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On 'Frontline,' Revisiting Three Families Dealing With Poverty Five Years Later

By [Mark Walsh](#) on November 21, 2017 3:39 PM | **No comments**

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Five years ago, the PBS newsmagazine "**Frontline**" visited three families in the Quad Cities area of Illinois and Iowa who were barely scraping by.

That episode, "**Poor Kids**," predated this blog, and I had not seen it. But on Wednesday, "Frontline" will take a tack it follows from time to time by showing the bulk of the original report, with updates on the key players.

The fact that this episode airs the night before Thanksgiving, when most of us will be sitting down to tables of plenty, is all the more poignant.

The "Poor Kids" families are identified by the three cities or towns where they lived in 2012.

In Moline, Ill., an intact family struggles. The father has lost his job and the family lost many of its possession as the bills went unpaid at a storage facility. Young Brittany lost her favorite Teddy bear. Teenager Roger misses the internet connection and has "serious World of Warcraft withdrawal."

Roger cites his evidently high achievement level in the video game when he could play online. "In real life, I'm a 14-year-old boy with nothing going for him."

Over in nearby Stockton, Iowa, 10-year-old Kaylie and her 13-year-old brother, Tyler, are going undernourished. Tyler says that sometimes the family has cereal but no milk, or vice versa. Kaylie craves Chinese food, which the family cannot afford.

The two kids and their mother have to move into a motel, which to their disappointment does not include the mini-fridge they were expecting. Kaylie fills a plastic garbage can from the motel's ice machine to pour over some groceries in the sink in the hopes of keeping it cold.

The family also has to give up one of its two dogs.

Meanwhile, in Davenport, Iowa, (which is one of the Quad Cities, as is Moline), 9-year-old Jasmine and 13-year-old Johnny are living with both their parents in a Salvation Army homeless shelter. They're too young to be left in the shelter alone at any time, so they pile in the car as their mother drives their father two hours to his job.

The documentary report is mostly about the families' struggles at home. We do see the kids in Moline at school, where they are among the underprivileged who are provided a basket of food to take home with some regularity. Meanwhile, in Davenport, Johnny brings home a good report card despite his home situation.

But in Stockton, it is clear that the kids' living in a motel is negatively affecting their education. "If I keep missing school, I see my future poor, in a box, on the street," Kaylie says.

About 40 minutes in, we see some symbols of the passage of time and the transition from President Barack Obama to President Donald Trump.

I won't reveal all the circumstances when the filmmakers caught up with the families. One has relocated to another city. One has suffered even more heartbreaking medical misfortune. And the third seems to have improved its lot at least a little with jobs for the father and a now 19-year-old son.

"Poor Kids" airs Nov. 22 at 10 p.m. Eastern time on PBS (check local listings.) It will also be available online at pbs.org/frontline.

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