

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

POVERTY'S GRIP Suburbs share in suffering

Sunday, June 1, 2008 3:25 AM

BY RITA PRICE AND MARK FERENCHIK
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



The Slone family is not living in poverty by government standards, so Ken and his wife, Ruthie, support their kids, Lindsey, 4, and Ryan, 7, on his salary of less than \$25,000. Mrs. Slone, a college graduate, lost her marketing job four years ago.

The poorest | Rankings of metropolitan areas based on the percent of people living below the poverty level

1. Louisville, Ky.	13.3%	10. San Diego	11.7
2. Columbus	13.1	11. Charlotte, N.C.	11.5
3. Austin, Texas	13.0	12. Portland, Ore.	11.5
4. Nashville, Tenn.	13.0	13. Indianapolis	11.2
5. Milwaukee	13.0	14. Kansas City, Mo.	10.7
6. Cleveland	12.5	15. Raleigh, N.C.	10.2
7. Chicago	11.9	16. Minneapolis	8.9
8. Cincinnati	11.9		
9. Jacksonville, Fla.	11.8		
		United States	12.1%

Source: Community Research Partners study based on U.S. Census data for 2006, of cities that are in Ohio, near Columbus, or considered similar to Columbus.

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ruthie and Ken Slone have a house in a subdivision, vegetables in the garden and two happy, active kids.

The couple also has an income so low, they must rely on food pantries, thrift stores and government-subsidized health care for their children.

"It's very humbling," said Mrs. Slone, a college graduate who lost her marketing job four years ago. "I never thought I would be in this situation."

With a household income of less than \$25,000 a year, the Slones teeter just above the federal poverty line of \$21,200 for a family of four. They are frugal and carry little debt. Still, the poverty level, the government's estimate of the minimum income for self-sufficiency, falls far short, the Slones and others say.

"We're just lucky we've had family and friends who can help," Mrs. Slone said.

Politics has long kept the nation's poverty-rate formula from the overhaul it badly needs, experts say. Meanwhile, poverty's grip -- by almost every measure -- has tightened and spread.

Central Ohio seems particularly hard hit.

The Columbus metro area had the second-highest poverty rate among 16 similar metropolitan areas, including Cincinnati and Cleveland, according to a 2008 report the Columbus Partnership commissioned. Only the Louisville, Ky., area has a higher rate of poverty.

"I would not have expected Columbus to be near the bottom," Columbus Partnership Chief Executive Robert Milbourne said. "It was alarming."

Columbus and its suburbs don't have the bombed-out look of some Rust Belt cities. The large number of people employed by government and Ohio State University has traditionally sheltered the city from economic downturns, although less so recently.

Although the city of Columbus has a lower poverty rate than the city of Cleveland -- 20.7 percent for Columbus in 2006 compared with 27 percent in Cleveland -- experts say poverty spreads outside the core city and beyond Columbus' boundaries.

"People don't have any idea there are families living in the Dublin school district living in poverty," said Evelyn Behm, a vice president at the Mid-Ohio Food Bank.

About one in 10 Dublin schools students receive free or reduced-price lunches.

About 13 percent of Worthington schools students -- 1,255 of 9,567 children -- are eligible for free lunches.

"It's a misperception that (poverty) is concentrated in the central city," said Bill LaFayette, economist for the Columbus Chamber.

The Slones live in the Westerville school district. The solid suburban trappings of the area sometimes clash with the reality of their budget.

"I've always been an avid thrifter and yard-saler," said Mrs. Slone, 35. "But I did go through a rough period when I thought, 'Wait. Do I have to shop here?' I was no longer doing it because I wanted to. I had no choice."

She had earned more than twice their current income until the company she worked for cut its marketing division. Mrs. Slone was eight months pregnant with their second child. A year later, she learned she had thyroid cancer.

After her treatment ended, she tried unsuccessfully to find a job. Mr. Slone, 37, is working full time and hopes to find a better job after he graduates in the fall with a bachelor's degree in business information systems.

They have managed to hang onto their house, but their budget has no margin.

Mrs. Slone said she clips coupons, swaps child-care with other parents, buys only food on sale and visits parks for free entertainment.

The other day she found herself excited to snag a tube of kids' toothpaste -- the equivalent of a luxury item -- at the Westerville Area Resource Ministry's pantry.

For now, Mr. Slone works as a bill collector. He needs the job but aches for the people he contacts.

"It's been very hard for him doing this," his wife said.

The people on the other end of the phone might be surprised to know how much he understands.

rprice@dispatch.com

mferenchik@dispatch.com
