

Business

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Poverty rate up slightly in Appalachia Those with health insurance increase

By **The Associated Press**

The number of Appalachians living in poverty last year increased by 114,000 to 13.3 million, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures released Tuesday.

But there was good news in the numbers. Median incomes were up in all the 13 states that make up Appalachia, where the median income ranged from \$36,338 in Mississippi to \$68,080 in Maryland. However, with the exception of Maryland, Virginia and New York, those incomes across Appalachia still were below the national median of \$50,233.

And the number of people in the region who did not have health insurance last year fell to 13.6 million from 13.7 million from the year before.

Appalachia includes all of West Virginia and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

Virginia had the biggest increase in the number of people living in poverty, from 709,000 in 2006 to 743,000 a year later. Alabama, Kentucky, Maryland and Tennessee also had slight increases in the number of people living in poverty.

Ted Boettner, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, said the numbers were generally good for his state.

"Poverty's down, incomes are up and health coverage is basically stagnant, except for children, where we've seen dramatic decreases," he said. "But we still have some of the worst poverty in the country."

West Virginia's poverty rate dropped to 16.9 percent last year from 17.3 percent the year before, but it still tied with Alabama for the sixth highest poverty rate in the country.

To lift more West Virginians out of poverty, Boettner said state lawmakers need to follow the lead of 24 others states and enact a state earned income tax credit. Such a move would help 145,000 working poor adults "who are trying to make ends meet, but need a little incentive."

Also in West Virginia, where the number of uninsured increased by about 9,000, an advocate of more government health-care programs said the figures weren't as bad as they could have been.

"I'm delighted the increase isn't bigger," said Perry Bryant, executive director of West Virginians for Affordable Health Care.

Bryant's group, which has pushed for the expansion of the state Children's Health Insurance Program, said the numbers also show that private employers are struggling to provide coverage to their workers.

Renate Pore, the budget center's health policy analyst, said the state needs to do more to help the 250,000 working-age adults who aren't covered, but she said the state had done a good job of making sure children have health insurance. The Census reported that all but 2.4 percent of West Virginia children had health insurance last year.

The state's median income of \$37,060 is nearly \$1,000 more than the year before, but is still the second lowest median household income in the country.

Mississippi had the lowest median income at \$36,338.