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More Sacramento-area families crowding into shared homes, census says

By Phillip Reese and Hudson Sangree

Despite the fledgling economic recovery, more than 180,000 Sacramento-area residents live in homes stuffed with more than one occupant per room, a trend that has grown since the start of the recession, new U.S. Census Bureau data show.

These residents are usually poor or on the precipice of poverty, caught between the vise of high rent and high unemployment and just one fragile step above homelessness.

They're people like Monica Ramirez, who shares a three-bedroom Rancho Cordova home with three other adults, an autistic boy and eight other children, taking turns sleeping on the couch, bed or floor.

With rents high and blue-collar jobs scarce, it's all Ramirez and the 12 others staying with her can afford.

"It's been hard," said Ramirez, who is studying to become a nurse. "But it's the only way we can feed the kids."

Between 2007 and 2011, the number of Sacramento households living in rental housing with more than one person per room jumped from roughly 18,000 to 24,000, a 30 percent increase, census figures show.

That's one person per room, not per bedroom – for instance, five people living in a two-bedroom house with a living room and kitchen. The census excludes bathrooms.

Another 10,000 owner-occupied households are similarly crowded.

While some of these residents are strapped middle-class families, most have little income, census figures show. Though many never owned a home, their declining circumstances are direct fallout from the housing bust.

When banks started repossessing thousands of homes in 2007, a flood of families suddenly needed rental housing. Rising demand meant rental rates stayed high even as property values fell sharply. High rents have a disproportionate impact on the poor.

At the same time, unemployment in the region, while falling, has remained in the double digits for 43 consecutive months, making it hard for some to pay rent. And average household incomes have fallen four straight years.

"The fundamental problem is that folks are paying more than half of their incomes on rent," said John Foley, executive director of Sacramento Self Help Housing. "That's just unstable."

Children are disproportionately affected by the trend. About 95,000 of them live in Sacramento-area homes with more than one occupant per room, census figures show.

"They don't have a place to sleep, a desk to do homework," said Charlene Hunt,

"The fundamental problem is that folks are paying more than half of their incomes on rent. That's just unstable."

-John Foley, executive director of Sacramento Self Help Hous-

ing. He is the district liaison for homeless services at Folsom-Cordova Unified School District. "These kids are living in a state of confusion."

Living with friends

Ramirez is 37 and has four children, ages 17, 16, 13 and 12. She's living in a three-bedroom house with a friend who has three kids; the friend's sister, who has two children; and the friend's mother, who owns the home.

She was forced to live with her friends, she said, when she couldn't find a job that paid enough to cover child care. It's particularly tough for her to locate affordable care for her 13-year-old son.

"He's severely autistic, non-verbal," she said.

She wants something better for her children, so she studies hard for her nursing classes at Sacramento City College. "I don't want to let go of that goal," she said of becoming a nurse. "It's my only way out."



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At night, Ramirez said, "I let the kids take over the bed. I use the couch."

Since one bed isn't large enough for four children, Ramirez said, they take turns sleeping on the floor.

"We don't get to have any privacy," she said. "But things will get better."

Several miles away, near Oak Park, Laura Sondrini stays in a one-bedroom rental apartment with her daughter Michelle and 6-year-old granddaughter Noelle.

Sondrini, 55, lost her job as an assistant in a doctor's office a few years ago and hasn't found work since. She used to live in "a cute two-bedroom house," she said, but had to leave when rent increased.

Her daughter recently finished a training program in medical billing but also hasn't found steady work, prompting her to move in with Sondrini six months ago.

Sondrini served in the Navy for six years during the first Gulf War and pays her \$650 monthly rent with a government voucher that helps veterans avoid homelessness.

Sondrini's 550-square-foot apartment is a squeeze for three people. A small couch, TV and chair pretty much fill the living room, which backs into a tiny kitchen. The bedroom, at 250 square feet, looks big by comparison.

Concerns about Noelle dominate the family's habits. At night, Noelle sleeps in bed with Laura, while Michelle sleeps on a couch.

"We shut down the TV and everything so she can do her homework," Sondrini said.

Job losses are a factor

The number of multigenerational households like the Sondrinis' grew 30 percent in the Sacramento region between 2007 and 2011, census figures show. Reversing the trend, several experts said, hinges on two key factors: economic growth and lower rents.

"Overcrowding is just a logical option when you can't find affordable housing," said Rachel Iskow, executive director of Mutual Housing California. It happens "when people's hours at work get cut down or they lose a job or they get a rent increase notice and can't afford it."

On the bright side, the economy is growing, albeit slowly. The region's unemployment rate fell by about 1.5 percentage points during the last year, to 10.3 percent, though it remains twice as high as the rate before the recession.

The region added about 20,000 jobs during the last year, a 2 percent increase.

Rents, however, remain a trouble spot. Even as home prices fell dramatically during the bust, average rents remained stable, hovering around \$1,000 a month for a two-bedroom home.

With corresponding drops in earnings, almost half of all local renters spent at least a third of their income on housing last year, up sharply from before the recession, census figures show.

"Overcrowding is just a logical option when you can't find affordable housing."

-Rachel Iskow, executive director of Mutual Housing California

Bringing rents down will require an increase in supply – more affordable rental housing – or a decrease in demand – more renters becoming homeowners.

But that doesn't appear to be in the offing anytime soon: State cuts to redevelopment funding have reduced the number of new affordable rental housing projects coming to market. And even amid rising home sales, homeownership rates remain near 20-year lows in the region.



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