



Plight of the impoverished

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The most desperate of the Gulf hurricane victims have tended to be the poor. Images of the lost and stranded have pointed beyond the natural disaster itself to the largely hidden struggle that is the lot of so many low-income Americans.

Last month, the Census Bureau released 2004 data showing an additional 1.1 million Americans were in poverty compared to the preceding year. That brought the total number of impoverished Americans to 37 million -- the fourth straight year in which the numbers had increased. (What would be the impact of immigration on these numbers?)

Of course, poverty figures have critics on all sides. Conservatives complain that they leave important forms of wealth, such as employee and public benefits, unmeasured. Liberals, for their part, argue that the poverty line is unrealistically low, and ignores the true cost of living. However valid the criticisms, though, it is nevertheless disturbing to see the numbers increasing.

Of special concern is the number of children in poverty -- about a third of the overall total. In Rhode Island, their plight has taken on new urgency. In 2003, 16.7 percent of Rhode Island's youngsters were living in poverty. But last year the rate leaped to 21 percent, bounding past the national child-poverty rate of 18.4 percent.

Rhode Island does a fairly good job of providing health care for these youngsters, especially in comparison with other states. But these numbers mean that the state is looking at significant investments, especially in education, if it hopes to keep its economy on a sound footing.

With the images of hurricane-stricken areas fresh in our minds, now is a good time to consider ways of helping a broad spectrum of working families. After all, although the economy grew in 2004, median household income remained flat, at about \$44,000. Productivity is up, but the gains have been plowed largely into profits, rather than wages.

One example: Instead of continuing its push for tax breaks benefiting the well-off (repeal of the estate tax, for instance), Congress might consider lifting the minimum wage, which remains at \$5.15 an hour.

Putting Katrina and Rita's displaced workers back on the job is crucial to weathering the disasters. But recognizing that so many had already been struggling is equally crucial.