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Blue-Collar Jobs Disappear, Taking Families' Way of Life Along



Damon Winter/The New York Times

Jeffrey Evans, 49, who moved in with his mother, Shirley Sheline, 73, after losing his job in an automotive factory, said, "I lost everything I worked for all my life."

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By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)

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JACKSON, Ohio — After 30 years at a factory making truck parts, Jeffrey Evans was earning \$14.55 an hour in what he called “one of the better-paying jobs in the area.”

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Damon Winter/The New York Times

Shari Joos begins her long work day in a school cafeteria at 9:30 a.m., and ends with a 2 p.m.-to-10 p.m. shift at Wal-Mart.

Wearing a Harley-Davidson cap, a bittersweet reminder of crushed dreams, he recently described how astonished and betrayed he felt when the plant was shut down in August after a labor dispute. Despite sporadic construction work, Mr. Evans has seen his income reduced by half.

So he was astonished yet again to find himself, at age 49, selling off his cherished Harley and most of his apartment furniture and moving in with his mother.

Middle-aged men moving in with parents, wives taking two jobs, veteran workers taking overnight shifts at half their former pay, families moving West — these are signs of the turmoil and stresses emerging in the little towns and backwoods mobile homes of southeast Ohio, where dozens of factories and several coal mines have closed over the last decade, and small businesses are giving way to big-box retailers and fast-food outlets.

Here, where the northern swells of the Appalachians lap the southern fringe of the Rust Belt, thousands of people who long had tough but sustainable lives are being wrenched into the working poor.

The region presents an acute example of trends affecting many parts of Ohio, Michigan and other pockets of the Midwest.

Slammed by the continued decline in the automobile and steel businesses, Ohio never recovered from the recession of 2001-2, and blue-collar families who had made it partway up the economic ladder find themselves slipping back, with chaotic effects on families and dreams.

Throughout the state, the percentage of families living below the poverty line — just over \$20,000 for a family of four last year — rose slightly from 14 percent in 2005 to 16 percent in 2007, one study found. But equally striking is the rise in younger working families struggling above that line. The numbers are more dismal in the southeastern Appalachian part of the state, where 32 percent of families lived below the poverty line in 2007, according to the study, and 56 percent lived with incomes less than \$40,000 for a family of four.

“These younger workers should be the backbone of the economy,” said Shiloh Turner, study director for the Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati, which conducted the surveys. But in parts of Ohio, Ms. Turner said, half or more “are barely making ends meet.”

One consequence is an upending of the traditional pattern, in which middle-aged children take in an elderly parent. As \$15-an-hour factory jobs are replaced by \$7- or \$8-an-hour retail jobs, more men in their 30s and 40s are moving in with their parents or grandparents, said Cheryl Thiessen, the director of Jackson/Vinton Community Action, which runs medical, fuel and other aid programs in Jackson and Vinton Counties.

Other unemployed or low-wage workers, some with families, find themselves staying with one relative after another, Ms. Thiessen said, serially wearing out their welcome.

“A lot of major employers have left, and the town is drying up,” Ms. Thiessen said of Jackson. “We’re starting to lose small shops, too — Hallmark, the jewelry and shoe stores, the movie theater and most of the grocery stores.”

Shari Joos, 45, a married mother of four boys in nearby Wellston, said, “If you don’t work at Wal-Mart, the only job you can get around here is in fast food.”

Between her husband’s factory job and her intermittent work, they made \$30,000 a year in the best of times, Mrs. Joos said. Since last fall, when her husband was laid off by the Merillat cabinet factory, which downsized to one shift a day from three, keeping anywhere near that income required Mrs. Joos to take a second job. She works at a school cafeteria each weekday from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and then drives to Wal-Mart, where she relaxes in her car before starting her 2-to-10 p.m. shift at the deli counter.

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Her 20-year-old son went to college for two years, earning an associate degree in information science, but cannot find any jobs nearby. He still works at McDonald's and lives at home as he ponders whether to move to a distant city, as most local college graduates must. Her 22-year-old son works at Burger King and lives with his grandparents — “that was his way of moving out,” Mrs. Joos said.

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The New York Times

Mines and factories have closed in southeastern Ohio.

In late December her husband landed a new job, driving a fork lift at a Wal-Mart distribution center, a shift that ends at 2:30 a.m. It pays a little less than he used to make and is an hour's drive away, so gasoline soaks up a painful share of his wages.

“We never see each other,” Mrs. Joos, 45, said on a recent morning as she packed a roast beef and cheese sandwich for her evening meal. “We never even think of taking a vacation.”

Luckily they had paid off their mobile home and an addition they built.

As experienced men in this corner of Ohio have found themselves working for lower wages, others feel they must move.

"I'm ain't going to work for no \$8 an hour!" said Lindsey Webb, 52, who, like Mr. Evans, was one of hundreds laid off when Meridian Automotive Systems closed its local plant. On a recent night, Mr. Webb was helping out in a trailer in front of the old factory, a vigil by the United Steelworkers Union to remind the company of its obligations to former workers.

Mr. Webb, who worked at the plant for 33 years, made more than \$16 an hour doing machine maintenance. Now he is thinking of moving to Arizona, taking along his elderly father, whom he helps care for.

Darrel McKenzie, 44, was also a maintenance man at Meridian and grossed more than \$60,000 a year. Now he has restarted at the bottom as a union pipe-fitting apprentice and expects to make \$20,000 this year. His family just "does less," Mr. McKenzie said.

Mr. Evans said that moving back into the home where he grew up, after decades of independence, was a stinging reminder that "I lost everything I worked for all my life."

His mother, Shirley Sheline, 73, had worked 28 years at the same auto parts plant, and shares his dismay. "Can you believe it, a grown man forced to move back with his mother," she said.

Seeing his desperation last year, she added a room to her house with a separate door.

"I don't know what I'd have done without my mom," Mr. Evans said. "At least I can help her, or if I get back on my feet, she can rent it out."

By contrast, selling his Harley, which he would have paid off this year, was pure torture. He had owned a Harley since he was 20, and weekend cruising with pals was his favorite recreation.

"The buyer said he wanted to take it away in the back of a trailer," Mr. Evans recalled, "and I said, 'That won't happen.' "

"Instead I drove it to his house, threw him the keys, came home and got drunk."

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