

# Society of St. Vincent de Paul

## Hot Topics

From the National Voice of the Poor Committee  
[www.voiceofthepoor.org](http://www.voiceofthepoor.org)

According to US Census data, poverty remains steady at 36.5 million people in the United States. (1) (2) Often overlooked are children, who comprise 35 percent of the Poor. About one in ten families (9.8%) live in poverty — an estimated 7.7 million families. These figures are based on the government's income definition for poverty. (3) Over half are single mothers with children.

Many Councils of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul operate shelters, food pantries, and other services. Through home-visits members see first hand the struggles of the Poor. The little emergency assistance given is simply not enough to sustain. Serious systemic change in the social fabric of this country is needed. In response to hearing the cries of the Poor in communities across America, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has joined Catholic Charities-USA to call for a reduction in US poverty by 50 percent by the year 2020. (4)

The lives of millions of Americans can be transformed with adequate funding to fill gaps and provide practical assistance and skill building along with a safety net particularly for parents with young children. What is needed are holistic solutions, rather than a piecemeal approach, along with regular support and follow up. Economic, social, and political obstacles separating rich and poor in America (accessible health care, affordable housing, community safety, equal educational opportunities...) must be bridged. While charity can provide a little salve in troubled times, healing deep wounds requires much, much more.

- We call for an involved government that seeks tactical change through carefully thought out, collective efforts, and purposeful measures that move individuals and families from poverty to self sufficiency.
- We ask that government policies be enacted with long-term, realistic, do-able solutions.
- Considering that 35 percent of all Poor are children, strengthening and supporting families is critical.

#### References:

1. DeNavas-Wilt, C, Proctor, BD, Smith, J. Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006. US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, US Census Bureau. August 2007.
2. Webster, BH and Bishaw, A. Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data From the 2006 American Community Survey. US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration, US Census Bureau. August 2007.
3. Office of Management and Budget. Poverty for a family of four is \$20,614 or less; for a family of three, \$16,079; for a family of two, \$13,167; and for unrelated individuals, \$10,294.
4. [http://povertyinamerica.typepad.com/campaign/about\\_the\\_campaign.html](http://povertyinamerica.typepad.com/campaign/about_the_campaign.html)

## Housing

Housing costs have skyrocketed coast-to-coast resulting in higher shelter costs for working families — over 50% of income in many cases. The Society receives requests for larger amounts of emergency housing assistance and help with utilities nationwide.

### We Support:

- Increasing permanent housing for low and moderate-income families (i.e., National and State Housing Trust Funds).
- Raising the number of rent subsidy programs especially for extremely low-income households.
- Full funding for affordable housing programs such as Section 8 and Section 202 Preserve targeting Section 8 (Housing Choice) vouchers for extremely low-income households.
- Increased funding for homeless assistance programs. (i.e., McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance)
- Provide housing first with supportive services for homeless.
- Utility assistance programs. (The need for utility assistance is critical to well being and even survival, particularly for the elderly, the sick, and children. )

## Food & Nutrition

It is estimated that 36 million people don't have reliable access to food in the USA; an estimated 26 million receive Food Stamps. Children are over half of the participants. Families and children receive nearly 80% of all benefit dollars. The Society provides emergency assistance receiving thousands of requests for emergency food assistance annually.

### We Support:

- Maintain Food Stamp eligibility. Support outreach and education efforts to those eligible for Food Stamps.
- Extend Food Stamp eligibility to more single adults and more working families. Reduce the complexity and stigma in the application process. Promote outreach efforts at national, state and local levels. Allow families to participate without forfeiting the opportunity to save.
- Provide adequate funding for Food Stamps and other nutrition programs that serve the needy. Base benefits on an updated measure of what families need. Provide families with access to quality food options — a variety of foods, fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, whole grains, and other wholesome foods. Provide adequate education based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and current infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

## Income and Assistance

The economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.

Economic Justice for All, Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, U. S. Catholic Bishops, 1986.

People have the right to productive work, to fair wages, and to private property and economic initiative. Paying a just wage is a powerful witness to employers, donors, government officials, church leaders and others who are - or should be - concerned with economic justice for all people.

### We Support:

→ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): Support improvements to reduce child poverty, improve employability of recipients, provide affordable, quality child care, promote adequate family income, and support marriage and family life.

→ Support and promote the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

→ The abolishment of predatory loan practices.

In a letter to Congress on behalf of the USCCB, Cardinal McCarrick writes, "Efforts to revitalize neighborhoods and to expand homeownership among low income families are being threatened by abusive lending practices. These practices, termed predatory lending, trap far too many unsophisticated and vulnerable people, often the elderly, into high cost loans that frequently lead to foreclosure after stripping any equity from the home. "

## Immigration

US immigration policies should be based upon the following guiding principles:

- People have the right to find opportunities in their own homelands.
- People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The human dignity and human rights of the undocumented migrants should be respected.

Reference: "Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope", A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, January, 2003. Nos. 33-38.

### We Support:

→ Adoption of an immigration policy that is comprehensive and provides legal status and legal avenues for entry into the United States, based on the US Bishops' document, "Strangers No Longer," and Pope John Paul II's, "Ecclesia in America."

→ Allow undocumented who have been in the US five years and were under the age of 16 when they entered the US to have their status changed to legal permanent residents qualifying for in-state tuition and other educational benefits.

→ Address the status of the estimated 50% of farm workers who are undocumented by establishing a process for "earned legalization."

An estimated 11 to 12 million undocumented persons reside in this country. The USCCB and Network have endorsed immigration reform that allows a path to citizenship for undocumented persons in the country; a temporary worker program which protects both U.S. and foreign-born workers; family based immigration reform which reduces backlogs in family unity categories; restoration of due process protections for immigrants; and policies which address the root causes of flight.

## Health Care

More people than ever are living without health insurance. US Census data estimates 47 million Americans are without health insurance.

### We Support:

→ Preserving Medicaid entitlement and benefits for low-income individuals.

→ Legislation to facilitate enrollment of children in Medicaid and SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Program).

→ Restoration of Medicaid and increased funding of State Children's Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP) to cover children at up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level at States' choice. (Based on population growth, S-CHIP is underfunded in many states.)

- The poor should not have to choose between food, shelter and medicine.
- Every child should receive basic health care, which includes vaccinations and regular check ups.
- No child should be allowed to suffer from what are often easily treatable illnesses.
- Every person in need of medical help should have easy access to quality and compassionate care.
- Health care institutions should be encouraged to deliver just, compassionate, and quality service to the poor.

Having adequate medical coverage for all means finding a way to encourage and enable health care providers to provide service. The Society seeks to keep an open dialog with the medical community and legislators on economic issues related to universal health care.

• Holding the medical community to the highest standards, including ethical integrity from administration to face-to-face patient service, to medical research and development must be encouraged.

• While investigating ways to improve the quality of human life, scientific study must be conducted in such a way that all work honors God, the creator, and the human person. Every person has value.

• Life is a precious gift from God. From conception, to maturity, and aging, the person must be honored and respected.

# Restorative Justice

According to a June 12, 2006 article in *USA Today*, on any given day, 2.2 million people are incarcerated. A total of 13.5 million people spend time in jails or prisons during the course of a year. As a result of get-tough-on-crime laws, the number of adults in prison has tripled over the past 25 years. Prisons are overcrowded, unsafe, unhealthy and inhumane. The failure of the correctional system has resulted in a recidivism rate (individuals returned to prison) of over 50% in most states. State budgets for the correctional system, equal or surpass their education budgets.

America's criminal justice system is broken. The US Catholic Bishops came to this conclusion after consulting with "Catholics involved in every aspect of the system – chaplains, police officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, probation and parole officers, wardens, correctional officers, crime victims, offenders, families of both victims and offenders, and treatment personnel." Restorative justice provides an alternative to the Western criminal justice system and is considered a sign of hope.

(Position Statement on Restorative Justice, SVDP Voice of the Poor)

## We Support:

→ The development of a new model for our nation based on restorative justice, a process to right wrongs and to being the healing needed for victims and their families, for offenders and their families, and for the community at large. We support retooling the current system with a focus on reparation, forgiveness, hope, and rehabilitation.

Finding avenues to set wrongs right, foster forgiveness and restore trust are key factors. Such a model must address safety, heal relationships, remedy physical damage caused by the offense, and tackle underlying causes (e.g. poverty, addictions, social problems, un- and underemployment, limited resources, and poor moral foundation). We must teach offenders empathy along with new ways of acting and being in community. Responding to crime at the earliest stage and encouraging voluntary cooperation and minimum coercion provides the best opportunity for changing hearts, minds, and spirits. The role of neighborhood institutions, including the faith community, is critical in building a cooperative spirit of teaching and establishing moral and ethical standards.

While it is unlikely that all offenders will choose to cooperate, this model provides a means for countless individuals on probation, parole, or incarcerated — who are lost in the current system — to seek restoration and forgiveness. Many want to one day be productive and accepted citizens but do not know what to do or how to get there.

All actions taken and consequences imposed need to be reasonable, restorative and respectful for the offender, as well as the victim and the community. Those, who pose significant safety risks and are unwilling to change, need to be placed in surroundings emphasizing safety, values, ethics, responsibility, accountability, and civility. Those who wish to change need opportunities to understand the impact of their crimes on their victims, learn empathy and develop the skills necessary to be productive in society.

## **Resources:**

**[www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org)   [www.networklobby.org](http://www.networklobby.org)  
[www.catholiccharitiesusa.org](http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org)**