



S.D. Poverty Rate Reaches Highest Level In A Decade

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By Hank Crook and Gloria Penner

GLORIA PENNER (Host): I'm Gloria Penner and I'm joined by the editors at the roundtable These Days in San Diego. Today we'll talk about San Diego's newest black mark as its poverty rate growth exceeds the state and the nation, and yesterday's hate crime summit after a series of hate related attacks throughout the county, also could Escondido and Oceanside team up to win the Chargers or does the City of Industry have the edge? The editors with me today are Alisa Joyce Barba, western bureau chief for National Public Radio. Alisa, good to see you.

ALISA JOYCE BARBA (Western Bureau Chief, National Public Radio): Good morning, Gloria.

PENNER: Good morning. Miriam Raftery, editor of East County Magazine. I'm glad you could come back, Miriam.

MIRIAM RAFTERY (Editor, East County Magazine): Thank you, Gloria.

PENNER: And Kent Davy, editor of the North County Times. As always, Kent, welcome to our studios.

KENT DAVY (Editor, North County Times): Thank you for having me, Gloria.

PENNER: Of course. And to our listeners, our call-in number is 1-888-895-5727, that's 895-KPBS. Well, we now know that the national unemployment rate is up to 9.8%, that's one in ten workers unemployed. And this week the Center on Policy Initiatives here in San Diego released information that was pretty shocking to most of us. The think tank reported that last year the poverty rate in San Diego rose at a much faster pace than all of California and the rest of the United States. So, Alisa, is that as harsh a statement about San Diego as it sounds?

BARBA: Is it a harsh statement about San Diego? I think it's definitely a harsh reality about what – how much money it costs to live in San Diego and how difficult it is, I think, to bring all those funds together to have a house, to do the kinds of things you need to do to live here. I think, you know, there's a national poverty level which puts us, I think, at 12.6%, the people living below the national poverty line but I think that this group, this think tank, what it did is it uses a different measure for poverty than the federal level because the federal level doesn't take into account the standard of living. It costs more to live here, we all know that. So they look at it differently and they see actually a level of something like 26% of people in San Diego County are living below their level of poverty, which is to say like 850,000 people, nearly a quarter of our population, over a quarter of our population here, which is really, really stunning, I think.

PENNER: It is stunning. And the question is, is that real poverty or is that something that's called, euphemistically, economic hardship?

BARBA: Economic – I don't know if there's a difference, really. I mean, there's poverty, there's economic hardship, I think we know that a lot of us, a lot of our neighbors are living in economic hardship for sure.

PENNER: All right. Now let me turn to you on this, Kent. What do you think represents poverty in this country? I mean, what is poverty? How do you live when you live in poverty? So that we can sort of paint a picture.

DAVY: Well, under the kind of discussions that's going on with these statistics, it's a – this is an income defined poverty so that it typically does not include safety net related kind of issues. So there are some things that help lift many of our citizens to some extent in relative terms to say someone who lives in Bangladesh or in terribly poor countries in Africa. Notwithstanding that, the effect of the recession that we're currently in has thrown fuel in great quantity to the hardship of lives of people on the bottom. With all of the unemployment, with all of the pieces of our economy that have driven people from full time to part time work, that have exacerbated the problem that they have, this becomes really untenable for people to live here. It will eventually push or help push people back to other places. A very interesting conversation, I'm – and I think it was mostly just speculative of a kid in the newsroom yesterday, we were talking about a very interesting Wall Street Journal story. It was the tale of a house that had gone—very, very nice house—gone up in value over 100 years and come down in value and finally sold recently for \$11,000.00. So I got a kid sitting here saying, you know, I have to live with roommates here and share because it – the cost of living here is high enough. If I went to Detroit, I could live – I could buy that house. And, well, you've got to live in Detroit and you've got to find a job in Detroit and all those sorts of things but there's a – there is a real relative disparity in what it costs to live in this – in this area.

PENNER: Okay, so – But the whole area? I mean, for example, Miriam Raftery, you're with East County magazine, and east county seems to be suffering the most. Areas like El Cajon, for example, their unemployment rate is higher than the rest of the county. I mean, when we talk about poverty and you take a look at what's going on in El Cajon where businesses are shuttered and there's a real problem there, what does poverty look like in El Cajon?

RAFTERY: Gloria, in El Cajon, 21% percent of the people are actually below the federal poverty level and...

PENNER: Federal?

RAFTERY: The federal poverty level. And 46% are economically challenged using that CPI standard. That's almost half of the population out there. So I think that's a shocking statistic. And, granted, El Cajon has perhaps a bit more affordable housing than some places of the county but still that's a very, very high number. You're talking about situations where you may have a mother forced to choose between do I buy food or do I buy medicine for my child or do I pay the rent this month? And that's the kind of situation that some people are dealing with. And, of course, the foreclosure crisis has hit east country very hard. Campo, I believe, was the highest in the county for foreclosures the last time I checked, and so on top of losing jobs, not having high enough incomes, a lot of people are also losing their homes and yet we don't have a homeless shelter out there that's run by any of the cities in east county.

PENNER: Let me just turn to our listeners before I get back to you Alisa and Kent. How responsible do you—and I'm asking our listeners now—do you believe that San Diego's low paying jobs are for San Diego's very rapidly increasing poverty level, especially in the service and tourism areas? And do

you think those low paying jobs should pick up a responsibility, a very strong responsibility, for what is happening to our economy here in terms of the poverty rate? Our number is 1-888-895-5727, 895-KPBS. Alisa, you wanted to respond to something Miriam said.

BARBA: Yeah, actually I just want to give out a little bit of information because I think it's pretty stunning when you listen to this kind of thing, that the federal poverty level says for an individual you need to make under \$11,000 a year. Eleven – can you imagine trying to live in San Diego under \$11,000 a year? For a family, the federal poverty level is \$22,000 a year.

PENNER: You heard what Miriam said, though. Miriam said that there are people in El Cajon who are beyond – below the federal level.

BARBA: Right, twenty – she said, what, 26%.

RAFTERY: 21%.

BARBA: 21%, so I just think – I just want people to understand how little we're talking about here in terms of how little money that is that people are actually making. And the other point I wanted to make, which I just think is really, really interesting, the biggest increase in poverty, the group that is suffering the biggest increase in poverty in this county are white men of working age, which is really interesting. I think, you know, I think people assume that it's going to be immigrant labor, it's going to be, you know, maybe it's going to be women, but it's white working men. And I live in Point Loma, which is an area relatively affluent but I have to say I have never seen so many men in their twenties and thirties begging on the streets.

PENNER: Begging.

BARBA: Begging, yes.

PENNER: Yeah, actually...

BARBA: All the time.

PENNER: ...that's true. And there was a time, Kent, I know you want to say something about something else but I want to ask you this, there was a time when San Diego was considered recession proof. We had defense industries and the military industries. But that doesn't seem to be the case anymore.

DAVY: It's certainly not the case anymore. San Diego led – in some respects, led this recession as the housing market collapsed starting in December of 2006, combined with some of the national economic trends, the falloff in auto sales, you've got a snowballing effect. This county became so dependent during the late nineties and the early part of this decade on real estate and the spinoff related industries and businesses, furniture sales, flooring, irrigation, landscaping, electrical work, all of these kinds of real estate related things that when the real estate market collapsed here, it destroyed a lot of wealth, a lot of lives.

PENNER: I want to put out another question to our listeners, our producer would like to know whether you are seeing changes in your neighborhood the way Alisa Barba is seeing changes in her Point Loma neighborhood. So many young men, twenties and thirties, white working men, without jobs. Are you seeing changes like that or similar changes? Or are you struggling to make ends meet right now?

We'd like to hear from you. 1-888-895-5727, 895-KPBS. Kent, you had something...

DAVY: Yeah.

PENNER: ...else to say.

DAVY: One of the, I think, the fascinating statistical conditions in this is that despite the fact that there's 12% poverty rate, you're seeing only about a 4% participation rate in food stamps in the county. And I, frankly, cannot answer why that is. I don't know if it is bureaucratic bars to be able to obtain food stamps for those who are eligible, and I know a year or so ago the County said that it was going to work to try and streamline that eligibility process in getting people signed up, or if it is a pride issue. Perhaps white men who have been gainfully employed for years don't want to go stand in line for food stamps. But that participation rate's very interesting.

PENNER: Well...

BARBA: It's one of the lowest participation rates in the country, actually.

PENNER: In food stamps.

BARBA: Yes.

PENNER: Well, the County has been roundly criticized for making it tough on people who look for County help, making them into pariahs...

BARBA: Umm-hmm.

PENNER: ...making them feel, you know, less than deserving. Is there any improvement that you've heard of, Miriam, in County programs for food stamps or any kind of help for people who are financially suffering?

RAFTERY: I haven't really looked into the County food stamp program that much. I can certainly tell you that in east county, the lines at the food banks are getting longer and longer. We ran a piece a couple of months ago about how demand at food banks had doubled in places like La Mesa and, you know, some of the other areas out there. So I think whatever is being done, that more needs to be done because there's a lot of hungry folks out there. It's sad to see, you know, elderly women in their walkers waiting for six hours in line to get food the day that we went.

PENNER: Well, I can tell you from a personal experience last year when my mom was just about ready to pass into her reward and I went down to the County to get some MediCal help for her.

RAFTERY: Umm-hmm.

PENNER: I spent all day there.

RAFTERY: Umm-hmm.

PENNER: And I – I did not see a person. So, I mean...

RAFTERY: Yeah.

PENNER: ...you know...

RAFTERY: It's difficult enough when you're healthy and...

PENNER: Right.

RAFTERY: ...young and...

BARBA: Well...

RAFTERY: ...but if you're elderly and, you know, or you had health issues...

PENNER: Sure.

RAFTERY: ...then it's even more difficult for people.

PENNER: Absolutely. Alisa.

BARBA: Well, and, you know, just to add to the bad news, I mean, these figures that we're talking about come from 2008. We're not even – we haven't even talked about 2009 where we're looking at, you know, a job loss that is quadruple...

DAVY: Exactly.

BARBA: ...what we're looking at in 2008. So these poverty figures severely under-represent what we're seeing and what we're experiencing in the county. And the really scary thing is, and we all know this and this is very obvious, Mayor Sanders revealed today that we're looking at over \$100 million deficit, City deficit, County deficit, for next year. We're going to be cutting services all across the board from the City and then, of course, we're looking at State services being cut as well. So the social safety net that has been woven to kind of catch these hundreds of thousands of people in poverty is unraveling at a rapid pace.

PENNER: Miriam, very briefly.

RAFTERY: I was going to touch on what she just said but the cuts in State services are devastating and they're hurting the poorest of the poor. We're seeing complete elimination of some programs for the disabled, programs to keep elderly people in their homes longer when they become ill, things like that.

PENNER: Okay, so what we're saying is sort of a never-ending downward spiral, jobs not available, those that are not paying enough salaries, and then not enough support from government agencies in order to help those people who have gotten to the lowest of the low. We're going to come back in just a moment and we're going to take more comments from our editors and also we're going to turn to your phone calls and find out what you want to say. This is the Editors Roundtable. I'm Gloria Penner.