

Poverty rate 12.6 percent in Riverside, S.D. counties

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By Dave Downey

After easing during the first half of the decade, the poverty rate has risen sharply in recent years across Riverside and San Diego counties in response to the deep recession, according to a 2008 snapshot of American life released late Monday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

And San Diego County's estimated poverty rate of 12.6 percent was the highest recorded for the area in a half century, said Murtaza Baxamusa, director of research and policy for the Center on Policy Initiatives in San Diego.

"The only time we saw it this high was the recession of the late '50s, when it was 14 percent," he said in a telephone interview Monday.

Riverside County's poverty rate also was listed at 12.6 percent, having increased by more than 1 percentage point from 2005. But the estimated 2008 rate still represented an overall improvement from the 14.2 percent rate documented by the 2000 Census for the year 1999.

San Diego County's 1999 rate was 12.4 percent. It had declined to 11 percent before the housing bust triggered one of the worst economic downturns in Southern California history.

The percentages are based on income levels established by the federal government and detail the proportion of residents in families that live on less. Other families may be struggling too even though they bring home more.

The dire economic conditions also can be seen clearly in the surge of people applying for food stamps.

The Census Bureau reported that 3.4 percent of San Diego County residents received food stamps in 2008, up from 2.2 percent in 2006. In Riverside County, 4.3 percent of residents received food stamps, up from 3.1 percent two years earlier.

"I was surprised by the steepness of the increase," Baxamusa said. "I was expecting poverty to increase, but this kind of increase is incredible."

The poverty rates in both counties increased faster than for the state and nation as a whole.

California's poverty rate was listed at 13.3 percent for 2008, up from 13.1 percent in 2006.

The nation's rate of 13.2 percent in 2008 was actually down slightly from 13.3 percent two years earlier, the bureau reported.

The numbers were reported in the bureau's 2008 American Community Survey.

What's scary about the fast-rising regional poverty numbers, Baxamusa said, is that the numbers reflect what was happening on the ground in 2008. Since then, unemployment has gotten worse.

In August, the unemployment rate reached 14.5 percent in Riverside County and 10.4 percent in San Diego County, up dramatically from 9.7 percent and 6.4 percent respectively one year earlier.

"It begs the question of what we are going to do about it," he said. "We don't want to be sliding into any more poverty than this."

Administrators for local relief agencies are having a difficult time as it is keeping up with the swelling demands for food and other aid.

Interfaith Community Services, which operates relief centers in Escondido and Oceanside that provide meals, housing, job training and other services, has seen its clientele surge from 28,000 people for its fiscal year that ended July 31, 2008, to nearly 34,000 for the year that concluded this July 31.

"Both centers are absolutely overwhelmed with the level of business," said Suzanne Stewart Pohlman, executive director. "We are terribly, terribly busy."

Similarly, the Temecula-Murrieta Rescue Mission has seen a steep rise in demand for its services since it began providing boxes of food, fresh produce and clothing to needy families in March. David Jones, director for the mission, said the number of families served each Wednesday has increased from 60 to more than 190.

"Every week we have 30 to 35 families that are new," Jones said. "And this past week we had 39."

With the unemployment rate continuing to rise, Jones expects the demand for aid to keep growing.

"I'm afraid it's going to continue for a while," he said.

As long as unemployment remains high, the poverty rate will stay high, said Ed Schafer, chief demographer for the San Diego Association of Governments, a regional planning agency.

"Either they are being laid off or their hours are being cut back. And the bills are still there," Schafer said. "And they are sinking into poverty."

The poverty rate swelled through much of North San Diego County and Southwest Riverside County, with the sharpest increase occurring in Escondido, where one in five were living below the federal poverty line of \$21,200 for a family of four in 2008. The 19.7 percent rate there was up from 13.5 percent just two years earlier.

In Temecula, the rate increased from 5.2 percent in 2006 to 6.6 percent in 2008.

The rate actually declined in Vista and Carlsbad, but demographers said that likely fell within the margin of error for the Census Bureau's survey. Relatively small samples were used for cities' numbers, they said, and the county totals are far more reliable.

But the survey was consistent in showing higher poverty rates among minority groups. For example,

27 percent of Hispanics in Escondido and 14.7 percent of Hispanics in Murrieta were below the poverty line, compared to 11.2 percent and 4.5 percent respectively of those cities' white populations.

When it came to food stamps, the Census Bureau found that in every sampled community more people sought federal aid for food last year. For example, 3.9 percent of San Marcos residents received food stamps in 2008, up from 2.3 percent in 2006, and 3.7 percent of Temecula residents applied for stamps, up from 1.2 percent in 2006.