

# Vanderburgh County bucks economic trends | POLL

## *Poverty, job numbers compare favorably*

By Bill Straub

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WASHINGTON — The sluggish economy has taken its toll on Vanderburgh County over the past year, but the region appears to have weathered the down cycle better than the rest of Indiana and the nation as a whole.

Data released Tuesday by the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) under the umbrella American Community Survey shows, somewhat surprisingly, that Vanderburgh County actually thrived in key areas.

While many areas witnessed an increase in the poverty level in 2009, Vanderburgh County experienced a drop. While home prices fell and wages adjusted for inflation sank nationwide and in the Hoosier State as a whole, the county experienced an uptick in both categories.

The most significant statistic marring the local picture came in the area of unemployment, which jumped substantially from a rate of 4 percent in 2008 to 6.4 percent last year. But that still remains appreciably superior to statewide totals that saw unemployment soar from 6.9 percent to 11 percent in 2009.

Even median family income rose 1.8 percent in Vanderburgh County despite the rise in unemployment, from \$56,438 in 2008 to \$57,446. Nationally, real median household income fell 2.9 percent, from \$51,726 to \$50,221.

The American Community Survey is a statistical survey sent to about 3 million addresses nationwide per year. It replaced the long form circulated during the decennial census that many participants found burdensome and intrusive. The ACS is the largest survey other than the decennial census that the Census Bureau administers.

"Collectively, ACS and census data are critical components of the nation's information infrastructure, providing data essential to our economy and our communities," said Census Bureau director Robert Groves. "ACS data are required by numerous federal programs and for planning and decision making at the state and federal level. ACS data help communities and businesses create jobs, plan for the future, establish new businesses and improve our economy."

It also provides a snapshot of where particular communities stand. And according to the latest numbers, Vanderburgh County is doing better than most.

The number of county residents working rose from 2008 to 2009, going from 85,696 to 86,541, a 1 percent improvement. But the modest increase failed to keep pace with a hike in the local labor force, which went from 89,709 to 92,466.

Most county workers — 20,177, or 23 percent — are involved in the area of education services and health care/social assistance. According to the data, the number of workers involved in farming, fishing and forestry occupations went from 125 in 2008 to 730 last year.

Working men still far outstrip working women when it comes to salaries in Vanderburgh County. The median earnings for full-time, year-round working males is \$40,882. Women earn about 80 percent of that — \$32,741.

Poverty grew substantially nationwide with 3.5 million people added to the rolls in 2009, hopping from 13 percent in 2008 to 14.3 percent in 2009. Indiana followed suit, according to ACS, going from 13.1 percent to 14.4 percent last year.

But Vanderburgh County managed to buck that trend, although the rate remains relatively high. The survey found that the local poverty rate went from 17.4 percent in 2008 to 14.7 percent in 2009 — a drop of 2.7 percent in one year, one of the country's few political districts that came make that claim.

On the negative side of the ledger, the number of county residents with health insurance slipped from 87.4 percent to 86.8 percent. The drop came in the area of those with public health coverage such as Medicare. That number dropped from 28.7 percent to 27.3 percent.

Perhaps the most inspiring number came in the area of home values. According to the American Community Survey, the value of owner-occupied units in Vanderburgh County went from a median \$110,500 in 2008 to \$112,800 in 2009, an increase of 2.1 percent.

Nationally, as a result of the housing bubble that caused a crash in the market, home values dropped 5.8 percent, with the biggest fall coming in Merced, Calif., which witnessed a 34 percent drop. In Indiana as a whole, values fell 1.4 percent, from \$124,800 to \$123,100.

Despite the optimistic local numbers, Sarah Downing, research and policy analyst for the Indiana Institute for Working Families, said the statewide numbers "not only speak to the magnitude of the recession but also to the slowed economic growth that Indiana and the nation have experienced over the past decade."

"The increase in poverty rates reflect decreases in wages and incomes caused by long-term unemployment and the number of workers forced to cut back their hours due to the recession," she said. "The longer individuals are unemployed or forced to work reduced hours, the more difficult it becomes for them to stay above the poverty level."

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