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Utah poverty level flat, income rises

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The effect of the recession in Utah, at least in 2008, was maybe a bit different than expected.

It did not create more poverty in Utah. The median family income even managed to go up 4.5 percent. But food stamp usage appears to have really shot up. And times appeared to be far tougher for minorities than whites.

That's according to new survey data released today by the Census Bureau. The poverty data, family income and food stamp numbers had been delayed by technical problems when the census earlier this month released other data from its huge annual American Community Survey.

The full wave of the recession isn't reflected in the data, given that the financial meltdown on Wall Street that led to the banking collapse was just beginning a year ago this month.

Census data show that poverty in Utah in 2008 stayed about the same as it was in 2007, with an estimated 9.6 percent of Utahns living in poverty, It reported 9.7 percent in 2007.

That is about a quarter lower than the national poverty rate of 13.2 percent. Utah's poverty rate ranked a low 43rd among the 50 states and District of Columbia.

The median family income in Utah ranked 20th among the states at \$65,226. That was up about 4.5 percent from 2007, when it was \$63,438.

Utah often does well in income for overall families or households because it has the nation's largest families, and such measures include income from older teenagers and others who work. Utah tends to score low, however, in per-person earnings.

The notable difference in the data is a startling jump in the use of food stamps, with 5.6 percent of Utahns reporting they had relied on the government-assistance program at some point during the previous year.

That was up from 4.9 percent who reported receiving such aid in 2007. However, the Census Bureau cautions against comparing the numbers too closely because it changed the wording of its question on that topic, which may have caused some of the higher numbers.

Utah ranked a low No. 42 among the states for usage of food stamps. Nationally, 8.6 percent of Americans received food stamps, about 50 percent higher than Utah's rate.

Of course, many Utahns receive food assistance from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instead of using the federal aid, and area food banks run by other civic organizations have reported steady and record increases in demand the past year.

The state Department of Workforce Services, which manages the federal program, has tracked demand from 2002 to the end of 2009, and reports that the number of people on food stamps has reached 88,000, up from about 35,000 in 2002.

Area anti-hunger advocates say the increase is startling and telling about the ripple effect of the recession.

"Given Utah's traditional low participation in food stamps, that's a pretty dramatic jump to say the least," said Gina Cornia, director of the Utahns Against Hunger advocacy group. Just over a year ago, Cornia and other advocates were urging people to sign up for food stamps rather than just let their family go hungry or trying to get by with services offered by church storehouses and other food banks statewide.

More people are signing up, and they are tending to stay on the program longer, Cornia said, noting that the average length of time is now 17 months.

One reason for the growth is Utahns can sign up for assistance online and are allowed by virtue of the only federal government waiver in the country to complete requests forms without having to go through an in-person interview with a Workforce Services staff member.

Because people who are poor or headed through financial difficulties are often losing their usual modes of transportation, "saving them a trip and doing it electronically can reduce at least one stress in their lives," Cornia said.

Although the increase in usage indicates that a lot more Utahns are having a lot more problems, "people should keep in mind that food stamps were set up to help families deal with exactly this kind of financial setback, and that they're helping people get through some tough times."

The data estimated that the vast majority of food stamp recipients in Utah are white — 85.9 percent of them. It said 13.9 percent are Hispanic, with other minority groups accounting for small percentages of the total.

Meanwhile, the data showed that minorities usually had lower family incomes and higher rates of poverty than Utah whites.

For example, the poverty rate among whites in 2008 was 9.1 percent. Among American Indians, it was 24.6 percent; among Pacific Islanders it was 24 percent; among blacks it was 20.6 percent; and among Hispanics it was 17.3 percent.

The median family income for Utah whites in 2008 was \$65,901. In comparison, it was a mere \$42,047 for Utah blacks; \$42,332 for American Indians; \$43,451 for Hispanics; and \$58,961 for Pacific Islanders.

But Utah Asians had the highest median family income of any such group, \$70,894.

The more education that Utahns received, the less likely they were to be in poverty.

The data showed that 16.8 percent of Utahns older than 25 who had not finished high school lived in poverty.

That was nearly twice as high as the 8.8 percent in poverty who finished high school. Just 6.5 percent of those who had some college lived in poverty, as did 3.6 percent of those who had a bachelor's degree or more.

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