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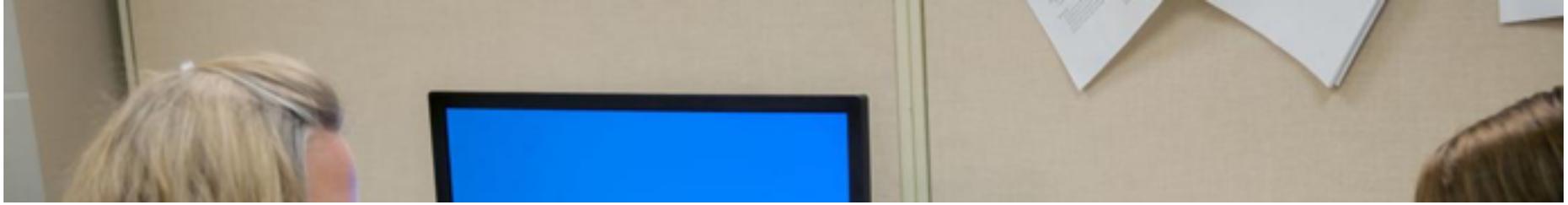
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TOP STORY

Latest census data show local growth, challenges

WES SWIETEK wswietek@bgdailynews.com Sep 15, 2018



Local wages are up and poverty and unemployment levels are down, but Bowling Green and Warren County still lag behind national averages in most of those categories. The question remains as to how much the region's job growth will affect poverty and wage levels going forward.

The latest American Community Survey Census Bureau data was released Thursday. The figures showed that in Bowling Green:

- The unemployment rate for those 16 and over dropped from 5.5 percent in 2016 to 4.7 percent in 2017.
- The percent of the population living below the federal poverty level decreased from 27.9 percent in 2016 to 21.1 percent last year.
- Median household income in Bowling Green rose from \$37,305 in 2016 to \$40,814 in 2017.

By contrast, in 2017 the nationwide unemployment rate was 5.3 percent, the percent of the population in poverty was 13.4 percent and the median household income was \$60,336.

The rise in wages and decrease of people in poverty and unemployed was welcome news for Bowling Green Mayor Bruce Wilkerson.

"I hope we can attribute it to the efforts of the community as a whole," he said. "As a community, we have worked together to that goal and we are making progress thanks to the efforts of city, county and state government."

The city's population grew from 65,239 in 2016 to 67,067 last year.

Warren County numbers include Bowling Green and showed similar improvements for the most part:

- The unemployment rate in the county actually ticked up, from 3.9 percent in 2016 to 4.3 percent

in 2017.

- Median household income increased from \$46,686 in 2016 to \$48,962 in 2017.
- The percentage of individuals below the poverty level fell from 19.3 percent in 2016 to 16.6 percent last year.

According to census data, the county grew in population from 125,532 in 2016 to 128,845 last year.

"That is about the level of growth we were anticipating. It is gratifying to see we are growing," Warren County Judge-Executive Mike Buchanon said. "It's a result of a lot of hard work. ... I feel good about our efforts."

Industry recruitment and workforce development have been a major focus of local officials in recent years.

Robert Boone was hired in 2017 as the South Central Workforce Development Board's president and CEO to ramp up efforts to find workers to meet the growing demand of local employers.

"I think Bowling Green and Warren County have been highly successful in recruiting and helping employers expand," said Boone, who credited "an innovative" workforce board that has strived to provide "not just the typical unemployment services" that have been offered in the past.

Boone cited as examples of those efforts programs to connect veterans with training and jobs, as well as an effort to keep more foreign-born workers who commute in large numbers out of the county to work in Bowling Green.

"We are doing a much better job with targeted recruitment efforts," Boone said.



Officials acknowledge, however, that poverty levels and income remain areas that need improvement.

"It's hard to compare cost of living" in Bowling Green to large cities like New York or Chicago, Wilkerson said, "but I don't want to discount that we have a long way to go. I'm glad we have been able to make progress, (but) we continue to strive to make improvements."

"To some degree they go hand in hand," Boone said of workforce development and an improvement in metrics such as poverty and income. "An argument is to be made that industry does follow the workforce (and that) supply and demand influences wages."

Buchanon also said continued economic growth will continue to drive up wages and decrease poverty.

"It all goes together. The market will drive wages up through supply and demand," he said.
"Good jobs will make all the difference."

Western Kentucky University sociology professor Jerry Daday said the key to improving measures such as poverty is not to focus just on unemployment numbers, but on the quality of the jobs available. He cited the work of noted Princeton professor and MacArthur "Genius" fellow Matt Desmond that finds employment is not the singular solution to bringing people out of poverty.

"In recent decades, the nation's tremendous economic growth has not led to broad social uplift," Desmond wrote last week in The New York Times. "Economists call it the 'productivity-pay gap' — the fact that over the last 40 years, the economy has expanded and corporate profits have risen, but real wages have remained flat for workers without a college education. ... American workers are being shut out of the profits they are helping to generate."

"Wages are starting to climb," Daday said, "but a lot of it boils down to that we need to make sure we are attracting high-paying jobs so people can at least make ends meet."

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