community action agencies. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice for people and communities in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin.



We are *People Helping People*, and everyday our actions make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. For more than 49 years, we have been helping people living below the poverty line and low-income people (up to 200% of the poverty line) build on their strengths and become more self-sufficient. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 31,000 people work towards self-sufficiency.

Couleecap currently operates more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, employment, transportation, emergency assistance, health, education, child & family development, and business development. The following story is an example of one of the many people Couleecap is helping achieve self-sufficiency:

Mike had been living on the streets for years before entering Couleecap's Housing First Program. During those years on the street, he struggled to find employment, struggled with personal tragedies, and abused alcohol. Mike entered the Housing First Program in December of 2014 and has made remarkable progress since then. After he secured an apartment and was settled in, Mike's first goal was to complete a physical and an AODA (alcohol and other drug abuse) assessment. He completed both exams right away and began receiving regular AODA counseling. Currently Mike is working regularly with an AODA counselor and he enjoys meeting with his counselor. Mike and his case manager worked together to find employment for him. It was soon discovered that he was not eligible for employment services through other agencies, so he and his case manager picked up applications by hand and completed them together. Mike was able to secure employment and currently works at a local fast food restaurant on a part time basis. Mike has gone from years of homelessness, and sometimes hopelessness, into gaining housing and employment, and maintaining his sobriety in less than nine months in the Housing First Program. He is very proud of his apartment and he is very appreciative for all the help he has received through Couleecap.

You Can Help, Too

Each of us has the power to help people find a way out of poverty. Here are some ways you can get involved:

- Educate yourself about poverty issues. Visit your local library or websites on the Internet. Some good websites are Wisconsin Community Action Program (WISCAP) – www.wiscap.org; Couleecap – www.couleecap.org; Institute for Research on Poverty – www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp.
- Support and vote for local elected officials who care about poverty issues.
- Increase affordable housing by joining a local housing coalition.
- Support your local food pantries all year round.
- Advocate for a higher minimum wage, more assistance for child care, more assistance with healthcare costs, and more assistance with transportation costs, so working families can get out of poverty.
- Make a donation to Couleecap's People Helping People Initiative. Your donation will be used to help our program participants: buy gas to get to work, buy books for school, buy food for their families, etc.



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References:

- ¹AAA; Annual Cost to Own and Operate a Vehicle, 2015; <http://newsroom.aaa.com>
- ²Center for Economic Policy and Research; The Minimum Wage and Economic Growth, 2013; www.cepr.net
- ³Debt.org; Doctor Visit Costs, 2011; www.debt.org
- ⁴Mortgage Calculator, 2015; www.mortgagecalculator.org
- ⁵National Conference of State Legislatures; State Minimum Wages, 2015; www.ncsl.org
- ⁶The Commonwealth Fund; Health Insurance Premiums, 2013; www.commonwealthfund.org
- ⁷University of Wisconsin-La Crosse; Tuition and Housing Costs, 2015; www.uwlax.edu
- ⁸US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates, 2009-2013; www.census.gov
- ⁹US Department of Agriculture; Official USDA Food Plans: Cost of Food at Home, 2015; www.cnpp.usda.gov
- ¹⁰US Department of Health & Human Services; Poverty Guidelines, 2015; <http://aspe.hhs.gov>
- ¹¹US Department of Housing & Urban Development; Fair Market Rents, 2015; www.hud.gov
- ¹²Viterbo University; Annual Comprehensive Costs, 2015; www.viterbo.edu
- ¹³Western Technical College; Tuition and Fees, 2015; <http://westerntc.edu>