



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER



Community **Action**

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.

Although Twin Cities poverty dips in many places, it continues to rise in St. Paul

April 13, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 15

In 2011, following the release of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Minnesota Compass published a statistical profile titled "Poverty in Saint Paul." The data, which was alarming, showed that nearly one-quarter of all St. Paul residents lived below the federal poverty guidelines. And, of the more than 67,000 people living in poverty, approximately 25,000 were children.

Another disturbing trend highlighted by Minnesota Compass was the rate at which poverty was increasing in the capital city. From 1999 to 2010, poverty rose significantly at the national, state, and the Twin Cities metro level. Yet in St. Paul, the surge in poverty was even sharper rising by 50 percent during the decade. Furthermore, another 57,000 St. Paul residents lived between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty, which in essence means that nearly half of the city's population was classified as low-income.

During the last five years or so, there have been a number of other poverty studies that revealed new trends across the Twin Cities. For example, a Metropolitan Council report from 2015 documented the spread of poverty into suburban communities. Other research focused on things such as concentrated poverty, gentrification, and related issues.

Now, a new report from the Met Council published in February, finds that while poverty has started to trend downward across much of the metropolitan area, there are still neighborhoods where it is growing. Among the areas where poverty is on the rise are some northern suburbs and the City of St. Paul. In contrast to Minneapolis, where the poverty rate has remained "relatively flat" the last few years, the number of St. Paul residents at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty threshold (which is the baseline of how the Met Council defines poverty in its study) continues to rise. Today in St. Paul, the number of individuals living below that threshold is estimated to be around 125,000.

Moreover, pockets of concentrated poverty are swelling in all corners of St. Paul. According to the latest data areas such as St. Paul's East Side, North End, Thomas-Dale, Summit-University, and Hamline-Midway maintain poverty rates (185 percent of poverty or below) between 55 and 65 percent. In considering the impact of concentrated poverty both in St. Paul and other areas, The Met Council states that:

Research on concentrated poverty suggests it may have an overarching impact on residents – even those who are not themselves low-income – such as reducing potential economic mobility and negatively affecting their overall health and well-being...If concentrated poverty exposes residents to certain harms, then a sizable (and growing) share of the region's residents may

not participate in or contribute to our region's overall prosperity.

Across the Twin Cities there are more than 100 census tracts that are blighted by concentrated poverty. Writing for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, reporter Frederick Melo appropriately notes that these areas "are urban and suburban, black and white, immigrant and non-immigrant." Nonetheless, people of color are disproportionately more likely to live in an area of concentrated poverty.

In fact, of all the areas of concentrated poverty in the Twin Cities, people of color make up the majority population in more than three-quarters of these census tracts. In St. Paul alone, people of color make up between 60 and 80 percent of those residing in high-poverty areas.

That things still seem to be getting worse in St. Paul is quite troubling, particularly in light of all the attention that has been paid recently to the region's racial disparities. There are current efforts that are being undertaken to address these persistent and pernicious inequities. Yet once again, at the risk of sounding like a broken record, I must ask this question. When are we going to see real progress?

Clarence Hightower is the Executive Director of Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties. Dr. Hightower holds a Ph.D. in urban higher education from Jackson State University. He welcomes reader responses to 450 Syndicate Street North, St. Paul, MN 55104