Poverty in Twentieth-Century America

Michael B. Katz and Mark J. Stern

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In twentieth-century America the history of poverty begins with most working people living on the edge of destitution, periodically short of food, fuel, clothing, and shelter. It ends with poverty greatly reduced, its components reshuffled. It is a story of both malleability and resilience – of poverty reworked by great economic, cultural, and political forces, and of poverty stubbornly resistant to rising affluence and productivity. It spans the time when the experience of scarcity tainted beliefs in the possibility of universal comfort and prosperity with the tinge of utopian fantasy and an era when the continued existence of material deprivation amid unparalleled abundance seemed unnecessary, indeed, a national disgrace.

The history of twentieth-century poverty is relevant to the larger story of economic and social change not only because it deals with matters so close to the bone of existence. As well, poverty's fluid quantity and composition register the great transformations in work, income, race, gender, family, and the state. Poverty is a prism refracting the great transformative experiences which constitute the century's history.

In this article, we use new estimates of poverty rates before the 1960s to examine the trajectory of poverty between the end of the Great Depression and 1990. Our first theme is variability: poverty rates among age, gender, racial, and ethnic groups and city dwellers, suburbanites, and rural residents all shifted over time. As a result, successive cohorts of Americans experienced poverty in different ways. These variations, we show, were not random. Instead, they reflected the great changes in work, family, and public policy that characterized the history of America in the twentieth century. Although poverty rates fell during the century (and rose again near its close), many Americans always remained in poverty, and they turned to both long-standing and novel strategies for survival. Among the latter, the most important was assistance from government. Contrary to one prominent line of conservative current-day policy history, poverty did not decline almost solely as a result of rising real wages. To the contrary, from the start of the great decline in poverty rates in the 1950s, government played a prominent and indispensable role. Not only conservatives read the history of poverty inaccurately, however. One prominent line of liberal analysis – the assertion that rising African-American poverty in American cities resulted largely from deindustrialization – also pushes beyond the evidence. The occupational distribution of African-Americans, and its relation to poverty rates, we argue, make the deindustrialization thesis untenable for all but a very few cities at best. In the end, however, the most important point in this article is that the historical experience of the last century shows that poverty is neither immutable nor inevitable. Rather, it is malleable – responsive not only to great macroeconomic forces but, as well, to intelligent and effective public policy.

Defining Poverty

For all its concreteness – the tenement photos of Louis Hine, the haunting images of Dorothea Lange, the pathos of the homeless huddled over steam grates - poverty is an elusive subject - its definition never clear or uncontested. In the work of many theorists it has been a relative condition demarcated by norms and expectations. Poverty, in this approach, is the inability to reach the level of living considered adequate and customary in a given time and place.[1] In late twentieth-century America, a family unable to afford a television or telephone would be considered poor – a criterion hardly relevant to definitions of poverty in much of the world. For others, poverty should be considered an absolute condition – the inability to afford the basic necessities of survival – shelter, food, and clothing.[2] The problem here is defining the basket of goods that constitutes the neccesities of survival. Should it be an income level defined in dollars – if so, what is that income and how is to be adjusted? Should it be, as others argue, a relation to the median income (less than half or forty percent is commonly proposed)?[3]

Poverty is also a slippery moral problem. It forces public authorities and private philanthropists to decide who deserves help. Which needs are legitimate? Even a very rich society cannot respond to everyone's claims. In the United States, since early in the nineteenth-century, the line, drawn partly with moral criteria, has tried with very imperfect success to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. In one form or another, this distinction has persisted and still shapes policy. Nonetheless, the

[1] Timothy Smeeding, Lee Rainwater, and Gary Burtless, "United States Poverty in a Cross-National Context," *Focus*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001):50-54.

[2] There is a large literature on the measurement and defnition of poverty. See, for instance, Patricia Ruggles, *Drawing the Line: Alternative Poverty Measures and their Implications for Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1990).

[3] Thomas Corbett, "Evaluating Welfare Reform in an Era of Transition: Are We Looking in the Wrong Direction?," *Focus*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001):1-5.

content of the categories has changed over time. In the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, upright single mothers – assumed generally to be widows – were the quintessential deserving poor; by the late twentieth-century, single mothers in need of assistance dominated images of the undeserving. These shifting ideas of social obligation and moral worth have complicated attempts to reach consensus on a definition of poverty.

In fact, in the United States, there was no official definition of poverty until the 1960s, when the necessity of measuring the impact of anti-poverty programs forced the issue. Then, the ambiguities surrounding poverty were papered over by a bureaucratic standard, which rested on the assumption that food consumed about a third of family income. Government statisticians determined the amount of a thrifty food budget for families of various sizes and multiplied by three. Below that amount lay poverty.[4] With modifications this definition – which everyone admits is unsatisfactory – has persisted. Food consumes much less than a third of most households' incomes today; the definition takes no account of in-kind income such as food stamps or subsidized housing - there are other problems as well. But politics throw up a great obstacle to revision: almost any definition that is more adequate will raise the number of people in poverty, and no government wants that.[5]

Like government officials, social scientists measuring poverty over time are forced to choose crude standards. They rely for the most part on government statistics based on the official poverty line. One difficulty, of course, is that the poverty line does not start until the 1960s – for many social scientists this is early enough; for historians it

[4] Mollie Orshansky, *The Measure of Poverty: Technical Paper I Documentation of Background Information and Rationale for Current Poverty Matrix* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1977).
[5] Christopner Jencks, "The Politics of Income Measurement," in William Alonso and Paul Starr, eds., *The Politics of Numbers* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 1987), pp. 83-131.

is too late. The U.S. census started to collect income statistics only in 1940, which, therefore, is the earliest date at which reasonably reliable numbers on which to base a national study of poverty are available. The 1940 income figures (which refer to 1939) are imperfect: they do not include the self-employed (except in a few instances), and they do not give exact amounts for unearned, non-wage or salary income. However, for the low-income population, these are not major problems. Using cost of living studies, it is possible to determine a poverty line for 1940 and 1950 roughly comparable to the government's official one for later years. [6]

Poverty in the early twentieth century

Despite the lack of official statistics, there is plenty of evidence with which to show that poverty was widespread early in the twentieth-century and to limn in its composition and causes. This evidence comes from many sources: early cost of living studies, reports of social reformers and other observers, and the case records of charitable organizations that assisted the poor, to name three important ones.[7] Social reformer

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[6] Our poverty lines for 1940 and 1950 were derived from a review of cost-of-living budget for the period compiled by Oscar Ornati during the 1960s. Oscar Ornati, *Poverty Amid Affluence* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966). Based on his analysis, Ornati calculated three poverty "bands": minimum subsistence, minimum adequacy, and minimum comfort. The last year of Ornati's time series—1960—was the first year for which the official poverty line was calculated. The Orshanky line for a family of four was between Ornati's subsistence and adequacy lines. Therefore, we used Ornati's subsistence and adequacy figures for 1940 and 1950 to estimate poverty lines for those years. We used the Orshansky matrix (based on age and gender of household head, size of family, number of children under the age of 18, and whether the family lived on a farm) to estimate thresholds for all families. We used the definitions of family in the IPUMS data set to estimate family size. Steven Ruggles and Matthew Sobek et. al. , Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 2.0, Minneapolis: Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, 1997 [htt://www.ipums.umn.edu].
Our procedure differs from that used by a number of other researchers, including Christine Ross, Sheldon Danziger, and Eugene Smolensky, "The Level and Trend of Poverty in the United States, 1939-1979," *Demography* 24:4 (November 1987):587-600. They used a simple cost-of-living adjustment to adumbrate the 1960s poverty line back several decades. This results in much higher poverty rates. For a more detailed description of our procedures, see Mark J. Stern, "Poverty and the Life-Cycle, 1940-1960," *Journal of Social History* 24:3 (Spring 1991):521-540.
[7] For an excellent review of cost of living studies, see, William B. Hartley, "Estimation of the Incidence of Poverty in the United States, 1870 to 1914," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin 1969. On the

Robert Hunter's study, *Poverty* (1904), for instance, estimated that half the population of New York City lived in absolute poverty – a number that seems neither an exaggeration nor unrepresentative of other large cities.[8] For the whole nation, a 1969 economics dissertation using Bureau of Labor Statistics studies, the manufacturing census, and other sources estimated that poverty among wage earners fell from 62 percent in 1870 to 39 percent in 1900, before rising to 44 percent in 1909. Extrapolating to the entire population, poverty decreased in the late nineteenth-century from 45 percent to 32 percent and then increased to 35 percent in the next decade. The author, William B. Hartley, attributed fluctuations in the poverty rate to business cycles and immigration. While robust growth in GNP offset the pressure on wages and incomes from immigration prior to the first decade of the twentieth-century, between 1900 and 1910, he argued, massive immigration overcame increased productivity, lowering wages and increasing poverty. Productivity gains, it should be noted, were not distributed evenly. Poverty declined less than GNP grew, indicating that a disproportionate share of rising real wealth went to industries above the poverty line.[9]

The poor, not surprisingly, were disproportionately new immigrants and African-Americans. Tellingly, according to the Immigration Commission of 1909-1910, only 38 percent of foreign-born families were supported entirely by the incomes of male household heads compared to 60 percent of the native-born. Both new immigrants and African-Americans were less likely than the native born to have worked for twelve months. But the most important point is this: in the early twentieth century the major

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general history of poverty in the twentieth-century, see James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty 1900-1980* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[8] Robert Hunter, *Poverty* (New York: MacMillan, 1904) [reprint Harper and Row, 1965], p.

poverty group consisted of full-time members of the workforce. About four of every ten workers earned poverty wages. This is what sets turn-of-the-century poverty off most sharply from the late twentieth-century when, despite the persistence of the working-poor, poverty was predominantly associated with intermittent participation in the workforce or with joblessness.[10]

The causes for widespread poverty among workers and their families are not hard to understand. Foremost among them were irregular work and low wages. Seasonal work, business cycles, and fluctuations in the labor needs of individual firms all contributed to the insecurity of manual work and the periodic unemployment that undermined working class security. Wages inadequate to support a family comfortably meant that a great many men with manual jobs could count themselves, at best, among the working poor. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries trends in prices, wages, and inequality only worsened the situation. Between 1896 and 1914, claim economic historians Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, inequality increased. An "upward drift" in inequality, they argue, accelerated "from the turn of the century up to America's entrance into World War I." Increases in the cost-of-living and declines in the wages of the working poor fueled both this inequality and poverty. Urban low-income workers experienced a 22 percent rise in their cost of living compared to only a 15 percent increase for well-paid professionals. In the same years, the real annual earnings of urban common laborers declined at a yearly rate of .25 percent.[11] Whether poverty increased on farms – and how widespread it was – remain harder to gauge and, in these

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[9] Hartley, "Estimation of the Incidence of Poverty, pp. 135-137, 144, 153-163.
[10] Hartley, "Estimation of the Incidence of Poverty," pp. 187-196.
[11] Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), pp. 131-132.

years, subject to contradictory trends. Farmers who were income-poor could grow much of the food needed to feed their families, and their deprivation assumed different, perhaps harder to see, forms. While the farm cost-of-living index rose an extraordinary 41 percent, the real wages paid on farms increased notably in relation to unskilled manufacturing wages, and the value of farm land went up as well.[12] The "inequality surge" in these years remained, therefore, more an urban event. The real story of widespread, grinding rural poverty, by contrast, begins in the 1920s and continues through the Great Depression.[13] In 1939, 60 percent of rural households – and 82 percent of farmers - remained poor.[14]

Injury, sickness, and death were other great sources of poverty in early twentieth-century America. Rates of workplace and industrial accidents, exceptionally high by world standards, translated into sudden loss of income that threw families out of the ranks of the working poor into desperate poverty and dependence on public and private charity. Illness had the same impact. With diets inadequate, living conditions unsanitary, and working conditions unhealthful, it is no surprise that sickness was a constant theme in family stories of destitution and dependence. Sickness left men unable to work and women unable to care for their children or to supplement their husbands' wages. Diseases, especially tuberculosis, swept through poor neighborhoods and devastated families. Even with free care in dispensaries and charity hospitals, the cost of sickness always strained family budgets. And when the breadwinner died, widows found themselves with no insurance, no savings, and no means of earning a wage adequate to

[12] Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "The Transformation of Northern Agriculture, 1910-1990," in Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States, vol. III*, *The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 719, Fig. 12.5.
[13] Williamson and Lindert, *American Inequality*, pp. 93, 120, 124-125, 131.

support their families. When both parents died, or were devastated by injury or sickness, orphaned children without relatives willing and able to care for them were left with only one alternative for support – institutions, the last refuge of the desperately poor. [15]

Trends in poverty

With 1940 it becomes possible to look more systematically at poverty and to plot trends over time. The census captured poverty in 1939, a year when the worst effects of the Great Depression had ended but the prosperity of wartime had not begun. Wages, which had recovered from their nadir in the mid-1930s, reached only their level of twenty years earlier.[16] Rural America, however, remained mired in depression with most farmers and their families poor. The final year of the 1930s is, thus, fortuitously, a useful point at which to begin the series of poverty statistics. For it offers the last glimpse of an era that faded forever with the war and its impact.

Given the character of work and economic trends in 1940, widespread poverty was to be expected. Only twenty percent of jobs might be classified white collar while 11 percent of workers were common laborers, the largest urban job category and a number that had not changed much for decades. As in earlier decades, both irregular work and low wages disfigured working class life. In March 1940, the reference week for the census, 11 percent of workers reported unemployment, although half had jobs in public emergency work programs. In the calendar year 1939, however, only 58 percent had worked more than 48 weeks, and many had to take jobs outside their usual occupation, an

[14] Authors' calculation.
[15] On the relation of hospital to poverty and to health care for the poor, see Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Care of Strangers: The Rise of America's Hospital System* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
[16] Lance E. Davis, et al, *American Economic Growth: An Economist's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 184-232; Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: the American Record Since 1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 524-528.

experience that in most cases occasioned downward mobility.[17] While on the average men, excluding the self-employed, averaged an income of $1,006 and women $592, manufacturing operatives, 18 percent of the workforce in 1940, earned $824 and laborers $571, at a time when the poverty threshold for a non-farm family of four was $925.[18] Although only service workers (largely women) and laborers earned on the average less than the poverty line, other blue collar incomes remained uncomfortably close, frequently falling below it. Overall, 40 percent of working households under the age of 65 earned poverty wages – a figure that rises to 54 percent with the inclusion of those over 65 and those not working. Nor were non-manual workers immune from poverty: the incomes of 12 percent of professionals, managers, and clerical workers and about one-quarter of sales workers put them below the poverty line. Within the manual working class, aside from skilled workers in industries other than construction, all occupational groups had poverty rates between 44 percent and 77 percent. The rates for female householders – who earned lower wages than men within the same occupations and clustered in low wage work – were 40 percent higher than the rates for men.

The other enduring characteristic of poverty was its relation to age. Working-class men reached their peak earning capacity in their 20s and 30s. Thereafter, their wages declined. Thus, poverty rates dropped from 55 percent for workers in their early twenties to 46 percent for those in their thirties, rising to 50 percent and 65 percent of employees in their 50s and early 60s. There were some variations by occupation within this general

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[17] Authors' calculations.

[18] Figure refers to a family with two children where the head was under 65 years of age. Authors' calculations.

pattern, which was most pronounced for manufacturing operatives among whom, undoubtedly, the strength and agility of youth were at a premium.

Families survived, or found their way out of poverty, through strategies practiced within the working class for a very long time. These were of four types: help from other family members, household extensions, informal social relations, and public benefits. Children often contributed significantly to family incomes. In all, they lifted 7 percent of families out of poverty. But this help was skewed toward older families with working-age children who boosted 14 percent of families with household heads in their 50s and 17 percent in their 60s over the poverty line. By contrast, household heads in their thirties, whose children were young, often found themselves in acute distress.[19] The increase in work among married women also helped some families escape poverty. Although only 6 percent of families left poverty as a result of women's work, in instances where women were employed, 40 percent of otherwise poor families added enough income to move above the line. Wives helped, too, by looking after boarders and relatives who added to the family income by paying rent. The practice of taking in household extensions remained common: 19 percent of households contained a relative and 10 percent at least one boarder. Although it is not possible to estimate the income these additional household members provided, it is clear that in the early twentieth century they lived most often with economically vulnerable families.[20]

[19] Child poverty has been documented in many sources. See, for example, National Center for Children in Poverty, "Young Children in Poverty Fact Sheet" (November 1997) [http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/dept/nccp/cptext.html].
[20] On women's contribution to the household economy through keeping boarders, see, for instance, Matthew Joseph Sobek, "A Century of Work: Gender Labor Force Participation, and Occupational Attainment in the United States, 1880-1990," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997, pp. 162-168.

Poor families also survived with the help of informal social relations, which are impossible to quantify. They turned to kin and friends for donations of food, clothes, small amounts of money, and temporary housing. They were sustained by credit from landlords and local grocers. They found help when sick in free dispensaries and hospitals. And they turned to the network of private charities and mutual aid societies. None of these sources of aid lifted families out of poverty. That was not their purpose – their mission, instead, was to assure survival.[21] The same can be said of the work programs of the New Deal, especially the Works Progress Administration, and Aid to Dependent Children, Old Age Assistance, and Unemployment Assistance: all introduced as part of the Economic Security Act in 1935. (Social Security had not yet started to pay benefits.) Aid to Dependent children paid benefits to about 1.2 million Americans in 1940, but the average benefit was $32 a month, or $384 a year at a time when the poverty threshold for a family of three was $1,000. Old Age Assistance helped about two million people with an average grant $240 a year, which meant that it moved a couple about half the distance toward the poverty line of $840. Unemployment Insurance paid benefits to about one million workers each week, or about five million at some point during the year. Its average benefit was $10.56 a week. A worker who exhausted his 26 weeks of benefits would have collected $275, or about one-sixth of the amount necessary to keep a family of five above the poverty line.[22] Where Unemployment Insurance made a notable difference was with relatively well-paid workers – like those in the automobile industry – periodically out of work for short periods. There was, however, one other strategy

[21] Michael B. Katz, *Improving Poor People: the Welfare State, the "Underclass," and Urban Schools as History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 144-172.
[22] Authors' calculations. The use of the male pronoun is deliberate here – unemployment insurance benefits were skewed toward employed males. For background on social insurance programs, see Michael B. Katz,

frequently used by working class families who anticipated the poverty accompanying old age: buying a house. Poor families did not own property at an appreciably lower rate than others. But ownership was sharply skewed by age: As they aged and lost earning capacity, their rate of ownership increased.[23] Clearly, they used money from their working-age children to assure that they would have a place to call home when with advancing years their incomes declined.

The great economic and social changes that accompanied and followed World War II rearranged these long standing contours of poverty. The decline in family poverty was extraordinary. At the end of the 1930s, nearly half the households in America had incomes below the poverty line; at the end of the twentieth century that number had been reduced by nearly three-quarters. This impressive achievement, however, did not happen evenly across the decades, and after the 1970s it stalled. Among all households, poverty declined at an uneven pace from 44 percent in 1939 to 13 percent in 1989: the rate dropped 27 percent in the 1940s, 36 percent in the 1950s, 29 percent in the 1960s, 20 percent in the 1970s, and not at all in the 1980s.[24]

At mid-century, poverty rates differed between town and countryside. In 1950, two-thirds of farmers lived in poverty, at a time when the highest rate among urban occupations was laborers' rate of 41 percent. Although the 1950s may have seemed prosperous compared to the previous decades, in that year one-quarter of factory

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The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), chs. 8 and 9.

[23] Michael B. Katz and Yansong Lu, "Property Ownership in the Early Twentieth Century," America at the Millennium Project, Working Paper #3, August 2001.

[24] On trends in poverty in recent decades, see Sheldon Danziger and Daniel H. Weinberg, "The Historical Record; Trends in Family Income, Inequality, and Poverty," in *Confronting Poverty: Prescriptions for Change*, ed. Sheldon Danziger, Gary D. Sandefur, and Daniel H. Weinberg (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 18-50.

operatives, 37 percent of those in service occupations, and 18 percent of craft workers lived in poverty.

By 1990 all of these rates had plummeted (although they were somewhat higher than the 1980s rates). Farmers' poverty rate had fallen to 16 percent, still high compared to other occupations, but a dramatic improvement from forty years earlier. In 1990, only service workers and laborers had poverty rates higher than 10 percent. Among all those in the labor force, poverty had fallen from 27 percent in 1950 to 7 percent four decades later.

Rising real wages, productivity growth, and declining unemployment all combined with the expansion of public benefits to reduce poverty. Earlier in the century, as we have seen, work, even full time year round work, was not always been enough to keep families out of poverty. However, between 1900 and 1990, real annual earnings in manufacturing, in 1987 dollars, rose from about $6,000 to $25,000. (Still, as late as 1969, only 6 percent of white - but 23 percent of black - householders who worked full time for a full year earned poverty incomes.) Non-farm labor productivity increased at an uneven rate, but the trajectory was upward, with productivity much higher at the century's end than at its beginning. (The annual rate of growth between 1945 and 1972 averaged 2.34 percent, higher than in either earlier or later periods.) As for steady work, in late nineteenth-century Kansas, to take one example, it took only 3.5 years for 95 percent of laborers to experience unemployment; in the late twentieth-century, it would have taken 26 years. In 1910, 32 percent of all workers in manufacturing, transportation, and mining were unemployed at some point during the year.[25] Starting in the 1950s, poverty also went down on account of public benefits – notably expansions of unemployment insurance and Social Security (topics to which we return).

For whites, the decline in poverty among workers stalled in the 1970s, a reflection of declining real wages and growing income inequality. For those who worked less than full time for a full year, the situation deteriorated while for blacks, the anti-poverty effectiveness of steady, full time work continued to increase, although at a slower pace, and many remained poor. At the century's end the working poor were a troubling reminder of stalled progress in wage growth and equality, not an oxymoron.

Despite rising real wages, if families had relied solely on the earnings of breadwinners, poverty among them would have declined much less. In 1939, only 42 percent of householders earned enough to lift their families out of poverty. Twenty years later, with increased pay and postwar prosperity, the proportion had risen to 60 percent, an increase of 18 percent. It peaked at 68 percent in 1969 and then dipped in both the 1970s and 1980s as real wages declined. By 1989, it was only 1 percentage point higher than it had been forty years earlier. In this respect, trends among men and women who headed families were roughly similar. The capacity of both to earn higher than poverty-level incomes peaked in 1969. Among men it declined in each of the next two decades. Among women it plummeted in the 1970s and then regained some ground in the 1980s. Even then, only four of ten women householders earned more than a poverty wage. Thus, without two incomes many more families would have been in poverty in late twentieth-century America. Indeed, it was the increased proportion of married women in the

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[25] Claudia Goldin, "Labor Markets in the Twentieth Century," in Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge

workforce – a stunning growth from 22 percent to 59 percent between 1950 and 1990 – that partially offset the impact of declining male wages on families.[26]

Fluctuations in poverty rates also resulted from changes in family structure. Indeed, the calculation of poverty rates by family often masks the low, sub-poverty wages of women. In 1990, women living in male-headed households had a poverty rate of 14 percent while those in female-headed houses had a poverty rate of 17 percent. In 1950, male workers' poverty rate of 27 percent exceeded that of women by only one percent. By 1990, this gap had increased—men's rate was 6.5 percent and women's 8.2 percent—not because of gender changes in relative wages, but because fewer employed females lived in families that included male workers. Between 1950 and 1990, the proportion of female headed families doubled, from 16 percent to 32 percent. [27]

The major factors that influenced poverty during the century—rising wages, the movement of women into the labor force, the increase in female headed households, and the expansion of public programs—influenced the experiences of successive generations at different points in their lives. Because poverty fell so quickly—from 43 percent in 1939 to 13 percent by 1989—most Americans through the century found themselves expecting a harsher reality than they were required to face. Teenagers who had matured during the Great Depression lived their early adulthood during the booming economy of the early postwar years. Americans who had once worried about economic security in old age enjoyed the results of the explosion of Social Security benefits after the late 1960s. Conversely, given the slow economic growth of the 1970s and 1980s, for the first

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University Press, 2000), pp. 566-567, 595.

[26] Sobek, "A Century of Work, p. 87, table 2.4.

[27] Authors' calculations.

time since the Great Depression, a generation faced gloomier economic prospects than its parents.

Poverty, nonetheless, generally fell among all cohorts at each stage of their lives. Take Americans born during the 1920s as an example. During the 1930s, as young children more than half had lived in poverty. By 1950, however, less than a quarter of them were still poor, a figure that plummeted to less than one in ten by the 1970s. Later generations also experienced similar, if less dramatic, declines in poverty. At the time of the 1960 census, for example, about a quarter of Americans born during the 1950s were poor, but in middle age their poverty rate was only slightly below that of the 1920s generation.

Historically, the elderly faced the bleakest economic prospects. Men and women born during the 1880s, to take a sharp example, endured the Depression during their prime earning years and barely shoehorned ten years of contributions to Social Security before retiring during the late 1940s and early 1950s. As a result, their poverty rates rose sharply during their 60s, peaking among 68 year olds in 1950 at 45 percent. Fortunately the expansion of Social Security payments—beginning with the 1950s amendments—improved their prospects during their later years. The prospect of rising poverty during old age remained the norm until the 1900s cohort which reached retirement age when the most dramatic expansions of Social Security occurred between 1969 and 1972.

The experience of midlife poverty also changed during the last half of the twentieth century as the impact of the “life cycle” squeeze diminished. That is, poverty had historically increased among parents in their 30s with young children. Indeed, this was the case among parents born in both the 1900s and 1910s. By contrast, those born forty years later – when real wages were higher and married women more often worked outside the home – experienced low and steady poverty during their middle years.

Despite the reductions in poverty among the elderly and middle aged, in the last half of the twentieth century poverty among children, which initially fell, rose alarmingly. Children born during the 1920s and 1930s experienced very high poverty rates followed by rapid declines during their teen years. Still, among older teens, poverty rates remained well over 40 percent for both these cohorts. By comparison, the 1950s generation did quite well; their poverty rate, never above 30 percent, had fallen to less than 20 percent by the time they reached adulthood. Generations born after 1960 experienced a different poverty trajectory. Although less than twenty percent of cohorts born in the 1960s and 1970s lived in poverty, by the time those born in the 1970s reached their teen years, poverty rates among them were actually higher than among those born in the 1950s. Even more disquieting, childhood poverty rates among the 1980s cohort were considerably higher than rates among children in the two older cohorts. As a result, American children experienced the highest poverty rates in Western industrialized democracies.[28]

Thus, poverty has always related closely related to life's stages. Earlier in the century, it appeared among families under the greatest economic strain – when parents were in their thirties with children too young to work – but it was most pervasive among the elderly, a majority of whom lived in poverty. By late in the century, this pattern reversed: the elderly were the least likely of any age group to be poor and children – nearly one of five of whom were poor – were the most likely to find themselves below the poverty line. This great shift – really a product of the post-1960 years – resulted from increased public benefits for the elderly, that is, Social Security, as well as from the spread of private pensions. It also reflected the lack of income support programs for families with children and the erosion in the value of public assistance, primarily Aid to Families with Dependent Children, whose real value dropped 51 percent between 1970 and 1996.[29]

Race, ethnicity, gender, and poverty

Not all ethnic groups experienced cohort shifts in poverty with the same intensity. Although the general pattern of change was similar, poverty has always reflected inequalities of race and the rhythms of immigration. Not surprisingly, among African-Americans poverty rates have been much higher than among whites. Although African-American poverty fell dramatically between 1939 and 1989 – from 71 percent to 29 percent – its distance from the white rate widened. In 1939, the ratio of African-American to white poverty was 176; in 1989 it was 311. The extraordinary poverty rates among African Americans in lessened with the great migration of black Americans to the North after World War II – indeed, poverty among them went down more sharply than among the population as a whole.[30] And because African Americans depended more on Social Security for old-age income than the rest of the population, the expansion in benefits proved especially important for them. Nonetheless, changes in family structure and economic stagnation among African Americans born after 1960 stalled and, in some

[28] Smeeding, Rainwater, and Burtless, "United States Poverty," p. 52.
[29] U.S. House of Representatives, *1996 Green Book*, 447-48, Table 8-15.
[30] For an optimistic account of African-American economic experience, see Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, *America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997)..

instances, reversed the “progress” of earlier generations and widened the poverty gap between blacks and whites.

Poverty among Latinos has followed a different trajectory that reflects the increased immigration of recent decades. In 1939, Latino poverty – 59 percent – was about midway between the African-American and white rates. By 1989, following the arrival of millions of poor Mexicans and others of Hispanic origin, it was only slightly lower than blacks’ and, in fact, had increased in both the 1970s and 1980s. In the same years, poverty among Asians also reflected the rhythms of immigration. Almost as high as black poverty, the 65 percent rate among the small Asian population in 1939 plummeted to 2 percent in 1969 and then, after Asian immigration resumed and the United States accepted many refugees, began to increase, reaching 18 percent in 1989, a rate twice the one for whites.

Until the late twentieth-century, most women were unable to earn their way out of poverty, and families headed by women were poor more often than ones headed by men. Although the share of households headed by women in poverty declined, the distance between them and households headed by men widened. Women’s poverty rates have been slightly higher than men’s throughout the second half of the century. In 1950, the male poverty rate was 34 percent and women’s rate was 36 percent. By 1990, as more women lived in female-headed households, the gap between the genders’ rates increased. By 1990, 12 percent of men and 15 percent of women lived in poverty.

The steep decline in poverty among female headed households – from 59 percent to 26 percent – between 1939 and 1989, a decline of 56 percent, was much less than the 83 percent drop in households headed by men. In 1939, the poverty ratio of female to male-headed households was 148; a half-century later it had increased to 371. As with African-Americans, the situation of women who headed households was paradoxical: an absolute improvement accompanied increased inequality. Comparisons among ethnic groups tell a similar story: households headed by black women always have been poor more often than those headed by women who were white or Latino. But the proportion of female-headed households in poverty among all groups fell during the half century; only the drop was greatest among whites and least among Latinos. The result was a near doubling of both the black- and Latino-white poverty ratios. In 1989, 44 percent of black and 42 percent of Latino female headed households, remained in poverty - compared to 20 percent of whites. Still, women had closed some of the gap with men: among those who earned more than poverty wages, the ratio of male to female householders declined from 272 to 170.

Poverty rates among women stubbornly resist falling as far as among men partly because women earn less and partly because the family composition of the poverty population has reversed. As late as 1960, only 11 percent of the population lived in female-headed households; by 1990 26 percent did. As a result, the proportion of all poor people who lived in female-headed households increased from 18 percent in 1950 to 53 percent in 1990. In 1939, 72 percent of households in poverty consisted of two-parent families; in 1989, a single parent headed 67 percent of households in poverty.[31] The 1960s was the decade in which this reversal occurred. Now, poverty rates register the economic hardships that confront single mothers. In 1939, 72 percent of Americans lived in a family with a male-head and a stay-at-home wife and four-in-five of these families

[31] In this analysis, male headed is used as a surrogate for 2-parent and female-headed for single-parent. These designations are not exact but they are very close to the actual situation.

had children present. By 1990, this “breadwinner” family had almost become an endangered species. Only 17 percent of Americans lived in a breadwinner family with children and another 9 percent had a working husband and a nonworking spouse without children. Forty years earlier eight people lived in breadwinner families for each person in a female-headed family with children. In 1990, female-headed families were home to slightly more people than these “traditional” families. This is why the problems of single mothers dominate current-day discussions of poverty.[32]

Poverty rates have varied geographically, as well as by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and occupation. Indeed, they have traced the shifting economic fortunes of the nation’s regions and the changing balance between city, suburb, and countryside. Earlier in the century, the South remained the most impoverished region while cities were the engines of prosperity with poverty rates lower than their suburbs and much lower than in the countryside. In 1939, central city poverty was 30 percent compared to 29 percent in the suburbs and 59 percent in rural America. By 1989, with city economies decimated and economic growth transferred to suburbs, the central city rate had dropped less than half, to 19 percent, while the suburban rate had plunged more than two-thirds to 8 percent and the rural rate had fallen below that for central cities (18 percent). The shifting central city – suburban balance in poverty rates appears even more vividly in the case of individual metropolitan regions. For instance, in 1939 the poverty rate in the city of St. Louis was 29 percent compared to 31 percent in the suburbs. Ten years later, the city poverty rate remained 25 percent, still only five percentage points higher than that of the suburbs. By 1980, however, city and suburbs had become two nations. Twenty-two

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[32] This is the demographic situation that underlies what some writers have referred to as the “feminization” of poverty. The article that introduced the phrase “feminization of poverty” is Diane Pearce, “The

percent of St. Louis's urban residents were poor compared to only 7 percent of those in the suburbs. In the same years, "sunbelt" economic growth erased much of the distinction in prosperity between North and South.

Strategies for reducing poverty

A very large number of families have always had to find ways to close the distance between the inadequate wages of their principal earners and the incomes needed to lift them out of poverty. Only their strategies have varied over time. Earlier in the century, as we have seen, they relied primarily on the wages of children and the unpaid labor of spouses who looked after boarders. With time, they exchanged the paid labor of children for that of wives, shed household extensions, and began to rely on transfer payments from government. Overall, since 1940, the sources of the reduction in poverty have been divided roughly into thirds between increased earnings of household heads, earnings of secondary workers (mainly wives), and government transfer payments.

These strategies proved necessary because a shifting but substantial fraction of household heads earned too little to keep their families out of poverty. At the peak in 1969, 68 percent of the population lived in households whose head earned more than poverty wages. Between 1970 and 1990, this proportion fell to 63 percent. The expansion of women's work, however, as we have seen, compensated for this trend. In 1970, the earnings of other family members pulled 7.5 percent of the population out of poverty; in 1990, the proportion had increased to 11.3 percent. Earnings from spouses not only compensated for the low wages of household heads; they replaced some of the

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Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work, and Welfare," *Urban and Social Change Review* 10 (1978):28-36.

income once derived from boarders and lodgers, whose share among households declined from 4.6 percent in 1950 to 1.5 percent in 1990.[33]

Conservative writers on social policy have argued that most of the reduction in poverty predated the expansion of government transfer programs, and that social welfare programs, in fact, unwittingly have made poverty worse by reducing incentives to work.[34] This common argument misreads the history of poverty and badly underestimates the importance of government by missing the dissolution of the iron link that had joined poverty to work. Before the 1950s, poverty remained largely a market phenomenon; in the 1950s, expanded government programs began to partially insulate select groups from the market. As a result, among the more fortunate, low wages – or the absence of earned income – no longer automatically meant poverty. Thus, even in the 1950s, government transfer programs played a major role in poverty reduction – a role that intensified in importance during the 1960s.Without public assistance and social insurance poverty would have been far more pervasive. Nor is there credible evidence that welfare payments intensified poverty by dampening incentives for work. In the years when welfare rolls grew most rapidly, the real value of public assistance benefits dropped steeply.[35]

In the 1950s, unemployment insurance and the expansion of Social Security benefits alleviated poverty among white families more than among blacks, because blacks often lacked the work history necessary to qualify for these programs. For similar

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[33] Authors' calculations.
[34] The most prominent account offering this interpretation is Charles Murray, *Losing Ground*: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1980).
[35] John E. Schwarz, *America's Hidden Success: A Reassessment of Twenty Years of Public Policy*(New York: Norton, 1983); Mark J. Stern, "Poverty and Family Composition Since 1940," in *The "Underclass" Debate*: *Views from History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Michael B. Katz, ed., pp. 220-253.

reasons, they also benefited men more than women. Indeed, the reference point for early American social insurance programs was the two-parent family supported by a husband/father employed in the regular labor market. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the liberalization of public assistance, the expansion of food stamps, the introduction of Supplemental Security Income, and further expansions of Social Security finally helped black as well as white families raise their incomes and began to move the benefits of the welfare state beyond the male breadwinner model. In 1979, for instance, public transfer programs reduced poverty among the partially employed from 24 percent to 17 percent and among those who did not work from 65 percent to 30 percent. The most effective public anti-poverty program has been Social Security. Increased in size and indexed for inflation, Social Security benefits in the 1970s reduced the poverty rate among elderly householders from 26 percent to 17 percent in one decade. Of the elderly at risk in 1979, two-thirds avoided poverty because of government transfer payments. Today, because of public benefits, the poverty rate among the elderly is the lowest for any age group. While reductions in welfare state benefits after the early 1970s lessened the effectiveness of public programs other than Social Security and Medicare , in the 1990s the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit resulted in a new government program that proved effective at lifting many of the working poor above the poverty line, although it did almost nothing for the nonworking poor.[36]

Reliance on income statistics as the measure of poverty has obscured the ways in which government programs have helped some groups more than others. In fact, income statistics exaggerate the similarity in the economic well-being of blacks, Latinos, and

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[36] Katz, *Price of Citizenship*, pp. 293-298; Christopher Howard, *The Hidden Welfare State: tax Expenditures and Social Policy in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 69,

whites. Many whites escaped or avoided poverty through the accumulation of assets-notably, real estate - as well as through income. In this, they received preferential help from government. Federal mortgage programs underwrote homeownership in suburbs from which blacks were excluded and denied them in the inner city neighborhoods in which they lived. In various other ways, public programs subsidized the acquisition of appreciating property assets by whites with the result that, today, there are vast differences between the wealth of blacks and whites of similar incomes. As a practical matter, this means that blacks often cannot turn to a home equity loan to tide them over temporary economic trouble or finance a comfortable old age. Lacking an economic cushion, they remain more vulnerable than whites, more prone to fall into poverty in moments of crisis.

Another misconception about the history of poverty appears often in the writing of liberal social scientists: namely, that current high rates of black poverty – especially among men - result from the chronic joblessness that has followed the deindustrialization of American cities. The model on which this argument rests fits only a minority of cities, notably Chicago and Detroit. Elsewhere, blacks did not find extensive employment in manufacturing; indeed, they were denied the best jobs in the industrial economy. Even in cities where black industrial work was common, service jobs remained the core of black urban employment. Nor did black industrial workers fare better than African-Americans who worked in other kinds of jobs – they neither earned higher wages nor worked more steadily. In a sample of fifteen representative cities, Buffalo, New York, had the highest share of black industrial workers, except for Detroit. But its black poverty rate was among the highest. Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Atlanta, and Boston, by contrast,

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had the lowest black poverty rates, and relatively few African-Americans there worked in industrial jobs. Among these cities, there was, in fact, no relation between poverty rates and the share of the African-American population in industrial work.[37]

The under-representation of blacks in manufacturing work should come as no surprise. For the third-quarter of the nineteenth century, for instance, Theodore Hershberg and his associates showed that in Philadelphia blacks lived the closest of any ethnic group to manufacturing jobs but held the fewest of them. At the turn of the century, W.E.B. DuBois, in his great study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, documented the continued absence of the city's African Americans from manufacturing work.[38] This pattern of discrimination and exclusion continued until after World War II. In 1949, in St. Louis, to take one city, 26 percent of whites and 4 percent of blacks held skilled and semi-skilled jobs. In 1949, the largest category of work among African-Americans – 30 percent – was service (barber, caterer, cook, maid) rather than industrial, and a decade later, more African-Americans still worked at service than industrial jobs. And those African-Americans who did secure industrial employment could count on neither steady work nor a living wage. In 1949 in Detroit, for example, 43 percent of African-Americans employed in industrial jobs, compared to 67 percent of whites, earned a living wage and had steady employment.

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[37] This discussion of the relations among industrial work, government employment, and African-American poverty is based on Mark J. Stern, "The Management of African-American Poverty," unpublished paper, April 1999, available from author. The correlation between manufacturing operatives as a percent of the black labor force and the black poverty rate across the fifteencities (r-quared = .22) was not significant at the .01 level.

[38] Theodore Hershberg, et.al., "A Tale of Three Cities: Blacks, Immigrants, and Opportunity in Philadelphia, 1850-1880," in *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the 19th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, Theodore Hershberg, ed., pp. 461-491; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study. New Introduction by Herbert Aptheker* (Millwood, N.Y.:Krause-Thomson, 1973; org. pub. 1899).

What correlated most directly with different rates of urban black poverty was the incorporation of African Americans into local political structures, a process that translated into government jobs and expanded welfare benefits. Politics and public service held the key to lower black poverty rates. After World War II, the great migration of blacks to Northern and Midwestern cities registered in increased political power and public jobs. This was the work that proved steadiest and paid best. In 1949, when only 32 percent of African-Americans held steady jobs that paid a living wage, 75 percent of African American white-collar government employees earned more than poverty wages. Blue-collar government jobs did not pay as well, but at least they were steady. Government employment varied by region – it was lowest in the South – and, as well, among cities in the North. And it proved the best predictor of black poverty rates. In the four cities in the sample with more than 10 percent of black household heads in government work in 1949 (Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, Washington, D.C.), black poverty rates were below 50 percent; cities with the lowest numbers of blacks in public employment (Atlanta, Detroit, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Philadelphia) had the highest rates of black poverty. In all, public employment explained more than 60 percent of the variance in black poverty rates across the fifteen cities.[39]

At the same time, county boards administered the public transfer programs that served blacks directly – the categorical programs in the Social Security Act (Old Age Assistance, Aid to Dependent Children, Aid to the Blind) and state General Assistance. Where blacks had some standing in local bureaucracies that determined eligibility and

[39] This refers to the correlation between public employees as a percent of the black labor foce (long-transformation) and the black poverty rate (log-transformation). The association is significant at the .001 level.

administered aid, they eased the access of poor African-Americans to these programs.[40] This is why the effectiveness of transfer programs in helping blacks escape poverty correlated highly with black public employment. In 1949, it was in cities with the highest levels of public employment that the most African-Americans escaped poverty because of public transfers.[41] The size of black public employment explained 33 percent of the effectiveness of a city's public assistance payments.

Although the incorporation of African-Americans into local politics in the 1960s improved their economic well-being, in the 1970s and 1980s the situation reversed. Attacks on transfer programs led to cuts in public assistance, unemployment insurance, and disability payments that reduced black family incomes. And a number of cities responded to the fiscal crises of these decades by cutting their workforces – actions that impacted African-Americans severely and disproportionately. Together, reduced public benefits and public sector layoffs pushed up the rate of black poverty. By the late 1980s, black public employment had fallen from its high of 9 percent to 7 percent. The decline registered in the economic health of black communities, where incomes from government jobs dispersed widely, sustaining many families and businesses. Because the new federalism of the 1970s and 1980s allowed localities increased discretion in the provision of services and benefits, the decrease varied throughout the nation, tightening the association of black poverty with public employment, Indeed, the correlation between the

[40] On the incorporation of African Americans into an urban political machines, see Paul Kleppner, *Chicago Divided: The Making of a Black Mayor* (DeKalb, Il: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985) and William J. Grimshaw, *Bitter Fruit: Black Politics and the Chicago Machine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[41] In 1950, we have no direct data on public transfer payments. However, variations in unearned income are largely attributable to public transfer payments. See, Richard Sterner, *The Negro's Share: A Study of Income, Consumption, Housing, and Public Assistance* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1973); Robert C. Lieberman, *Shifting the Color Line: Race and the American Welfare State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

African-American poverty rate and African-American government employment reached -.7.[43]

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The reduction of poverty was one of the great accomplishments of the twentieth century. Primarily a product of the two to three decades after World War II, poverty's reduction was a bumpy, uneven process that responded to trends in productivity, income, and the economy; and, after the early 1970s, it more or less stalled. While poverty rates dipped for all groups – whether defined by ethnicity, race, gender, or occupation – the relative differences in poverty among them by and large did not shrink. Indeed, in some instances, as with African Americans and women, they grew much larger. As a result, the social structure of poverty remained quite stable during the decades when it has been measurable – and presumably, although it cannot be quantified as exactly, over the course of the whole century. Where the demography of poverty changed – as with the extraordinary decline of poverty among the elderly, its rise among children, and the increased share of households headed by women among the poor – the process resulted from actions of the state and great shifts in the organization of families and the life course rather than from fundamental modifications in the structures of inequality.

It was the wages of married women, the impact of the welfare state, and the rewards of public employment – as much as rising wages – that reduced and reshaped poverty: married women's wages supplemented male incomes inadequate to keep families out of poverty; generous transfer payments boosted the incomes of the elderly;

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[42]Michael R. Sosin, "Legal Rights and Welfare Change, 1960-1980," in Sheldon Danziger and Daniel H. Weinberg, *Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn't* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 260-282.

miserly benefits for children kept an unforgivably large share of them poor, and some urban governments brought African-Americans into city jobs. Poverty's decline and recomposition, however, did not erase old distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor. Instead, the content of the ancient categories altered to reflect the new situation, with the most dramatic development the movement of single mothers to first place among the undeserving. The result served to reinforce the opposition to public assistance and to justify further reductions, which, in turn, increased poverty. This history shows that the demographic and cultural composition of poverty, as well as its rate, are neither immutable, inevitable, nor the natural by-product of economic processes. To be sure, they respond to the economy's success in generating wealth. But they are, as well, a product of the rules and customs through which that wealth is distributed and of the strategies that families and governments adopt to respond to the consequences.

The source for all tables and figures is: Census, Public-use microdata samples, 1950-1990.

Table 1. Mean wages by occupational group, 1940

Occupation	*Males*	*Females*	*All workers*
Professionals	1,693	1,053	1,371
Agricultural workers	325	149	316
Managers	2,260	1,181	2,181
Clerical occupations	1,283	838	1,047
Sales	1,329	540	1,111
Construction crafts	859	452	857
Other crafts	1,361	811	1,342
Manufacturing operatives	1,004	516	823
Other operatives	902	503	860
Service workers	716	314	465
Laborers	576	427	571
White-collar government	1,805	1,085	1,565
Blue-collar government	1,114	596	1,093
Other	970	476	820

Table 2. Poverty rates, by occupation, 1940-1990

Occupation	*1940*	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1990*
Professional and technical	14.1	12.1	3.9	3.1	3.7	3.0
Agriculture	78.3	63.4	45.8	22.2	16.5	16.3
Managers, proprietors	16.0	15.3	6.4	2.7	3.4	2.9
Clerical, sales	13.6	15.0	5.4	4.0	4.7	6.4
Craft	22.0	17.7	8.7	4.8	5.2	6.0
Operative	27.5	24.9	12.8	6.8	7.2	8.9
Service	44.9	37.1	26.2	14.2	12.1	13.4
Labor	54.0	41.2	25.1	12.5	10.9	12.4
Other	47.6	36.4	16.9	29.0	31.8	46.3
Total	31.8	26.7	13.5	6.7	6.5	7.3

Table 3. Index of representativeness, poverty rate by ethnicity.

	1940	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1990*
Nonhispanic black	195	238	334	345	337	344
Latino	180	192	263	251	267	264
Asian, Pacific Islander	95	133	87	117	153	162
Other	230	281	288	318	315	337
total	110	115	129	132	141	146

Nonhispanic whites=100.

	YEAR Census year					
	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Nonhispanic white	38.6	30.3	16.5	10.3	8.7	9.1
Nonhispanic black	75.4	72.0	54.9	35.7	29.2	31.3
Latino	69.6	58.1	43.2	25.9	23.1	24.0
Asian, Pacific Islander	36.8	40.3	14.3	12.0	13.2	14.8
Other	88.8	85.0	47.4	32.9	27.2	30.7
Total	42.5	34.9	21.3	13.6	12.2	13.3

Table 4. Poverty rate by gender, household heads

	Male heads	*Female heads*	*Index*
1940	36.7%	62.0%	169
1950	28.5%	55.9%	196
1960	16.4%	46.0%	280
1970	9.5%	37.4%	393
1980	7.8%	24.7%	317
1990	7.8%	23.4%	302

Table 5. Poverty rate by ethnicity, female householders

	1940	*1950*	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1990*
Nonhispanic white	58.7	51.5	41.5	33.5	19.8	18.3
Nonhispanic black	83.6	81.1	70.2	56.3	42.4	42.1
Latino	74.5	67.7	54.7	49.0	39.3	34.7
Asian, PI	37.1	20.1	41.7	31.3	24.9	21.3
Other	66.7	80.1	62.5	51.1	37.7	44.6
Total	62.0	55.9	46.0	37.4	24.7	23.4

Table 6. Proportion of population, by household type, total population and persons living below the poverty threshold, by year

Persons living in all households

	1940	***1950***	***1960***	***1970***	***1980***	***1990***
Male, working spouse, children	6.3	10.3	18.4	23.8	27.8	29.9
Male, spouse not working, children	58.2	56.9	50.2	40.2	26.7	17.3
Male, working spouse, no children	3.5	5.3	5.8	6.8	7.9	8.1
Male, spouse not working, no children	12.3	12.6	10.5	9.9	9.6	8.9
Two parent families	**80.3**	**85.1**	**84.9**	**80.7**	**72.0**	**64.2**
Male, no spouse, children	4.1	2.9	2.2	2.6	2.6	3.7
Male without spouse or children	1.9	1.5	2.0	2.8	5.1	6.4
Female, children	11.0	8.1	7.5	9.4	13.7	17.8
Female, no children	2.7	2.3	3.4	4.6	6.6	7.8
One parent families	**19.7**	**14.9**	**15.1**	**19.3**	**28.0**	**35.8**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Persons living in households below poverty line

	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Male, working spouse, children	5.3	7.7	11.3	8.4	9.5	9.9
Male, spouse not working, children	56.7	56.2	45.7	30.3	23.0	15.6
Male, working spouse, no children	1.5	2.3	2.0	1.3	1.5	1.3
Male, spouse not working, no children	10.7	10.8	10.9	10.6	6.9	5.0
Two parent families	**74.2**	**77.0**	**69.9**	**50.5**	**40.9**	**31.8**
Male, no spouse, children	4.5	3.5	2.1	3.0	3.6	5.2
Male without spouse or children	2.7	1.9	3.5	5.8	8.6	10.2
Female, children	14.4	13.6	16.5	27.4	33.1	38.3
Female, no children	4.2	3.9	8.0	13.2	13.8	14.5
One parent families	**25.8**	**23.0**	**30.1**	**49.5**	**59.1**	**68.2**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 7. Poverty rate by metropolitan status

	1940	*1950*	*1960*	*1980*	*1990*
Outside metro area	59.4%	49.3%	29.8%	15.3%	17.7%
Central city	30.0%	23.5%	17.1%	16.7%	19.0%
Suburban	28.7%	22.3%	11.5%	7.5%	7.9%
Total	42.5%	34.9%	21.3%	12.2%	13.3%

Figure 1. Poverty rate by age, males, 1940

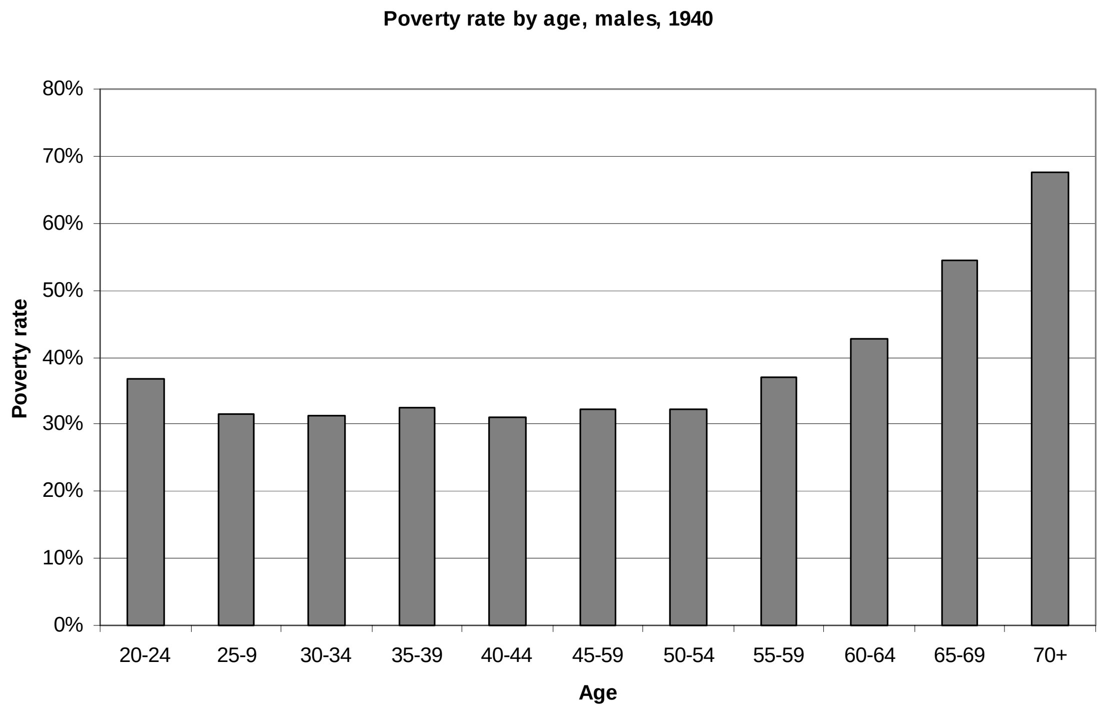


Figure 2. Poverty rate by census year, US 1939-1989

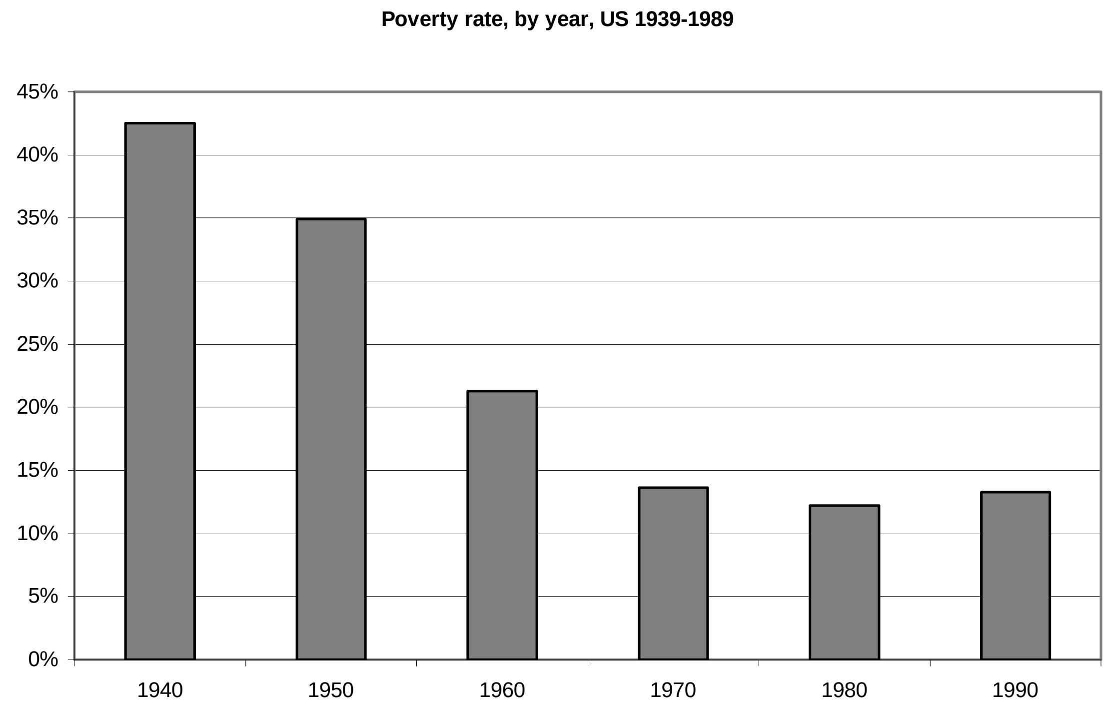


Figure 3. Percent of population living in households whose head earned more than the poverty threshold

Figure 4. Poverty rate by age, 1920 birth cohort, US

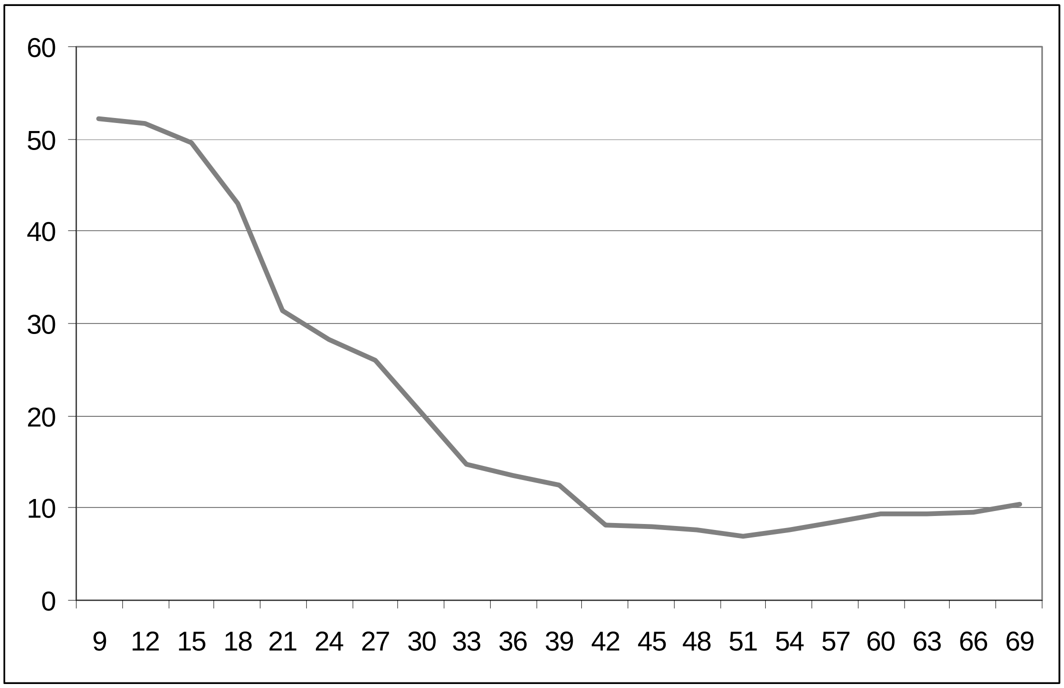


Figure 5. Elderly poverty rate by age, selected birth cohorts

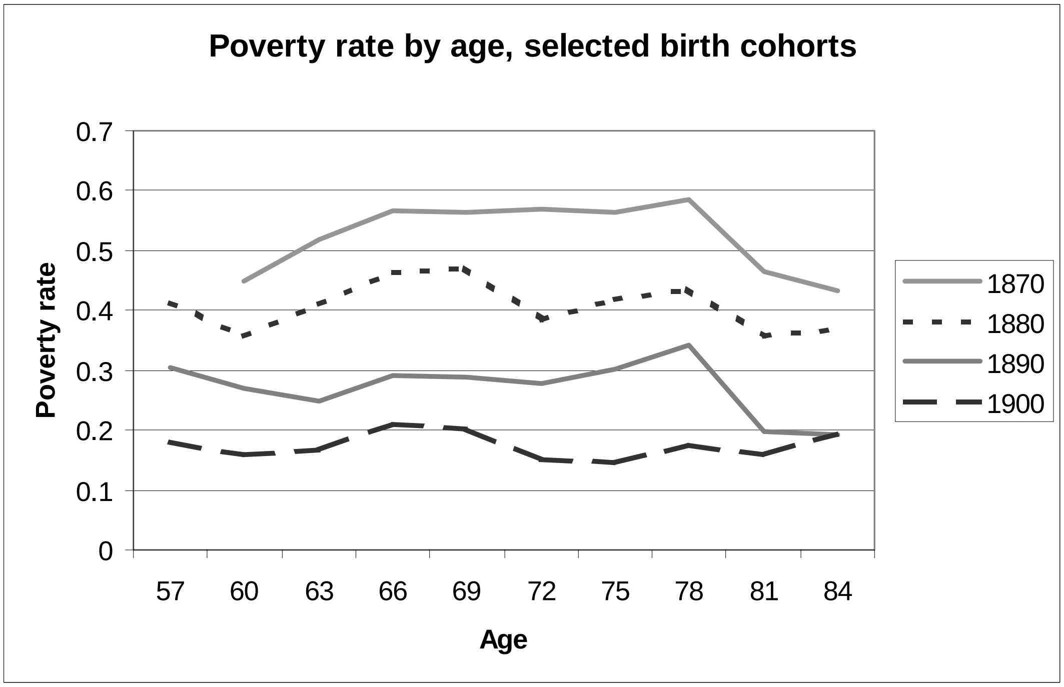


Figure 6. Midlife poverty rate by age, selected cohorts

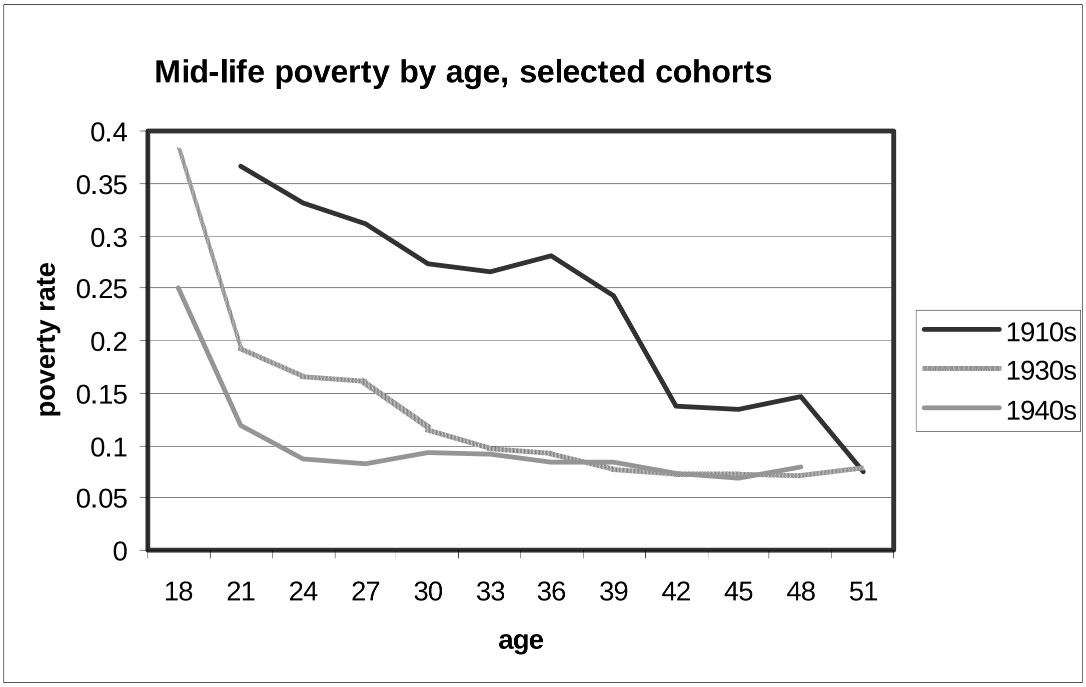


Figure 7. Child poverty rates by age, selected birth cohorts

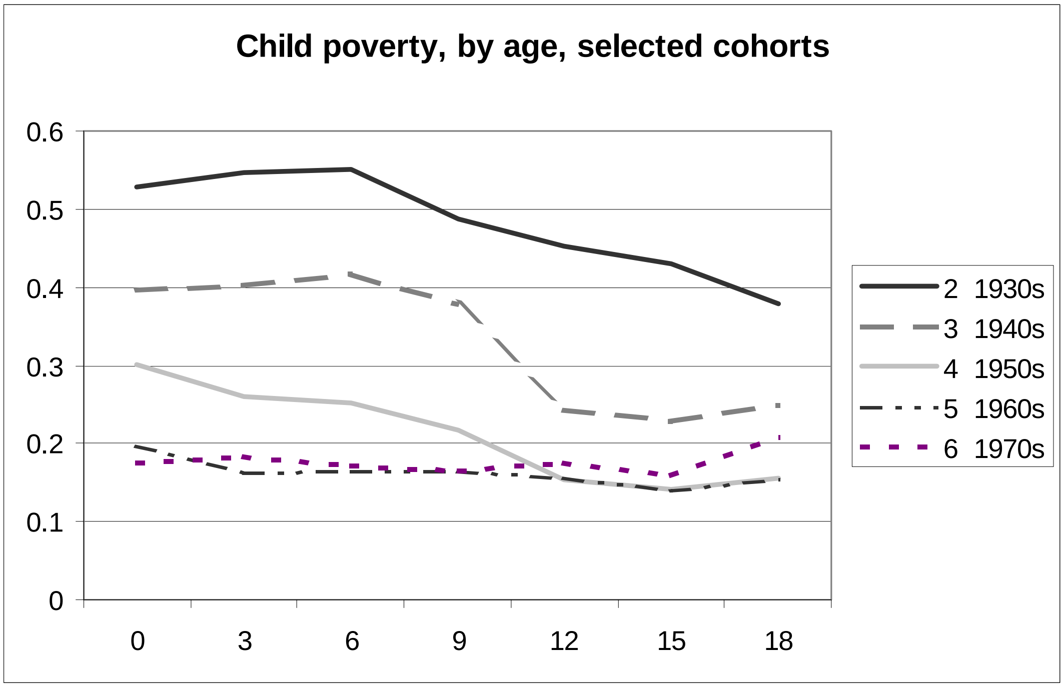


Figure 8—Distribution of poor people by household structure

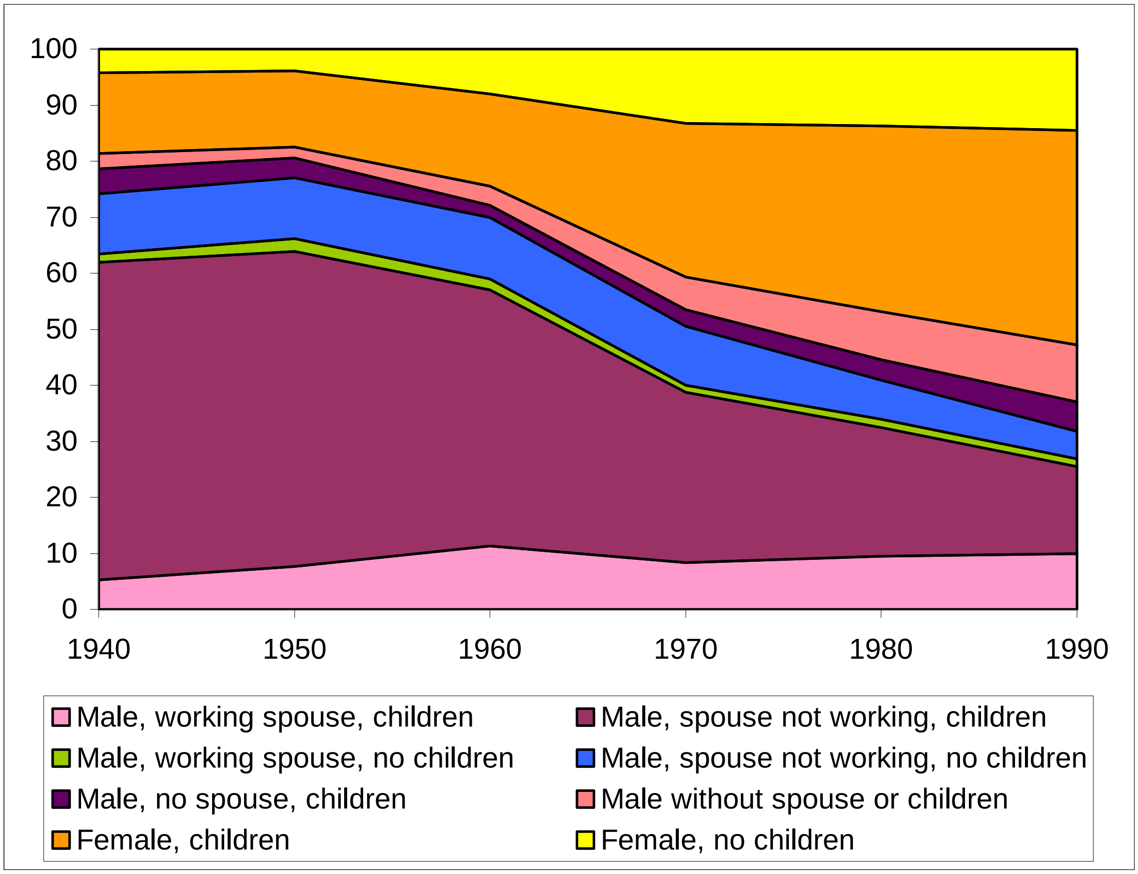


Figure 9. Percent of population that escaped poverty because of the earnings of family members other than the household head

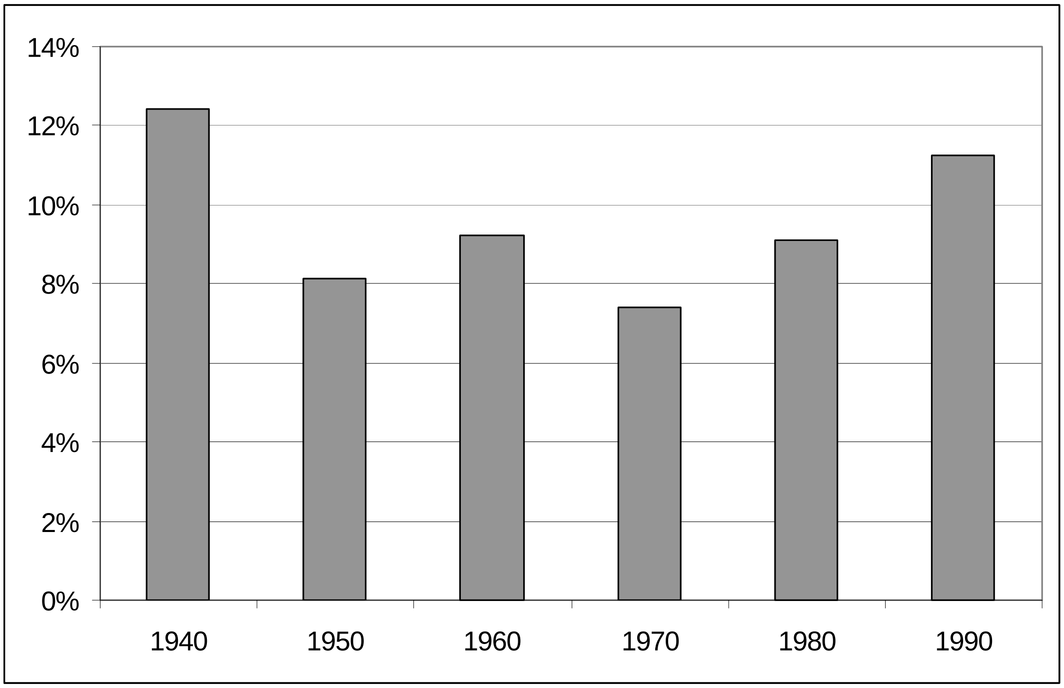


Figure 10. Proportion of the population that escaped poverty because of all unearned income and public transfer payments.

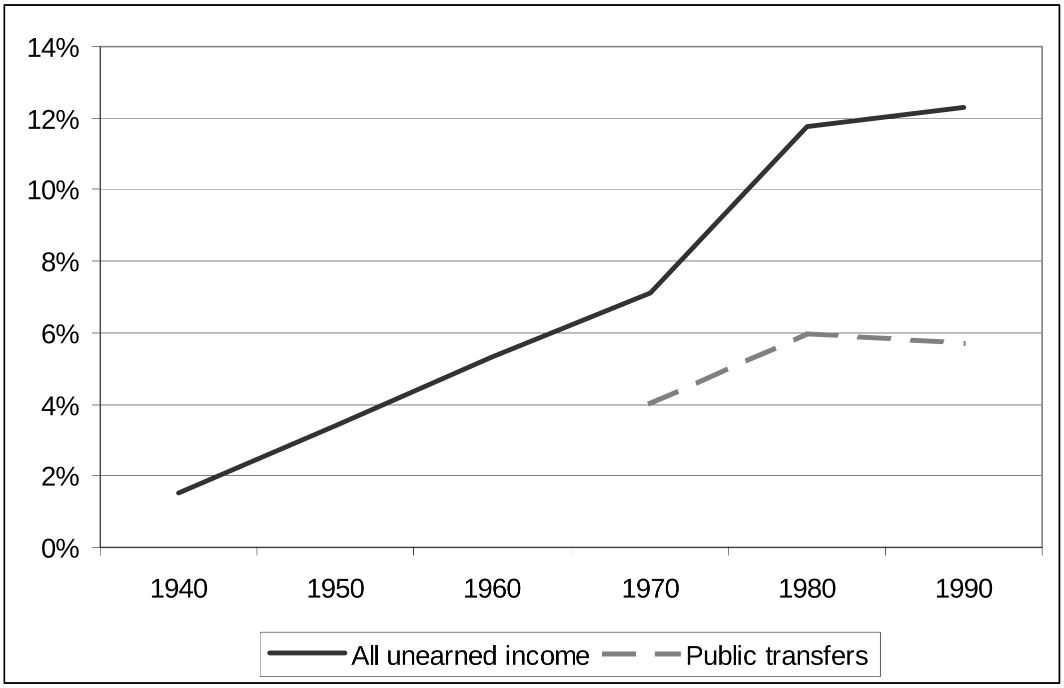
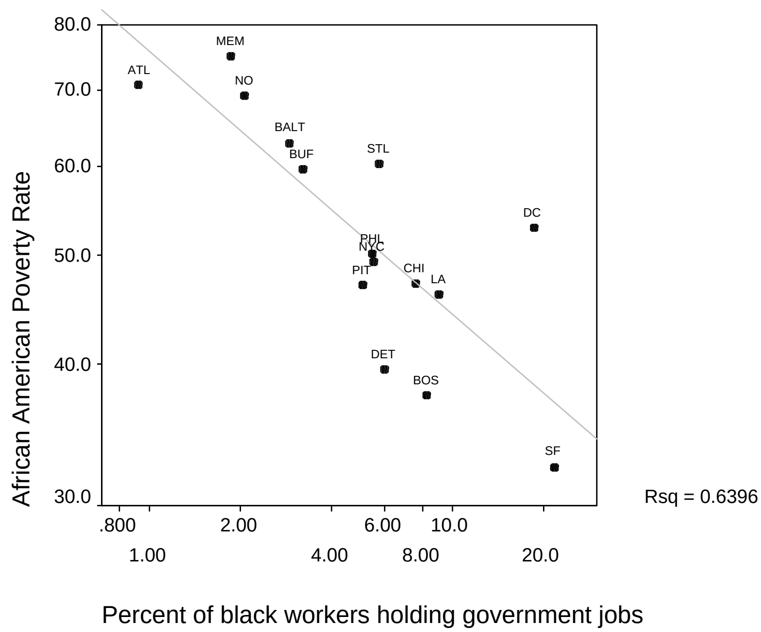
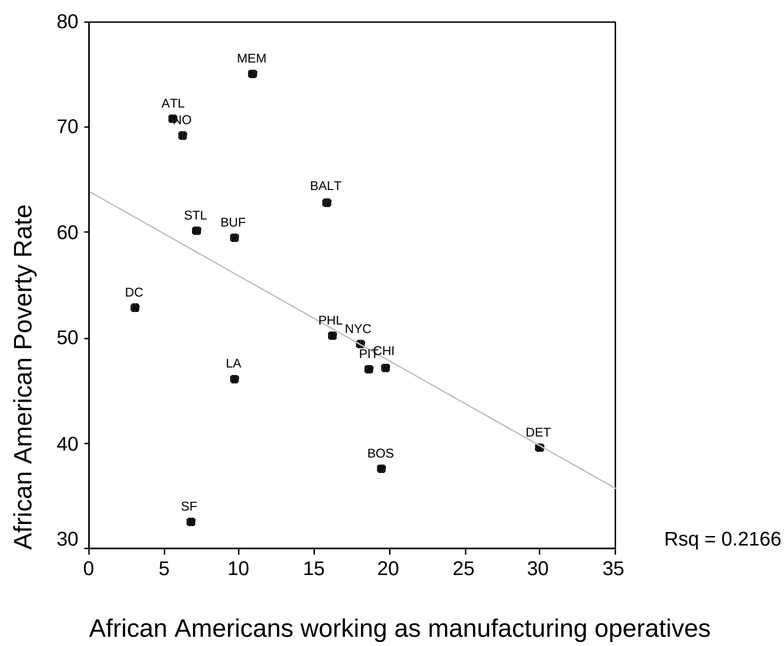


Figure 11. Correlation of proportion of African Americans who worked as government employees and manufacturing operatives with African American poverty rate, selected metropolitan areas, 1950





Key: ATL-Atlanta, BALT—Baltimore, BOS—Boston, BUF—Buffalo, CHI—Chicago, DET—Detroit, LA—Los Angeles, MEM—Memphis, NO—New Orleans, NYC—New York City, STL—St. Louis, SF—San Francisco, DC—Washington, DC