

# Report, summit on children's welfare highlight familiar problem

WASHINGTON – When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., hosted a national summit on child welfare, she shined a light on a problem that is all too familiar to officials of Catholic Charities USA.

“The numbers are moving in the wrong direction,” said Desmond Brown, director of health and welfare policy at Catholic Charities USA, about a new report released by the National Center for Children in Poverty to coincide with the summit.

The report said 42 percent of U.S. children under the age of 6 – roughly 10 million – are vulnerable to poor health and substandard education, largely as a result of poverty and economic hardships.

“We have gathered today to begin what will be a long-term conversation, and to signal our deep commitment to caring for our children and creating a prosperous future for them and for our entire nation,” Pelosi said at the May 22 summit in Washington, attended by academic and policy leaders who spoke about the state of early childhood development in the U.S.

Catholic Charities agencies around the country, which serve some 7 million clients annually, largely from poor working families, “are on the front lines – day to day” in the battle against poverty, according to Shelley Borysiewicz, manager of media relations for the Alexandria, Va.-based Catholic Charities USA.

The National Center for Children in Poverty report – which compiled data in terms of how well each state met the basic needs of young children and families – found that access to quality health care, early learning opportunities and family economic support vary widely. While most states have maintained or increased health care eligibility since 2001, 33 states have decreased eligibility for child care subsidies.

Most states recognize the importance of funding early childhood development, the report said, but the amount of money each state spends on early education programs

fluctuates; New Jersey spends \$456 million in preschool programs, for example, while Nevada spends \$3 million.

“For young children to thrive, they need high-quality health care and early learning experiences, as well as nurturing parents who are economically secure,” said Jane Knitzer, the report’s co-author and director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, in a statement prior to speaking at the summit.

Though the 2007 poverty level for a family of three is \$17,000, the report estimated that it would take twice that amount to provide basic necessities.

While the national poverty rate has remained unchanged at 12 percent in recent years, Brown said there are 37 million Americans in poverty and the rate for minorities is nearly double the national average. The poverty rate for those under 18 has remained stagnant at 17.6 percent, and rates for the elderly are on the rise, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Brown attributed much of the increase in national poverty levels to economic recessions and tax policies.

“There are a lot of misconceptions about people in poverty,” he said. “Just because you’re slightly above (the poverty line) doesn’t mean your life is all that better.”

Poverty-stricken children are less likely to have health insurance or to have visited a dentist within the last year, the report said.

Catholic Charities USA had set a goal of cutting poverty in half by 2020, calling for strengthening of the nation’s nutrition safety net, enactment of universal health insurance coverage, creation of more affordable housing and other policy changes.

“Congress has the opportunity to help children,” Brown said. “There are a lot of issues that we’re pushing for.”