

Scars of recession hard to hide in Jackson with higher poverty and more families seeking assistance

Published: Sunday, October 23, 2011, 6:30 PM Updated: Sunday, October 23, 2011, 6:45 PM

Jackson Citizen Patriot

Though economists marked the end of nation's prolonged recession in 2009, its effects have undeniably lingered. Homes are worth less, foreclosures continue to rise and families own fewer vehicles, work fewer hours and earn less money. **Median household income has declined statewide**, U.S. Census Bureau statistics show. Though there was little change in Jackson County, where median income was \$42,912 in 2006 compared to \$42,862 in 2010, that doesn't mean families haven't been struggling. Jackson saw a spike in the number of families in poverty and the rate increased from 7.1 percent in 2006 to 10.6 percent in 2010, according to Census figures.

The number of those seeking aid through local social service agencies also exploded between 2006 and 2010. The number of Jackson area families receiving food assistance nearly doubled during that time period, rising from 7,819 in 2006 to 14,392 in 2010, according to statistics from the Jackson County Department of Human Services. The volume of clients visiting the Community Action Agency — a private nonprofit that serves Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties — grew from an average of 9,600 between 2006-08 to 23,912 in 2010, said spokeswoman Jessie Murray. The waiting lists for some programs are unprecedented, she said.

Job loss has been a major contributing factor, said Kate Martin, planning and community development director for the Community Action Agency. "We've actually been in a recession for a decade in Michigan," Martin said. "It's just been down, down, down."

Out of the three counties the agency serves, Jackson had the greatest job loss. The number of jobs in the county fell about 12 percent, sinking from 72,741 in 2006 to 64,063 in 2010, according to an agency report. Though some jobs are coming back, they are typically low-wage, so families cannot make ends meet on one income alone, Martin said. The demographics of the agencies clients also have changed. More are men and more are white and middle-aged, Martin said. Most lost jobs during the recession, she said. "They are the new poor and we're starting to see them," Martin said.