

Nearly 1 in 6 Americans in poverty, Census data show

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The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The ranks of the nation's poor have swelled to a record 46.2 million — nearly 1 in 6 Americans — as the prolonged pain of the recession leaves millions still struggling and out of work. And the number without health insurance has reached 49.9 million, the most in over two decades.

The figures are in a Census Bureau report, released Tuesday, that offers a somber snapshot of the economic well-being of U.S. households for last year when joblessness hovered above 9 percent for a second year. The rate is still 9.1 percent before the start of an election year that's sure to focus on the economy and President Barack Obama's stewardship of it.

The overall poverty rate climbed to 15.1 percent, from 14.3 percent the previous year, and the rate from 2007-10 rose faster than for any

decrease, and he said "the law change certainly could be a factor."

For last year, the median — or midpoint — household income was \$49,445, down 2.3 percent from 2009.

The poor include Nekisha Brooks, 28, of Fort Washington, Md., who lost her job as a customer service representative for AT&T several months ago in a round of layoffs. Raising five young children, she is now on food stamps and partly leaning on friends and family for help.

"It's hard on the kids," Brooks said, describing how her family has had to cut back on clothing and restaurant outings. "I've been putting in job applications every day and calling around, from housekeeping to customer service to admin or waitress, but nobody seems to be hiring right now."

Bruce Meyer, a public policy professor at the University of Chicago, cautioned that the

worst may be yet to come in poverty levels, citing in part continued rising demand for food stamps this year as well as "staggeringly high" numbers in those unemployed for more than 26 weeks. He noted that more than 6 million people are in the category of

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similar period since the early 1980s when a crippling energy crisis amid government cutbacks contributed to inflation, spiraling interest rates and unemployment. For last year, the official poverty level was an annual income of \$22,314 for a family of four.

Measured by total numbers, the 46 million now living in poverty are the most on record dating back to when the census began to track in 1959. The 15.1 percent tied the level of 1993 and was the highest since 1983.

Broken down by state, Mississippi had the highest share of poor people, at 22.7 percent, according to calculations by the Census Bureau. It was followed by Louisiana, the District of Columbia, Georgia, New Mexico and Arizona. On the other end of the scale, New Hampshire had the lowest share, at 6.6 percent.

The share of Americans without health coverage rose from 16.1 percent to 16.3 percent — or 49.9 million people — according to Census Bureau revisions. The increase was due mostly to continued losses of employer-provided health insurance in the weakened economy.

Congress passed a health overhaul last year to address rising numbers of the uninsured. While the main provisions don't take effect until 2014, one aspect taking effect in late 2010 allowed young adults to be covered under their parents' health insurance until age 26.

The uninsured rate for adults 18 to 24 actually declined last year, from 29.3 percent to 27.2 percent, noted Brett O'Hara, chief of the Health and Disability Statistics branch at the Census Bureau. That was the only age group that posted a

in the category of long-term unemployed and more likely to fall into poverty, accounting for more than two out of five currently out of work.

The latest numbers, which cover Obama's second year in office, offer political fodder for both parties as Obama seeks to push a new \$447 billion plan for creating jobs and stimulating the economy. The plan includes a proposed Social Security payroll tax cut and an extension of unemployment benefits.

Obama is urging Congress to pay for the new spending largely by increasing taxes on the wealthy, which Republicans have emphatically rejected.

According to the report, the gap between the rich and poor widened last year, at least based on some measures. For instance, income fell for the wealthiest — down 1.2 percent to \$180,810 for the top 5 percent of households. But the bottom fifth of households — those making \$20,000 or less — saw incomes decline 4 percent.

Other measures pointed to a longer-term widening of income inequality but with little change in 2010.

On Tuesday, the Census Bureau also noted the impact of government safety-net programs on the poor. It estimated that new unemployment benefits passed in 2009 — which gave workers up to 99 weeks of payments after layoffs, and didn't run out for most people until this year — lifted 3.2 million above the poverty line. Social Security kept about 20.3 million — seniors as well as working-age adults receiving disability payments — out of poverty.

"If these programs are cut back in the future, poverty rates are likely to rise even more," Meyer said.