

In a good economy, report reveals grim news for Florida families

The United Way reports that almost half of state households struggle to afford basic needs.



Volunteer Stella Davis, 44, places canned goods and other food items into a bin at the Metropolitan Ministries Holiday Tent in Tampa before Thanksgiving. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

By [Christopher O'Donnell](#)

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Spending is up and unemployment down, which means Florida's economic indicators have been headed the right way for several years.

Yet, the untold story of the state's economic rebound is that almost half of Florida households still struggle to pay for basic needs, according to a new in-depth study of the working poor released Wednesday by the United Way.

That is also true of the Tampa Bay market where 43 percent of households are struggling to afford housing, child care, food, transportation and health care, an increase of nearly 8 percent since 2010.

Most of that hardship is the result of stagnant wages, the report states, and an economy dominated by low-wage and entry-level jobs.

About 67 percent of the state's jobs pay less than \$20 per hour, equivalent to a salary of about \$42,000. Yet, the "household survival" budget for a family of four runs to almost \$60,000 per year.

"That is not an \$20 an hour job; that is multiple jobs," said Doug Griesenauer, the director of financial stability initiatives for the United Way Suncoast. "Those high paying jobs are not very prevalent."

The report is intended to highlight the plight of working families who live above the federal poverty line but find it difficult to afford basic necessities.

That makes it tough for families to save for unexpected expenses like car repairs or medical bills.

Some 47 percent of Floridians don't have money set aside to cover expenses for three months in case of an emergency, a number that was highlighted by the recent federal government shutdown when federal workers were forced to rely on food banks while they were no longer receiving paychecks.

"They're having to choose which bill to pay and saving doesn't become an option," Griesenauer said.

The report calculates the survival budget to meet household needs based on the cost of items like rent, child care, food and transportation. In Hillsborough County, that comes out to \$21,504 for a single adult and \$54,084 for two adults with two young children.

Across Florida, about 14 percent of families officially live in poverty. About 47 percent of families earn less than the economic survival level calculated in the study.

The United Way has produced the study, known as the "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed," or ALICE report, every two years since 2012 to highlight the difficulties faced by families.

Leaders of the non-profit group traveled Tuesday to Tallahassee to show the results to lawmakers and to call on them to provide more help for working families.

"The ALICE Reports shows us that, although economic recovery is happening in our community, it's not happening equally for everyone," said United Way Suncoast CEO Suzanne McCormick in a statement. "When nearly half of households in our community are on the financial edge, it's clear we have to work together to address these big issues around housing, transportation and skilled employment opportunities for stronger families and a stronger economic region long term."

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