

2013-07-28-us-majority-will-face-poverty

Survey: Majority in U.S. will face near-poverty

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Majority-U-S-will-face-near-poverty

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WASHINGTON — Four out of 5 U.S. adults struggle with joblessness, near poverty or reliance on welfare for at least parts of their lives, a sign of deteriorating economic security and an elusive American dream.

Survey data exclusive to The Associated Press points to an increasingly globalized U.S. economy, the widening gap between rich and poor and loss of good-paying manufacturing jobs as reasons for the trend.

The findings come as President Barack Obama tries to renew his administration's emphasis on the economy, saying in recent speeches that his highest priority is to "rebuild ladders of opportunity" and reverse income inequality.

Hardship is particularly on the rise among whites, based on several measures.

Pessimism among that racial group about their families' economic futures has climbed to the highest point since at least 1987. In the most recent AP-GfK poll, 63 percent of whites called the economy "poor."

"I think it's going to get worse," said Irene Salyers, 52, of Buchanan County, Va., a declining coal region in Appalachia. Married and divorced three times, Salyers now helps run a fruit and vegetable stand with her boyfriend, but it doesn't generate much income. They live mostly off government disability checks.

"If you do try to go apply for a job, they're not hiring people, and they're not paying

that much to even go to work,” she said. Children, she said, have “nothing better to do than to get on drugs.”

While racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in poverty, race disparities in the poverty rate have narrowed substantially since the 1970s, census data show. Economic insecurity among whites also is more pervasive than is shown in government data, engulfing more than 76 percent of white adults by the time they turn 60, according to a new economic gauge being published next year by the Oxford University Press.

The gauge defines “economic insecurity” as experiencing unemployment at some point in their working lives, or a year or more of reliance on government aid such as food stamps or income below 150 percent of the poverty line. Measured across all races, the risk of economic insecurity rises to 79 percent.

“It’s time that America comes to understand that many of the nation’s biggest disparities, from education and life expectancy to poverty, are increasingly due to economic class position,” said William Julius Wilson, a Harvard professor who specializes in race and poverty.

He noted that despite continuing economic difficulties, minorities have more optimism about the future after Obama’s election, while struggling whites do not.

“There is the real possibility that white alienation will increase if steps are not taken to highlight and address inequality on a broad front,” Wilson said.

Pockets within US

Sometimes termed “the invisible poor” by demographers, lower-income whites are

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generally dispersed in suburbs as well as small rural towns, where more than 60 percent of the poor are white. Concentrated in Appalachia in the East, they are also numerous in the industrial Midwest and spread across America's heartland, from Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma up through the Great Plains.

More than 19 million whites fall below the poverty line of \$23,021 for a family of four, accounting for more than 41 percent of the nation's destitute, nearly double the number of poor blacks.

Still, while census figures provide an official measure of poverty, they're only a temporary snapshot. The numbers don't capture the makeup of those who cycle in and out of poverty at different points in their lives. They may be suburbanites, for example, or the working poor or the laid off.

In 2011 that snapshot showed 12.6 percent of adults in their prime working-age years of 25-60 lived in poverty. But measured in terms of a person's lifetime risk, a much higher number – 4 in 10 adults – falls into poverty for at least a year of their lives.

By race, nonwhites still have a higher risk of being economically insecure, at 90 percent. But compared with the official poverty rate, some of the biggest jumps under the newer measure are among whites, with more than 76 percent enduring periods of joblessness, life on welfare or near-poverty.

By 2030, based on the current trend of widening income inequality, close to 85 percent of all working-age adults in the U.S. will experience bouts of economic insecurity.

"Poverty is no longer an issue of 'them', it's an issue of 'us'," says Mark Rank, a

professor at Washington University in St. Louis who calculated the numbers. “Only when poverty is thought of as a mainstream event, rather than a fringe experience that just affects blacks and Hispanics, can we really begin to build broader support for programs that lift people in need.”

Rank’s analysis is supplemented with figures provided by Tom Hirschl, a professor at Cornell University; John Iceland, a sociology professor at Penn State University; the University of New Hampshire’s Carsey Institute; the Census Bureau; and the Population Reference Bureau.

Among the findings:

- For the first time since 1975, the number of white single-mother households who were living in poverty with children surpassed or equaled black ones in the past decade, spurred by job losses and faster rates of out-of-wedlock births among whites. White single-mother families in poverty stood at nearly 1.5 million in 2011, comparable to the number for blacks. Hispanic single-mother families in poverty trailed at 1.2 million.

Bleak future seen

Going back to the 1980s, never have whites been so pessimistic about their futures, according to the General Social Survey, which is conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago. Just 45 percent say their family will have a good chance of improving their economic position based on the way things are in America.

The divide is especially evident among those whites who self-identify as working class: 49 percent say they think their children will do better than them, compared

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with 67 percent of non-whites who consider themselves working class.

In November, Obama won the votes of just 36 percent of those noncollege whites, the worst performance of any Democratic nominee among that group since 1984.

Some Democratic analysts have urged renewed efforts to bring working-class whites into the political fold, calling them a potential “decisive swing voter group” if minority and youth turnout level off in future elections.

“They don’t trust big government, but it doesn’t mean they want no government,” says Republican pollster Ed Goetas, who agrees that working-class whites will remain an important electoral group.

“They feel that politicians are giving attention to other people and not them.”