

Census figures show more jobs, more poverty

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Even as the economy was adding 2.2 million jobs last year, more than 1 million more Americans fell into poverty, according to Census Bureau figures released Tuesday.

Chicago's 2004 poverty rate was pegged at 21.1 percent in the report -- up nearly 2 points from the previous year and worse than most major U.S. cities, including New York and Los Angeles.

A census spokeswoman said the increase in Chicago was not considered statistically significant. But Gina Guillemette of the Illinois Poverty Summit, which analyzes poverty trends, said almost 48,000 more Chicagoans lived in poverty in 2004 than in 2003 -- a total of some 571,727.

GOING TO SCHOOL PAYS

In the income equation, more education equals more money.

*The census said male high school dropouts made a median annual income of \$21,760 in 2004. A high school diploma moved it up to \$31,183; men with some college earned \$37,883, and a bachelor's degree was worth \$52,242.

*Asian men had the highest median income, at \$46,888. White men followed with a median income of \$45,573, followed by Asian females (\$36,137). Black men (\$32,686) and white women (\$32,678) made about the same. Black women earned \$28,581, followed by Hispanic men (\$26,749) and Hispanic women (\$24,030).

Andrew Herrmann

Not all are unemployed. "Families are having a harder time dealing with the basic costs of living," said Guillemette, who cited housing, health insurance premiums and taxes.

Whitney Smith, associate director of the anti-poverty Chicago Jobs Council, said while there are more jobs, many don't pay very well. The jobs where the state forecasts the most growth -- cashiers, retail, warehouse workers and janitorial -- have starting pay of only \$6 to \$7 an hour, Smith said.

Additionally, the competition for such jobs is high, as former white-collar and manufacturing workers are now battling with traditional entry-level candidates, Smith said.

Household income stays flat

Cook County also saw a slightly higher percentage of people in poverty -- 14.6 percent -- while DuPage and McHenry counties, both around 3.8 percent, ranked among the least poor of the nation's larger counties.

Nationally, 12.7 percent of Americans -- some 37 million -- lived in poverty in 2004, up 1.1 million from 2003. About a third are children.

Household income remained flat in the United States and in Illinois, and the number of Americans without health insurance edged up by about 800,000 to 45.8 million people. About 14 percent of Illinoisans have no health insurance, a number that has held steady over the last couple of years, the census reported.

The Census Bureau defined the poverty threshold in 2004 as annual income of \$19,307 for a family of four.

For Chicago, the poverty rate grew to 21.1 percent in 2004, up from 19.3 percent the previous year. Of cities of more than 1 million, Chicago ranked behind only Philadelphia, with 24.9 percent living in poverty. New York recorded 20.3 percent; Los Angeles was 18 percent.

In Chicago, the median household income dropped by \$857 between 2003 and 2004, to \$40,656.

'You really need two jobs'

Leonard Alexander Jr., 43, a married father of one who lives in the Austin neighborhood, looks for a job every day. For the last six months, since he lost his school bus driving position, it has been a fruitless search.

His wife is helping make ends meet with a low-paying post at a preschool, but "you really need two jobs to make it," Alexander said.

He describes "all the stress" of trying to make ends meet. "I really want a job badly. I have a family," he said.

Cook County's poverty rate of 14.6 percent in 2004 was up from 13.3 percent in 2003. Statewide, over the last three years, the poverty rate has been flat, averaging 12.5 percent.

The numbers marked the fourth straight year poverty increased.