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Study: Life isn't cheap for 'working poor'

BYLINE: By DIONNE WALKER, Associated Press Writer

It costs a lot to be 'working poor' especially in metro Atlanta.

A single parent of three in Gwinnett County needs to make more than \$62,000 a year to avoid going on government assistance, according to the author of a new report that examines the most basic costs of living for families in each of Georgia's 159 counties.

And in Fulton County, a single parent of three would need to make \$53,683 a year and use public transportation just to be self-sufficient.

"This is just the bare minimum," said Diana Pearce, who authored the report and partnered with the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute to release it.

Atlanta resident Shirley Dean knows what life is like near that minimum. She makes about \$200 a month more than the \$26,141 the report suggests she needs to support her teenage daughter and elementary school-aged son.

She's learned to scrimp here and there.

Tossing cereal and vegetables into her cart at Wal-Mart on Monday, the single mom outlined a basic spending rule that's kept her self-sufficient even amid rising food and gas prices:

"If you don't got it," she said, "you don't got it."

The 2008 Self-Sufficiency Standard for Georgia examines basic monthly costs of things like food.

Families making the salaries detailed in the report would be considered working poor, that is, making ends meet but with zero cash left over for tuition, debts or even a fast food lunch, Pearce explained.

Pearce, head of the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington, has produced similar reports for 38 other cities and states, where they've been used to help shape eligibility standards for government assistance programs.

The latest report uses recent federal data on housing, child care and food costs as well as state surveys. It breaks down the costs of living based on family size and age, from a single adult to a family of four with a newborn and a 3-year-old.

Costs depend not only on the number of children in a family, but also on their ages, Pearce said. A single parent with a teenager and a child in elementary school might face fewer costs than another single parent of two, raising an infant and a toddler.

Pearce said it differs from the federal poverty measure, which is based mostly on food costs and doesn't weigh geographic differences.

"Though the South is a less expensive place than places like New York City and Washington DC, it's not that inexpensive," Pearce said.

Fayette County had the highest self-sufficiency standard in the state for a single parent of one preschooler: It would take at least \$42,086 to provide for housing, health care, food, transportation and other basics for the family, the report shows.

Costs of living were also high along the coast and in smaller cities throughout Georgia.

In Muscogee County, a husband and wife with two young children would need around \$41,261 to squeak by, or about \$6,100 more than the county's 2004 median income.

Some of the greatest increases in costs of living have come in smaller locales like Greene County since a similar study was done in 2002.

The 15,000-person county about 85 miles east of Atlanta saw a 70 percent increase in health care costs for a single parent of a preschooler, and a 17 percent jump in food costs for families of all sizes.

Baker County has the lowest self-sufficiency standard for a single parent of one, at just \$20,280.

On the Net:

Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, <http://www.gbpi.org/>