

## Orlando Sentinel (Florida)

### Low wages squeezing Floridians A study says housing, child-care and other costs hurt families.

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By Kate Santich

The economic chasm between the haves and have-nots in Florida is wide and getting wider, fueled by low wages that fail to cover the most basic needs, especially for families with small children, according to a report released Tuesday.

The report sets "**self-sufficiency standards**" for each county in the state -- a measure of income needed to survive without public assistance.

In Orange County, for instance, a single parent of two children -- a baby and a school-aged child -- needs to earn \$18.71 an hour just to live a "bare-bones, no-frills" existence.

That's about \$39,500 a year -- and nearly three times the state's minimum wage of \$6.67 an hour.

"There's something wrong with this picture," said Sophie Brion of the Women's Fund of Miami-Dade County, who spoke at a news conference on the findings. "We have to [understand] the needs of real families so we can debunk myths and destigmatize poverty. The truth is: No matter how hard you work, sometimes the numbers just don't add up."

The research was conducted by the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington for the Human Services Coalition, a Miami-based nonprofit that champions anti-poverty programs.

#### Costs eclipse wages

In analyzing the cost of housing, child care, fuel and food, the report came up with a **self-sufficiency standard** that fluctuates according to how many children a resident has to support and how old they are. If the

Orange County single parent has a third child, for example, the self-sufficiency wage shoots up to more than \$52,000 a year.

In case after case, the wages needed by families to subsist dramatically eclipsed the minimum wage and the federal poverty line, which is roughly \$20,000 a year for a family of four.

"At \$7 an hour full time, that's \$14,000 a year -- which is probably enough money if you're a single person living at home with your parents," said James Wright, director of the Institute for Social & Behavioral Sciences at the University of Central Florida. "But if you're living in your own apartment and paying \$800 a month in rent, you simply don't have any money left at the end of the year."

Part of the issue, Wright said, is that poverty levels were set 40 years ago and based on the cost of food. But since then increases in housing, energy bills and health care have dramatically outpaced the rise in grocery bills -- making the poverty line an inadequate indicator of the true scope of poverty.

This comes as small consolation to Kathy Morabito, a 49-year-old Rockledge nurse whose husband died nine years ago. Since then, she has been raising two children on her own -- the youngest is now 13. Even at her salary of \$18 an hour, well above minimum wage, she is barely keeping pace with her bills.

"I have no money in the bank. None," she says. "It's pathetic. Right now I am working extra hours so I can get overtime. I have to."

She'll be working Thanksgiving -- because it pays time-and-a-half. And she has plans to

move in with another family so she can put aside some savings.

### **Fuel or food?**

Daniella Levine, executive director of the Human Services Coalition, said she hopes the report will spark an examination of public policy -- and eventually changes to industry as well as government eligibility requirements for assistance.

In Maryland, for instance, the **self-sufficiency standard** has been used in certain areas as a basis for setting wages of government workers and requirements for government contractors.

In Florida, the report found that the biggest expenses for families with preschool and school-aged children was not housing, but child care. In Hillsborough County, for instance, child care consumed 30 percent of a family's budget, while housing only required 22 percent.

In Orange County, child care for a single infant runs an average of \$571 a month. In Osceola, it runs \$593, and in Seminole the expense is \$600.

And most recently, fuel costs have hit low-income families especially hard.

"People are being forced to choose between buying gas and buying food," said Carmen Hernandez, supervisor of the emergency family-assistance program at Catholic Charities of Central Florida. "And any extra expense they have causes a crisis for the family. If the car breaks down, and they have to fix it, then they can't pay their rent."