embracing characterization that can encompass all the poor. Some are poor because they cannot work; other are poor even though they do. Most of the poor receive no assistance from public programs; others remain poor because they have no resources but the limited payments provided under such programs. And public programs to help the poor are in the main geared to serve those who cannot work at all or are temporarily out of a job. The man who works for a living but is not making it will normally find no avenue of aid.

Age and poverty

In 1966, persons age 65 or older accounted for 18 percent of the 29.7 million persons counted poor, though they made up only 7 percent of the nonpoor population. This reflected the fact that, among persons age 65 or older, nearly 1 in 3 was in a household with income below the poverty line compared with only 1 in 7 persons under 65.

The heavy poverty burden of the aged results from several factors. Compared with those younger the aged have a preponderance of women, particularly women living alone. Women at all ages are likely to be poorer than men, and persons living alone are more often poor than those who are part of a family group. Fewer of the aged are in the labor force than is true for the rest of the adult population, and in our society those who do not or cannot work will almost always be poorer than those who do.

Of those in households with not enough income to come up to the poverty standard, almost two-thirds were women, but only half of the aged in nonpoor households. Moreover, of the women in the nonpoor units, 2 in 5 were living as the wife of a family head: of the aged women in poverty only 1 in 4 was sharing the income of a husband. For those aged living in another's household rather than in their own, it was usually a younger relative, and a nonpoor one at that with whom they were sharing.

Three out of 4 of the "other relatives" did not have enough money to live by themselves except in poverty, but most of these were living with a family group that did have sufficient income for the entire household to be labeled nonpoor.

Half of all the aged poor were living by themselves, the majority of them women—reflecting how little income this group has. But the status also reflected the fact that more and more people, including women, are enabled to continue maintaining a household in their old age because they now can count on some regular income, even if only an inadequate one.

In 1959, 97 percent of the men aged 65 or older and 75 percent of the women had some money of their own. By 1966 the proportion reporting some income was 99 percent for men and 83 percent for women. Over the same period the number of aged living by themselves (or with nonrelatives only) increased from 24 percent to 27 percent.

On the average, aged couples or persons living alone must get along on less than half the money income available to a young couple or single person—a difference greater than any possible differential in living requirements. The fact that for a variety of reasons, more and more aged persons are spending their last years living by themselves or just with a spouse rather than as part of a larger family group emphasizes the significance of the income disadvantage of such elderly households.