

Fewer people live in very poor Provo neighborhoods, study finds

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Jim Dalrymple - Daily Herald Daily Herald | Posted: Saturday, November 5, 2011 12:03 am | (2) Comments

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PROVO -- The great recession sent millions of people across the nation plummeting into poverty, but a new study by the Brookings Institution offers at least a glimmer of hope for parts of Utah County.

On Thursday, the Washington, D.C.-based policy organization released a report titled "The Re-Emergence of Concentrated Poverty: Metropolitan Trends in the 2000s." While the report paints a bleak picture of poverty across the U.S. -- suggesting the nation has experienced an increase in poverty throughout the last decade -- it indicates that the Provo metropolitan area actually saw a decrease in the number of people living in extremely poor neighborhoods.

The report spans a 10-year period, beginning in 2000 and ending in 2009. During that time, the Provo metropolitan area saw a decrease of 3,326 people living in "extreme poverty tracts," or very poor neighborhoods. The report defines those neighborhoods as areas in which at least 40 percent of individuals live below the poverty line.

According to the report, the decrease means that 1,090 people live in extreme poverty tracts in the Provo area, 374 of whom are actually classified as poor. The decrease also represents a 6 percent drop in the concentrated poverty rate, from 7 percent to 1 percent.

By comparison, Salt Lake City saw almost exactly the opposite effect, with an increase of 3,613 people living in extreme poverty tracts. The report states that 4,209 people in the Salt Lake metro area now live in very poor areas. The Ogden metropolitan area saw a similar increase, adding 3,827 people to its poor neighborhoods for a total of 9,135 residents in extreme poverty tracts.

Among the other findings included in the report is that poverty concentration is increasing faster in

suburban areas, and that on a national level the recession wiped out much of the gains made against poverty through the 1990s.

But despite the comparatively positive news for Utah County, the picture isn't entirely rosy, according to experts. Policy analyst Drew Martinez of the Community Action Partnership of Utah said poverty remains a persistent problem in the state. And according to CAP, the overall poverty rate in the county was 11.8 percent, significantly higher than the concentrated poverty rate looked at by the Brookings Institution.

Martinez said that poor people in Utah run the risk of living in "food deserts," or places with low access to healthy and varied food. They also can end up in places with low walkability, where they end up having to travel long distances to meet their needs.

"We want to create communities where we live, work and play in the same area," Martinez said, adding that poor neighborhoods are often places where that isn't possible.

Bill Hulterstrom, president and CEO of United Way of Utah County, said that solutions exist to help people living in poverty. He said those facing the loss of a home or who don't have budgeting skills can receive counseling, for example, and Utah's relatively tight-knit communities provide some support. But he also said that in Utah County poorer people are more likely to go unnoticed because they may not simply be concentrated in poor neighborhoods.

"Our poverty is more likely to be intermingled throughout the entire community," he said.

Hulterstrom suggested that change can happen as individuals and communities model positive behaviors. He particularly emphasized the importance of education, as well as simple actions like getting to know neighbors.

Martinez stressed that policy and legislative action also are essential to ending poverty, as well as the drain on a community's resources it creates.

"One person in poverty is too much," he said.

For more information:

http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2011/1103_poverty_kneebone_nadeau_berube.aspx

<http://www.utahcap.org/>

<http://www.unitedwayuc.org/>

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