

COMMONWEALTH INSIGHTS



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Poverty in Massachusetts: Lower Than Average But Far Too High, Especially for Children

While there are many indicators of opportunity, and the condition of communities, few are more important than the poverty rate. That rate—the percentage of people with incomes below the federally-defined poverty level—is a powerful tool for identifying people under the most economic duress. It's not perfect; debates have taken place for years about how the rate is calculated. It doesn't tell the full picture; income is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for people to thrive. But the poverty rate is an essential metric for organizations that work to alleviate suffering, help people meet basic needs, and expand opportunity.

Those goals represent the overarching mission of the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits of all specialties, whether they be small, medium, or large, work to improve people's lives and help communities thrive.

Nonprofits strive to eliminate the causes and devastating effects of poverty. The entire sector has a stake in that effort, because poverty does not have a single cause. It can arise from a lack of jobs,

Key Points:

- County-level poverty in Massachusetts is as high as 20%, and linked to unemployment.
- County-level child poverty is as high as 30%, and closely tied to high school dropout rates.

Key Strategies for Reducing Poverty:

- Expanding job growth policies
- Strengthening the Earned Income Tax Credit
- Minimizing the "cliff effect"
- Helping more students complete high school
- Creating new partnerships

insufficient educational opportunities, poor housing options, health care difficulties, or other factors. Likewise, poverty's solutions are not limited to one subsector of the nonprofit world. The sector as a whole plays a key role in the drive to reduce, and eventually eliminate, poverty and its effects.

Each fall the U.S. Census Bureau publishes new data on poverty in its American Community Survey (ACS). In addition to widely publicized national and state rates, the Bureau provides poverty estimates for nearly every county (excluding those with very small populations). Those include nearly all Massachusetts counties, and the results are striking.

Figure 1: U.S. State Poverty Rates 2015

