



**Across the Nation, the Recession Causes Steep Increase in Poverty;
*Nutrition Aid and Health Coverage Helps Children Withstand Dangers***

Statement of Deborah Weinstein, Executive Director, Coalition on Human Needs

September 28, 2010

At least one in four children was poor in nearly 190 counties in 39 states in 2009, a time of severe recession (See: http://chn.org/pdf/2010/ACSchildpov_allcounties2009.pdf). In 33 counties in 17 states, at least one in three children was living in poverty. The [American Community Survey](#) for 2009, released today by the U.S. Census Bureau, shows rising poverty in the majority of states, with children much more likely to be poor than other age groups.

Child poverty is particularly dangerous because children's health and development is threatened when children are poor, especially if their poverty persists over years. The American Community Survey data is important because it goes beyond national or even state averages to shine a spotlight on local areas where poverty is rampant. A national average of one in five children in poverty should ring alarm bells. But places where a third or more of the children are poor require an immediate emergency response.

At the start of the recession, Congress and the Obama Administration took steps to lessen the hardships children and families were experiencing. Food stamp benefits were increased and unemployment benefits were extended and made more available for the lowest-earning families. While this help did not solve all the problems faced by families, it made it more likely that parents could afford nutritious food and avoid homelessness. The new reports show that in 23 states plus the District of Columbia, the percentage of households receiving [food stamps](#) (now known as SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) ranged between 10 percent and 14.9 percent, in another four states plus Puerto Rico, 15 percent or more of households increased their food supply through SNAP. Across the U.S., households receiving food stamps/SNAP increased by nearly 20 percent. In 16 states, the increase exceeded 25 percent (see data: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-8.pdf>). That is good news, because when young children do not get enough nutritious food, the healthy development of their brains and bodies are at risk.

Congress should listen to a tale of four cities. In Cleveland, Ohio, and Gary, Indiana, more than half the children were poor in 2009. In Tampa, Florida, 29 percent were poor, and in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, more than one in three children lived in poverty. In each of these places, more households received food stamps in 2009 than in previous years. Unemployment climbed steeply. In Cleveland, the unemployment rate in the civilian labor force jumped from 15.9 percent to 21.4 percent in one year; in Tampa, unemployment rose from 7.1 percent to 13.9 percent. And yet, while adults were losing health insurance in droves, the proportion of children without health insurance either dropped, or even when it climbed modestly in Tampa, was still well below the percentage of uninsured adults.

These families got some help from the federal government in meeting their children's essential needs. The time for this kind of assistance has not ended. The [Federal Reserve](http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/press/monetary/20100921a.htm) Board of Governors has recently acknowledged that the recovery is slowing, with high unemployment predicted for some time (See: <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/press/monetary/20100921a.htm>). That means continued threats to children and families.

But although millions of children still need emergency aid, Congress is not acting like it. They are about to leave Washington. Because some Members are prepared to block almost any action put forward by the current leadership, it appears that they will let a successful program that created 250,000 temporary jobs expire. They have already cut food stamp benefits by \$59 a month starting in 2014, and are considering multiple proposals to start the cuts more than a year sooner, despite the bitter reality that unemployment is likely to remain at 9 or 10 percent for years. The federal extended Unemployment Insurance program is poised to expire again at the end of November. Even the collecting of child support, which helps 17 million low-income children, is stalled. On top of all that, low-income tax credits that lift millions of children out of poverty are caught up in the fight over whether to extend tax breaks for the wealthiest 2 percent.

In the meantime, there is the tale of four cities, or 190 counties, and the stunningly high numbers of children in poverty who live there. They need our help.