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Census Bureau Releases Poverty Data

Poverty continues to be high, especially among young children, while the wealth gap increases

Philadelphia, September 12, 2012 – Today the United States Census Bureau released annual data on income, poverty, and health insurance coverage. The data included indicators that children remain particularly vulnerable. One out of four children under the age of five (25.1 percent), live in poverty. Furthermore, 12.3 percent, or 2.45 million children under 5 are living in extreme poverty, at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty level.

“Clearly, young kids are not emerging from this recession unharmed,” said Dr. Mariana Chilton, an associate professor and director of the [Center for Hunger-Free Communities](#) at Drexel University’s School of Public Health. “Who is emerging unharmed, and potentially benefitting, are those at the top of society’s ladder.”

The Census data show that in the U.S., overall 15 percent of people are living in poverty, meaning they earn less than \$23,021 annually for a family of four. The percentage is almost the same as the previous year.

Despite unchanging poverty rates, the median household income decreased 1.5 percent overall, showing different rates by race and ethnicity. For instance, while non-Hispanic whites saw a decrease of 1.4 percent, blacks saw a household income decrease of 2.7 percent.

Census data show major gains for people with the highest incomes, and a statistically significant increase in income inequality (a measure of differences in aggregate income between wealthy and poor). Those with incomes over \$100,000 saw an increase of 1.6 percent, while earnings for middle- and low-income individuals decreased.

“In the meantime, these Census figures show that so many families are living in extreme economic hardship where they can’t pay their bills, put food on the table, and stay current on rent,” Chilton said.

Chilton pointed out that these trends reflect Americans' struggles to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families, as documented in the hunger and health experiences of families in Philadelphia interviewed through the [Children's HealthWatch](#) study. Chilton is co-principal investigator of this multi-site study. Results of interviews with caregivers of children under the age of 4 conducted as part of this policy-relevant study based in the Emergency Department of St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, indicate that in 2011, 22% of families interviewed did not have access to adequate food. In addition, 10% of the young children in the Philadelphia sample were at risk for being underweight, an indication of undernutrition. Children's HealthWatch has found that young children living in families who experience economic hardships like food insecurity are more likely to suffer negative health consequences.

Census data released today showed the impact that public assistance programs have on poverty rates. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) helps families living near and below the poverty line buy nutritious food each month. Today's Census figures showed SNAP helped to lift 1.7 million children out of poverty.

"We knew that SNAP is the nation's strongest defense against hunger, and with the data today we also know it can lift children and families out of poverty," said Chilton. "Now is the time to protect this program from any further cuts, because we see it is effective in helping buffer kids from the recession and the ravages of poverty."

"Despite good news on SNAP benefits, deep poverty experienced by young kids remains problematic. This data is a reflection of our nation's values. It shows just how little we value our young children, when we can allow for one quarter of our kids to suffer from poverty," Chilton said. "Is this the American legacy? And when will our country's leaders, and those who want to lead our country, begin to speak up about it?"

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