

Rising house prices outstrip worker incomes

BY SIOBHAN MCDONOUGH
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WASHINGTON — The American dream of having a job and owning a tidy home is becoming a fantasy for more people.

Housing prices are outstripping wage increases in many areas, meaning more people are either spending above their means or living in dilapidated conditions, according to a pair of studies being released Friday by the Center for Housing Policy, a coalition pushing for more affordable housing.

It's generally accepted that a family should not spend more than 30 percent of its income on housing to ensure there is enough money for other necessities.

But in a recent six-year period, the number of low- and middle-income working families paying more than half their income for housing has increased 76 percent. In 2003, 4.2 million working families spent more than half their income on housing, up from 2.4 million in 1997.

The problem is even more acute for immigrant working families: They are 75 percent more likely than native-born working families to pay more than half their income for housing.

Barbara Lipman, the research director for the center, said a full-time job doesn't guarantee families a decent, affordable place to live.

"The problem seems to be impervious to economic conditions because

the number of working families in this situation has grown during the boom-boom '90s and early 2000s," she said. "More families are competing for a limited supply of affordable housing. The price is going up faster than the wages of working families."

One out of every eight families in the United States, or 14 million, had critical housing needs in 2003, defined as either paying more than half of income for housing or living in run-down quarters. The center found homeowners now are more likely than renters to have critical housing needs — 55 percent of the 14 million are people who own their homes.

Meanwhile, the median-priced home in 2003 was \$176,000, up more

than 11 percent from 2001. During this time, national median salaries went up only 4 percent for licensed practical nurses (to \$33,000), 3 percent for elementary schoolteachers (\$43,000) and 7 percent for police officers (\$45,000).

And even though some people buy houses farther out that are more affordable, their commuting costs increase and consume a chunk of their savings. The group found that for every \$1,000 families saved on housing by moving some place cheaper farther out, they're only \$225 ahead because their transportation costs go up so much.

"Choices are a bit grim — commuting longer distances, working longer hours, having another

wage-earner in the family, taking a second job," Lipman said.

For renters, the center found a worker needed to earn \$15.21 an hour in 2003 to have a two-bedroom apartment that did not consume more than 30 percent of income. But the national median wages of retail sales workers and janitors, for example, were under \$9 an hour.

In Los Angeles, the median income for a construction laborer was \$29,050, more than \$70,000 short of what was needed to qualify for a mortgage on a median-priced home, which cost \$335,000. A laborer made only about half the salary required for such a mortgage in Atlanta, New York and nationally.

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