

Study: Single parenthood in state a tough go

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The real costs of staying alive without help in Montana are such a long leap from life on the welfare grid - and from the federal definition of "poverty" - that many people will fall short, says a new study by a University of Washington social work professor.

The research, compiled in "The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montana" and authored by Diana Pearce, finds that a single parent with two children, one preschool-age and one school-age, must earn \$12.42 an hour in Rosebud County and \$17.50 an hour in Bozeman to provide for her family.

"As we can see in the report, living without subsidies is nearly impossible in Montana," Kate Kahan said in an interview Monday. She is director of the Missoula-based poverty rights advocacy group Working for Equality and Economic Liberation, the lead agency in commissioning the study. "We know how many wages are at \$5.15. And we certainly can attest during welfare reauthorization that people are working, and they're not making it."

Compared to 15 larger cities around the country, Billings ranks among the lowest self-sufficiency standard. A single adult can meet basic needs earning \$7.10 an hour; in San Francisco, the same adult must earn \$11.33.

To be self-sufficient in Missoula, a single adult must earn at least \$7.05 an hour. But an adult with an infant and a preschool child must earn \$16.15, and an adult with an infant, a preschool child and a school-age child must earn \$20.57 an hour.

"Even though the costs are lower in this state, the wages are so low," Pearce said in an interview Monday.

In some areas of Montana, such as Beaverhead County and Great Falls, single adults can get by on \$6 and some cents an hour.

"But many people are earning less than that," Pearce said, "and supporting children."

The research, a year and a half in the works, will be released Tuesday at a press conference at the state Capitol in Helena. That will include release to government and agency officials.

Kahan and Pearce will be joined at the press conference by Joan Kuriansky, executive director of Wider Opportunities for Women, a Washington, D.C.-based national women's employment organization that works for independence and equality of opportunity for women and girls and led the study with WEEL. Also speaking at the conference will be Judy Smith of the Missoula-based Women's Opportunity and Resource Development and Frank Kromkowski of the Montana Community Labor Coalition and Montana Workers' Rights Board.

Montana is the 20th state Pearce has studied since she developed the idea and methodology while working at WOW. She published the first two self-sufficiency standards studies in 1996 for Iowa and California. By the end of this year, WOW hopes to have self-sufficiency standards for 35 states.

WOW plans to use data on self-sufficiency standards in its lobbying to shape the course of the reauthorization of national welfare

reform law, which must be completed by Congress by the end of September.

Knowing the self-sufficiency standards can help state and federal governments and agencies develop policies and programs that help keep people from having to go back to welfare, said Kuriansky. Montana especially could take a look at its co-payment for state pay child care and at other programs that have thresholds that cause the aid to be withdrawn when a recipient makes even very little money.

"There are a lot of policy issues for a state that has one of the lowest average wages in the country to consider," she said.

The self-sufficiency standard is more meaningful than the federal poverty guidelines, Pearce writes in the report. Federal poverty definitions were developed based on a single expense, food, 40 years ago. They were based on a two-parent family in which the man worked and did not take into account the configuration of the modern family and its resulting expenses - child care, transportation to two jobs and taxes. It also is standard nationwide, while costs of living are not.

The report used the barest-bones numbers for expenses, Pearce said. They allow for no pizza, no dining out and no recreation.

"This is survival," said Kahan.

Karlynn Jarosch, a single mother of three children who has been on and off welfare most of her life, said the numbers in the report make sense.

"This is a true indicator of what it takes to survive," she said.

Jarosch earned a college degree and worked her way off welfare, only to find herself back on after only six months. In her first professional job, she earned \$11.44 an hour and did not work full time. The wages meant she lost most of her public help, including food stamps, child care assistance and, she says, the state's aggressive pursuit of child-support payments from the father of her child who is still at home.

"I was forthcoming," she said. "I reported I'm going to work. And they slashed everything."

She does not want to be on welfare, she said.

"I did everything I was supposed to do," she said. "I went to school. I made the dean's list."

Jarosch's daughter would like to take violin lessons, and she'd like to be like other kids who listen to their personal CD players on the school bus, she said. Neither is very expensive, but both are out of the question, she said.

"When I'm really tired of saying no to my children is when they bring things home from school," she said. "How do you say no when the whole school is going on a ski trip?"

About half the states have studied former welfare recipients as their caseloads have declined, said Kuriansky, and have found that many women are returning to public assistance within a year.

"One of the challenges is how you support people," she said, "how you have more of a cushion to help the transition."