



Poverty and minorities

story by Theresa Novak, Carol Savonen, Andrea Dailey, Bob Rost

Although Oregon's population remains overwhelmingly white, the state's minority population has grown in the 1990s.

About 88 percent, or 2,873,000, of Oregon's 3.3 million residents are white, according to July 1998 population estimates by the Oregon Employment Department.

Hispanics, Asians, African Americans and Native Americans make up the other 12 percent, or roughly 400,000 people.

Although small in total numbers, Oregon's minority population experiences much higher rates of poverty than whites. (See graph on page 13.) These high rates of poverty can lead to the mistaken notion that poverty is primarily a minority issue. In terms of absolute numbers, more than 300,000 white Oregonians live below the poverty line compared to slightly under 100,000 minority residents.

The reasons people live in poverty are remarkably similar, regardless of their race or ethnic background: lack of education, a devastating life experience, lack of family support and health problems are some of the primary reasons people fall into poverty.

But according to representatives from Oregon's Hispanic, Asian-American, African-American and Native American populations, racism is a continuing factor in keeping their poverty rates up to twice that of Oregon's white majority.

Hispanic

About 200,000 Oregonians are Hispanic, according to 1998 population estimates by the Oregon Department of Employment. About 27 percent, or 54,000 of them, live below the poverty level.

Almost a third of Oregon's Hispanics have no health insurance. They earn about half the average state per capita income. This forces many young Hispanics to drop out of school to find jobs to help support their families.

"With a great supply of low-paying jobs in the state, what would you do if you were poor?" asked Maria Elena Campisteguy-Hawkins, the executive director of the Oregon Council for Hispanic Advancement. "Work or go hungry? Sometimes it takes both parents and kids working to support a family in Oregon at low wages."

The education system is not friendly to Latinos, added Chris Santiago Williams, director of Oregon's Commission on Hispanics.

"The dropout rate-as high as 20 percent in some counties-is a sign that something is not going right out there with Latinos in the school system," he said. If you ask the teachers, they say that Latino students don't care about school. But if you ask the students, they want help. They say there is a lack of bilingual, bicultural curricula in the schools(The students) lack role models and encouragement."

Campisteguy-Hawkins said that unless the school system can find a way to reach these young people, the Hispanic community will continue to see high poverty rates.

"This cycle of poverty perpetuates itself. Poverty often contributes to dropping out, which contributes to more poverty."

Those who work with the poor agree that the people living in the worst poverty in the state are largely suffering in silence-the undocumented migrant workers who make much of Oregon's agricultural bounty possible.

Oregon doesn't have reliable records of the actual numbers or vital statistics for migrant workers, who sometimes live in appalling conditions and try to subsist on the fringes of a society.

The Mexican Consulate of Oregon estimates that up to 90,000 undocumented Mexican nationals work in Oregon.

Mario Magaña, a former migrant worker who is a recent OSU master's graduate, said many employers are honorable and fair. But if employers do not pay their workers or treat them badly, undocumented workers are unlikely to complain for fear of being deported.

"Even if you have immigration papers, if you don't have a license or car insurance, you can go to jail," Magaña said. "Usually these people have no money for lawyers."

African American

More than one-quarter of the state's 57,000 blacks are in poverty in a given year, according to 1996 poverty data.

Poverty's known associates-below-grade performance in school and high suspension and dropout rates-also affect African Americans far out of proportion to their numbers in the population. In 1996, fewer than one-quarter of African American eighth-graders met Oregon's reading and math standards- less than half the statewide average. An African American in the Salem-Keizer School

District, second largest in the state, in 1998-99 ran a 48-percent chance of being suspended at least once during high school. The rate for whites was 16 percent. Based on 1997-98 statewide data, more than 44 percent of African American students are dropping out of high school-nearly double the rate for whites.

On the brighter side, more African Americans in Oregon have high-school diplomas and college degrees than do blacks on average nationally. However, African American men earn much less than their white counterparts-on the national average, \$13,000 a year less for college graduates and \$6,000 a year less for high-school graduates-which increases their risk of being pushed into poverty if things go even just a little bit off track.

Perhaps most discouraging, the core of "misery measures" that pertains to African Americans hasn't budged substantially despite decades of government policies and programs.

That's because the real antidote to poverty, including in Oregon's African American community, is something money can't buy, say some of the community's leaders-it's an attitude shift at a fundamental level and on a grand scale.

"People have a strong tendency to look at the world in terms of 'them and us'," says Norm Monroe, staff assistant to Beverly Stein, chair of the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. "We isolate [the poor] in all ways, and we foster their dysfunction by treating them poorly. We see that play out in our value systems: we say we're well, they're sick. We see in it our public-policy planning: we tend to plan for and around poor people but not *with* them."

Education and training, including cultural-sensitivity training, should be top priorities in antipoverty programming, says Cornetta Smith, executive director of Albina Ministerial Alliance in Portland, whose organization offers a broad range of social and job-related services to low-income and poor people. Training should not be a one-way exercise but rather an exchange: employers and prospective employees should learn about each other's cultures and expectations, about job and work ethics, and how to balance family and job responsibilities.

In working with the poor, says Smith, "the first thing *you* have to know is the poor do want to get out of poverty. But *they* have to know that their helpers are peers, that there's common ground here and we all bring something to the table. The people in poverty and of color are a very important piece of what makes it all work as a city, a state, and a nation."

Native American

Native Americans in Oregon have the state's highest overall poverty rate, 29.4 percent. Given this high rate of poverty, it's obvious that constructing gambling casinos hasn't worked in bringing Oregon's 40,700 Native Americans out of poverty.

"The idea that the casinos have made all Native Americans rich is a myth," said Gary Braden, executive director of the Native American Rehabilitation Association NW Inc. in Portland.

The unemployment rate among members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation remains about 20 percent despite the tribe's Wildhorse Casino, said Debra Crosswell, the tribal public affairs manager.

"That's down from 40 percent unemployment we had a few years ago, but it's still about four times the national unemployment rate," she said.

Oregon's Native Americans belong to nine federally-recognized tribes: The Burns Paiute Tribe; The Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians; The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; The Confederated Tribes of the Siletz; The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs; The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation; the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Indians; The Klamath Tribe; and The Coquille Tribe.

About 89 percent of Oregon's Native Americans live in the urban centers of Portland, Salem and Eugene, according to the 1999-2001 Oregon Directory of American Indian Resources.

The 29 percent who are in poverty often have not had access to training and education programs.

"The kind of salaries where you could get a manual labor job and make a reasonably good living are gone. Many of the jobs now require knowledge of electronics and computers. Most of the tribal membership in the labor force don't have those skills," said Jim St. Martin, tribal manager of the Burns-Paiute Tribe.

Tribes with no land base and few resources are even worse off. Tribal members receive a share of timber harvesting or casinos only if they live on the reservation. These shares seldom amount to a living wage. Even so, older tribal members may be reluctant to leave, St. Martin said.

"Their home is here. This is where their ancestors are. This area holds great significance for them."

Asians

A half a world away from their heritage, some of Oregon's 98,000 Asian Americans say they resent the stereotype that Asians are a model minority with few problems related to their ethnic heritage.

Poverty rates differ greatly within Oregon's Asian American community. While those of Japanese and Asian-Indian ancestry generally have incomes comparable to whites, many of the newly arrived Asians, such as Vietnamese and Cambodians, have much higher poverty rate than whites.

So the model-achiever myth rings hollow to people such as Sharon Lee, an associate professor of sociology at Portland State University.

According to Lee's studies, although many Asian Americans have lived and prospered in Oregon since the 19th Century railroad expansion brought them West, a newer wave of Asian Americans fled to Oregon not for jobs, but for their lives.

"Unlike most other Asian Americans, many Southeast Asian Americans were involuntary immigrants," Lee wrote in her 1998 Population Reference Bureau Report titled *Asian Americans: Diverse and Growing*.

Harsh economic conditions and political persecution in Southeast Asia accounted for some of the 1.2 million emigrants who came to the United States from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos between 1975 and 1994. Among them was a desperate flood of refugees escaping widespread genocide by the Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia.

About 5,000 refugees from Southeast Asia settled in Oregon. Fearful of government involvement of any kind, even for help, many of these refugees were poorer, younger, with more children and less education than the Asian Americans already living in Oregon, Lee said.

With strongly ingrained traditions and strong family ties, these refugees have been slower than some to move into the economic mainstream, she said.

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/html/em/em8743-e/part3/minorities.html>