

Census figures on uninsured, poor offer signs of hope, challenges

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Sep. 14, 2012

WASHINGTON -- There were signs of progress in the statistics on the uninsured and the poor released by the U.S. Census Bureau Sept. 12, but it is safe to say that no one in Catholic circles was satisfied with the numbers.

"We must not forget that these numbers represent real people -- they are our children, our neighbors, our friends -- and we shouldn't feel content that there are still a record number of people in this country struggling to make ends meet," said a statement from Catholic Charities USA.

The bureau's report on "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2011" showed that the number of people living in poverty in the United States in 2011 was 46.2 million. Although the figure was not statistically different from 2010's 46.3 million, it reversed a trend of growing poverty numbers over the past three years.

The federal government set the poverty threshold for a family of four in 2011 at \$23,021.

Median household income declined by 1.5 percent, however, from \$50,831 in 2010 to \$50,054 last year. Asian-American households earned an average of \$65,100 in 2011, followed by non-Hispanic white households at \$55,400, Hispanic households of any race at \$38,600 and African-American households at \$32,200.

The data also showed that the gap has widened between the richest and poorest segments of society since the United States began its "war on poverty" began in the 1960s, when 4.4 percent of the population lived below 50 percent of the poverty line and 18.2 percent were at or above 400 percent of the poverty threshold.

In 2011, 6.6 percent of the U.S. population was living below 50 percent of the poverty threshold, while 35.1 percent of Americans were living at or above 400 percent.

The number of Americans without health insurance went from just under 50 million in 2010 -- or 16.3 percent of the population -- to 48.6 million, or 15.7 percent, last year.

The uninsured rate remained statistically unchanged for children under 19 and those in the 26-34 and 45-64 age groups. But it declined for people ages 19-25, 35-44 and 65 and older.

Sr. Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, said that although the report shows "a continued moral and economic challenge" in terms of the number of uninsured, it also represented "signs of real progress" through the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

She attributed much of the 2.2 percent decrease in the uninsured rate for those between 19 and 25 to the health reform law's requirement that young adults be allowed to remain on their parents' health insurance policies until age 26.

She said approximately 30 million to 32 million of the 48.6 million uninsured will receive coverage in the

coming years under the Affordable Care Act and urged full implementation of the Medicaid expansion called for in the law.

Some governors have said they will not accept the Medicaid expansion in their states, even though it is fully funded by the federal government in its early years. The U.S. Supreme Court overruled a section of the law that would have allowed the federal government to withhold other Medicaid funding if states turned down the expansion.

Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of the Catholic lobbying group Network, joined other faith leaders in a Sept. 10 news conference calling on all governors to accept the expanded funding.

"My strong support of Medicaid expansion comes out of my pro-life stance, because it is right and moral thing to do," said Campbell, a Sister of Social Service who addressed the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., about her experiences during the recent "Nuns on the Bus" tour around the United States.

At a separate news conference Sept. 12, Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, said it is important to remember that "everyone has a role to play in alleviating poverty and advocating for the common good."

"There is a tremendous amount of good that is done by charitable agencies, but it is not possible for charitable agencies to meet all of these needs," he said. "When you talk about 46 million people living in poverty, that has to be addressed not just by private agencies but by government acceptance of responsibility. Everybody has to work to create the common good."

Contributing to this story was Dennis Sadowski.

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