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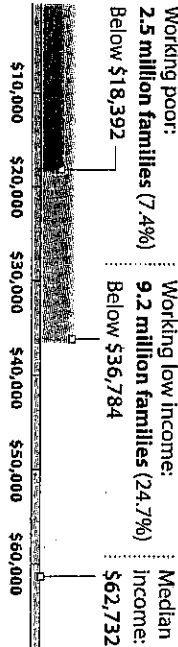
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Uphill struggle for the working poor

More than a quarter of all U.S. working families are considered to be in the low-income category.

TYPES OF WORKING FAMILIES

Based on annual household income of a family of four



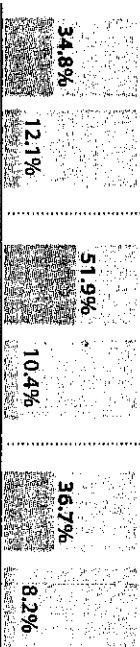
HOW LOW-INCOME WORKING FAMILIES COMPARE

Low income Other working families

At least one parent lacking high school diploma

Spend more than a third of income on housing

At least one parent lacking health insurance



Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

Chicago Tribune/Max Rust and Phil Gail

1 in 4 working families is low income, study finds

By Barbara Rose
Tribune staff reporter

One of four working American families earns wages so low they struggle to survive financially, according to a report due out Tuesday.

These 9.2 million families include 20 million children. Their breadwinners work an average of 1.2 jobs. Most are in their prime working years. And 72 percent were born in the United States.

The study, funded by the Annie E. Casey, Ford and Rockefeller

er foundations, paints a portrait of janitors, cooks, cashiers and health-care aides who barely make ends meet in a nation where good-paying jobs are out of reach for many.

"One emergency—a broken-down car, rent increase or serious illness—can disrupt the family's precarious equilibrium and plunge them into financial chaos," the report states.

The non-partisan report spotlights a growing disparity between low-wage earners and the educated skilled workers that

U.S. businesses increasingly demand.

Its release comes in the final weeks of a heated presidential campaign in which issues concerning low-income families largely have taken a back seat to those of the middle class and to worries about terrorism and the war in Iraq.

"What we haven't come to grips with is how large this number is" of working low-income families, said Brandon Roberts, co-author of "Working Hard, Falling Short."

"This is an issue of our na-

tional competitiveness. If these families are not poised to succeed, it should concern all of us."

President Bush's campaign stresses tax incentives to encourage businesses to hire new workers, while Sen. John Kerry has called for an increase in the \$5.15 hourly minimum wage to \$7 by 2007.

The report looked at families earning less than twice the federal poverty level, or less than \$36,784 for a family of four. The

PLEASE SEE WORKERS, BACK PAGE

WORKERS:

Illinois is in bottom half in job training

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U.S. median income for a family of four is \$82,732.

They include families like that of Chicago's Miriam Perez, 39, a day laborer who worked double shifts chopping vegetables or packing tomatoes to support her five children until that work dried up.

"Sometimes I don't sleep very much," said Perez, who earns the state mandated \$5.50 hourly minimum wage. "When I can get (a double shift) I take it to get the overtime."

Illinois news mixed

Illinois, one of 12 states with minimum wages above the federal standard, gets a mixed report from the national study and a companion report.

A total of 23 percent of the state's working families are low income, slightly better than the national average of 27 percent.

Yet Illinois compared poorly in several important educational measures. Thirty-four percent of Illinois' low-income working families are headed by a parent without a high school diploma or the equivalent, ranking the state 40th nationally.

Illinois also spends less on education and training than the national average per adult without a high school diploma. The state spends \$14.88 per non-degree adult compared with an average \$38.99 nationally, ranking No. 33 among all states.

More alarming, less than one-third of Illinois adults enrolled in high school degree or equivalency programs are successful.



Day laborer Miriam Perez (center) works at the minimum wage of \$5.50 per hour in her effort to support her family.

Tribune photo by José M. Osorio

according to a February report by the nonprofit Chicago Jobs Council and Women Employed Institute.

"It's going to be a challenge for Illinois to attract new jobs to the state" without a better record, said Rachel Urzuli, senior policy associate at Women Employed.

The national report calls for increasing the number of low-income working adults who complete education and training programs.

More than one-third of working low-income families have a parent who didn't finish high school.

The report also calls for improving wages, benefits and supports for low-income working families and increasing the number of good jobs.

Poverty jobs nearly one-fifth

In Illinois, 18 percent of all jobs are in occupations where the median wage is less than the federal poverty threshold.

Yolanda Starling, 25, a single mother of three, works in one such job. She earns \$7.14 per hour working for food service company Sodexho as a cashier at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.

Her hours recently were cut

to 27 per week, providing her with less than \$1,000 per month.

Her monthly rent is \$500, placing her squarely in the majority of working low-income families who spend more than one-third of their income on housing.

"I need better wages," Starling said. "Other than that it'd be a good job."

Her goal is to attend night classes at Kennedy-King College to become a licensed practical nurse. "I'm trying to start back before Christmas," she said.

Perez, the day laborer, sets aside money from the combined \$2,000 per month she and her 18-

year-old son bring home to pay his tuition at Wilbur Wright College.

Ricardo Sanchez studied Monday morning in a computer lab at the nonprofit Goodwill Industries International Inc. after getting off his shift stocking shelves at a Jewel Food store at Ohio and State streets, where he makes \$7.70 per hour.

The 21-year-old Chicago native is studying to complete his high school equivalency, but he's also looking for a second job to support his pregnant wife and her two children. His wife works at a Lane Bryant store.

They recently ate rice and bo-

Real wages for workers without high school diplomas declined 19 percent over the last 30 years, while real wages increased 16 percent for those with college degrees.

logna sandwiches for dinner when they ran short of cash. "I'm looking for anything just keep looking," Sanet said.

The national report cites challenging environment.

One in five jobs in the U.S. is in an occupation that paid median hourly wage less than \$8.84 in 2002—roughly the federal poverty threshold.

Minimum-wage jobs have lowered their ability to keep a family out of poverty since a high point in 1968. Then, annual earnings of full-time minimum wage earners totaled 1.2 times the poverty threshold for a family of three according to the report.

Last year, annual minimum wage earnings represented 10 percent of the poverty threshold.

Those at the bottom of the educational ladder are lost ground: Real wages for workers without high school diplomas declined 19 percent over the last 30 years, while real wages increased 16 percent for those with college degrees.

"Two related warning signs are sounding loudly and urgently," the report states. "First, millions of American families are struggling to meet their basic needs. Second, our economic structure faces a major challenge finding skilled and well-educated workers, without whom U.S. businesses will be hard-pressed to compete."