

## The Persistence of Poverty in the United States

*"Poverty in the United States is a moral and social wound in the soul of our country"*  
Catholic Charities USA

In the days and months preceding the election of President-Elect Obama we heard much about change and hope. The excitement at his election has been a source of great hope for people who felt their voice would never be heard. The common good of all hopefully means better health care, a better and more stable economy, better jobs, and of course hope for a more peaceful world rid of violence in our streets and an end to war. President- Elect Obama takes office at a time of unprecedented anxiety and fear.

Two relatively recent studies showed poverty was on the rise in the US even before the current economic crisis. The deepening poverty of low wage workers and the increasing ranks of the unemployed have become all too visible this year. Child poverty rates climbed from 17.4% to 18% and even these figures do not adequately reflect current actual numbers. Catholic Charities Centers throughout the country try to help the poor and some of our Sisters work directly and indirectly with them following our Chapter Statement which says "We call ourselves, personally and collectively, to work to alleviate extreme poverty locally and globally."

The human face of suffering is seen in the faces of infants who do not get adequate health care and nutrition. We see it in the faces of men and women who live in neighborhoods of violence and concentrated poverty struggling to hold down two or three low-paying jobs and still cannot feed their children. We see it in the vacant stare of homeless people. (The greatest increase in homelessness is among families with children). We see it in the mentally ill who have no access to mental health services. We see it in the faces of the undocumented immigrants living in the shadows. We see it in the faces of elderly citizens, especially women who are dehumanized and demoralized when they have to choose between utilities and food. We see it in the hopelessness and neglect of Native Americans on Reservations. Poverty in the midst of plenty is particularly demoralizing and calls to us as Sisters of Mercy to act in specific ways to alleviate poverty. Some examples follow.

**First to work in our local areas in direct service.** Seeing our brothers and sisters in soup kitchens and food lines converts us in ways that nothing else does. An example of this is Carmel Lohan's ministry. She works as a Chaplain in Fr. Joe's Village in San Diego. Its mission is simple: to help people in need turn their lives around and regain independence. The Village provides "one-stop shopping" – comprehensive, essential care all under one roof. Programs such as education, job training, child care, medical and dental care and substance abuse counseling enable thousands of families and individuals to discover the confidence and the ability to succeed. Honoring the dignity of every child and adult encourages them to invest in their own



future. Project Homeless Connect was held there recently for any homeless person where all the above services were offered. Treating each individual with respect and hospitality marked the occasion and helped many to avail of services offered.

Immaculata Knox in Melbourne Florida works with the Commission for Community Development where she is in contact with other agencies including the police department in tackling social problems. Immaculata also connects people who attend JustFaith, a program teaching Catholic Social Principles to parishioners, with poor in rest homes and with the food pantry that is stocked by the students and parishioners. She also links people with the Sisters of Notre Dame who work with the migrant workers.

For many years Maria Maxwell, Jacksonville, Florida has been working with farm workers in a variety of ways particularly in English as a Second Language Program. Noreen O'Connor also teaches English to Spanish immigrants in Perris California. Many other Sisters do similar ministry in their areas. None of us can do it alone, but by collaborating with others we can do a great deal.

**Second, to recognize our ability to be a voice for the voiceless in advocacy.** We cannot act alone to bring about changes needed to end crushing poverty. We have many opportunities to collaborate with others in challenging our representatives and keeping the needs of the poor before them. Valerie McGeough in Billings, Montana works with the St. Vincent de Paul Society's Voice of the Poor Committee. Their present project is working with Senator Max Baucus in helping those released from prison. A big obstacle for them to overcome is to obtain necessary identification so as to be able to get a job. In another mission, the Committee has educated itself in the difference between pay day loans, title loans etc. so that they can now make their clients aware of predatory lenders and direct them toward other options. As a High School Counselor Valerie raises awareness among her students and involves them in raising money for poverty projects. Over \$1000 dollars was collected by students this fall. Connecting the rich and poor is surely following the example of Catherine. Schools throughout the Province have regular collections for the poor as well as awareness-raising of students as to the plight of the poor in the world.

**Third, a ministry of presence.** A feature of US social structure is that people live at levels of wealth or poverty and are not aware of the sufferings around them. Our role of making links is crucial. Anne O'Sullivan works with Native Americans in South Dakota. Life on the Reservation can be harsh and hopeless. Unemployment on most Indian Reservations in South Dakota is as high as 80%. Anne works on the Cheyenne Indian Reservation and knows first hand the pain and suffering unemployment brings. The root cause of much of this suffering goes back to the time Native Americans were forced to live on Reservations. Their meaningful way of life was disturbed. They became dependent on the Government for basic needs and deprived of this when treaties were ignored. Over the years this unnatural way of living tore at the fabric of their existence leaving their self esteem in shreds. All too many Native Americans found comfort drowning their misery in alcohol and of late drugs and videos. Many die young from alcohol abuse, either through accidents, sclerosis of the liver, or the cold. It is a vicious cycle that needs to be broken. Anne's ministry is a ministry of presence. She is a conduit or a channel through which donations are distributed. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy are the services rendered in the name of the Church. After church a meal is provided to encourage fellowship. Attendance at wakes and funerals are appreciated. There is a security knowing Sister is home and can be reached.

Nowhere is the ministry of presence more needed than in prisons and rest homes. Many Sisters visit and train others for this very important ministry in parishes throughout the Province. Poverty dehumanizes and degrades a human being no matter where they are. The Community at St. Anthony (Betty McGovern, Mary Teresa McDermott, Margaret Mullany) in San Bernardino open their convent to provide lodging for families/children who have to travel miles to see Mom in prison for a Mother's Day visit. They provide transportation to and from buses as well as financially helping the *Get On The Bus Program*.



Day laborers (mainly Mexican) gather around Home Depot (up the street from our El Cerrito house) every day in the hope of being picked up for a job. There are often upwards of fifty standing around in little groups waiting for some person who has bought home improvement materials to offer them work. This picture was taken at around noon and there were still at least twenty men there waiting in hope. (Anne Maher)

People in poverty remain invisible and voiceless in our society. They lack the means for effective political participation. In this regard we are blessed with the means of receiving good advocacy information from Catholic Charities and Diocesan Offices when an urgent email or letter needs to be sent to our representatives in State Houses or Congress. Action alerts are very important and I cannot but think that Catherine McAuley would be a cyber advocate if she lived here today!

We all can, as Catherine reminds us, practice the mercy which *the poor treasure beyond gold, the kind word, the gentle look the patient hearing of sorrows.*

(Note from Carmel. When preparing this, someone asked "Whatever became of - Let not your right hand know what your left hand is doing?" We offer the article in gratitude for the opportunities afforded us to be Mercy in our world. May we continue to seek out ways to help the poor and voiceless)

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