

# Study: 38 percent of NJ households struggle



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(Photo: File photo)

Nearly 40 percent of New Jersey households can't afford basic necessities, according to a report released today, in a sign that workers are struggling with low-paying jobs and the rising cost of living.

The increasing share of workers on the brink threatens to put a strain on schools, housing and the health care system. And it leaves the government less tax revenue to address the problem, the author said.

"Some parts of the economy have picked up, but the number of people in poverty and (just above it) has continued to increase despite those improvements," said Stephanie Hoopes Halpin, a professor at [Rutgers University-Newark](https://spaa.newark.rutgers.edu/) (<https://spaa.newark.rutgers.edu/>).

The report was sponsored by the [United Way of Northern New Jersey](http://www.unitedwaynj.org/) (<http://www.unitedwaynj.org/>) to bring attention to the state's deteriorating economic conditions and generate support for the nonprofit group's programs to improve education, health care and financial stability.

[Where will N.J. workers find new jobs? \(/story/money/business/2014/08/14/nj-jobs/14054475/\)](/story/money/business/2014/08/14/nj-jobs/14054475/)

## Tepid recovery

It comes as the state feels the weight of a tepid recovery from the recession. Facing budget shortfalls, [New Jersey's credit rating](/story/news/politics/new-jersey/2014/09/10/christie-nj-credit-rating-downgrade/15393901/) (</story/news/politics/new-jersey/2014/09/10/christie-nj-credit-rating-downgrade/15393901/>) has been downgraded eight times.

[Brookdale Community College](/story/news/education/2014/09/11/will-brookdale-lay-staff/15421931/) (</story/news/education/2014/09/11/will-brookdale-lay-staff/15421931/>) in Middletown, a key institution training the work force, said last week that lower enrollment and less state and county aid could force it to cut staff. And the transportation group [Regional Plan Association](http://www.rpa.org/) (<http://www.rpa.org/>) has said New Jersey has \$21.3 billion in critical transportation needs.

Workers feel the pinch. On a muggy, late spring day in June, a handful of health care workers and community activists held signs, banged on plastic tubs and chanted slogans in front of [Victoria Healthcare Center](http://atriumhealthusa.com/) (<http://atriumhealthusa.com/>) in Matawan to call attention to the workers' plight.

The members of the [1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East](http://www.1199seiu.org/#sthash.330rTA9k.dpbs) (<http://www.1199seiu.org/#sthash.330rTA9k.dpbs>) labor union had been working under the terms of a contract that expired nine years earlier.

Julianna Innocent, a certified nurse's assistant from East Orange, spent her days at the assisted-living center caring for patients, waking them, dressing them, washing them. She made \$12 an hour and didn't have health insurance from her employer. Her drive alone cost \$4 in tolls.

"We need respect for our job," Innocent said. "We need to get a raise to take care of our families."

A message left with Victoria Healthcare's administrator last Thursday wasn't returned. But a union spokesman said the workers didn't have a new contract.

[5 growing jobs that don't need a college degree \(/story/money/personal-finance/2014/08/31/jobs-college-degree/14914187/\)](/story/money/personal-finance/2014/08/31/jobs-college-degree/14914187/)

## Common problem

The United Way report shows Innocent's financial state is increasingly common.

The group looked at households that are either in poverty or what it calls "ALICE," asset limited, income constrained, employed. The group's income varied depending on their age and location. But Monmouth and Ocean County residents younger than 65 who made less than \$60,000 a year meet the benchmark.

It found:

- In 2012, about 1.2 million New Jersey households, or 38 percent of the total, struggled to afford basic household needs of housing, child care, food, health care and transportation. That was up from 32 percent in 2007 and 37 percent in 2010. In Ocean County, 45 percent of households were in this category. In Monmouth County, it was 33 percent.

- Nearly three-quarters of the state's fastest-growing occupations in 2012 paid less than \$20 an hour.
- The cost of basic housing, child care, transportation, food and health care in New Jersey increased by 19 percent from 2007 to 2012.

John Franklin, chief executive officer of United Way of Northern New Jersey, said he hoped both lawmakers and corporate leaders would take steps to support programs that would provide relief. Example: government-funded child care or corporate policies that allow employees to care for what has become an aging population in New Jersey.

"We really want to have a conversation in this country about what's important and bring dignity to this segment of the population," Franklin said.

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**Ten Monmouth-Ocean towns with the highest percentage of struggling households:**

1. Manchester Township: 53 percent
2. Berkeley Township: 50 percent
3. Shrewsbury Township: 47 percent
4. Seaside Heights: 44 percent
5. Keansburg: 44 percent
6. Asbury Park: 43 percent
7. Long Branch: 42 percent
8. Lakehurst: 42 percent
9. Keyport: 42 percent
10. Seaside Park: 41 percent

*Source: United Way of Northern New Jersey*

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