

Community Support for Low-Income Elementary School Students with a Winter Gear Drive under COVID-19 Constraints

by Paige Wentworth and Lois-Ann Kuntz

Abstract

Washington County has one of Maine's highest rates of child poverty. Winter is especially difficult with below-freezing temperatures, higher fuel costs, and many seasonal tourism-related businesses closed. Typically local schools have collections of hats and gloves that children can share. With the 2020-2021 COVID-19 restrictions, children could not reuse winter gear from a shared box and, if they did not have their own winter gear, they were unable to participate in outside activities. Additionally, because of spacing constraints, schools were using gyms for classrooms not for physical activities, which doubly disadvantaged students without winter gear. This paper describes a university student winter gear project and underscores the need for policies supporting children in poverty.

annual unemployment rate of 4.6 percent.¹

A report by the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center (Acheson [2011](#)) indicated that, at that time, Washington County had the highest rate of child poverty in the state as well.

Compared to their peers in higher-income brackets, children from poor families have both poorer physical health and less education, which contribute to a lifetime of working and earning less (Duncan et al. [2013](#)). Contributing to these long-term outcomes, children in low-income families may also experience poor nutrition

and health care, family mobility, and toxic stress (Gibson and Barr [2017](#)). Further, the intersections of race and poverty in Washington County means that these rates are even worse for low-income children who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. A press release from the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP [2014](#)) reports that half of Black Mainers and one-third of Maine's Native Americans live in poverty. According to the 2016 Census data, Washington County also had the highest percentage of minority population. This county includes two Passamaquoddy reservations and the town of Milbridge, where 6 percent of the population and 24 percent of the elementary school students are Hispanic or Latino (Atkinson [2015](#)).

According to James Garbarino, childhood poverty produces "stress that results from growing up in the context of not meeting culturally and socially defined basic needs. Poverty is an assessment of one's position in the social order...and is related to issues of self-esteem and shame" ([1998](#): 112). Brené Brown, best known for her research on shame and vulnerability and how this affects our relationships, defines shame as an "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and

BACKGROUND

In the fall of 2020, the University of Maine at Machias offered a class entitled, "The Psychology of Prejudice," in which students were asked, "What is prejudice?" Throughout the semester, students learned about prejudice and discriminatory actions facing many marginalized people. The class's final project was to plan or implement a project meant to reduce effects of marginalization in local communities. This report documents one of these projects intended to support low-income elementary students in the eastern section of Washington County.

The statistics around poverty in Washington County reported by the Center for Workforce Research and Information are stark. Washington County is Maine's poorest county with a median household income of \$41,347, compared to Maine's median income of \$57,918 and the US median of \$62,843. While Aroostook and Piscataquis Counties have slightly lower median incomes, the poverty rate for Washington County is the highest at 18.9 percent, compared to Maine's already high poverty rate of 11.8 percent. Maine's annual unemployment rate in 2019 was 3 percent compared to Washington County's

therefore unworthy of love and belonging” (2015: 69). This sense of shame may help explain why children don’t want to ask for help in front of their peers.

Project Choice

Most schools in Washington County have a collection of hats and gloves that children share when they go outside. Many of these schools, however, cannot afford to purchase each student a new winter gear every year, so instead, they share these items in a school-wide bin. Because of COVID-19, however, children could not reuse hats and gloves other children had used. This inability to share clothing not only kept students from playing outside, it also prevented them from getting ample exercise. Complicating this situation further, school gymnasiums which in the past were used for recess on cold days, were being used as classroom space because of COVID-19 spacing protocol. Additionally, as part of social-distancing efforts students were not allowed to have recess in the 2020–2021 school year. So with no recess breaks allowing students to play freely outside, students’ only time outside was during regularly scheduled physical education classes.

Students without adequate winter gear, however, would be unable to participate in outdoor PE classes. The loss of this benefit by children without winter gear weighed heavily.

Additionally, many parents in Washington County are unable to purchase warm winter gear for their children. The goal of this project was to ensure sure that as many students as possible had warm gear for the frigid winter months. With everything that the COVID-19 pandemic had taken from individuals in 2020, we felt that this project was a perfect opportunity to give back.

CONDUCTING THE WINTER GEAR DRIVE AND DISTRIBUTION

Initially there were concerns about how this project would be received in the community related to COVID-19 anxiety, but persistence paid off. The locations and schools for this winter clothing gear for elementary school children were selected out of convenience for the primary author who resides in the eastern area of Washington County and was substitute teaching in the schools where distributions were made. These schools were operating in person, but with the COVID-19 restrictions of masks and social distancing. We set up seven donation boxes within a 20-miles radius in the eastern part of Washington County. Additionally, personal Facebook page posts announcing and recruiting donations were made and shared. Figure 1 is the flyer used on the donation boxes and in Facebook posts encouraging donations. Table 1 lists the locations of the seven donation boxes. We also left a trifold pamphlet with information about poverty in Maine along with some resources for low-income individuals near the donation boxes, a copy is available in the online Appendix (<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol30/iss2>).

PROJECT RESULTS

When the three weeks allotted for the drive had passed, the donation boxes were overflowing, which was more support from the community than we had imagined. We received a total of 417 items. As this was advertised as a hat and mitten drive, the most commonly donated items were these two items, but we also received other cold-weather items for a total of 188 hats, 145 sets of mittens or gloves, 30 pairs of socks, 25 scarves, 11 jackets, 7 pairs of snow pants, and 11 pairs of boots. In addition, a donation of \$70 in cash allowed the primary

FIGURE 1: Donation Flyer



TABLE 1: Winter Gear Donation Box Placement and the Corresponding Town

Donation box location	Town
WaCo Diner	Eastport
Heather's Nail Salon	Eastport
New Friendly Restaurant	Perry
Perry Farmers' Union General Store	Perry
Morgan's Irving & Convenience Store	Pembroke
Johnson's Mobile Mart Gas Station	Pembroke
Snowmobile & ATV Club	Dennysville

TABLE 2: Distribution of Winter Gear Donations

Number items donated	School
100	Edmunds Consolidated School
117	Pembroke Elementary School
200	Woodland Elementary School

author to purchase 14 pairs of gloves in sizes that were not widely available, which brought the donation total to 417 winter gear items.

In addition to the donations, people provided support by sharing the information on Facebook. With a total of 53 Facebook shares, the flyer quickly got positive attention. Additionally, some community members reached out to ask about how they can help others in need when drives like this are not taking place. They were told about the Wings program in Washington County, which helps families in need and also accepts donations.²

Once the donations were collected, they were distributed to several elementary schools in the eastern area of the county (Table 2). Schools with larger populations received more items. This project required an investment of approximately 16 hours. It took approximately three hours to distribute the boxes at the beginning of the drive and an additional three hours to collect the full boxes. It took about four hours to sort items and deliver them to various schools. There was additional time to prepare flyers and pamphlets and coordinate with donation sites and schools.

The donated items were kept in the schools' front offices to ensure that students who needed the items received them discreetly. Teachers directed students toward

the office to obtain winter gear, so they could join their classmates in outdoor activities at school as well as having clothing needed to be prepared for the outdoor months. Many teachers, staff, and administrators throughout the three schools were openly grateful for the donations. Through substitute teaching, the primary author felt that student morale was up in the schools and children's attitudes were increasingly more positive. She perceived that students enjoyed being able to go outside and play.

DISCUSSION

With virulent variants of the COVID-19 virus, it is likely that there will continue to be constraints around sharing winter gear in the future. It is hoped that schools and parent-teacher associations are attentive to the need for winter outerwear for children and youth. While we recognize that winter gear drives do not solve the serious issue of childhood poverty. Our drive had overwhelming community support, and perhaps worked to increase awareness of childhood poverty in Washington County.

The past year and a half has been difficult. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown wrenches in a lot of plans. The primary author, however, appreciated the opportunity to do this work in the class and was thankful for the community that made a success. Giving back to the community with this hat and mitten drive was one of the highlights of 2020. Through a pandemic, over 400 pieces of winter gear were distributed to children going without. It is also hoped that the project raised awareness of the issue of people in the need of support and kindness.

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NOTES

- 1 Data are from the Maine Department of Labor, Center for Workforce Research and Information's website: <https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/county-economic-profiles/countyProfiles.html>
- 2 More information is available on the program's website: <https://www.wingsinc.org/locations/machias-maine/>.

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