

The INDEPENDENT

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Opinion

Data shows standards of living still deteriorating

Guest Editorial by Robert Greenstein on U.S. Census Bureau estimates of Poverty, Income and Health Insurance for 2003

2003 marked the third straight year that living standards have deteriorated, with poverty increasing, the number of uninsured climbing, and the income of the typical household stagnating. The income of the typical, middle-class household is \$1,535 below where it was three years earlier, while 4.3 million more Americans were poor than in 2000, and 5.2 million fewer people had health insurance, producing the largest number of uninsured on record, with the data going back to 1987. Further, by some indicators, gaps between the most well-off and other Americans – already at exceptionally wide levels – became still larger in 2003.

The federal government's response to these adverse developments has been misdirected. As recent studies indicate, the nation has squandered huge amounts of resources on poorly designed tax cuts that greatly increased budget deficits and further widened gaps between the most well-off and everyone else, and did so without much pay-off in terms of jobs. These policies are burdening further generations with large amounts of debt and starving the budget of resources that could be used to address such problems as the growing health insurance crisis.

Adding to these concerns, prospects for improvements in 2004 are uncertain. Health insurance coverage is likely to continue to erode, and it is unclear whether there will be substantial improvements on the poverty and income fronts. This uncertainty reflects ongoing softness in the labor market. While the unemployment rate is down somewhat from 2003, jobs are up modestly, and economic growth has been significant, the share of the population that is employed has failed to rise. In addition, average weekly wages have fallen this year, and the safety net for the unemployed has weakened with the untimely termination of the temporary federal unemployment benefits program. Three years into the recovery, early indications are that any improvements in 2004 are likely to be modest.

Robert Greenstein is Executive Director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities



Ike Says . . .

By Dale E. Webb, Member
Nehalem Valley Chapter, Izaak Walton League



Have you ever stood outside and noticed all the sounds around you? For most of us the answer is "no." We go about our normal routines, absorbing the noise around us. We filter out a lot of ambient noise, picking up only on the sounds that catch our

interest. Recently, I went on a trip to Eastern Oregon and, on one night, there was no sound.

The trip was a special one; it was in pursuit of Bighorn Sheep. My friend from childhood, Jim King, has drawn a sheep tag for the Sheepshead unit, which lies slightly northeast of the Steens Mountains. This is high desert country, dry, dusty and hot. Many people consider it god-forsaken land, but for California Bighorn Sheep it is home. We also saw many other species of wildlife, including rabbits, antelope, wild horses, an unfortunate coyote, doves, sage grouse, chukars and hawks.

This was not a hunting trip, but one to scout for the hunting trip to come. We needed to discover the lay of the land and, most importantly, the location of the sheep. There were four of us on the trip, Jim and myself, Jim's son, Marshall, and my son, Mike, who was home on leave from the Army.

The day was hot, very hot, when we entered the Sheepshead unit from the North, leaving the

last paved road that we would see for the next four days. There was no sign of water, just sagebrush, rocks and alkali dust. We drove slowly over rock-strewn goat trails, stopping frequently to glass promising rocky slopes for sheep. We were seeing nothing. The afternoon turned into evening as we slowly made our way to the southern end of the hunt unit, seeing nothing besides an unfortunate coyote. We continued until just before dusk, so as to prolong our comfort in the air-conditioned pickup cab.

We finally stopped on a ridge-top saddle next to a huge butte. Stepping out of the pickup was like stepping into a furnace; it was still well over 100 degrees outside. We quickly set up camp — four cots set out in the sagebrush. Cooking gear and the grub boxes were stacked next to the pickup. Our stomachs were still digesting burgers we ate in Burns, so we grabbed a quick snack of elk jerky and washed it down with a cold beverage.

It was about then that we noticed the sound, or should I say the lack of it. It was almost eerie not hearing anything. My ears almost hurt from the lack of stimulation. We all knew we were in for a treat that night. As we laid on top of our sleeping bags in the dry heat, the stars popped out in the sky above. Soon, the meteors began their display against the inky backdrop and, occasionally, a satellite would slowly move across the heavens. The night remained silent, so silent that you could have heard a snake slithering over your sleeping bag!

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