

DISCUSSION

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Any operational definition of poverty, whether it is based on income or some other variable, should fulfill, as nearly as possible, four requirements: (1) It should divide the population in such a way that all of those who are classified as in poverty are in worse condition, somehow defined, than all of those who are not so classified. (2) It should divide the population in such a way that those who are classified as in poverty are not only relatively deprived but severely deprived. The word poverty implies a serious situation. (3) It should be invariant over time. (4) It should reflect the underlying problems which have occasioned the definition. For convenience these requirements may be termed the criteria of accuracy, severity, invariance, and relevance. The question that I would like to explore briefly is the extent to which the criteria are satisfied by current, commonly-used definitions.

Accuracy

A considerable amount of valuable research, some of which is described in the three papers just presented, has been concerned with this aspect of the measurement problem. Crude income data have been refined to reflect differences in: wealth holdings, family size and composition, the cost of living among cities and regions, spending patterns, and income in kind. Some attention has also been given to the fact that because of the inability of the poor to take advantage of bulk-purchase opportunities, supermarket prices, and reasonable credit terms, a dollar of income does not buy as much in the ghetto as it does elsewhere. Still further work has been devoted to the problem of adjusting income data to include the governmental goods and services which are received by the poor and others.

In effect, all of these efforts have focused on the single task of more accurately measuring per capita real income, so that we may distinguish low-income families from moderate- and upper-income households with some precision. Implicitly, therefore, they assume either that low-income is synonymous with poverty or that it is a very good proxy for it. Given the large number of low-income families in the United States who do not seem otherwise severely deprived and the equally large number of moderate-income families who do have serious problems, there is some reason to doubt this assumption and to raise the question of what it is we are trying to measure. Is it really just low-income, or is it much more than that? Are we more accurately measuring the wrong thing? These possibilities lead us to a consideration of the fourth criterion.

Relevancy

It is now fairly well recognized that every year large numbers of families "move" across income-poverty lines, either in one direction or the other. Which families make such moves and

how soon, if ever, they cross back again is not known. Consequently, cross-sectional income data, which are presently used to estimate the extent of poverty in the United States, may not accurately measure how many and which families have low incomes over an extended period of time. This fact has not bothered as many analysts of poverty as it should. Apparently, it is felt that the length of time a family spends below a given income line has no bearing on whether it is in poverty or how severely it is deprived. If the family is below the line, it is assumed to be in poverty, whether it has been there six months or six years. This view may be acceptable as a first approximation. However, the number and severity of problems associated with low income would be very different if every family experienced low income one-fifth of the time than if one-fifth of the families were in this situation perpetually. Clearly, there is a time dimension to poverty which present definitions ignore, with unfortunate results.

Consideration of this dimension of the problem leads to what I believe is a more realistic conception of poverty. Poverty is not low income per se, but the collection of problems that tend to result from being deprived of adequate income over a sustained period of time. More specifically, poverty consists first of the deprivation of physical well-being -- physical comfort, physical health, and safety -- that is experienced by low-income groups to a greater extent than by others; and, second, the deprivation of mental well-being that is occasioned by enforced idleness, being forced to rely on a stigmatizing dole, lack of opportunity to improve, and alienation from the mainstream of society.

The underlying goal of anti-poverty programs is not nearly so much to raise incomes above any particular line, but to reduce the above deprivations and distribute them more nearly at random among income groups. The income distribution which achieves this objective cannot be determined *ex ante*, but only after analyzing the incidence of the deprivations themselves. It is significant, therefore, that all of the current poverty lines carry with them the prior assumptions that: (1) the goods and services which can be purchased with an income that falls just at the line will prevent the deprivations of concern to us; and (2) nearly all families who have the minimum income will consume in the "proper" manner. The first assumption has never been subjected to empirical inquiry. The second is known to be false. Thus, income proxies for poverty are, at the moment, at least two steps removed from reality, and, like GNP, only crudely measure degree of well-being.

Severity

The issues which have just been discussed emerge again with respect to the problem of where to draw the income-poverty line. This problem

essentially involves reducing the range within which an arbitrary decision must be made. It is obvious that the lower the line is drawn, the higher will be the proportion of the low-income group who are seriously deprived; but the higher, also, will be the proportion of seriously deprived persons who are not classified as poverty-stricken. The converse is obviously true if the line is drawn high. All of those who are seriously deprived are likely to be classified as in poverty, along with many persons who are not deprived at all. No way around this difficulty has been found, and "objectively" determined poverty lines therefore vary significantly. A major reason for this situation would appear again to be reliance upon erroneous or untested assumptions about the relationship between income and consumption patterns, and in turn between these patterns and income-related problems. The determination of "seriously low" income can only be made with reference to independent measures of the outcomes associated with various income levels. We do not yet have these measures. We have not even specified the relevant outcomes.

Invariance

If, as many persons believe, poverty will always be with us, one reason may be that it is constantly being redefined. We are continually reminded that using the standards of 40 years ago, few of today's population would be in poverty. Similarly, using 1968 standards, most of the population of the roaring and prosperous 1920's would appear to have been destitute. Allowing for changes in definition, the extent of poverty today is not substantially less than it was four decades ago. Because this conclusion seems so clearly implausible, something must be wrong. That something is the failure to specify the various ways in which low-income families are deprived relative to others in society and to seek measurable goals along each of these dimensions. This procedure would not result in a definition that is totally invariant over time, since new goals can constantly be added to any list. It would, nevertheless, introduce much more constancy than is now present.

^{1/} For an elaboration of these remarks, see Morton S. Baratz, William G. Grigsby, Conceptualization and Measurement of Poverty, 1966.