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Requests for help contradict statistics

Census says poverty rates leveling off, but agencies say more seeking services

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Poverty rates in Fort Collins and Larimer County appeared to level off in 2008 after rising sharply in the early part of the decade, according to data released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

But information in the bureau's American Community Survey does not reflect the current level of poverty around the county brought on by the economic downturn and the loss of jobs, say local agencies that work with low-income residents.

The data does not match today's reality, said Mary Carraher, executive director of Project Self-Sufficiency. The agency has seen a growing number of families seeking its services, she said.

"I don't see how we can have the economy we have today and not hear worse news than what we are hearing from the Census Bureau," she said.

The poverty rate in Fort Collins averaged 16.9 percent between 2006 and 2008, down from the 17.5 percent average from 2005 to 2007, according to the census survey.

Larimer County's poverty rate averaged 12.8 percent from 2006 to 2008, up slightly from 12.6 percent from 2005 to 2007.

Poverty as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2008 was a family of four earning less than \$21,200 a year. For an individual, the poverty line was set at \$10,400.

The most recent poverty rates in Larimer County and Fort Collins were well above the rates found in the 2000 census - 9.2 percent in Larimer County and 14 percent in Fort Collins.

More telling than data collected throughout 2008, when the county was still experiencing some economic growth, are current measures of the demand for social services, Carraher said.

Between June 2008 and June 2009, the Food Bank for Larimer County saw a 25 percent increase in clients; applications for food stamps were up 54 percent; applications to the Temporary Aid to Needy Families, or TANF, cash-assistance program were up 83 percent; and residents receiving Medicaid was up 18.7 percent.

Finding work is the biggest problem facing applicants to Project Self-Sufficiency, said Bethany Hicks, an adviser with the program. Some applicants are homeless and "bouncing from house to house," she said.

"A lot of people are really scrambling," Hicks said. "They don't have jobs; they are working with the Work Force Center; they are applying for TANF; they are waiting for affordable housing."

The wait to get into Project Self-Sufficiency is six months in Fort Collins and three months in Loveland, Hicks said.

Local information from the 2008 American Community Survey was presented Tuesday to more than 100 people at a meeting sponsored by the Coloradoan and Pathways Past Poverty, a communitywide initiative supported by United Way of Larimer County.

One of the biggest challenges facing those working with the program is a lack of awareness about the extent of poverty in the county, said Marija Weeden-Osborn, coordinator of Pathways Past Poverty.

Coloradoan Executive Editor Robert Moore, who presented the American Community Survey results at Tuesday's meeting, said the surveys were collected before the recession took full hold in Northern Colorado and caused a widespread loss of jobs.

In August, the region had 5,300 fewer jobs than it did a year ago, he said.

Getting the region and country back to where it was economically before the recession is going to take time, said Martin Shields, an economist from CSU, especially in terms of adding jobs.

The only sector of the economy that has added job recently is health care, he said.

"This has been a really widespread and kind of evil recession in terms of touching every (economic) sector," Shields told the audience.

Growth in the number of people living in poverty in Larimer County this decade has been greatest in children and senior citizens, Moore said.

Between 2006 and 2008, an average of 7,176 children in the county lived in poverty, up 68 percent from the 2000 census, which showed 4,271 children at that level. The average number of seniors living in poverty from 2006 to 2008 was up 85 percent to 1,886.

Following the presentation, Margaret Long, manager of the Larimer County Office on Aging program, said it's not clear why poverty is growing among seniors.

Part of the growth could be attributed to older people losing jobs and not being able to find new work, she said. Others might have been hurt by the downturn in the stock markets.

Young retirees might have moved to the area and brought along their aged parents, she said.

"I think it's a multi-faceted problem," she said. "What it says to me is that given the funding we have, we have to look even more carefully at targeting our services."

Statewide, the Census Bureau reported 11.4 percent of residents lived below the poverty level in 2008, up from 9.2 percent in 2000. The number of Colorado children living in poverty rose from 11.3 percent in 2000 to 15.1 percent in 2008, according to the census data.

Greeley had the highest poverty rate among Colorado's largest cities, with about one in every five people living below the federal poverty line, according to the Census Bureau: About 27 percent of children in Greeley were living in poverty.

Additional Facts

By the numbers

Poverty rates

> 2006-08 average - Larimer County: 12.8 percent; Fort Collins: 16.9 percent

> 2005-07 average - Larimer County: 12.6 percent; Fort Collins: 17.5 percent

> 2000 census - Larimer County: 9.2 percent; Fort Collins: 14 percent

Median household income (adjusted for inflation, 2008 dollars)

> 2006-08 average - Larimer County: \$55,924; Fort Collins: \$49,305

> 2005-07 average - Larimer County: \$55,038; Fort Collins: \$48,808

> 2000 census - Larimer County: \$62,879; Fort Collins: \$57,456