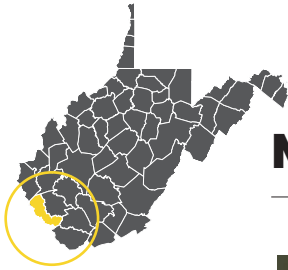


A POOR PEOPLE'S PANDEMIC REPORT:

MAPPING THE INTERSECTIONS OF POVERTY, RACE AND COVID-19

County Snapshot



Mingo County, West Virginia



Kris Olsen and her son
PHOTO: STEPHEN PAVEY

Before the pandemic, there were approximately [710,000](#) people who were poor or low-income in West Virginia, accounting for over 40% of the population (SPM). The state minimum wage is \$8.75. During the pandemic, Sen. Manchin, former governor of West Virginia and senator since 2010, has [pushed back](#) on raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 and expanding the Child

Tax Credit (CTC), going against low-wage constituents and voters in the state.

Kris Olsen is a single mom from Charleston, Kanawha County, West Virginia. Kanawha County is in the 9th poorest decile of counties in the country, with a COVID-19 death rate higher than more than half of U.S. counties. When her CTC payments ended in December 2021, she said, "The tax credit was a lifeline. It's not just that it helped make ends meet, it's that it gave me peace of mind that my ends were going to be met. And then to yank it away? It's just cruel."

West Virginia is emblematic of the larger Appalachian region, in terms of its abundant natural resources, mining and rural poverty. An hour and half from Kanawha County, Mingo County is home to the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest labor uprising in U.S. history. Over 3000 Mingo County miners joined the United Mine Workers and were all swiftly fired. After several weeks, the miners, many of whom were deeply poor and had been evicted with their families, faced down against private security forces and bombardiers, the West Virginia National Guard and federal troops. Although the battle was a victory for the mine owners,

Blessing Box in
Kermit, WV
PHOTO: FATHER LARK
MUNCY



it also galvanized a broader and stronger labor movement that went on to achieve significant gains in the years that followed.

With the demise of the coal industry in the 20th century, Mingo County has faced widespread poverty and hardship. In the early 2000s, it also became one of the most impacted counties during the national opioid epidemic. From 2006-2012, Williamson, which is the county seat and has a population of only 3000 people, received more than [30 million](#) opioid pills. The county as a whole received more narcotic pain pills per capita than any other place in the country. As Father Lark Munch, who runs the Holy Trinity Church in Kermit, Mingo County, commented, "there is lots of pain in this area. It was the physical work [in the mines] that broke the bodies. People will take anything they can get to take away the pain, but it doesn't go away."

Today, Mingo County is one of the lowest income counties in the U.S., with over half (52%) of residents living under 200% of the poverty line (OPM). It is 95% white and its COVID-19 death rate is 470 per 100,000, ranking it in the highest 25% of counties by death rate.

During the pandemic, Father Lark's church began scaling up their community-based projects of survival. Food distribution increased dramatically, including through blessing boxes where community members could directly leave and receive non-perishable goods. As he noted, "The blessing boxes got around all the stigma of the food pantries. We need more of them. People are hungry and facing really hard times. I've never seen it this bad before."