

America's Immigrant-Driven Poverty Increase

by Linda Thom

On September 24, 1998, the United States Census Bureau issued two press releases to accompany their annual report on poverty, *Poverty in the United States: 1997* (Dalaker and Naifeh). The release headlines read:

*Poverty Rate Down, Household Income up —
Both Return to 1989 Pre-Recession Levels
and
Poverty Level of Hispanic Population Drops,
Income Improves*

What impression do these headlines give? Most would probably read them and believe that after years of grim economic times, Americans are again thriving and that Hispanics, especially, are making good economic progress. Unfortunately, the headlines are partially true at best and disingenuous at worst.

What the Bureau **did not say** is that the number of poor people increased by 4 million between 1989 and 1997 even if, according to Dr. Daniel Weinberg who lead the press briefing, “the poverty rate is statistically no different from the pre-recession rate in 1989.” (Actually, the poverty rate is not down as the headline says but rather up from 12.8 percent in 1989 to 13.3 percent in 1997 but this information is buried in the full one-hundred-page poverty report in one of the probably 50 pages of tables). Further, the Bureau **did say** that the drop in Hispanic poverty rates “accounted for a significant share of the decrease in the overall poverty rate between 1996 and 1997.” That is what happened in one year. What the Bureau **did not say** is that the Hispanic poor accounted for almost three quarters of the 4 million increase in America’s poor since 1989.

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If the data for the period are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, Hispanics and Asians accounted for 84 percent of the added poor people since 1989. Blacks in poverty declined by 186,000 and “others” in poverty increased by 825,00. Others are mostly non-Hispanic whites and Native Americans. While it is true that table upon table of data are available in the Census Bureau’s document, *Poverty in the United States: 1997*, who knows anyone in the media who sits down and analyses the data to see what press releases have left unsaid. The media take the press summaries prepared for them, listen to the briefing, and that is what goes to press. Unfortunately, the Census Bureau did not disaggregate the data and, by leaving so much unsaid, left the impression that all is well in America.

The Bureau’s failure to publicly announce that there has been a huge increase in poor people since 1989 and that Hispanics and Asians caused most of that increase continues to keep the truth from the American people and from American policy makers. The truth is that both the numbers living in poverty and the poverty rate would be declining in America were it not for immigration — and that, despite a booming economy, many immigrants are dying on the vine.

The Real Story

The press releases cited above accompanied the release of the Bureau’s annual report on poverty, *Poverty in the United States: 1997*. Buried in the body of the report itself, the Bureau does indicate that in 1997, the poverty rate for both native-born Americans and foreign born residents declined and now stands at 12.5 percent for the native-born as compared to 19.9 percent for foreign-born residents. The Bureau’s report also notes, “...the foreign-born population was disproportionately poor when compared with natives of the United States.” Nowhere, however, does the report indicate that it is manifestly clear that in the last decade, virtually all the added poor people are

Hispanics and Asians and that may have something to do with immigration.

In addition to poverty rates by nativity, the Bureau provides poverty rates by race and ethnicity. The Bureau's press conferences and press releases state the current poverty rates and changes from the prior year. The one year poverty rates are in the right direction — down. This peek at the numbers reveals little and

focusing only on the changes in the poverty rate is down right misleading if the numbers of poor people are increasing.

The federal government defines poverty thresholds by income and number of family members. In 1997, the poverty threshold for a family of four was an income of \$16,400 a year. In 1989, the income threshold for a family of four was \$12,674. In 1997, 35.6 million people were poor, up by over 4 million from 31.5 million in 1989. Despite this increase of 4 million poor people, the 1997 poverty rate was up only slightly from 1989. The poverty rate is calculated by dividing the number of poor people by the entire population. Thus, 35,574,000 poor divided by 268,480,000 people results in an overall poverty rate of 13.3 percent in 1997.

In 1989, 12.8 percent of America's 246 million residents were poor and in 1997, 13.3 percent of the 268 million people were poor. The Census Bureau correctly states that an increase in the poverty rate of half a percent is not statistically significant. What is statistically significant, however, is that poor people increased by 4 million. The nation has a growing poverty problem, not one which is statistically unchanged. The population increased by 22 million and of those added people, 4 million were poor. So what if the poverty rate in 1997 is not statistically different from the pre-recession 1989 rate? This is a losing proposition.

Table One shows the changes in poor people by

Change in Numbers of Poor People by Race and Ethnicity, 1989 to 1997
(Numbers are in thousands)

YEAR	All Poor	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Others
1997	35,574	1,468	9,116	8,308	16,682
1989	31,528	939	9,302	5,430	15,857
Change 1989-97	4,046	529	-186	2,878	825
Percent of total change	100%	13%	decline	71%	20%
1997 Poverty Rate	13.3%	14.0%	26.5%	27.1%	8.6%
1989 Poverty Rate	12.8%	14.1%	30.7%	26.2%	8%

Table One

race and ethnicity from 1989 to 1997 (Calculations by author from Dalaker and Naifeh). The category, "others" is almost entirely non-Hispanic whites but also includes Native Americans and others.

The number of poor people increased by 4 million but observe that, together, the number of Hispanic and Asian poor people rose by 3.4 million. Even though poor Hispanic people increased by 2.9 million, their poverty rate only rose by nine-tenths of a percent. The Asian poverty rate declined by one-tenth of a percent but there are 529,000 more Asian poor people. Focusing on poverty rate and not numbers in poverty is completely misleading.

Actually the picture is worse than the numbers suggest. Some might believe that an increasing population will always increase the number of poor people, but that is incorrect. Table Two shows the change in population by race and ethnicity from pre-recession 1989 to 1997 (Calculations by author from Dalaker and Naifeh). Tables One and Two show that the Black population increased by 4.1 million but the Black poor decreased by 186,000 between 1989 and 1997. Some might counter that the population of Hispanics and Asians is growing rapidly and, therefore, the number of poor increased rapidly. That is true — Hispanics and Asians accounted for 61 percent of the population growth between 1989 and 1987 but they accounted for 84 percent of the poverty increase. Others accounted for 21 percent of the population growth but only 8 percent of the growth in

poor people. Poverty among Hispanics and Asians is growing faster than their share of population growth. Blacks are making tremendous strides, especially in the last few years and others' numbers are growing but those in poverty are growing much more slowly.

Between 1989 and 1997, Asians accounted for 17 percent of the total U.S.

population increase but accounted for 13 percent of all the added poor people. The absolute number of added poor Asians increased by 56 percent and their total population grew by 57 percent. This does not seem so bad unless it is compared to the tremendous progress of Blacks. If Blacks can make such great strides in the current economy, then why is that many Asians cannot?

Black people have a very high poverty rate — 26.5 percent in 1997 compared to the Asian poverty rate of 14 percent. But the Black poverty rate declined from 30.7 percent in 1989 to 26.5 percent currently and for the last several years has been lower than the Hispanic poverty rate which was 27.1 percent in 1997. This turn around for Black Americans contrasts to the sobering escalation of poor Hispanics and Asians.

The plight of Hispanics and Asians is abysmal but for children it is worse. In 1997, the poverty rate for Asian and Hispanic children was increasing, not decreasing while the rates for whites and blacks are declining. Overall, the number of poor children in America increased by 1.5 million and Asian and Hispanic children accounted for all of the increase and then some because their poor increased by 1.6 million.

Change in Population by Race and Ethnicity, 1989 to 1997
(Numbers are in thousands)

Year	All	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Others
1997	268,480	10,482	34,458	30,637	192,903
1989	245,992	6,673	30,332	20,746	188,241
Change 1989-97	22,488	3,809	4,126	9,891	4,662
% of total change	100%	17%	18%	44%	21%

Table Two

Not only did the number of poor Black children decline by 150,000, their poverty rate declined from 43.7 percent to 37.2 percent. These numbers are still distressingly high, but they are headed in the right direction because the number of Black children increased by 1.7 million even as their numbers in poverty declined. Table Three displays 1997 child poverty rates by race and ethnicity (Dalaker and Naifeh).

The Immigration Connection

Are the increases in Asian and Hispanic poverty connected to immigration? Of course, they are. Currently, three quarters of new arrivals on America's shores are Hispanic or Asian. In 1990, two of every three Asians living in the United States were foreign-born and among Hispanics two of every three were foreign-born or the children of immigrants (del Pinal and Singer, Lee).

But the increase results not just from immigrants moving to America but also to the increase in United States-citizen children born to immigrants. Between 1989 and 1996, data from the United States Department of Health and Human Services show that births to native-born women are decreasing just as births to immigrants are increasing. Moreover, not only the number but the percent of all births is shifting. In 1989, 85.2 percent of America's 3.9 million births were to native-born mothers. By 1996, the percentage had dropped to 80.8 percent of the 3.9 million births (Mathews, et al., Ventura). Between 1989 and 1996, Hispanic women,

1997 Child Poverty Rates by Race and Ethnicity

All Children	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Others
19.9%	20.3%	37.2%	36.8%	11.5%

Table Three

native and immigrant, gave birth to 5.1 million babies and Asians gave birth to 1 million children. In 1996, 62 percent of Hispanic new mothers were immigrants and 85 percent of Asian new mothers were immigrants.

Of the 701,339 Hispanic births in 1996, 70 percent

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were to Mexican-origin women who were both native and foreign-born. Unfortunately, this large subgroup of Hispanics has a very high fertility rate and it is rising. In 1989, Mexican-origin women had a fertility rate of 94.5 births per 1,000 population of women in childbearing years and by 1996, the rate jumped to 120.7 per 1,000. This compares to the fertility of non-Hispanic Black women which dropped from 84.8 per 1,000 in 1989 to 72.5 per 1,000 in 1996 and non-Hispanic White women whose rate dropped from 60.5 to 57.3. The range of rates was not available for Asian women but the rate in 1996 was 65.9 per 1000 women of child bearing age (Ventura). Note the 1996 Mexican-origin fertility rate of 120.7 in comparison to the Black rate of 72.5, the white rate of 57.3 and the Asian rate of 65.9. Clearly, both immigration and the high Mexican-origin fertility rate is driving the explosion in the Hispanic child population and the Hispanic child poverty growth.

Conclusion

Because so many immigrants are Hispanic and Asian and because so many Hispanic and Asian new mothers are foreign-born, the conclusion is obvious: immigration is driving most of the increase in population and in poverty. But the numbers in poverty are increasing faster than the rise in population. Even so, why does America need any more poor people? And why is the Census Bureau failing to give the bad news? More important, why is the Bureau slanting its releases to the press by saying that all is well? The recession is over and everybody is doing fine; that is the impression the press is given and then the press

releases this distortion to the American people. The press cannot be blamed for this. News writers do words, not numbers. The Census Bureau does numbers and as the government agency in charge of the numbers, the Bureau is accountable for providing complete and accurate information.

The truths are:

- America is importing millions and millions of uneducated, poor people with high fertility rates.
- The Census Bureau is not disclosing the facts.
- The American people and American policy makers will never know the facts unless the Census Bureau starts disclosing the real story and not misleading America about immigration's impact on poverty.

The really disturbing part of this is that even if the United States significantly curtails immigration and changes to a skills-based legal immigration policy, the huge base of poorly educated immigrants with high fertility rates will continue to plague America for years to come. Those who are less pessimistic should consider that more than one hundred thirty years have passed since America freed Black slaves. Today, Blacks still struggle to achieve the American dream and the country still continues to wrestle with the consequences of this prior wave of cheap, foreign labor.

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Migration from Miami

Native-born citizens move away from immigrants

by William Booth

Everything here is nice and neat, just the way Joanne Smith likes it. The developers call their new city on the edge of the Everglades "Our Home Town," and Smith agrees. "It's more like America," she says.

Like thousands of others, Smith moved to this planned community 40 miles north of Miami just a few years ago, searching for a safe and secure neighborhood like this one, where both modest homes and rambling mansions sit against the manicured landscape of palm and hibiscus, and gated streets called Wagon Way and Windmill Ranch gently curve around the shallow lagoons and golf links.

Weston is a boomtown filling with refugees. But the migrants pouring into this part of Broward County are rarely those from the Caribbean, Central and South America — the immigrants to the South who have transformed

Miami and surrounding Dade County into a metropolis proudly called by its business and political leaders "The Gateway to Latin America."

Instead, the refugees here are mostly native-born and white, young and old, and they have been streaming up from Miami for years now, creating a new

The out-migration of whites is occurring in many high-immigration cities. Miami is one prominent example.

version of the traditional "white flight" in reaction not to black inner cities, but to immigration.

While Miami is unique in many respects, because of both geography and politics, the out-migration of whites is occurring in other high-immigration cities. New York and Los Angeles, for example, each lost a million U.S.-born residents in the last decade, as they gained a million immigrants.

According to an analysis of the most recent census data, for a almost every immigrant who came to Miami-Dade County in recent years, a white non-Hispanic left.

"I loved Miami, but it's a mad scene down there now," said

Smith, who is semi-retired and asked that her occupation not be given. Before her move to Weston, Smith lived in Miami for two decades, "In a nice neighborhood gone bad. People say things, 'Oh, that's change and that's progress,' but I like it clean and green — and everybody speaking English," Smith says.

In discussions about the historic demographic transformations occurring in the United States, which is absorbing almost 1 million immigrants a year, most of the attention focuses quite naturally on the newcomers: Who are they and where are they from and how do they make their way in America?

But immigration is a two-way street — and the welcome the immigrants receive from the native-born is crucial for the continued idea of America as a fabled "melting pot." Of course, there are many whites — and blacks, too — who have remained in Miami-Dade County, to either continue their lives as before or accept, even embrace the Latin tempo of Miami, who have learned how to pronounce *masas de puerco* at lunchtime and to fake a respectable *merengue* dance step, who enjoy the culture, the business opportunities and caffeinated hustle of a metropolis dominated by immigrants. No one

William Booth is a Washington Post staff writer. This article, the fifth in a series of occasional articles, appeared November 9, 1998. Copyright (c) 1998, it is reprinted by permission of the Washington Post Writers Group.