

# Is Oregon Failing Its Families?

Housing Prices,  
a Recession  
and a Poor Safety Net  
Spell Financial Instability  
for Families

By Marie Sherlock

*\*Names of families have been changed by request.*

Sara Peterson\* never expected that she'd become a statistic. But the east Portland mother has joined the growing legion of Oregon parents who are struggling to meet the basic needs of their families.

Peterson has been looking for a job in her field – corrections – since graduating from Mt. Hood Community College last spring. But the economy isn't cooperating with her. "It's frustrating," says Peterson. "There just aren't any jobs."

Meanwhile, she's found part-time work as a retail sales clerk, earning a bit more than minimum wage.

Peterson lives with her partner, Matt Clegg, their 3-year-old son and Clegg's teen-ager. Even though Clegg works full-time, also in retail sales, the family can't make ends meet. Their biggest expense is the \$695 monthly rent they pay for their modest two-bedroom apartment, says Peterson. "Rent is ridiculous," she says, "probably close to 75 percent of our income goes to rent." As a result, the family often runs out of money by the

end of the month. So Peterson has had to ask for help from Portland Impact, a nonprofit organization serving low-income residents of southeast Portland, to lend a hand with the family's utility bills, and from Snow-CAP, an east Multnomah County emergency assistance agency, for an occasional food box and diapers.

Peterson is one of the "lucky" ones. She's never had to skip meals; the kids have never gone hungry. Even though the percentage of her family's monthly income earmarked for housing is far above the 30 percent recommended by federal housing agencies, Peterson has never been homeless.

The Taylor family has. Rachel and Jacob and their three sons – Joseph, 11, Timothy, 10, and Orion, 9 – moved from Los Angeles in July "because we wanted a better life for our children," Rachel says. The family stayed with friends for a month until they had a

falling out with their hosts and ended up living in their car. An outreach worker with JOIN, a nonprofit group that secures permanent housing for families and individuals living on the streets, helped them get into an apartment.

Rachel now is working as a kitchen supervisor and the kids are enrolled in school; Jacob is still looking for work. Rachel says that, having been homeless, she's now grateful for "the little things you take for granted, things like a bathroom and your own space and your children being able to function."

## Struggling Families Could Be Your Neighbors

Throw away your stereotypes of single, unemployed mothers on welfare. The Taylor and Clegg-Peterson households, and thousands of others like them, represent the new, very

### A QUICK LOOK

Children First for Oregon recently gave the state an "F" for family financial stability in its 2003 report card on the status of Oregon's children. This grade reflects the increasing number of Oregon parents who cannot provide essential food, shelter and medical care for their children. A look behind the numbers reveals a diverse population struggling to make ends meet in the face of high housing prices and low-paying jobs.