



How do we reach out to poor people in our midst? Let's face it: if you're reading this magazine, you probably aren't poor. Many of those whom Jesus inspired over two millennia weren't poor either. But Jesus cared about the poor, in a sense, more than he cared about anyone.

Indeed, Godly love knows no favorites, but poor people struggle against steeper odds than do the rest of us. Jesus showed us that while the world always will value wealth and ignore the poor, true love will reach out in a stronger way to the poor than to anyone.

This special report is about growing poverty in the United States today. We can't tell the whole story, but we turned to some Catholic organizations to help us understand more deeply: St. Vincent de Paul, Catholic Charities, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, and a smaller parish program, JustFaith.

We are aware it's election season; we endorse no one. But the principle that must guide our choices is this Franciscan position, indeed the Catholic position: What impact will our choices have on the "least of these"?

—John Feister
Editor in Chief

Who Are the Poor?

We must do more than treat the symptoms of poverty, says Sheila Gilbert, president of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. We must work to find a cure.

BY CAROL ANN MORROW

MEETING PEOPLE IN POVERTY face-to-face is the fundamental first action of Vincentians, as members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are called. Strengthened by prayer and reflection, they go two by two to relieve human need, always beginning with a personal visit.

This makes Vincentians a primary and informed source of knowledge about the faces and places of poverty in the United States today. Seeking to grasp this picture, *St. Anthony Messenger* interviewed Sheila Gilbert, current president of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, at her modest home on the east side of Indianapolis. The life-long Hoosier has been the soft-spoken, direct, and knowledgeable leader of the 172,000 Vincentians in this nation since September 2011 and has been an active member of the society for 30 years. She is the first woman to head the society in the United States (see sidebar on page 33).

Elsewhere in this issue you can track the numbers. Gilbert prefers to describe situations.

What It's Like to Be Poor

A man struggling with poverty offered Gilbert an analogy to describe his situation. The childhood entertainment of capturing grasshoppers in a glass jar with holes in the lid has some predictable stages. "When you first capture the grasshopper, it jumps and jumps and jumps, trying to get out, banging its head against the lid," recalls Gilbert. "But the longer the grasshopper's in there, the less high it

jumps, the less it tries, until finally it just sits on the bottom. That's what it is to be in poverty long-term. After a while, you just can't bang your head anymore. You just sit there!"

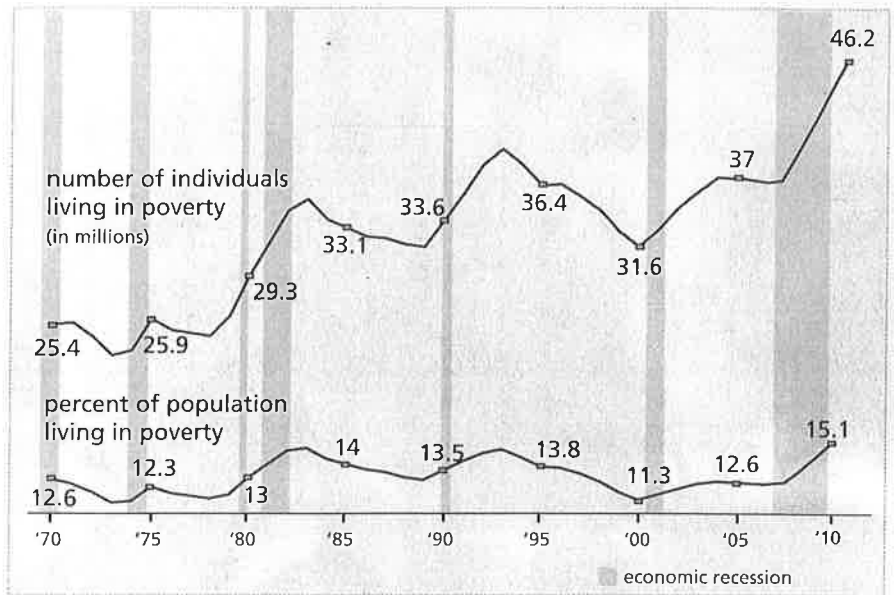
That story moves Gilbert to a two-fold conclusion: "We have to take the lid off the jar! To keep teaching people to jump and encouraging them to jump when all they do is hit their head doesn't make any sense! So we have to take the lid off the jar as well as help the grasshopper to jump again." Urgent care of the symptoms of poverty needs to be coupled with a cure for the epidemic, Gilbert concludes.

A Matter of Choices

Can Gilbert offer a picture of who's struggling in that jar called poverty today? She says, "The poor are those who do not have good choices to make. The only choices they have are bad ones. Here's a fairly common scenario: a single mother's working two unskilled, minimum-wage jobs to make do. One of her children is having problems in school and may be expelled if the mother can't come in for a conference. If she goes to school, she loses her job. If she doesn't, her child is expelled. Neither choice works!"

Having only poor choices can be traced to a lack of resources, Gilbert explains. She articulates 11 necessary resources, some less obvious than others, all adapted from a book called *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* by Philip E. DeVol. Financial, emotional, mental, and physical resources are four that many might predict with confidence. Integrity and trust, as well as motivation and persistence, are less measurable resources, but certainly their absence is notable in those who just quit trying to jump out of that jar of poverty. Gilbert continues the tally with spiritual resources, social support, and relationships and role models. Two that seemed less obvious to this listener were language resources and knowledge of hidden rules.

An Increasing Epidemic



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey

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You would be poor if you were:

- One person and earned less than \$11,139
- Two people and earned less than \$14,218
- Three people and earned less than \$17,374
- Four people and earned less than \$22,314
- Five people and earned less than \$26,439
- Six people and earned less than \$29,897
- Seven people and earned less than \$34,009
- Eight people and earned less than \$37,934
- Nine people or more and earned less than \$45,220

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU



Gilbert explains the lack of language resources: "In a household that has been living in poverty for generations, the child will come to school with a vocabulary of 200 to 600 words. A child from a middle-class family will have a vocabulary of 2,000 to 6,000 words! Things are explained to them. That doesn't happen to a child in

poverty whose parents don't have the words. They can't give what they don't have." The perception that poor language skill equals ignorance is difficult to overcome and is often internalized by a child in school.

Not knowing the hidden rules is a final obstacle facing those who "move into another culture, another situa-

tion, another economic class," Gilbert says. "The only way you even know you've broken a rule you didn't know existed is from a look you get or the way you get written off."

Lacking just a few of these 11 resources is another way to identify poverty. It takes more than money to jump out of the jar, no matter how industrious the captured grasshopper becomes.

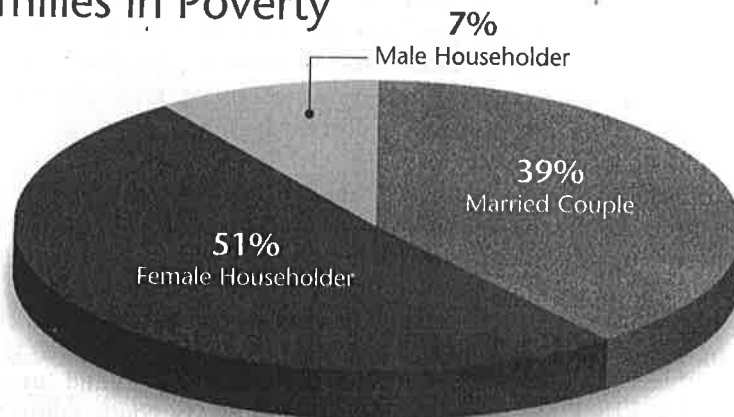
Different Faces in Different Places

As its national president, Gilbert has seen firsthand the special works that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has initiated and maintained throughout the country. Much poverty is "situational," she says, brought on by circumstances beyond individual control. When people are barely stable, a crisis can leave them with no resources to recover. She has seen a wide swath of persons struggling with poverty and offers a mix of examples that the Society of St. Vincent de Paul recognizes and addresses.

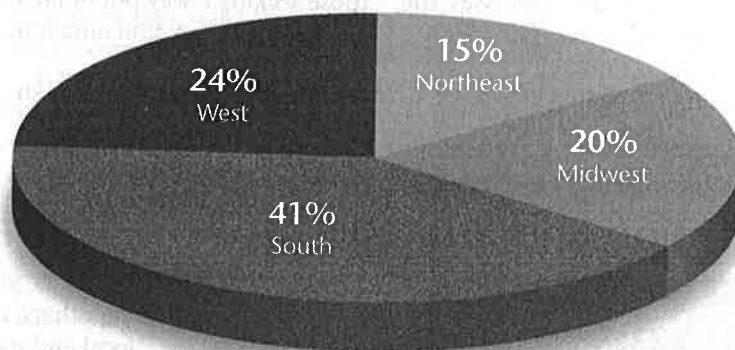
■ **Disaster Victims:** The society's Austin, Dallas, and Houston councils are working with victims of disasters. Gilbert ticks off floods, wildfires, tornadoes, and hurricanes that have plunged Oklahomans and Texans into poverty. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Gilbert explains, "is normally what we call a 'last responder.' When all the other agencies have gone home and there's still this pocket of people who weren't quite eligible for help and didn't have insurance, we walk with them and try to get them stable again." The Vincentians have assisted about 20,000 households affected by disasters in this part of the nation.

■ **Homeless Veterans:** In western Oregon, the society has mobilized the entire community of Eugene to assist the 4,500 homeless veterans in that area. Paid staff, some of whom were formerly homeless themselves, manage 1,000 units of affordable housing.

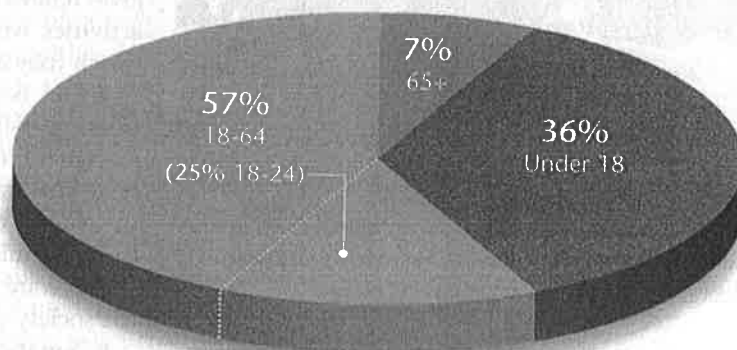
Families in Poverty



Where Are the Poor?



Age of the Poor



SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU INCOME, POVERTY, AND HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IN THE UNITED STATES: 2010

■ **Mentally Challenged Adults and/or Addicts:** In Kentucky, the local council recognized Louisville's unmet needs and provides transitional housing for persons who are mildly mentally handicapped or in recovery programs. The society also provides wraparound services, because, Gilbert explains, "you

can't just house people. You've got to help them recover."

■ **Unemployed, Shut-ins, Persons with Disabilities:** Gilbert volunteers at the society's food pantry in Indianapolis. There, she says, "we're seeing more and more people in their 50s and 60s. They've been laid off or downsized.

They have all the expenses from their former lifestyle, but no way to pay." They experience foreclosure, the ruination of their credit, even a steep rise in rental costs due to the laws of supply and demand. The society has also seen the need for Priority Monday, a day at the pantry for those who have disabilities and need extra assistance to shop. On Wednesdays, they do home deliveries for those who can't join the other 800 families who come on a typical Tuesday.

Gilbert sums up this litany of people in trouble this way: "People who are living in poverty come in all ages, all races, all sexes." She dismisses the stereotype of a "guy in his undershirt, drinking a beer, smoking a cigarette, and watching TV, pulling in a check. In

reality, it may be a single mother. It might be a family. They might be working 40 to 80 hours a week, but their combined income isn't enough to support the family."

Generational Poverty

Some people fall into poverty due to an unexpected crisis. Other people are born into it. The latter, Gilbert says, "have to have a supporting relationship in their lives. Having a social worker who gives you a plan and turns you loose and thinks you're going to do the plan is not realistic." She views Vincentians as an important piece for those seeking a way out of poverty to a better place they find unfamiliar and full of pitfalls.

Gilbert's neighbor, whom she calls

"an angel in my life," was born into poverty; Gilbert describes her early life as "just one challenge after another." She was virtually without a mother, a high school dropout, pregnant early, and eventually the mother of four daughters and living in a car. In her earlier life, "she would be lucky to go for a period of three months with nobody [in her family of origin] shot or stabbed or in some other crisis," says Gilbert.

"I have watched her struggle. It's two steps forward and, sometimes, it feels like three steps back." Gilbert describes her friend as "entrenched" in an extended family who can't quite imagine a life that isn't day-to-day, free of crises and care. She's had junk cars repossessed, electricity turned off, no money for rent, entitled unemployment

SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL Mission and Strategies



Volunteers from the St. Vincent de Paul Society distribute school supplies and food to families in Chicago.

Personal holiness is a principal reason why Vincentians serve people in poverty. They embrace works of charity as a way of serving Christ. In 2010, members visited more than 648,000 people in their homes and provided more than \$595 million in tangible and in-kind services.

The National Council of U.S. Vincentians approved a sixfold strategy in 2000. That plan includes renewed focus on spiritual formation of its

members, greater public witness to the joy of serving others, and greater collaboration with other local and national organizations that also serve people in need. "Greater solidarity with and care for people who are poor" is a significant strategy that gives renewed emphasis to their many outreach activities, works tailored to the communities in which they arise.

Service begins with a home visit, but may include housing assistance, disaster relief, job training and placement, food pantries, dining halls, clothing, help with transportation and utility bills, care for the elderly, and medical care/medicine. As St. Vincent de Paul said, "Charity is infinitely inventive."

There are many ways you can become involved in the society's efforts, including:

- **Donate:** Donations help provide direct assistance to the poor in your local communities. The society accepts many kinds of donations, including clothing, food vouchers, furniture, money, and even your old cars.

- **Join a local conference:** Many parishes have their own St. Vincent de Paul conferences that are open to volunteers. Check with yours or a neighboring parish for opportunities to become involved.

ment benefits denied, empty cupboards, and probably worse. She has worked all her adult life in a variety of jobs, but has never earned enough to lift her permanently out of poverty.

Gilbert says her valued neighbor has taught her "the reality of what it is to live in poverty." She adds, "I've been a role model for her, but I have learned and grown as much in my relationship with her as she has with me."

Making New Choices

Gilbert's neighbor wavers between the past and the future, a future they both hope will see her employed and stable. But, Gilbert says, "There are as many people falling into poverty as are coming out," so assisting one person at a time won't suffice. "The systems are pushing people into poverty and holding them there. So if a community doesn't look at the whole complex of how [it's structured] and what the impact is on the least in that community, then we're treating the symptoms and the individual when there's an epidemic for which we need a cure."

Who is responsible for this epidemic? Gilbert is unwilling to lay the blame on others. "I think we have to admit that every single person in this country has contributed to the situation we have today, some more directly than others. . . . We don't reach out and look at the larger problems."

Gilbert explains that the society is looking at larger system-wide problems now. She notes the website voiceofthepoor.org, with its link to capwiz.com. These sources inform and advocate on issues such as the 2012 Farm Bill, which includes the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs and, at the time of this interview, was threatened with a \$4 billion cut.

"What we have in this country," says Gilbert, "is the product of choices we have made. If a choice has been made, or we allowed the choice to be made, a choice can be changed. . . . When a community gets together—a



First Woman President

SHEILA GILBERT, the first woman president of the U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul, says the mid-'70s marked the beginning of women as active participants in the society. While Gilbert has been a Vincentian for 30 years, she's been working at the national level for about 20, mostly in formation. Her project for the completion of a master's degree in pastoral theology was to write a

book of spiritual reflections that was used at conference (parish) meetings of the society for about five years. National leadership has meant the neglect of her roses and her irises, her piano practice, and her systematic exercise. For now, strength training involves lifting her suitcase, while brisk walks through hotel hallways and a great many airport corridors keep her heart healthy, she hopes.

Gilbert, educated by Franciscans and a Secular Franciscan herself, has a lot of heart. "I looked at the faces in the food pantry" [where she volunteers every Tuesday she's in town]. "Suddenly, I knew this could not continue. I could see Christ there and every one of those people just crying out to me to stop this. So for the next six years, that's what I will be doing. We walk with people in their pain. And we want to walk with them out of poverty!"

parish community, a group of parishes, or a city, for instance—and begins to look at root causes, the barriers to coming out of poverty, they can begin to work together. That's business and education, social services and people in poverty. By putting together a strategy, that community can be one that's truly workable and sustainable for all its members."

The "War on Poverty" in the 1960s was largely funded by the government and focused on public-sector jobs and education oriented to employability. The society, by contrast and expansion, "is based on entire communities coming together intentionally to make choices that will allow all women and men the opportunity to live economically sustainable lives that are spiritually rich and fulfilling," Gilbert explains. Vincentians are not at war with poverty so much as in service to persons burdened by it.

Impossible? Naive? Gilbert doesn't think so. She cites Luke 1:37: "Nothing will be impossible for God." And, she adds, "Vincentians serve in hope. That is a key principle for us. We count on divine providence to lead us, and I believe that is what's happening right now." God has heard the cry of the poor, says Gilbert. She hears it, too, and is rallying Vincentians across the nation to help individuals and entire communities to take bold steps toward ending poverty. **A**

Carol Ann Morrow, retired assistant managing editor of *St. Anthony Messenger*, is a graduate of St. Mary Academy, the same Franciscan high school from which Sheila Gilbert graduated.

WEBPLUS Visit AmericanCatholic.org/WebPlus to learn more about the national society, its works, and membership opportunities.

PHOTO COURTESY SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL