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Poverty: Harming 1-in-3 Miss. families

Hard times at Christmas in Mississippi? It's not just the recession.

Nearly one in three Mississippi households was unable to make ends meet - even before the economic recession, according to a report released Wednesday by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center.

The study, "Overlooked and Undercounted: Struggling to Make Ends Meet in Mississippi," found that even working families are not earning enough money to cover basic living expenses.

The findings drew on U.S. Census Bureau data from 2007, at least a year before the nation's economy went south.

"This report shows what Mississippi is like in ordinary times," said its author, Diana Pearce, director of the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington. "You could assume that since many workers have lost their jobs since 2007, there would be a substantial increase in the numbers contained in this report."

When the recession started in December 2007, Mississippi's unemployment rate was 6.3 percent. The state's October 2009 unemployment rate, the latest available, was 9.8 percent, up by 3.5 percent.

"Even if you look at the report's numbers from pre-recession, they are high, and startling in many cases," said Ed Sivak, executive director of the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, an organization that advocates for low- to moderate-income families.

The statistics include this finding: 55 percent of Mississippi households headed by someone with less than a high school education have inadequate incomes.

The rate drops to just 12 percent for those with a college degree.

The study shows that all household types are affected by a lack of adequate income but that it impacts a disproportionate number of African-Americans, households headed by women, and families with young children.

The Christmas season spurs generosity and sharing. But when the season ends, poverty remains.

As legislators return to Jackson in January to begin crafting a Fiscal Year 2011 budget, they must remember - along with Gov. Haley Barbour - that budget cuts have consequences.

It's not just a line on a budget. Real people are hungry, real people are homeless and real working Mississippians - one in three, this study suggests - are unable to make ends meet.

Self-sufficiency requires education and a job. When those factors are missing or deficient, poverty becomes a virtual guarantee.

Christmas comes but once a year, but hard economic times are constant for many Mississippians. Those hard times are merely exacerbated by the current recession and high rate of joblessness.
