



Wider Opportunities for Women

For Immediate Release

Sept. 10, 2009

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New Poverty Data Suggest Long Road to Economic Security Without Education, Training

“The poverty rate released today tells us we must begin now to build bridges for low-income workers of all ages, especially women, to training and educational opportunities,” said Joan Kuriansky, Executive Director of Wider Opportunities for Women, commenting on the Census Bureau’s release 2008 income data.

Low-income workers need help finding career pathways that can lead to economic security for themselves and their families. The poverty rate in 2008 was 13.2 percent, or 39.8 million people. This was the highest rate in 12 years and the largest number since 1960. The poverty rate for those aged 65 and over was statistically unchanged at 9.7 percent. However, seniors continue to experience rising out-of-pocket health care costs and losses in the value of retirement accounts. Many more must continue to work beyond age 65.

Kuriansky noted that, while the pay gap between men and women remained unchanged at 77 percent, the Census Bureau reported the median income of women full-time workers fell at nearly twice the rate of working men in 2008. The real median earnings of men who worked full-time, year-round declined by 1.0 percent between 2007 and 2008, from \$46,846 to \$46,387. For women, the corresponding drop was 1.9 percent, from \$36,451 to \$35,745.

The release of poverty data this year was accompanied by a growing drumbeat in the media over the need for an alternative to the federal poverty line to more accurately reflect what is needed to make ends meet. WOW has encouraged the White House and members of Congress to adopt the approach taken by two measures¹ WOW uses in its work with public agencies and nonprofit allies in 40 states and the District of Columbia.

In 2008, the median Self-Sufficiency Standard for one parent and one pre-school child was \$25,553. In comparison, the poverty threshold for a two-person family was only \$14,051. In 2008, the Elder Index for a single renter in good health was \$20,346 compared to the federal poverty threshold for a person 65 and over of \$10,326. The Elder Index demonstrates that many seniors fall short of what they actually

¹ The Self-Sufficiency Standard, developed by Dr. Diana Pierce of the University of Washington while she directed the Women and Poverty Project at WOW, and the Elder Economic Security Standard™ Index, developed in conjunction with the Gerontology Institute at UMASS Boston. Both standards use local housing, food, transportation, out-of-pocket health costs and taxes. The standard for families figures in the cost of child care and the Elder Index considers the different costs depending on housing and health status.

need to meet their basic needs and age in place with dignity even though they are not considered impoverished under the official poverty definition.

According to Bureau of Labor Standards, there are a number of high-growth occupations such as computer support specialists, police officers, electricians, and plumbers, that can be attained with some post-secondary education up to a two-year degree or on-the-job training. Such jobs can lead to economic security at wages ranging from \$33,780 for automotive technicians to \$57,280 for registered nurses.

“Many of the jobs created or saved by the Recovery Act, as well as pending climate change legislation, promise to be the type of jobs that can lift working families well above the poverty line,” said Kuriansky. “If they are union or other high-quality jobs, they also are likely to provide health insurance and a retirement plan that can prevent poverty in old age.

“However, most of the high-demand occupations of the new American economy, including new green jobs, are ones with which women and girls are largely unfamiliar,” said Kuriansky. “Policies and programs that demonstrate the earnings potential of these jobs for girls and women can help open doors for them to career and technical schools, apprenticeships and employment.”

“Because many more seniors must continue working into their retirement years, policies must be shaped to accommodate their need to develop new skills and to obtain flexible work arrangements. Like the many women who work part-time due to care-giving responsibilities, older workers deserve proportionate access to health, retirement and unemployment benefits, and they should be spared penalties on their pensions,” Kuriansky stated.

U.S. Poverty in 2008		
	2007	2008
All Americans	12.5%	13.2%
Women	13.8%	14.4%
White	9.2%	9.6%
African-American	26.3%	26.2%
Hispanic	21.5%	25.5%
Asian	10.7%	12.2%
Single Family Heads of Household	28.3%	28.7%
Single Mothers of a Young Child	44.5%	45.4%
Seniors (65+)	9.70%	9.70%
Single Senior Women	19.90%	18.90%

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Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) leads two national networks promoting economic security within the United States: the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project (FESS) focusing on the needs of low-income working families and the Elder Economic Security Initiative, addressing what income seniors require to age in place. WOW works in 35 states, the District of Columbia, and at the federal level to promote programs and policies that accurately measure the income and assistance needs of families and the elderly. For more information, please visit www.wowonline.org