



▷ A little more than 38 percent of Owsley County's citizens fall below the national poverty level. Without good roads to bring business into town, the local economy has suffered. But Owsley County Sheriff Kelly Shouse says the people of the county work hard to do the best they can with what they have.

PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

## Owsley, Martin and Clay sheriffs talk about rewards, challenges of policing Kentucky's poorest counties

**A** lack of money and manpower are common themes in law enforcement agencies across the country. Three Kentucky counties, however, face a difficult economy with what one federal agency considers unreasonable means.

The U.S. Census Bureau ranked Owsley, Martin and Clay counties among the 20 poorest communities in the nation. And while the sheriffs of the three modest regions recognize their plight, each of them considers it a privilege to serve their communities.

Rarely does a night pass that someone in Owsley County isn't looking for Sheriff Kelly Shouse. Like most officers of the law, Shouse responds to complaints ranging from triple homicides to citizens infuriated by their neighbors' pets.

"People think Kelly can fix everything," said Sheila Dooley. Dooley serves as the agency's 911 operator, secretary, tax collector, bookkeeper, female deputy and any other duty that comes her way. "If we took only serious calls, it wouldn't be a bad job at all."

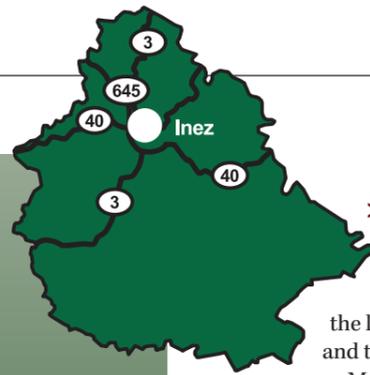
But Shouse and his staff truly wouldn't have it any other way. While the foolish calls and barely-dripping stream of revenue could stand to be improved, Shouse is proud of his community and those who work hard to make it a place to call home.

Clay County Sheriff Kevin Johnson also realizes his agency's biggest challenge is its tax base. The largest of the three counties, Johnson is responsible for a population of 23,629. And while the average household income reaches just over \$22,000 annually, Johnson said only about 37 percent of the county is active in the workforce.

Johnson leads a team of 17 sworn deputies, eight of which regularly work the county's mountainous terrain. Of the three census-identified counties, Clay is considered the poorest — a fact Johnson argued based on the ample business and industry the community supports. >>

KELLY FOREMAN | PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

# For love of the county



# Martin

Population 2009	13,070	Kentucky
Population change since 2000	3.90%	6.70%
Citizens 65 or older	10.60%	13.20%
High school diplomas	54%	74.10%
Bachelor's degree	9%	17.10%
Average travel in minutes to work	29.8	23.5
Median household income	\$22,841	\$41,489
Persons below poverty level	35.30%	17.30%
Land area in square miles (2000)	230.7	n/a
Disabled citizens	4,400	n/a
Average home value	\$62,100	\$86,700
Home ownership rate	79.40%	70.80%

>> Clay's options for everything from fast food to medical services far outweigh the charming valleys of Martin County, in which the largest employers are coal mines and the Big Sandy Federal Prison.

Martin ranks between Clay and Owsley both in population size and scale of poverty. Home values are higher in Martin than its counterparts with the largest percentage of citizens who own their own property. Martin also is the only county of the three that reported growth between the current census data collection and the previous one in 2000.

Martin County Sheriff Garmon Preece employs four full-time deputies and assures his community 24-hour law enforcement coverage. However, he is quick to say that the sheriff's office has many responsibilities that take priority over enforcing the law.

### RANGE OF DUTIES

Preece was born in a small doctor's office not far from where his sheriff's office sits in

the center of Inez. One of 14 children, a smile creeps across his face as he talks about the old businesses and people who once lined the small-town streets.

As a child, Preece said his father could only afford one pair of shoes for the kids a year, and when the soles were worn out, his daddy fixed cardboard in the heels to make them last. His family would have fallen within the impoverished threshold — but they didn't know it.

Preece believes a great deal of Martin's current lower-income communities don't know they're impoverished, either. They just do the best they can with what they have.

"If you drive around the county, we have some very wealthy people," Preece said. "You will see a lot of fine homes. And we have a lot in poverty. Anywhere you go you are going to have poor people. But [regardless of their incomes] we have a lot of good people."

Martin County's biggest problem is the same as that of most small towns these days — drug abuse. Preece's deputies work a lot of driving under the influence cases, in which 95 to 97 percent of the offenders are intoxicated by drugs, not alcohol. The county also has a high theft rate, a statistic Preece also attributes to those stealing to buy more narcotics.

And while Preece makes enforcing the law a priority, it is one that falls behind his other commonwealth-mandated duties.

"The number one job of the sheriff is to collect taxes," Preece said. "The number two job is court security and to make sure that the judge and everybody in the courtroom is safe. The third job is to serve papers. You can get in trouble with those three jobs more so than doing law enforcement. Law enforcement is kind of secondary to the sheriff's office."

Preece also is convicted by a duty to serve the people of Martin County, a conviction he says led him to seek office in the first place. After 18 years in the coal mines, Preece spent several years pastoring churches in neighboring communities.

"[In the Bible,] Romans chapter 13 says everyone is subject to a higher power. The higher power in that text is the government. It says people who hold that job are ministers of God. I preached it, so I ran because I think Christians should be in government office."

It is that service that keeps him committed to Martin County's citizens — regardless of their income. >>



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

□ Martin County Sheriff Garmon Preece is proud of his community — the place he has called home most of his life. Many of the county's citizens have known his family for years, and they depend on him to help with their problems.

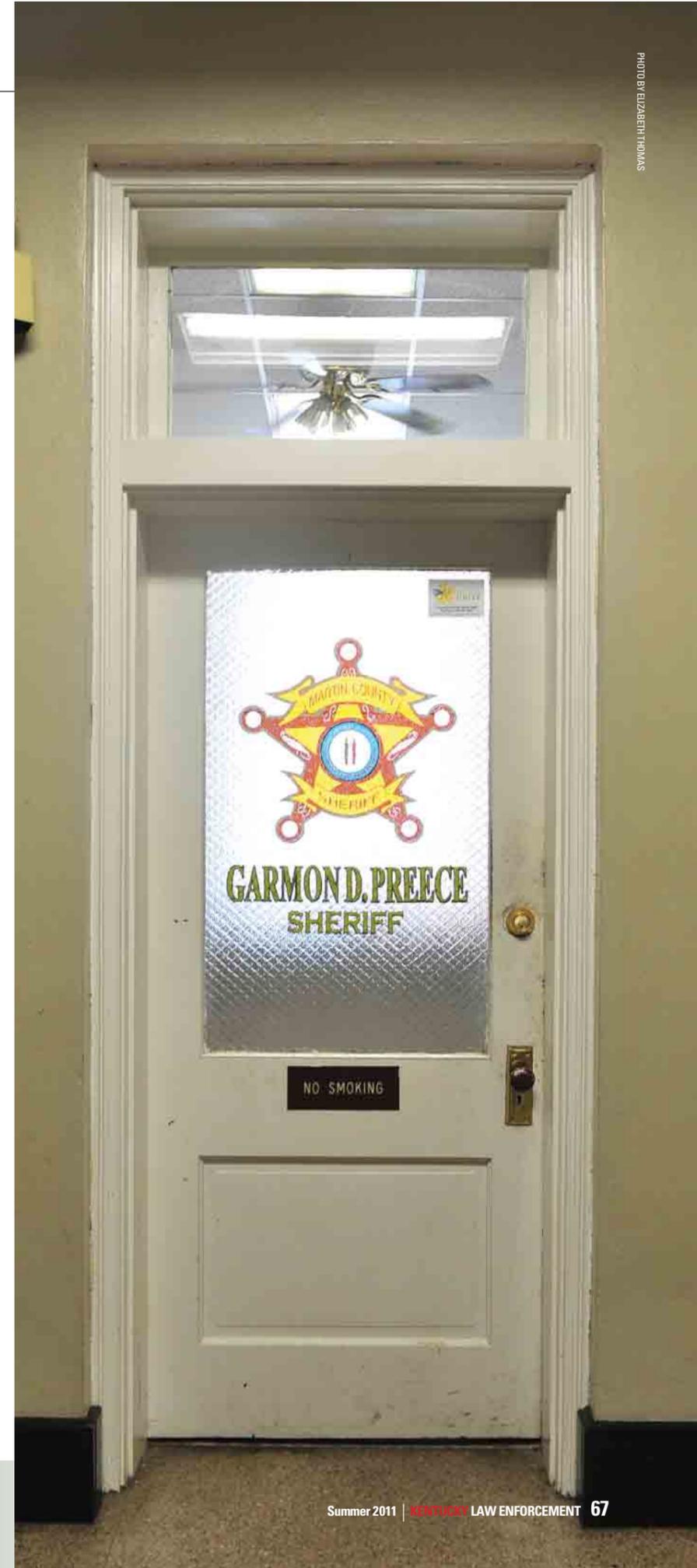


PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS



☐ Owsley County Sheriff Kelly Shouse, left, Sheila Dooley and Owsley County Jailer Robert Cope discuss ongoing activity in the county. Resources are slim in Owsley County, but the sheriff's office works together with Cope and other local emergency services to provide the best service possible.

PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

“If you drive around the county, we have some very wealthy people. You will see a lot of fine homes. And we have a lot in poverty. Anywhere you go you are going to have poor people. But [regardless of their incomes] we have a lot of good people.”

>> “It’s good for people to know who you are and where you came from,” he said. “People have a lot of confidence in you. They tell you things, personal things sometimes because of that confidence. You have to do everything you can to help them.”

**JUGGLING IT ALL**

In Owsley County, Sheriff Shouse’s commitment to his life-long neighbors has sent him out at 3 a.m. after citizens’ would-be-burglars and at 6 a.m. to counsel teens about the importance of going to school.

Shouse has operated most of the four years he has served Owsley as sheriff with only one other deputy. In addition to his law enforcement duties, that deputy is responsible for helping with court security at least once a week. Shouse also is answerable for transporting all offenders to the closest jail, which is in Lee County, as well as state prisoners, juveniles and mental health patients.

And when a member of the community passes, Shouse said it isn’t uncommon for the

family to personally call and ask him to lead the funeral.

With the fewest deputies to assist him of the three counties, Shouse bears the brunt of citizen complaints. But, even when the weight of his responsibilities becomes unbearable, Shouse continues to work hard. It’s a concept he says many locals understand, despite an undeserved reputation of apathy.

“I do the best I can,” he said. “There comes a time when you can’t go [to late-night calls] even if you want to. And I’ve gone before when I shouldn’t, really and truly.

“[A citizen] called me one night saying somebody was trying to get in the back of her house, so I hurried and run out there,” Shouse continued. “It was her big, white cat scratching. Now, to her, it was somebody trying to get in. She’s an old, widow woman who lives by herself. Do I tell her I don’t have time to go? Or do you get up and go? I don’t have to [police]. I can do other stuff. But I actually like it.”

Like Preece, Shouse understands the plight of many of his neighbors because he has spent his life in Owsley County. He has seen businesses come and go — but mostly go. Because of windy, dangerous roads leading into the quaint and cozy community, many businesses refuse to take root because it isn’t safe, or in some cases even possible, for tractor trailers carrying supplies and equipment to reach the town.

At one time, Shouse himself worked for a group of builders who constructed an industrial park full of beautiful, solid buildings, but no one ever filled them. Instead, the buildings have sat unoccupied for years, gathering dust and slowly dilapidating.

And it’s not just industry. There really is very little business of any kind to speak of in Booneville. Children in the community have to ride about 25 miles to even smell the familiar aroma of a McDonald’s Happy Meal, Shouse said.

It’s that lack of business that leads to non-existent revenue to operate the sheriff’s office. There are plans in place to reconstruct and relocate Ky. Route 30 to create a more solid road and attract more business.

“If that road came close to Booneville, it would help us,” Shouse said. “You could live here and be in London in 30 minutes.”

But until that happens, Shouse said he and his staff are going to keep on keeping on. From parades and fairs to trail rides and Christmas outreach programs, the sheriff’s office works hard to be a part of the community. >>



The Census Bureau measures poverty using a set of income thresholds that vary based on a family’s size and composition. For example, a family with two adults younger than age 65 and providing for two children met the poverty guidelines if the family’s total income was less than \$21,756. The thresholds are reevaluated each year and are determined by changes in the Consumer Price Index. □

For more details, visit [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).



☐ A metal factory in Owsley County sits alone amongst vacant and deteriorating buildings in an industrial park constructed to attract more business to the county.



# Owsley

Population 2009	4,619	Kentucky
Population change since 2000	-4.90%	6.70%
Citizens 65 or older	16.50%	13.20%
High school diplomas	49.20%	74.10%
Bachelor’s degree	7.70%	17.10%
Average travel in minutes to work	28.7	23.5
Median household income	\$19,829	\$41,489
Persons below poverty level	37.60%	17.30%
Land area in square miles (2000)	198.09	n/a
Disabled citizens	1,676	n/a
Average home value	\$40,800	\$86,700
Home ownership rate	78.50%	70.80%

# Clay



>> "It's tough," he said. "It is. But we manage to kind of juggle it all."

### GETTING THE JOB DONE

On paper, Clay County's population is poorer than Owsley's. However, Sheriff Johnson argues statistics are just a game of numbers.

It's true, he said, that there is a large part of the community that suffers from disabilities or are otherwise unemployed. Tax collection itself is not a problem, but he said there just aren't that many taxes to collect. The census reports that nearly 7,500 of Clay's 23,629 citizens are disabled — a number Johnson considers low. Those who collect disability are exempt from paying the same property taxes a working citizen pays, he said.

"So then, obviously, if they own a certain amount of property, we have lost that revenue," Johnson said.

The county's tax base is by far Johnson's biggest hurdle, he said.

"The tax base is what runs the sheriff's office," he said. "The biggest challenge is there's

Population 2009	23,629	Kentucky
Population change since 2000	-3.80%	6.70%
Citizens 65 or older	12%	13.20%
High school diplomas	49.40%	74.10%
Bachelor's degree	8%	17.10%
Average travel in minutes to work	31.2	23.5
Median household income	\$22,365	\$41,489
Persons below poverty level	38.30%	17.30%
Land area in square miles (2000)	471.01	n/a
Disabled citizens	7471	n/a
Average home value	\$43,800	\$86,700
Home ownership rate	74.70%	70.80%

not enough revenue coming in to be able to hire manpower, buy equipment and things of that nature. But we do what we do with what we've got."

Johnson has been in law enforcement for more than 22 years. After 18 years with the Manchester Police Department, he ran for sheriff hoping to see a change in policy and move the sheriff's office in a more positive direction.

"I don't have the luxury of some sheriffs in larger counties who sit behind a desk all day and push papers," he said. "I do that, but I also have to go out and work the wrecks and accidents and cases, too. When I became sheriff, my number one thing here was to combat the drug problem. Have we solved that problem? Absolutely not. But do we fight it on a daily basis? Absolutely.

"I know this is going to sound crazy, and I'm not trying to be arrogant," Johnson continued. "But we don't look at things as a challenge. We're going to do what needs to be done. I don't look at it as, 'Well, man, this is a challenge — we don't have enough men, we don't have enough of this, we don't have enough of that.' We are obviously limited by our financial resources. But we take and stretch everything out.

"It's always going to be about money, regardless of how you look at it," he said. J

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Clay County Sheriff Kevin Johnson talks to a citizen while patrolling a local neighborhood. Johnson said because of limited resources in his county, he has to be a very active part of the community's daily law enforcement.



A citizen's dog barks protection of its owners while Clay County Sheriff Kevin Johnson and his officers investigate suspected drug activity.

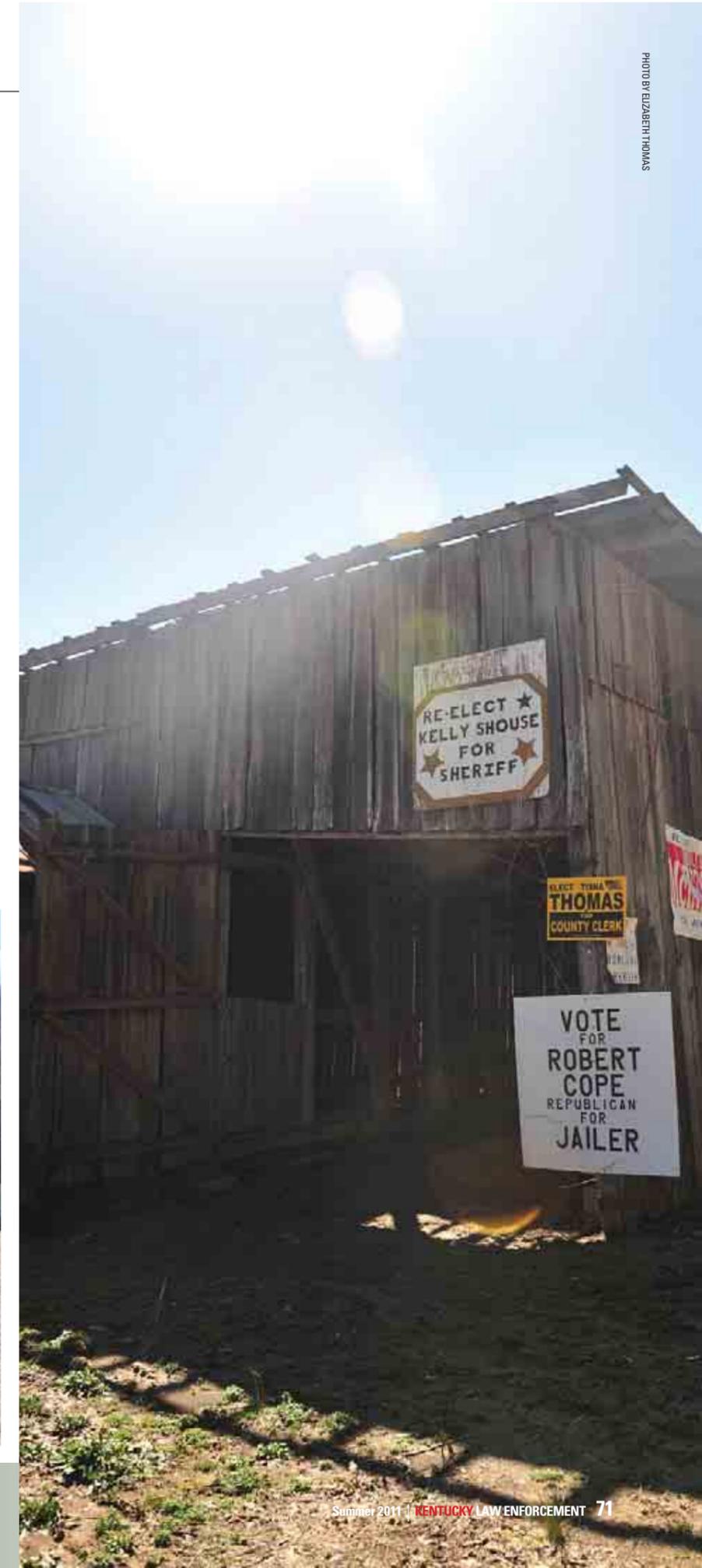


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