

Census shows Central Valley areas among poorest in nation

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FRESNO -- Three metropolitan areas in California's Central Valley, the region with the highest farm revenues in the country, rank among the poorest in the state and nation, Census figures released Thursday show.

Fresno, Modesto and Bakersfield-Delano areas are among the top five U.S. regions with the highest percentage of residents living below the poverty line.

The Fresno area, ranked as the second most impoverished in the nation, trailed only the U.S.-Mexico border area of McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, Texas, the American Community Survey figures show.

Bakersfield-Delano and Modesto ranked fourth and fifth. The data compared large metro areas in 2011 of half million people or more.

The valley's poverty rate is high even though its agricultural productivity is soaring. California is home to a \$35 billion agricultural industry and Fresno County produces more than \$5.6 billion in agricultural products. One in four people in the county lived under the poverty line in 2011.

In California, one in six residents lived in poverty. California's poverty rate went up slightly, from 15.8 to 16.6 percent. Median income fell from \$59,540 in 2010 to \$57,287 in 2011.

In Fresno County, median income fell from \$46,479 to \$42,807. Unemployment rose to 16 percent, and food stamp use climbed to nearly 18 percent.

By comparison, the statewide unemployment rate is 12 percent, and California's food stamp use is placed at 8 percent.

While Fresno's poverty rate declined by a percentage point in 2011 to 25.8 percent -- a statistically insignificant decrease -- it ranked as the poorest metro area in the state for the second year in a row.

Experts say the poverty problem in the nation's agricultural powerhouse is deeply ingrained. The most important barrier is the valley's lack of economic diversity. There are simply too few good nonagricultural jobs around and jobs in agriculture tend to be low-wage ones -- except for those who run agribusinesses.

"It's a pretty ag-heavy region, so the inequality of wages and the opportunity to earn better wages is really skewed," said Caroline Farrell, executive director of the Delano-based Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. "If you own a farm, you're apt to earn more wealth, while if you're a farmworker, don't earn very much."

The valley has not been able to bring or retain many new companies partly because it lacks a qualified workforce, said Atonio Avalos, associate professor of economics at Fresno State University.

"We have an issue of skills mismatch," Avalos said. "Companies may be offering jobs, but the skills of people in the valley are not ones they are looking for."

Students who want to get a college degree face many barriers, he said, and public funding for education is being slashed. Those who do graduate leave to find jobs elsewhere.

The valley also doesn't offer attractive amenities and has serious problems such as air pollution that have gone unaddressed.

"If you're a doctor or engineer, there are other places where you can make good money and live in better conditions," Avalos said. "Many people don't come here or leave because of the high incidence of asthma and other respiratory problems."

Valley leaders, said Farrell of the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, need to decide whether to break the poverty cycle by investing more in schools, educating children of color and encouraging them to go to college.

"There's a class and racial divide here," she said, "and we need to decide how we are going to change that."