

POVERTY IN CAYUGA COUNTY

'That could be me, that could be you': Poverty expanding in Cayuga County



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AUBURN | Beneath a railroad bridge that crosses the Owasco River stands a home.

Set up in Auburn Correctional Facility's shadow, the make-shift dwelling is comprised of a cement tube just roomy enough for an adult to crouch in. It is stuffed with a nest of mismatched fabric and backed by a wall of rotting, wooden planks.

A second cement circle — filled with broken bottles, charred logs and feces — functions as garbage bin, stove and bathroom.

It is not much, but it is someone's home.

As a train chugs across the bridge, James Breslin, director of program services for Auburn's Rescue Mission, stands on a cement base and points at different locations surrounding the outlet — places where a portion for Cayuga County's homeless population, numbering at an estimated 1,070, have sought shelter.

The county's homeless contingent illustrates the most extreme example of poverty — of what can happen when people run out of options.

And that endangered, impoverished population is growing.

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Cayuga County has never been immune to poverty.

Like the rest of the nation, the county has long been home to a faction of residents who have struggled to find work, food or, in the most dire cases, shelter. But over the past decade, local advocates have seen the poor population it serves steadily expand.

In the past year alone, the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency has helped more residents keep the heat and lights on with emergency utility assistance, given out more free clothing and sheltered more victims of domestic violence.

According to Trish Ottley, the agency's marketing and development director, C/SCAA has seen a need for weatherization services in a larger number of neighborhoods — many of which, 10

years ago, belonged to the middle class.

"There's poorer neighborhoods," Ottley said. "I think there's a lot of that shift."

Between 2008 and 2013, Cayuga County has witnessed an annual increase in the number of residents who need temporary assistance, food stamps and supplemental security income. The number of residents requiring TA alone, for example, has nearly doubled over the past five years.

Homelessness has also increased.

From 2011 to now, Cayuga County's homeless population — according to Auburn's Rescue Mission — has risen from 475 people to 685 people. If you add in the homeless helped by social services, that number rises to 1,070.

"There's a lot more than people think," Breslin said.

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When describing the portion of Cayuga County that struggles to provide for itself, it's impossible to paint a single face.

It is residents who have jobs, but don't make enough to make ends meet. It is seniors who, despite having worked all their adult lives, cannot survive on a fixed monthly income.

Cayuga County's poor include veterans who have fought for their country, and disabled residents who have injuries that make working impossible. It includes single mothers— along with a large number of women who faced poverty and homelessness after escaping abusive partners.

And, most devastatingly, it is huge portion of the county's children.

"It looks like a lot of different things," Ottley said. "I don't think there's one easy way to sum it up."

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the 2012 American Community Survey, Cayuga County's overall poverty rate is 12.2 percent. Among residents under the age of 18, the poverty rate jumps to 17.9 percent.

For a one-member household, the federal government sets the poverty line at \$11,670. For a household of four, the poverty bar rises to \$23,850.

Many portions of the county have poverty rates that rise well above the county, state and national levels.

In Auburn, for example, about one out of every four of the city's children live in poverty. Across the city, 18.4 percent of all residents are poor.

Among the city's women, the poverty rate grows. Single women with children under 18, for example, have a 38.5 percent poverty rate. Among black, single mothers, the poverty rate rises to a staggering 62.7 percent — a percent well above both Syracuse and Rochester's rates.

Beyond city limits, many of Cayuga County's rural residents also battle indigence — often at levels worse than city, state and national levels.

"There's a lot of isolated rural residents living in poverty throughout the county that live in very poor housing conditions," Ottley said.

In Cato, Locke and Summerhill, more than a quarter of all children are poor. Rates reach the most dire levels in Genoa and Conquest, where well over one out of every three children live in poverty.

According to Laurie Piccolo, C/SCAA's executive director, adults in poverty make impossible decisions on a daily basis — choosing between washing their clothes at the laundromat or paying to keep the lights on. Cash-strapped parents often decide to go hungry, feeding their children instead of themselves.

"Somebody may have to sit there and decide, 'Am I paying the rent this month? Am I paying the gas and electric?'" Piccolo said. "That's fairly long term."

And when residents do opt to purchase food and pay rent late, Ottley said many Cayuga County landlords impose high penalties that tenants cannot afford to pay — often leading to eviction.

For children, living in poverty casts both long and short shadows.

When winter roars, some poor children may be forced to walk to school without the protective warmth of a coat. Others wake up on Christmas morning without presents under the tree. And too many go to bed with growling, hungry stomachs.

"That's a whole emotional experience for a child growing up in poverty that they're living differently than their peers," Ottley said. "There's long term impacts from that."

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The roots of poverty are varied and vast.

Some residents are vaulted into economic straits by fires or floods, divorces or car accidents. Many are born into poverty, growing up in families that are cash-strapped.

But for many, it is the symptom of another struggle.

In Cayuga County, Ottley said poverty frequently can be traced back to domestic violence, mental illness and addiction. A plethora of low-wage jobs and a lack of affordable child care also contribute to the problem.

"Finding employment that pays a living wage is really challenging, and part of that has to do with the mix of jobs that are available here in the community," she said. "There's a lot of minimum-wage jobs, but at the same time, there's a lot of people trying to get those minimum wage jobs."

When residents try to lift themselves out of poverty, Piccolo said there is much to impede their progress.

With education gaps and jobs paychecks that don't provide enough to get by, many adults cannot afford to pursue the skills necessary to find a better-paying career.

"The individuals are not able to improve their living because of a lack of education," she said. "It's the skill set that they have that traps them into that lower-paying position."

And with a lack of affordable, quality housing, many Cayuga County residents — both inside and outside of the city — struggle to foot large rental bills for homes that are infested with mold, roaches and bedbugs.

Outside of Auburn, impoverished residents face an additional set of obstacles.

Piccolo said rural residents struggle in their geographical isolation, traveling long distances for work, shopping and doctors appointments. If a car breaks down, the lack of public transportation leaves some people stranded.

And when unemployed residents, whether rural or urban, do manage to get hired, Ottley said they lose public assistance — and quickly discover their jobs do not pay enough to survive.

"It's not a sustainable situation for them because there's no transition out of poverty," she said. "It's kind of black and white."

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Struggling to survive is never part of a life plan.

So when it comes to seeking aid, Ottley, Piccolo and Breslin agreed that asking for help is not always an easy task to stomach — especially considering the wealth of stigmas that come with being poor.

"It's so easy to blame people and to accuse them, and that is part of the problem. When people really do need help, it's a humiliation for them," Ottley said. "There's nobody who wants to be standing in line at a food pantry."

When she sees the mix of people waiting for food at her agency's food pantry — the single mother, the elderly couple, the disabled veteran — Piccolo sees how hard it is for her clients to admit the need for assistance.

"There's that perception that we're giving them the food, that we're making life easy for them. I don't see that," she said. "We're extending a helping hand."

And since life does not always go as planned, Piccolo encouraged skeptical residents not to look so disparagingly at those in need.

"Honestly, we're all one accident away from being in poverty," she said. "That could be me. That could be you."

Cayuga County's homeless population

Historically in Cayuga County:

- Less than 2 percent of the homeless are veterans
- 6.7 percent of the homeless population is chronically homeless
- 26.7 percent of the homeless have a disability
- 17.4 percent of the homeless are mentally ill
- 5.8 percent abuse alcohol, 4.8 percent abuse drugs
- 8.5 percent abuse both alcohol and drugs

Homeless Management Information Systems (2013)

- 685 homeless people enrolled (464 adults, 221 children)
- 145 homeless families (95 single-parent families, 50 two-parent families)
- Gender of the homeless: 51.2 percent female; 48.7 percent male
- Age of the homeless: 32.3 percent between 0 to 17 years; 65.7 percent between 18 to 61 years; 2 percent 65 years and older
- Race of the homeless: 70 percent white; 20 percent black; 8 percent Hispanic/Latino; 10 percent other
- Veterans: 15.5 percent (may be skewed by Chapel House, which accepts homeless veterans from 18 counties)

Cayuga County Department of Health & Human Services (2013)

- 324 people were placed in motels (233 adults, 91 children)

Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency (2013)

- 52 homeless victims of domestic violence were housed in C/SCAA's domestic violence shelter (29 adults, 23 children)

Cayuga County's 2012 population in poverty

By age

- *17 and under*: 17.9 percent
- *18 to 64*: 11.3 percent
- *65 and up*: 7.6 percent

By gender

- *Male*: 10.4 percent
- *Female*: 13.9 percent
- *Employed male*: 5.2 percent
- *Employed female*: 6.5 percent
- *Unemployed male*: 24.1 percent
- *Unemployed female*: 39.3 percent

(Note: The median income of all male full-time workers is \$46,446; the median income of all female full-time workers is \$35,790)

By race

- *White*: 11.3 percent
- *Black*: 40.3 percent
- *Hispanic/Latino*: 24.21 percent
- *American Indian*: 3.5 percent
- *Asian*: 14.3 percent

By family

- *Married couples*: 3.6 percent
- *Married couples with children under 18*: 7 percent
- *Single female householder*: 23.9 percent
- *Single female householder with children under 18*: 34.7 percent
- *Black single female householder with children under 18*: 62.7 percent

By work experience

- *Worked full-time, year-round in past year*: 1.6 percent
- *Worked less than full-time, year-round in past year*: 36.1 percent
- *Did not work*: 36.2 percent

Auburn's 2012 population in poverty

By age

- *17 and under*: 24.2 percent
- *18 to 64*: 17.9 percent
- *65 and up*: 12.5 percent

By gender

- *Male*: 16.3 percent
- *Female*: 20.3 percent
- *Employed male*: 8.6 percent
- *Employed female*: 9.7 percent
- *Unemployed male*: 37.3 percent
- *Unemployed female*: 50.3 percent

(Note: The median income of all male full-time workers is \$45,298; the median income of all female full-time workers is \$33,801)

By race

- *White*: 15.5 percent
- *Black*: 45.9 percent
- *Hispanic/Latino*: 30.6 percent
- *American Indian*: 0 percent
- *Asian*: 23.1 percent

By family

- *Married couples*: 4.8 percent
- *Married couples with children under 18*: 6.9 percent
- *Single female householder*: 26.5 percent
- *Single female householder with children under 18*: 38.5 percent
- *Black single female householder with children under 18*: 62.7 percent

By work experience

- *Worked full-time, year-round in past year*: 1.8 percent

- *Worked less than full-time, year-round in past year: 41.8 percent*
- *Did not work: 41.6 percent*