



LOGAN WESTOM/The Columbian

Steven Doerk, center, works on homework with his classmate, Zach Martinez, before their math class at Clark College. Doerk, laid off in November, is taking classes to bolster his chances of landing a full-time job.

# Living with less income

## County households earning less than \$35,000 up 24% as job picture stays bleak

By AARON CORVIN  
Columbian staff writer

If money is the lifeblood of making your way in this world, then Vancouver resident Steven Doerk, 42, sure could use some more of it.

In 2010, he was laid off, and even though he's found part-time work his monthly pay's plummeted by hundreds of dollars.

He and his wife and two children aren't living in their rental home paycheck to paycheck yet. But a really bad month is only a costly medical problem or vehicle-repair job away.

"We've never been able to get ahead at any point in time," Doerk said.

A new analysis of wage and income trends in Clark County shows that Doerk's situation is a microcosm of a larger problem. The analysis by regional labor economist Scott Bailey found that the number of Clark County households earning less than \$35,000 annually increased by about 24 percent from 2008 to 2009.



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Meanwhile, the county's poverty rate is climbing faster than in Washington state and the nation, according to Bailey's analysis. The county's poverty rate for 2009 (11.8 percent) was well above the 9.6 percent from 2008 and 9.3 percent from 2007.

Job losses, predominately in lower-wage positions, and cuts in hours worked have pushed the incomes of middle- and lower-income families further down the scale, Bailey said. "It's fair to say it's just more of what's been happening," he said. "It would be one thing if this

was a regular recession where you get a snap back, but this isn't a regular recession. There's likely a permanent decline in our economy's potential overall."

And without solid job growth to re-employ people and put money in their pockets, consumer spending — and therefore overall economic growth — will remain soft. "For most people, their job is their income," Bailey said.

### 'We're stagnant'

But getting back into the labor market doesn't nec-

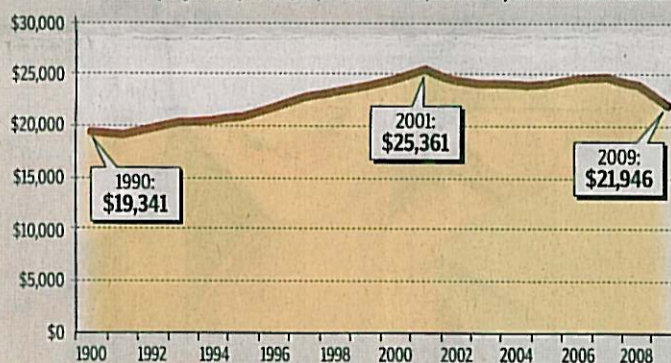
essarily bring the same or better pay.

In fact, those who manage to find a job often must settle for less pay, according to a survey of 5,000 people conducted in April by the state Employment Security Department. The survey, aimed at learning about job seekers who'd run out of all their allowable jobless benefits, found that eight in 10 people who returned to work were earning less money than they did before they were laid off.

Before they were laid off, those people were mak-

### Clark County per capita earned income, adjusted for inflation

The county's per capita earned income, which includes earnings from a job and from self-employment, was \$21,946 in 2009, down 8 percent from 2008.



SOURCES: US Bureau of Economic Analysis/LMEA; Washington State Employment Security Department, Labor Market and Economic Analysis

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# Income:

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ing an average hourly wage of \$25.38, according to the survey. When they returned to work, their average wage was \$18.12 — a decrease of about 29 percent.

Doerk understands this tough situation all too well.

About 10 months ago, the Vancouver resident was laid off from his civilian job with the Oregon Military Department. At the time he was laid off, Doerk hadn't received a pay raise in about four years, he said, and furloughs had already eroded his earnings.

Now, Doerk, who has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, is receiving unemployment insurance benefits, working as a part-time instructor at ITT Technical Institute to supplement his income and attending classes at Clark College.

He hopes to boost his income with a new career. But the nation's political dysfunction and feeble economy offer little encouragement. "I'm no economist by any means, but as far as I can see right now, we're stagnant," Doerk said. "I can fully see us falling into another recession."

## Job growth equals prosperity?

The income of Clark County workers likely will draw more attention in the future as regional political and business leaders attempt to measure progress on long-term strategies to recruit employers and foster local business expansion.

In fact, a new, countywide economic development plan — commissioned by the nonprofit Columbia River Economic Development Council, the county's chief jobs promoter — identifies new performance metrics, including average annual pay and median household income.

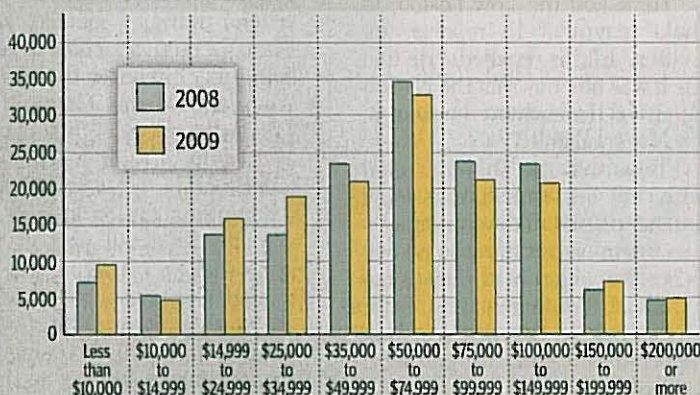
The county's economic prosperity "cannot be measured solely by the traditional metric of job creation," according to the plan.

But those are long-term issues. For Doerk, getting a higher-paying job as soon as possible is what matters now.

As he studies computers at

## Number of Clark County households by income range

From 2008 to 2009, more Clark County households shifted to lower income brackets.



SOURCES: American Community Survey; Washington State Employment Security Department, Labor Market and Economic Analysis

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Clark College, he's joined by hundreds of others seeking a new start. Enrollment numbers have reached historic highs as more people look to gain an edge in a tough job market.

Doerk said he sees himself working in information technology, perhaps a job helping maintain

a computer network at an office.

Classes are going well, he said, and he's able to find the time he needs to study and complete his homework.

He said he hopes the economy takes a turn for the better. "It's been awhile since times have been good."