

Poverty's newest victims: Children

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Diane Stevenson / Statesman Journal
Family Building Blocks puts on "Family Night" Thursday at Riverfront Park. Eighty percent of Family Building Blocks clients fall below the poverty level. Anahi Paredes, 2, and her brother Vidal, 6, of Dallas, enjoy the evening.

Young adults are the recession's lost generation. In record numbers, they're struggling to find work, shunning long-distance moves to live with mom and dad, delaying marriage and raising children out of wedlock, if they're becoming parents at all. The unemployment rate for them is the highest since World War II and risk living in poverty more than others.

Data released Thursday from the 2010 American Community Survey show the wrenching impact of a recession that officially ended in mid-2009. There are missed opportunities and dim prospects for a generation of mostly 20-somethings and 30-somethings coming of age in a prolonged period of joblessness.

"We have a monster jobs problem, and young people are the biggest losers," said Andrew Sum,

an economist and director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

He noted that recent college graduates getting by on waitressing, bartending and odd jobs will have to compete with new graduates for entry-level career positions when the job market does improve.

"Their really high levels of underemployment and unemployment will haunt young people for at least another decade," Sum said.

Richard Freeman, an economist at Harvard University, said young people "will be scarred and they will be called the 'lost generation' — in that their careers would not be the same way if we had avoided this economic disaster."

The latest figures also show a rebound in the foreign-born population to 40 million, or 12.9 percent, the highest share since 1920. The 1.4 million increase from 2009 was the biggest since the mid-decade housing boom and could fuel debate in this election season about immigration strategy.

In Oregon, the number moved to 9.8 percent, which wasn't a statistically significant increase.

Most immigrants continue to be low-skilled workers from Latin America, with growing numbers from Asia also arriving. An estimated 11.2 million people are in the U.S. illegally.

People age 65 and older tended to return to or stay in their jobs, accounting for the few employment gains in recent months. About 1 in 6 older people is now in the labor force, with Oregon just below that at 14.8 percent. The national figure is at its the highest level since the 1960s, before more generous Social Security and Medicare benefits made it more attractive to retire.

Employment among people age 16-29 was 55.3 percent, with Oregon right around the national average. That's compared with 67.3 percent in 2000; it's the lowest since the end of World War II.

Young men who lacked a college degree were most likely to lose jobs because of reduced demand for jobs in construction, manufacturing and transportation during the downturn. Among teenagers, employment was less than 30 percent.

The employment-to-population ratio for all age groups from 2007-2010 dropped faster than for any similar period since the government began tracking the data in 1948. In the past year, 43 of the 50 largest metropolitan areas continued to post declines in employment: Charlotte, N.C., Jacksonville, Fla., Las Vegas, Phoenix, Los Angeles and Detroit. Each experienced a severe housing bust, budget deficit or meltdown in industries such as banking or manufacturing.

Without work, young adults aren't starting careers and lives in new cities.

Among adults 18-34, the share of long-distance moves across state lines fell last year to roughly 3.2 million people, or 4.4 percent, the lowest level since World War II. For college graduates, long-distance moves dipped to 2.4 percent.

Oregon saw a slightly larger share of young movers, with 6.2 percent of those 18-34 coming from out of state.

Opting to stay put, roughly 5.9 million Americans age 25-34 last year lived with their parents, an increase of 25 percent from before the recession. Men are nearly twice as likely as women to live with their parents.

Marriages fell to a record low last year of just 51.4 percent among adults, compared with 57 percent in 2000. Among adults 25-34, marriage was at 44.2 percent, also a new low.

By race and ethnicity, 31 percent of young black men lived in their parents' homes, compared with 21 percent of young Latino men and 15 percent of young white men. At the state level, New York had the highest share of young men living with their parents at 21 percent, followed by New Jersey and Hawaii, all states with higher costs of living.

Younger women across all race and ethnic groups had fewer children compared with 2008.

In Oregon there were 16 percent fewer births among 20-34 year-olds. Nationally births declined 6 percent last year even though the number of women in this group increased by more than 1 million, according to an analysis of census data by Kenneth Johnson, sociology professor at the University of New Hampshire.

Never before has such a drop in births occurred when the population of young adults increased in at least 15 years.

"Are people just delaying births, or does this represent a real loss of babies that won't be replaced? During the Great Depression, there was a permanent loss of births — they were never made up," Johnson said.

Home ownership declined for a fourth consecutive year, to 65.4 percent, following a peak of 67.3 percent in 2006. Oregon followed the trend, dropping from 63.1 percent to 62.5 percent

"Many young adults are essentially postponing adulthood and all of the family responsibilities and extra costs that go along with it," said Mark Mather, an associate vice president at the private Population Reference Bureau. He described a shift toward a new U.S. norm, one that's commonly seen in Europe, in which more people wait until their 30s to leave the parental nest.

"Some of these changes started before the recession but now they are accelerating, with effects on families that could be long term," Mather said.

The District of Columbia plus 14 states had the largest ratios of college graduates to high-school dropouts, more than 3 to 1. Several of these places, including the district and states with larger immigrant populations, had the widest income gaps between rich and poor.

The number of Hispanic children in poverty rose by half a million to 6.1 million last year, making a majority of the increase in total child poverty. Hispanics now comprise 37 percent of children in poverty, compared with 30 percent for whites and 27 percent for blacks.

"We are really at a crossroads," said William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution. "These new young immigrants and their children need a pathway to the middle class — good educations, affordable housing and jobs — at the same time federal and state budgets are strapped for funds. While we face tough choices, the quality of our future labor force depends on meeting their needs."

Other census findings:

-About 1 in 4 families with children is headed by single mothers, a record. Among young families with a head of household younger than 30, the poverty rate jumped from 30 percent in 2007 to 37 percent. In contrast, poverty remained at a low 5.7 percent for families with a head of household 65 or older.

-The number of households receiving food stamps swelled by 2 million to 13.6 million, meaning that nearly 1 in 8 receives the government aid. Among households receiving food stamps, more than half have children.

The 2010 numbers are from the American Community Survey, which queries 3 million households. In some cases, figures are supplemented with data from the Current Population Survey to establish historical trends.