



Poverty Rate at 50-year high in San Diego County; El Cajon has worst poverty rate in County

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Poverty in San Diego County shot up in 2008, rising at a much faster pace than in California or the nation. This plunge in quality of life for many San Diegans is documented in U.S. Census data released today.

The data shows that 850,000 county residents--29% of the population--were living in economic hardship in 2008, according to analysis by the Center on Policy Initiatives. That measure, using a threshold double the federal poverty level, is a more realistic gauge in cities like San Diego where living costs such as housing and fuel are higher than the national average, CPI reports.

"The starkest case is that of El Cajon, which has 21% living below the poverty rate (compared to 12.6% countywide)," said CPI director of research Murtaza Baxamusa. "One in five is pretty dire. El Cajon, in terms of poverty, is the worst city in the County...The City of El Cajon really needs to examine their public policies and their investment in people." Even worse, nearly half (46%) of all people in El Cajon are living in economic hardship, using the threshold of double the poverty level.

"The problem is not only the increase in unemployment, but a growth in working poverty as more people have had their hours cut to part-time," said Baxamusa. "Nearly a third of our county population is now struggling to make ends meet under severe economic distress."

The County's official poverty rate rose in 2008 from 11.1% to 12.6%, the highest level on record in the past 50 years. That means 46,000 more people fell below the federal poverty level, subsisting on less than \$10,991 for an individual or \$21,834 for a family of two adults with two children.

But the poverty threshold is the same throughout the nation for various family sizes, so the Census Bureau also reports how many people live below 200% of the federal level, still a very low income in San Diego. In 2008, 62,000 more County residents slipped beneath that level.

The biggest significant increase in poverty was among white men of working age.

Imperial County had the state's highest poverty rate -- percentage of people living below the federal poverty level -- in 2008: 22.9%.

"The stark increase in poverty in our region underlines the need for public policies that create not just any jobs, but good jobs with pathways to stable careers," Baxamusa said. "As the economy recovers and people return to employment, they must have fair wage and benefit levels that eliminate working poverty."

New figures for other East County cities and for the unincorporated areas of the County are not available, since the yearly figures are only released for cities with populations over 65,000.

As we enter an economic recovery cycle, Baxamusa said investment in public infrastructure and job creation should focus on those in economic hardship “to create career ladders that allow them to climb out of poverty, to retool and train them for instance to apprenticeship jobs in the construction industry, where there are more job openings with investment in infrastructure.”

Public agencies should also assure that other factors, such as a shortage of affordable housing, should not create further problems for people struggling in economic hardship. Such steps could help people in our region emerge stronger than before, he said.

“Things like homelessness are life-changing experiences,” Baxamusa concluded. “Even if you find a job, even if you find a home, it is a permanent scar on the psyche of society.”