

East St. Louis forum attendees propose community-driven solutions to child poverty

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Tashonia Hentz listens to the Rev. Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Children's Defense Fund, during the meeting on child poverty at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's East St. Louis Learning Center.

Restructuring local government, improving public transportation and boosting education spending could significantly reduce child poverty in East St. Louis — benefiting over half of the city's children, advocates for young people said Tuesday.

Children's Advocates for Change, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization, hosted a forum aimed at addressing child poverty in East St. Louis, where the poverty rate for children is three times the national average. More than 100 educators, religious leaders, Metro East officials and others gathered at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's East St. Louis Learning Center to discuss potential solutions.

The median household income in East St. Louis is less than \$29,000, compared to the state average of around \$78,000, according to data from Child Trends, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center based in Bethesda, Maryland, presented at the forum. The city has fewer college-educated adults and homeowners than the statewide average.

The city's population has dropped from over 82,000 in the 1950s to just under 18,800 today. Nearly a third of residents live in poverty, more than double the state rate of about 12%.

Increased funding for public schools would lead to better educational outcomes and lead children to be better equipped to break the cycle of poverty, said Sheila Burton, founder of the Land of Lincoln's Education Advocacy project.

"The education children receive in East St. Louis is simply not enough," Burton said. "They cannot compete with students in neighboring districts where achievement and proficiency levels are so much higher, and that's not acceptable."

But chronic absenteeism is disproportionately common in East St. Louis public schools, with 65% of high school students missing 15 or more school days. Parents play the most critical role in lifting children out of poverty, said Tiffany Gholson, director of parent and student support services in East St. Louis Public Schools.

"Parents, if they graduated, graduated without the skills they need to be successful," Gholson said. "So they stay in that cycle of poverty, which then impacts their kids. We just stay in this continual cycle ... they come out with no skill set ... it's not livable."

Panelists also examined the impact of recent poverty reduction measures, including increased unemployment benefits and child tax credits introduced as part of federal COVID-19 relief efforts. Despite these measures, poverty rates across Illinois have seen little change over the years.



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Tasha Green Cruzat, president of Children's Advocates for Change, listens to the Rev. Starsky Wilson, president and CEO of the Children's Defense Fund, as he answers questions from the audience during the meeting on child poverty in Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's East St. Louis Learning Center.

Mamie Cosey, a 55-year resident of East St. Louis, is trying to raise her children to beat the cycle of poverty.

"Our children are our greatest possession. When we fail them, we have failed our community," Cosey said. "I'm thankful to you being here. ... I had four children, but I raised 11... so to all of you here today, keep the fight going because it's important."

Officials from Children's Advocates for Change plan to host similar forums across poverty-stricken areas across Illinois.

"Child poverty is not a mere statistic," said Tasha Green Cruzat, president of the organization. "It is a lived experience for many families. ... It affects their health, education and overall well-being. Yet amidst these challenges, we also witness the resilience of our community."

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