

Strange Facts about America's 'Poor'

COMMENTARY [Poverty and Inequality](#)

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Commentary By



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This morning, the Census Bureau announced that a record 46.2 million, or one in seven Americans, lived in poverty last year. Although the current recession greatly increased the number of poor persons, high levels of poverty predate it.

In fact, for two decades, census officials have announced in most years that more than 35 million Americans were poor. Last year's number was 43.5 million. But there is a wide chasm between the public's concept of poverty and "poverty" as it is defined by the Census Bureau.

The public generally thinks of poverty as substantial material hardship such as homelessness, or malnutrition and chronic hunger. In reality, the vast majority of those identified as poor by the annual census report did not experience significant material deprivation.

In a recent Rasmussen poll, adults agreed (by a ratio of six to one) that "a family that is adequately fed and living in a house or apartment that is in good repair" is not poor. By that simple test, about 80 percent of the Census Bureau's "poor" people would not be considered poor by their fellow Americans.

In the same Rasmussen poll, however, 73 percent said poverty was a severe problem. Why the disconnect? The answer: Public perception of poverty in the U.S. is governed by the mainstream media, which invariably depicts the Census Bureau's tens of millions of poor people as chronically hungry and malnourished, homeless or barely hanging on in overcrowded, dilapidated housing.

The strategy of the media is to take the least fortunate 3 percent or 4 percent of the poor and portray their condition as representative of most poor Americans. While we must have compassion for those who are truly homeless or without food, they are far from typical among the poor.

How do the poor live? For starters, a poor child in America is far more likely to have a widescreen plasma television, cable or satellite TV, a computer and an Xbox or TiVo in his home than he is to be hungry.

How can that be? In 2009, the U.S. Department of Agriculture asked parents living in poverty this question: "In the last 12 months, were [your] children ever hungry but you just couldn't afford more food?" Some 96 percent of poor parents responded "no": Their children never had been hungry because of a lack of food resources at any time in the previous year. Only 4 percent of poor parents responded "yes," their children had been hungry at some point in the year.

Don't hold your breath waiting for ABC or CBS to beam out that information.

Here are more surprising facts about Americans defined as "poor" by the Census Bureau, all taken from various government reports and included in my new paper from The Heritage Foundation called "Understanding Poverty in the United States":

- Eighty percent of poor households have air conditioning. By contrast, in 1970, only 36 percent of the entire U.S. population enjoyed air conditioning.
- Fully 92 percent of poor households have a microwave; two-thirds have at least one DVD player and 70 percent have a VCR.
- Nearly 75 percent have a car or truck; 31 percent have two or more cars or trucks.
- Four out of five poor adults assert they were never hungry at any time in the prior year due to lack of money for food.
- Nearly two-thirds have cable or satellite television.
- Half have a personal computer; one in seven have two or more computers.
- More than half of poor families with children have a video game system such as Xbox or PlayStation.
- Just under half — 43 percent — have Internet access.
- A third have a widescreen plasma or LCD TV.
- One in every four has a digital video recorder such as TiVo.

As noted, TV newscasts about poverty in America usually picture the poor as homeless or as a destitute family living in an overcrowded, rundown trailer. The actual facts are far different:

- At a single point in time, only one in 70 poor persons is homeless.
- The vast majority of the houses or apartments of the poor are in good repair; only 6 percent are overcrowded.
- The average poor American has more living space than the average non-poor individual living in Sweden, France, Germany or the United Kingdom.
- Only 10 percent of the poor live in mobile homes or trailers; half live in detached single-family houses or townhouses, while 40 percent live in apartments.
- Forty-two percent of all poor households own their home; on average, it's a three-bedroom house with one-and-a-half baths, a garage, and a porch or patio.

Certainly, the recession with its high levels of unemployment has generated suffering in many segments of our society. But the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that among the lowest-income fifth of households, inflation-adjusted consumer spending actually increased modestly during the

recession.

Given these facts, how does the Census Bureau conclude that more than 40 million Americans are poor? They identify a family as poor the family's cash income falls below specific thresholds. For example, in 2009 a family of four was "poor" if annual cash income fell below \$21,954.

But in counting income, the Census Bureau ignores almost the entire welfare state. This year, government will spend over \$900 billion on means-tested anti-poverty programs that provide cash, food, housing, medical care and targeted social services to poor and near-poor Americans. (Social Security and Medicare are not included in that total.)

This means-tested welfare spending comes to around \$9,000 for each poor or low-income American — virtually none of which is counted by census officials for purposes of calculating poverty or inequality. The missing money is greater than the gross domestic product of most other countries.

All of this might lead a thoughtful liberal to ask: Doesn't the higher standard of living enjoyed by most of the poor (supported by the uncounted means-tested welfare spending) suggest the welfare state is working? Have we won the War on Poverty?

The answer is a partial yes.

Not even the government can spend \$900 billion per year and have no impact on living standards. But the original goal of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty was to eliminate the "causes" as well as the "symptoms" of poverty.

Johnson said he sought to make the poor self-sufficient and prosperous, and to reduce dependence on government. LBJ promised to shrink, not expand, the welfare state. In helping the poor, he said, his goal was to "make taxpayers out of taxeaters."

After \$17 trillion spent on the War on Poverty, Johnson's goal is further off than ever.

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