

# One-third of Detroit's population lives below poverty line

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According to US Census Bureau figures released August 30, Detroit is now the poorest city in America, with fully one-third of its residents living below the official federal poverty level, a derisory \$19,157 in household income for a family of four. Nearly one half of the city's children, 47.8 percent, live below the poverty level.

In 2002 23.2 percent of Detroit residents were considered poor by the Census Bureau. In a two-year period, according to these figures, some 75,000 to 80,000 more people descended into poverty, a staggering increase.

Among the country's poorest cities, Detroit was followed by El Paso, Texas, where 29 percent of the population lives in poverty; Miami; Newark, New Jersey; Atlanta; and Long Beach, California. Cleveland, the most impoverished metropolis on the previous Census Bureau list, fell to No. 12.

Incomes in Michigan declined last year by nearly 3 percent. The Midwest was the only region in the US in which incomes dropped and poverty rates rose in 2004. In the country as a whole, 25 of the 50 states saw median household incomes drop and 33 states experienced increases in their poverty rates.

Tens of thousands of workers in Michigan have lost jobs in manufacturing since 2000, either finding no work at all or lower-paying employment. For example, in Genesee County, home to Flint, the former auto manufacturing center, the proportion of people living in poverty rose from 14.2 to 17 percent in 2003-2004. Providing a little historical perspective, in 1960 one in ten Flint residents lived in poverty; the figure is now *one in four*. The median household income adjusted for inflation for Wayne County, which includes Detroit, has declined by an astonishing 10 percent since 2000.

Food banks, soup kitchens and other programs for the

poor are recording substantial increases. An official at the Catholic Charities of Shiawassee and Genesee counties, Deborah McCormack, told the *Flint Journal*, "We used to have a time when summertime was slower. Now we are busy the whole year." Gleaners Community Food Bank, which operates in metropolitan Detroit, estimates the number of families who qualify to get food from its programs has increased 18-25 percent this year compared to 2004.

One measure of the social divide can be gauged by the difference between poverty rates and median household incomes in Wayne County and neighboring Oakland County. While 20 percent of Wayne's population lives below the poverty line, only 5 percent share that fate in Oakland County. Median household income in the latter is \$63,035, compared with \$40,322 in Wayne (and \$27,871 in the city of Detroit). Even this comparison conceals the extraordinary growth in the wealth of upper income layers, as Oakland County also has a large number of working class families and poverty-stricken areas such as Pontiac.

State and local politicians, in response to the Census Bureau figures, were either unhappy to be reminded about the miserable state of the Michigan economy or offered fatuous statements about a brighter tomorrow that no one, including themselves, believes for an instant.

Falling into the first category, a spokeswoman for Michigan's Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, Liz Boyd, complained, "We don't need a report out of Washington to tell us that people in Michigan are hurting." In the second, representing Detroit's Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, spokesman Howard Hughey told the media that the city was attempting to attract diverse businesses. Hughey said, "By partnering with organizations like the Initiative for a Competitive Inner

City, we're creating new economies and innovative educational opportunities."

I spoke to Kurt Metzger, research director at Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies in Detroit, about the Census Bureau statistics. Metzger was not astonished by the figure of one-third of the city's population living in poverty. If anything, he feels that the 2002 estimate was probably too low. He noted that "between 1990 and 2000, a lot of people dropped off the poverty rolls. They got jobs that paid just enough to get them over the threshold."

The economic downturn that began in 2000 continues to have consequences.

"Ever since 2000 there has been a continuing exodus from the city. Anybody with the wherewithal, especially those with children, is finding ways to get out. The better off, to Oakland County; those less well off to Eastpointe, Fraser, Hazel Park. Lower interest rates have freed up rental properties a bit in those areas. Those who can't afford it aren't going anywhere. So there is no reason why the poverty rate in Detroit shouldn't be high.

"There are pockets of gentrification, but that's a drop in the bucket. This city has so many people without education, without skills, without anything. Nobody is creating jobs, they can't go anywhere. This has exacerbated the gap between Detroit and Oakland County."

I asked Metzger his estimate of the real unemployment rate in Detroit; the official figure stands at an already high 15 percent. He replied, "I would not be surprised by a figure closer to 30 or 35 percent. Of course there is an underground economy, with people not reporting their incomes. Detroit historically has had a low labor-force participation rate, compared with other cities. Then overlay the loss of jobs, the other recent problems."

Given the stark situation indicated by the Census Bureau figures, I asked Metzger if he was aware of a single politician from either major party who was proposing a sustained effort against poverty. Tellingly, he laughed. "I never hear a damned word about people in poverty from the politicians," he said. "From Kerry, nothing. Oh, a few references to the number of people without health care. But he didn't push it, the Democrats didn't push it. If there was a third party talking about the poor, we didn't hear about it. Nobody

seems to care.

"Only when an event like the New Orleans devastation happens, then you suddenly hear something about the poor. And then, I can guarantee you, the pictures of looters, most of them black, will only encourage this kind of talk: 'Look at them! Why should we care? It's just throwing good money after bad.'

"I don't think things are getting any better. Fighting poverty doesn't seem to be there, in the political arena. Nobody's talking about it."



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