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Poverty study receives praise

AMANDA MCELFRESH • AMCELFRESH@THEADVERTISER.COM • OCTOBER 26, 2009


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Local researchers who study poverty and its effects across the state say they are encouraged by the U.S. Census Bureau's decision to release revised estimates of how many Americans are living in poverty.


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The new formula, developed in part by the National Academy of Science, shows that about 47.4 million Americans lived in poverty last year, about seven million more than originally estimated. In addition, almost 18 percent of children lived in poverty, a slight decrease from the number found using the traditional formula.

The traditional measure was created in 1955 and does not take into account factors such as rising medical care, transportation, child care or geographical variations in living costs, or non-cash government aid. The new formula was released last week.

"The way we measure poverty is way off-base," said Bobbie DeCuir, project director for poverty at the Cecil J. Picard Center for Child Development and Lifelong Learning. "I think it's important that to address poverty, you have to make sure you measure it properly first. People are going without. Children are going without."

DeCuir said that based on traditional measurements, a single mother with two children under the age of 13 needs about \$18,310 a year for basic needs. But data from the Picard Center and the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University shows that, in Lafayette Parish, that same family needs \$37,356 per year for basic expenses.

Because of that disparity, DeCuir said it isn't surprising that the new formula shows more people are living in poverty that originally believed and pointed out that many items that were

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and pointed out that many items that were considered luxuries 40 or 50 years ago, such as telephones, are now considered commonplace. In addition, the costs of basic needs have increased substantially.

"It's about time that we have something like this," DeCuir said. "Change is inevitable. I think it's important that we have a measure to see exactly who is in poverty."

Although the revised formula and the figures still need more study, especially to see how they compare with local statistics, Gail Bonhomme, project director for families at the Picard Center, said she hopes the changes can lead to public policy improvements.

"Hopefully it will open the minds of middle-class decision makers," she said. "Often as middle-class people, we look at lower-income people with our rose-colored middle-class glasses."

As an example, Bonhomme said she and her husband once gave a new pair of shoes to a youth relative whose parents were financially struggling. While they were happy to provide the gift, she worried that some might see the child with new shoes and make assumptions about the parents' priorities, without knowing they were a gift.

"Often people can create a perception and cast it over a whole population," she said. "That can affect outcomes at different levels. People have to think and act differently."

Information from The Associated Press was used in this article.

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