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Detroit's median household income was the fourth-lowest of all U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

■ Median household incomes recorded decreases, though small, in Macomb, Livingston and Wayne counties. Oakland County had a 0.5% increase and Washtenaw County a 2.8% bump.

■ Numbers for smaller communities were harder to evaluate. Poor households in Livingston County jumped 28.7% while other metro Detroit areas saw increases that ranged from 25.1% in Dearborn to 22.3% in Livonia to 69.8% in Canton. Experts cautioned that large year-to-year fluctuations in smaller locales likely reflect the size of the sample and can't be considered indicators of long-term trends.

Nationally, by contrast, the poverty rate declined from 13.1% to 12.7% in 2006 — the first dip in this decade — and median household income climbed to \$48,451. In 2006, the poverty level for a family of four was an annual income of slightly less than \$21,000.

"The most vital measure of economic well-being is household income, and the fact that Michigan is lagging is a double whammy in a period of overall prosperity," said David Littman, a senior economist for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a Midland-based think tank.

"While the rate of decline or bad news throughout most of the state may have abated a little bit, the fact that it hasn't turned around in a positive direction to match an ongoing U.S. advance puts us in a formidable state of financial jeopardy in both households and the government sector for years to come," Littman said.

When all people living below the poverty level are considered, including those in group settings such as dormitories, nursing homes and prisons, Michigan ranked 20th nationally among states and the District of Columbia at 13.5%, slightly worse than the rate for the nation. The census data were released Tuesday by the

U.S. Census Bureau and included Michigan communities with populations of 65,000 or more.

Large income disparity

Overall in metro Detroit, median household incomes and poverty rates varied — sometimes frenetically so — from county to county and community to community, according to the Free Press analysis. For example, Troy, in Oakland County, experienced a 27.5% decrease in the number of poor households, while Shelby Township, a Macomb County counterpart, saw a 23% jump in poor households.

Susan Rapazzini, a Macomb County resident, doesn't see things getting any better soon. The 49-year-old has been looking for full-time work for two years. After a 13-year career with Kids 'R' Us, Rapazzini was laid off two years ago. She has worked part time since then for Wal-Mart, earning roughly 60% of what she'd made. She moved with her two children into her sister's Warren home.

"To try to get back into that position at that pay, it's nearly impossible," said Rapazzini, who attended a job fair Tuesday for the Mall at Partridge Creek in Clinton Township. "Actually, at this point it is impossible. The state of Michigan is very difficult right now."

Jim Rogers, data center manager for the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, said wild statistical fluctuations in year-to-year data shouldn't be dismissed, but the numbers, particularly household incomes, should be put in perspective.

"When only one year of time elapses and you see big changes in a particular location, I suspect that those differences may be because relatively small samples are taken for communities of 100,000 or so, and the margins of error are pretty substantial," Rogers said. "It's not really a slam on their methodology, it's just the reality of when you have samples and they're relatively small. There shouldn't be huge changes in the course of a year, unless something really unusu-

al happens, like a Hurricane Katrina, or you're looking at real household incomes. People don't react that quickly to the economics of an area."

Experts said some household income increases also could be attributed to the growing number of people within one family who have to find full-time jobs to make ends meet.

Detroit grapples with poverty

Detroit continued to struggle, according to the data, which showed 28.5% of city households are in poverty, just a fraction less than Buffalo.

Detroit's median household income fell by 2% to \$28,364 in 2006, down from \$28,069 in 2005. But the data showed the number of households in poverty also decreased, from 89,885 in 2005 to 82,284, an 8.5% drop.

Promoting stable neighborhoods and boosting the job base are among the keys to improving the city's plight, said Matt Allen, spokesman for Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick.

Allen said the lack of financial support from the federal government is hurting Detroit and other cities. "There's no help coming from the federal government," Allen said. "We are having to grapple with this amidst the single largest and permanent adjustment in the automotive industry."

Not only autoworkers are hurting. Rich Andrews, 53, of Madison Heights said he was laid off a month ago from his landscaping job. "I've applied for everything and I ain't got nothing" in benefits so far, he said Tuesday.

Last year, he said, he lost another job with a window-installation company. Divorced, he said he's feeling the pressure of making his child-support payments. Now he's thinking of moving out of Michigan, perhaps to Nevada.

"Who's ever hiring," he said.

Contact SUZETTE HACKNEY at 313-222-6614 or shackney@freepress.com. Free Press data analyst Victoria Turk and staff writers Ruby L. Bailey, Bill Laitner and Niraj Warikoo contributed.

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DAVID LITTMAN, senior economist for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy