Household Income Trends:
February 2013

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Note

This publication is a monthly household income report for February 2013 based on data derived by Sentier Research from the Current Population Survey (CPS), the source of the nation’s official statistics on employment and unemployment. It does not contain any information on the characteristics of households. Readers who are interested in income changes by detailed household characteristics should consult our recent report, “Changes in Household Income During the Economic Recovery: June 2009 to June 2012,” which is available on our website (www.sentierresearch.com). This earlier report focuses on household income changes during the recession that lasted from December 2007 to June 2009, and three full years of “economic recovery” lasting from June 2009 to June 2012. It shows household income changes during the recovery by a wide variety of demographic, social, and economic characteristics of households.

Summary of Findings

According to new data derived from the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS), median annual household income in February 2013 was $51,404, about 1.1 percent (or $590) lower in real terms than the January 2013 median income of $51,994.

(Incace amounts in this report are before-tax money income and have been adjusted for inflation; income amounts are expressed in February 2013 dollars and have been seasonally adjusted, unless otherwise noted.)

Changes in real median annual household income over the past year have presented no clear trend. Real median annual household income increased by 1.5 percent between January 2012 ($51,135) and May 2012 ($51,880). This was followed by a period from May 2012 to January 2013 in which none of the month-to-month changes in real
median annual household income were statistically significant. The decline in real median annual household income of 1.1 percent between January 2013 and February 2013 is the first significant decline in the median since the change recorded between December 2011 and January 2012, when real income declined by 1.7 percent. (See Figure 1.)

This latest decline in real median annual household income reflects, to a large extent, the 0.7 percent increase in consumer prices between January 2013 and February 2013. Even though we are technically in an economic recovery, the most recent experience suggests that real median annual household income is having difficulty in keeping pace with inflation. As we have noted in our previous reports, we are watching this household income series closely for signs of any sustained directional movement.

The February reading on the labor market from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates a mixed situation. The decline in the unemployment rate from 7.9 percent in January 2013 to 7.7 percent in February 2013 is definitely an encouraging development. However, there was a worsening in the average duration of unemployment, which increased from 16.0 weeks in January 2013 to 17.8 weeks in February 2013. The broader measure of employment hardship, which includes the unemployed, marginally attached workers (of which discouraged workers are a subset), and persons working part-time for economic reasons stood at 14.4 percent in January 2013 and 14.3 percent in February 2013.

Changes in consumer prices have a direct effect on the measured level of real median annual household income, so it is instructive to trace how the CPI moved during the recent period of income increase, stagnation, and now decline. From January 2012 to May 2012, when real median annual household income was increasing, the CPI increased by 0.5 percent. From May 2012 to January 2013, when real median annual household income stagnated, the CPI increased by 1.1 percent. In contrast, the CPI increased by 0.7 percent between January 2013 and February 2013, a very significant one-month increase indeed.

It is obvious that recent trends in consumer prices have been heavily influenced by the pattern of sharp rises and steep falls in the price of fuel at the pump. Fuel prices increased very steeply during the period from July 2012 to September 2012, fell during the remainder of the year, and have increased recently. Because all of the income amounts in this series are shown after adjustment for changes in the CPI, the uneven pattern in prices over the past year has had a very significant effect on the trend in real median annual household income.

The median annual household income in February 2013 can be put into broader perspective by a comparison with previous levels of household income dating back to the start of the last decade. The February 2013 median annual household income of $51,404 was 5.6 percent lower than the median of $54,437 in June 2009, the end of the recent recession and beginning of the “economic recovery.” The February 2013 median was 7.3 percent lower than the median of $55,438 in December 2007, the beginning month of the recession that occurred more than five years ago. And the February 2013 median was 8.4 percent lower than the median of $56,101 in January 2000, the beginning of this statistical series. These comparisons demonstrate how significantly real median annual household income has fallen over the past decade, and
how much ground needs to be recovered to return to income levels that existed more than ten years ago.

The Household Income Index (HII) shows the value of real median annual household income in any given month as a percent of the base value at the beginning of the last decade (January 2000 = 100.0 percent). The HII for February 2013 stood at 91.6, about the same level as in April 2012 (91.7), but still higher than the January 2012 level of 91.1. Prior to January 2012, the HII had increased steadily from August 2011 to December 2011; 90.3 in August, 91.0 in September, 91.6 in October, 91.8 in November, and 92.7 in December.

Three employment hardship measures—the unemployment rate, the median duration of unemployment, and a broad measure of employment hardship that groups the unemployed, marginally attached workers, and part-time workers who want full-time work—are contrasted against the HII in Figures 1, 2, and 3 below, respectively, at the back of this report.

As shown in Figure 1, between January 2013 and February 2013, the unemployment rate declined from 7.9 to 7.7 percent. The unemployment rate is significantly lower than the August 2011 level (9.1 percent), the month when the HII was at its lowest reading (90.3).

As shown in Figure 2, between January 2013 and February 2013, the median number of weeks unemployed increased from 16.0 weeks to 17.8 weeks. Taking this increase into account, the median number of weeks unemployed is significantly lower than the August 2011 level (21.8 weeks).

As shown in Figure 3, the broad measure of employment hardship in February 2013 (14.3 percent) was just slightly lower than in January 2013 (14.4 percent). This broad measure of employment hardship is also significantly lower than the August 2011 level (16.2 percent).

Other economic factors, such as changes in average hourly earnings and average hours worked per week, have also had an effect on household income levels. At the start of the recession in December 2007, the average hourly earnings (expressed in February 2013 dollars) for all private employees were $23.39 per hour. After taking inflation into account during the recession and the economic recovery, average hourly earnings increased to $23.82 by February 2013. The average number of hours worked per week for all private employees was 34.6 hours in December 2007, falling to a low of 33.8 hours in June 2009, and then rebounding to 34.5 hours by February 2013 (all figures are seasonally adjusted from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics based on the Current Employment Statistics survey).

The Nation’s official estimates of household income and poverty are released once a year by the U.S. Census Bureau. Official data derived from the 2012 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) that relate to annual income received during calendar year 2011 were released by the U.S. Census Bureau on September 12, 2012. These are the most recent statistics on annual income that are currently available from the U.S Census Bureau. The U.S. Census Bureau will release updated income estimates for calendar year 2012 sometime later this Fall.

While the U.S. Census Bureau provides the most accurate measures of both the level and change in household income, the new series presented in this report provides an interim measure that tracks income changes on a
monthly basis, an attribute that is especially important during periods of economic instability. As demonstrated in this and our previous reports, the new monthly series has the ability to track household income changes during the specific months of important economic events, such as the recession and the economic recovery, that do not coincide neatly with calendar year boundaries.
Data Sources and Estimation Methods

This study is based on data collected in the Current Population Survey (CPS), the same household survey used to derive the official monthly unemployment rate. Data have been compiled from each monthly survey taken since January 2000 (as of February 2013, 158 surveys in total). Each of these surveys collected data for a nationally representative sample of more than 50,000 interviewed households and their respective members (approximately 135,000 per month). The survey collects the detailed information needed to determine the employment characteristics of all civilians age 16 years old and over and to compute the official unemployment rate. It also collects key demographic and social characteristics for all household members, including children. Some of these are as follows:

- Age
- Gender
- Relationship to householder (i.e. spouse, own child, grandchild, nonrelative, etc.)
- Race and ethnicity
- Educational attainment
- Veteran’s status (era of past membership in the armed forces)
- Presence of disabilities
- Citizenship
- Country of birth

Estimates of household income from the survey are based on a single question that asks respondents to report the total money income received by the household during the previous 12-month period. The definition of income used in the survey includes the following:

- Wages and salary
- Nonfarm self-employment income
- Farm self-employment income
- Social Security and Supplemental Security Income
- Interest, dividends, net rental income, and royalties
- Cash public assistance (federal and state)
- Unemployment compensation and workers’ compensation
- Retirement income from pensions, annuities, other retirement plans
- Veterans’ pensions and compensation
- Child support and alimony
- Other cash income excluding capital gains or lump sum, one-time amounts

The total amount of household income before taxes is recorded in one of 16 categories as shown below:

- Under $5,000
- $5,000 to $7,499
- $7,500 to $9,999
- $10,000 to $12,499
- $12,500 to $14,999
- $15,000 to $19,999
- $20,000 to $24,999
- $25,000 to $29,999
- $30,000 to $34,999
- $35,000 to $39,999
- $40,000 to $49,999
- $50,000 to $59,999
- $60,000 to $74,999
- $75,000 to $99,999
- $100,000 to $149,999
- $150,000 and over

The total household income estimates in this report are based on a composite moving average. Each month 25 percent of the sample households are new while 75 percent were also interviewed in the previous
month. As the household income question is asked only for the “new” households each month, statistics derived from the full sample represent a moving average covering the 4-month period prior to the interview month. The household income estimates in this report reflect all sample households. We have determined that estimates based solely on the 25-percent sample entering in a single month exhibit an unacceptable level of sampling variability.

The raw data collected for each household member in the survey must be aggregated and summarized at the household level in order to generate the household statistics underlying this analysis. Householders are identified in order to compute statistics that relate to characteristics of the householder. Counts of the number of household members, number of children, and number of earners are computed by examining each household member’s detailed information. Missing responses to the question on household income are imputed using statistical matching techniques in order to adjust for any nonresponse bias. Procedures for imputing missing responses are based on the same methodology used by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), the source for official estimates of annual income, poverty, and health insurance coverage. There are some reporting differences when asking for total household income as compared to using the CPS ASEC supplemental questionnaire, which asks a detailed series of questions on the receipt of income during the previous calendar year. We have made adjustments to correct for bias caused by these differences. The U.S. Census Bureau’s income estimates for calendar year 2011 were released on September 12, 2012. That release does not include any monthly trend data, and does not report on income developments during 2012.

All statistics shown in this analysis are based on weighted sample data. The survey for each month includes a sample weight for each household. The sum of these weights across all sample households provides a national estimate of the total number of households existing for that month. When summed these weights also provide estimates of the number of households by characteristics such as race, age, gender, presence of unemployed, etc.

Estimates shown in this report may differ from actual values because of both sampling variability and nonsampling error. Sampling variability occurs because responses are obtained from a sample of the population (50,000 interviewed households) rather than from a full census. Nonsampling error can occur from a variety of factors. Households may report incorrect information when answering questions about the total amount of household income received during the past 12 months prior to the interview. When a respondent forgets the exact dates for a sequence of events this can result in a known survey bias called “telescoping,” in which the reporting of the events is telescoped either forward or backward.

The telescoping phenomenon may be especially relevant in situations where household members become unemployed or find a job after a significant period of unemployment. For example, a respondent who recently found a job following a long period of unemployment may erroneously include the annual salary from the new job when responding to the household income question in the CPS that should be restricted only to income received during the 12-month period prior to the survey month. Similarly, respondents with Social Security income may use their current monthly Social Security benefit to compute annual household income during the previous 12-
month period even though the current monthly amount reflects the first month following a cost-of-living adjustment.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI-U) for all urban consumers has been used to make adjustment for changes in prices where noted in the tables and text of the report. We have used the seasonally adjusted CPI to make these adjustments.

The Household Income Index (HII) has been seasonally adjusted to reduce seasonal differences in the reporting of household income. Various factors may contribute to seasonal difference in the way households report their incomes in the CPS. Earlier studies by the U.S. Census Bureau have shown that reports of household income tend to rise as the survey month approaches the April tax-filing period. This trend, while apparent in surveys of the 1980’s and early 1990’s, is less pronounced in more recent years. Seasonal adjustments are made using the X-12-ARIMA software. This software was developed by the U.S. Census Bureau and is the same software used to create adjustment factors for monthly employment and unemployment series released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The household income estimates in this report reflect modifications made as part of annual benchmarking adjustments that were implemented in January 2013, which improve the methods used for estimating the level of household income and update the factors used for making seasonal adjustments to the time series data. In addition, beginning with January 2013 we are using the seasonally adjusted Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers (CPI-U) to make adjustments for changes in prices throughout the entire household income series back to January 2000. (All estimates prior to January 2013 were based on the not seasonally adjusted CPI-U.) These various adjustments result in a trend line in real median annual household income, and the corresponding Household Income Index (HII), that closely resembles the previously published trend line. Similar benchmarking adjustments will be made in January of each year as part of an effort to introduce continuous improvements into the household income data series.

The estimates in this report reflect new population controls based on the 2010 Decennial Census results. These controls are used to “weight” the survey observations so that they reflect the population by detailed demographic subgroups. Introduction of the new survey weights to reflect the latest Census results is standard operating procedure for the CPS. Traditionally their introduction has had only very minor effects on comparisons of median incomes but may have some small effects on estimated numbers of households. The new population controls were introduced in January 2012 for the CPS.

Each January the U.S. Census Bureau makes additional adjustments to the population controls in the Current Population Survey. This means the sample weights are revised so that estimates from the CPS agree with pre-specified national population totals by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin and with state level totals by age, sex, and race. The estimates in this report reflect those adjustments.
About the Authors

**Gordon Green** is a former Chief of the Governments Division at the U.S. Census Bureau and a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES). For many years at the U.S. Census Bureau, he directed work on the Nation’s official income and poverty statistics program. He received a Ph.D. in economics from The George Washington University in 1984. He is author of the book, *Making Your Education Work for You* (Forge, 2010), which shows students how to make top grades in high school and college and engage in effective job planning. He is also author of the book, *How to Get Straight A’s in School and Have Fun at the Same Time* (Forge, 1999), which is intended for younger students. Additional information is available at: [www.gordonwggreen.com](http://www.gordonwggreen.com)

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Sources: For income data: Sentier Research, LLC estimates of annual household income derived from the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau; for the unemployment rate and the CPI-U: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
Figure 2.
Median Household Income Index (HII) and Median Duration of Unemployment by Month, January 2000 to February 2013

Sources: For income data: Sentier Research, LLC estimates of annual household income derived from the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau; for the median duration of unemployment and the CPI-U: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
Figure 3.
Median Household Income Index (HII) and Percent Unemployed, Marginally Attached, or Working Part-time for Economic Reasons by Month, January 2000 to February 2013

Sources: For income data: Sentier Research, LLC estimates of annual household income derived from the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau; for the percent unemployed, marginally attached, or working part-time for economic reasons and the CPI-U: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.