

# Poverty rate hits 17.5 percent in Nashville

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## Brookings Institution study finds suburbs have only slight rise

By Naomi Snyder  
THE TENNESSEAN

Marilyn Musser cleaned house for a psychiatrist until a few weeks ago, when the psychiatrist lost her own job and couldn't afford Musser anymore.

So, Musser showed up Friday at St. Luke's Community House in Nashville, where emergency free food boxes are delivered to local residents. "There are no jobs," she said. "People get laid off and they can't find work, and the pay rates went down."

A study released last week by the nonprofit Brookings Institution says that while times are tough all over, Nashville has fared worse than the suburbs that surround it. The city of Nashville added about 32,110 people living below the poverty line between 2000 and 2008, a gain of 4.2 percentage points, reaching 17.5 percent of the city's population.

The suburbs as a group, which comprises 12 surrounding counties, saw an increase of 22,129 people living in poverty, a rise of less than one percentage point. Fewer than 1 in 10 people in the suburbs live below the poverty line, Brookings said.

Those numbers contradict the general trend in the 94 largest metro areas in the country, which saw suburban poverty grow faster than urban poverty in the same time period, the study group said.

With the latest economic blows from the recession since the 2008 figures were tabulated, the Brookings Institution, a research organization that does work on poverty and urban-suburban demographics, now estimates that nearly 20 percent of Nashville lives below the federal poverty line.

That means income of less than \$21,834 a year for a family of four.

Those who work on poverty issues cite a variety of reasons for the rising poverty in Nashville: A flight of the middle class to the suburbs for what they perceive as better schools, lackluster job growth and low educational levels all have plunged more of the city's residents into poverty during the last decade or so.

"The kinds of jobs that were sustaining the neighborhood in the past aren't there," said Christopher Sanders, the development director for St. Luke's Community House in West Nashville. "People are running out of options."

He said many of the manufacturing and construction jobs on which residents once depended have disappeared.

Job growth has been strong in the past decade in some of Nashville's suburbs, but there are obstacles to getting to them, nonprofit leaders say.

Williamson County saw an influx of corporate headquarters and retail stores in the last decade, with job growth of more than 30 percent between 2001 and 2009. Rutherford County has seen 20 percent growth in employment in the time period.

Davidson County, in contrast, has seen employment levels fall during the same time period by more than 4 percent.

## Transportation lacking

The Rev. William Barnes, a retired pastor who worked 30 years for Edgehill United Methodist Church here, said 30 percent of the people in Edgehill don't have cars. "The public transportation system doesn't really connect well to the suburbs," he said. (There is an Anchor Trailways Runner shuttle funded with federal transportation dollars that takes people from Nashville to Franklin twice a day. It costs \$9.24 per round trip, with a 15 percent discount for frequent riders).

Also, places such as Williamson County have jobs but not much affordable or subsidized housing for low-income people, Barnes said.

Eddie Latimer, the chief executive officer of Affordable Housing Resources in Nashville, said developers who get tax credits to build affordable housing get higher scores on their funding applications if they locate in neighborhoods that are already poor, not ones that are wealthy.

Kristi Daugherty, who was picking up free boxes of food Friday at St. Luke's, said she wasn't much interested in working or living in the suburbs, because her family lives in Nashville.

"I need their help with child care," she said.

The mayor's office issued a statement from Mayor Karl Dean, who was in Washington on Friday, saying, "Poverty has always been an issue in urban areas, and it's something we have to stay focused on in terms of housing, transportation, health and other issues.

"But the best way to end the cycle of poverty is through education, which is one of the reasons I have made improving schools my top priority."

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