

1980-1989  
K  
1980-1989

# Employment up in county, but so is poverty

By JENNIFER KOSS

STAFF WRITER

More Santa Cruz County residents were working in 1987 than the year before, but a report on poverty by the county's Community Action Board said conditions for low- and middle-income residents grew worse and the gap between rich and poor widened.

The report, released today, said unemployment in the county declined from 8.3 percent in 1986 to 8.2 percent last year, and is expected to fall to 8.1 percent this year.

At the same time, however, last year the top 10 percent of wage-earners took in a third of the total income in the county, while the lowest third received only 6 percent, according to the report.

In Watsonville, seasonal jobs in agriculture and the food-processing industry "condemn many workers, particularly Hispanic workers, to job insecurity and low wages," the report states.

The report, describing problems faced by the county's poor in employment and housing,

will be publicly presented at 7:30 tonight at the International Senior Center on Beach Street by members of CAB's board of directors, which includes Watsonville Councilmen Joe Marsano and Dennis Osmer, county Supervisor Gary Patton and Santa Cruz Councilwoman Jane Weed.

Representatives from the low-income community and the business sector will also be on hand to hear testimony from the public on the annual report. The report and its accompanying testimony will later be incorporated into CAB's "Local

Plan," or work plan, for the coming year, said CAB volunteer Christine Johnson-Lyons.

The report predicts no improvement in local poverty conditions despite a declining unemployment rate, largely because 66 percent of new jobs in 1988 are expected to be in the retail trade and services industry, both of which traditionally pay low or minimum wages.

Low wages in conjunction with steadily climbing real estate costs — the price of a house increased by about \$10,000 in 1987 — have led to "dangerously overcrowded conditions" and a growing number of homeless people in the county, according to the report.

Although the median sale price of a home in Watsonville is lower than in all other areas of the county — \$115,600 compared to a countywide \$137,000 — it is still well above what many county residents can afford, the report says, and many people cope with the situation by doubling up on housing.

Families that come within

the Planning Department's definition of "poverty level" — which would be any family of four earning less than \$21,250 annually — cannot afford to buy homes, the report shows.

Renting is no answer, since the average monthly rent is \$660 for a two-bedroom house in Watsonville and \$600 for a two-bedroom apartment; in Santa Cruz, the prices are \$788 for a two-bedroom house and \$664 for an apartment.

Those feeling the housing crunch most sharply are single women with children, and Hispanics, who earn an average of 26 percent less than their Anglo counterparts, according to the report.

"These persons are generally employed at minimum or low wages in services such as motels, restaurants or convalescent homes," the report states. "Others are seasonal agricultural workers or cannery workers with unpredictable employment schedules and lower wages."

Low wages can make even the process of applying for legalization under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 financially prohibitive, the

report says. Residents qualifying for legalization must have worked in agriculture at least 90 days between May 1, 1985, and April 30, 1986, or have been in the United States since Jan. 1, 1982. Most who have been here since 1982 are employed in minimum-wage service-industry or cannery jobs, says the report.

"It is conceivable that a person could be charged as much as \$1,450 to apply for legalization in this land of great opportunity," the report says.

Other areas of concern to the working poor, it continues, are the cost of child care and medical care, while their children face educational barriers in schools that are not providing for the needs of a growing bilingual and Spanish-speaking population.

According to the report, "at least one-fifth of the population of Santa Cruz County continues to struggle with the severe difficulties that result from poverty-level or near-poverty level income."

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE  
Register-PAJARONIAN  
April 20, 1988

7405  
Aptos, California 95061