

Campaigns don't address poverty

Patricia Zapor/CNS

WASHINGTON — Try typing the word "poverty" into the search functions of the Web sites for the presidential campaigns of President George W. Bush and Sen. John F. Kerry and it might seem as though it's only a problem in other, distant parts of the world.

While both candidates talk about how they intend to improve the economic situations of middle-class voters, neither so far has devoted much campaign effort to the problems of the 35 million Americans living below the poverty line.

When they mention poverty in speeches, it's usually in references to fighting poverty to prevent terrorism, or as a strategy in combating HIV/AIDS internationally.

"I'm not thrilled with either party's take on addressing poverty," said Jesuit Father Thomas Massaro, a moral theology professor at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass., and author of the 1998 book *Catholic Social Teaching and U.S. Welfare Reform*.

Although both candidates emphasize plans to improve the financial lot of the middle class, he said, "nobody's talking about upward mobility for the poorest people, about people at the bottom of the job market."

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development's Poverty USA project notes that the number of Americans living below the poverty level has increased by 3 million since 2000. That included 600,000 more people living in "severe poverty," for a total of more than 14 million people getting by on less than \$4,600 a year, half the poverty level for a one-person household.

About one of every three people in the country was poor enough for at least two months of the year to be classified as living in poverty, according to CCHD data from the Census Bureau. In 2004, the poverty level for a household of three was an income of \$15,670 a year, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

A 2001 study by Network, a Catholic social-justice lobby, found that a third of people taking advantage of soup kitchens and other charitable food programs had incomes above the federal poverty level. Of those, three-quarters were former welfare recipients who couldn't make ends meet in low-paying jobs without benefits.

"Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility," the U.S. bishops' quadrennial statement about how contemporary political is-



Jim West/CNS

Girls help harvest greens at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen's garden in Detroit July 28. The garden supplies the kitchen and low-income residents with fresh organic produce. The number of Americans who live below the poverty level has increased by 3 million since 2000, according to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

ues relate to Catholic teachings, says a fundamental measure of society "is how we care for and stand with the poor and vulnerable."

It talks about the need for a living wage and encourages reducing poverty and dependency by providing job training, child-care assistance, health care, affordable housing and other forms of aid such as the Earned Income Tax Credit. It also said U.S. agricultural policy should have the goal of "food security for all," and encourages support for food stamps, the federal nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children, and other programs.

Kerry supports raising the minimum wage from the current \$5.15 to \$7 an hour by 2007. Bush has said he fears an increase would price people out of jobs but that he might support a small increase in the minimum wage as long as states could choose to set their minimums lower.

On housing, the Bush administration has proposed turning the federal voucher program into a block grant to states, saying the change will give states flexibility they have sought. The administration's budget request for 2005 would fund the voucher program at a level \$1.6 billion below what would be needed to

cover all the vouchers currently in use, according to Network.

Kerry opposes the proposed cuts in voucher funding and other housing programs. His campaign Web site notes his support of various bills to expand housing assistance through additional vouchers for people with AIDS and to allow housing authorities to increase subsidies in markets where rents are rising.

The five-year mandate for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families expired two years ago, but Congress has been unable to approve a reauthorization bill.

Bush's proposal for reauthorization called for continuing child-care subsidies for welfare recipients at the \$2.7 billion level funded for 2003. The version of the bill pending in the Senate includes an amendment to add \$6 billion for child-care programs for parents who are leaving TANF. The administration argues additional funding is unnecessary.

The administration also supports increases in the number of hours a week TANF recipients would be required to work or be in job training, and in the number of participants required to work. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has opposed those proposals.

Kerry, who voted for the 1996 TANF law, opposed efforts in Congress to cut welfare spending by \$65 billion and has supported bills to more fully fund child-care programs for welfare participants, and to provide more job training before welfare recipients are required to leave the program.

On food programs and other low-income supports, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that Bush administration budget projections call for cuts in domestic discretionary programs including the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program, energy-assistance funds and child-care subsidies over the next five years.

Kerry has called for full funding of WIC and other discretionary programs with spending caps to ensure such expenditures do not exceed the rate of inflation. The cap would not apply to defense, education and mandatory programs such as Social Security.

Bush signed legislation to expand the child tax credit from \$600 to \$1,000 per child. The law did not, however, include single parents with income under \$6,000 a year or couples who make less than \$12,000.

Kerry has sponsored and voted for legislation to expand the credit to allow another 16 million lower-income families to participate.