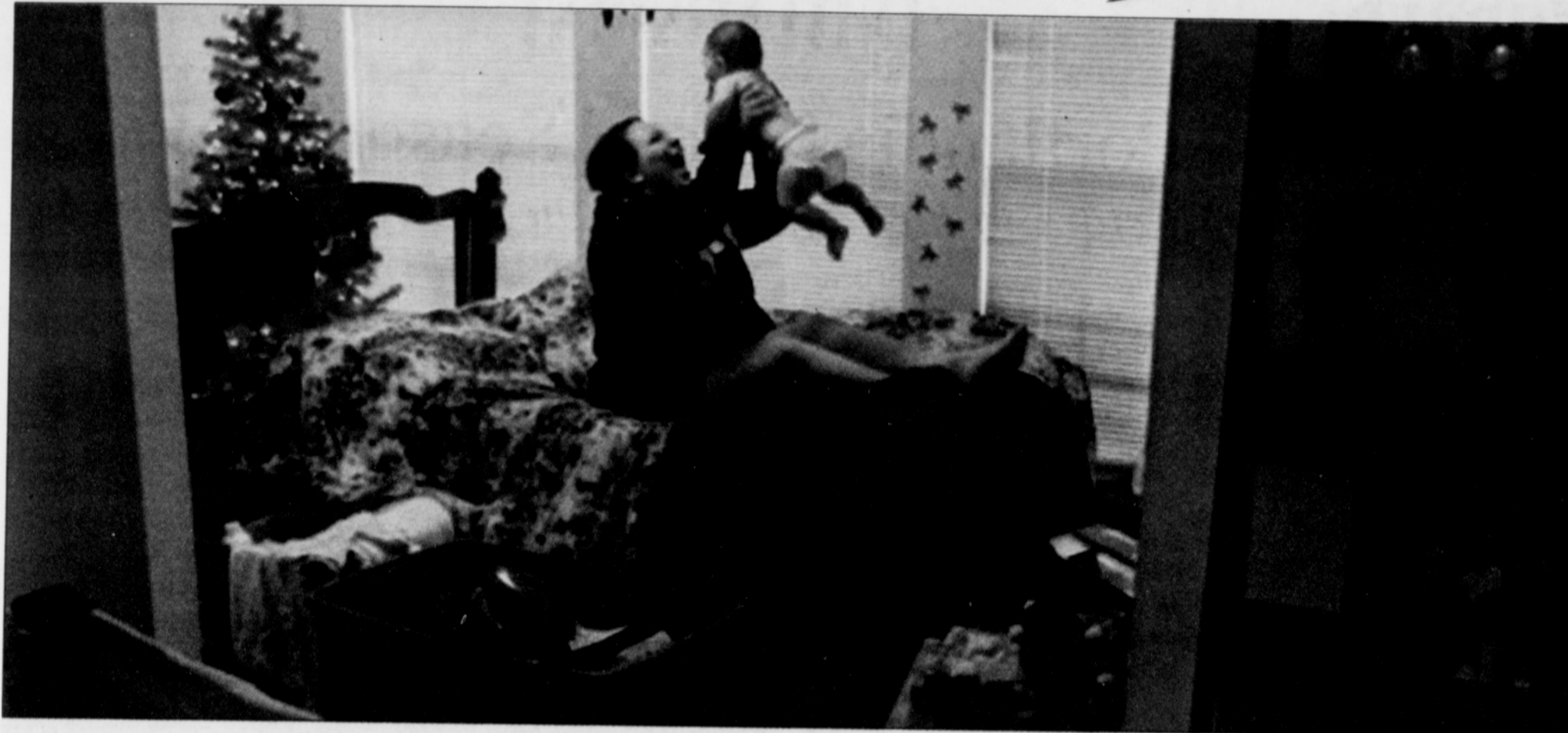


LAW & JUSTICE



Zenobia Bechtol, 18, and her seven-month-old baby girl Cassandra play in the dining room of her mother's apartment in Austin, Texas where they live. Bechtol and her daughter were recently evicted from their apartment after her boyfriend, an electrician, lost his job.

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Half of Americans Deemed Low-Income

Status grows with joblessness and fraying safety net

(AP)—Squeezed by rising living costs, a record number of Americans — nearly 1 in 2 — have fallen into poverty or are scraping by on earnings that classify them as low income.

The latest census data depict a middle class that's shrinking as unemployment stays high and the government's safety net frays. The new numbers follow years of stagnating wages for the middle class that have hurt millions of workers and families.

"Safety net programs such as food stamps and tax credits kept poverty from rising even higher in 2010, but for many low-income families with work-related and medical expenses, they are considered too 'rich' to qualify," said Sheldon Danziger, a University of Michigan public policy professor who specializes in poverty.

Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at the conservative Heritage Foundation, questioned whether some people classified as poor or low-income actually suffer material hardship. He cited poor people who live in decent-size homes, drive cars and own wide-screen TVs.

Mayors in 29 cities say more than 1 in 4 people needing emergency

food assistance did not receive it. Many middle-class Americans are dropping below the low-income threshold — roughly \$45,000 for a family of four — because of pay cuts, a forced reduction of work hours or a spouse losing a job. Housing and child-care costs are consuming up to half of a family's income.

States in the South and West had the highest shares of low-income families. Overall, about 97 million Americans fall into a low-income category. About 49 million fall below the poverty line and are counted as poor. Together, they represent about 48 percent of the U.S. population. That's up by 4 million from

2009.

Broken down by age, children were most likely to be poor or low-income — about 57 percent — followed by seniors over 65. By race and ethnicity, Hispanics topped the list at 73 percent, followed by blacks, Asians and non-Hispanic whites.

Paychecks for low-income families are shrinking. The inflation-adjusted average earnings for the bottom 20 percent of families have fallen from \$16,788 in 1979 to just under \$15,000, and earnings for the next 20 percent have remained flat at \$37,000. In contrast, higher-income brackets had significant wage growth since 1979, with earnings for the top 5 percent of families.

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THE LAW OFFICES OF Patrick John Sweeney, P.C.

Patrick John Sweeney
Attorney at Law

1549 SE Ladd
Portland, Oregon

Portland: (503) 244-2080
Hillsboro: (503) 244-2081
Facsimile: (503) 244-2084
Email: Sweeney@PDXLawyer.com



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