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GUEST COLUMN: Local poverty a growing issue that needs to be addressed

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Upon my reading the headline of the Wednesday January 16, 2013 edition of the Journal Gazette-Times Courier, "Report: 1 in 3 Illinoisans are Poor," I was not at all surprised to learn that 1 in 3 residents of Illinois are poor or low-income, nor was I shocked to see that there is a rise in food stamp usage around the state.

I was, however, appalled at the lack of local coverage on the condition in Coles County.

According to the report referenced in the lead article, the poverty population in Coles County increased 16.8% between 2010 and 2011, resulting in a 3.1% increase in the percent of the population officially classified as poor.

Nearly 1 in 4 persons in Coles County is poor—not near poor or at-risk—but officially living below the poverty line. These statistics should cause us to pause and consider the social, economic, and political conditions of our community.

After relocating to Coles County two and a-half years ago, and as a scholar of poverty, inequality and food insecurity, I refocused my research on localized poverty and hunger in Coles County and surrounding communities.

For nearly two years I have been collecting and analyzing data, and giving presentations to raise the awareness of prominent community groups such as the Lumpkin Foundation, Sarah Bush Lincoln Health System, the Mattoon and Charleston Exchange Clubs, several groups of faculty, staff and students at Eastern Illinois University, and faith-based groups such as Wesley United Methodist Church.

The full Heartland Alliance Report which in-part informs this important article, but is missing from the Associated Press syndicated write-up, indicates that Coles County is on a county well-being watch list because of this heightened concern with our poverty population.

This risk is due to the high percent of children in poverty (21.4%), a high percent of unemployed persons (8.7%), and a decreasing percentage of high school graduates (85%) for all students, but more severe for low-income students (76.5%).

Based on my own research, nearly 45% of individuals are low-income and at-risk of falling into poverty, and approximately 40% of individuals are food insecure, meaning that they are at-risk of missing one or more meals per day, or if able to eat, that the meal is nutritionally inadequate.

My research differs from the Heartland Alliance Social Impact Research Center report because I look at poverty within different geographic areas of the county.

While there are definite pockets of poverty and affluence in both Charleston and Mattoon, a comment I often hear while presenting my work around the county is that the student population at Eastern Illinois University must skew the data. Both the Heartland Alliance report and my own research – when excluding data representing student populations in cities home to our state universities – show only nominal, non-significant differences in county well-being.

With this lens, the depth and breadth of concern over our neighbors, family members, and friends is ever-more stark. The poverty experienced within our community does not discriminate based on age, gender, race, or even family structure.

The only discrimination is the poverty of recollection and imagination to acknowledge that so many of our community members struggle every day to make ends meet.

With Coles County now in the top-ten poorest counties in the state, as indicated by this report, I hope we can now recognize that poverty is not an individual problem, the result of personal immorality or deficiency; with nearly one in four people officially poor, this is a community and social issue that needs our direct attention now.

Michael Gillespie lives in Charleston
