

Number of working poor families growing

Vicki Fong

Although the War on Poverty was declared in the 1960s, a poor family today in 2005 is much worse off than the average poor family in the 1960s, because official poverty measures fail to keep up with changing basic needs, according to a new report.

An Atlas of Poverty in America: One Nation Pulling Apart, 1960-2003 was published this month by a team of Penn State researchers funded by the Ford Foundation.

"America has become a nation of people where all able persons who can work, do, but many cannot make ends meet," said Dr. Amy Glasmeier, lead author and professor of Economic Geography at Penn State. "America is not currently doing all it can to assist working families, those who are discriminated against in the labor market, and the disabled, to make ends meet."

"Current U.S. poverty rates may underestimate poverty among the working poor," she said. "Being poor in 1960 meant getting by on less than \$3,553 for a family of four a year. Families were not expected to own a car or have a bed for each family member, and nothing was budgeted for medical care or insurance."

Today, official guidelines still assume that families spend about one-third of their income on food, but food spending has dropped to one-sixth, with a larger share of

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expenses being taken up by housing, utilities and transportation. If health care and childcare expenses are included as necessities, the minimum level of income needed by a family of four is much higher.

Over the last 30 years, the number of jobs that do not pay a living wage has increased dramatically. In the U.S., as many as 25 percent of all jobs pay less than a poverty-level income, the report explains. In some states, up to 30 percent of all jobs do not pay a living wage. A living wage takes into account differences in the cost of living across different areas of the U.S.

The minimum wage produces an income below the poverty line. In many communities, the national minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour provides an income insufficient to support individuals or families, the report clarifies.

While the average number of poor working families in America increases, developments have positively affected the minimum standard of living.

"Certainly, progress has been made over the intervening 40 years in terms of an overall minimum standard of living as measured

by material conditions," the researchers write. "In the last 40 years, the largest positive change occurred for the poor elderly. In 1959, 35.2 percent lived below the poverty line; today, it is 10 percent. A combination of programs, [such as] Social Security and Medicare, [has] been the main reason. Still, more than 40 percent of elderly persons live on incomes only twice the national poverty level, which is approximately \$18,000 a year."

Looming trade deficits, growing disparity in the availability of good jobs, reduced returns on investments in education, and the loss of labor-intensive manufacturing jobs in America's low-wage regions raise serious questions. Individuals and families at greatest risk for poverty today are men with less than a college education, people of color, working families and families headed by women, and a significant number of the nation's elderly who live at or close to the poverty line, the report says.

"The problem of persistent poverty is a complex one that includes communities and individuals, who through no fault of their own, find themselves unable to make ends

meet in this globalizing, information-intensive world," the researchers wrote. "If anything, the gap between the economically secure and the poor is more severe than it was four decades ago. In many families today, children cannot say they expect to be better off than their parents."

Various types of people in regions across the U.S. live in poverty.

"Of the more than 35 million persons classified as living in poverty, most are children, disabled or elderly," Glasmeier notes. "But 7 million of them are men and women who are working at jobs that do not pay a wage they can live on. A majority of working poor are over age 24 and in their wage-earning period of life."

Working poor are in every state, according to the report. In 17 states, working poor are the majority of the working age population. These states are concentrated in the Farm Belt, where economic decline has been ongoing for the last 20 years, and in the West, where population growth has helped keep wages low, say the researchers.

"Working poor families with children are even more concentrated in the South, Southwest and the western Plains states," Glasmeier said.

Today, the U.S. can help working families to make ends meet by "providing better wages, better access to education, more health care, more transportation subsidies, and more jobs," Glasmeier said.

Student groups organize around social change

by Amber Fusiak

New and returning Penn State students have a variety of opportunities to join groups that work for social change.

The Penn State chapter of **Amnesty International** fights to defend human rights and lives worldwide, independent of governments and political ideologies. Amnesty International has a high international profile campaigning to abolish the death penalty, oppose abuses related to the "War on Terror," denounce torture, stop violence against women and end the uncontrolled proliferated misuse of firearms.

The Penn State chapter campaigns to take state-wide action to stop torture. The chapter brings awareness to the public eye, educating students and the Centre County community through creative expression about stopping torture.

Rescue Childhood advocates the rights

of children across the globe, taking responsibility for the injustices of the present which will be left for future generations. The organization promotes activism at all levels – the university, locally, nationally and internationally.

Aligning themselves with UNICEF, a leading organization for the promotion of children's rights, Rescue Childhood supports the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Student activists lobby, advocate and campaign to create change within governments across the world to better the welfare and survival of minors.

Proactive in the fight against racial intolerance, **Students and Youth Against Racism** (SAYAR) looks towards mutual acceptance and tolerance of all humanity. The organization aims to abolish this racism within the local community, educating individuals to the injustice of racial discrimination by displaying posters, holding protests,

circulating petitions and publishing information. SAYAR searches for volunteers to fill active or informal roles: artists, graphic designers, writers, photographers, journalists and Web designers. The group even recruits hackers to hack hate group Web sites, all in the name of ending racism.

The **Feminist Majority Foundation** develops fresh strategies to promote gender equality, stop violence, and empower both older and younger women in society. Locally, nationally and globally, FMF focuses on empowering women in law, medicine, academia and on the Internet. The organization is dedicated to obtaining civil rights of all individuals.

The program also supports racial non-discrimination while striving to protect the environment. Within the labor market, FMF supports equality of pay, collective bargaining of workers and the abolition of sweatshops.

For more information

-The PSU chapter of Amnesty International - visit their office in HUB 307 or contact Mara Kasputis (msk215@psu.edu) or Maya Tessema (mut114@psu.edu), the co-coordinators of the association.

-For more information about Rescue Childhood visit the information desk in the HUB or contact Victoria Killion (vfk120@psu.edu), the coordinator for the campus and the community.

-For more information about Students and Youth Against Racism, e-mail L-SAYAR@lists.psu.edu or visit the hub information desk.

-To get involved with the Feminist Majority Foundation, contact Meghan Ochs (meo151@psu.edu), the vice-president.