

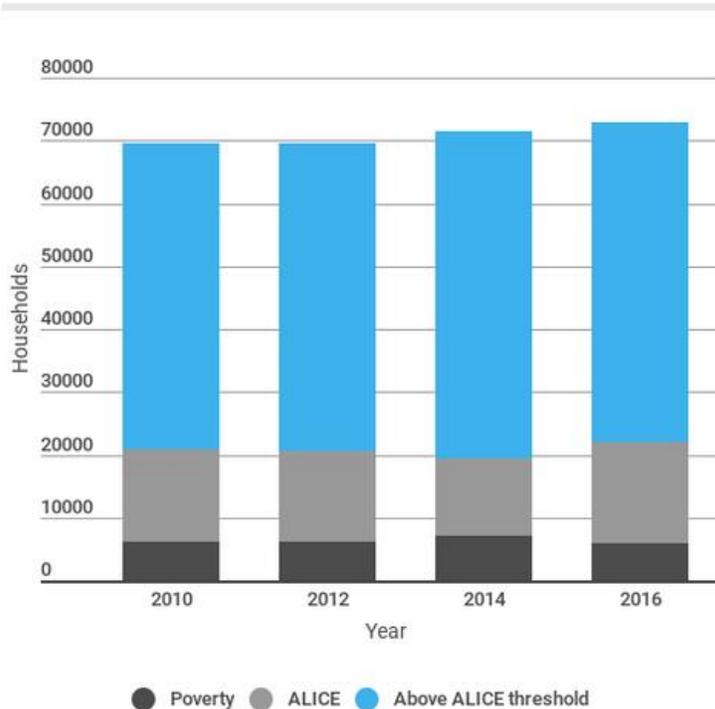
## 'The people that we know and love.' One-third of Wisconsinites can barely make ends meet

[Devi Shastri](#), Appleton Post-Crescent

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(Photo: Devi Shastri/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

### Households by income, Outagamie County



Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report



LaWanda McCullough was a "success story" in the Wisconsin Works (W-2) job training program — that is, until she got sick.

Things were going well. Two years ago, the 36-year-old mother of five moved to Oshkosh from Chicago to escape her boyfriend, who she said was trying to kill her. She was working, her children thriving in school.

Seven months ago, she came home from work and blacked out. The doctors ran her through a battery of tests and came back with several issues including diabetes and sarcoidosis. She began to wear a heart rate monitor. At her doctor's recommendation, she went down to working part time. She was denied disability assistance.

"It's better here. It's more safer," McCullough said. "But no matter what I do, I can't get ahead."

She's not alone. The 2018 Wisconsin ALICE report, released Tuesday, looks at household need beyond the federal poverty level to better understand where people who are living paycheck-to-

paycheck struggle most. ALICE is an acronym for the criteria that bring this group of Americans together — Asset limited. Income constrained. Employed.

More than 37.5 percent of Wisconsinites had income levels that do not meet the true cost of living, a new study by United Way found. Between 2010 and 2016, the number increased five percent, compared to the total increase in the state's number of households (two percent).

On average, Fox Valley counties hovered around 30 percent. Winnebago County saw a slight dip, Outagamie and Calumet counties a slight increase in the number of ALICE households.

People who fall under the ALICE threshold struggle to make ends meet, often despite working more than one job, said Nanci Micke, vice president of marketing and communications for United Way Fox Cities.

And with almost 1 in 3 people in the state making less than what United Way researchers determined as Wisconsin's "Household Survival Budget" (\$19,848 for a single adult and \$61,620 for a family of four), it's unlikely that ALICE has an unfamiliar face.

"It's the people that we know and love," Micke said. "It could be our parents. It could be our children. It could be our grandparents as they get older. It could be families with children who have special needs. It could be us.

"ALICE is all around us."

McCullough worked over 50 hours a week to support her children, enrolling in classes to get her certified nursing assistant certification in Wisconsin. But when she got sick, her doctors advised her to take it easy. She now works about 17 hours a week as a nursing assistant for an in-home care service. She still wants to get further education, to be a nurse herself.

But the setbacks keep piling up, she said. The decisions she needs to make get harder.

"I had to decide to pay my rent or pay my light bill or get school clothes," she said. "So, I can't get school clothes, but I've got a roof over our heads."

The United Way's household survival budget only includes essentials: housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, technology (recently added to reflect the cost of a smartphone), taxes and miscellaneous costs.

"That household budget has no extras in it," Micke said. "They're not talking about movies. There's no vacation. There's no cable television. The things that many of us might take for granted as the things we enjoy — it's not included in that basic survival budget."

The survival budget has increased two to three times faster than inflation between 2010 and 2016 and lands thousands of dollars above the federal poverty line, which is \$11,880 a year for a single adult and \$24,300 for a family. Wisconsin's minimum wage (\$7.25/hour), earns employees \$14,500 per year.

Locally, Calumet, Winnebago and Outagamie counties are doing better than the rest of the state. Micke said the progress could be linked to the high number of support resources offered across the Fox Valley.

But there's plenty of need left, Micke said — with about 30 percent of people wrestling [tough choices](#) everyday. They're choosing between making rent or taking a sick child to the doctor; getting the car they rely on to get to work each day fixed or paying off some debt.

"When you think about what the statistics are, and that it's one-third of our population, it makes it important," Micke said. "It makes it something that we need to be working on. ... That's still too many people who are struggling."

## **Across generations: Millennials and baby boomers face challenges**

Statewide demographic trends bode warnings for local efforts, Micke said, particularly when it comes to the two opposite ends of the age spectrum.

Young people and retirees make up the state's highest percentage of households under the ALICE threshold statewide: 72 percent of households run by someone under 25 and 42 percent of households run by someone over 62 did not make enough money. Age data was not broken down on the county level.

But Susan Panek, president of the Oshkosh Area United Way, said the two trends are not a major surprise in Oshkosh. Almost half of the city of Oshkosh (46 percent) lives under the ALICE threshold.

"Our Oshkosh Area Community Pantry gives out over a million pounds of food annually, and that's just that one pantry," Panek said. "If we combined others it would be a lot more. And while we're seeing some of the numbers at the pants level off or even (decrease), we're seeing more people who are single or seniors using the pantries."

A major struggle for millennials could be student debt as an added expense, Panek noted. The statewide ALICE report notes millennials are more likely than previous generations to live with their parents or roommates, while they are less likely to be living with a romantic partner.

The effect of Wisconsin's aging population can also be seen in the Fox Valley, Panek said, and efforts to support older populations through housing support and more are a main focus.

"If (seniors) are on fixed incomes, on social security, their benefits aren't increasing at the same rate (as inflation)," Panek said.

Seniors are also working longer and are growing old without retirement savings, Micke added, and there is a shortage of workers in senior care. From 2010 to 2016, the number of seniors in Wisconsin living under the ALICE threshold grew 23 percent.

These trends are also no surprise to Paul Van Auken, chair of the sociology department at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Van Auken specializes in part in community sociology: what makes up a community, how it changes and its demographics.

He said the social supports of the past have decreased over the years, impacting people across generations. Programs that focus on better quality of life could be one way to attract people to the region for higher wages and a good place to settle. Some of those issues, like millennial home ownership may already be improving, Van Auken suggested.

But the challenges are less obvious in the Fox Valley, Van Auken said, compared to places like Milwaukee, where segregation and inequality are more stark.

"Part of the issue in the Fox Valley is this more kind of subtle segregation that we have," he said. "It just exacerbates this reality of continuing to exist below the surface."

## **No easy answer**

Experts and advocates agree that there is no simple solution to get families above the ALICE threshold in the Fox Valley and beyond, but note increased awareness is half the battle.

Data from the 2018 ALICE report reveal big picture trends and localized areas of improvement.

Programs continue to focus on empowering people who are struggling, to give people the tools to combat the cycle of poverty locally. In Oshkosh, the [EMPOWER program](#) works with single moms, pairing them with program coaches from throughout the community who connect them with parenting resources and job training with the goal to secure jobs that pay over \$15 per hour.

In each community, people can call 2-11 to get connected to resources.

Beyond local resources, experts said it's important to help people see those living below the ALICE threshold with empathy and understanding.

Having more people living above the ALICE threshold is not only about supporting struggling households, Van Auken said, it's also about supporting the community. When people are spending less time navigating public transit or driving to multiple jobs, they have more time to be active citizens, to come to meetings and events and have their voices heard.

Changes will need to come from all levels — including state and local investments, Panek said. And everyone needs to be involved to prepare locals to get high wage jobs. The jobs are here, Panek said, but Wisconsin lacks the qualified workers to benefit from them.

"We need to involve a lot of people. The corporations, the faith communities, the government, everybody, in this conversation to say, 'OK, how do we improve?'"

It's depressing, McCullough said, to not be able to work and to have to tell her children they can't have things. But her kids are what keep her going, she said, and she's holding out hope that her health will improve and she'll be able to go back to work soon.

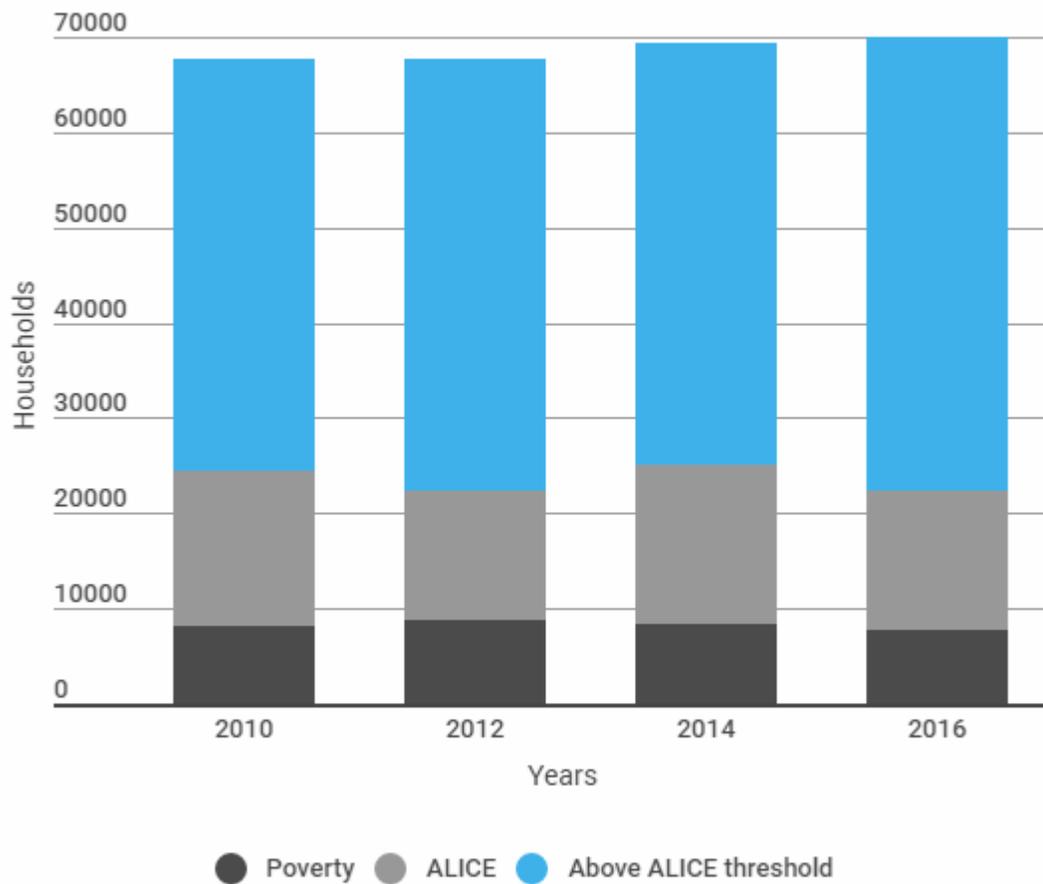
She struggles to think any more concretely about the future though. She needs more resources, she said. Things are always changing on her. For her, the ALICE data is not a surprise.

It's her life.

"It's depressing and I feel sad," she said. "I feel like I failed and I did this and I did that. And it's like when I try, it seems like something always knocks me back down."

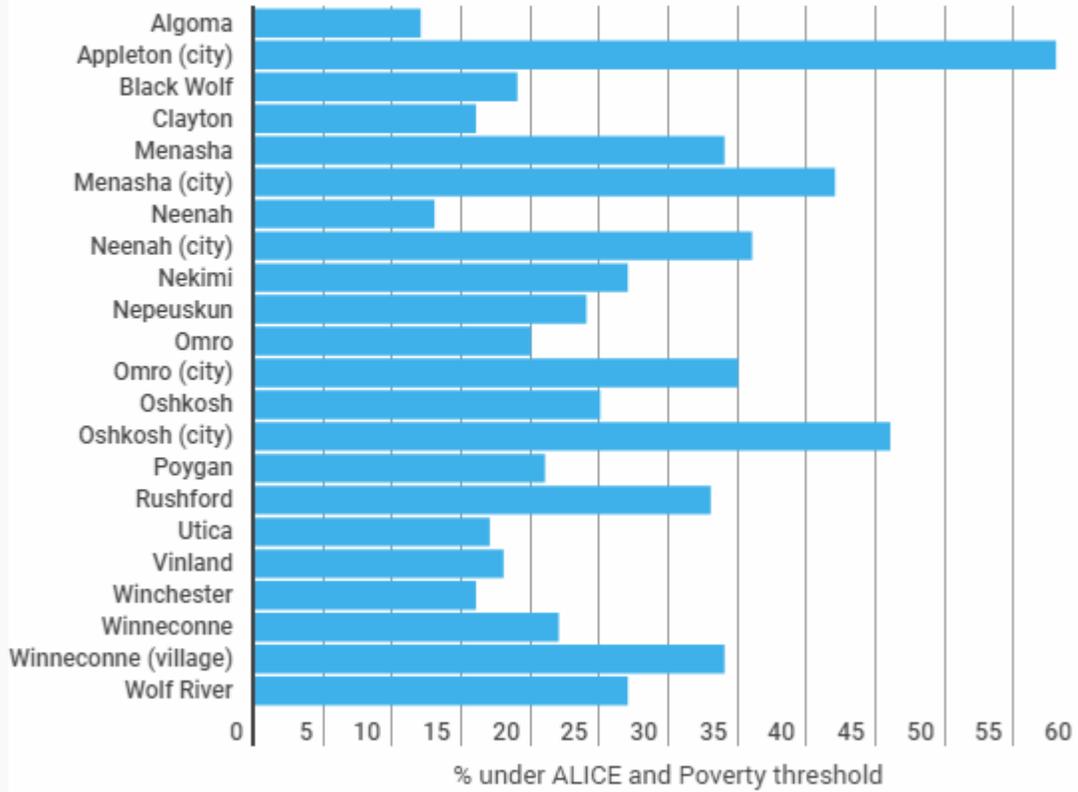
## **Check out local ALICE numbers:**

## Households by income, Winnebago County



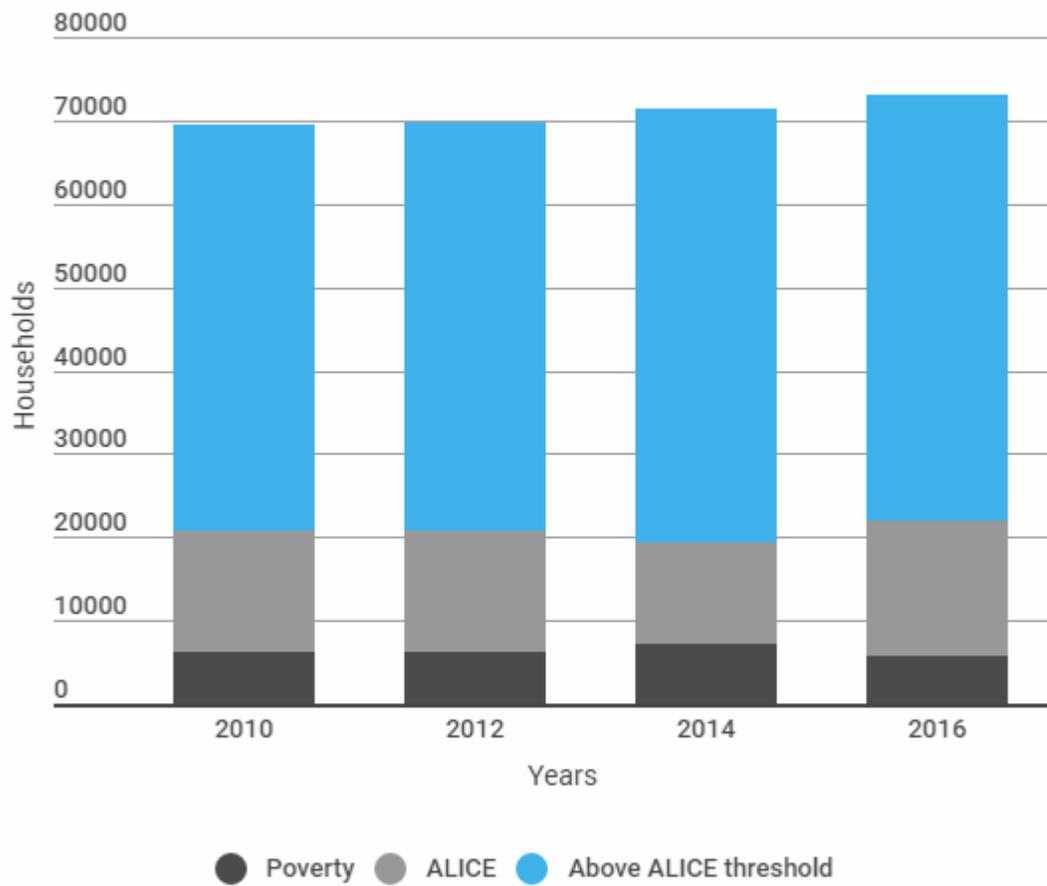
Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report

# Households below ALICE threshold, Winnebago County (2016)



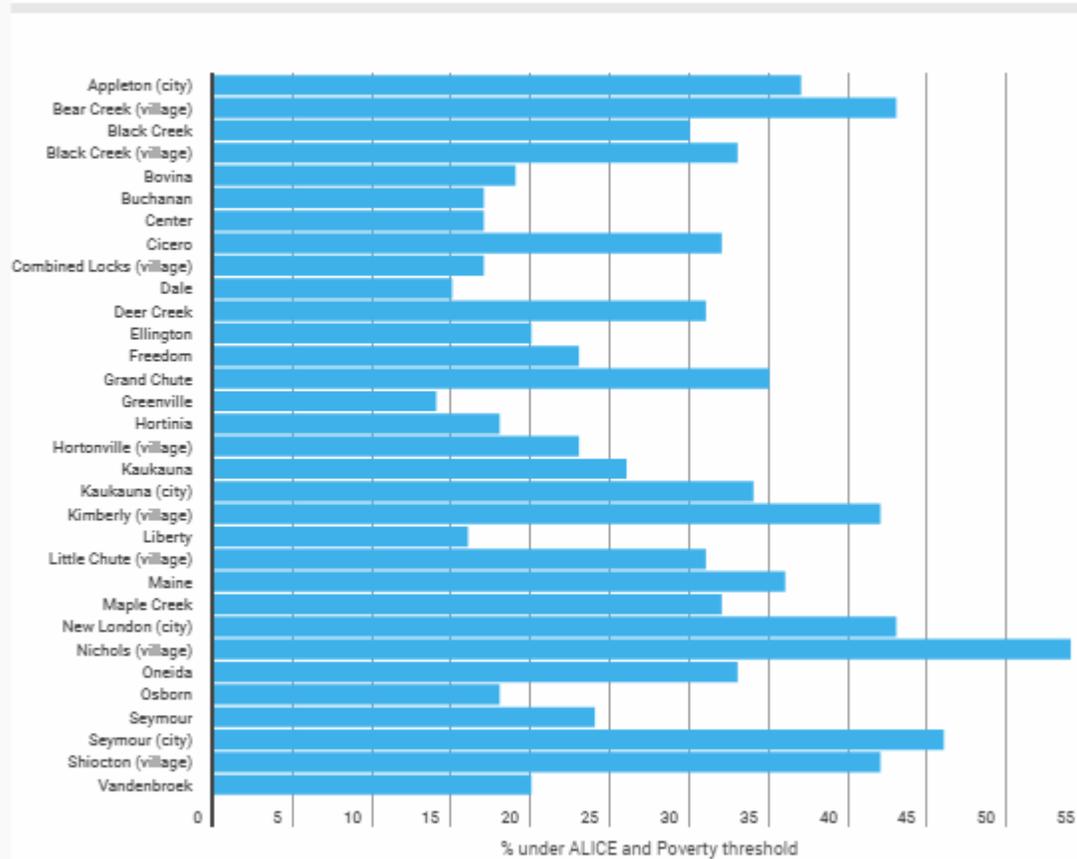
Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report

## Households by income, Outagamie County



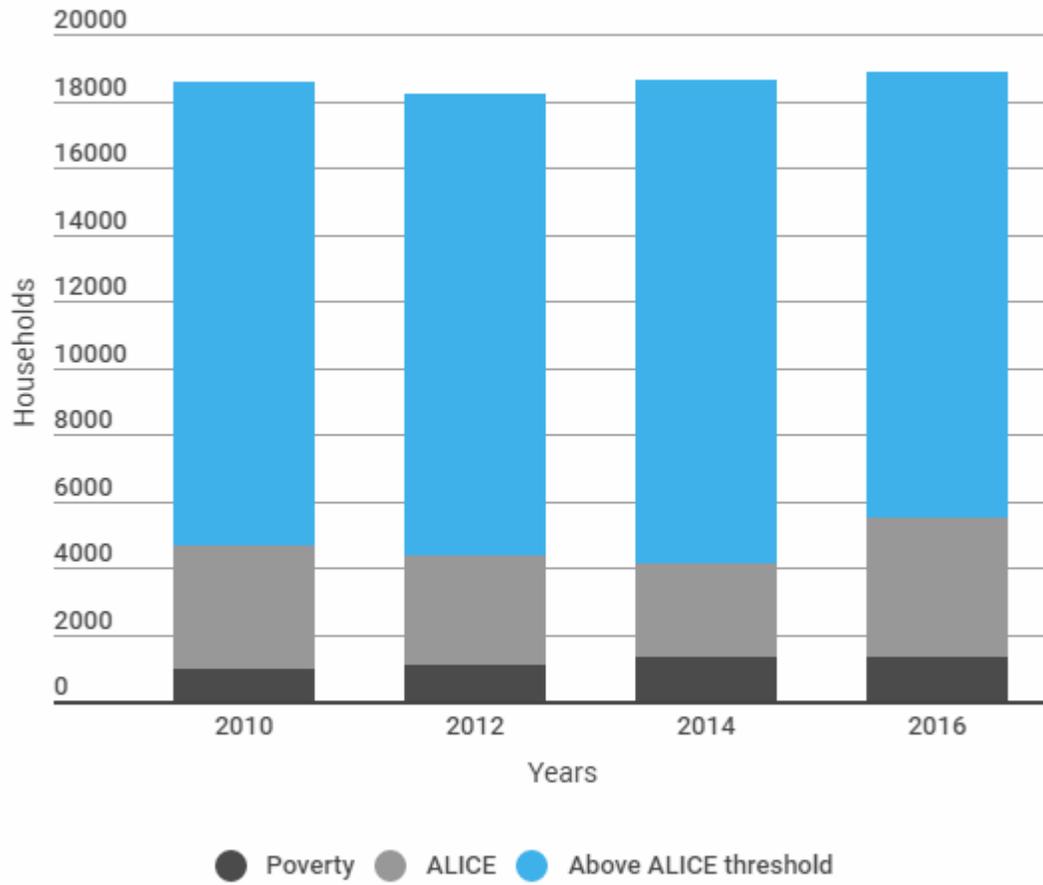
Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report

# Households below ALICE threshold, Outagamie County (2016)



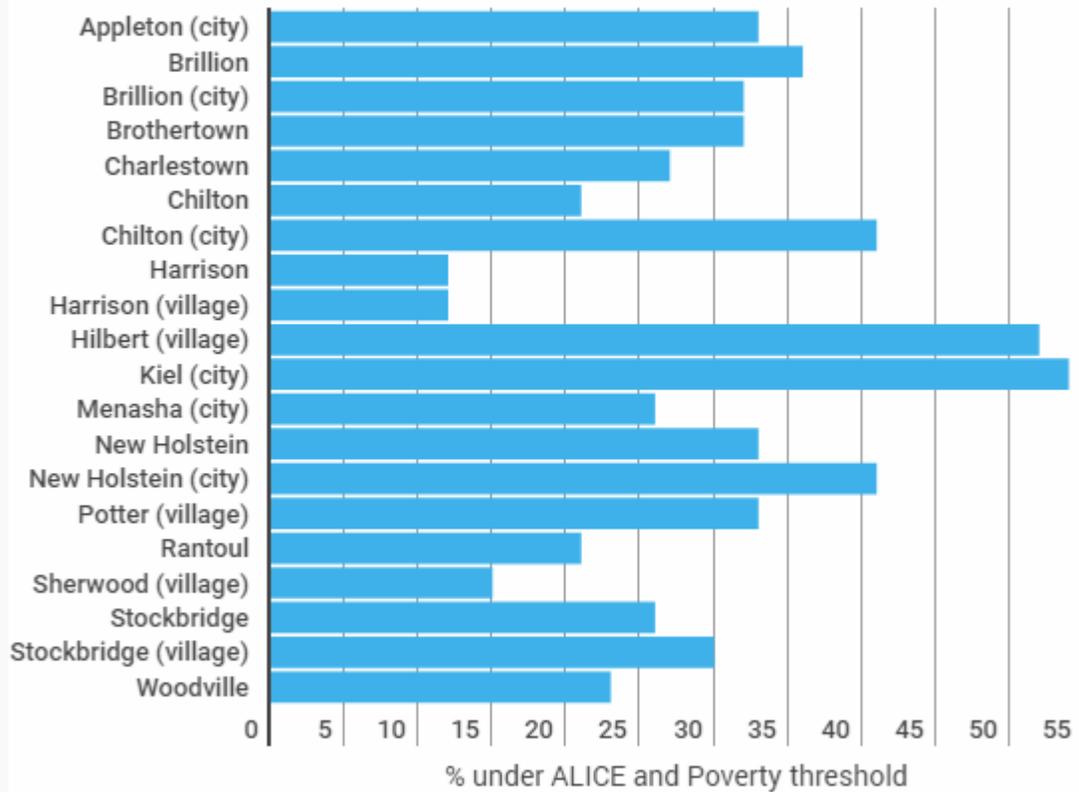
Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report

# Households by income, Calumet County



Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report

# Households below ALICE threshold, Calumet County (2016)



Source: United Way 2018 ALICE Report