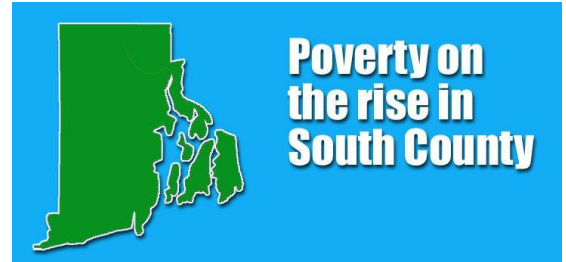


## Study finds poverty on the rise in South County

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By VICTORIA GOFF and EMILY DUPUIS / Sun Staff Writers

While the percentage of poverty-stricken Rhode Islanders remained nearly unchanged from 2007 to 2008, Washington County's low-income population grew more than other areas of the state.



About one in nine Rhode Islanders continued to live in poverty in 2008, according to figures released last week by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Meanwhile, in southern Rhode Island alone, the number of people earning an annual income below the federal poverty level — \$10,997 for an individual — jumped from 5.3 percent in 2007 to 8.24 percent in 2008.

The Census data stems from the American Community Survey, a nationwide report that surveys 3 million people annually.

Despite the state's sliding economy and rising unemployment, officials from The Poverty Institute at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work attribute the unchanged statewide poverty level to the availability of unemployment insurance. They say this likely prevented some from falling below the federal poverty line.

But they say they are surprised by the rise in Washington County, where 10,087 people of the county's 122,347-population were considered poor in 2008.

Kate Brewster, executive director for the Poverty Institute, has a theory: part-time and seasonal service industry workers in Washington County — a tourism magnet because of its beaches — didn't qualify for unemployment insurance. Statewide, 40 percent of people out of work receive the benefit, which pays a maximum of 60 percent of their previous pay, an average of \$381 a week, she said.

In addition, local manufacturing plants have not only laid off workers, but many closed their doors in 2007 and 2008, said Cindy Gardiner, social services manager of Wood River Health Services in Hope Valley.

"We have plenty of empty factories that can be filled, but we just have to bring in [businesses]," she said. "And [now] I just think there are too many barriers for them."

The Rev. Jean Barry, executive director of the WARM Center in Westerly, also pointed to the job losses in the area, exacerbated by the economic downturn.

While other people are working, they're earning minimum wage — and struggling to cover food, clothing and housing costs, she said.

Gardiner, who helps those in southwestern Rhode Island, said she has seen an influx of former donors who are now need assistance.

She said many “are waiting to the very end” to seek help because they think, “I’m a hard-worker. I’ll get another job.”

“Then their unemployment has expired and there’s nothing for them,” Gardiner added.

Barry said social service groups, like WARM and Wood River, provide a safety net in Washington County.

“We’re the agencies that are seeing donations decrease. We’re also having a more difficult time finding funding through foundations,” Barry said. “So Washington County people need to support all of us as much as they can financially.”

Gardiner and Barry said they are uncertain what this winter will bring.

“I don’t know what to expect this year because I do believe there are going to be more needs than usual and less donations,” Gardiner said.

Rachel Flum, a policy analyst for the Poverty Institute, said she expects poverty levels in Rhode Island will rise in 2009.

She cited reports from economists, who say the recession is nearing an end, but high unemployment will likely lag behind.

“For Rhode Island, it will probably continue to rise for a while,” Flum said.

In the interim, she and Brewster said they think it’s important for Congress to extend unemployment benefits for laid-off workers.

“If unemployment [is not] extended... and we continue to have high unemployment, certainly those folks [will lose] their income and that will plunge them, no doubt, into the ranks of those living in poverty,” Brewster said.

For the long-term, the state needs to improve the skills of its workforce, Brewster said.

“There’s a lot of talk in Rhode Island about growing the top and knowledge-based economy and the high-tech industries,” she said. “But there’s less discussion on some of the jobs in the health care industry and the new green jobs industry that don’t require a bachelor’s degree, but do require more than high school. That’s where we really think the focus needs to be.”

“Gone are the days of the high-wage manufacturing jobs that didn’t require a lot of training,” she added. “That’s not something new, but trying to figure out where we go from there is critical.”