

# Poverty experiment is an eye-opener

**By James Thalman**

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Community advocates Shawn Teigen and Jessie Tregeagle already have a pretty good sense of the daily struggle facing poor Utahns.

“But knowing about it and experiencing it are two different things,” Tregeagle said.

The two employees of Utah’s branch of

## Benson on vacation

Lee Benson is on vacation. His column will resume on Sunday.

the National Community Action Partnership joined for three weeks the estimated 254,000 residents who live in poverty to help raise public awareness of what it’s like to really go without.

“We realize that we have a lot of backstops that people who are poor by circumstance, not by choice, don’t have. We’re only doing this temporarily, still I think experiencing it even for a little while will help us do our jobs better, and maybe help break a few of the public stereotypes about the poor.”

Teigen, his wife and child have \$298 to

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MIKE TERRY, DESERET NEWS

**Shawn Teigen prepares to ride his bicycle home from his work at Community Action Partnership in Salt Lake.**

## POVERTY

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live on until May 21. That's \$14.22 or \$4.76 per person per day. The federal poverty level for a family of four is \$22,050. If the Teigens were in poverty for real, they would qualify for food stamps.

Tregeagle has \$141, or about \$6.72 per day and about \$1.41 per meal. She would not qualify for food stamps, were she actually in poverty. The poverty level is \$10,830 per year for a single person, which is \$902.50 per month or \$624.81 for three weeks.

The two have been at it for a week, and they say it has already been an education.

First of all, they agreed, being poor is a lot more work than they expected, and it takes an inordinate amount of time to just take care of daily life. Going totally menial on food is less about being a little hungry all the time, Teigen said.

"Every expense, every trip anywhere, every meal has to be a deliberate, planned step," he said. "And everything just takes a lot longer and a lot more conscientious effort."

The two were pretty conscientious already, trying to live greener and basically within their means most of the time. Tregeagle didn't give up her car, it pretty much gave out on her just before the experiment began. A new transmission ran her \$2,000, which she was able to pay.

"But it has been a good reminder that if I were really poor, any added serious expense from just regular wear and tear of life will be a setback a poor person can't really hope to recover from," she said.

Just keeping a roof over your head, as many so-called middle-class Americans are finding out, is a grind as well, they said.

For a family in poverty, survival is precarious, and the unavoidable financial bumps like a broken car or water heater can lead to an eviction and, within a few weeks, homelessness, he said.

"The attitude of many 'normal' people is that poverty will never strike them," said Heather Tritten, executive director of the community action partnership in Utah. "In reality, poverty can strike anyone at anytime. A lot

of people, especially in the current economic crisis, are finding that out. And many of them who were doing OK are falling behind. And once you fall behind, it's nearly impossible to ever get ahead."

Not having enough money is a problem by itself. Having to be deliberate about every little expenditure takes a lot more planning, and a lot more planning takes a lot more time.

So does just getting around, especially in a place where the car is king and the bicycle can stay the heck off the road.

Teigen pedaled 20 miles one way last week to play a soccer game. He was pooped before he got there, and then he got to pedal all the way back after his team lost.

"Commuters stuck in traffic think getting around is a pain and is taking too much time," he said. "To plan a trip, figure out how long it should take to ride there, then actually do it, now that takes a lot of time and effort."

More about Utah's poverty profile, the poverty experiment and Tregeagle's and Teigen's blog is available at [www.utahcap.org](http://www.utahcap.org).

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