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# Nation's top three poorest counties in western South Dakota

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Ryan Lengerich Journal staff | Posted: Sunday, January 22, 2012 7:00 am | (0) Comments

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## Poverty rates

Counties with highest poverty rate

1. Ziebach County, S.D. 50.1
2. Todd County, S.D. 49.1
3. Shannon County, S.D. 47.3
4. Issaquena County, Miss. 43.3
5. Humphreys County, Miss. 42.2
6. Washington County, Miss. 42.2
7. Sioux County, N.D. 41.3
8. Holmes County, Miss. 41.2
9. Corson County, S.D. 40.9
- (T) 10. Lake County, Tenn. 40.4
- (T) 10. Allendale County, S.C. 40.4

Poverty is considered a four-person family earning less than \$22,314.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau

Local counties poverty rates

- Ziebach County 50.1
- Shannon County 47.3
- Bennett County 34.2
- Jackson County 32.9
- Fall River County 16.7
- Butte County 15.3
- Pennington County 15.2
- Lawrence County 14.0
- Haakon County 13.4
- Custer County 11.2
- Meade County 10.6

Poverty is considered a four-person family earning less than \$22,314.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau

Western South Dakota is home to the three counties with the nation's highest poverty rate, and four of the top 10, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

South Dakota has long had several counties toward the top as Native American reservations have a major presence in -- and in some cases occupy all -- the most destitute counties. The state has never had the top three dating back to at least 2003, when the bureau began distributing the figures in an easily readable electronic format.

The figures, based on 2010 income, show Ziebach County with the highest poverty rate, at 50.1 percent, which is down from 62 percent in 2009. Todd County at 49.1 percent and Shannon County at 47.3 percent are next, with Corson County ranking ninth with 40.9 percent.

Poverty is considered a four-person household income less than \$22,314. South Dakota has 14.6 percent of its residents living in poverty, just below the 15.3 percent national average.

Ziebach County, encompassed completely by the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, has held the country's highest poverty rate since 2004.

Julie Garreau was born, raised and still resides on the reservation. In 1988 she founded the Cheyenne River Youth Project, a child and family services organization. In 2010 she lost her Democratic bid for the state Senate.

"I don't think they see themselves as though 'we are the poorest,'" Garreau said. "It's a statistic of course, but that is not a reflection of who we are as people, as a community."

About half the Cheyenne River population is under 18 years old, which, Garreau said, represents hope.

"That is a lot of young, engaged people we could be training into adulthood," she said.

The youth that do succeed in school, and perhaps obtain a college degree, may return to the reservation, she said, but high unemployment leads them to opportunities elsewhere.

South Dakota has eight counties in the top 100 poverty rates, each at more than 30 percent. There are 3,142 counties in the report. Mississippi also has four counties in the top 10 and 17 counties in the top 100.

Pennington County has 15.2 percent, about the national average, while Minnehaha County is 11.7 percent. Lincoln County near Sioux Falls is lowest with 4.9 percent, far lower than any other county in the state.

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation encompasses all of Shannon County and parts of Jackson and Bennett counties, each ranked in the top 100.

"As long as we have an epidemic of drug use and alcohol use on our reservations, we are always going to have that problem," said Myron Pourier, executive board member for the Oglala Sioux Tribe at Pine Ridge.

An emphasis on returning to their traditional ways, such as little or no drugs and alcohol, and outreach programs are helping, Pourier said.

"We have families with five to six families in one home. That's how our people live and it's normal here on the reservation," he said. "Our biggest struggle is, it's time to get adequately funded by the federal government."

Garreau said funding and healthcare are major problems, but the causes of poverty are complex and date back to the nation's inception.

Having the highest poverty rate could even bring national attention to the county, leading to more resources and ideas, she said.

"Nobody here is throwing in the towel," Garreau said.

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