Why are there 47 million Americans without Health Insurance, while only 36.5 million Americans “in poverty.”

“Poverty is having to make choices between basic human needs.” This is the belief of Khalilah Collins, Executive Director of Women In Transition, a poor people’s organization that advocates for Economic Human Rights based in Louisville, Kentucky. This is not the same definition, however, that the United States Department of Health and Human Services offers. Poverty for a family of four is making less than $20,650 a year. According to the United States Census Bureau, 36.5 million Americans are living in poverty. Yet, 47 million Americans cannot afford heath insurance – a basic human need and according to Women In Transition, an Economic Human Right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drafted in 1948. The portion of this international document detailing Economic Human Rights has been approved by every country in the United Nations, except for the United States and Somalia. The declaration states in Article 25:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)

According to this definition, those extra 10 million Americans who cannot afford health insurance, yet do not fall beneath the poverty line, are not receiving their economic human rights. Are we really trying to end poverty, or just to cover it up?

What is poverty? According to the World Bank Group:

Poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is being sick and not being able to see a doctor. Poverty is not having access to school and not knowing how to read. Poverty is not having a job, is fear for the future, living one day at a time. Poverty is losing a child to illness brought about by unclean water. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom.
These two numbers show an obvious problem with the way the United States (in our example, the Census Bureau) evaluates poverty. Though an income above the poverty line is supposedly enough to support an adequate standard of living, there is a 10 million person gap between those in poverty and those without health insurance (although this is not completely a direct overlap). If poverty is “being sick and not being able to see a doctor,” then all 47 million Americans without health insurance should be included in our definition of poverty.

Though the United States government often states we are involved in a “war against poverty,” is it more likely that we are just trying to hide poverty? The number of people “in poverty” in the United States does not adequately represent those at the bottom of our social structure, those who are truly poor in our society. Is hiding the problem going to solve it?