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Poverty figures: Hispanics, children hard hit

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- As the median U.S. household income declined, more Americans dropped below the poverty line, with Hispanics and children taking a particularly hard hit, according to statistics released Sept. 13 by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The bureau's report on "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010" put the nation's official poverty rate at 15.1 percent for the third consecutive annual increase. It was up from 14.3 percent in 2009.

In the first full calendar after the December 2007-June 2009 recession, the real median household income went from \$50,599 in 2009 (in 2010 dollars) to \$49,445 in 2010. The decline was felt across all races and age groups, among Hispanics and non-Hispanics and native-born and foreign-born Americans.

But the data showed that the poverty rate among blacks and Hispanics of any race was nearly identical in 2010, with 27.4 percent of blacks and 26.6 percent of Hispanics living below the poverty line. The poverty rate was 12.1 percent for Asian-Americans and 9.9 percent for non-Hispanic whites in 2010.

The poverty threshold for a family of four was \$22,113 in 2010.

The Census Bureau found that 22 percent of children were living in poverty last year, up from 20.7 percent the year before.

In the past decade, the median African-American household income decreased by \$5,494, while the median Hispanic household income declined by \$4,235.

Nearly 10 percent of children under 18 were without health insurance in 2010, a rate that was not statistically different from 2009.

But 30.7 percent of Hispanics were uninsured last year, compared to 20.8 percent of blacks, 18.1 percent of Asians and 11.7 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

The number of people without health insurance in the United States went from 49 million in 2009 to 49.9 million last year.

Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, said the newly released statistics "demonstrate as clearly as ever the need for a strong, sustainable safety net."

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"Policymakers concerned for human dignity and the common good should keep our nation's vulnerable persons in mind as they deliberate about how best to reduce debt and develop a sensible budget framework," she said in a Sept. 13 statement. "Such steps should be taken without harming vulnerable people or imperiling the ability of health care providers to deliver the best possible care to all who need it."

Calling the number of uninsured people "intolerably high," Sister Carol said it "would likely reflect even greater hardship without help offered by" the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the health reform law passed last year.

"Provisions of the Affordable Care Act that became effective last year have helped millions get the coverage they need," she said. "Many more provisions ... will roll out in coming months and years. CHA encourages lawmakers to support these common-sense reforms that expand coverage and access while improving families' health and financial situations."

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