

Weath Gap Hits Manufacturing Workers Hard

Jim Fitzgerald and Vicki Smith, Associated Press Writers

MOUNT VERNON, N.Y. (AP) — A Wall Street adviser leaves early for work to avoid panhandlers at his suburban train station. In coal country, a suddenly homeless man watches from a bench as wealthy women shop for dresses. A down-and-out waitress sits glumly on her stoop across the street from a gleaming suburb. A freshly elected politician loses his day job.

They're the faces of a census report released this week showing that the gap between the richest and poorest Americans is wider than ever.

The recession technically ended in the middle of last year, but the numbers can't tell the whole story. The census report translates to stories of impatience, resignation and hopelessness for those who are living it across the country.

It's the story of Roy Houseman, who, having barely finished celebrating his election to the City Council in Missoula, Mont., was laid off. It's the story of Ashleigh Dorner, an unemployed Detroitter who has a car but no money for gas or insurance. It's the story of John Morgan, a financial adviser who avoids interaction with the poor in the gritty New York suburb of Mount Vernon.

And it's the story of Charles Fox.

Fox, 68, has claimed a bench on High Street in Morgantown, W.Va. It's tucked between a pizza shop and a gelato stand he can't afford to visit. Beside him are two black trash bags stuffed with his belongings.

He had a home until last month, when a fire burned down one of the last cheap motels in town. Now he sits in the morning sunshine, worrying about the approach of winter.

"I ain't found no place to live yet," he says, staring down at the sidewalk.

Morgantown's metro area has the largest gap between rich and poor in the 50 states, the new census figures say. That's partly because it's a college town, and the number of students is growing rapidly, along with the low-paying jobs that support them.

College towns also have highly paid professors, researchers and doctors. And they're a landlord's market: Fox, who was spending \$450 a month on rent — three-quarters of his monthly disability check — says he can't find a room for under \$1,000 a month.

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He used to work in a coal mine, but a blocked artery in his leg makes walking and standing — and holding a job — difficult. At night, he finds a bunk at a packed homeless shelter.

"I sit up here on the street in the daytime and just wonder, 'Where am I going to go?'" he says. Tears fall as he adds, "Sometimes I go two or three days without anything to eat."

Across the street is Coni & Franc's, where blouses go for \$100 and gowns for thousands. But owner Constance Chico Merandi says she deals with the homeless and working poor, too.

There's a sale table with \$10 shoes, and sometimes Merandi, 51, pulls an already discounted dress from her sale rack and lets it go for less to a woman dreaming of a wedding gown she knows she can't afford.

"It's just part of living and coexisting here," she says. "We realize we have to do something."

Meanwhile, Fox sits on his bench and waits for his luck to change.

"You ain't got a chance anymore in this town," he says. "You really don't."

When the linerboard plant at Smurfit-Stone Container in Missoula, Mont., was shutting down, 29-year-old Roy Houseman became one of more than 400 workers in the cold.

His situation was unique: As a newly elected city councilman, Houseman was expected to help move Missoula's economy forward after losing \$60,000 of his annual income. He was left with just the \$12,500 a year he was pulling in as a part-time councilman.

He saw his co-workers forced into retirement or out of Missoula. Most were in their 50s, an age that can cause a would-be employer to blanch.

Houseman and his wife, Andrea, knew they didn't want to leave Missoula. The mountain town is considered Montana's cultural center, with its university, professional population and urbane atmosphere.

But Missoula also has the state's largest homeless shelter, serving as many as 350 people a day.

Andrea Houseman was able to find a better-paying job to help them get by. Roy Houseman started graduate school at the University of Montana, hoping to position himself for better economic times.

"As the recession goes, I think people try to find places to shelter — and universities

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are places to shelter," he says.

The Housemans put on hold their plans to have children, as well as their plans to save for retirement.

"That's one thing I have to say the recession has taught me," Houseman says. "It's hard to plan long term."

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John Morgan, a financial adviser on Wall Street, goes to work earlier some mornings to avoid panhandlers at the railroad station in Mount Vernon, a struggling city of 68,000 bordering the Bronx.

He has no interaction with other residents, including the poor — and doesn't want any.

Warily eyeing a man begging commuters for "train fare," Morgan says, "This guy hits me all the time. At first I gave him a dollar or two and now he sees me coming."

Morgan, 64, is a widower who lives alone in a condominium apartment. He and his wife raised a family in a house in neighboring Pelham before moving two years ago to one of Mount Vernon's more pleasant neighborhoods.

"I don't have anything to do with Mount Vernon," Morgan says. "I shop in Pelham. I go straight out to my house on Long Island on the weekends. I've never spent a weekend in Mount Vernon."

As Morgan spoke, police patrolled the downtown train station, where a missing-woman flier hung.

He has his doubts about the statistics revealing a wider gap between rich and poor. The data showed that the top-earning 20 percent of Americans — those making more than \$100,000 each year — received 49.4 percent of all income. The bottom 20 percent took in just 3.4 percent of income.

"Things aren't good out there," he says. "I think the rich are getting poorer and the poor are staying poor."

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Ashleigh Dorner was getting by, she says, until job losses in and around Detroit stunted business at the restaurants where she hustled for tips to augment her lower-than-minimum-wage pay. Around the same time, her boyfriend began bringing home less money as home improvement work dried up.

Now she's unemployed and they have to live on the \$1,000 per month he earns and "a lot of help from family," Dorner says, sitting with her 2-year-old daughter on the stoop of their rented home.

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They have no telephone. They have a car, but they can't afford to put it on the road.

"We don't have money for car insurance or even gas," says Dorner, 25. "My boyfriend rides his bike back and forth to work."

Their home on Detroit's far east side is across the street from one of the affluent communities known as the Grosse Pointes.

Jon Gandelot, 67, lives and practices estate planning law in Grosse Pointe Farms, where fancy homes sit serenely on professionally manicured lawns, just blocks from some of Detroit's worst neighborhoods.

Gandelot holds little hope for a recovered Detroit, where the unemployment rate is approaching 30 percent. Driving through the city to get to his suburb is "like day and night, but it has been this way for 30 years," he says.

"Detroit has always had promises of a renaissance. It just never comes to fruition," says Gandelot, an estate planning attorney.

Dorner says she knows her high school diploma doesn't count for much in this economy, and she doesn't resent her wealthy neighbors.

"I don't hold any hard feelings toward them," she says. "I wish I could be in their situation."

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Smith reported from Morgantown. Corey Williams in Detroit, Matt Volz in Helena, Mont., and Hope Yen in Washington contributed to this report.

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