

WHAT THE POVERTY STATISTICS DON'T DO

Our numbers cannot tell us yet some of the most important things we need to learn—about the legacy of poverty—the chain of despair we suspect is transmitted hand-to-mouth so that indeed the sins of the fathers are visited on the children, even unto the third generation. They do not tell us whether it is best to change the world in which our poor live or help them conform to the one they're in. They give us little but faith to lean on in predicting lasting or side-effects of one anti-poverty program versus another. Nor can they help us know in advance whether it is best to concentrate on the adult or the child, and perhaps to find later that what advances one may hinder the other. Our impulse as technicians and as citizens is to call for more and better data. Yet the real difficulty is not that we don't have enough numbers but what we do with those we have. Much of the controversy over the statistics of poverty turns not on the poverty statistics but over the different meanings attributed to them.

It is science we cry for but in reality it is philosophy we crave, with the numbers serving only to rationalize or justify what has already been decided. This is probably as it should be, provided we are humble enough to acknowledge it and don't drape ourselves in the mantle of virtue as we proffer each our own particular brand of eternal truth. In these days of consumer awareness, however, we must all as producers label our packages complete with a list of ingredients and with instructions for use. But in our role as consumers we should follow the instructions. And if as often happens with a convenience product we prefer ways of our own to use it we ought not to cry "foul" if it then does not turn out like the picture.

We wait for the answer and work while we wait. In the meantime, our poverty statistics, weak though they be, show us where problems are even if they cannot always reveal exact dimensions. We have yet no way to define poverty to everyone's satisfaction, not even our own. But we have not yet reached the point where we cannot act for lack of the right numbers. Unlike some other calculations those relating to poverty have no intrinsic essence of their own. They exist only in order to help us make them disappear from the scene. And so if I may plagiarize from myself, remedial actions need not wait on statistical refinements. If as individuals and as a Nation we can think bold solutions and dream big dreams we may be able to wipe out the scourge of poverty even before we can agree on how to measure it.

RESEARCH AND STATISTICS NOTE

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THE POOR IN 1965 AND TRENDS, 1959-65

The five tables presented in this Note continue the series of estimates of trends in the poverty and low-income status of the population developed by the SSA. Earlier data and descriptions of the indexes can be found in a series of articles by Mollie Orshansky in the *Social Security Bulletin* for January and July 1965 and April and May 1966.

As described in detail in those articles, the SSA variable poverty and low-income indexes are based on the economy and low-cost food budgets developed by the Department of Agriculture and the general assumption that families are poor if these amounts represent more than one-third of their total income (more than 27 percent for couples and somewhat less for single persons for whom economies of scale in housing are not applicable). The poverty and low-income cut-off points are adjusted each year to reflect changes in food prices. Table 1 shows the weighted averages of income criteria for families of different size and composition that were used in estimating the incidence of poverty and low-income status in 1965.

Tables 2-5 present 1965 estimates of poverty and low-income status for households and the individuals in those households. Additional data for 1965 will be published in subsequent R&S Notes. These basic tables are made available now for others who wish to use them.