



**CHILDREN OF HARD TIMES**

## The Lynch Family



The latest edition of UNICEF's report on child poverty showed the United States ranks second out of 35 developed countries on the scale of what economists call "relative child poverty" with 23.1 percent of its children living in poverty. Only Romania ranked higher. It was another shameful reminder that, as economist Sheldon Danziger put it, "Among rich countries, the U.S. is exceptional. We are exceptional in our tolerance of poverty."

For the Lynch family in Columbus, Ohio, headlines like this aren't news. Lucille Lynch and her children Sarafina, 17, Timeeka, 14, Daisha, 11, and Elijah, 10, live on just slightly over half of the federal poverty level. The family's only cash income is the combined \$1,200 per month Social Security disability checks for Elijah, who has autism, and for Lucille, who suffers from a lung condition, along with occasional and minimal child support.

Their family is a portrait of deep poverty in

America. In 2010 20.5 million Americans were living on less than half of the federal poverty level.

The Lynches live in isolation in a dark house in a dangerous neighborhood between several main roads. A church that helps the family built a chain link fence around the house so Elijah can't run out into the street. A block and a half away is a group home for sex offenders. Lucille gets advisory flyers in the mail with photographs of the men and their offenses—rape and gross sexual imposition were listed on two of the flyers on the living room table the day Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Julia Cass met the family while on assignment for the Children's Defense Fund. "It's scary to know that," Daisha said. "You don't want to go out in the street because of them."

Lucille, 47, considers herself lucky she has the house which she inherited from her parents. She left high school in the 11th grade—"It was horrible and I couldn't learn. There was too much violence." Later she took classes and became certified as a nursing aide and for seven years she worked in nursing homes bathing, dressing, and diapering patients. But in 2006 she began feeling ill and by the next year, "I couldn't breathe. I couldn't lift them anymore at all." She was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, which causes inflammation of the lungs, and had to stop working. She's done occasional babysitting since then.

One of the many sad consequences of deep poverty is that autism often goes undiagnosed longer, which is critical because many therapies for autism are most effective when they begin before age three. Elijah was diagnosed at five. Lucille said she knew something was wrong because “he wasn’t speaking. He wasn’t looking at people.” But pediatricians told her to wait and see if he improved and he wasn’t tested until he reached kindergarten age.

When Elijah was eight he began having problems in his special education classroom. Lucille eventually found out a child sitting behind him on the school bus was hitting him and another in his classroom was choking him. She said that school had one teacher and one aide trying to handle two classrooms full of children with different special needs. Lucille took him out of school and enrolled him in Buckeye Online – a statewide private charter school that gives online instruction and receives money from the public education system.

The three girls experienced school violence too, and now Sarafina and Daisha also stay at home and study with Buckeye Online, which provided two computers for the family to use. Sarafina was just starting middle school when she had a gun pulled on her. Daisha left school three years ago. “I didn’t really talk to other kids because they were so mean to me,” she said. “I got into a fight once but I didn’t want to fight but I had to because they kept hitting me. Nobody stopped them.” Online schooling means the children are isolated at home. Church is their major outside activity.

The family of five receives \$583 a month in food stamps. They go to food pantries and raise tomatoes in pots but they often are down to peanut butter sandwiches at the end of the month and regularly eat filling, starchy foods like rice, pasta, and potatoes.

Lucille is hoping her children will “do better” than she did. She has the idea that art might help them get ahead because they all have the family talent for it. “There’s a lady who volunteers at the church, an artist,” Lucille said. “She’s going to help them make portfolios. Sarafina wants to present hers to the Columbus College of Art and Design.” Lucille is still holding onto the American Dream for her children—but for now, the Lynches are living a much sadder American reality.

## The Hanebuth Family



The January jobs report from the U.S. Department of Labor was good news for the 243,000 people who found jobs. And good news for the American economy as the unemployment rate fell to 8.3 percent, the lowest level in nearly three years. This is the 16th straight month of jobs growth, but the recovery can't come soon enough for the millions of long-term unemployed like Tiffany Hanebuth from Middletown, Ohio. She says, "I just want a job, any kind of job."

As with other families barely afloat on minimum wage jobs, the Hanebuths never had steady smooth sailing, but they were self-supporting until two years ago when Tiffany was laid off as a carhop at a Sonic drive-in and could not find another job. "I remember before, you could just go anywhere and get an application and get hired that day. It's not like that now," she said.

Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Julia Cass recently met Tiffany Hanebuth on assignment for the Children's Defense Fund, and Cass says by anybody's definition Tiffany is a survivor and a worker. Tiffany was raised by her father who she said was a biker and bar owner. "He started bringing friends home and it was too much for me," Tiffany said. By the time she was 12 she left home to stay with friends and eventually found a job, got her own apartment, and finished high school. Tiffany didn't meet her mother until she was 17. "My father told me she didn't want to take care of me because she was a drug addict," Tiffany said. "I wanted to find her and I did. She was a drug addict."

Despite the fact that her own childhood was so chaotic and cut short, Tiffany wants to provide a better life for her own children, Aaron, 10, Ayden, 7, Daniel, 6, and Serenity, 5. Aaron said he wants to go to college, get a job at NASA, live with his mom, and pay the bills for her. Tiffany has always been the breadwinner for her children although their father, who doesn't live with them, helps out with child care and other occasional needs. She's worked at gas stations, fast food restaurants, grocery stores, a Bob Evans restaurant, and various factories through temporary agencies before she lost her job two years ago.

Tiffany managed on unemployment for almost a year but fell behind on her rent and the family was evicted. She lost \$150 when a landlord kept her deposit and didn't give her the apartment. "He said, 'Take me to court if you want to.' I think he knew I couldn't afford to do that." That's when the family lived for a while in a motel and a homeless shelter. The shelter staff helped her get public housing at a sprawling complex named Freedom Court where Tiffany pays \$180 a

month rent. She also signed up for food stamps and in June 2010, for cash assistance from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Anyone who thinks welfare recipients do nothing but sit around and cash their checks isn't familiar with the schedules of Tiffany and many others like her. The welfare reform of the late 1990s put the emphasis on moving recipients from welfare to work and set a lifetime limit on federally-assisted cash payments for many families. Initially recipients are required to go to a job readiness site for a month to get training in resume writing and interview skills and use the computers and fax machines to apply for jobs. The big problem is that when there aren't many jobs, the system doesn't work as designed. So Tiffany was assigned to community service in exchange for receiving cash assistance (about \$650 a month for her and the children). Her assignment was at the local Salvation Army where she put donated clothing on racks and did whatever else she was asked to do. After several months, she was hired there and went off cash assistance. "But I only worked there a month and a half before they had to let the new people go," she said.

When she reapplied for cash assistance she was told she would be sanctioned for not reporting to community service and could not receive assistance for three months because she was on record as not having signed in at the Salvation Army. But Tiffany said she didn't sign in for community service because she had started to work there instead. She said she took her pay stubs to the welfare office but the sanction was not withdrawn. "The guy was actually rude. He said if I wanted to keep complaining, he'd take my food stamps and Medicaid too." By that point Tiffany had sold her car and television and gotten behind on bills. She's still in a hole.

Tiffany got back on cash assistance after the three months passed. She now does 86 hours a month of community service at the food pantry of Family Services of Middletown and likes it there. The people are nice and she can sometimes take home extra produce. She usually takes the bus but at the end of the month she sometimes walks—a two-hour trip. The director gave her a bicycle, but it was stolen at the housing project. Recently she missed a day when Ayden was sick. "I'm a stress ball that I won't be able to make up the hours and be sanctioned again," she said.

Tiffany's children sometimes get backpacks of food at school on Fridays to take home for the weekend. Tina Osso, Executive Director of the area's Shared Harvest Foodbank, said that 300 children in Middletown schools received the backpacks last school year. "They don't go to all the children who receive free breakfasts and lunches, just to those identified as showing physical, behavioral, or academic problems associated with chronic hunger," she said. But cuts in federal and school district funding have put this school year's backpack program in jeopardy. Tiffany, who's never been afraid of hard work, doesn't want to have to rely on assistance and donated food forever. For now, the safety net is doing exactly what it is designed to do: programs with proven track records are keeping Tiffany and her family above water while she continues searching for a job. Proposals to dismantle many of these proven programs wouldn't make unemployed parents' job hunts any easier—but they would leave millions of poor children with less help and less hope. They need jobs!

