

Children feel stress as poverty rates rise

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue

Eleven-year-old Sarai Camacho of Donna, Texas, tears up when she tells why her mother let the babysitter go for her and her younger sister this summer. It's the same reason her father brought the family to Indiana so he could work the melon fields for a season.

"Last December, my mom didn't get paid for one month, and we started having problems," said Sarai at Oaktown (Indiana) First Christian Church, which hosted free classes for children of migrant workers. "My mom said for us to come here [to the church] so she doesn't have to give money to the babysitter because we're running out of it."

For churches, it's become an all-too-familiar sight: working families that aren't able to make ends meet. As household resources are tapped out, churches are often the first to see the changing face of poverty—and it's often a young one.

"We're seeing younger families come in," said Ken Campbell, food coordinator for Lazarus House, a Christian ministry to help the needy in Lawrence, Massachusetts. "They're coming forward because one member in the household got laid off or had their hours cut, and now they're just barely making it."

Across the United States, rising numbers of children are coping with the stressors of economic hardship:

- Child poverty rates reached 22 percent in 2010, up from 20.7 percent in 2009 and 16.2 percent in 2000, according to a September report from the U.S. Census Bureau. Between 2000 and 2009, the number of children

living in poverty increased from 13.1 million to 15.5 million, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

- The Casey Foundation also reported that 4 percent of American children had been affected by home foreclosures since 2007, and 11 percent had at least one unemployed parent in 2010.
- Catholic Charities USA, which serves about one in four Americans who live in poverty, served 2.7 million children in 2010, up from 2.4 million in 2006. The steepest increase came in food-related services, as Catholic Charities fed 56 percent more children (935,000) in 2010 than in 2006 (600,000).

As

families cycle in and out of poverty, faith-based service programs tend to catch people who fall through the cracks of other safety nets, according to Robert L. Fischer, codirector of the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University.

When

emergency needs arise, people often turn to churches first. "The most disadvantaged families oftentimes don't go to formal settings to receive services, but they will go into a church," said Taniesha Woods, senior research associate at the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University. "Churches can provide information and reach families and children who wouldn't know about [public] services otherwise."

On the front lines, religious workers see signs of growing desperation. Four years ago at Torrente De Cedron Pentecostal Church in Lynn, Massachusetts, the weekly food pantry stayed open for two hours as about 75 families came through for a few days' worth of groceries.

Now the line begins forming hours before the pantry opens, according to Senior Pastor Oscar Ovalles, as more than 200 families come from city neighborhoods and affluent suburbs alike. Even with the use of smaller bags to stretch supplies, everything is gone within 30 minutes.

"Families are in crisis," Ovalles said. "What used to be saved for a rainy day is now the main course because Dad lost his job or Mom is no longer working."

Similar signs of stress are visible in nearby Lawrence. The overnight shelter at Lazarus House is always filled to capacity, Campbell said, and needs for food continue to increase. In early 2010, the weekly pantry gave a few days' worth of groceries to about 300 individuals who were, in most cases, picking up for families with children. This fall, the pantry is serving about 800 per week on average.

Many who now need help aren't used to receiving any sort of church-based assistance. Sarai's family in Indiana, for example, until recently had lived stably on income from her mother's teaching job and her father's work in agriculture and food processing. Now they depend on the church's help with child care to make ends meet.

"Because of what we're going through right now with money, I would love to help my family," Sarai said. "I would love to go to college," she said, and earn enough afterward to support her parents.

To meet growing needs, religious groups are trying to be resourceful despite the uphill challenge. In Massachusetts, Torrente De Cedron used to run its pantry on \$3,000 raised from parishioners' donations, but now the congregation can't afford the \$10,000 that's needed to run the program. This fall, the church began hosting regular fund-raisers to sustain the pantry.

"The food pantry is no longer just something that we want to do on a volunteer basis for the community," Ovalles said. "Now it's a mandatory thing that we have to have because of the need that we can see in these families and in these kids." —RNS