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The South is tops in poverty

By Gene Nichol

September 29, 2012

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- By the numbers 17.9 The percentage of Tar Heels who live in poverty 25 The percentage of North Carolina children who live in poverty 40 The percentage of N.C. children of color who are poor

The recent release of poverty figures by the Census Bureau, again, speaks volumes about the American South.

We are, as ever, the nation's poorest region. The South has the highest percentage of citizens living in poverty. Ten of the country's 12 poorest states are Southern. Though about 15 percent of Americans live in poverty, in Mississippi the figure is 23; Louisiana, 21.4; Arkansas, 19.5; Georgia, 19.1; South Carolina, 18.9; Texas, 18.5. The former Confederate states set the gold standard in American economic deprivation.

We share the indignity with our kids. In fact, we visit it upon them disproportionately. Of the 10 states with child poverty rates in excess of 25 percent, nine are from the South. Of the 11 states with over 10 percent of kids living in extreme poverty (\$11,525 in income for a family of four), 10 are Southern. The Southern

Education Foundation reports that of the 6 million children living in extreme poverty in the United States, a disproportionate 42 percent are our Southern neighbors.

We also lead the nation in those without health care coverage of any kind. Here, Texas paves the way – with an astonishing 24.2 percent. But Louisiana (20.3), Florida (20.2), South Carolina (19.7), Georgia (19.3) and Mississippi (18.6) give the Longhorns a spirited run for their money.

To add insult to our traditional injury, the Pew Foundation released a new national study of economic mobility. The states with the lowest economic mobility – where the poor are most apt to remain poor and the rich most likely to stay that way – are Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina and Texas.

And, on these broad fronts, North Carolina clings stubbornly to its regional heritage: 17.9 percent of Tar Heels live in poverty, 25 percent of our kids. Almost 18 percent of us lack health care coverage. We have the fifth-highest unemployment rate in the country. We face daunting levels of extreme poverty and extreme child poverty. Almost 40 percent of our children of color are poor. Four in 10. Try saying that out loud, in the richest nation on earth, without a catch in the throat.

As November approaches, if you're old like me, you're apt to get calls from across the country asking whether these imposing, humiliating numbers, and the wounds they reflect, will affect the electoral outcome. Will Southern voters (and candidates) turn their attentions to the plight of the struggling souls on the lowest rungs of the ladder? Not likely.

In our heated gubernatorial race, when it comes to poverty, mum's the word. Vigorous competing plans are offered to achieve disparate ends. None seeks to lift Tar Heels out of poverty. It is hard to imagine the sledding is any better in Jackson or Tallahassee or Austin or Baton Rouge.

At the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, the drumbeat was relentless. Republicans represent those at the top – the wielders and beneficiaries of economic privilege. Democrats, on the other hand, are champions of the middle. Middle class, middle income, mid-level, working folks and families. Main Street, not Wall Street.

Well and good, I suppose. But who, in this defining dichotomy, speaks for those at the bottom? If any poor people followed the proceedings in Tampa and Charlotte, they must have wondered when their convention would be scheduled.

And, in the South, we move a step beyond marginalization – often pointedly, boastfully, refusing to embrace policies congenial to those facing economic hardship. Many Southern governors carped about federal stimulus efforts, occasionally even turning back dollars, as their states reeled from unemployment.

Opposition to the Affordable Care Act was most potent, and uniform, in the South – though our citizens benefit from it disproportionately. We now threaten to reject expansions of Medicaid that would dramatically (and inexpensively) offset our gaping holes in health care coverage.

A survey, last year, of the Congress' Tea Party caucus – those most vehemently opposed to a bolstered safety net – reported that the largest state contingents are from Texas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee. New England claims no members. This led one pundit to suggest the activists should have taken Fort Sumter, not Boston harbor, as their rallying cry.

Over the top, perhaps. But for those of us who choose to live, enthusiastically, in the American South, the silent marriage of privilege and privation mocks our commitment to egalitarian constitutional democracy. It also confounds our efforts to face and resolve our most trying and chronic problems.

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