

INFLUENCE OF THE POVERTY LINE ON FEDERAL PROGRAMS

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There are many poverty measures used by the federal government. One of them, which is variously referred to as the Orshansky, Social Security, "OMB", or Census poverty measure, holds a place of pre-eminence. In one sense, it is more official than the others. It is certainly more widely used. This measure was originally developed by Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration in 1964 and was, with revisions, officially adopted in 1969 by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as the Federal Government's official statistical measure of poverty. The measure is built around the Department of Agriculture's economy food plan of 1961 and the national average ratio of family food expenditures to total family after-tax income as measured in the 1955 Household Food Consumption Survey. It consists of 124 separate poverty cutoffs differentiating families by size, number of children, age and sex of head and farm or nonfarm residence. The cutoffs are updated annually by changes in the Consumer Price Index. The poverty cutoff for a male headed nonfarm family of four with two children in 1974 was \$5000. According to the Census Bureau's report based on the March 1975 Current Population Survey, in 1974 there were approximately 24.3 million persons, or 12 percent of the population, poor by this definition. There were 5.1 million poor families, 9.2 percent of all families.

The 124 official poverty lines are somewhat awkward to use for many applications. A simplified list of weighted average poverty lines, or "cutoffs", is published annually by the Census Bureau; the weighted average cutoff for 1974 are shown in table 1.

Whatever their original purposes were, either in their design or in their official adoption as a federal statistical tool, the Orshansky poverty lines have been adapted for many uses and they have had pronounced effects on individuals, geographic areas, and social institutions.

In order to gauge the effects of changing these poverty lines, it is useful to distinguish three uses to which they are put. First, the poverty lines, along with annual reports from the Census Bureau on the number and characteristics of the poor, serve as a measure of the nation's progress in reducing the extent of poverty. Second, they are used as a statistical tool to identify needy populations for the purpose of designing or evaluating federal programs which are aimed at assisting the poor. Thirdly, they are used for administrative purposes to dispense funds to individuals or areas in need.

Poverty Lines as Measures of Progress

The poverty lines remind us of the existence of

the poor and needy. Their effect on the national consciousness and consequently on national initiatives on behalf of the poor is very real. A concern is sometimes expressed that the official poverty counts have consistently decreased and will probably continue to do so. It is feared that this will lead to an artificial solution of the problem of poverty inasmuch as poverty will only seem to go away through the device of federal statistics. Proposals to revise the current poverty measure by using more current statistics or to change the basis of poverty measurement by using relative concepts based on median family income sometimes stem from this appreciation of the far reaching effects of the poverty. Of course, such proposals also stem from alternative economic concepts, from a desire to use current data, and from practical considerations like availability of raw data and the suitability of these measures for various administrative purposes. Furthermore, some argue in favor of the lower poverty counts because they believe that there are in fact fewer poor people than in years past. No matter what the underlying motivations, these poverty measures would tell different stories to the public over long periods of time and therefore would probably affect the way people think about the poor and about the effectiveness of government programs for the poor.

According to the data from the Current Population Survey, under the official poverty measurement system (when backdated by the Consumer Price Index), the number of poor families was reduced from 18.5 percent in 1959 to 9.2 percent during 1974. Revising the official poverty line on the basis of current nutrition standards, food plans, food prices, and a higher multiplier reflecting more recent overall consumption data would raise the poverty lines in real terms and lessen the amount of progress shown in reducing the extent of poverty. A relative poverty line based on 50 percent of national median family income would consistently show about 19 percent of all families as poor over the past fifteen years, although at ever higher real income levels.

Poverty Lines As a Statistical Tool

The largest social insurance programs like Social Security, Railroad Retirement, and Veterans benefits; the public assistant programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Supplemental Security Benefits; and in kind programs like food stamps, Medicare, and Medicaid generally do not incorporate the official poverty lines either for setting their income eligibility levels or their benefit levels. Now, there are many reasons why there is not a direct link to the poverty lines. Imposing a cutoff of benefits at the poverty line could produce a sudden decrease in benefits as a person's income

Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended, is an example of a program using a poverty measure as part of an allocative formula. Approximately \$1.5 billion are distributed annually partly on the basis of the number of poor school-age children in each county. Where county boundaries are not coterminous with school districts, county amounts are then suballocated to the school districts by state departments of education. Children living in school attendance areas which have an incidence of poverty as high as or higher than the district-wide average are eligible for Title I services. Children are selected for participation on the basis of educational deficiencies, regardless of family income. Other programs which distribute funds to needy areas are Title I of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, and grants made to Community Mental Health Centers with disproportionate poverty populations in health catchment areas.

The Community Services Administration (CSA), formerly the Office of Economic Opportunity, provides an example of administrative use of the Orshansky measure for determining individual income eligibility. Uniform income eligibility standards are issued for poverty-related programs administered by CSA such as the Community Action

Agencies. Based directly on the official Federal poverty measure, these guidelines eliminate many of the distinctions and smooth some of the remaining variations. The CSA poverty thresholds allow for variations by family size, with equal dollar increments or additional family members. Like the Orshansky poverty matrix, cutoffs for farm families are 15 percent below those for nonfarm families. In addition, two major geographic variations are partly taken into account by raising the cutoffs by 25 percent for Alaska and by 15 percent for Hawaii. The CSA thresholds are updated annually according to the change in the Consumer Price Index. Table 2 presents the 1974 CSA poverty cutoffs for the continental United States, along with the comparable weighted average cutoffs from the Orshansky system from which these were derived. For each of the weighted Orshansky averages in Table 2, the numbers in parentheses indicate the range of variation across all other poverty lines for the same family size in the full Orshansky matrix of 124 poverty lines.

Similar guidelines are issued by the Secretary of Labor and the Secretary of Agriculture for their programs for low income persons. Examples of such programs are the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act and the Child Nutrition Programs.

Table 2 1974 Orshansky Poverty Thresholds and Community Services Administration Income Eligibility Guidelines

Family Size	Community Services Administration		Orshansky Poverty Measure	
	Nonfarm ^a	Farm ^a	Nonfarm	Farm
1 person	\$2590	\$2200	\$2495(2358-2659) ^b	\$2092(2004-2260)
2 persons	3410	2900	3211(2948-3724)	2707(2506-3165)
3 persons	4230	3600	3936(3568-4223)	3331(3033-3590)
4 persons	5050	4300	5038(4900-5252)	4302(4165-4465)
5 persons	5870	5000	5950(5781-6232)	5057(4914-5298)
6 persons	6690	5700	6699(6457-7087)	5700(5489-6024)

SOURCE: Federal Register, Vol. 40, No. 132 (July 9, 1975), p. 28794.
U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1974," Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 102, Table A-2.

^a All States except Alaska and Hawaii. The thresholds for Alaska are 25 percent higher, and those for Hawaii are 15 percent higher.

^b Figures in parentheses indicate the range of variation across the thresholds in the measure.

A single legislative act may contain both an allocative formula for distributing fixed program funds and eligibility criteria for determining which individuals in each area are entitled to receive assistance. Furthermore, entirely different poverty measures may be used in the various stages of one program, as with the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). The measure of poverty used for distributing CETA funds is a single-dollar threshold (\$7,000 in 1969 dollars), with the allocation based partly on the number of families in an area with an income below that level. At the local level, however, individual eligibility

is determined in part on poverty guidelines like those just described for the CSA and in part on other factors like unemployment or underemployment.

In some programs the Orshansky thresholds are used but in a modified form. Some of the benefits of the Child Nutrition Program, for example, are available to families with incomes up to 195% of the poverty lines. Another common adaptation is to include status as a recipient of welfare, in conjunction with the poverty thresholds, to identify target populations. A person may be eligible for food stamps for example either by

the fact that his family income falls below the poverty cutoff or because he is in a family receiving welfare payments. A special criterion relating family income to the cost of the food is also used in this program.

Except for the Child Nutrition Program and possibly the food stamp program, the budgetary impact of a change in the official poverty matrix would not be great for all the programs just named. In most cases, the poverty thresholds are used to distribute equal fixed appropriated funds to States, counties, cities, or other areas on a formula basis or to needy persons on a first-come, first-served basis or on a most-in-need basis.

Raising the poverty lines would not cause federal appropriations to rise in the near term. Use of the poverty lines for administrative purposes affects how thinly and to whom the limited

funds are distributed. Thus, the relevant factor in determining who will benefit from raising or lowering the poverty lines is not the poverty rate or total poverty count but rather the change in the distribution of the poor among the various demographic subgroups of the population.

The two concepts, poverty rates and distribution can be compared in the following two tables. The official poverty lines were lowered to 75% of their official value, then raised to 125%, 150%, and 200%. These were alternately used as new "poverty" lines to measure the demographic characteristics of the poor at higher or lower poverty levels. From these tables, particularly Table 4, it is possible to identify whites, working poor, male headed families, and the elderly as groups whose representation in the poverty population would increase with higher poverty lines, and who would thus be the primary beneficiaries of higher poverty lines.

Table 3
Poverty Rates by Selected Characteristics for
Alternative Poverty Levels, 1974

Characteristics	Universe (in thousands)	Current Measure	Scaling of Current Measure			
			75%	125%	150%	200%
<u>Persons</u>						
Total	209,343	11.6%	6.9%	16.5%	21.6%	33.1%
Living arrangements:						
In families	190,471	10.2	6.1	14.6	19.4	31.0
Male headed	167,227	6.5	3.6	10.2	14.7	26.4
Female headed	23,245	36.8	24.2	46.0	53.1	64.3
Unrelated indi- viduals	18,872	25.5	15.1	36.2	43.9	54.8
Race:						
White	182,355	8.9	5.2	13.2	17.9	29.2
Black	23,704	31.5	20.1	41.5	49.2	62.4
Other	3,284	15.1	9.5	21.7	26.0	38.8
Age:						
Under 5 years	16,002	16.7	10.9	22.8	29.3	44.1
5-17 years	49,800	15.1	9.2	20.4	25.9	39.1
18-64 years ^a	122,414	8.8	5.5	12.5	16.5	26.3
65 years & over	21,127	15.7	6.7	25.9	35.1	50.3
<u>Families</u>						
Total	55,712	9.2	5.5	13.3	17.9	28.8
Sex of head:						
Male	48,470	5.7	3.1	9.2	13.4	24.2
Female	7,242	32.5	21.2	40.8	47.6	59.5
Presence of children:						
None	24,381	5.1	2.5	8.7	12.7	22.1
One or more	31,331	12.4	7.8	16.9	21.9	34.0
Employment status of head:						
Employed	40,419	5.1	3.0	7.8	11.1	20.4
Unemployed	2,797	16.1	10.9	22.8	29.2	43.0
Not in civilian labor force	12,497	20.9	12.3	29.1	37.1	52.7
Source of income: ^b						
Earnings	49,529	6.4	3.8	9.8	13.7	23.8
Social Security	12,162	10.0	4.5	16.9	24.3	39.9
Public assistance	4,359	46.9	27.4	59.4	68.3	79.8
<u>Unrelated Individuals</u>						
Total	18,872	25.5	15.1	36.2	43.9	54.8
Sex:						
Male	7,890	20.4	13.2	28.0	34.0	44.5
Female	10,981	29.3	16.4	42.1	51.0	62.1
Employment status:						
Employed	9,660	13.2	9.0	18.7	23.3	33.6
Unemployed	930	32.4	23.7	40.2	45.3	59.4
Not in civilian labor force	8,282	39.2	21.1	56.2	67.7	79.0
Source of income: ^b						
Earnings	11,609	14.6	9.2	20.9	26.0	37.1
Social Security	6,982	30.7	11.9	49.6	62.8	75.7
Public assistance	1,656	62.7	30.6	79.8	90.8	96.1

SOURCE: Special tabulations by the Census Bureau from the March 1975 Current Population Survey.

^a Includes a small number of heads, wives, and unrelated individuals 14-17 years of age.

^b A family or unrelated individual may have more than one source of income. Consequently, the totals for these categories exceed the numbers of families and unrelated individuals.

Table 4

Distribution of the Poverty Population by
Selected Characteristics for Alternative
Poverty Levels, 1974

Characteristics	Total Population	Current Measure	Scaling of Current Measure			
			75%	125%	150%	200%
Persons						
Number (in thousands)	209,343	24,260	14,538	34,615	45,211	69,389
Living arrangements:						
In families	91.0%	80.1%	80.5%	80.3%	81.7%	85.1%
Male headed	79.9	44.8	41.7	49.4	56.4	63.6
Female headed	11.1	35.3	38.8	30.9	27.3	21.5
Unrelated individuals	9.0	19.9	19.5	19.7	18.3	14.9
Race:						
White	87.1	67.2	65.1	69.5	72.3	76.9
Black	11.3	30.7	32.7	28.4	25.8	21.3
Other	1.6	2.0	2.1	2.1	1.9	1.8
Age:						
Under 5 years	7.6	11.0	12.0	10.5	10.4	10.2
5-17 years	23.8	31.0	31.7	29.3	28.5	28.0
18-64 years	58.5	44.3	46.5	44.4	44.7	46.5
65 years and over	10.1	13.6	9.8	15.8	16.4	15.3
Families						
Number (in thousands)	55,712	5,109	3,052	7,437	9,948	16,036
Sex of head:						
Male	87.0	54.0	49.8	60.3	65.4	73.2
Female	13.0	46.0	50.2	39.7	34.6	26.9
Presence of children:						
None	43.8	24.2	20.0	28.6	31.2	33.6
One or more	56.2	75.8	80.0	71.4	68.8	66.4
Employment status of head:						
Employed	72.5	40.1	39.5	42.4	45.2	51.4
Unemployed	5.0	8.8	10.0	8.6	8.2	7.5
Not in civilian labor force	22.4	51.1	50.5	50.0	46.6	41.1
Source of income: ^b						
Earnings	88.9	62.1	61.5	65.0	68.0	73.4
Social Security	21.8	23.9	17.9	27.6	29.7	30.2
Public assistance	7.8	40.0	39.2	34.8	29.9	21.9
Unrelated individuals						
Number (in thousands)	18,872	4,820	2,841	6,832	8,284	10,333
Sex:						
Male	41.8	33.3	36.7	32.3	32.3	34.0
Female	58.2	66.6	63.3	67.7	67.6	66.0
Employment status:						
Employed	51.2	26.4	30.7	26.5	27.2	31.4
Unemployed	4.9	6.3	7.7	5.5	5.1	5.3
Not in civilian labor force	43.9	67.3	61.5	68.1	67.7	63.3
Source of income: ^b						
Earnings	61.5	35.1	37.6	35.5	36.5	41.7
Social Security	37.0	44.5	29.3	50.7	53.0	51.1
Public assistance	8.8	21.6	17.8	19.4	18.2	15.4

Table 1.

Weighted Average Poverty Cutoffs in 1974 by Size of Family and Sex of Head,
by Farm-Nonfarm Residence

Size of Family Unit	Total	Nonfarm			Farm		
		Total	Male Head	Female Head	Total	Male Head	Female Head
1 Person (Unrelated Individual)	\$2,487	\$2,495	\$2,610	\$2,413	\$2,092	\$2,158	\$2,029
14 to 64 Years	2,557	2,562	2,658	2,458	2,197	2,258	2,089
65 Years and Over	2,352	2,364	2,387	2,357	2,013	2,030	2,002
2 Persons	3,191	3,211	3,220	3,167	2,707	2,711	2,632
Head 14 to 64 Years	3,294	3,312	3,329	3,230	2,819	2,824	2,706
Head 65 Years and Over	2,958	2,982	2,984	2,966	2,535	2,535	2,533
3 Persons	3,910	3,936	3,957	3,822	3,331	3,345	3,133
4 Persons	5,008	5,038	5,040	5,014	4,302	4,303	4,262
5 Persons	5,912	5,950	5,957	5,882	5,057	5,057	5,072
6 Persons	6,651	6,699	6,706	6,642	5,700	5,700	5,702
7 or More Persons ^a	8,165	8,253	8,278	8,079	7,018	7,017	7,066

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Characteristics of the Population Below the Poverty Level: 1974," Current Population Reports, Series P-60, No. 102, Table A-2.

^a Represents an average for families with 7 or more persons.

reaches the poverty line. This may cause serious inequities or adversely affect work incentives. Also, the purpose of a program may not be congruent with the Federal statistical definition of poverty. Moreover, some believe that it would be too expensive to guarantee a poverty level income to all persons through these programs.

The important factor concerning the relationship between the poverty lines and these programs is not the absence of a direct link between the two; it is the general surprise which is usually registered when someone is first informed about the lack of the connection that is important. Even after going through the arguments just summarized about why there need not be a direct link, there is a persistent and nagging feeling that there ought to be one. This notion is quite strong. It is shared by many program analysts, public leaders, and the public. The author has witnessed deliberations on subjects like welfare reform, health financing and other social programs and has observed first hand how participants both in formal meetings and at informal discussions instinctively reach for the poverty line or some adaptation of it as a rough measure of where they want to come out. Much fine tuning of program parameters takes place after the basic program structures have been roughly estimated, but the first cut is often made by reference to the official poverty lines. Congressional and executive branch staff members have asked for statistics to help formulate program benefit levels at "somewhere around 150% of the poverty lines" or "just right above the poverty line". If the poverty lines were higher or lower, then program analysts and legislators throughout the government would be thinking about programs with higher or lower benefit levels and someone would eventually be proposing them as serious candidates for review. A good example

of this phenomenon can be seen in the fact that the guaranteed benefit levels of the Supplemental Security Income Program are just slightly below the poverty lines. Another example is the recent ongoing public debate on whether the non poor, specifically those with incomes above the Orshansky lines, should be eligible to purchase food stamps. Less obviously, federal income taxes are keyed to these poverty lines to the extent that an unofficial but nevertheless real policy has existed to set the personal exemptions and the standard deductions near the official poverty lines so that the poor won't have to pay federal income taxes.

Admittedly, this analysis is disappointing in as much as the effects, however real, are difficult to measure. Furthermore, the influence of the poverty lines on the level of the federal budget through the large social programs is a long range, sometimes permanently postponed, effect. In the near term, the federal budget would not increase with higher poverty lines. Rather, because of the way the lines are used for administrative purposes, limited federal funds would be shared by more and different people.

Poverty Lines As Administrative Devices

Some federal programs, either by law or by executive order, make direct administrative use of the official poverty lines. Federal programs for the poor differ in design. Some programs are designed to aid areas and some are designed to aid families or individuals directly. In the former case, the poverty measure is used in an allocative formula to distribute the appropriation, typically a fixed amount, among the subunits of the of the nation designated by the legislation. In the second type of programs, a poverty cutoff may be used as an income eligibility criterion for individual applicants.

For example, the current "poor" population is approximately 2/3 white and 1/3 non white. If the poverty lines were raised by 50 percent (so that the poverty line for a non farm family of four would be about \$7500 in 1974) then the poor population would be almost 3/4 white. Similarly, under the current measure, 54 percent or slightly more than 1/2 of all poor families have male heads. If the poverty lines were increased by 50 percent, then 2/3 of the officially poor families would have male heads. If the poverty lines were doubled, then almost 3/4 of the poor families would have male heads.

As far as the geographic distribution of the poor is concerned the South would show a decreased share of the poor, and consequently of federal funds, while all other regions would show an increased share under higher poverty lines.

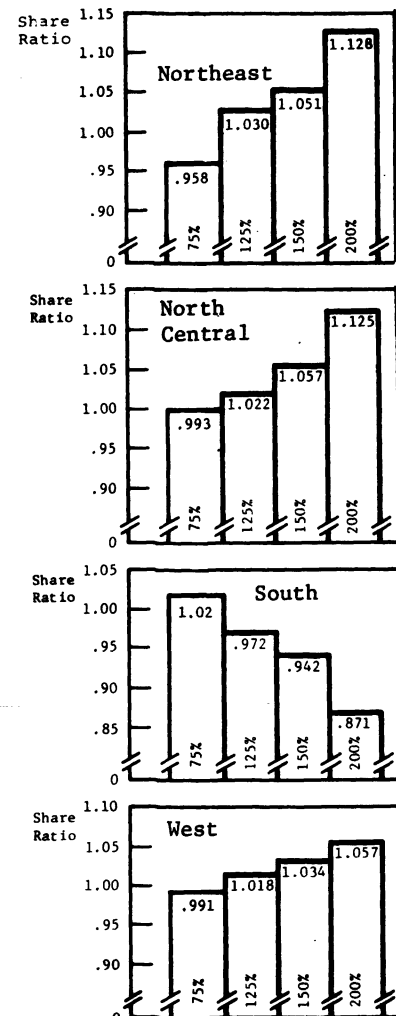
As an aid in comparing effects, the notion of a share ratio is used. The share ratio is defined as a region's percentage of the nation's poor population resulting from an alternative poverty level divided by its percentage resulting from the current level. Percentages are based on 1970 Decennial Census and reflect data for the year 1969. A ratio of 1.0 indicates that a region's share is unchanged by the alternative measure; a ratio smaller than 1.0 indicates a decreased share.

Figure 1 illustrates this. In each case, the bar on the graph represents the region's share of the poverty population under the various poverty levels relative to its share under the current level. For example, the Northeast contained 17.9 percent of the 27.4 million poor persons in the United States as counted in the Decennial Census. Raising the current poverty thresholds by 25 percent results in a poverty population of 37.5 million persons, of which 18.4 percent resided in the Northeast. Therefore, the share ratio for the Northeast under the upward scaling of the poverty measure by 25 percent is 1.03 (18.4/17.9). If the poverty lines were increased by 50 percent, then the Northeast would increase its share of the nation's poor by 5.1 percent, the North Central region by 5.7 percent, and the West by 3.4 percent. The South however, would decrease its share by 5.8 percent.

In addition to the regional patterns, the more populated states as a group increase their share of poor persons more than other states as the poverty lines are increased. When the poverty lines are set at 150 percent of the official thresholds, the national poverty rate is increased by from 13.9 percent to 24.3 percent. However, over half of this increase is attributable to low-income persons living in the eleven most populated states. As a group, these states contain 48 percent of the poverty population under the current poverty thresholds and 51 percent of the poverty population under poverty thresholds set at 150 percent of the official level.

The general principles just illustrated, that the federal budgets would not increase with

Figure 1



Source: Special tabulations by the Census Bureau from the 1:100 Sample of the 1970 Census Population.

Note: The use of share ratios for the analysis of distributional effects of alternative poverty measures was introduced by Lawrence Brown, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. For further discussion of this, see Characteristics of Low-Income Population Under Alternative Poverty Definitions, Technical Paper XVIII to The Measure of Poverty, a report published by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, April, 1976.

higher poverty lines but that limited funds would be shared by a larger and differently composed poor population, are not true in every case.

In some programs, eligibility is open-ended, in that the benefits are provided to all eligible persons requesting them; such programs would force the Federal budget upward if the poverty line were increased. The Child Nutrition program of the Department of Agriculture, for example, would be affected significantly by an increase in the poverty line. Based on poverty rates for children, as indicated in table 3, a 25 percent increase in the poverty line could result in an increase of more than 30 percent in this program's budget under current law.

A smaller effect would occur in the food stamp program because its income eligibility criteria already generally exceed the poverty lines for most family sizes. There would be a much more significant effect on the food stamp program if it were redefined primarily on poverty criteria such as in recently proposed legislation and regulations. Obviously, the structure of the poverty guidelines would then be a most crucial program parameter.

Other Poverty Measures

Measures of poverty or income eligibility and concepts of need other than the Orshansky measure are also used in Federal programs. A single dollar threshold that is unchanged for family size is currently used as an eligibility criterion in the College Work-Study program authorized by the Higher Education Act of 1965. As mentioned earlier, this type of measure is also used in the allocation formula of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act; one was also used in the allocation of funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act until 1974.

Another measure of income eligibility is one based on some percentage of median income. Title XX of the Social Security Act (social services) adopted 80 to 115 percent of median family income in each state as its standard. Title II of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 uses 50 and 80 percent of median family income in the "area" as its eligibility criteria. The use of standards based on median income is a relatively new development in Federal programs, although there is precedence in social service programs.

Finally, administrative and legislative references abound in terms that target Federal programs to the "disadvantaged," "needy," "dependent," "economically disadvantaged," and "individuals whose income and resources are insufficient." In many such references, the terms are employed without definition.

There is not sufficient room here to examine all viable poverty measurement techniques. Not all changes can be approximated by reference to higher or lower poverty lines. Some revisions, such as those based solely on substitution of new food plans for the 1961 economy plan, could raise poverty lines for some family types and lower them for others. For a fuller treatment, one should consult the report entitled The Measure of Poverty published in April 1976 by The Department of Health, Education and Welfare. There is also a series of technical papers connected with the report which bear on the subject of this paper.

This paper draws heavily, sometimes by verbatim transcription, from The Measure of Poverty. The intent was to pull together those parts of the report which describe the generalized effects on beneficiaries of federal programs of changing the official poverty lines. The author therefore must acknowledge, and is happy to do so, his gratitude to the members of the Poverty Studies Task Force, a federal interagency group which prepared the report, for use of the materials from the study. At the same time, it must be noted that this paper is an edited selection and organization of some of that material along with some original statements which were not subject to approval or even advance review by the Poverty Studies Task Force. Hence, incorrect interpretations of or wrong conclusions about the transcribed material are attributable to the author of this paper and not to the Poverty Studies Task Force.

To obtain copies of The Measure of Poverty or the technical papers, one may write to:

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