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African Americans Front and Center in Government Poverty Report **By Racine Tucker-Hamilton, Bread for the World** **BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator**

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In September of 2009, the U.S. Census Bureau released its [annual report](#) on poverty for 2008. This is the first set of data that reflects the impact of the recession on American households. The data revealed that the number of people living in poverty now totals 40 million, a 2.6 million increase from 2007, and the highest level since 1997. Child poverty also increased from 18 percent to 19 percent, bringing the total number of children in poverty to over 14 million.

Many of those children are African American girls like ten-year-old Valencia Shackelford and her nine-year old sister Genora who were featured recently in the Montgomery Advertiser. Valencia and Genora, whose family lived in a van in Alabama for a time after their rented home was destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in 2004, are among the American children who live in poverty. Valencia said the hardest part about not getting enough to eat was "not being able to function as a normal person. There was no energy." Genora added, "You feel like a speck of dirt."

According to the Census Bureau report, 34.5 percent of African-American and 28.6 percent of Hispanic children live in poverty. For white children, the rate is 15 percent. The findings also showed that although the poverty rate was statistically unchanged for African-Americans (24.7 percent) in 2008, it is still higher than any other minority group. It increased for non-Hispanic whites (8.6 percent in 2008, up from 8.2 percent in 2007), Asian-Americans (11.8 percent in 2008, up from 10.2 percent in 2007) and Hispanics (23.2 percent in 2008, up from 21.5 percent in 2007).

Prior to the recession, low-income families were already struggling to make ends meet; the economic downturn has only made their situation worse. Rev. David Beckmann,

president of [Bread for the World](#) said: "We need to recognize that there are still and will continue to be millions of struggling families and we have to make sure that they get the help they need to get by."

Contributing to the poverty picture is the rising unemployment rate. Recently released government data shows that the unemployment rate has reached 9.7 percent, the highest since 1983. Participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) -- formerly known as food stamps -- has increased by almost 3.5 million in the first six months of this year, reaching a total of 35 million. One out of every nine Americans now receive SNAP benefits.

This increase in hunger and poverty in the United States remains largely an unreported story. "It's eerie to me how little attention this crisis is receiving. The poor seem to be completely out of the picture," recently wrote *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert.

As we try to recover from the recession, we need to ensure that the poor are not only in the picture but are in the front and center of these recovery efforts.

BlackCommentator.com Guest Commentator Racine Tucker-Hamilton works for Bread for the World, www.bread.org. Bread is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad. Click [here](#) to contact Ms. Tucker-Hamilton.



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