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NEW CENSUS DATA SHOW AN INCREASE IN POVERTY More Detailed Data Are Expected Later this Month

By Sharon Parrott

Today, the Census Bureau released data from the 2002 American Community Survey (ACS) on a range of topics, including population, school enrollment, educational attainment, foreign-born status, income and poverty. The Census Bureau released national and state data, as well as data for selected counties, on these topics. As explained below, the data released today do *not* represent estimates for calendar year 2002. Instead, these data, roughly speaking, represent the situation in the country between the mid-point of 2001 and mid-point of 2002.

The ACS data show that the overall poverty rate and the poverty rate among children in this 2001-2002 period were significantly higher than during the same period a year earlier. Overall, the number of people in poverty rose by 1.34 million people between the 2001 and 2002 ACS periods while the number of related children in poverty rose by more than 600,000. This increase in poverty reflects the overall weakness in the economy and in the labor market.

Later this month, the Census Bureau is scheduled to release much more complete income and poverty statistics derived from a different survey, the annual Current Population Survey. This survey, conducted in March 2003, will show “official” poverty and income statistics for calendar year 2002 (January – December 2002) and will be comparable to the income and poverty statistics released each fall. The figures to be released later this month also will provide a richer set of information about earnings, income inequality, and poverty than the data released thus far from the ACS. It is important to note, however, that the ACS’s far larger sample size allows for more reliable state and sub-state estimates to be calculated on a range of topics and is a valuable tool for policymakers and researchers alike.

How the ACS is Conducted

The 2002 ACS surveyed 740,000 households between November 2001 and December 2002. Households were interviewed once during this time period and asked about their circumstances *over the twelve months prior to the month of the interview*. For example, households interviewed in January 2002 were asked about their circumstances from January 2001 to December 2001 while households interviewed in December 2002 were asked about their circumstances from December 2001 to November 2002. Estimates are derived by averaging the circumstances of households interviewed in different months together.

Thus, the ACS data derived from the 2002 survey reflect some information from as early as November 2000 and as recent as November 2002.