



CRAIG KOHLRUSS / THE FRESNO BEE

Delilah Hernandez, 33, says she has been homeless for most of her life and is unable to work due to a disability. She has floated around various homeless encampments, including this tent city at H and San Benito streets. A health advocate says the poverty in Fresno is still overwhelming.

Fresno poverty numbers improve

Study shows drop in concentration of working poor between 1999, 2005.

By Kerri Ginis / The Fresno Bee

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A new report confirms a much-noticed finding that Fresno is home to the most concentrated urban poverty in the country -- but also finds that the city has made gains in recent years.

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The housing boom and general upswing in the economy that Fresno experienced during the first half of this decade led to a 4-point drop in the percentage of poor people living in the city's poorest neighborhoods, according to the report being released today by the Brookings Institution.

 [From The Bee archives: Poverty in Fresno \(2005\)](#)

In 1999, 34% of the working poor were concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods primarily in southeast and west Fresno. By 2005, that had declined to 30%.

But researchers warn the improvements could quickly erode given the current economic downturn.

"As the economy turns another corner here that could spell trouble for the region," said Alan Berube, co-author of the Washington D.C.-based Brookings Institution report. "But I think what this shows is that [poverty] is not an intractable problem. At least in the context of a decent economy, low-income families can live in somewhat better neighborhoods."

This is the second Brookings report in three years to highlight Fresno's high concentration of poverty. In 2005, using census data, the Brookings Institution said Fresno had the highest concentration of poverty among the 50 largest cities in the United States. That influential report was widely cited by politicians and others and spurred efforts to try to improve the plight of the city's impoverished residents.

The most recent analysis, using federal tax data, shows the concentration of people living in poverty increased in many other parts of the country. But Fresno and other cities in the western U.S., including San Diego, Riverside and Los Angeles, showed decreases in the concentration of the working poor. The Sacramento-Roseville region had no areas that met the definition of concentrated working-poor neighborhoods.

"What we are showing in the analysis is that the concentrated working-poverty rate is related to the overall economic performance," Berube said. Fresno's economy performed well through 2005 "and that seemed to alleviate some of the problem."

Researchers looked at the number of people living in high-poverty ZIP codes who received the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (or EITC) in 1999 and 2005. Families eligible for the credit typically have incomes below \$30,000, Berube said.

The analysis found that the number of Fresno neighborhoods in which at least 40% of tax filers received the tax credit declined from 16 to 12. There are two explanations for the decline: Either people who lived in those neighborhoods moved elsewhere or people in those neighborhoods began earning too much money to be eligible for the EITC.

"I suspect it has more to do with people earning more money than they did in 1999 because of the improved economic standards," Berube said.

But even with that small improvement, some agencies and individuals who work closely with Fresno's working poor say they don't see much change in the concentration of Fresno's poor neighborhoods. Many say the "Tale of Two Cities," which Mayor Alan Autry dubbed Fresno's gaping economic divide during his 2000 election campaign, hasn't gone away.

"I think this community doesn't recognize the depth and breadth of poverty that exists here," said Amy Chubb, executive director of Fresno Works for Better Health Advocacy Center, an organization working to alleviate poverty.

Chubb said residents are still living in tents, in unsanitary conditions without running water, just blocks from downtown. She said the lack of education, limited job training, and low wages are contributing to the city's high poverty rate.

"It's hard for me to believe that in the 21st century we have people living in Third World conditions like this," she said.

Others agree and said not enough is being done to lift people out of poverty. The Fresno Metro Ministry -- a multifaith organization that promotes social, economic and environmental justice -- said the concentration of the poor may actually be increasing.

Many people are having to move in with relatives because their low-income apartments have been sold or the rents increased. Others have lost jobs because of the citrus freeze last year. And this year's drought is forcing more people to move into friends' and relatives' homes.

"We're seeing more concentration of people in smaller places," said Edie Jessup, Metro Ministry's hunger and nutrition manager. "We still have huge issues to take care of."

City officials say they know there is more work to do, but they believe they have made strides in helping poorer residents.

Mayor Alan Autry said the city has invested \$47 million to put curbs, sidewalks and gutters in neighborhoods throughout southwest Fresno. The city also put an empowerment zone in place to give businesses financial incentives to move into some of the poorer areas of the city.

In addition, the city has dedicated more police to tackling the gang problem in these neighborhoods, opened community centers and a regional sports complex.

"We are better off by every measure now than we were 8 to 10 years ago," Mayor Alan Autry said. "More things are in place ... to get through these difficult times. We won't take a giant step backwards."

City officials must look at long-term ways to improve people's lives -- even during tough economic times, said Manuel Pastor, an economist and geography professor from the University of Southern California who has studied Fresno's poverty issues.

Pastor said Fresno needs to diversify its economy, improve job training and increase access to education, health care and jobs that pay more than minimum wage.

"If you want the Fresno economy to turn around in a long-lasting and fundamental way, your basic asset is your people -- making sure they're well trained and well treated," Pastor said. "Then you have a region that is ripe for thriving in any type of economy."

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