

Manchester College researchers warn of society at risk

Unique study melds homelessness, health, hunger and dropout statistics

NORTH MANCHESTER, Ind. (August 2003) – We in America consider ourselves a generous people – and in many ways we are. Yet hunger, homelessness and inadequate health care continue to expand, while a worrisome school dropout rate shows no improvement.

- Emergency food requests have multiplied an astounding 20-fold since 1984 – including nearly a 20 percent jump just last year.
- Homeless families with children comprised 41 percent of the U.S. homeless population in 2002.
- Newly released figures reveal that in 2002, 43.6 Americans were without health insurance.
- The Bush Administration’s proposed budget cuts \$1.4 billion from No Child Left Behind funding, including money for reducing the number of high school dropouts.

Though researchers and the media have looked at these factors individually, it is only by examining them together that we can see how a society, in general, looks after its citizens, particularly its most vulnerable. So asserts Neil Wollman, Ph.D., senior fellow of the Manchester College Peace Studies Institute. He led a research team of mathematics Professor Jim Brumbaugh-Smith, Ph.D.; social work Professor Bradley Yoder, Ph.D., and three students. They discovered alarming trends.

“Unfortunately, unless new forces come into play, the overall picture cannot be expected to improve in the foreseeable future,” says Wollman. “Certainly no one is anticipating a decrease in these human needs. No significant economic upturn is generally predicted for the near future – even with tax cuts. State budgets are suffering record shortfalls, with more than a third of the states cutting educational funding by a total of billions of dollars.”

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 20-fold between 1984 and 2002, with a 19 percent increase between 2001 and 2002. Only one-third of surveyed U.S. cities were able to meet this demand in 2001. As measured by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 33.6 million people experienced food insecurity in 2001. That is, 12.6 percent of the nation (17.6 percent of children) wondered at sometime during 2001 whether they would have sufficient resources to acquire food.

The housing statistics are equally dire, with a 12-fold increase in emergency shelter requests from 1984 to 2002, including a 19 per cent increase from 2001 to 2002. The social group most susceptible to homelessness is families with children, Wollman says. In 2002, homeless families made up 41 percent of the overall homeless population – 1.5 times the rate in 1985. In 60 percent of the cities surveyed, homeless families were sometimes turned away for lack of available shelter.

The researchers describe the level of basic health care in the United States by the percentage of the population lacking health insurance for an entire 12-month period. Again, health coverage has deteriorated fairly steadily over the years 1987 to 2002. In 2002, 43.6 million individuals (15.2 percent of the population) did not have health insurance, a large 5.7% jump from 2001 (US Census Bureau). Many of these people are among the “working poor” – in families with at least one person working full-time for an employer who doesn’t offer health insurance or offers insurance with premiums that would jeopardize rent and food supplies for the families.

“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.” Yoder says. “The possible creation of prescription drug benefits by Congress under Medicare would improve the health care of older people, but, unfortunately, would have no impact on the 41 million who currently have no access to care.”

Another area of societal concern the researchers studied is education, which they measured by the U.S. high school dropout rate. Contrary to the other areas addressed, annual drop out rates have remained fairly consistent over the past 20 years, hovering near 5 percent since 1982, notes Professor Yoder (National Center for Education Statistics). “Though stable, the fact that there are so many student retention programs leads one to conclude that the dropout rate is considered too high by society,” says Yoder. Such programs include President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" program, which directs some funding toward decreasing the number of high school dropouts.

“A number of programs are successful at the local level – identifying key factors for lowering the rate –however, these programs never spread significantly enough to translate into sustained improvement at the national level,” says Yoder. Furthermore, the dropout problem is particularly acute for certain minority populations. (7.4 percent of Hispanic and 6.1 percent of African-American students dropped out in 2000, versus 4.1 percent of Caucasians and 3.5 percent of Asian Americans.) In 2001, the most recent data reveal that 11 percent of 16-24 year olds (about 3.8 million) were out of school without a high school diploma.

At the federal level, the administration's 2004 budget proposal makes no major changes that would significantly address these social needs, the researchers found. For example, the budget proposes \$1.4 billion less funding for No Child Left Behind than was enacted in 2003, while restructuring Housing Assistance for Needy Families as a state-run block grant program likely will weaken, rather than improve, housing assistance. Funding remains essentially frozen for other programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and the Workforce Investment Act (job training for unemployed workers). “Net improvement in people’s daily lives is unlikely,” Brumbaugh-Smith notes.

"Given the basic nature of these long unfulfilled needs – and the fact that a number of other countries see fit to provide in these area – we may need to look more closely at ourselves and our self image of being a compassionate people," Wollman concludes.

Manchester College students involved in the research were Benjamin E. Leiter of New Windsor, Md.; Amy L. Fry-Miller of Fort Wayne, Ind., and Erin H. McCourt of Fremont, Calif.

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. Complete details about the index are available at: <http://www.manchester.edu/links/violenceindex/>
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