DISCUSSION

Sar A. Levitan
Center for Manpower Policy Studies, The George Washington University

Since this is a meeting of the American Statistical Association, it appears proper to discuss the papers in order of the authors' reliance on quantification. This arrangement also permits me to organize my comments in the proper order, ladies first.

Dr. Ida Merriam has established some kind of a record for an American Statistical Association session. There isn't a single number in her paper. She deals rather, with the broad concepts underlying social indicators. These measurements have vital social implications. Time permits comment only on one of her recommendations.

Few would quarrel with Dr. Merriam's observation that poverty indices need continued review and updating to reflect changes in costs of living as well as economic growth and productivity. Nonetheless, I find her proposal to raise the poverty indices developed by Mollie Orshansky and adapted as the "official" government measure denoting poverty disturbing. My objections stem from tactical and operational considerations. Rarely have a series of social indicators, as those developed by the Social Security Administration dealing with poverty, been as rapidly and widely accepted. The present data denoting poverty are based on cost of living measurements in 1959 and have been adjusted for increases in the CPI. Dr. Merriam's proposal would add increased productivity as a factor for adjustment in poverty income criteria and would raise the current income level denoting poverty by some 30 percent depending, of course, on the rate of productivity that would be used.

Strong pressures have already been exerted to raise poverty income criteria and to qualify more persons for participation in antipoverty programs. Thus far the antipoverty warriors have largely succeeded in withstanding these pressures and in restricting the limited resources allocated to these efforts to the 30 million who are now classified as poor. Raising the income criteria would qualify additional millions for these programs, limiting and possibly excluding large numbers of the "hard core" poor. Our social legislation is replete with measures which have been intended to help the poor but have benefited the more affluent. Raising the poverty income criteria would repeat this age old trend.

Aside from this very real operational problem, it also appears to me that it would be tactically wrong to confuse the public at present with a new set of criteria denoting poverty. Using two separate indices would also add to the confusion and to the pressures to qualify more persons for the antipoverty program.

If American Statistical Association papers are ever read, then Professor Stanley Lebergott's discerning paper should provide sufficient subject to dozens of new dissertations and monographs. It seems to me, however, that Lebergott takes his numbers too seriously. In reading his paper, it would be well to remember Henry Clay's admonition--I mean the economist, not the statesman--that "statistics are no substitute for judgment."

I am therefore not as disturbed as Professor Lebergott by the fact that labor force participation of 14 and 15 year-olds has not changed between 1920 and 1960. Assuming that the numbers are right, it is likely that "labor force participation" in 1920 was not the same as it was in 1960. In 1920 a farm boy "participating" in the labor force may have worked from sun-up to sundown. Forty years later the teen-age son of this same farmer was more likely to live in a city and his "participation" in the labor force may have been limited to a few hours of mowing lawns.

I find it more difficult to deal with Lebergott's findings that throughout this century, male family heads have earned 80 percent of family income. My difficulty comes from the fact that Lebergott challanges philosophers or moralists to explain this phenomenon. Being neither a philosopher nor a moralist, I would just suggest the possibility that if the data are correct, the results may be due to a statistical fluke, and leave it at that.

In the final part of his paper, Professor Lebergott treads new ground and raises some interesting questions about the rise of a supervisor "class" which he attributes to the increasing size of business units. He divides manufacturing employment into three groups: self-employed, foremen and employees. Ignoring the first group, he finds that the number of foremen per one hundred employees increased from 2.4 in 1910 to 4.2 in 1960. However, if Lebergott had included self-employed with foremen--both perform supervisory work--

then the trend in the rise of foremen which he stresses would not hold true. In 1910 there were 9.3 self-employed and foremen per 100 employees and in 1960 the proportion of self-employed and foremen to employees declined to 6.4 per hundred.

Professor Otis Dudley Duncan's paper is an elegant illustration of the manipulation of statistics and an attempt to quantify complex social phenomena. It is definitely an "in" paper--all numerology with a regression coefficient as a solution to all problems. The technique is skillful but it is not at all clear whether the results have any relation to reality.