

The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

Recession: Hard times on rise for the poorest of Utahns

New count, however, doesn't capture the effects the recession has had on the state.

By Brooke Adams
The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated:

The Salt Lake Tribune

<http://www.sltrib.com>

Mike Hays has skirted the edge of homelessness as he has struggled to stay employed. Family often provided a safety net.

But this year, with his extended family also strapped, was a disaster, and he landed two months ago with his wife and three children at The Road Home shelter.

"It's just been hard finding a job," he said Monday. "This year has been absolutely so hard on me."

Federal data show more than a quarter of a million Utahns experienced poverty last year, but that new count from the U.S. Census Bureau is an outdated snapshot that doesn't capture the effects the prolonged recession has had on the state, experts say.

Poverty data released today from the 2008 American Community Survey show there were 257,649 Utahns living below the poverty level, an increase of 6,565 people from 2007.

Nationally, the poverty rate was 13.2 percent -- an increase of 0.2 percent or 1.1 million people, putting the total number of Americans living below the poverty threshold at 39.1 million.

As a percentage of the population, the change in Utah was flat -- 9.6 percent in 2008 compared with 9.7 percent a year earlier. The survey data for Utah has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The census said its poverty data is based on income reported between January 2007 and November 2008 and does not reflect the impact of the recession, which officially began in December 2007.

Glenn Bailey, executive director of Crossroads Urban Center in Salt Lake City, said the census measures miss people clustered at or above the poverty line and are a "weak estimate of the economic health of low-income people.

"What happens is a lot of people are working poor," he said. "They are still struggling to make it. From our perspective, the situation is very serious."

He said the record number of Utahns seeking food stamp help -- which surpassed 88,000 in August, a record high -- is more reflective of where the state is today.

Community Action Partnership of Utah released a report earlier this year that, using three-year averages, came up with a 10.3 percent poverty rate for Utah. That prompts executive director Heather Tritten to say, "We don't know the true story."

"We're not going to see the [effect of the] downturn until we get 2009 data," she said.

The data also don't match what providers who work with poor and homeless Utahns say they are seeing: More people falling into homeless and poverty because of the economic downturn.

"We have had a 37 percent increase in the real number of people who've come to us in need of emergency shelter [since 2007]," said Matthew Minkevitch, executive director of The Road Home. "Where we were serving about 3,500 to 3,600 men and women two years ago, last year it was 5,300."

Minkevitch said a "very disturbing" trend that began last year has continued into 2009: A steady increase in families with children who need help. On any given night, there are 21 to 29 families making use of Spartan

accommodations in the shelter's lobby, he said.

In 2008, the poverty threshold for an individual was \$10,400 a year; for a family of four it was \$21,200. Tritten considers those threshold levels "extremely low."

"We double it," she said. At \$44,100 for a family of four, it's still a struggle to make ends meet, she said.

The census survey shows that 10.5 percent of Utah children under the age of 18 lived below the poverty level last year -- well below the national average of 18.2 percent.

It also showed that about 15 percent of Utahns listed as living below the poverty line worked part time or part of the year during 2008; about the same percentage did not work at all. Forty-one percent of the families receiving food stamps included two or more workers, a sign of soft wages.

Many of those showing up at the shelter have lost jobs or had cutbacks in work hours which led them to fall behind on financial obligations, Minkevitch said.

That scenario perfectly fits Mike and Rebecca Hays and their children, who range in age from 2 to 7.

The Hayses moved to Duchesne where Mike hoped to land work on an oil rig last September -- just as oil prices dropped and drilling companies laid off workers.

They came back to Salt Lake City in January and used a tax return to pay three months rent on an apartment. Mike got and lost a series of jobs in road construction; one company folded. He had a job lined up with a manufacturing company when it put all hiring on hold.

He was so worried about bringing his children to a shelter that the family slept in a tent in a backyard for a while.

On Aug. 8 they finally took refuge at The Road Home, where they lucked into a family room. "It's a lot better experience than I was expecting," Hays said, who also has tapped into food stamps and public health insurance.

"You have no idea; thank God for this," he said.

brooke@sltrib.com

Poverty By the numbers

24.6 » Percent of American Indian/Alaska natives in Utah below the poverty threshold.

16.8 » Percent of those age 25 and over who have less than a high school degree who live below the poverty threshold.

7.4 » Working women age 16 and older who are in poverty.

10.5 » Percent of children under age 18 who lived below the poverty threshold. That's 85,033 children. Our rank: 48 No. 1: Mississippi: 30.4 percent.

6.8 » Percent of people age 65 and over who lived below the poverty threshold. That's 16,238 senior citizens. Our rank: 49 (tied with Hawaii) No. 1: Mississippi, 16.9.

Source: 2008 American Community Survey

Close Window

Send To Printer