

# Child Poverty, Rural Poverty,

By the Rev. Fred Kammer, S.J.



The figures released in September by the U.S. Census Bureau from its 2009 American Community Survey give us multiple angles from which to view the poverty of the five states of the Gulf South. If we just look at the overall numbers of people living below “the poverty line”—a measure considered too low by many experts—we see figures<sup>1</sup> reflected in this table with the overall U.S. and regional numbers (see Table 1).

On this simple measure of the percentage of the

AREA	POPULATION	IN POVERTY	RATE
U.S.	299,026,555	42,868,163	14.3%
Alabama	4,588,899	804,683	17.5%
Florida	18,124,789	2,707,925	14.9%
Louisiana	4,367,637	755,460	17.3%
Mississippi	2,848,335	624,360	21.9%
Texas	24,176,222	4,150,242	17.2%
Gulf South	54,105,882	9,042,670	16.7%

TABLE 1  
**THE POVERTY LINE  
2009**

population living in poverty, Mississippi has the highest percentage in the nation, as has been the case for a number of years. The national poverty rate, at 14.3 percent, is the highest it has been since 1994, reflecting the “great recession” of the past several years.

If we consider the future of the region, however, one of the most significant factors is the poverty of its children. Child poverty has an impact that usually carries throughout the life of the person who is poor as a child, manifesting itself in continuing health problems as an adult. In addition, early childhood poverty is “often correlated with fewer years of completed schooling.”<sup>2</sup> When looking at child poverty, several different views also are helpful. The first is the poverty of all children under 18; a second is the poverty of children under five, a group more deeply affected by their poverty; and a third, important in the South and elsewhere, is rural child

poverty, which is more acute than in suburban or central city areas. Table 2<sup>3</sup> below reflects three sets of child poverty views.

The reality of so much child poverty in the region, such poverty among very young children, and such intense rural child poverty will deeply affect the future of the region. It also should ring multiple alarms among Gulf South policy-makers, educators, and voters.

The last look at the new poverty figures is a significant distinction in calculating what is called “deep poverty.” **Deep poverty describes those with incomes below half of the official poverty threshold.** These would be individuals with incomes below \$5,478 a year, two-person families with less than \$6,996 a year, a three-person family with less income than \$8,549 a year, and so forth. Perhaps it should be called “desperate poverty” or just “desperation.” Tragically, in the United States **18.8 million people live in deep poverty.** This is 6.3 percent of the U.S. population. In the Gulf South, the numbers of persons in deep poverty is reflected in the Table 3.

The shocking fact of so many millions of Gulf South residents and so many Americans living in deep poverty is exacerbated by the continuing increase in the wealth of the richest families in America over recent decades.

The stark inequality revealed in the 2009 American Community Survey belies the myths of American equality and opportunity that buttress the persistent resistance of policy-makers and the wealthy to social and economic policies that would reverse wealth-concentrating economic and tax policies that have dominated state and federal governments. *Surprisingly, middle-America continues*

TABLE 2  
**CHILD  
POVERTY  
RATES  
2009**

AREA	NO. OF POOR CHILDREN <18	% POOR CHILDREN <18	% POOR CHILDREN <5	% POOR RURAL CHILDREN
U.S.	14,359,130	19.7%	23.2%	24.2%
Alabama	272,239	24.5%	29.0%	31.2%
Florida	835,363	21.0%	24.8%	29.6%
Louisiana	265,503	24.0%	28.8%	29.7%
Mississippi	229,365	30.7%	33.9%	37.8%
Texas	1,639,551	24.2%	28.0%	27.1%
Gulf South	3,242,021	23.6%	N/A	N/A

# and "Deep Poverty"

*to watch without reaction as wealth is increasingly concentrated at the top and even supports policies to its own economic detriment and the continued impoverishment of the poor in their communities.*

To understand what is happening, it is helpful to consider all U.S. families in five income "quintiles." In other words, all U.S. households are aggregated by the Census Bureau into five equal-sized groups by income. The lowest quintile are those with incomes of \$20,452 or less; the second quintile contains households with incomes between \$20,454 and \$38,550; the middle quintile's income ranges from \$38,551 to \$61,801; the fourth quintile has incomes between \$61,802 and \$100,00; and the fifth quintile's income exceeds \$100,000. In 2009, the bottom 20 percent of households shared just 3.4 percent of all income. The second group received 8.6 percent. The middle group took home 14.6 percent of U.S. income while the fourth group received 23.2 percent of income. The highest group of households gathered in 50.3 percent of all U.S. income dollars. This division is represented in Chart 1, depicting the 2009 division of U.S. household income.

## Shares of U.S. household income in 2009

It's as if five families split \$100 in annual income. The poorest family receives \$3.40 while the richest family takes home \$50.30. The inequality is even greater if we were to compare the income of the bottom 5 percent with that of the top 5 percent of U.S. families. What is surprising to many people is that *this situation of income inequality in America is not getting better, but far worse.* U.S. tax and economic policies continue to encourage and widen inequality in this country. For a visual depiction of the change, it is helpful to look at the income shares of the quintiles of U.S. households back in the year 1979, 30 years earlier, presented in Chart 2.

TABLE 3 DEEP POVERTY

AREA	NO. IN DEEP POVERTY IN 2009	% IN DEEP POVERTY IN 2009	% IN DEEP POVERTY IN 2000
U.S.	18,776,800	6.3%	5.0%
Alabama	343,928	7.5%	6.1%
Florida	1,180,365	6.5%	5.5%
Louisiana	315,241	7.2%	8.3%
Mississippi	266,213	9.3%	7.1%
Texas	1,752,422	7.2%	6.3%
Gulf South	3,858,169	7.1%	N/A

## Shares of U.S. household income in 1979

As the two pie charts show, the bottom fifth of U.S. households now take home half as large a share of income as they did 30 years ago. The second "family" takes home about a quarter less of a share. The shares of the middle quintile of households and the fourth are largely unchanged, but the top quintile of families have seen their share increase from 43 to 50 percent of household income in the U.S. Within that top quintile, the after-tax income of the wealthiest families has skyrocketed in recent decades, making the reality of poverty in this country far more morally unacceptable.

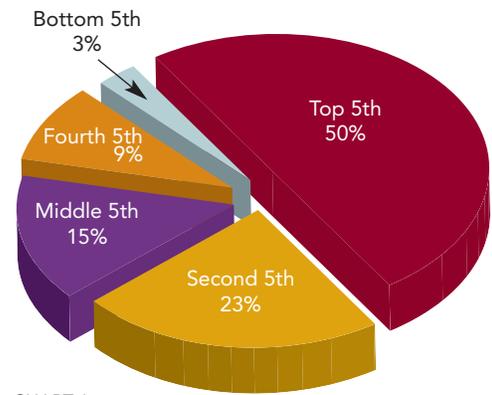


CHART 1 2009 DIVISION OF U.S. HOUSEHOLD INCOME

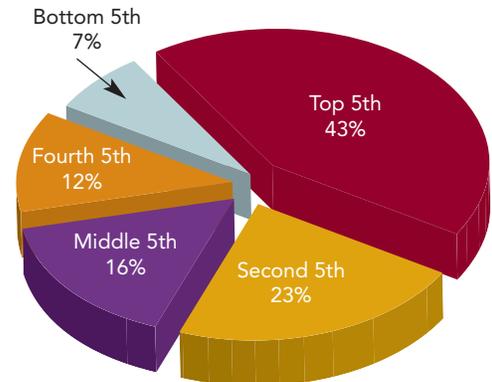


CHART 2 1979 DIVISION OF U.S. HOUSEHOLD INCOME

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009, calculations by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Washington, D.C.
- 2 Marybeth J. Mattingly and Michelle L. Stransky, Carsey Institute, Issue Brief No. 17, Fall 2010, p. 1.
- 3 Sources: *Ibid.*; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, calculations by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; and ACS Survey, Selected Economic Characteristics, 2009, by individual state reports.