Some 17 states showed statistically significant increases in the poverty rate, led by Louisiana, Oregon, Arizona, Georgia and Hawaii.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The U.S. economy is showing signs of finally bottoming out: Americans are on the move again after record numbers had stayed put, more young adults are leaving their parents' homes to take a chance with college or the job market, once-sharp declines in births are leveling off and poverty is slowing.

New 2011 census data being released Thursday offer glimmers of hope in an economic recovery that technically began in mid-2009. The annual survey, supplemented with unpublished government figures as of March 2012, covers a year in which unemployment fell modestly from 9.6 percent to 8.9 percent.

Not all is well. The jobless rate remains high at 8.1 percent. Home ownership dropped for a fifth straight year to 64.6 percent, the lowest in more than a decade, hurt by more stringent financing rules and a shift to renting. More Americans than ever are turning to food stamps, while residents in housing that is considered "crowded" held steady at 1 percent, tied for the highest since 2003.

Taken as a whole, however, analysts say the latest census data provide wide-ranging evidence of a stabilizing U.S. economy. Coming five years after the housing bust, such a leveling off would mark an end to the longest and most pernicious economic decline since World War II.

"We may be seeing the beginning of the American family's recovery from the Great Recession," said Andrew Cherlin, a professor of sociology and public policy at Johns Hopkins University. He pointed in particular to the upswing in mobility and to young men moving out of their parents' homes, both signs that more young adults were testing out job prospects.

"It could be the modest number of new jobs or simply the belief that the worst is over," Cherlin said.

Richard Freeman, an economist at Harvard University, said the data point to a "fragile recovery," with the economy still at risk of falling back into recession, depending in part on who is president and whether Congress averts a "fiscal cliff" of deep government spending cuts and higher taxes in January. "Given the situation in the world economy, we are doing better than many other countries," he said. "Government policies remain critical."

The census figures also show slowing growth in the foreign-born population, which increased to 40.4 million, or 13 percent of the U.S. population. Last year's immigration increase of 400,000 people was the lowest in a decade, reflecting a minimal gain of Latinos after many Mexicans already in the U.S. opted to return home. Some 11 million people are estimated to be in the U.S. illegally.

The bulk of new immigrants are now higher-skilled workers from Asian countries such as China and India, contributing to increases in the foreign-born population in California, New York, Illinois and New Jersey.

Income inequality varied widely by region. The gap between rich and poor was most evident in the District of Columbia, New York, Connecticut, Louisiana and New Mexico, where immigrant or minority groups were more numerous. By county, Berkeley in West Virginia had the biggest jump in household income inequality over the past year, a result of fast suburban growth just outside the Washington-Baltimore region, where pockets of poor residents and newly arrived, affluent commuters live side by side.

As a whole, Americans were slowly finding ways to get back on the move. About 12 percent of the nation's population, or 36.5 million, moved to a new home, up from a record low of 11.6 percent in 2011.

Among young adults 25 to 29, the most mobile age group, moves also increased to 24.6 percent from a low of 24.1 percent in the previous year. Longer-distance moves, typically for those seeking new careers in other regions of the country, rose modestly from 3.4 percent to 3.8 percent.

Less willing to rely on parents, roughly 5.6 million Americans ages 25-34, or 13.6 percent, lived with Mom and Dad, a decrease from 14.2 percent in the previous year. Young men were less likely than before to live with parents, down from 18.6 percent to 16.9 percent; young women living with parents edged higher to 10.4 percent, up from 9.7percent.

The increases in mobility coincide with modest improvements in the job market as well as increased school enrollment, especially in college and at advanced-degree levels.

Marriages dipped to a low of just 50.8 percent among adults 18 and over, compared with 57 percent in 2000. Among young adults 25-34, marriage was at 43.1 percent, also a new low, part of a longer-term cultural trend in which people are opting to marry at later ages and often cohabitate with a partner first.

Births, on the other hand, appeared to be coming back after years of steep declines. In 2011, the number of births dipped by 55,000, or 1 percent, to 4.1 million, the smallest drop since the pre-recession peak in 2008, according to Kenneth Johnson, a sociology professor and senior demographer at the University of New Hampshire. More recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also show that once-precipitous drops in births are slowing.

"There are signs that young adults have turned a corner," said Mark Mather, associate vice president at the Population Reference Bureau. "More young adults are staying in school, which will increase their potential earnings when the job market bounces back. It's going to take some time, but we should see more young adults entering the labor force, buying homes and starting

families as economic conditions improve."

While poverty slowed, food stamp use continued to climb. Roughly 14.9 million, or 13 percent of U.S. households, received food stamps, the highest level on record, meaning that 1 in 8 families was receiving the government aid. Oregon led the nation at 18.9 percent, or nearly 1 in 5, due in part to generous state provisions that expand food stamp eligibility to families making 185 percent of the poverty level - roughly $3,400 a month for a family of four. Oregon was followed by more rural or more economically hard-hit states, including Michigan, Tennessee, Maine, Kentucky and Mississippi. Wyoming had the fewest households on food stamps, at 5.9 percent.

Government programs did much to stave off higher rates of poverty. While the official poverty rate for 2011 remained stuck at 15 percent, or a record 46.2 million people, the government formula did not take into account noncash aid such as food stamps, which the Census Bureau estimates would have lifted 3.9 million people above the poverty line. If counted, that safety net would have lowered the poverty rate to 13.7 percent. And without expanded unemployment benefits, which began expiring in 2011, roughly 2.3 million people would have fallen into poverty.

Some 17 states showed statistically significant increases in the poverty rate, led by Louisiana, Oregon, Arizona, Georgia and Hawaii. Among large metropolitan areas, McAllen, Texas, led the nation in poverty, at 38 percent, followed by Fresno, Calif., El Paso, Texas, and Bakersfield, Calif. In contrast, the Washington, D.C., metro area had the lowest level of poverty, about 8 percent, followed by Bridgeport, Conn., and Ogden, Utah.

"There are signs among all these measures that the multiple downsides of the Great Recession have bottomed out, which is good news especially for young people who have seen their lives put on hold," said William H. Frey, a demographer at Brookings Institution. "There is some light at the end of the tunnel."