Between 1959 and 1966 the number of nonaged one-person households rose by only 6 percent, but the number of elderly men and women living alone—or with nonrelatives only—was a third greater in 1966 than in 1959. In parallel fashion, with youngsters marrying and starting their families at an earlier age than they formerly did, the number of childless couples under age 65 rose by only 2 percent in this 7-year period, whereas the number of aged couples increased by a fifth. There are thus relatively more elderly persons who must manage by themselves on their own meager resources.

The fact that aged men and women are less likely to work regularly than younger persons and that they earn less when they do work is the main reason why poverty is so much more prevalent among the aged. As a case in point, fewer than a fourth of all men 65 or older and heading a family in 1966 worked throughout the year compared with five-sixths of those under 55. Indeed, of the family men under 55, even among the poor, nearly three in five worked all year but only one in 10 of the aged heads of poor families did so. As a result, whether poor or nonpoor, male heads under 55 were able by their earnings to provide at least 70 percent of the family's total money income. Among the aged families the man's earnings represented less than 30 percent of total income among the nonpoor, and only 6 percent among the poor.

When families are matched by work experience and by sex of the head, aged families are not so much worse off than others. The poverty rate for families of all aged men is nearly triple that of younger ones, but when the family head works the year round the rate of poverty among the aged is only twice that of the others. And, indeed, when the family head does not work at all, the average aged family will do better than a corresponding younger one because social security and other public support programs are more readily available to older people. Among the families headed by men who did not work at all in 1966, 28 percent of the aged were in poverty, compared with 37 percent when the head was aged 55 to 64 and 40 percent if he was under age 55.

The poverty gap and public income support programs

The latest statistics on the aggregate dollar amount by which poor households fell short of their estimated income need are for 1965, when the total poverty roster numbered 31.9 million persons, of whom 14 million were under age 18 and 5.3 million were at least 65. At that time the SSA poverty income standards were about 4 percent lower than in 1966—to conform to the change in the estimated cost per capita of the U.S. Department of Agriculture economy food plan which serves as the core of the SSA poverty index.

In 1965 the total dollar poverty gap—the aggregate difference between required and actual income—stood at $11 billion. This figure represented an overall reduction of 20 percent since 1959, but now one-fifth of the gap represented unmet needs of families with children and headed by a woman, compared with one-sixth then. In contrast, the share of the total gap accounted for by families with children and a man at the head dropped from 37 percent in 1959 to 34 percent in 1965. A fourth of the aggregate shortfall—$4 billion—quantified the unmet income needs of the 4-million aged households in poverty.

It must be remembered that aggregate deficits as computed represent a needs-resources gap still remaining after payments of public assist-