

March 21, 2005

153

Poverty in Idaho

As a young adult, the transition into living on my own grows closer every day. Although I am 18, I still live at home. However, I have been working since I was sixteen, and I already support myself in many ways. I have reached the age where I am witnessing first hand my peers striking out on their own, and I can see exactly what struggles it entails. It is easy for me to believe and identify the possible reasons why Idaho has the highest poverty rate in the nation for 18-24 year olds. I think that Idaho's low minimum wage, our high drop out rate, and the growing number of young adults living on their own all largely contribute to the amount of people currently living in poverty.

Day after day, I hear my friends complain about not having enough money, yet they constantly talk about moving out on their own and taking the huge leap into independence. I often wonder if they stop to consider the numerous financial obligations they will be faced with. Many teens would probably agree that minimum wage doesn't go very far when trying to pay for a cell phone or a car. When expenses such as rent, insurance, gasoline or a power bill are added on top of the many teenage "necessities" that seem impossible to live without, living on your own becomes more difficult than it sounds. Although Idaho may have a lower cost of living, it is nearly impossible to support anyone other than yourself earning such a low income. If funding an education is considered, it becomes even more difficult. Furthermore, if attending school, working full time in order to receive a reasonable amount of money is not easy. One person living on

their own is considered to be living in poverty if their annual income is \$9,310 or less. Suppose a college student worked 40 hours a week making minimum wage, which is \$5.15 in Idaho. Their annual income would be \$9,888 before taxes were taken out. Looking at these figures, I believe it is fair to say that the minimum wage is directly related to the high poverty rate. If Idaho can not attract higher paying jobs, raising the minimum wage would make a huge impact.

For many, the minimum wage is not an issue. Individuals with higher education may find that better paying jobs are more easily attainable. Unfortunately, Idaho also has a relatively high drop out rate. On average, 11% of 16-19 year olds living in Idaho are high school dropouts compared with the national rate of 9%. This lack of education makes higher paying jobs much harder to come by. There are many possible explanations for the high drop out rate, but one thing is certain: a good education is much more likely to bring a good paying job.

As a senior in high school, it is scary to know that I will soon move out and be faced with great responsibility. It is comforting to know that I am not alone. It is safe to say that most people do move out between the ages of 18 and 24 which would explain the higher poverty rate for this age group. Most of them are college students, living on fast food and working part time to get by. Living on your own can be expensive. The cost of moving out and possibly paying for an education, is more than many young adults are prepared to handle.

As I come face to face with these issues, I begin to realize that I have a lot of planning to do. I intend to wait for a considerable period of time before moving out on my own. It is clear to see that if I intend to live free of poverty, an education is a must. As a whole, I think that poverty could be reduced if our minimum wage was raised. I also feel that if others had the funding they needed for college; it would help in the long run. Community programs that informed young adults of FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and offered one-on-one counseling would be a tremendous help in taking some of the load off paying for a college education.

I have witnessed first hand friends and peers who are living on their own, and I know that it is not easy. Poverty-like conditions are not uncommon, such as an empty fridge or gas tank. However, as the reasons for this growing poverty rate begin to unfold, so do the steps that can be taken to stay out of poverty. It is clear that one can not live on minimum wage. In effect, a good paying job will come from a good education, and this is necessary for young adults who intend to make it on their own.