

Impoverished thinking

From the Editors in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

The poverty rate in the U.S. reached 14.3 percent in 2009—the highest level in 15 years. Another 4 million people dropped below the poverty line that year, bringing the total number of people in poverty to 43.6 million—the highest number since the late 1950s. The greatest increase in poverty is among children, with one in five affected. In 2008, more than a million American children went hungry, an increase of 56 percent over the previous year—and the figure is expected to climb even higher.

One has the greatest chance of being poor in America if one is Hispanic or African American in a one-parent, female-headed household and living in a rural region or an inner city. Poverty is, of course, closely related to employment. When unemployment rates go up, as they have in recent years, it is no wonder that more people fall into poverty.

Calling attention to poverty is not popular in American politics today. No leader even suggests mounting something like a war on poverty, as was attempted in the 1960s—and which made a significant dent in poverty levels. David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, notes that "no recent president has made reducing poverty one of his top three issues. Even the Democrats hide it."

One problem, Beckmann says, is that unlike the poor in Africa, poor people in the U.S. are "uncomfortably close": "You can go to a meeting about helping poor people in Africa and not get your hands dirty. If you work with poor people in this country, well, you've got to work with them."

Soup kitchens and other charities aren't sufficient, argues Beckmann. Only political action can address people's needs. He reports that when he asks Christians how they help the hungry, most claim to contribute to food charities. But when he asks them how many have contacted their elected officials to urge support for food stamp programs and school lunch programs, very few people raise their hands.

If Congress were to increase current federal food programs by a mere 6 percent, writes Beckmann, it would match the amount of food aid contributed by all food

charities combined. Likewise, if it were to trim the food aid by 6 percent, it would be the equivalent of wiping out all the food charities operating in the country.

Soup kitchens and homeless centers are struggling to meet the demand, and they need support. But elected representatives need to know that government aid for the poor and the unemployed is more necessary now than ever. As Beckmann puts it, "A thousand points of light is not enough light."