

Illinois residents still struggling with poverty

Cole Lauterbach

May 9, 2018

Illinois still is seeing high poverty rates.

An annual report from the Heartland Alliance's shows 1.6 million Illinois residents are considered to be living in poverty as of 2016. That's still higher than pre-recession levels, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, it's about 14 percent of the state's total population.

The poverty line is defined as a family of four living off less than \$24,755 annually, not counting government assistance.

"We're doing uniquely bad in that we haven't returned to our pre-recession poverty levels," said Katie Buitrago, director of research at the Social Impact Research Center at Heartland Alliance.

Buitrago says there is a high number of people in poverty in Cook County but higher percentages in counties such as Champaign and others in southern Illinois.

She said Illinois residents were hit hard by the recession and the state government's two-year budget impasse.

The Heartland Institute's report blames "discriminatory practices, policies and social structures" for the state's high level of people living in poverty.

CATO Institute senior fellow Michael Tanner said a job is the fastest way to lift someone above the poverty line.

"Economic growth has done more to reduce poverty than probably any government program in history," he said.

The state's stagnant wage rates, Tanner said, should share much of the blame, but a history of well-meaning government programs, such as occupational licensing and drug laws combined with poor public education, have held Illinoisans' heads under the poverty line.

"In many ways, we actually make it more difficult for people to get out of poverty and then we blame them," he said.

In Tanner's 2014 paper, he says the federal government has spent \$19 trillion fighting poverty since 1973, adding another \$1 trillion every year.

The state with the highest rate of people below the poverty line is Mississippi, at 22 percent.