

Poverty in America?

By: Rep. Glenn Grothman

Last month the United States Census Bureau issued its annual report on poverty in the United States. Per usual they claim that about one-eighth of Americans are poor and presumably in need of some assistance. When I think of poor, I think of people who are hungry, people with inadequate housing or people without heating or clothes. If one-eighth of people are poor, where are they?

An analysis by the United States Department of Commerce sheds some light on this issue. Forty-six percent of the poor own their own home. Seventy-six percent have air conditioning and ninety-seven percent have a color television set with fifty-five percent having two! Sixty-three percent have a cable TV or a satellite dish. Seventy-three percent own a vehicle, seventy-three percent own a microwave, seventy-eight percent have a VCR or DVD, and twenty-seven percent have a cell phone.

This doesn't seem poor to me. Thirty years ago, the above would in many cases be a pretty good description of the rich!! Poor people have a greater incidence of obesity than wealthier people. This is not because they are eating more fatty foods—the percent of fat intake is almost identical between rich and poor. Vitamin intake is also virtually identical. This is why even the poorest Americans are taller and weigh more than the average soldier in World War II and are two inches taller than the average soldier in World War I.

Comparisons of living space with other countries are also illuminating. People who travel abroad will not be surprised to hear the average poor person has more living space per person (440 square feet) than those people living in Munich, Paris or London and over 50 percent more than people living in Athens or Tel Aviv. How can this be so? First, poverty is based solely on income, not assets. One could have a home, cars, furniture, and substantial money in the bank or be getting money from someone else but if you aren't making money yourself, you are considered poor. Undeclared income does not count. Neither do government benefits for food, housing allowance, heat, etc. This may be why I hear from people in grocery stores or in social services that the type of food purchased or the number of poor who smoke (quite expensive today) indicates a lot of disposable income.

Theodore Dalrymple, British author and doctor and a keen observer of what he terms as the “underclass,” likes to point out the poor can be a gold mine. What he means is that over time more and

more people in our governments, our universities, and some non-profit institutions make a living studying or helping the poor. It is in their interest to greatly exaggerate the amount of poverty. We must help the poor in America. But we should be skeptical of government statistics designed to exaggerate the problem and be aware that many beneficiaries of these programs (school breakfasts, etc.) are better off than the taxpayers who pay for them.

Please let me know what you think on this issue. Contact me here in Madison---please call 1-888-534-0058.

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