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Last Year's Poverty Rate Was Highest in 12 Years

In the recession, the nation's poverty rate climbed to 13.2 percent last year, up from 12.5 percent in 2007, according to an annual report released Thursday by the Census Bureau. The report also documented a decline in employer-provided health insurance and in coverage for adults.

Poverty Rises and Income Falls The rise in the poverty rate, to the highest level since 1997, portends even larger increases this year, which has registered far higher unemployment than in 2008, economists said. The bureau said 39.8 million residents last year lived below the poverty line, defined as an income of \$22,025 for a family of four.

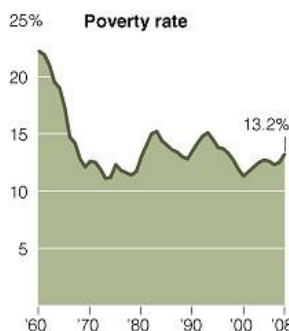
In another sign of both the recession and the long-term stagnation of middle-class wages, median family incomes in 2008 fell to \$50,300, compared with \$52,200 the year before. This wiped out the income gains of the previous three years, the report said. Adjusted for inflation, in fact, median family incomes were lower in 2008 than a decade earlier.

"This is the largest decline in the first year of a recession we've seen since the Census Bureau started collecting data after World War II," said Lawrence Katz, an economist at Harvard University, referring to household incomes. "We've seen a lost decade for the typical American family."

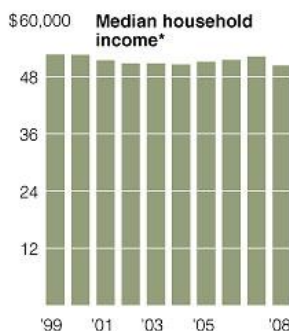
The share of American residents who said they lacked health insurance throughout the entire year remained steady, at 15.4 percent, or 46.3 million people. But the total masked some more worrisome trends that are helping to drive the debate over a national health care overhaul.

Poverty Rises, Income Falls and More Health Insurance for Children

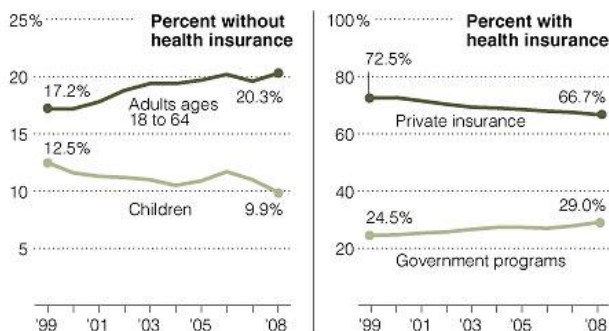
The nation's poverty rate reached 13.2 percent in 2008, the highest rate since 1997.



Median household income fell nearly 4 percent to \$50,303 in 2008 from 2007.



The share of children who were uninsured declined, partly because of the federal government's efforts to insure low-income children. But the share of uninsured adults ages 18 to 64 climbed slightly.



Source: Census Bureau *Adjusted for inflation

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Continuing an eight-year trend, the number of people with private or employer-sponsored insurance declined, while the number of people relying on government insurance programs including Medicare, Medicaid, the children's insurance program and military insurance rose. The share of children who were uninsured declined, to 9.9 percent from 11 percent in 2007, apparently because of the federal government's special efforts to insure low-income children. But at the same time, the share of adults aged 18 to 64 without health insurance rose, to 20.3 percent in 2008 from 19.6 percent in 2007.

In a speech last Thursday to promote his health care overhaul, President Obama referred to the census survey and said that things had grown worse since September 2008. "Over the last 12 months, it's estimated that the ranks of the uninsured have swelled by nearly six million people," he said.

The accuracy of the census numbers, which are collected each spring for the previous year as part of the Current Population Survey, is subject to debate. Family incomes in the poverty area do not include the value of food stamps, money received through tax credits or unreported income.

On the other side, the poverty threshold has not been adjusted over the years to reflect the rising relative costs of housing and medical care and does not take account of large regional differences in the cost of living.

Whatever the flaws, which remain similar every year, "we think the C.P.S. data present a very good measure of the trends over time," David S. Johnson, chief of the housing and household economic statistics division of the Census Bureau, said Thursday in an audio news conference. Because unemployment has climbed so much more sharply in 2009 — averaging 9 percent, compared with an average of 5.8 percent in 2008 — "the real spike in poverty is going to be in the '09 numbers," which we get next year," said Sheldon Danziger, a professor of public policy at the University of Michigan and co-editor, with Maria Cancian, of the coming book "Changing Poverty, Changing Policies" (Russell Sage Foundation).

Erik Eckholm, emphasis added
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Union News



AFL-CIO News service graphic(s) added

Working Families Need an Interim Senator for Massachusetts: Robert J. Haynes, president, Massachusetts AFL-CIO, writes that the state's working families need two voices in the Senate during the upcoming weeks of debate on critical issues like health care. Like the labor heroes we remembered on Labor Day, Ted Kennedy didn't believe that the American dream was only reserved for the powerful and privileged. While Massachusetts workers lost our biggest voice and best champion for the little guy, we should not have to go without two U.S. senators for months on end. Working families cannot wait that long for full representation; not ever, but certainly not in these times with such monumental challenges facing our nation. Kennedy believed it was wrong for people to have to risk their lives unnecessarily at work, to be stripped of their pensions, denied health care, or impoverished by the recklessness of banks. He believed a father with an ill child shouldn't have to choose between being with that child and keeping his job. Now his lion's voice has fallen silent, too soon.



Low-Income Young Workers Hard Hit: While all young workers face a tougher economic reality in 2009 than they did in 1999, low-income workers face particularly tough economic challenges. The new AFL-CIO and Working America report, "Young Workers a Lost Decade," chronicles a future of economic doubts and a present of lower-paid jobs, fewer benefits and longer hours than under-35 workers faced a decade ago. More than half of all young workers live on the low-income end of the wage scale, earning less than \$30,000 a year. Three quarters of those workers say prices are rising faster than their incomes, and seven out of 10 say they do not

have enough money saved to cover just two months of living expenses. If they get sick, not only are young workers likely to lose a day's wages if they stay home, they'll pay for health care out of their own pockets. Less than half have paid sick leave—compared to 70 percent of workers who earn more than \$30,000 a year—and 44 percent do not have health insurance.

'Too Big to Fail' Banks Need Tough Regulation : While the rescue of the nation's top financial institutions was necessary, the rescue must be accompanied by strong action now to rein in the same institutions that caused the global financial crisis in the first place, several experts said today. During a forum sponsored by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), panelists pointed out that the nation's four largest bank holding companies control nearly half of the bank assets in the country—almost double the amount they controlled in 2002—not a good situation for our economy. The biggest threat: All these banks are carrying billions of dollars in bad debts. Their weak balance sheets make them hesitant to lend—the so-called zombie bank phenomenon. But their financial weakness is paired with political power, power that may not be consistent with our democratic principles, says Damon Silvers, deputy chair of the Congressional Oversight Panel (COP).



Obama Says He Won't 'Back Down on Basic Principle' of Public Option: Telling Congress “the time for bickering is over...now is the season for action,” President Obama tonight offered his most detailed vision of health care reform legislation in speech before the nation and both houses of Congress. That health care reform vision includes a public health insurance plan option that Obama says will keep “pressure on private insurers to keep their policies affordable and treat their customers better.” “It’s worth noting that a strong majority of Americans still favor a public insurance option of the sort I’ve proposed tonight. I will not back down on the basic principle that if Americans can’t find affordable coverage, we will provide you with a

choice. And I will make sure that no government bureaucrat or insurance company bureaucrat gets between you and the care that you need.” He said his overall health care reform plan will meet three basic goals: *Provide more security and stability to those who have health insurance; •Provide insurance to those who don’t; and •Slow the growth of health care costs for families, businesses and government.*

Young and Worried About the Future: Today’s young workers, facing a tumbling economy, growing joblessness and stagnant wages, are more than twice as likely to be worried about their economic future than their under-35 counterparts a decade ago. The recent major study and nationwide survey, “Young Workers: A Lost Decade” by the AFL-CIO and Working America finds that 41 percent of young workers say they are concerned they won’t be able to achieve their economic and financial goals. In 1999, the AFL-CIO’s young worker survey found that more than three quarters of under-35 workers were hopeful and confident of a brighter economic future, and just 20 percent expressed doubt about their financial future.

Truth Comes Out: Online News Workers Join Union: In today's global society, people in different cities and continents meet, talk and take actions on the Internet. Now, the employees of Truthout.org have shown how you can join a union all online without ever seeing each other or coming face to face with an organizer. Late last month, the Truthout workers became the first online-only news service to join a union. The new members of The Newspaper Guild-CWA (TNG-CWA) joined using the country's first "virtual card check." Union cards were verified with faxed PDFs of each employee's signature. With tools like Skype and Google Documents, organizers spent long hours on conference calls, "meeting" at night, each in their own living rooms, kitchens or backyards. Virtual majority verification (also called "card check") holds great promise for helping workers join unions in far-flung, online operations in which workers are not located in one central location.



Op-Ed Highlights: Building Worker Power: Here are two great op-eds on the continuing fight for the Employee Free Choice Act. In North Carolina's News & Observer, Arne Kalleberg, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, calls the Employee Free Choice Act an "effective tool" for workers to improve their own lives and communities. The Employee Free Choice Act, Kalleberg says: *...would help to level the playing field by giving workers a real opportunity to decide whether or not they wish to be represented by a union. Studies by sociologists and economists have demonstrated conclusively that unions raise wages and benefits for working people and protect them from discrimination and unsafe workplaces.*

It would provide some ballast to out-of-control business lobbying influence and it would help us to resume the long American march toward a more humane and democratic society. It protects America's employees' freedom to choose whether or not to form a union and provides them with the opportunity to improve their economic situation.

Report: Restoring Balance to the 'Gloves-Off Economy': As we look across an economy that isn't working for far too many workers, it's obvious the wages, retirement security and freedom to bargain for a better life are eroding—and our economy has suffered as a result. How do we restore fairness and workers' rights to our economy? In a new report, "Confronting the Gloves-Off Economy: America's Broken Labor Standards and How to Fix Them," some of the country's top scholars on workplace issues take a critical look at what's gone wrong in the relationship between workers, their employers and the government—and what we can do to turn it around.

Too High A Price for High Octane



No more than a thimbleful of hydrofluoric acid killed 37-year-old Alcoa technician John L. Dorton in fewer than seven hours from the moment he inhaled the mist at the plant where he worked in Port Comfort, Texas.

It's that deadly.

Its transportation to factories and its use there imperils workers and nearby residents. Environmental, safety and advocacy groups have for years demanded that manufacturers substitute safer chemicals or processes whenever possible.

As far back as 2003, U.S. Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) issued a report called "Needless Risk," detailing how oil refineries using hydrofluoric acid to increase octane in fuel unjustifiably jeopardize workers and surrounding communities, especially in a time of potential terrorist attacks.

Only about 50 of the nation's 148 petroleum refineries boost octane with hydrofluoric acid. The others use sulfuric acid or a different process. Sulfuric acid is hazardous as well, but a tanker spill is more easily cleaned and doesn't form a potentially lethal, hovering cloud that defies dispersal. In addition, exposure to sulfuric acid manifests instantly as a burn on the skin. So does hydrofluoric acid in high concentrations. But hydrofluoric acid is insidious. A dilute hydrofluoric acid doesn't immediately burn. Blistering may be delayed by 8 to 24 hours. In the meantime, hydrofluoric acid penetrates the skin, destroying soft tissue and decalcifying bone. If inhaled, it devastates lung and esophagus tissue. After any exposure, chemical maker DuPont recommends treatment occur "within seconds."

In just the past five months, accidents at three refineries involving releases of hydrofluoric acid injured 13 U.S. refinery workers, two of them critically. One is a 34-year-old member of my union, a husband and father of two. He's in a San Antonio hospital clinging to life after 10 surgeries and an amputation.

Refinery workers and their communities pay too high a price for high octane fuel created with hydrofluoric acid. The United Steelworkers (USW) union joins groups like PIRG, Clean Water Action and Center for American Progress in demanding that refineries using hydrofluoric acid switch to sulfuric acid or another safer method to enhance octane.

Clean Water Action of Pennsylvania repeated its call for conversion to safer technologies in March after two spills occurred in one month in Eastern Pennsylvania, one forcing evacuation of 5,000 residents. Myron Arnowitt, Pennsylvania Director for Clean Water Action, said then, "It just goes to show that we need to get away from this dangerous chemical before the refinery itself or one of its trucks has an accident inside the City of Philadelphia."

"We're getting closer to a real disaster," he said.

Here's what prompted that statement:

First, on March 11th at the Sunoco refinery in South Philadelphia, release of hydrofluoric acid sent 10 workers to two hospitals for exposure to vapors.

Then, just 11 days later on March 22, a truck carrying 33,000 pounds of hydrofluoric acid to a refinery overturned in a town north of Philadelphia called Wind Gap, causing a small spill. Because the acid is so dangerous, police and fire officials evacuated 5,000 residents for nine hours.

Two more episodes followed in quick succession:

On July 19th, a fire and massive release of hydrofluoric acid at the CITGO Petroleum Corp. refinery in Corpus Christi, Texas, critically injured the 34-year-old USW member. CITGO estimated that 4,000 pounds of hydrofluoric acid escaped.

Less than a month later, on Aug. 6th, hydrofluoric acid escaped again, injuring two workers, critically wounding one, at the ExxonMobil refinery in Joliet, Ill.

A year earlier, in yet another incident, a hydrofluoric acid leak at the Holly refinery in West Bountiful, Utah, injured a worker on Aug. 15, 2008.

And a year before that, in Sarnia, Ontario, just over the border not far from Detroit, a Suncor refinery accident sent oil and hydrofluoric acid into an open trench, where construction workers stood 200 feet away. Twenty-three suffered breathing problems and nausea and were treated at a hospital.

In any of these cases, this lethal chemical could easily have killed workers or members of the community.

In recent years, the refinery industry has installed safety devices, including water curtain and cannon systems, rapid acid dump systems and a vapor suppression additive to mitigate the possibility of a Bhopal cloud.

But John L. Dorton died for lack of a couple of trivial pieces of equipment, any of which may have saved his life. A U.S. Department of Labor investigation determined that Alcoa required maintenance workers to wear hydrofluoric acid cartridge respirators and face shields and provided them with special tools to prevent discharge of hydrofluoric acid during the stem valve cleaning procedure Dorton was conducting when he got sprayed.

But, the investigation concluded, Alcoa didn't do the same for technicians like Dorton. It failed to give them the tool or instructions to use the respirator and face shield. Because corporations cannot be trusted, because they continually make such errors, hydrofluoric acid must be eliminated whenever possible.

Safety consultant Paul Orum put it this way: "Adopting safer chemicals is the only certain way to protect American communities from a toxic gas release." He was hired by the Center for American Progress, a nonpartisan research and educational institute, to prepare a report issued last fall, called "Chemical Security 101, What You Don't Have Can't Leak, or Be Blown Up by Terrorists."

It lists the 101 most dangerous chemical facilities in the U.S., including eight petroleum refineries using hydrofluoric acid. Among those is the Sunoco refinery in Philadelphia that released hydrofluoric acid in March. It's listed partly because the surrounding population is 4.4 million. Others include PDV Midwest Refining (CITGO) in Lemont, Ill., with a nearby population of 3.1 million; Marathon Petroleum in St. Paul Park, Minn., with 2.2 million residents, and Chalmette Refining (ExxonMobil) in Chalmette, La., with 1 million neighbors.

When confronted with demands to convert to safer octane boosting methods, the likes of ExxonMobil and CITGO – both of which had spills this year – cry that they can't afford it.

Excuse my French, but: Baloney.

As Chemical Security 101 points out, switching to a safer process enables a facility to stop complying with costly, federally-mandated security measures to prevent terrorism. In addition, the manufacturer's insurance premiums for liabilities, for deaths, injuries, contamination and property damage in the event of a major toxic gas release would decline. Really, though, for ExxonMobil to cry poor is galling. This is the corporation that reported the largest annual profit in U.S. history for 2008 — \$45.22 billion.

Labor Day 2009, was a time of tribute to the contributions of workers. The refineries in this country still using unnecessarily hazardous hydrofluoric acid need to make sure their workers and the residents of their neighborhoods live to see Labor Day 2010 by making the conversion now.

Leo W. Gerard USW International President, edited for timeline