

Trends in homelessness, health, hunger, and dropout data suggest a “Society at Risk”

NORTH MANCHESTER, Ind. (December 19, 2005) - We in the United States consider ourselves to be a generous people, and in many ways we are. Yet hunger, homelessness and inadequate health care continue to increase in our nation, while a worrisome school dropout rate has shown little improvement in recent years.

- Emergency food requests increased 14.4 percent from 2003 to 2004, with 38.2 million people (or 13.2% of the population) living in households experiencing "food insecurity."
- In 2004, 81 percent of major cities turned people away from shelters because they were filled to capacity, while families with children comprised 35-40 percent of the U.S. homeless population, depending on which survey's results are used.
- In that same year, 45.8 million people were without health insurance.
- The improvement in dropout rate is jeopardized by the Administration's FY 2006 request for the "No Child Left Behind" Act. It is \$12 billion below the amount needed to fully fund it, including cutting funds for programs to reduce the number of high school dropouts.

Researchers and the media have looked at these factors individually. But by examining them together, we can see whether our society responds adequately to the needs of its citizens, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Lead researcher and Manchester College professor Neil Wollman states, "Such findings are part of a longer term dramatic and continuing deterioration for those most at risk in our society. And unless new forces come into play, the overall picture cannot be expected to improve in the foreseeable future. With financial demands for Katrina and permanent tax cuts domestically, and for Iraq and Afghanistan abroad, the plight of the poor will surely worsen further. Given the basic nature of these long unfulfilled needs—and the fact that all other industrialized countries provide in these areas—we may need to look more closely at ourselves and our self-image of being a compassionate people."

A research team at Manchester College (Neil Wollman, Ph.D.; James Brumbaugh-Smith, Ph.D.; Bradley Yoder, Ph.D.; and student Jonathan Largent) have discovered some alarming trends:

The United States has experienced a large increase in hunger and homelessness since the 1980s. In medium to large cities surveyed each year by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, emergency requests for food rose 26-fold between 1984 and 2004. As measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 38.2 million people (including 13.9 million children) lived in households that wondered at some time whether they would have sufficient resources to acquire food. These rates are the highest seen since 1998. Furthermore, in 2004, 48 percent of cities had to turn away people seeking food assistance, with an average of 20 percent of food requests going unmet.

The housing statistics from the U.S. Conference of Mayors are equally dire, with a 6.5 percent increase in emergency shelter requests in 2004, and a 14-fold increase from 1984-2004. These results are similar to those found in 1984 by the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, which surveyed 900 agencies in 426 cities and towns in urban, suburban and rural locations. This survey showed 35% of those seeking shelter were families with children, and reported, on average, a 27 percent increase in need for shelter. In October, 2005, *USA Today* reported recent HUD counts from 460 cities nationwide and tallied 727,304 homeless living on the street, with 42 percent being families with children.

The level of health care in the United States is described here by the percentage of the population lacking health insurance for an entire 12-month period. Health coverage has declined fairly steadily over the years 1995 to 2004. According to US Census Bureau studies in 2004, 45.8 million individuals, or 15.7 percent of the population, did not have health insurance (compared to 14.1% in 1995). When we look at different subpopulations, we find significant trends.

Demographically the lack of health insurance in 2004 was 11.3% for non-Latino whites, 32.7% for Latinos, 19.7% for African Americans, and 16.6% for those of Asian descent. "On another front, fortunately, the creation of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) by Congress in 1997 has helped to extend health care to some of the poorest of U.S. children." researcher Bradley Yoder says. "Unfortunately, the creation by Congress of prescription drug benefits under Medicare will have very little impact on extending coverage to the 45.8 million who currently have no access to care." Due to increased enrollment in Medicaid, in 2004 those covered by government health insurance did increase from 26.6 to 27.2 percent. However, many of these people are among the "working poor," whose employer doesn't offer health insurance or whose premiums are unaffordable.

Another area of societal concern is education, which is measured here by the U.S. high school dropout rate. Annual drop out rates have decreased somewhat, dropping to roughly 3.6% in 2002 and 2003 (US Census Bureau). Notes Professor Yoder, "Dropouts aren't increasing, but the dropout rate is too high for the well-being of our society." Administration funding proposals for 2006 include cutting or eliminating funding for 48 educational programs. The dropout problem is particularly acute for some racial and ethnic minority populations. 6.5 percent of Latino youth and 4.5 percent of African-American students dropped out in 2003, versus 3.0 percent of Caucasians and 2.4 percent of Asian Americans.

Other social welfare programs serving low-income families are being cut. The restructuring of the Housing Assistance for Needy Families program into a state-run block grant enterprise will likely weaken housing assistance. Funding remains essentially frozen for other programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income. Significant cuts are in the works by Congress for Medicaid, State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), food stamps, and the Workforce Investment Act (job training for unemployed workers). "At the same time that funding for our most vulnerable will be declining, the Administration wants to extend tax cuts of \$2.1 trillion, which are primarily for those whose annual incomes are over \$200,000," Yoder notes.

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The housing, food, health, and education measures used are part of the 19-variable National Index of Violence and Harm, produced annually by Manchester College students and faculty. Most other measures in the Index, which studies everything from street crime to discrimination and pollution, have actually improved over the eight-year period studied. See www.manchester.edu/links/violenceindex/documents/2003NewsRelease_000.pdf for the most recent findings from the Index. Complete details can be found at www.manchester.edu/links/violenceindex or contact Neil Wollman at njwollman@manchester.edu or 260.982.5346.

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The independent, liberal arts Manchester College is located in North Manchester in northeast Indiana. It is home to the nation's first undergraduate Peace Studies program and of the Graduation Pledge Alliance. The residential college offers more than 45 areas of study to 1,075 students from 23 states and 30 countries. To learn more about Manchester visit www.manchester.edu.