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Press of Atlantic City

Editorial

Atlantic City's poverty / Everyone's problem

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Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey indicate that the recession hit Atlantic City earlier and harder than the rest of the region.

That should be no surprise to anyone.

Low-wage service industry workers are among the most vulnerable workers anywhere - and low-wage service industry jobs are what the casino industry provides, to a large degree. And when the casinos are hurting, it's dealers, cooks, bartenders, waitresses and similar workers who get laid off.

Not that the region isn't thankful to have those jobs - but this new Census report only highlights the importance of both reinventing Atlantic City and diversifying the region's economy, which are two hot topics these days.

Atlantic City's population fell slightly to 34,769 in 2008, down from 35,770 in 2007 - but the percentage of families living in poverty grew to 24 percent from 19 percent in the same period. The city's median household income was a mere \$27,414, far below Atlantic County's median income of \$55,349.

Indeed, median household income and the number of housing units *increased* countywide in Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Ocean counties from 2006 to 2008.

But, as always, Atlantic City stands out for all of the wrong reasons.

Too many people find it easy to dismiss Atlantic City and its residents these days - while simultaneously touting the need to make Atlantic City more of a "destination resort." But unless its people and their poverty are addressed, Atlantic City is never going to be Disney World by the sea.

Former Atlantic City businessman Reese Palley once said that no one should live in Atlantic City - that was the only way to make the town a true fantasy resort that visitors would be drawn to, he

said. Palley was probably right. But the problem is that people *do* live in Atlantic City - and a city that does not meet *their* needs can never truly meet visitors' needs.

In other words, the region ignores Atlantic City's poverty at its own peril. You can blame Atlantic City's dysfunctional government, if you want. You can even blame city residents themselves, if that's your inclination. But Atlantic City is not the only place where a culture of poverty, crime and welfare has become self-perpetuating.

The question everywhere - and especially here, where so much of the region's economy depends on this small city at the tip of Absecon Island - is how to break that cycle of poverty. And frankly, no matter whom you want to blame, it really is everyone's problem in southern New Jersey.