Channeling Dorothea Lange

BY JULIE DELCOUR Associate Editor
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Accompanying this column about Oklahoma's long-running battle to improve child well-being is an unflinching portrait taken 76 years ago, during the depths of the Great Depression, by famed Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange.

It is the lesser known of two black-and-white photos Lange printed from her encounter on a scorching August day in 1936 with an unidentified mother and her two children - a family struggling to survive in the Elm Grove transient camp on the outskirts of Oklahoma City in the Canadian River bottom.

The other photograph, not shown, is entitled "Damaged Child, Shacktown," and features only the small girl, who stares defiantly into Lange's camera lens, her face darkened with grime.

Thirty years after she captured the images, Lange reportedly broke down during an interview, recalling the deprivation and isolation of the girl, whose powerful image is but one of many Lange captured in the '30s that she hoped would open eyes and minds to the human condition during the Dust Bowl era.

"The camera is an instrument," Lange explained, "that teaches people how to see without a camera."

Oklahoma could use a Dorothea Lange these days to adequately convey the extent of child poverty.

While I offer no picture illustrating conditions in 2012, there are the proverbial thousand words - information gleaned from the Kids Count report that tells the story of why one in four Oklahoma children lives in poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation assembles the data each year to educate and enlighten the public about the state of child well-being nationally and in each state - to make us see, without benefit of a camera - the status of America's children.

In Oklahoma, nearly a quarter of its children live in poverty, placing it, yet again, in the bottom 10 states - this year No. 40, up from 43 in 2011 and 44 the year before.

Heavy foot

The factors that jeopardize the well-being of Oklahoma children in 2012 bear some striking similarities to those in 1936 - economic insecurity, displacement, hunger, neglect, lack of opportunity. No matter the era, poverty remains the heavy foot on the throat of too many kids.

The number of children living in poverty here rose 9 percent from 2005 to 2010. More alarming was a 100 percent increase in the percentage of children - 11 percent - living in high-poverty areas.

Oklahoma ranks 29th in economic well-being; 39th in education, 40th in family and community and 44th in health. Out of 16 indexes, Oklahoma saw improvement in a few categories: a 7 percent decrease in child and teen deaths, a 6 percent decrease in children not attending preschool, a 3 percent drop in fourth-graders not proficient in reading, an 8 percent decline in eighth-graders not proficient in math. Yet, despite years-long efforts by many dedicated child advocates to create and sustain assistance programs, the picture remains bleak for too many of this state's children.

One gain is a 23 percent decrease in children without health insurance. In 2010, 10 percent of children were uninsured compared to 13 percent two years before.
Ten percent of children live in a household in which no adult works. No matter the reason for unemployment - a bad economy, refusal or inability of parents to find work, lack of opportunities or education - joblessness affects kids. Public assistance is not nearly as lucrative as many believe. Kids grow up and often repeat the patterns that disconnect many parents from the work force: domestic violence, depression, substance abuse and histories of incarceration.

Oklahoma has notoriously high incarceration rates, especially among women. Thousands of children here have one and often both parents behind bars. Oklahoma also has high rates of substance abuse and mental illness and a high incidence of child abuse and neglect despite concerted efforts to protect kids.

Oklahoma's children have other obstacles confronting them - 61 percent of children in poor families live with a single parent, 15 percent live in homes in which the head of the household did not finish high school; 5 percent live with parents who speak limited English.

National Center for Children in Poverty figures show that life is far harder for minority children - 42 percent of African-American children live in poor families, 36 percent of Hispanic children and 27 percent of Indian children. That compares with 16 percent of white children.

The good souls, agencies and foundations whose mission it is to improve the well-being of children struggle continually to keep the safety net from further unraveling, to open eyes to the great needs of impoverished children. They will continue to channel Dorothea Lange. But the odds are long that the cycle, mostly ongoing for at least 75 years, will ever end.

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Associated Images:
An unflinching portrait by famed Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange of a family in an Oklahoma transient camp during the Dust Bowl. Library of Congress/Courtesy

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