

Report: City incomes decline

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HUNTINGTON -- New Census data show the overall wealth of people living in the city of Huntington declined over the past eight years, a sign of the city's economic stagnation, a local economist said.

Forty-six percent of Huntington's 20,733 households make \$25,000 or less, according to the data released today by the U.S. Census Bureau. The percentage of U.S. households that fall into that income bracket is 26.

Furthermore, only 7 percent of the city's households make \$100,000 or more, far less than the 19 percent of U.S. households that make more than six figures.

When adjusted for inflation, the number of households in the city making less than \$25,000 has increased by 3 percentage points since the 2000 Census, while the number of households making more than \$100,000 has slipped 1 percentage point.

The new information is contained in data collected between 2005 and 2007 for the bureau's American Community Survey. The survey estimates help federal officials determine where to distribute more than \$300 billion to state and local governments each year.

The information represents the first detailed income data for Huntington and most of the counties in the region since the 2000 Census.

The data paints an even bleaker picture than it suggests because it includes "unearned" income such as Social Security, pensions and housing subsidies, said Cal Kent, vice president of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Marshall University.

Almost one-third of the \$893 million in reported household income in Huntington came from sources other than wages or salaries.

"This is a city that is not improving economically," he said. "It's in a relative position to the 2000 Census, and that's discouraging news.

"It explains a lot of our problems, such as housing. These are problems that can be traced back to the issue of our residents just not having the financial means."

The data also shows the difficulty that fiscally strapped Huntington has when it tries to raise revenue through broad-based taxes and fees, Kent said.

"A lot of the higher-income individuals have moved outside the city, and they've taken the tax-paying ability with them," he said. "That may be one of the reasons to look at an occupation tax, because it would not affect the low-income people nearly as much as the high-income people

who live outside the city but work in the city."

Huntington gained the authority earlier this year to implement a 1 percent occupation tax as part of a five-year home rule pilot program. However, the tax proposal has yet to come before Huntington City Council for approval.