

WEEKEND WAVE

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Friday Economic Roundup

Census: Median household incomes increase

By JONATHAN SCHOLLES Charlotte Sun Staff Writer

Sarasota and Charlotte counties and the state of Florida noticed increases in median household income and less people living in poverty in 2015, a trend detailed by the U.S. Census Bureau recently as it released a comprehensive report on the nation, its people and economy in the American Community Survey.

Sarasota County, which has 405,549 residents, saw an 8 percent increase in median household income between 2014-2015, spiking from \$52,109 in 2014 to \$56,286, according to Census data released Thursday. Just south, Charlotte County, which has 169,130 citizens, noticed a 5.7 percent increase in median household income, jumping to \$45,492 in 2015 after settling at \$43,039 a year earlier.

Florida, the third largest state with 20.2 million people, had a median household income of \$49,426 in 2015, a 4.1 percent increase from the previous year.

Each, though, fall short of the national benchmark.

According to the Census findings, the United States had a median household income of \$56,516 in 2015, a 5.2 percent improvement from \$53,718 the previous year. There is certainly parity in the income data between Sarasota County and the national average, though, U.S. metrics by far outdistance Florida and Charlotte County, 14.3 percent and 24.2 percent, respectively.

"This helps people, businesses and governments in all of our states and local communities

better understand the needs of their populations, the markets in which they operate and the challenges and opportunities they face," Census Bureau director John Thompson said in a statement.

The report also indicated that less people are living in poverty and more have health insurance. It did dive into income inequality, however, and statistically found no significant changes in the year studied, the Census Bureau said.

People living in poverty dropped in Sarasota County from 10.2 percent to 8.8 percent in 2015. Data indicates 35,372 people were living in poverty a year ago. Poverty levels in Charlotte County remained fairly consistent, dropping from 11.9 percent to 11.3 percent in 2015, respectively, and identifying 19,188 people living below the national poverty level.

Florida has 3.1 million people living in poverty, a 3.1 percent decrease from 3.2 million in 2014.

Another indication the economy seems to be improving is more people surveyed reported having health insurance.

According to Census data, the number of uninsured Americans dropped from 10.4 percent to 9.1 percent in 2015 with 29 million people without health insurance. Sarasota and Charlotte counties both noticed decreases and both have uninsured rates at 10 percent. Charlotte County's number of residents without insurance was 16.4 percent in 2014, while Sarasota checked in at 15.5 percent.

The Census Bureau also released statistical info in more than 40 social, economic and housing topics for communities with populations over 65,000. Since none of the local cities meet that qualification - North Port is the closest with 62,345 residents - current data is unavailable.

According to 2014 data, Siesta Key has the highest median household income at \$74,167, while Manasota Key has poverty and uninsured rates at 4.7 percent and 4.3 percent, respectively.

Port Charlotte had the lowest local median household income at \$39,387 and had the highest number of people living in poverty at 15.7 percent.

Wages climb as jobless, poverty rates fall

By **GARY ROBERTS** Charlotte Sun Staff Writer

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA - Consumers are welcoming an array of good economic news, as income levels rose sharply while unemployment and poverty levels dropped dramatically from the previous year.

In Charlotte County, August's jobless rate of 5.3 percent fell below the previous month's 5.6 percent and down from 6.1 a year ago, according to the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. The local figures released this week are not seasonally adjusted.

Similarly, Sarasota County's unemployment rate also declined last month to 4.5 percent, from 4.7 percent in July.

It was 5.1 percent in August 2015. In DeSoto County, the jobless rate was 6.0 last month, 6.3 in July and 6.7 percent a year ago.

But perhaps the most encouraging economic indicators were revealed in the U.S. Census Bureau's annual report, issued Sept. 13, which said poverty and income levels showed the biggest improvement in decades on both fronts.

Moderate wage gains and healthy job growth raised the country's median household income to \$56,500 last year, up 5.2 percent, or \$2,800, from 2014. It was the sharpest annual increase on record.

Correspondingly, the nation's poverty rate fell to 13.5 percent in 2015 from 14.8 percent the year earlier, marking the largest annual percentage drop since 1968. Last year's mark, however, was still considerably higher than the 12.3 percent poverty rate in 2006, the year before the Great Recession began, and the 40-year low of 11.3 percent in the year 2000.

While the boost in salaries is a good sign, Chris Westley, Florida Gulf Coast University Regional Economic Research Institute director, is waiting for next month's figures to determine if this is the start of a trend or just a statistical outlier.

"Wages have been depressed for several years, so we're finally moving toward a level that makes sense," he said. "It might be a positive harbinger for further economic growth in November."

Curtailing his optimism is still sluggish growth in productivity, which significantly impacts sustainable earning power, Westley said.

The U.S. gross domestic product needs to grow at least 3 percent annually to maintain the standard of living, he said. But since 2010, the GDP has climbed an average of just 2.1 percent annually, posting a 2.4 percent increase each of the last two years.

Another reason to be wary is the straggling pay rate in Southwest Florida.

The region's average annual wage stood at \$38,852 in 2015, well-behind Florida's \$44,810 and the U.S. average of \$51,296. The area's average annual wage was \$35,000 in 2014, and \$45,000 statewide, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Charlotte County's average annual wage was \$35,672 in 2015, while Sarasota County posted \$42,882 in the same year. Both of these figures were all-time highs for their respective county.

And Westley has found still one more concern locally. Of the total 40,200 private sector jobs in Charlotte county, 27,000 of them, or 67 percent, come from just three industries - trade, transportation and utilities; education and health services; and leisure and hospitality.

"The unemployment numbers are good, but they also show the labor market is not very diversified," he said.

Westley added, however, that he expects the area's jobless rate to continue to recede when tourist season arrives.

Meanwhile, Florida's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate remained at 4.7 percent in August for the fourth consecutive month, but was down from 5.2 percent a year ago. The U.S. unemployment rate stayed at 4.9 percent month-to-month, but was 5.1 percent in August 2015.

FLORIDA ECONOMIC NEWS

- Clearwater's Tech Data Inc. to buy technology firm for \$2.6 billion ([Tampa Bay Times](#))
- Medical device firm moves to Tampa Bay Area ([Business Observer](#))
- Embraer to begin manufacturing jet seats in Titusville ([Florida Today](#))
- IAAPA intends to move world HQ to Orlando ([Orlando Sentinel](#))
- Homebuilder Lennar to buy WCI in \$643 million deal to expand in Florida ([Reuters](#))
- Florida home sales up 8.2% in August ([Builder](#))
- Texas company will open office in Sunrise ([South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#))

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