



# COALITION ON HUMAN NEEDS

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## **New Census Bureau data show important gains in median household income, poverty rate, and health coverage. Yet there is more to be done.**

*Editor's note: The following is a statement from Coalition on Human Needs Executive Director Deborah Weinstein on today's Census data. Weinstein is available for interviews.*

The official poverty rate is down, median household income is up, and the percentage of uninsured Americans is lower than it has ever been in the history of our nation. Truly we have a lot to be thankful for.

At the same time, too many Americans are still being left behind in an economy that is working for some of us – but not for all. Too many Americans remain uninsured, and we are not doing all we can to put public programs that we know fight poverty to their fullest use.

First, let's review what we learned today, when the U.S. Census Bureau released its annual data on poverty, median household income and health insurance coverage.

We learned that the nation's official poverty rate in 2015 was 13.5 percent, with 43.1 million people in poverty, 3.5 million fewer people than in 2014. The 1.2 percentage point decrease in the poverty rate from 2014 to 2015 represents the largest annual percentage point drop in poverty since 1999. There were more than one million fewer poor children in 2015 (down from about 15.5 million to 14.5 million children in poverty).

We learned that real median household income increased by 5.2 percent between 2014 and 2015. In 2015, median household income in the U.S. was \$56,516, up 5.2 percent from the 2014 median income of \$53,718. It's the first annual increase we've seen in median household income since 2007, the year before the Great Recession of 2008.

We learned that the number of people without health insurance coverage for the entire 2015 calendar year was 9.1 percent, the lowest level ever, down from 10.4 percent in 2014. That means the number of people without health insurance dropped from 33 million in 2014 to 29 million in 2015. That's significant – and it is good to see that, increasingly, children are receiving

coverage, in part because of the Affordable Care Act, in part because of the Children's Health Insurance Program and in part because of Medicaid expansion.

Second, in reviewing today's data, it is important to understand the importance of public programs in fighting poverty. For example: without Social Security, 26.6 million Americans would have fallen beneath the poverty line.

Low-income tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, lifted 9.2 million Americans above the poverty line (close to 5 million of them children), while the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program kept 4.6 million Americans out of poverty (including 2 million children).

Third, in light of today's newly released statistics, it is important for us to contemplate what further measures could be taken – by the next Administration, the next Congress, and by the states – to further reduce poverty, increase household median income, and cover more Americans with health insurance.

One thing we could do is raise the federal minimum wage, and, where appropriate, raise the minimum wage at the state level. Another important step would be expanding low-income tax credits – for example, to workers without children. Expanding access to affordable child care would help. And it would make a huge difference if the 19 states that have not taken advantage of the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion would do so.

Taking these steps wouldn't just have the effect of lifting all boats. It would also address income inequality between whites and blacks and Hispanics, and between women and men. The disparity continues to be troubling – and unacceptable in a land of plenty. We know from today's statistics, for example, that poverty among Hispanics was 21.4 percent in 2015, and it was 24.1 percent among blacks – compared with 9.1 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Still, the progress for African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos is strong: 735,000 fewer African Americans and 971,000 fewer Hispanics were poor in 2015 as compared to the previous year. We can build on this progress.

Finally, today's U.S. Census reports should act as a clarion call in opposition to those who would significantly cut anti-poverty programs. We must not be fooled by calls to "cut poverty and expand opportunity" when those calls really mean less access to programs that work, such as education, nutrition and housing assistance and health coverage, as proposed by House Republicans. Such actions would shrink economic opportunity for the too many Americans who still have not found their footing in the current recovery.