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Media Relations

September 15, 2015

UNH Research: Disregarding Medical Expenses, Half as Many Elderly Mainers Would be Poor

DURHAM, N.H. – Traditional poverty measurement masks the role rising medical costs play in pushing seniors into poverty, according to new research comparing Maine seniors to those across the nation from the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire. The newer Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which accounts for these costs, reveals that more than one in 10 Maine seniors were living below the poverty line between 2009 and 2013 (2.3 percent higher than official estimates).

The new research found that medical expenses account for about half of elderly poverty in Maine and a third of elderly poverty nationwide. Without medical expenses poverty among Maine seniors would be cut in half. In addition, while poverty among seniors has declined greatly since the advent of Social Security, about half of Maine seniors (51 percent) would be poor without the benefits.

“Maine seniors, like their counterparts across the U.S., face greater economic vulnerability than indicated by the nation’s official poverty statistics,” the researchers said. “In addition to demonstrating the critical importance of Social Security for seniors, this research highlights the need for greater advocacy and policy to support seniors and a greater investment in programs to support aging adults.”

The research was conducted by Andrew Schaefer, a vulnerable families research associate at the Carsey School and doctoral candidate in sociology, and Beth Mattingly, director of research on vulnerable families at the Carsey School and a research assistant professor of sociology. The data for their research come from the 1970-2014 Annual Social and Economic Supplements (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey. Data for SPM analyses are from a pooled sample of 2010-14 (ASEC) data. Read the full report: <https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/vulnerability-of-seniors>

The Carsey School of Public Policy conducts research, leadership development, and engaged scholarship relevant to public policy. They address pressing challenges, striving for innovative, responsive, and equitable solutions at all levels of government and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

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