



REED HOFFMANN Staff photographer

**Impoverished child** Anna Almedino's grandson, Justin, 5, stands in the doorway of her home on Harris Street, where he lived last summer. The neighborhood is the city's poorest.

*The roots of*  
**POVERTY**  
*in Rochester*

# The poorest of the poor

By **SHERRIE NEGREA**  
STAFF WRITER

**L**ATE ONE AFTERNOON, ANNA Almedino was scrambling for dinner: She had eight people to feed but no money to buy even one egg.

As more of her children and grandchildren gathered on her front porch, Almedino, a 40-year-old single mother, headed up to the corner grocery at Avenue B and Conkey Avenue.

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The owner let her take two bags of beans and one bag of rice — on credit.

"I didn't get no Kool-Aid and sugar, which would really top it off," she said when she returned. "That's considered a luxury. But the rest was a necessity."

Three generations of the Almedino family gathered around Anna's table in the sparsely furnished apartment for dinner that night: Anna; her daughter, Yvette, 21, and her three children; her son, Artis, 20, and his newborn baby; and another son, Livosia, 15.

In this small neighborhood along St. Paul Street in northeast Rochester, 84 percent of the 197 families who live below the federal poverty level are like Almedino's: They are headed by single women.

Known to the government as Census Tract 39, the neighborhood is the poorest in the city. It stretches from the Gene-

see River two blocks east to Harris Street and from Huntington Park north seven blocks to Avenue D.

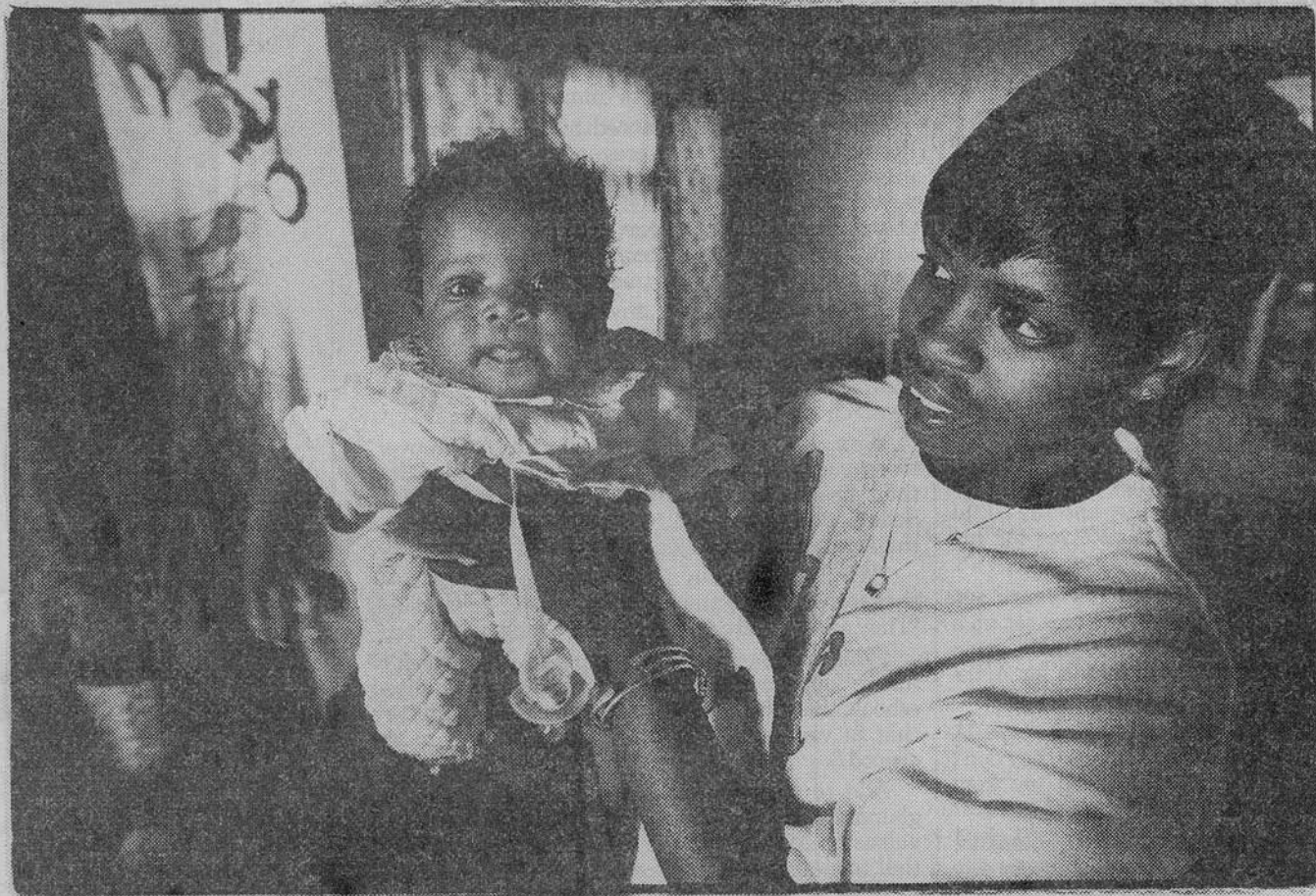
During the past 30 years, a dramatic rise in the number of poor women and children has transformed this area from a stable Jewish enclave into a predominantly black neighborhood where children are shot in drug houses, where welfare has become a way of life and where there is little hope that anything will change.

Of the 650 children who live here, 74 percent are poor, according to the 1990 census.

The trends that swept this neighborhood are mirrored throughout Rochester, where 84 percent of the city's 11,100 poor families are headed by women and 38 percent of its 58,600 children live in poverty.

The growth in the number of poor families headed by women has been fueled by the city's persistently high teen pregnancy rate, a problem that is costing county taxpayers

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**Proud Aunt** Yvette Almedino, 21, shows off her brother's daughter, Asia. Yvette, who is single, has three children of her own, ages 5, 3, 2.



Brighton, but said she quit after a man living there was making slurs about black women.

"He was bugging me," she said. "He'd follow you down with pints of liquor. He had no where else to go."

The man wanted Almedino and other maids working at the motel to drink with him in his room, something she said she refused to do.

"She just got upset one day and she left," said the hotel owner, Michael Patel.

Though still unemployed, Almedino took one step toward overcoming her sense of inertia in September. Five days after a 12-year-old boy was killed in a drug house a block away from her apartment on Harris Street, she packed up her family and moved near her parents' home.

Her new apartment on Thomas Street is back in the neighborhood where she grew up, except now there is a drug house next door.

Almedino does not see any alternatives.

"I don't want to live in the suburbs because I wouldn't feel welcome," she said before moving. "When you're in the city, at least you know who the enemy is."

Although the apartment has carpeting, freshly painted peach walls and a bright kitchen, Almedino is not satisfied with her life. She still depends on social services to pay her \$375 monthly rent.

"I need a change of scene, I need a job," she says. "I'll even work at McDonald's, I don't care."

## Risk factors

One of the key predictors of whether a child will become a teen parent is whether his or her mother had an adolescent pregnancy. Teen-agers who grow up in homes without fathers are also at risk, research shows.

Anna Almedino's son, Artis, a hard-nosed young man who wears high-top sneakers and stylish baggy pants, met those criteria. At age 19, he fathered a child, Asia, who is now 5 months old.

Asked why he got his girlfriend Tawanda, 18, pregnant, Artis said, "It just happened. I didn't try to make no kids."

Asked if they were using contraception, he said, "I don't know if she was or not."

Artis, who attends Edison Technical and Occupational Education Center, says he has no intention of marrying his girlfriend. He sometimes gave her part of his paycheck from his summer job at Baden Street Settlement to help pay for diapers.

"I ain't gonna marry her because of this," he said. "She talks too much. She be into my business. She wants to know when I get off of work, when I come home. I don't want her to know all of that."

Asia, who lives with her mother on Avenue D, is one of more than 1,000 babies born to Rochester teen-agers each year. There are about 200 babies born annually to suburban teen-agers in Monroe County.

Between 1981 and 1991, Rochester had the highest teen pregnancy rate of any of the state's six largest cities. The city also had the highest out-of-wedlock birth rate for teens in the state during the same period.

"The hardest thing to reconcile as we read this data is: Here's a city that's relatively resource-rich and yet we have these problems which we think can potentially be prevented," said Dr. Elizabeth R. McAnarney, chairman of the pediatrics department at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry and a teen pregnancy researcher.

Although local health professionals seem baffled about why Rochester ranks No. 1 statewide in teen pregnancy, one fact is clear: The problem has created an enormous financial burden for the county.

Last year, Monroe County spent \$86 million on welfare payments and other social programs for families headed by women who were teen-agers when they bore their first child. Such women make up more than half the county's 16,518 welfare cases.

Every family in Rochester that began with a teen birth will cost the public \$26,280 over the next 20 years in welfare benefits and public housing, according to county figures. With more than 1,000 teens giving birth each year, the 20-year tab is about \$26 million.

"The group in the United States that has persistent poverty, that doesn't get off welfare is teen-age mothers," said Dr. Michael Weitzman, chairman of the pediatrics department at Rochester General Hospital.

Despite programs offered by the Rochester School District for young mothers, half of the teen mothers in the city do not complete high school, according to a 1989 study. And 92 percent of the teen births in the city are to unmarried mothers.

One explanation advanced by local experts for Rochester's soaring teen pregnancy rate is that the problem is rooted in the city's high concentrations of poverty. Indeed, the census tracts with the highest poverty rates in Rochester often have the highest teen pregnancy rates, according to an analysis by the county Health Department.

"If teens do not see any future opportunities, they're not going to go and take the pill every day, even though it's readily available," said Kristin Moore, executive director of Child Trends, a research organization based in Washington, D.C.

With the accessibility of abortion, moreover, teen-agers who give birth are making a choice that their pregnancy is wanted, according to Dr. Eric Schaff, who is project director of the Teen Center at the Anthony Jordan Health Center in Rochester.

"We haven't really come to grips with that — that teen-age pregnancies are wanted," Schaff said. "They are actually, to many teen-agers, a solution."

"This is often their way of coping with the lack of future opportunities, very large impersonalized schools that aren't meeting the needs and a culture that is very supportive for parenting and motherhood."

Add to the mixture the media messages that glamorize sex — from daytime soap operas to videos on MTV — and it should not be a surprise that teen-agers get pregnant.

In a recent survey of 1,400 Monroe County youths, 33 percent said they had had sexual intercourse by age 15, and 53 percent said they had had sexual intercourse by age 17.

"We've got a lot of kids who are unsupervised so

they have time and, in many cases, available settings," said Tam Spitzer, associate professor of psychology at St. John Fisher College.

"Parents that are working. Parents that are absent for one reason or another. And we've got sexuality plastered on every billboard, saying, 'This is fun, this is great, this is happiness.'"

### Rebellion plays a role

Tanya Sapp, a 29-year-old mother who lives on Athens Street in Census Tract 39, was 18 when she first became pregnant.

At the time, she was attending Monroe High School and living in an adolescent group home because she was not getting along with her mother and stepfather.

"I think the reason I became pregnant is, for one, my mother and I never had a mother-daughter relationship," said Sapp, sitting on her front stoop one afternoon. "I guess I kind of rebelled and that kind of threw her for a loop."

As a teen-ager, Sapp was left to take care of her mother's children from a second marriage — a 6-month-old and a 2-year-old. Her mother was not home because she was working as a dietitian.

Sapp said she rebelled by doing "crazy things" with her boyfriend, Kevin, which eventually included using cocaine. After spending nearly three years trying to break her drug addiction, she finally left Kevin, who fathered her three children: Jason, 11; Kevin, 9; and Shimeka, 4.

They were never married.

Two years ago, Sapp, now drug-free, got married for the first time. Her husband, George, is a migrant worker from Jamaica.

Since the marriage, however, the couple has been separated more than once. For Sapp, the marriage has not made any difference in her financial stability.

"Despite being married and having a husband, I still see myself as single," she says.

Sapp's husband works in a grocery store on Genesee Street. The couple's separations and lack of substantial income has left Sapp to struggle by herself.

Yet with sheer will and hope for a better life for her three children, she has made some progress.

Last June, she reached a milestone: For the first time in 10 years, she got off welfare.

"I reported that I have a job," she said proudly. "Basically, I make more than what they were giving me."

Though Sapp works full-time as a nurse's assistant at the Lakeshore Nursing Home, her weekly income of \$219 is not enough to buy food for her and her children, and pay the rent and day care. To close the gap, she is planning to reapply for food stamps.

She dreams of leaving the cluttered two-bedroom apartment she rents for \$395, and of moving to a safe neighborhood. Even though she doesn't know how she'll pay for her children's Christmas presents, Sapp is already planning how to decorate the bedrooms in that faraway place.

"If I really had a choice, I'd like to move out to Irondequoit," she said. "I've been there many times."

### Marriage no simple remedy

Joblessness among unskilled men, particularly minorities, is one of the major reasons for the breakup of the urban family, according to Sheldon Danziger, professor of social work and public policy at the University of Michigan and a well-known poverty researcher.

"If young men could get jobs and support a family, they would be more likely to marry the women after they fathered children out of wedlock," he said.

Even if couples marry, as in Sapp's case, marriage alone is not the cure that will lift those families out of poverty, Danziger said.

"Marriage by itself, given the economic difficulties of low-skilled men, is going to have limited effect on reducing poverty," he said. "Often people act as if getting married is a simple solution. It's not a simple solution."

Divorce is also a factor driving the increase in female-headed families. Because divorce rates nationally are higher among lower-income families, poor neighborhoods have been hit hardest by marital breakups.

"The economy plays havoc on the population in a variety of ways," said Henry Louis Taylor Jr., director of the Center for Applied Public Affairs Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. "It can make it difficult for people to get married, and once they get married, to stay married."

In Census Tract 39, the ratio of divorced to married persons has skyrocketed in the last 30 years.

In 1960, there were only 36 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons in the tract. By 1990, the ratio was 720 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons, according to census data.

"I think problems of employment create marital tensions that are simply not resolved, so the marriage dissipates," said Scott J. South, associate professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Albany.

What that means is more children in poor neighborhoods are living in single-parent families and at lower income levels.

On average, women who divorce experience a drop in income of one-third to one-half of their pre-divorce income.

"Singleness and parenting will put you at risk of poverty, whether you get there by divorce or by having a child out of wedlock," said Diane Larter, deputy director of the Monroe County Department of Social Services. "A minimum wage job will not get you out of poverty. It takes two."

Though the issue is still controversial, the bulk of social science research shows that children who grow up in single-parent families experience more behavioral problems than children from intact families.

"I don't want to be put in the same camp as Dan Quayle, but it's just not true that it doesn't matter whether you grow up in a single-parent family," said Gary Sandefur, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin who co-authored *Uncertain Childhood, Uncertain Future*, which will be released next



year.

"It does make a difference and people should take that into account when they make decisions in their lives."

In his study of 20,000 children, Sandefur found that children who grow up in single-parent families are less likely to finish high school, more likely to have a premarital birth and more likely to experience periods of idleness as adults.

Children from single-parent families are more vulnerable to such problems because there is less income to spend on their needs, more residential instability and less supervision and attention from adults, the study found.

### Some women beat the odds

Despite the difficulties faced by divorced women in poor neighborhoods, some, like Joann Lagares, persevere against the odds.

Lagares, a 25-year-old mother of five children, did not need food stamps until she separated from her husband. Nearly five years later, she and her children live on an annual income of \$11,184 — well below the poverty line of \$18,587 for a family of six.

But step inside her three-bedroom house on Avenue D and there are few signs of poverty. The rooms are neatly furnished with plush carpeting, modern-looking furniture and framed pictures hanging on freshly painted walls.

Lagares, a student at Monroe Community College, appears poised, articulate and confident.

"Most people don't believe me, that I receive public assistance," she says smiling. "I'm not one who looks poor."

Common threads run through Lagares' life and those of other poor single mothers living in her neighborhood: Her parents, both from Puerto Rico, were separated when she was a young child. After moving to Rochester, she became pregnant at age 15 and dropped out of school.

But there are differences, too.

For one, Lagares said, she knew as a child that she wanted to attend college and become a journalist or a teacher. Despite the time she has spent raising five children, whose ages range from 4 to 10, she also had the ability to focus on her goal and make it happen.

"I've always wanted my education degree. That was always my No. 1 priority," she said.

"But when I got married, I didn't think it was going to happen. We didn't qualify for (educational) grants. But when we separated, that was the first thing that came to my mind: Now I must qualify."

Her presumption was correct.

After applying for and receiving federal and state grants, Lagares has attended MCC without paying a penny for either tuition or books. Next fall, she will transfer to State University College at Brockport to complete her bachelor's degree in education.

"She's really swimming upstream because she's dealing with a big family," said Tony Caiazza, a human services professor at MCC, who taught Lagares last year.

"But she's deeply committed," he said. "That came to the forefront as I came to know her."

With persistence, Lagares has also taken advantage of a handful of other government programs that helped her buy her own house, get free day care, and pay for home improvements and heating bills.

In the past year, she also has begun taking charge in her neighborhood. Concerned about the way her son Angel was being taught at School 8, Lagares helped start a parent-teacher association and became its first president in March.

What Angel isn't learning in school isn't the only problem. The 8-year-old boy is also frightened by what he sees as he walks to school on Conkey Avenue: bags of drugs hidden in the bushes and men drinking alcohol and loitering on the street.

"That street over there is bad — the one in front of School 8," Angel said, pointing toward Conkey. "There are too many fights."

While walking with her children through the neighborhood, Lagares is not afraid to tell the drug dealers on the street to find some other place to sell their wares.

Another family activity is attending church four times a week on Joseph Avenue, where Lagares teaches a youth Bible class.

Her dream is to become a city school teacher and earn enough money to buy a house in a safer neighborhood.

"It will be a white house with a white picket fence," she says. "I don't want to leave the city, but there will be room in the front and back of the house so we can stretch our arms."

"I think that's what keeps me going and working hard — so that I can give this to my kids." □

## About this series

This is the third of a four-part series about the growth of poverty in Rochester and its effect on the community.

**Day One:** Analyzed a city where a generation has been lost to poverty — where poverty has doubled in 20 years, where the roots of poverty may harken back to George Eastman and where poverty threatens the spirit of its people.

**Day Two:** Examined dramatic shifts in the city — the decline of the white population, the loss of manufacturing jobs and the deterioration of neighborhoods — that set the stage for the expansion of poverty.

**Today:** Portrays the struggles of three families faced with poverty. The three, like the vast majority of Rochester's poor families, are headed by women; an outgrowth of high teen-pregnancy rates, out-of-wedlock births and divorce.

**Day Four:** Describes the revitalization of central Newark, N.J., by New Community Corp., a nonprofit group that has been able to do what Rochester has not: Provide a comprehensive network of services, including day care, job training and affordable housing to the poor.