

OPINION

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Our Economic Pain is Spreading

Census figures show poverty's enormous size

BY MARC H. MORIAL

What would be the national reaction if suddenly the incomes of all the households in cities of from roughly 570,000 to 690,000 people—dropped below the federal government's poverty line of \$18,244 for a family of four?

Would there be a declaration of a national emergency, followed by urgent calls and swift action to bring the people of the stricken city out of poverty?

Well, a new federal report shows that poverty across the United States has increased to such an extent that it matches the population of an entire city the size of a Washington, Boston or Baltimore. In short, the economic pain that has gripped millions of Americans is deepening.

According to the Census Bureau, poverty increased and median household income fell in 2002 for the



Unfortunately, as one might expect, African Americans and Latino Americans are disproportionately enduring the hardship of poverty.

second consecutive year. The number of Americans in poverty jumped by 1.7 million to 34.6 million. The poverty rate itself rose from 11.7 percent to 12.1 percent; and median household income fell by \$500.

This deepening of poverty in America is rooted in the economic downturn that has sharply increased unemployment. The number of Americans out of work six months or longer has soared from 650,000 a month in 2000, to nearly 1.9 million a month thus far this year.

Unfortunately, as one might expect, African Americans and Latino Americans are disproportionately enduring the hardship of poverty.

Blacks as a group suffered the

greatest increase in the poverty rate at 24 percent in 2002, up from 22.7 percent in 2001. The poverty rate for Latinos was 21.8 percent.

African Americans' median household income suffered the sharpest decline of all groups, falling by as much as 3 percent, while that of Latinos fell by 2.9 percent. Some groups of Asian Americans also suffered sharp declines in median household income.

One thing these latter statistics underscore is how foolish, cruel, and dangerous it would be to bar governments from identifying the differences that exist among Americans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, as Proposition 54, the failed

California initiative would have required.

The economic advances African Americans recorded during the boom years of the 1990s bear witness to the combined power of a growing economy and vigorous efforts to expand educational and economic opportunity.

The most impressive achievement of the rosy years of the 1990s was the decline of the black unemployment rate to 7.2 percent, a record low, in mid-1999. That was in large measure due to poor African Americans with low skills rushing to fill the low-wage service-sector jobs the booming economy had, finally, opened up to them.

Despite all the gloomy statistics to be found in the latest Census Bureau report on poverty, we should regard that 7.2 percent figure of 1999 as a beacon for the American economy to strive for, so that the economic pain millions are now experiencing can become a thing of the past.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Workers Will Add to Their Coal Collection

BY JEFF THOMPSON

Unemployed Oregonians don't need to peek at their Christmas present from Congress and the Bush Administration. They already know what they are getting this year—coal.

Bush Administration boosters celebrate increased productivity (more output with fewer workers) and rapid GDP growth (all of that mortgage refinancing), but most people judge the success of the economy by jobs.

And in Oregon and in the rest of the country, jobs have not recovered from

the recession. America has lost 2.2 million jobs since 2000, with Oregon accounting for 53,000 of those lost jobs.

In recent weeks the job hemorrhage appears to have stopped, with the U.S. economy adding 82,000 jobs per month over the last four months. But this low level of growth won't put Americans back to work.

The U.S. needs to add 150,000 jobs per month just to keep up with workforce growth, let alone absorb the millions who lost their jobs. To overcome the damage done by the 2001 recession, the

U.S. needs to create nearly 7 million jobs.

And it's a similar story in Oregon. With 50,000 jobs lost and workforce growth of 70,000, Oregon still has to create 120,000 jobs to overcome the recession's damage.

The upshot of mammoth job loss followed by meager job growth is that there remain millions of long-term unemployed across the country, many of them in Oregon.

Despite this, Congress and the Bush Administration decided to pull the plug on the key federal extended unemploy-

ment benefits program.

Heartfelt pleas from some in Oregon's delegation had little impact.

Possibly Congress thinks that the unemployed will be overjoyed that the richest one percent of Oregonians, with average incomes of \$710,000, will receive \$41,000 in federal tax cuts in 2004.

If unemployed workers' hearts aren't warmed by tax cuts for affluent households they can always burn the coal.

Jeff Thompson is a policy analyst and economist with the Oregon Center for Public Policy.



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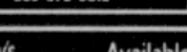
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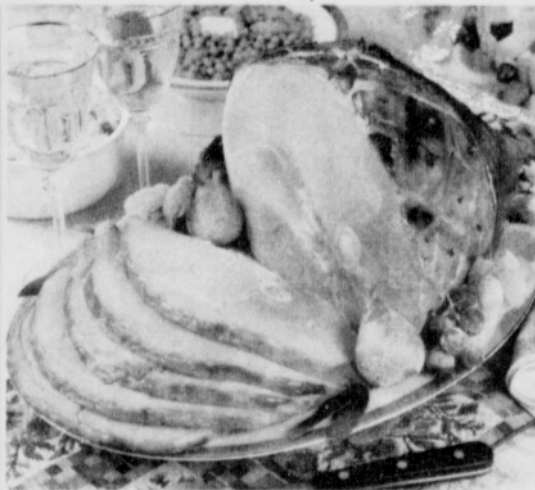
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