

The Working Poor in Western New York

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Most people living in poverty are working. They are just not getting paid enough. What is “enough?” In 2008, the federal poverty guideline for a family of four is \$21,200.¹ Most experts agree that this guideline is set artificially low, and that a family of four needs an income substantially higher than \$21,200 to escape poverty. For many public assistance programs, income eligibility is set at 150% of the poverty guideline, or \$31,800 for a family of four.

The City of Buffalo’s Living Wage Ordinance, which is designed to keep a family of three out of poverty, sets the living wage for 2008 at \$11.11 per hour for a worker with no health benefits, resulting in an annual wage of \$23,109. For a worker with benefits, the hourly rate is \$9.90, yielding an annual wage of \$20,592.²

The table below lists the 2007 median wages for some common western New York jobs paying less than \$26,000 per year.³ These workers account for 216,720, or 34.1%, of the 634,700 workers identified by the Department of Labor. The figures below include only jobs with over 1,000 workers. There are many other low-wage workers in less common jobs, such as the 370 pharmacy aides with a median wage of \$19,210, the 420 people doing tire repair for a median wage of \$19,010, and the 700 EMTs/Paramedics with a median wage of \$24,620.

Any discussion of poverty must center on this huge cadre of workers. The two most common responses to poverty, economic development and education, can do relatively little to reduce poverty among low-wage workers. Economic development as currently practiced means giving tax subsidies to large businesses in return for the promise to create or retain jobs. It does nothing to raise workers’ incomes, and it increases their taxes by shifting the tax burden from large corporations to working people.

Better and more education is desirable for many reasons, but it should not be offered as a cure-all for poverty. Most jobs do not require a college education: about two-thirds of the jobs in New York state require a high school diploma or less.⁴ We will always need large numbers of food service workers, janitors, landscapers, security guards, home health aides, preschool teachers, and child care workers. If we do not pay these workers a living wage, they will live in poverty, regardless of their educational level.

¹ <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/08Poverty.shtml/> In 2007, it was \$20,650.

² The Buffalo Living Wage Ordinance applies to a small number of employers with city contracts. For more information, see www.city-buffalo.com/Home/CityServices/Living_Wage_Commission.

³ Department of Labor, http://www.labor.state.ny.us/workforceindustrydata/wages_pr.asp?reg=wny. Wage data are from the 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 OES survey, and have been adjusted to second quarter 2007 by making cost-of-living adjustments.

⁴ Fiscal Policy Institute, *The State of Working New York, 2007*, p. 23.

Common Low Wage Jobs in Western New York (2007)

Occupation	Number Employed	Median Income
Below \$20,000		
Food Preparation / Serving	55,920	\$17,300
Retail Salespersons	20,170	\$19,060
Cashiers	18,780	\$16,360
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers	9,220	\$19,220
Security Guards	4,620	\$19,760
Child Care Workers	4,320	\$17,200
Maids/Housekeeping	4,040	\$18,920
Recreation Workers	2,070	\$19,560
Personal and Home Care Aides	1,620	\$19,380
Cleaners: Vehicles, Equipment	1,420	\$17,000
Laundry/Dry-Cleaning	1,250	\$17,840
Parking Lot Attendants	1,200	\$16,740
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>124,630</i>	
Below \$23,000		
Janitors/Cleaners	12,080	\$22,090
Teachers Assistants	8,800	\$21,790
Home Health Aides	7,400	\$21,670
Landscaping/Groundskeeping	3,440	\$22,690
Helpers – Production Workers	3,140	\$21,910
Preschool Teachers	1,880	\$21,180
Counter/Rental Clerks	1,590	\$22,340
Driver/Sales Workers	1,030	\$21,380
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>39,360</i>	
Below \$26,000		
Office Clerks	11,890	\$23,390
Nursing Aides, Orderlies	8,510	\$25,220
Team Assemblers	5,490	\$25,900
Receptionists/Information Clerks	5,420	\$23,880
Shipping Clerks	3,360	\$25,560
Tellers	2,550	\$24,140
Social Service Assistants	2,120	\$23,270
Hairdressers, Cosmetologists	1,970	\$23,510
Packaging Machine Operators	1,940	\$25,930
Electronics Assemblers	1,590	\$25,090
Rehabilitation Counselors	1,580	\$23,660
Telemarketers	1,570	\$23,450
Pharmacy Technicians	1,320	\$24,780
Data Entry	1,260	\$24,330
File Clerks	1,090	\$23,240
Sewing Machine Operators	1,070	\$24,450
<i>Subtotal</i>	<i>52,730</i>	
Total	216,720	