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Providence County poverty rate at 14%

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New U.S. Census Bureau estimates on Tuesday showed that Providence County had the highest rate of poverty in Rhode Island's four largest counties, but that it was the only one to have a decrease from 2007 to 2008.

The poverty rates by county were: Kent, 7.2 percent in 2008, 5.7 percent in 2007; Newport, 9.5 percent in 2008, 8.5 percent in 2007; Providence, 14 percent in 2008, 16 percent in 2007, and Washington, 8.2 percent in 2008, 5.3 percent in 2007, according to the American Community Survey, a yearly statistical snapshot done by the Census Bureau. Bristol County, with a population of about 50,000, fell below the American Community Survey's threshold of 65,000 for reporting detailed data.

The survey's calculation of overall poverty in Rhode Island conflicted with another Census Bureau product, the Current Population Survey, also out this month. That survey found that the number of Rhode Islanders living in poverty rose from 99,000 in 2007 to 132,000 in 2008. The difference is more than twice the survey's margin of error of 14,000, so it is considered statistically significant.

But the American Community Survey found 118,556 Rhode Islanders living below the poverty level of about \$10,990 a year. That is down from 2007, when it was 122,128. The difference is within the survey's margin of error of 8,064, so it is not considered statistically significant.

The Census Bureau, which sponsors the Current Population Survey with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, considers the Current Population survey to be the official source of U.S. poverty statistics.

Both surveys have a 90 percent confidence level, meaning they have a 10 percent chance of the true number of Rhode Islanders living in poverty being outside their margins of error.

Based on the American Community Survey numbers, the Poverty Institute at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work said the state's strong unemployment insurance benefits prevented the poverty rate from rising.

"For those laid-off workers who are actually eligible for unemployment insurance, the benefits have helped protect them from plummeting into poverty in this harsh economy," said Rachel Flum, a policy analyst at the institute.