



Census data a mixed bag for both counties

Better-educated work force doesn't translate to riches, census data show

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People in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties are better educated than they were in 2000, but that doesn't necessarily translate into making more money.

Results from the American Community Survey, taken from 2005 to 2009, show that more adults in the two counties have finished high school or graduated from college than the 2000 census found. The results were released last week.

However, the number of those living in poverty has increased in both counties. The median household income in Escambia has dropped by more than \$2,200 to \$43,148. The median income in Santa Rosa has inched up just \$337, to \$54,250.

Rick Harper, director of the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development at the University of West Florida, said the findings show the results of the economic hangover from 2004's Hurricane Ivan.

"The Great Recession hit earlier in Pensacola than elsewhere because we were still coming down from the post-Ivan high, so we saw a combination of slumping employment and weaker wage growth earlier than some other areas," Harper said.

Even the increase in educational attainment may be the result of the lagging economy, according to Susan Nelms, the executive director of Workforce EscaRosa, the state jobs services agency for the two counties.

"In a bad economy, the job seekers are in a lot competition for very few number of jobs," Nelms said. "A lot of employers require, at least, a high school diploma or GED. ... With some of the (high-tech) businesses like Clearwire or AppRiver, they require even higher education levels, like national certifications or some post-secondary courses.

"I think it's a change in the business structure of the two-county area," she said.

Those higher standards drive people in need of employment to seek more education, Nelms said.

"If they have been drawing unemployment compensation, they may have the time and the funds to go do it now," Nelms said. "They realize that to be more competitive, they're going to have to have it."

Suburban shift

That Santa Rosa's median income hasn't slumped like Escambia's is part of the "suburbanization process," according to Harper. Much of Santa Rosa's income, he theorizes, is actually earned in Escambia.

"Younger, more mobile workers with families and higher earned incomes move to places with newer subdivisions, while older residents tend to stay put," Harper said. The Census Bureau "measures on a place-of-residence basis, so many of those higher income Santa Rosa residents still commute to downtown Pensacola to work."

Ildi Hosman, public affairs director for the TEAM Santa Rosa Economic Development Council, said the income gap between residents of the two counties shows that "Santa Rosa is the community of choice in which to work, live and play."

"The individuals moving to the county represent a population with an overall higher historic income level," she said. She concedes, however, that Escambia and Okaloosa counties have higher wage rates than Santa Rosa.

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"Historically, Santa Rosa has been a bedroom community with most of our residents traveling outside the county line for retail purchases," Hosman said. "As Santa Rosa continues to grow, retail establishments are moving into the county. As this happens, the average wage rate for the county decreases."

Immigrant population

The survey also found increases in the number of foreign-born residents and the number of households where Spanish is spoken in both counties. Harper said that while many of those residents came here as laborers after Ivan, many will remain.

"The overall trend is here to stay," Harper said. "The Hispanic population is younger and growing more rapidly than traditional populations, particularly in the Southeast."

Hosman praised that development as a plus for the area.

"It increases the diversity of our workforce and is a plus for companies looking to expand or locate here because as companies increase their global presence, staff that can speak more than one language is very attractive," she said. "TEAM gets a lot of questions about a diversified workforce, and companies are always pleasantly surprised with an increase in these statistics in our area."

However, Nelms said the number of foreign-born and Spanish speaking workers has not had a significant impact on the local workforce.

"I am not sure it really has impacted the workforce that much," Nelms said. "We haven't seen that large of an increase in the Hispanic population (seeking job services). It might have gone up just a little bit."

What is the American Community Survey?

The American Community Survey is a relatively new survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, according to the bureau's website. The survey uses a series of monthly samples to produce annually updated data for the same small areas formerly surveyed by the regular census' long-form sample.

The findings released last week are based on a rolling annual sample survey mailed to about 3 million addresses between Jan. 1, 2005, and Dec. 31, 2009, according to the site. By pooling several years of responses, the survey can generate detailed statistical

portraits of smaller geographies.

The Census Bureau will release a new set of five-year estimates every year, giving these communities a powerful tool to track local trends over time.

Data from the American Community Survey is not part of the once-every-decade census required by the Constitution. The first data from the 2010 census is scheduled to be released on Tuesday, with more expected in January.

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