

# New study: Rochester is fifth poorest city in country

Sean Dobbin, Staff writer 9:14 p.m. EST December 10, 2013



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(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=http://on.rocne.ws/1bzVa2U&text=New%20study:%20Rochester%20is%20the%20fifth%20poorest%20city%20in%20the%20country>)

Don Rosier wheeled his motorized scooter to the center of the room, laying his cheek on his fist as he waited his turn.

Once a month, neighborhood residents can come to the St. Andrew's Food Cupboard on Portland Avenue and collect a box of food. Rosier, 67 and sporting a baseball cap with "Vietnam Veteran" written across it, said that lines at places like this are longer than they used to be.

There's one Rochester that everyone likes to boast about. It's the one with the great cost-of-living, the high-performing suburban school systems, the affordable real estate, and the short commutes, all of which combines to push it to the top of those "Best places to live" lists that come out every so often.

And then there's the Rochester that Rosier lives in. The one that's the fifth poorest city in the United States. The one with the third-highest concentration of extremely impoverished residents in the country. The one with the poorest large urban school district in the state.

**PDF:** [Read the report \(http://roc.democratandchronicle.com/assets/pdf/A22162251210.PDF\)](http://roc.democratandchronicle.com/assets/pdf/A22162251210.PDF)

In the hopes of highlighting the effects that poverty is having on the region as a whole, the Rochester Area Community Foundation on Tuesday morning released its 50-page analysis of poverty in the greater Rochester area (<http://roc.democratandchronicle.com/assets/pdf/A22162251210.PDF>).

"Maybe you've heard people use this term about crime — that perception of crime is worse than reality," said Ed Doherty, vice president of community programs for the Community Foundation. "I believe with poverty, it's sort of the opposite. The perception understates the reality."

Among the study's findings are that, at 31.1 percent, the percentage of Rochester's residents who are impoverished is just 5 percentage points below that of Detroit, which just declared bankruptcy and is the country's poorest city by the above measure.

When compared with cities of similar size, the picture gets even worse. Only Hartford, Conn. (32.9 percent), has a higher percentage of poor city residents than Rochester does.

## Concentration

There are poor people in every city, town, and village in the nine-county region. In total, more than 160,000 people live below the poverty line.

But the Rochester area's poor are more heavily concentrated than almost any other metropolitan area in the country. Forty-seven percent of city-dwellers live in neighborhoods of extreme poverty — defined as neighborhoods where 4 in 10 residents or more are living below the poverty line — according to the Community Foundation's study. That ranks second among similarly-sized cities (again, only Hartford, Conn. is worse) and third in the country overall.

Doherty, who authored the study, attributed this in part to Rochester's heritage as a "factory town," which created tight-knit communities of immigrant blue-collar workers. While Italian and Irish immigrants were generally successful in finding solid jobs, African-Americans in the mid-20th Century were discriminated against in terms of both employment and housing.

So as higher earners began leaving the city for the suburbs, the urban-suburban income gap began to grow, and the city and suburbs became more racially and economically segregated.

"Every year it's something different," said Sam Raysor, 70, of Rochester, who was waiting in line at St. Andrew's on Tuesday morning. "Groceries, they go up — it's hard to get by on a fixed income."

The ramifications of Rochester's concentrated poverty are also on display in the city school system. When struggling students are small in number, teachers can help — studies have shown that poor students do better when surrounded by higher achievers. But the City School District serves an overwhelming number of low-income families.

"If people live in a place where they can only attend certain schools — schools where the academic achievement gap is quite a bit — they are not going to be exposed to the same opportunities as other kids," said Hilda Rosario-Escher, president of the Ibero-American Action League. "And it just cycles."

Providers who work in these neighborhoods say that the heavy concentration of the area's poor contributes to the perception of two disparate Rochesters. Since the city's poverty is so condensed, it's actually easier to steer clear of, allowing Rochester to be considered one of the country's most and least livable cities at the same time.

"It's funny, isn't it?" said Father Bob Werth, a priest at St. Francis Xavier Cabrini parish, which operates several outreach programs in Rochester for the poor. "Some people won't even drive through these neighborhoods. They're going to avoid them and drive around them, because they're afraid they're going to get blasted at a red light or something."

### 'Do we care?'

David Rusk, an urban researcher and former mayor of Albuquerque, N.M., uses three key measures to analyze urban-suburban income inequality: population loss, isolation of racial minorities, and declining city incomes compared to the suburbs.

No city has ever narrowed its urban-suburban income disparity by even a single percentage point once these three measures reach certain levels — Rusk calls this "the point of no return."

Rochester reached the point of no return a decade ago.

For those key measures, things have only gotten worse in Rochester in the past 10 years, including a 5 percentage-point increase in the city's poverty rate. With poverty now so closely linked with city living, it has in some ways become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"I think there's a tendency to accept poverty as sort of a realistic part of urban life," Doherty said. "It's convenient to think that it's a city problem, not a regional problem."

The Community Foundation report stops short of advocating for specific solutions, though it mentions that the region hasn't typically made low-income housing a priority in the suburbs, and that countywide school systems have raised prosperity in certain areas.

"We have to talk about these things," said Jennifer Leonard, president and CEO of the Community Foundation. "We have to stop saying 'There are things we can't discuss.' I think the people in the suburbs — there will be an army of the willing if we equip them with the right information."

The hope is that the report will promote discussions throughout the region. Though it's happening slowly, poverty is increasing in most area suburbs, as well as the surrounding counties. In terms of raw numbers, there are now more impoverished residents in the metropolitan area living outside city limits than inside.

That poverty is creeping into the suburbs may in some ways help bring more participants to the table.

"I think that one of the first questions is: Do we care? Is this important?" Doherty said. "And I hope that we are able to demonstrate that this is important — that ignoring 160,000 poor people in our total region is not smart, and that concentrating such a huge percentage of them into one area, such that the systems in those areas can't really function, is not smart."

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