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Poverty worsens in city; 26% live below the line

Milwaukee has 8th-highest rate of large U.S. cities

By **BILL GLAUBER** and **BEN POSTON**
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Posted: Aug. 28, 2007

Johnniemae Ashford is a 41-year-old African-American woman caught in a poverty trap.

Advertisement She is raising five grandchildren and takes home \$187 every two weeks as a patient-care worker. She needs pots, pans, beds, groceries and cash for a first rent check so she can move her family out of her sister's house and into a new home.

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"I need help," Ashford said. "It's just bad out here right now."

Ashford's story is hardly unique, and

she's hardly alone.

More than one in four Milwaukee residents lived in poverty in 2006, according to figures released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Milwaukee had the eighth-highest rate of poverty among large cities in the United States with 26.2%, or 143,000 people living below the federal poverty line. In 2000, the city's poverty rate was 21.3%.

"It's getting slightly worse in the city," said Marc Levine, director for the Center of Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "What we're facing is a genuine culmination of two decades of economic decline and the failure of the city's leadership to confront that decline."

Census



Photo/Ri

Johnniemae Ashford raising five grandchildren, including Zamiliano Ashford, takes \$187 every two weeks to support the family. Like many other Milwaukee residents, the family uses the House of Peace community center food pantry to get by.

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Wisconsin's poverty rate was 11% with 581,000 state residents living in poverty, including 192,000 children. Nearly one in three of the state's African-American families and a quarter of the state's Hispanic families lived below the poverty level.

David Pate, an assistant professor in social work at UWM, called the poverty numbers "tragic and despairing."

"As a researcher, I do think it can turn around," he said. "We need to constantly raise awareness and raise attention."

The average median household income in the state was \$48,772, a 3.5% increase from 2005.

Nationally, the poverty rate fell for the first time in the 21st century, from 12.6% in 2005 to 12.3% in 2006, while median household income rose slightly for the second consecutive year, to \$48,201 in 2006.

Mirror image

In many ways, southeastern Wisconsin mirrors what is happening nationally - with an impoverished inner-city core surrounded by wealthier suburbs.

Sherrie Tussler, executive director of the Hunger Task Force, said

Tuesday she dropped off 150 lunches for children living in poverty just a few miles from suburban shopping malls where "people are dining out routinely and can afford a \$4 cup of coffee."

"You can choose to ignore poverty very easily based on where you live," she said.

Someone like Ashford can't ignore poverty. She lives with it every day, struggling far below poverty threshold - around \$20,444 in household income for a family of four with two children.

"I don't know anyone who has money," Ashford said.

With the help of the House of Peace community center in Milwaukee, Ashford hopes to scrape together enough food and money to survive another month and move into a new home.

"I try my best to get my grandchildren in a safe environment," Ashford said, holding her 2-year-old granddaughter Zamiliano.

Brother Mark Carrico of House of Peace said his food pantry has seen greater traffic in recent

Year	Rate	Population
2005	12.6%	5,810,000
2006	12.3%	5,810,000
2007	11.0%	5,810,000

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By The Number

11%
Poverty rate in Wisconsin (581,000 state residents)

18.5%
Poverty rate in Milwaukee County

2.7%
Poverty rate in Waukesha County

The poverty threshold is around \$20,444 household income for a family of four with two children.

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months.

"We've gotten down to bare bones a time or two," he said.

Linda Barnes, a social worker at the center, said she was not surprised that one out of four residents lives in poverty.

"It's still hurtful," she said. "It really brings it into focus how bad the poverty level is, and it's getting any better."

Yet even the city's impoverished neighborhoods are but a few minutes drive from greater wealth.

Waukesha County had the fifth-lowest rate of poverty among large counties in the United States with 3.9%, or 14,606 people, living in poverty. Waukesha County also had the second highest median income in the state with \$69,398.

Ozaukee County had the second-lowest rate of poverty among small counties in the United States with 2.7%, or 2,291 people. Ozaukee County also had the highest median income of Wisconsin counties with \$69,452 in 2006.

Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, said residents of wealthier counties should be just as focused on poverty as those in Milwaukee.

"Poverty is an expensive proposition," she said. "It costs more in terms of people having poor care outcomes. People who live in poverty are more likely to get in trouble with the law so with higher criminal justice costs and people at poverty aren't earning to their potential. It is a cost of us."

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