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Starkville organization works to curb poverty rates

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In a population of 23,888, 35 percent of Starkville residents live below the poverty line.

Lynn Phillips-Gaines, Starkville Bridges Out of Poverty founder, said via email that one of the reasons the poverty rate in Starkville appears to be so high is due to the fact that the number of apartments occupied by one or two people with less than \$10,000 income. A large portion of these persons live in apartments within close proximity to Mississippi State University, and one-third of the population may not actually be living in poverty as the numbers imply, she said.

Mississippi has 21 percent of its population living below the poverty line, compared to 13.8 percent of the nation's population, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Oktibbeha County has a 10 percent unemployment rate, according to the Mississippi Department of Employment Services.

Tequilla Manning, Starkville Bridges Out of Poverty operations administrator, said poverty is misunderstood by members of all social classes.

"In our community, poverty is people living paycheck to paycheck and spending more than they make," she said. "It's more output than input."

Manning said it is difficult to overcome poverty because in this area especially, it is generational poverty.

Dallas Breen, Stennis Institute of Government senior research associate, said via email while Starkville's poverty rate is similar to the rates of Oxford and Hattiesburg, Oktibbeha County as a whole suffers due to the lack of diverse job opportunities.

"I would say that the fact the county is a typically agrarian-based workforce without the agricultural opportunities would be a key contributor to the county's poverty rates," he said. "Adding to the problem is the poor performance of the county schools. Education is key in combating poverty."

Breen said Starkville's poverty rate can be attributed to a number of factors, but one of the main issues is the university effect on the community.

"A large number of individuals living below the poverty line are between the ages of 18 and 24," he said. "Students living in Starkville and registering as residents work in low-paying service industry jobs, such as restaurants or bars, earn less than the poverty limit set by the federal government."

Breen said the argument could be formed that the difference between Mississippi university towns and whether or not universities heighten the problem is not as big as one might think. However, the employment shift from an agricultural economy to a service-based industry leads to lower incomes and higher poverty rates as the education and skills of the employees do not match the shift.

"Starkville has the pleasure of having a well-respected, tier-one research university that is intertwined with the city," he said. "The city should work to retain some of the educated and experienced college graduates in the area ... At the county level, educating the county school-age children with new skill sets to match opportunities and funding for those schools would be the first step."

Manning said Starkville Bridges Out of Poverty is a community organization committed to eradicating poverty in Oktibbeha County by providing a framework for everyone to understand its causes and work together for solutions. The initiative has a three-prong program that works to unite middle class community members with those living in poverty as a way to "bridge" the gap poverty creates.

"We have community training that teaches and gives middle class a real picture of poverty and a breakdown of common stereotypes," she said. "Then we teach a 'Getting Ahead' program for people in poverty that say, 'I know I'm in poverty, I want out.' Our Getting Ahead Masters Program allies program graduates with people from the middle or upper class who serve as allies for guidance."