

NBER WORKING PAPER SERIES

THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY?

Victor R. Fuchs

Working Paper No. 1934

NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH
1050 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
June 1986

Financial support for this research from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation is gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank the members of the NBER discussion group on "Work and Family" for helpful comments, and Joyce Jacobsen for conscientious research assistance. The research reported here is part of the NBER's research program in Labor Studies. Any opinions expressed are those of the author and not those of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The Feminization of Poverty?

ABSTRACT

This paper uses Census of Population and Current Population Survey data to describe and analyze the sex-incidence of poverty in 1959, 1969, 1979, and 1984 according to a fixed standard and a standard that changes with national per capita real income. The popular view that there was a large increase in the percent of adult poor who are women and that this trend has accelerated in recent years is not supported by the data. There was considerable feminization of poverty in the 1960s, but in the 1970s the sex mix of poverty was relatively constant, and between 1979 and 1984 women's share decreased. The trend in feminization was more severe for blacks than for whites, primarily as a result of disparate trends in the 1970s. Statistical decomposition of the changes shows that an increase in the proportion of women in households without men was the principal source of feminization of poverty and the principal reason why the trend was more adverse for blacks than whites.

Victor R. Fuchs
NBER
204 Junipero Serra Boulevard
Stanford, CA 94305

THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY?

Victor R. Fuchs

"Feminization" is a key word in almost all current discussions of poverty. What does it mean? Has it occurred? If so, when? What were the causes? This paper examines the sex incidence of poverty in 1959, 1969, 1979, and 1984 among all adults (18+) and also for the sub-group ages 25-64. Disparate trends for whites¹ and blacks are discussed and analyzed, and poverty rates are calculated for both a fixed standard and a standard that changes with national per capita real income. Changes in the sex mix of the poor are decomposed into the portion due to sex differences in poverty trends among particular types of households and the portion due to changes in the distribution of population across household types. The paper also considers how conclusions about "feminization" might be affected by alternative measures of income and poverty and alternative rules for income sharing within households.

Data and Methods

The data examined in this paper come from the Censuses of Population of 1960, 1970, and 1980, and the Current Population Surveys of March 1980 and March 1985. Because the samples and survey methods differ somewhat between the Current Population Survey and the Censuses, direct comparison between the 1985 Survey and earlier Census results is inappropriate. In this paper the change between the 1980 and 1985 Surveys is linked to the changes in the earlier Censuses to facilitate comparison over the whole period, 1959 to 1984.

Feminization of poverty is defined as an increase in the percentage of the adult poor who are women. An alternative definition--an increase in the probability of a woman being poor relative to the probability of a man being poor--yields very similar results.² Other definitions, such as "all persons in female-headed and single-person households"³ (regardless of sex or age) do not precisely address the question of the poverty of women relative to men. Changes in the incidence of poverty among children and the elderly are important, but analytically distinct from the issue addressed in this paper.

Income is defined as the pre-tax cash income from all sources received by members of a household in the previous year. No imputation is made for nonmarket production (such as housework or childcare), fringe benefits (such as employer-paid health insurance premiums), or noncash transfers (such as food stamps). The possible effects of these factors on sex differences in the incidence of poverty are considered subsequently.

The poverty levels for each household in each year are set according to the official Census Bureau weights that establish poverty thresholds based on the number of adults and number of children in the household.⁴ For instance, a household with two adults and two children has a poverty threshold 1.51 times that of a household with two adults, and 1.95 times a one-adult household. Once a household is identified as having total money income below the poverty threshold, all the individuals in that household are designated as being in poverty. The implicit assumption is that income is shared equally between men and women in the same household, regardless of who provides it.

In the official approach to poverty measurement, the poverty thresholds change only to reflect changes in the price level; that is, in real terms there is a "fixed standard." According to this view, poverty means failure

to attain an absolute standard of income determined by the minimum amount needed for food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities of life. This standard does not change over time.

Another view is that the poverty standard should change over time as the general standard of living of the country changes.⁵ Adam Smith seems to have had this view of poverty when he wrote "By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people even of the lowest order to be without." Thus at one level of economic development shoes may be a necessity; at a higher level, bicycles; and at still higher levels a telephone, a television set, and a refrigerator may be deemed part of a minimum standard of living.

The historical record supports the changing standard approach. Each generation has tended to redefine poverty in the light of contemporary levels of living. For instance, in the depths of the depression of the 1930s, President Roosevelt noted that one-third of the nation was "ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed." Many at the time regarded this as an exaggeration, but probably two-thirds of American families in Roosevelt's day had incomes (adjusted for price change) below the official poverty standards that were set in the early 1960s. This paper, therefore, in addition to using a fixed standard, also reports the incidence of poverty under a "changing standard" that reflects changes in real per capita income for the economy as a whole.⁶

The poverty trends are calculated for ages 25-64 as well as for 18 and over. The latter is more comprehensive but the former may be more useful for bringing sex differences in poverty into sharp focus. Income comparisons at ages under 25 are not reliable guides to lifetime levels of economic well-being because many young adults are still in school; their current income may be much lower than their average lifetime income or their current level

of living. Also, some young people choose their first full-time job partly for the experience and training it affords; therefore their nominal wage does not adequately measure their total compensation. If, for instance, there is a change in the women/men ratio of enrollment in colleges and graduate schools, money income measures at ages 18-24 may give a misleading picture of the true sex differences in economic circumstances. Money income can also be a biased measure of living standards at older ages, partly because the value of assets such as owner-occupied homes is not included. Also, non-cash benefits such as subsidized housing and medical care are very significant for many of the low-income elderly.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of women and men in poverty under the fixed and changing standard for all adults and for those ages 25-64. Under the fixed standard there was a dramatic decline in the incidence of poverty between 1959 and 1969, some additional decline between 1969 and 1979, and then a rise between 1979 and 1984. Under a changing standard, poverty rates were about the same in 1979 as in 1959 and there was a substantial increase between 1979 and 1984. As expected, the incidence of poverty is appreciably lower at ages 25-64 than for all adults, but the broad trends are similar. The percent in poverty in 1979 differs between the Census and the CPS, indicating the importance of making linked comparisons rather than comparing CPS 1984 directly with earlier Census years. The incidence of poverty among blacks is more than double the rate for all races. The broad trends for blacks are similar to those for all races, but subsequent tables will show significant racial differences regarding "feminization."

The percent of poor who are women, presented in Table 2, shows a sharp increase during the 1960s for both whites and blacks for all poverty

Table 1. Percent in poverty,^{a/} by sex, selected years 1959-84.

	Age	Poverty standard	Sex	Census			CPS	
				1959	1969	1979	1979	1984
<u>All races</u>	18+	fixed	women	21.1	14.5	12.1	12.2	13.3
			men	17.6	10.0	7.8	7.4	8.8
	18+	changing	women	21.1	20.5	22.4	23.0	26.4
			men	17.6	15.2	16.2	16.0	19.8
	25-64	fixed	women	17.8	10.9	9.6	10.0	11.8
			men	14.1	7.1	6.3	6.1	8.0
	25-64	changing	women	17.8	15.7	17.5	18.5	22.2
			men	14.1	10.9	12.7	12.7	17.2
<u>Blacks</u>	18+	fixed	women	48.3	33.3	28.5	30.2	30.8
			men	41.3	24.0	17.9	17.7	19.9
	18+	changing	women	48.3	43.2	43.6	47.2	49.5
			men	41.3	33.6	31.6	32.8	37.2
	25-64	fixed	women	45.3	30.9	24.8	26.5	28.3
			men	36.8	19.9	14.3	14.0	16.1
	25-64	changing	women	45.3	40.5	38.4	42.2	44.5
			men	36.8	28.2	26.0	26.5	31.0

^{a/}Official poverty thresholds applied to households.

NOTE: The changing standard adjusts the fixed standard to reflect changes in national real per capita income.

Table 2. Percent of poor who are women, selected years 1959-84.

Age	Poverty standard	Race	Census			CPS	
			1959	1969	1979	1979	1984
18+	fixed	all	57.3	62.5	63.6	65.3	63.5
		white	57.1	62.1	62.4	63.9	62.2
		black	58.1	63.9	67.5	70.1	68.2
	changing	all	57.3	60.9	61.2	62.1	60.5
		white	57.1	60.6	60.4	61.2	59.6
		black	58.1	62.2	64.3	66.4	64.9
25-64	fixed	all	57.8	62.9	62.6	64.4	61.8
		white	57.3	61.7	60.2	62.2	59.4
		black	59.2	66.1	69.3	72.4	70.9
	changing	all	57.8	61.4	60.1	61.5	58.7
		white	57.3	60.4	58.4	59.8	57.0
		black	59.2	64.4	65.7	68.7	66.6

measures, but the increase was larger under the fixed standard than under the changing standard. One reason for the difference is that both men and women experienced substantial gains in real income between 1959 and 1969: under a fixed standard even sex-neutral increases in the average level of income tend to raise the percent of the poor who are women.

The effect of sex-neutral changes in income on the feminization of poverty can be seen in a hypothetical example and then with calculations based on actual data. Consider first the hypothetical income distributions in Figure 1; these are, by assumption, the same except that women's income is, on average, lower than men's. Let the poverty level be initially set at P_1 . Assuming an equal number of women and men, the fraction of the poor who are women is equal to the area under the women's curve to the left of P_1 divided by the sum of that area and the area under the men's curve to the left of P_1 . Now let average income rise, i.e., let both distributions move to the right. This is equivalent to setting the poverty level somewhat lower in the distributions, e.g., at P_2 . Now the fraction of the poor who are women will be larger, even though neither the shape of the distributions nor their relationship to one another has changed. It is possible to draw distributions with very unusual shapes that do not produce this result, but empirical experiments with 1984 data confirm the results of the hypothetical example. When the poverty thresholds are allowed to vary from 1.6 to 0.6 of the fixed standard threshold in 1984, the percent of the poor who are women tends to rise the lower the threshold, even though the income distributions are unchanged.

Table 2 shows that in 1984 the feminization of poverty was much greater among blacks than whites. Some differences were present in 1959 and 1969 as well, but divergent trends in the 1970s played a major role in enlarging these differences. Between 1969 and 1979 for whites 18+ there was

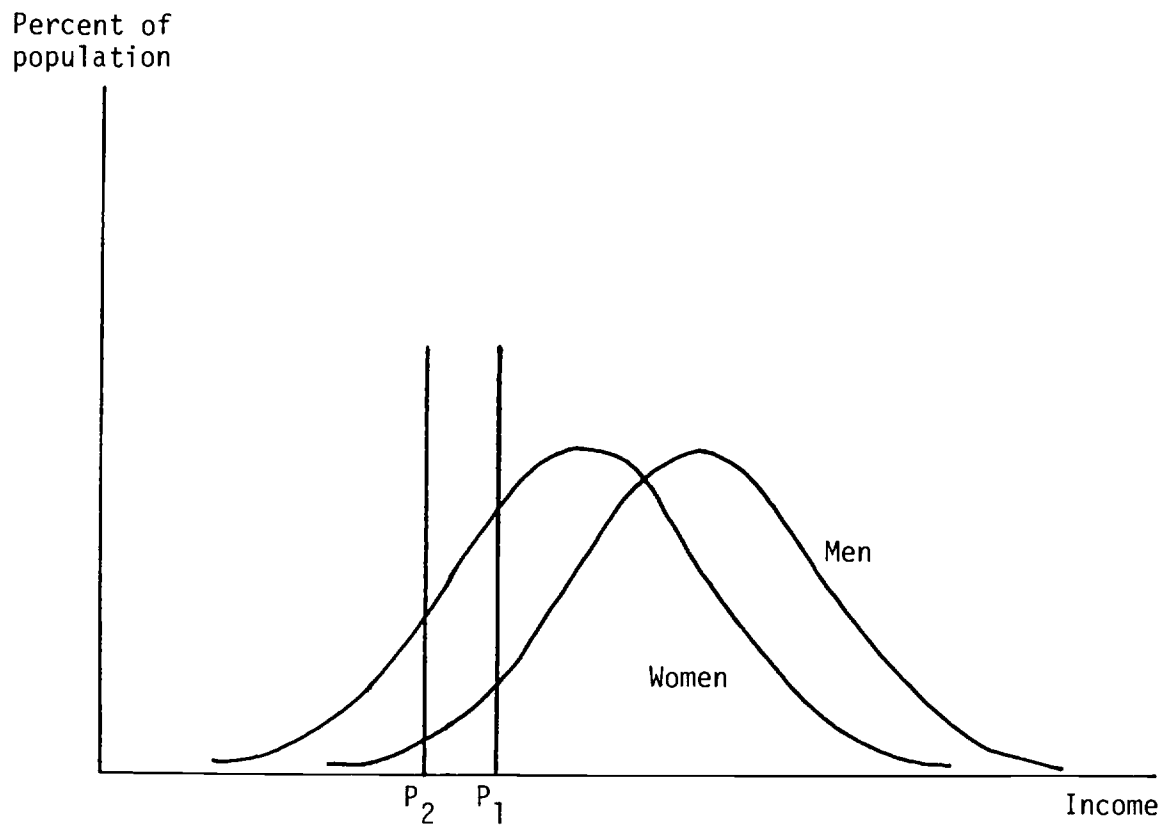


Figure 1. Hypothetical distributions of income and poverty thresholds.

virtually no change in the percent of the poor who were women, and for whites ages 25-64 the percentage actually declined. By contrast, the feminization of poverty continued for blacks, albeit not as rapidly as in the 1960s. In the most recent period, 1979-84, women's share of the poor decreased for both races, both age groups, and under both the fixed and changing standards of poverty.

Sources of Change

Why is the percentage of adult poor who are women always over 50 percent and why does the percentage change over time? The answer to both questions is to be found in the distribution of men and women by type of household and the incidence of poverty in those households. On average, men earn appreciably more money than women. However, if all men and women lived in two-sex households, the proportion of poor who are women would always be approximately one-half because the poverty measures assume equal income sharing between men and women within households. It is the presence of one-sex households and the lower income of women than men in those types of households that determines the feminization of poverty.

In Table 3 we see that 12.8 percent of white women and 23.9 percent of black women were in one-sex households in 1984. The incidence of poverty in such households is appreciably higher than in male one-sex households or in households that include adults of both sexes. Poverty rates are especially high for women in one-sex households with children. Comparable tables for all years, both age groups, and both poverty standards are available on request.

The percent of the poor who are women (X) depends on the poverty rate (R) of each sex in each type of household multiplied by the proportion of the population in each type of household (M).⁷ The change in the percent of

Table 3. Incidence of poverty and distribution of population ages 18+, fixed standard, by household type, 1984.

Type of household	Percent in poverty (R)		Percent of population (M)		Percent of poor (X)	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
<u>All races</u>						
one-sex, with kids	46.8	17.8	3.9	0.5	16.3	0.8
one-sex, no kids	21.2	12.8	9.9	6.4	19.0	7.4
two-sex, with kids	10.9	10.9	19.6	19.0	18.7	18.4
two-sex, no kids	5.3	5.4	20.1	20.6	9.5	9.9
all households	13.3	8.8	53.5	46.4	63.5	36.5
<u>White</u>						
one-sex, with kids	42.0	14.8	3.0	0.5	13.1	0.7
one-sex, no kids	19.3	11.3	9.8	6.3	19.5	7.4
two-sex, with kids	9.7	9.9	19.6	19.1	19.6	19.4
two-sex, no kids	4.7	4.7	20.6	21.0	10.0	10.3
all households	11.4	7.8	53.0	47.0	62.2	37.8
<u>Black</u>						
one-sex, with kids	57.8	39.4	12.9	0.7	28.3	1.0
one-sex, no kids	37.6	25.2	11.0	7.7	15.8	7.4
two-sex, with kids	22.6	21.9	19.1	17.8	16.4	14.9
two-sex, no kids	13.4	14.2	15.2	15.6	7.7	8.5
all households	30.8	19.9	58.2	41.8	68.3	31.7

the poor who are women (ΔX) between two years can be decomposed into the portion attributable to differential changes in the poverty rates of women and men by household type (ΔR) and the portion attributable to changes in the distribution of the adult population across types of households (ΔM). The contribution from each source can be estimated by holding constant the population distribution and allowing the poverty rates to change; alternatively the poverty rates can be held constant and the distribution of the population allowed to change.⁸ Neither approach is perfect because there may be an interaction effect between changes in poverty rates and changes in the distribution. This interaction effect is usually small, and an average of the two approaches is a reasonable way to resolve the problem.

Tables 4 and 5 present the results of such a decomposition for each period for all races and separately for whites and blacks. Several interesting conclusions emerge. First, it is clear that the feminization of poverty that occurred between 1959 and 1984 was mostly attributable to changes in the distribution of population by type of household and not to an increasing sex differential in the incidence of poverty within particular household types. Indeed, for all races the change in poverty rates alone would have reduced the percent of the poor who are women except for 18+ under a fixed standard.

Second, the feminization of poverty was much more severe among blacks than among whites. By 1984 over 68 percent of the black poor were women (age 18+, fixed standard); the comparable figure for whites was only 62.2 percent. This was primarily the result of an increase in the number of black women living in one-sex households with children. As a proportion of the total black adult population, this group increased from 5.8 percent in 1959 to 12.9 percent in 1984. There were increases for white women as well, but they were much smaller in magnitude.

Table 4. Sources of change in percent of poor who are women.

	All races			Whites	Blacks	
	1959 to 1969	1969 to 1979	1979 to 1984	1959 to 1984	1959 to 1984	
<u>18+, Fixed standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+5.2	+1.1	-1.7	+4.6	+3.6	+7.5
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+3.3	+0.8	-2.5	+1.6	+1.4	+1.7
Change in population distribution	+1.9	+0.3	+0.8	+3.0	+2.2	+5.8
<u>18+, Changing standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+3.6	+0.3	-1.6	+2.3	+1.8	+4.6
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+1.8	0.0	-2.2	-0.4	-0.4	-0.5
Change in population distribution	+1.8	+0.3	+0.6	+2.7	+2.1	+5.1
<u>25-64, Fixed standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+5.2	-0.4	-2.6	+2.2	+0.1	+8.5
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+3.6	-1.0	-3.2	-0.6	-1.8	+3.5
Change in population distribution	+1.6	+0.6	+0.5	+2.7	+1.9	+5.2
<u>25-64, Changing standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+3.7	-1.3	-2.9	-0.5	-1.7	+4.3
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+2.2	-2.0	-3.3	-3.1	-3.6	-0.7
Change in population distribution	+1.5	+0.7	+0.5	+2.7	+1.9	+5.1

NOTE: Totals may not be exactly equal because of rounding.

Table 5. Sources of change in percent of poor who are women, by race.

	1959 to 1969		1969 to 1979		1979 to 1984	
	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks
<u>18+, Fixed standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+5.0	+5.7	+0.3	+3.7	-1.7	-1.9
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+3.4	+2.5	+0.4	+1.9	-2.4	-2.7
Change in population distribution	+1.6	+3.2	-0.1	+1.8	+0.7	+0.8
<u>18+, Changing standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+3.5	+4.0	-0.1	+2.1	-1.6	-1.5
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+1.9	+1.0	-0.1	+0.6	-2.2	-2.1
Change in population distribution	+1.6	+3.0	0.0	+1.5	+0.5	+0.6
<u>25-64, Fixed standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+4.4	+6.9	-1.5	+3.1	-2.8	-1.5
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+3.2	+4.1	-1.8	+1.4	-3.2	-2.0
Change in population distribution	+1.2	+2.9	+0.3	+1.8	+0.4	+0.5
<u>25-64, Changing standard</u>						
Change in percent of poor who are women	+3.1	+5.2	-2.0	+1.3	-2.8	-2.2
Due to:						
Change in poverty rates	+2.0	+2.4	-2.4	-0.4	-3.2	-2.7
Change in population distribution	+1.2	+2.8	+0.4	+1.7	+0.3	+0.6

NOTE: Totals may not be exactly equal because of rounding.

Among whites the feminization of poverty was a phenomenon of the 1960s only. Since 1969 there has actually been a substantial decrease in the percent of the white poor that are women. This decrease is entirely attributable to changes in the poverty rates by household type; changes in the population distribution across household types were slightly unfavorable for white women. Among blacks, changes in both poverty rates and population distributions contributed to the continuing feminization of poverty in the 1970s.

Between 1979 and 1984 the percent of the poor who are women decreased for both whites and blacks as a result of changes in poverty rates; the incidence of poverty increased relatively more rapidly for men than for women. Indeed, for women in one-sex households without children the poverty rate (18+, fixed standard) actually declined from 24.1 to 21.2 percent while the comparable rate for men rose slightly from 12.5 to 12.8 percent. The poverty statistics undoubtedly reflect the differential trends for men and women in the labor market. Between 1979 and 1983 the women/men ratio of average hourly earnings jumped by an unprecedented five percentage points.⁹ Furthermore, the unemployment rate for men 20 years of age and over increased from 4.2 to 6.6 percent while the comparable rate for women rose only half as much--from 5.7 to 6.8 percent.

Changes in the percent in poverty between 1959 and 1984 by type of household are shown in Table 6. As the decomposition calculations suggested, overall, for all races, these changes were about the same for women as for men. There were, however, some sex differentials in changes depending upon type of household, age group, and poverty standard. In one-sex households without children the decreases were almost always greater (or increases smaller) for women than for men. This was particularly true among blacks: the change for black women ranged from -29.4 to -11.5 percentage points,

Table 6. Change in incidence of poverty 1959 to 1984, by sex, race, and type of household (percentage points).

	All races		Whites		Blacks	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
<u>18+, Fixed standard</u>						
One-sex, with kids	-11.0	-14.7	-8.7	-16.7	-22.2	+0.3
One-sex, no kids	-20.1	-15.0	-19.9	-15.4	-28.7	-11.5
Two-sex, with kids	-5.9	-5.8	-4.0	-3.8	-26.3	-27.1
Two-sex, no kids	-10.6	-10.4	-10.0	-10.1	-17.0	-15.2
<u>18+, Changing standard</u>						
One-sex, with kids	+7.6	-0.6	+11.2	-2.7	-6.4	+13.8
One-sex, no kids	-1.9	-1.7	-1.4	-2.4	-11.5	+3.7
Two-sex, with kids	+6.4	+6.2	+7.5	+7.5	-8.2	-10.4
Two-sex, no kids	-1.7	-1.6	-1.7	-1.7	-1.3	-0.1
<u>25-64, Fixed standard</u>						
One-sex, with kids	-13.3	-13.0	-11.2	-13.8	-22.9	+1.8
One-sex, no kids	-14.4	-7.7	-13.2	-7.2	-29.4	-10.6
Two-sex, with kids	-6.2	-5.6	-4.4	-3.8	-26.1	-27.7
Two-sex, no kids	-7.4	-5.6	-6.8	-5.0	-14.0	-12.0
<u>25-64, Changing standard</u>						
One-sex, with kids	+5.1	-0.2	+8.4	-1.9	-6.9	+21.2
One-sex, no kids	-4.1	+1.4	-3.0	+1.2	-17.8	+2.7
Two-sex, with kids	+4.9	+5.5	+6.0	+6.8	-10.5	-11.9
Two-sex, no kids	-1.3	+0.7	-1.1	+0.9	-2.7	+0.1

NOTE: The 1979-84 change in the CPS is linked to the 1959-79 change in the Census data.

depending upon age group and poverty standard while the range for black men was from -11.5 to +3.7 percentage points. Black women in one-sex households with children also showed significant gains relative to black men in similar circumstances, but the latter group is very small. Unlike the blacks, white women in one-sex households with children did not fare particularly well in comparison with their male counterparts.

Alternative Measures

The feminization of poverty measures presented in this paper are derived from a particular definition of income and a particular set of poverty thresholds. It is of some interest to speculate as to how the measures might differ if alternative definitions and thresholds were used.

The use of pre-tax rather than after-tax income is probably of little consequence because neither women nor men in poverty pay much income tax. Similarly, failure to include an imputation for fringe benefits is probably not important because these benefits are likely to be small for the poverty population, and are usually approximately equal for men and women as a percent of labor income.

The omission of noncash transfers is probably more significant, especially for the 18+ category; most of these transfers go to households headed by persons under 25 or over 64. As a percent of cash income, these transfers are probably more important for women than men; thus their inclusion would tend to lower the percent of the poor who are women, especially in 1969 and 1979. These transfers were relatively small in 1959.

Probably the most serious shortcoming of cash income as a measure of economic well-being is that it neglects the value of goods and services produced in the home. For all households (poor and nonpoor), the value of home production has been estimated at about one-half of money income.¹⁰ The

proportion is probably higher than that in low income households and probably highest of all in female one-sex households. Thus, inclusion of home production in the definition of income would tend to lower the percent of the poor who are women. Among whites, however, the reduction would be largest in 1959 and would get smaller over time as more women in one-sex households entered the labor force.

Taking the four possible modifications of the income measure together-- taxes, fringe benefits, noncash transfers, and home production--it seems that the level of the percent poor who are women would probably be lower than the figures presented in this paper. The trends in this statistic, however, would probably not be much affected because of the offsetting trends in noncash transfers and home production.

The official poverty thresholds used in this paper were established by Mollie Orshansky on the basis of food cost estimates for families with different numbers of adults and children.¹¹ Some arbitrary choices were made, including the important one that the poverty threshold for a one-person household should be approximately 80 percent of the threshold for a two-person household. Research by other investigators on adult equivalent scales has produced a wide range of answers to the question of how income needs vary depending upon the number of adults and children in a household.¹² Because there is no consensus concerning the "correct scale," it is useful to ask how the conclusions about the feminization of poverty might be affected if different relative poverty thresholds were used. Two alternative weighting schemes were tried. In one the economies of scale were assumed to be similar to the official weights but adults were assumed to require twice the income of children. The other scheme assumed equal needs for children and adults and no economies of scale. Under either alternative,

the percent of poor who are women is lower than when the official thresholds are used, but the trends in the feminization of poverty are virtually identical for all three weighting schemes.

One other possible modification of the conclusions of this paper arises from consideration of the rule for income sharing within households. When two or more adults are in the same household, the effective income of each will depend in part on how their combined income is shared. The official poverty statistics implicitly assume that income is shared equally regardless of who provides it, and this assumption has been followed in this paper. It is supported by casual observation that members of the same household usually consume similar amounts of housing, food, clothing, and other goods and services, even when their contributions to total income are unequal.

The equal sharing assumption does present problems for economic analysis, however, because it implies that when women in two-sex households increase their contribution to household income there is no effect on their relative economic well-being. The economic perspective suggests that the person who provides the income might have more control over its disposition. In sharp contrast to equal sharing, one could assume that income is shared among adults in proportion to their contribution to household income. Equal sharing and proportionate sharing are not the only possible assumptions, but most others produce results that are intermediate between these two polar cases.

If there were proportionate sharing, the percent of the poor who are women would be much higher than under equal sharing. There would, however, be a sharp downward trend in the percentage over time because women's money income has been rising much more rapidly than men's throughout the period. Between 1959 and 1979 it rose primarily because women's employment rate was

increasing while men's was decreasing. Between 1979 and 1984 the divergent employment trends continued; in addition, there was a substantial increase in the women/men ratio of hourly earnings.

Summary

This investigation of the feminization of poverty between 1959 and 1984 has yielded some striking conclusions regarding timing, magnitude, and causation. There was a substantial increase in the percentage of the poor who are women--but it occurred in the 1960s, not in the 1970s or 1980s as is often alleged. On the contrary, between 1969 and 1979 the percentage held relatively constant, and then decreased between 1979 and 1984. Over the entire span 1959-84, the change for whites ranged from +3.6 percentage points (ages 18+, fixed standard of poverty) to -1.7 percentage points (ages 25-64, changing standard of poverty).

The trend in feminization was more severe for blacks than for whites, with the percent of black poor who were women continuing to increase in the 1970s, albeit not as rapidly as in the 1960s. For the entire 25-year period the change for blacks ranged from +8.5 percentage points (ages 25-64, fixed standard) to +4.3 percentage points (ages 25-64, changing standard).

With respect to causation, the feminization of poverty that did occur was not the result of worsening labor market conditions for women in comparison with men. Part of the feminization was a statistical artifact: under a fixed standard the percent of women who are poor rises when income rises (i.e., when the poverty threshold falls to a lower point on the income distribution). Substantively, the increase in the proportion of women in one-sex households was the principal source of feminization of poverty and a major reason why the trend was more adverse for blacks than whites.

Overall, the trends in poverty rates by type of household were not better for men than for women, and between 1979 and 1984 they were distinctly worse. This was the result of relatively favorable labor market developments for women--a sharp rise in the women/men ratio of hourly earnings and a smaller increase in unemployment for women than for men.

FOOTNOTES

1. Includes all races except blacks.
2. The ratio of the probabilities of poverty is an arithmetical transformation of women's share of poverty if the sex distribution of the population is equal.
3. See Mary Jo Bane, "Household Composition and Poverty," in S. H. Danziger and D. H. Weinberg, eds., Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn't (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 209-231.
4. The official poverty statistics are actually based on families rather than households, but given the marked changes in the legal status of adults who share the same household it seems more appropriate to use a household approach throughout the period.
5. See Victor R. Fuchs, "Redefining Poverty and Redistributing Income," The Public Interest, No. 8 (Summer), 1967, pp. 88-95.
6. To calculate the poverty threshold under the changing standard, the fixed standard thresholds (already adjusted for price change) for any given household are multiplied by the following factors: 1959 = 1.00, 1969 = 1.31, 1979 = 1.54, and 1984 = 1.62.
7. That is,

$$X = \frac{\sum_h R_{wh} M_{wh}}{\sum_h R_{wh} M_{wh} + \sum_h R_{mh} M_{mh}} \cdot 100,$$

where subscripts w and m indicate women and men, and h indicates household type.

8. The change in X between period 1 and period 2, $(X^2 - X^1)$ equals

$$\left[\frac{\sum_h R_{wh}^2 M_{wh}^2}{\sum_h R_{wh}^2 M_{wh}^2 + \sum_h R_{mh}^2 M_{mh}^2} - \frac{\sum_h R_{wh}^1 M_{wh}^1}{\sum_h R_{wh}^2 M_{wh}^2 + \sum_h R_{mh}^2 M_{mh}^2} \right] \cdot 100.$$

The portion due to changes in poverty rates is given by:

$$(A) \left[\frac{\sum_h R_{wh}^2 M_{wh}^1}{\sum_h R_{wh}^2 M_{wh}^1 + \sum_h R_{mh}^2 M_{mh}^1} - X^1 \right] \cdot 100$$

or

$$(B) X^2 - \left[\frac{\sum_h R_{wh}^1 M_{wh}^2}{\sum_h R_{wh}^1 M_{wh}^2 + \sum_h R_{mh}^1 M_{mh}^2} \right] \cdot 100.$$

This paper uses the mean of the two methods. The difference between X and this mean equals the portion due to changes in the distribution of the population across household types.

9. See Victor R. Fuchs, "Sex Differences in Economic Well-Being," Science, Vol. 232, 25 April 1986, pp. 459-464.

10. Ibid., Table 1.

11. See Mollie Orshansky, "Counting the Poor: Another Look at the Poverty Profile," Social Security Bulletin, January 1965.

12. See R. A. Pollock and T. J. Wales, "Welfare Comparisons and Equivalence Scales," American Economic Review 69: 2, 1979; also Terry R. Johnson and John H. Pencavel, "Welfare Payments and Family Composition," in P. K. Robins, R. G. Spiegelman, S. Weiner, and J. G. Bell, eds., A Guaranteed Annual Income: Evidence from a Social Experiment (New York, Academic Press, 1980), pp. 223-240.