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Poverty Report Paints Grim Picture By Martin Espinoza

More than 60 percent of Latino households in Sonoma County are barely getting by on incomes of \$25,000 or less. Compare that to only 18.5 percent for the county as a whole.

Nearly 14 percent of children in Sonoma County and 16 percent in Santa Rosa were living below the federal poverty line — a dismally low threshold set at \$22,050 a year for a family of four. These are among the many findings in a new poverty report that details not only the adverse effects of the Great Recession but the lopsided consequences of an anemic economic recovery.

Sponsored by the North Bay Organizing Project and the Living Wage Coalition of Sonoma County, the report was presented Saturday at a forum on economic justice at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Rosa. The forum was organized as a way of highlighting economic trends that are endangering the middle class and pounding low-income and minority residents.

“The story here is that it's a recovery, but for whom?” said Marty Bennett, a member of the leadership council of the North Bay Organizing Project and a co-chairman of the Living Wage Coalition.

“From our perspective, there's really two Sonoma Counties — the affluent at the top and those at the bottom of the ladder. A substantial percentage are in the other Sonoma County.” The report, which was prepared by Ginny Browne, an East Bay planner and organizer, shows that in Sonoma County, communities of color are feeling the brunt of recent hard times.

From 2007 to 2010, the share of Sonoma County residents living in poverty grew from 9.4 percent to 11 percent, or 51,774 individuals. In Santa Rosa, more than 13 percent of the city's population is living in poverty, the report said.

That statistic jumps to nearly 17.7 percent for Latinos in Sonoma County and 19.7 percent for Latinos in Santa Rosa. Within Sonoma County's small black population, which numbered 7,610 residents in the 2010 Census, 21.1 percent lived in poverty. In Santa Rosa, 27 percent of blacks lived in poverty. “It's just extraordinary, when we look at the income disparity, the much higher rates of poverty and working poverty amongst Latinos and African-Americans,” Bennett said.

At the forum, the poverty report served as a launching point for attendees, which included labor, civil and immigrant rights and economic justice organizers, to tackle possible local solutions during afternoon working group sessions.

At one such session, a national community-organizing expert headed a discussion on ways to establish project labor agreements in major transportation works that ensure significant job opportunities and training for minorities, women and low-income residents. Laura Barrett, the national campaign director for the Transportation Equity Network, highlighted several cases across the country where such agreements were won. Local attendees were interested in how to score labor agreements for future SMART train projects and other highway construction jobs.

The forum's keynote presentation was given by Chris Benner, associate professor of community and regional development at UC Davis. Benner focused on the three-pronged crisis that he said afflicts the current economy: joblessness and sputtering growth; wage and race inequality; and political gridlock and fragmentation of society.

In a recent book he co-authored called "Just Growth," Benner examined 192 metropolitan regions across the country where decisions about growth are made by a diverse group of stakeholders, including communities of color. These are places where "growth and equity have gone together," he said.

"There's a lot of research out there that shows regions that are more equitable grow faster," he said.

During his presentation, Benner pointed out that population growth in many parts of the country will be driven by communities of color, particularly Latinos and Asians. Future economic growth in many parts of the country will depend upon getting more Latinos and African-Americans into the middle income range, he said.

The Sonoma County poverty report paints a dire picture of these populations.

The report says that federal poverty guidelines provide an inaccurate measure of current economic hardship. A more accurate measure is derived using 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold, which is \$44,100 a year for a family of four, according to the report. Using this measure, more than a quarter of all county residents are struggling to get by. In Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park and Healdsburg, 1 in 3 residents is struggling, the report said.

Among the other findings in the report:

Sonoma County's median household income, adjusted for inflation, dropped 5.7 percent, from \$65,531 in 2007 to \$61,837 in 2010.

In Santa Rosa, blacks earned 61cents for every dollar earned by whites, and Latinos earned 69 cents on the dollar. Women earned 79cents for every dollar earned by men in both the county and Santa Rosa.

About 15 percent of county wage earners fall within the five lowest-paid occupations, which include farming, building cleaning and other service jobs. In Santa Rosa, it's 17.8 percent.

The report uses “self-sufficiency” measures derived by the nonprofit California Budget Project. According to these measures, a family in Sonoma County must have two income earners working full-time earning at least \$19.11 an hour each or \$39,749 a year in order to pay for food, transportation, housing, health care and child care.

Although unemployment in Sonoma County declined from 10.4 percent in 2010 to 7.7 percent last year, about half of all new jobs through 2018 are expected to pay \$15 or less. The report, citing figures from the National Employment Law Project, points out that across the country 21 percent of all jobs lost during the recession were low-wage jobs that paid less than \$13.83 an hour.

However, these jobs comprised 58 percent of job growth during the recovery.