

CHAPTER TWO

YOUTH POVERTY IN AMERICA

In 1993, 23 percent of our children were living below the official poverty line. Of such children, the bipartisan National Commission on Children has said, “The harshness of [their] lives and their tenuous hold on tomorrow cannot be countenanced by a wealthy nation, a caring people, or a prudent society. America’s future depends on these children too.” Up to now, however, policy-makers in the United States have never made a serious effort to ensure that all of our children get a minimally decent start in life through governmental action.

—Barbara R. Bergmann (1996, p. 3)

This chapter begins our voyage of discovery and explores what is known today about the extent of youth poverty in America. In it we examine the concept of poverty, how poverty is assessed, the scope of poverty among youths and other age groups in the United States, and evidence concerning the duration, distribution, and sources of youth poverty.

In addition, we explore a number of stereotypes about poverty, particularly poverty among America’s youngest citizens. Many Americans seem to believe that poverty among youths in their country is minuscule, has little impact, and can be safely ignored. As well, some Americans assume that the elderly most often experience poverty, while others believe that youth poverty and its problems are largely created by those who are Black and Hispanic or that impoverished youths are often mired in poverty and are likely to remain poor throughout their formative years (and beyond).

Well, are these stereotypes accurate? Is it true that youth poverty is a “small” problem in the United States? Is poverty actually greatest among the elderly; are youth poverty and its problems largely Black and Hispanic issues; do most impoverished youths remain mired in long-term impoverishment? Answers for such questions may be found in research on youth poverty in America, and to this research I now turn.

POVERTY AND ITS ASSESSMENT

From the beginning, the [official American] poverty measure had weaknesses, and they have become more apparent and consequential because of far-reaching changes in the U.S. society and economy and in government policies.

—From a Statement by the National Research Council (Constance F. Citro & Robert T. Michael, Eds., 1995, p. 2)

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To understand youth poverty we must have some idea about what we are talking about. What exactly is poverty? What is meant when we read that youths or others in a population are impoverished? And how does one decide when people are “poor”?

Defining Poverty

In its extended sense, “poverty” refers to any form of scarcity, but in most writing on the topic the poverty concept is limited to specific forms of need. A few American authors have written that poverty should be thought of as lack of disposable income, and this is understandable in a country where people are expected to pay personally for most of the things they need in life. But even in the United States, some needs are provided through tax-supported social services—safe drinking water (for example), paved streets, sewage and garbage disposal, police and fire protection services—and this implies that even those in the U.S. who have very little disposable income may be less impoverished than persons in the worst of third-world countries where such services are not provided.

Reflecting such thoughts, most analysts now define poverty as *lack of the tangible (or material) resources needed for a “minimum ‘decent’ standard of living.”*¹ Some people may bear extra burdens because they are threatened by physical or social forces, have chronic diseases, are socially isolated, or are subject to discrimination because of racial, religious, or ethnic prejudice, but in current usage these conditions are not normally thought to indicate poverty. In contrast, citizens in advanced countries are assumed to be impoverished if they lack sufficient food, clothing, shelter, appropriate heat (or air conditioning), electricity and telephone services, indoor plumbing, transportation facilities, medical assistance, supplemental support when they are too young, too old, or too impaired to provide for their own needs, and access to facilities for education, recreation, and the like.²

This definition seems to be clear, but it actually dodges several issues. For one, most human beings do not live alone but rather in social groupings where tangible resources are shared. This means that “poverty” is normally a condition that is endured, in common, by all persons found in a social entity—a family or household perhaps, or a community, school district, state, or nation. This introduces confusion because we also talk about poverty as if it is experienced by individuals; for example, researchers often report poverty rates for classes of specific persons; e.g., youths, single mothers, or the elderly. Such usage is a shorthand way of referring to poverty within social entities that include those persons. Most studies of poverty in the United States focus on *families* or people who share a common *household*. Thus, when those studies report poverty rates for youths, single mothers, or the elderly, their data actually reflect the numbers of those persons who live in families (or households) where poverty is shared in common.

For another, we normally think about “poverty” as if it is limited to a category, or perhaps several categories, of easily identified persons who are stigmatized or socially isolated. Earlier American images of poverty focused on The Irish, The Italians, or immigrant groups from Eastern or Southern Europe crowded into major East-coast cities, desperate families fleeing the dust bowl during the Great Depression, or perhaps hardscrabble residents of the Appalachian highlands, whereas current images of poverty more often involve African-American urban ghettos, Native American reservations, or Hispanic immigrants. Such images are misleading. As we shall see shortly, youth poverty is actually widespread in America, and poverty is certainly not an either-or experience. In fact, many American families experience years of “near poverty” and are never able to secure the full panoply of tangible resources normally thought necessary for a decent life in America.

And for a third, judgments about “poverty” are clearly tied to specific contexts and to standards of living that are relevant to those judgments. During the 19th century, most Americans lived in homes without indoor plumbing, let alone electricity. One hundred fifty years ago these conditions did not suggest impoverishment in the United States, but they certainly do so today. Similarly, persons thought to be “very” poor in contemporary America actually have access to some types of resources that are rarely found in underdeveloped nations. Judgments about poverty are always made, then, within a specific time and place.

Assessing Poverty

Above all, the definition given above does not tell us how to detect or assess poverty. In theory it should be possible to survey the various types of tangible resources available in a social entity, thus to establish the subtle ways in which that entity is more “affluent” or “impoverished” than others, and this is actually done in some studies that compare poverty rates among regions or states in America. However, it would be very costly to secure such data for large numbers of small entities, such as the millions of households in America, and most studies of poverty base their judgments on but a single statistic, computed for each household, equal to the fiscal value of funds it has available for purchasing tangible resources. This statistic is then compared to a standard *poverty threshold* value, also expressed in fiscal terms and designed to represent minimally adequate resources, and when funds available to a household fall below the threshold value, that household is said to be “impoverished.”

At first blush, such a strategy seems reasonable in America where households usually buy most of their resources. But how does one obtain information about funds available to each household, and how does one deal with resources that the household does not buy? (What about food that farm families grow for their own consumption, housing that is provided by an employer, or social services obtained from charitable or governmental sources?) And what do we mean by “available” funds? (Should we include illegal income, for example, and if not, should we count pretax dollars or only those funds remaining after

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income and property taxes have been deducted?) And which types of tangible resources should we include when constructing our poverty measure, how should we determine the threshold value we will use when judging which households are poor, and how should we adjust that value for households with differing numbers of adults and children?

Many answers have been suggested for these questions, and they have generated various techniques for assessing poverty.³ Much has been written about these alternatives, but I focus here on three measures that often appear in studies of youth poverty and its educational impact.

The official method. I begin with the *Official Method* used to create most reports about poverty rates in America. In the early 1960s President Lyndon Johnson announced a “War on Poverty,” and this suggested need for a technique to measure poverty rates so that Americans could learn whether they were or were not “Winning the War.” Enter Mollie Orshansky, then an employee of the Social Service Administration. At that time, little was known about the costs of tangible resources needed by American families, but in 1961 the U.S. Department of Agriculture had published information about an Economy Food Plan detailing the foodstuffs families would need for temporary or emergency use when funds were low. Data were also available suggesting that American families then spent about one third of their total incomes on food, so Orshansky suggested that the “official” poverty threshold should be set at *three* times the annual income a typical family would need to purchase the “basket” of food items set forth in the Economy Food Plan, and that differing thresholds should be adopted depending on the size and composition of the family (or household).⁴ Households having annual incomes smaller than those specified by these thresholds would then be declared “impoverished,” and through use of this yardstick one could tap census data or conduct surveys to examine poverty rates for various types of Americans.

This suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm, the method proposed by Orshansky has proven to be durable, and it is used today not only for record keeping but also to establish eligibility for benefits provided by some government programs. Although minor adjustments have been adopted for it over time, and its thresholds are updated annually for inflation using the Consumer Price Index, even today it still depends on the work of government shoppers who purchase “baskets” of basic food items in supermarkets around the nation and analysts who then multiply the average costs of those “baskets” by three to set poverty thresholds.⁵ And although other thresholds are used by a few federal aid programs, the Orshansky method is still used by most federal agencies (including, crucially, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget), and most media reports of poverty rates reflect its use.

For those interested, simplified versions of the Official (“Orshansky”) poverty thresholds, used in 2002, are given in the first column of Exhibit 2.1. As can be seen, these thresholds are *not* generous. To illustrate, a family composed of two adults and two children could then earn no more than \$18,100 per year in 2002 in pretax dollars if it were to qualify for key poverty benefits. Even a few cents

Exhibit 2.1. Recent Poverty Thresholds for Annual Household Income

Household Size (Number of Persons)	(A) Official ("Orshansky") Thresholds	(B) Thresholds Used for Free Meals in Schools	(C) Thresholds Used for Reduced Price Meals in Schools
1	\$ 8,860	\$11,518	\$16,391
2	11,940	15,522	22,089
3	15,020	19,526	27,787
4	18,100	23,530	33,485
5	21,180	27,534	39,183
6	24,260	31,538	44,881
7	27,340	35,542	50,579
8	30,420	39,546	56,277
For each additional person, add	3,080	4,004	5,698

Sources: All thresholds displayed were those for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia. Official thresholds were those in place for 2002 and were obtained from the *Federal Register* (2002a).

Thresholds used for free and reduced price meals in schools were those in place during the 2002/03 school year and were obtained from the *Federal Register* (2002b).

of additional annual income would have meant that the family would no longer be qualified as "impoverished."⁶

From the beginning, however, it was clear that the Official Method was a flawed tool, over time those flaws have become more glaring, and many scholars (including Mollie Orshansky) have urged that it be revised or abandoned. Several issues have prompted these concerns. For one thing, the Official Method is based on reports of pretax income and ignores both the taxes that families pay and the value of tax-supported benefits that poor families may receive, such as food stamps, public housing, assistance from Medicaid and Medicare programs, welfare or temporary assistance benefits, and Earned Income Tax Credits. Ignoring such issues did not matter much in earlier years when low-income people paid few taxes and most of these benefits were not available, but such conditions no longer prevail. This has suggested to a few authors that the Official Thresholds are now too *high*, that they *overestimate* the number of poor persons

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in America today,⁷ and that new methods for measuring poverty should be adopted which include the taxes families pay and the benefits they receive.⁸

In contrast, many authors have argued that the Official Method was always based on the minimum basket of food needed to sustain life in an emergency, so from the outset it reflected an unrealistic, stingy standard. In addition, families today spend a lot more of their available incomes on nonfood needs. As more mothers have entered the workforce, for example, family needs for child care services, appropriate work clothes, and transportation have increased, and the costs of some nonfood resources (such as housing and health care) have escalated sharply—but these changes are not reflected in the Official Method. Living costs also differ sharply among American communities and are generally higher in urban centers where more and more Americans are now living, but the Official Method also does not reflect such matters. All of which implies, in turn, that Official Thresholds are now too *low*, that they *underestimate* the number of impoverished Americans,⁹ and that new methods for assessing poverty should be adopted which reflect both the current nature of tangible needs and the actual costs of living experienced by American families.¹⁰

Well, which is correct; are the Official Thresholds “too low” or “too high”? Would you believe that answers proposed for this question have reflected political commitments? Propagandists from far-right sources which desire to restrain benefits for the poor have claimed that Official Thresholds are “too high.” In contrast, advocates for impoverished youths, and other persons committed to improving life for disadvantaged persons have argued that they are “too low,” and the latter have assembled impressive evidence supporting their argument. As we shall see shortly, surveys have now reported that families whose resources place them “modestly above” Official Poverty Thresholds are nevertheless unable to afford resources needed for “decent” living. In addition, dramatic case studies have been published that reflected the lives of struggling families whose low incomes exceeded Official Thresholds but were unable to pay for crucial tangible needs.¹¹ And responding to such evidence, a general consensus has now emerged stressing that America’s Official Poverty Thresholds are, indeed, *too low*, which means—in turn—that poverty rates in the country are *greater* than those appearing in today’s Official statistics.¹²

The supplemental lunch method. How might one correct for this bias? One simple way to do this would be to raise the Official Thresholds by some fixed percentage—thus allowing more families to fall into the “impoverished” category—and various schemes for doing this have been advanced. Depending on the analyst who writes on the subject, the new, “replacement” thresholds might be set at 125%, 150%, or perhaps 200% of those used in the Official Method, but most of these proposals have not caught on in studies of youth poverty.

One fixed-percentage scheme has proven very useful, however, for studies of poverty effects in education. In 1970 the American Congress set up a program to support school lunches with federal funds and decreed that primary and secondary students who came from households receiving less than 130% of the

Official Thresholds would receive “free” lunches, whereas students from households where incomes fell between 130% and 185% of the Official Thresholds would receive “reduced-price” lunches in their schools.¹³ To make this system work, someone had to collect data about persons present and income available in each student’s household, and this task was assigned to public school districts which, in turn, were required to ask a responsible adult from each student’s household to provide such data early in each school year. These data are then processed by the district and form the basis for decisions about which students will receive “free” and “reduced-price” lunches (and sometime other meals, in some school districts). As a result, each district in the nation now has a file of information, updated each year, that lists students who are eligible for lunch (and possibly other meal) benefits, and this information is also used to indicate rates of poverty among students (and their families) in many studies. For those interested, the free-lunch and reduced-price-lunch thresholds—based on official data for 1991 and used during the 2002/2003 school year—also appeared in Exhibit 2.1.

Needless to say, this second strategy generates poverty thresholds that are more generous than those of the Official Method. To illustrate, during the 2002/2003 school year, a family composed of two adults and two children could earn up to \$23,530, and students from it would still be eligible for “free” lunches (or up to \$33,485 for “reduced-price” lunches). And this also means, of course, that larger rates for poverty among the families of young Americans are generated if one uses thresholds from this technique.

In practice, most researchers assessing poverty with this strategy have sought to bundle all impoverished students into one category, so have chosen the reduced-price-lunch threshold to represent “all students who receive free and reduced-price lunches (and possibly other meals).” And when this is done, I shall refer to the practice as the *Supplemental Lunch Method*.

The comparative method. So far so good, but how do poverty rates in America fare when compared with those in other countries? This question is crucial if we want to learn whether American youth poverty rates are “excessive” or “minuscule” when juxtaposed with those from other advanced nations. To answer it we must turn to studies reported by such organizations as the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) group, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).¹⁴ How have these studies generated comparable rates for different nations?

In theory, it might be possible to collect information from each nation about needs for basic tangible resources among its families and the number of families living in it that cannot meet those needs, but again this would be very costly. Instead, most comparative studies have adopted a simpler strategy in which those rates are generated by counting the numbers of families (or households) whose net income falls below a threshold defined as a specific fraction of the average (median) *net* income for the country in which they live, with the understanding that the same fraction will be used in all countries compared. Net incomes are

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normally expressed in the currency of each country studied and are defined as the fiscal value of gross cash income in each family, minus the value of taxes the family pays, plus the value of most types of tax-supported social benefits provided to the family (or household) unit—and in the typical comparative study, poverty thresholds are set at *one half* of median net income.

Data for making poverty estimates using the Comparative Method are drawn from statistical records provided by each national government. In addition, calculations are first made for a standard type of “reference family”—again, usually two adults and two children—but adjusted figures are also computed for other family (or household) types through use of a formula, based on research, which assumes that it costs less per person in larger families and requires only about 70% as much to provide basic tangible resources for children than for adults.¹⁵

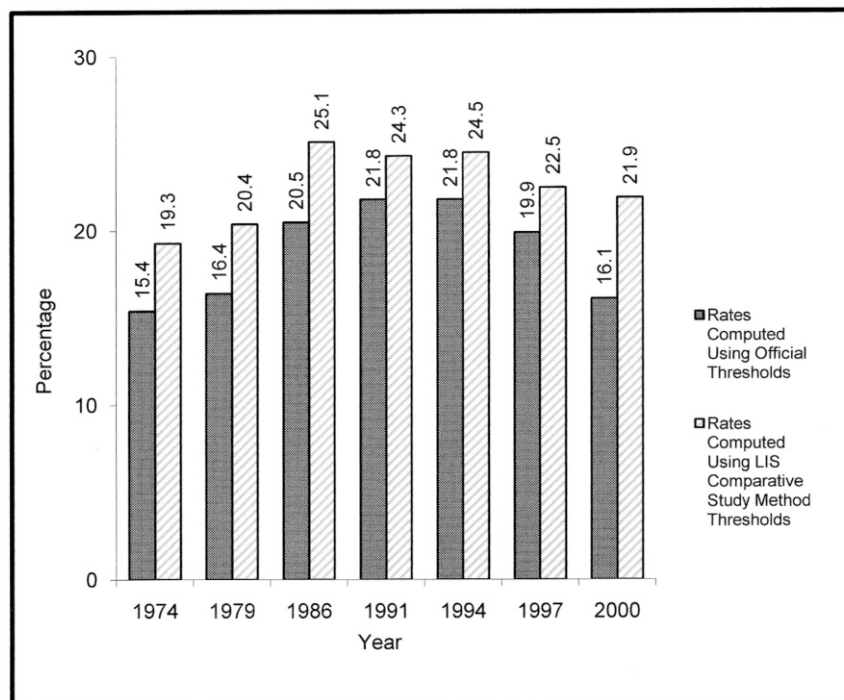
Most comparative studies set poverty thresholds at one half of median net income because surveys have confirmed that respondents (at least in the United States) tend to define “as ‘poor’ any family of four living on an income that corresponds to about half of median income for a family of [that] size.”¹⁶ Note also that these procedures generate poverty thresholds that are unique to each country, thus judgments about which families are and are not “poor” are normally made within each national context and do not reflect a universal standard for judging poverty. This does not matter much when comparing poverty rates among advanced nations—where standards of living are roughly similar—but it means that questions should be raised if the Comparative Method is used to contrast poverty rates for advanced nations with nations from the third world.

What then is the relation between poverty thresholds for America set by the Official Method and those generated by the Comparative Method? Interestingly, when Mollie Orshansky first proposed her solution, thresholds generated by the two methods were quite similar. Over time, however, the Official Method has become a more distorted measure, and the two sets of thresholds have drifted apart. Today the Comparative Method generates significantly higher thresholds for America, and this means that comparative studies report higher poverty rates for the United States than those from studies based on the Official Method. Exhibit 2.2 displays the size of such differences in youth poverty rates for various years between 1974 and 2000.

It is also useful to note that *medical* costs and benefits are not normally assessed when estimating poverty rates using the Comparative Method. The decision to exclude such data reflects the fact that medical benefit schemes are complex and vary from nation to nation, hence the values of such matters are difficult to assess. But other countries in the advanced world differ sharply from the United States in the way they finance health care costs. The former *all* have single-payer systems that provide tax-supported health benefits for each citizen and legal resident in their lands, whereas most Americans cover their escalating health care costs through insurance, membership in a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO), or cash outlays—all paid for with posttax dollars—and the bulk of low-income American families cannot afford to buy health insurance or join an HMO. By comparison with other advanced countries then, low-income families

in America spend more of their discretionary funds for health costs, have less adequate preventive health care, and are more vulnerable to financial ruin when catastrophic illness strikes. Which implies, in turn, that although Comparative Study estimates for American poverty rates may be generous, they are again *too low*.

Exhibit 2.2. American Youth Poverty Rates Computed Using Two Different Methods



Sources: Official poverty rates were obtained from *Poverty in the United States: 2001* (Proctor, B. D., & Dalaker, J., 2002, Table A-2).

Comparative study rates were obtained in January, 2004 from the Luxembourg Income Study website accessed at <http://www.lisproject.org/keyfigures.htm>.

To sum up then, various methods have been used for assessing poverty in America, and these have differing strengths and weaknesses. These methods generate somewhat different estimates for poverty rates, and this means that the “exact” numbers of Americans who suffer from poverty cannot be established. One can get a general feeling for poverty rates and numbers by pooling estimates from several methods, however, and each method can help us understand which groups in the population are more or less impoverished.

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In addition, it is clear that the Official Method now used in America is obsolete and generates poverty-rate estimates that are *too low*. This does not mean that continuing to collect data using the Official Method is an utter waste of time. On the contrary, since it has been in place for many years, annual publications of data generated by the Official Method provide at least some information about the ebb and flow of poverty rates over time. But other methods provide more realistic and charitable estimates of true poverty rates and numbers.

THE SCOPE OF YOUTH POVERTY

The highest incidence of poverty in America has been forced upon our children who are the least able to overcome it, and this problem is getting worse, not better By consigning ... one-fifth to one-third of all of our nation's children to poverty, we are laying the seeds for a degree of social degeneration and deterioration perhaps never before experienced in a modern industrialized nation. By condoning a situation where millions of our children live in intolerable conditions of poverty and low income, with all that implies about poor diet, poor health care, inadequate housing, exposure to being criminally victimized, and an education that leaves them illiterate and uneducated, we have come to virtually institutionalize a form of what can only be viewed as societal child abuse.

—Andrew J. Winnick (1989, pp. 206-207)

Given several methods for assessing poverty, what is known today about youth poverty rates in America? How many young Americans live in poverty, how do rates of poverty compare for youths, adults, and the elderly, and what problems appear when youths in the United States must endure poverty?

Poverty Rates and Numbers

How many young Americans live in poverty? Answers for this question differ, of course, depending on the year we are talking about and the method used for assessing poverty. If we take 1994 as our reference year, the Official poverty rate for Americans under the age of 18 was 21.8%, whereas the rate estimated by the Comparative Study Method was 26.6% and those generated by other methods were as high as 30%. Since the total population of American youths that year was roughly 70 million, this means that at least *15.3 million*, more realistically *18.6 million*, or perhaps as many as *21+ million* American youngsters were then living in poverty. Although these estimates differ, they tell a common story. That year, *vast* numbers of young Americans—more than one out of every five infants, children, and adolescents in the country—experienced poverty in their homes. And this condition was tolerated in the “Richest, Most Powerful, Most Humane Nation on Earth” during a period of sharp economic growth.

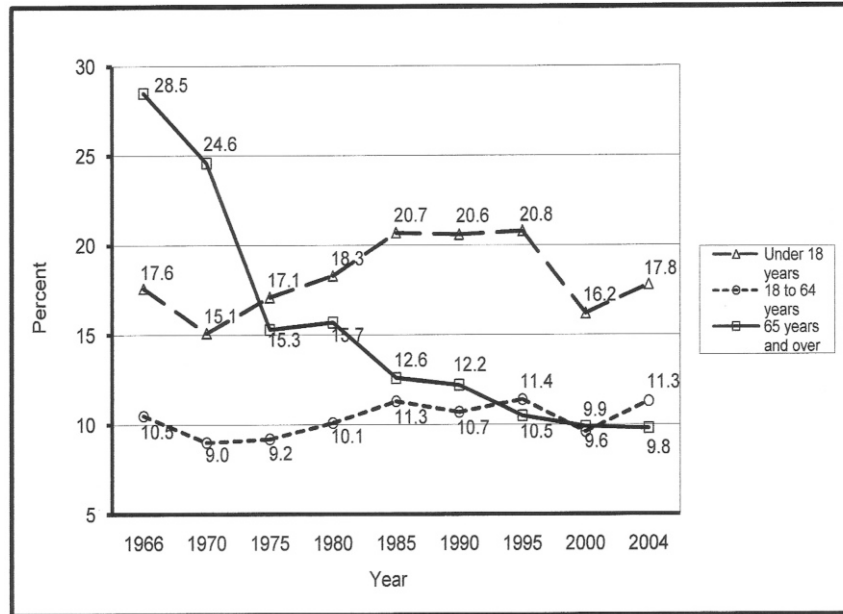
These numbers are truly astounding. They mean, among other things, that in 1994 more youths in the United States suffered from poverty than from *all* known infectious and inherited diseases combined, and that more American youngsters appeared on poverty rolls than on tallies of youngsters from families who were Black, Hispanic, did not speak English, or endured other conditions making success in education (and life) problematic. If we judge by numbers alone then, in 1994 poverty was the *leading* challenge faced by infants, children, and adolescents in America. Nor was 1994 an atypical year. If we look again at Exhibit 2.2 we see that rates for American youth poverty have been strikingly high in recent years. Minor fluctuations have appeared from year to year, and youth poverty rates have soared during the current sharp recession, but the general picture has remained one in which, since the mid-1980s, *huge* numbers of young Americans have experienced poverty each year.

How “bad” is this picture? One way to answer this question is to compare poverty rates for youths with those for adults and the elderly in America. This is done in Exhibit 2.3 which again displays Official data from the U.S. Census Bureau. As can be seen in this new figure, prior to 1970, Official poverty rates were highest for elderly persons (those over age 65), but rates for the elderly then *fell sharply* and have since been similar to rates for adults. In contrast, Official poverty rates for young Americans *fell modestly* during the late 1960s, *grew markedly* for the next 15 years, *stayed at high levels* for a decade or so, *fell slightly* in the late 1990s, and have since again been *growing*. Or, to provide another perspective for thinking about the issue, since the mid-80s, annual poverty rates for young people have been roughly *twice* those recorded for either adults or elderly Americans.

Why did poverty rates for the elderly fall sharply a generation ago? It does not require rocket science to answer this question. America had established its social security program during the 1930s, and during the late 1960s and early 1970s the numbers of elderly persons receiving benefits from that program grew significantly. As more and more elderly persons received those benefits, and eventually those from Medicare, poverty rates for this age group fell. Thus, this history provides a lesson from which Americans might learn as they think about poverty among their youngest citizens. American ideology stresses that able-bodied adults should become wage earners, but youths and the elderly are normally exempted from this requirement because they are thought to be more needy and less able to fend for themselves. Americans have already set up good, tax-supported services—social security and Medicare—that provide significant financial support for the elderly. These services were designed to reduce poverty for retirees, and they have worked.¹⁷ Americans have yet to set up equally effective support services for young people, but there is no theoretical reason why they should not do so.

Why did poverty rates for youths change over the years? In part these shifts have reflected advances or retreats in the nation’s economy, thus slight shifts in youth poverty rates have often matched parallel shifts in poverty rates for adults. But this does not fully explain why Official youth poverty rates grew markedly in

Exhibit 2.3. Official Poverty Rates by Age: 1966 to 2004



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960-2005 Annual Social and Economic Supplements

the 1970s and early 1980s nor why they fell slightly in the late 1990s, nor why they are again growing today. As we shall see shortly, the marked growth of youth poverty that began a generation ago was also tied to shifts in the composition of American families (and particularly growth in the numbers of families headed by single women); sharp growth in the income gap between The Rich and The Poor in America (generating cuts in earnings for low-income families); and loss of federal benefits due to conservative “reforms” begun under President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s.¹⁸ In contrast, the modest shifts in (Official) youth poverty rates in the late 1990s reflected both legislative actions and problems with the Official Method, whereas youth poverty rates are currently soaring because of America’s current recession which has pummeled low-income families.

Regarding earlier legislative actions, in 1996 Congress passed a bill, signed by President Clinton, that was designed to “end welfare as we know it.” This law forced a host of single mothers off welfare rolls and into employment, and far-right analysts have argued that this action generated more incomes for their families and thus reduced poverty among their children. The only trouble with this argument is that those mothers were also no longer eligible for tax-supported

benefits they had previously received, so that many of the families they led were *not* better off but actually *lost* net disposable resources.¹⁹ This has meant that, while these families would no longer appear on Official poverty rolls, they were nevertheless still impoverished and would appear as such in better estimates of youth poverty rates, such as those provided by the Comparative Method. (This argument is easy to confirm; look again at Exhibit 2.2 which shows how Comparative and Official youth poverty estimates diverged in 1997 and 2000.) If nothing else, this story should remind us again about the remarkable deficiencies of the Official Method—as well as the shakiness of superficial, ideologically driven analyses of poverty data.

To summarize then, although exact numbers of impoverished youths will vary depending on year and method used for assessing poverty, all data sources indicate that *at least one fifth of all American youths have experienced poverty in recent years, and this rate is now soaring*. Growth in the Official poverty rates registered for youths since 1976 have reflected at least three forces: *shifts in the composition of American families (and particularly, growth in the numbers of families headed by single mothers), recent and ongoing reductions in standards of living for low-income Americans, and legislation-driven reductions in benefits for low-income American youths and their families*. And although I do not review the data here, the same forces have generated a sharp increase in the numbers of American families living in “severe or deep poverty” during this period—that is, those who must survive on less than *half* the income specified by the Official (“Orshansky”) thresholds.²⁰

Problems Associated with Youth Poverty

Another way to assess the damage caused when one fifth or more of America’s youngest citizens are forced to endure poverty is to consider the challenges they face. What are their lives like; what problems do they encounter that youths from middle- and upper-income homes need not face; and how serious are those problems?

It is not easy to answer these questions because official census data provide little information about problems faced by young Americans, so for answers we must turn to surveys that have studied problems experienced by American youths. Subsequent chapters detail evidence from such efforts, but it is useful to anticipate the thrust of their concerns here. It is hard, however, to come to grips with the *huge* span of problems faced by impoverished youths. To quote Sue Books on the subject, “as a group, poor children [in America] bear the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill.”²¹ Let us begin by sorting those problems into three types—those stemming from the *homes* of those young people, the *neighborhoods* in which they live, and the *schools* they attend.

Home-based problems. Since we normally decide whether youths experience poverty by assessing resources in their homes, it follows that *impoverished American youths always come from homes that lack the full set of tangible (or*

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material) resources needed for a “minimum ‘decent’ standard of living.” Such deficiencies create many forms of problems.

Some problems are associated with the buildings that house those youths and their families. Too often those buildings lack adequate bathroom or kitchen facilities; have no sewer or septic service; lack reliable heating or cooling systems; have few or no electrical outlets in crucial rooms; have holes in their floors, cracks in their walls, or roofs that leak; are severely crowded; have walls covered by toxic, lead-based paints; or are plagued by rats, mice, and other vermin—and some of these problems can create severe, lifelong, physical or neurological handicaps for children.

Other home-based problems involve issues of food, nutrition, and health. Too often low-income youngsters (and their parents) do not have enough to eat or are fed diets that are based on junk foods, lack crucial nutrients, or are loaded with inadvertent poisons. Too often also those victims lack health insurance; have no regular access to dental or medical facilities; receive little or no preventive health care, and are subject to risks of chronic and possibly serious illnesses that are routinely screened and treated for youths who come from middle- or upper-income homes.

Still other problems reflect the grinding realities of inadequate incomes. Often the parents who head impoverished families: must work long hours at insecure and inflexible jobs that prevent them from meeting their children after school or responding to others’ needs in their households; find they cannot afford child care costs; must pay inflated rents for homes or apartments from which they may be evicted; and cannot cover crucial utility bills. These problems pose unending stresses for parents. As a result, they may develop chronic depression, withdraw into alcoholism or drug addiction, become sexual predators or violent abusers of others, or fail to sustain loving relationships with other persons in their families. Often too those parents move frequently with their children to distant cities, hoping thereby to escape from problems or find better jobs, or—worse—when they have only minimal resources, those persons may become homeless and must live in shelters, in automobiles, or on the streets. Moreover, older youths in impoverished families may face strong pressures to drop out of school and seek unskilled, low-paying employment in order to supplement the meager incomes of their homes.

And home-based problems may also reflect the fact that impoverished parents simply cannot afford to buy the equipment and experiences that would support the education of their children. Tragically, their homes often lack books and other reading materials, paper and writing tools, computers, or dedicated spaces where youths can do their homework. And parents from impoverished homes can rarely afford to pay for privately financed field trips, summer enrichment programs, or private tutorial services when their children need help with academic subjects.

Not all of these problems appear in each impoverished home, of course. But *many* do, some of the latter are truly serious, and when they are present, the physical, emotional, and cognitive growths of youths in those homes are

constrained and distorted. As well, American youths who experience long-term poverty may be faced with years of unending stress that restrict their abilities to cope with even simple life challenges.

Problems in neighborhoods. Problems in the homes of impoverished youngsters are bad enough, but *American youths often live in poverty ghettos where they are surrounded by other impoverished families, a stressful physical environment, and minimal public facilities and social services, and these conditions spawn other problems.* As we shall see later, poverty ghettos are less likely to appear in other advanced countries, thus in the U.S. such ghettos also generate problems for impoverished youths that are often unique.

Rural poverty ghettos in the U.S. are often isolated environments where only a few elements of the country's broad range of cultures are present, lives are dominated by the limited concerns of specific ethnic or religious groups, drug and alcohol abuse may abound, higher education (or completing school at all) are not valued highly, and youths may be pressured to abandon their own aspirations in order to meet the needs of other persons within extended families.

In contrast, youths living in America's *urban* (or, sometimes, *suburban*) ghettos often experience neighborhoods where Black, Hispanic, or immigrant families are concentrated; many adults are unemployed and few possess educational qualifications; streets and buildings are rife with decay, violence, theft, ethnic conflict, and gang warfare; walls are covered with graffiti; streets are rarely cleaned of trash and dead animals; vehicles filled with commuters who roar past on train tracks or freeways; jobs for youths and opportunities for advancement are scarce; parks, museums, and theaters are not available; and merchants charge exorbitant prices for food and other necessities.

And wherever they are found, American poverty ghettos often feature concentrations of alienated, disaffected, and often angry young people; few-if-any adult role models who portray economic or professional success; inadequate clinics, nursing, and hospital facilities; a shortage of affordable public transportation or public libraries; and few recreation facilities designed to serve the needs of youths. And too often those ghettos are plagued by poisons in the air, water, and food that ghetto residents must ingest.

Not surprisingly, some of these problems pose truly severe burdens for impoverished youths. And although specific poverty ghettos will not feature all of these problems, some inevitably appear in each poverty ghetto, and all such problems generate burdens for the youths who must endure them.

Problems in schools. In addition, impoverished American youths often encounter problems in the schools they attend, and again these problems are often unique to the United States. At least three types of school problems may be distinguished. First, some school-based problems appear because of laws or customs pressuring students to enroll only in local schools, and this means that *impoverished students living in America's poverty ghettos are likely to attend neighborhood schools that enroll large numbers of impoverished youths.* Severe

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concentrations of poor youths within schools typically create climates of alienation and despair (if not anger and violence) among students, and those schools often report high rates of transiency among students and teachers. Such conditions mean that schools with high-poverty rates find it very hard to provide high-morale environments that are physically safe, emotionally supportive, and educationally challenging.

Second, impoverished youths often encounter problems because of the peculiar way in which America funds public schools. Public education in other advanced countries is largely funded by state or national governments which provide *equal* funds for each student enrolled in each local school—and a few enlightened countries even provide *extra* funding for schools serving concentrations of needy students. In sharp contrast, public schools in America are operated by local school boards, and more than half of their funding comes from taxes paid by the communities those boards represent. This means that whenever a poverty ghetto is served by its own local school board, that board simply cannot extract sufficient funds from constituents to provide adequate support for its school. And when poverty ghettos appear as neighborhoods within a larger metropolis, the board serving that large city often finds reasons for providing extra funds for schools serving affluent families. All of which means, of course, that *most schools in America's poverty ghettos receive restricted funding—i.e., per-student funding that is one third or less than that provided for schools serving more affluent students.*

Restricted funding generates many problems for impoverished American youths. Schools with miserable funding may be housed in unsafe, overcrowded buildings with inoperative toilets, leaking roofs, broken windows, inadequate heating or cooling systems, and vermin infestations. Too often those schools have difficulty competing with better-funded, suburban schools for qualified and talented teachers, and key courses in their curricula may be taught by unqualified personnel. Often those schools cannot afford needed computers, audiovisual equipment, up-to-date curricular packages, musical instruments, art supplies, and libraries. (In the worst cases, they may have no funds for buying textbooks, basic laboratory equipment, uniforms for student athletes, or goal posts for their football fields!) In contrast with more affluent schools, they may be unable to hire nurses, counselors, or other health professionals, let alone staff responsible for outreach programs in their communities, and they rarely have resources for funding field trips, enrichment programs, and special curricula designed for student groups in their neighborhoods. And if these problems were not sufficient, schools in crime-ridden urban ghettos often must use some of their meager funds to erect barbed-wire fences, hire armed guards, and install metal detectors at their entrances.

Problems in schools that suffer from both poverty concentration and miserable funding may be truly draconian, but impoverished American youngsters are also punished by a third type of problem reflecting *discriminatory practices* appearing in many American schools. Among such practices are: *American tracking, remedial, and enrichment programs that are designed to provide extra*

resources for “talented” students (who, because of biased selection procedures, more often come from affluent homes) while denying those resources to “less deserving” students (who are more often impoverished); and *America’s long summer academic “vacation” which interrupts learning for all students but is particularly hard on youths from impoverished families* (who cannot afford to pay for youths’ summer enrichment experiences). These practices also do not often appear in other advanced nations, so the problems they generate for impoverished American youths also tend to be unique.

Summary. To summarize then, within the United States, impoverished youths suffer from at least five different sources of problems which may be truly serious:

- those stemming from their impoverished families;
- those arising in the impoverished ghettos in which they often live;
- those reflecting poverty concentration in the schools they often attend;
- those resulting from miserable funding for the schools they attend; and
- those generated by discriminatory practices common in American schools.

Few impoverished youths encounter the full panoply of these problems, but all will have to face some or more of them. And this means that America has organized its society so that impoverished youths must bear *a host* of often serious burdens that are not borne by nonimpoverished youths and are often unknown to those living in affluent and middle-income homes. And unfortunately, these burdens are *more* likely to appear in the U.S. than in other advanced nations.

How do American youths respond when forced to cope with a huge number of intractable, poverty-generated problems? Responses will differ from youngster to youngster, of course, but let’s examine how such events affected one real victim. Exhibit 2.4 was written by Valerie Polakow, a scholar-activist, who then directed a center for the study of child and family problems and has written extensively about women and children in poverty, homelessness, and child care policies in America and elsewhere. In this quote she describes her recent experiences with “Michael” who has experienced both poverty and homelessness.

Michael’s story is unique for the scope and severity of problems he has experienced, but in the U.S. at least some such problems are loaded onto the backs of *all* impoverished young people. And this means that youth poverty poses a truly massive challenge in the United States. As we now know, each year since the mid-1980s, one fifth or more of all young Americans have experienced poverty; thus this scourge afflicts more infants, youngsters, and adolescents in the country than any other known challenge; and rates for youth poverty are now growing. Nor is youth poverty an innocent experience. Within America, impoverished youths experience a host of problems stemming from their homes, their neighborhoods, and their schools. Some of these problems are mild, but others are truly severe, and collectively they place huge burdens on the backs of impoverished youngsters that are neither experienced nor understood by those in typical middle- or upper-income homes in the U.S. Thus, in America, the scope of youth poverty is wide, deep, pernicious, and too often misunderstood.

Exhibit 2.4. Michael's Story

Michael is a bright, articulate, 8-year-old who has experienced four episodes of homelessness in his young life. He was born into homelessness after his mother, eight months pregnant, fled to Michigan to escape his father's violence. During the latest episode, when the family fled from drug and gang violence at a public housing site, Michael was so traumatized that as I drove the family to a shelter, he lay on the floor of my car, screaming and clutching his pillow as he cried: "I hate this life—why can't I live in a place like other kids—it's not fair—I won't have friends no more at school—it's the worst thing in the world when you don't got no home. I never want to go in that shelter." Michael lay crying on the floor, curled up in a fetal position, and refused to leave the car to set foot in the shelter. An hour later, after being coaxed inside he sat on the stairway, angrily shouting about his mother, "Why does she do this to us—why can't we have a regular home like other kids—I can't go to school no more 'cos my friends will find out I'm in a shelter—I hate her, I hate her—I'm gonna run away from here"

During the three months that Michael spent alternating between the shelter and a "welfare motel" he experienced terrible nightmares, became very fearful, and lashed out aggressively at classmates in school. He ran away from school twice in the middle of the day and was punished by suspension. After the family was rehoused, Michael witnessed renewed threats of violence against his mother, by his father, who had tracked her down in Michigan. At that point Michael snapped. One afternoon the school janitor found him trying to crawl into the furnace, saying he wanted to die. Soon after, he was hospitalized for 14 days at a children's psychiatric unit. When I visited him in the hospital he told me, "I don't got no reason to live." ...

Michael was forced to endure both the trauma of homelessness and the terror of violence against his mother [and sister]; yet, during these months, he did not receive any intervention services from either of the two schools he attended. When he and his family lived at the welfare motel, his mother was forced to use a cab to get him to school, despite the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act provisions. The result was many absences from school and a rapid drain on her limited resources. When the family was rehoused in a different area, Michael had to change schools, losing friends and a supportive classroom teacher. When his episodes of aggressive and unmanageable behavior began at his new school, there were persistent reports of misbehavior to his mother, followed by school suspensions. Until Michael became suicidal and was hospitalized, there had been no psychological or educational interventions available to support him, despite clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Rather, he was considered a burden—one of "them," a kid who did not fit—whose destitution and continuing family upheaval disrupted the classroom. What future do such children have? In many ways, Michael serves a poster child for the "other" America—one of the many discards along the path of invisibility.

—Valerie Polakow (2003, pp. 95-96)

WHICH YOUTHS ARE IMPOVERISHED?

In the popular discourse on poverty, for decades the poor have been assigned the roles of “deserving” and “undeserving” in a morality play staged for others In antiyouth discourses, the young, especially the poor and young people of color, are being used in much the same way. Public discourses like those on teenage pregnancy, youth violence, and to some extent educational reform, depict [impoverished] young people in ways that scapegoat them for some of the nation’s most serious problems and offer the nation a simplistic picture of itself: one populated by two groups of people—the responsible, respectable (and usually older and white) majority, on one hand, and the irresponsible, dangerous (and often younger and dark) minority, on the other.

—Sue Books (1998, p. 184)

When asked to think about poverty, many Americans assume that it is limited to specific groups in the population, and—by extension—such beliefs are sometimes also applied to poverty among young people. Beliefs such as these are not only associated with the unique history of the country but are also promoted by media portrayals of poverty and propaganda issued by far-right sources. Let’s take a look at some of these stereotypes and see whether they really apply to youths in America, and if so whether they help us to understand America’s huge rates of youth poverty.²²

Blacks, Hispanics, and Youth Poverty

One of the strongest set of beliefs about poverty in the United States is that much of it is generated by *African-Americans*; thus many Americans believe that most of those who are poor are also Black and that most Blacks are also poor. So strong is this association that when a recent survey of American adults asked, “‘What percent of all the poor people in this country would you say are Black?’,” the median response was 50 percent. And when another survey asked, “‘Of all people who are poor in this country, are more of them Black or more of them White?, 55 percent of ... respondents chose Black, compared with 24 percent who chose White (with 31 percent volunteering ‘about equal’).”²³

In addition, some Americans assume that poverty problems appear because too many *Hispanics* have been allowed into the country, although this belief is more likely to surface in locales where poor Hispanic immigrants are clustered. But whether it is tied to Black or Hispanic identity, the presumed association between race (or ethnicity) and poverty tends to generate additional notions; crucially that prejudicial shortcomings thought to be characteristic of persons in those groups—such as “stupidity,” “laziness,” “irresponsibility,” “criminality,” or other supposed character defects—are responsible for the bulk of poverty and its associated problems.²⁴

As it happens, widespread belief in these stereotypes has only recently evolved. As noted above, in earlier years Americans tended to associate poverty

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with immigrant groups from Ireland, Scandinavia, and Southern or Eastern Europe, “forgotten” communities in Appalachia, and desperate refugees who fled the American “dust bowl” in the 1930s. And although many impoverished Blacks had long lived in rural areas of the South, their plights were largely ignored by the bulk of mostly White Americans living in the North. And only a trickle of Hispanics were then entering the United States.

All of this began to change during the Great Depression and World War Two. Large numbers of poor Black Americans began migrating out of the South, and many moved into more-visible ghettos in northern cities. In addition, earlier discriminatory practices that had limited federal support for impoverished Black families came under attack, so larger portions of federal aid were thereafter awarded to African-American families.²⁵ Then, in the 1960s, leaders of the civil rights movement began to place greater emphasis on economic discrimination, urban riots that rocked the nation during the summers of 1964 through 1968 called attention to Black urban poverty, and many Hispanic immigrants began to flood into southwestern states and major American cities, notably New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles.

These factors set the stage for shifts in America’s images of poverty, but those shifts seem to have been touched off by changes in the way poverty was portrayed in the mass media. Prior to 1960, for example, poverty was rarely featured in America’s news magazines, and most of those depictions did not focus on African-Americans. By 1965, however, many poverty stories were appearing in those sources, the bulk of such stories featured Black Americans, and these trends continue to this day.²⁶ Given such media stress, it is hardly surprising that many Americans began to assume that poverty was “largely a Black problem,” nor is it hard to understand why beliefs that poverty is also a “Hispanic problem” began to appear among Americans living in venues where newly arrived, impoverished Hispanic immigrants were concentrated.

Be that as it may, beliefs that poverty is largely confined to Blacks or Hispanics have serious consequences. They encourage Americans to “explain” poverty by citing the supposed shortcomings of these groups and to conclude that poverty is unimportant because it is largely confined to “them.”²⁷ In addition, the presumed close tie between poverty and race confuses thinking about both issues and distorts debates about programs designed to reduce the burdens of either.

As was noted in Chapter One, striking examples of such confused thinking appeared in public discussions of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans. Other examples surfaced in the way in which beliefs about poverty and race distorted debates about welfare programs. Although minor “reforms” to America’s welfare system had appeared under Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter, serious attacks on the concept of welfare erupted early in the Reagan years, and in his first campaign for the presidency, Bill Clinton was led to promise that he would “end welfare as we know it.” This promise was largely ignored during Clinton’s first two years, but conservative Republicans took control of Congress in 1994 and thereafter placed pressure on the president for serious welfare reform. Finally, in 1996, President Clinton agreed to a reform act that would reduce

governmental assistance for poor adults and help (or force) them into employment. As various authors have pointed out, debates involved in these events would have been far different had not Americans believed that the bulk of its poorest citizens are “persons of color” with character defects and that America’s welfare programs had been unfairly lavished on those undeserving individuals.²⁸

Well, are beliefs about a truly close tie between poverty and persons of color justified? Is it true that most poor youths in America are Black (or Hispanic) and that most Black youths (or Hispanic youths) are poor? Answers for such questions may be found in data published by the U.S. Census Bureau which reported Official poverty figures from 1997 for four racial/ethnic categories of impoverished American youths: those from families who said they were *White*, those from families who self-identified as *Black*, those from families claiming to be *Hispanic* (and could be of any race), and those from families who said they were of “*Asian or Pacific Island*” descent. The graphs set forth in Sections A and B of Exhibit 2.5 were derived from these data.

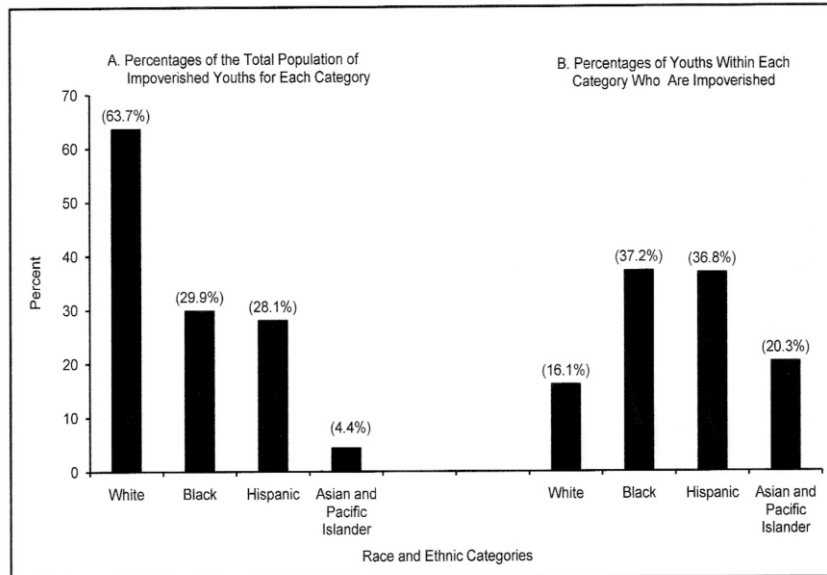
Section A reports percentages in the total population of impoverished youths appearing in each of these four categories, and as can be seen there, most impoverished youths in the country did *not* then come from families who were identified as *Black*, *Hispanic*, or of “*Asian and Pacific Island*” descent; rather nearly two thirds (63.7%) came from families who said they were *White*! This is hardly surprising, given that the bulk of American families have long been classified as “*White*” in census data, but since 1997 was not dissimilar to other recent years for poverty rates, it confirms that the tragedy of impoverishment is *not* confined to either Black or Hispanic youths in the U.S. When it comes to *numbers* of youths, then, impoverishment is an all-American problem.

But are Black and Hispanic youngsters more likely to be impoverished in America? To answer this question, turn to Section B of the exhibit. The stereotype would have it that poverty is far more likely among Black and Hispanic youngsters, and in partial confirmation of this belief, Section B indicates that poverty rates were indeed higher for *Black* and *Hispanic* youngsters in 1997. But does this mean that “most” Black and Hispanic youngsters were then impoverished? No, it does not. As can be seen, in 1997 only about one third of youths in each of these two groups were impoverished, so the bulk of youths in both groups are *not* impoverished.

And this means that both of the key stereotypic claims about truly close ties between poverty and race (or ethnicity) are not supported for American youngsters. Although *poverty rates are greater for Black and Hispanic youngsters in America, most of the country’s impoverished youngsters are actually White, and the “typical” Black or Hispanic youth does not come from an impoverished home.* And this means that if youths from these two groups should actually share widespread character “defects” (however unlikely this seems), those “defects” are *not* responsible for the bulk of America’s youth poverty problems.

This does not mean, of course, that impoverished youths who are Black or Hispanic face challenges that are identical to those faced by other youths from poor

Exhibit 2.5. Proportions of Impoverished Youths in Various Race and Ethnic Categories



Source: *Poverty in the United States: 1997* (Dalaker, J., & Naifeh, M., 1998, Table C-2).
 Note: Youths of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

families. Rather, stubborn prejudices, unique cultural histories, ghetto-based segregation, and persisting discrimination combine to guarantee that the experiences of impoverished youths will differ, at least in part, depending on race and ethnic identity, and those from Black and Hispanic families often face truly *severe* challenges in America. (Indeed, evidence bearing on some of these challenges is explored below and in Chapter Four.)

Does Youth Poverty Persist?

Next, we turn to another poverty stereotype that appears in both far-right propaganda and the mass media—the notion that much of American poverty is *persistent* and that America’s high rates of youth poverty appear largely because many families (particularly those who are Black or Hispanic) are mired in poverty and persist in an impoverished, dependent state, year after year. Is this belief justified? Is the bulk of American youth poverty generated by families who are permanently mired in impoverishment, and if not, what do we know about poverty spells and the likelihood that young Americans will experience poverty over the years?

One cannot answer these questions by looking at information from the U. S. Census Bureau, for such data concern merely the number of persons who experience poverty during a given year. To answer them, one must turn to *panel* studies in which a sample of persons is studied, again and again, over the years. Although many panel studies concerned with young Americans have appeared, most have focused on youths who were teenagers when the studies began and thus have provided little information about the poverty experiences of infants or young children.²⁹

An exception to this generalization appeared, however, in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). This study began, in 1968, when persons from 4,800 households, chosen to match the nonimmigrant American population, were contacted and interviewed. The sampled households contained about 18,000 people, including persons of all ages, and during subsequent years the PSID has endeavored to recontact these persons annually. Some of the questions asked in the study have concerned family income, and this means that the PSID has been able to track the economic prospects and poverty experiences of young persons and their families over subsequent years.³⁰

These features of the PSID are very attractive, but several limitations of the effort should also be noted. For one, the study began in the late-1960s, its initial data were collected more than a generation ago when rates for youth poverty were lower than they are today, and this means that some effects found in PSID studies may no longer apply. (To illustrate, from its beginning the PSID had generated somewhat *lower* estimates for poverty rates than those reported in Official statistics, and scholars have not yet fully agreed upon explanations for these differences.³¹) For another, since its initial sample was restricted to non-immigrant families, PSID data generate good evidence for Black and White families, but they provide little information for Hispanics. For a third, PSID data files provide details about both the families and neighborhoods of youths but no information about the schools to which they are exposed. And finally, *all* panel studies face problems because some persons in the original sample cannot be found later on or are unwilling to participate in subsequent waves of data collection. (Fortunately, this last issue seems to have generated only minor problems for PSID.)

Bearing in mind both the strengths and limitations of the PSID, what do findings from this effort suggest about the persistence of poverty among young Americans?³² Above all, they do *not* suggest that the bulk of impoverished youths come from families that are mired in poverty. (True, one can certainly find such families in the United States, but they generate fewer than 10% of youth poverty cases.) Nor, for that matter, do they suggest that most youth poverty is *transient* in nature and is not repeated in subsequent years. (Families with children can also be found who experience but a single poverty episode lasting a year or less, but such families generate only about a quarter of all youth poverty cases, and less than 15% of impoverished families endure a nonrepeated poverty episode that lasts for two or more years.) Instead, the bulk of youth poverty is generated by families that experience *repeated* episodes of on-and-off poverty. The latter

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families cycle back and forth between states of poverty and “near poverty” and have difficulty ever breaking out of the low-income hole into comfortable, middle-income lives.

Putting these ideas together, PSID evidence suggests that “more than 50% of those who are poor at any given time are in the midst of a spell of poverty [and/or near-poverty] which will last ten years or more.”³³ In addition, the fact that substantial amounts of youth poverty are volatile means that an astounding 35 to 40% of all youngsters in America will experience at least one episode of poverty before they reach legal age.

PSID evidence also indicates that differing poverty patterns are associated with specific types of families. Families that experience only transient poverty are more often *White*, are frequently headed by a male parent with 12 or more years of education, are more likely to have three or fewer children, and may never experience poverty subsequently. Those that endure repeated episodes of poverty and near-poverty may be of *any race* and are often headed by a parent who lacks a high school education. And those few families that suffer from permanent, unremitting poverty are more often *Black*, are often headed by a woman with little education, and are likely to involve many children.³⁴

Given the volatility of many poverty experiences, PSID analysts have also begun to examine events associated with a family’s entry into and exit from poverty. Not surprisingly, the same types of events seem to be involved in both processes. These include: loss (or gain) of a parent, loss (or gain) of a parental job, loss (or gain) in availability of work hours, loss (or gain) in work opportunities for others in the family, and disabilities that afflict (or no longer affect) the head of the family.

To summarize then, PSID evidence suggests that the bulk of youth poverty is *not* generated by families that are mired in a permanent, impoverished state. Nor is most of that poverty generated by families that experience only a short, transient poverty event (although more than a third of American youths will experience poverty before they are 18). Rather, *much of American youth poverty is generated by families that suffer from repeated poverty experiences and have difficulty climbing out of the low-income hole.*

The Geography of Youth Poverty

Two generations ago, Americans often assumed that poverty was centered in southern states—particularly in the Appalachian Highlands, the sharecroppered fields of the Deep South, and the drought-ridden dust bowls of Texas and Oklahoma—as well as in northeastern port cities where impoverished immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were clustered. Current media images suggest, however, that poverty is now largely a product of the ethnic ghettos of large urban centers, and, by implication, the rest of the nation need not worry about poverty. Are the latter beliefs accurate when it comes to contemporary youth poverty?

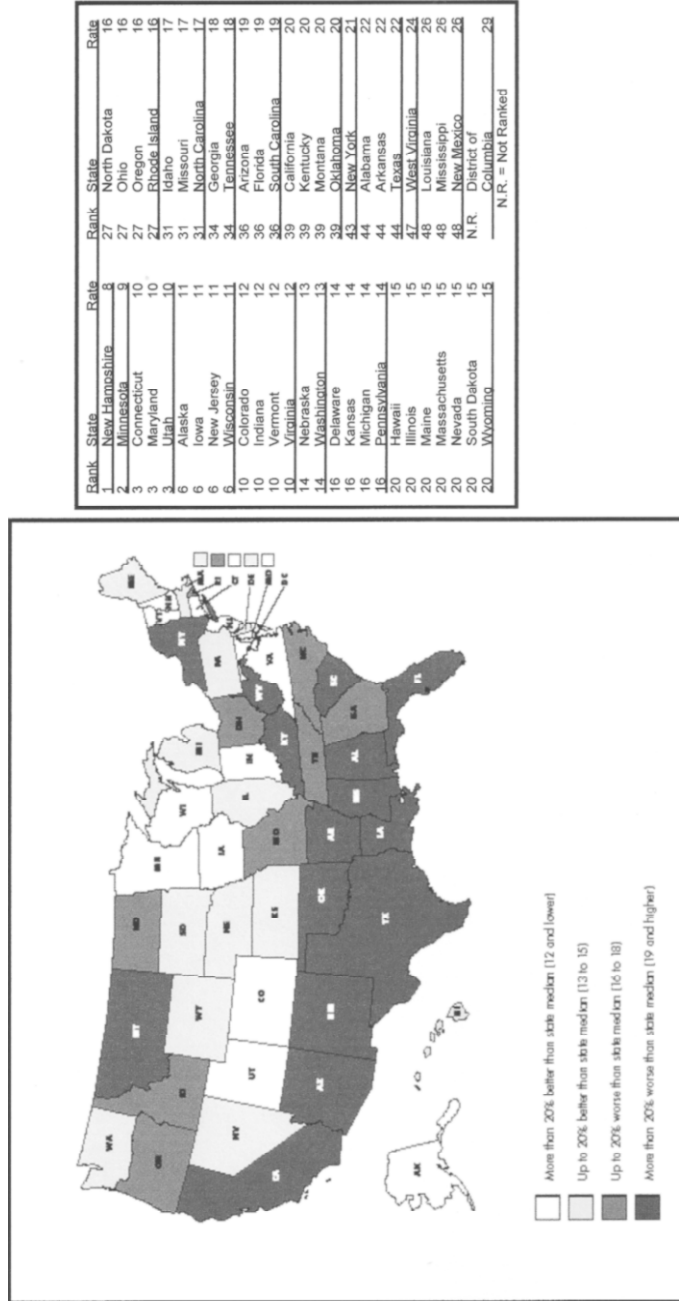
As is sometimes true for stereotypes, these images reflect at least some reality. Take a look at Exhibit 2.6 which portrays Official 2003 figures for poverty among “children” on a state-by-state basis.³⁵ As can be seen in the figure, excessive rates of youth poverty certainly occur in New York and California, and one must assume that these high rates reflect concentrations of youth poverty in the large urban areas of New York City, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay area. In addition, the “state” now reporting the highest rate of youth poverty is the District of Columbia where data come exclusively from a large urban population. On the other hand, note that high rates of youth poverty still persist now in the Appalachian Highlands, the Deep South, and the southwestern states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

When pushed to their limits, however, stereotypes may also mislead. If one were to judge by the mass media or some scholarly works focused on urban poverty,³⁶ almost all of youth poverty would surely be found in the centers of America’s major cities, but this is simply not the case. Several years ago, analysts at the Children’s Defense Fund used data supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau to calculate the proportions of impoverished youths who lived in central-city, suburban, and rural venues in 1992. According to their estimates, slightly less than half (44%) of all youth poverty cases were to be found in America’s central cities, whereas nearly a third (31%) appeared in suburbs, and fully a quarter (25%) were located in rural areas.³⁷ This suggests that *although the bulk of American youth poverty is now located in urban centers, it appears too in suburban and rural communities.*

This does not mean that youth poverty is scattered randomly throughout the United States. On the contrary, youth poverty in America is often *ghettoized*—is concentrated in specific residential neighborhoods that stand apart from others where middle-income and affluent people more often live. Some of these ghettos are indeed found in urban centers (witness the infamous ghetto neighborhoods of South Los Angeles or the South Bronx in New York City), but others (such as East St. Louis, Illinois) are suburban, whereas still others are rural (such as the impoverished, culturally isolated hamlets of Appalachia or the Deep South, the rural barrios of the Southwest, depopulating rural communities of the Upper Midwest, or America’s struggling Indian reservations).

America’s poverty ghettos have appeared for historical reasons, some of them inadvertent, some the product of ugly prejudice or discrimination against minority groups. Among the former, and in sharp contrast with cities in Europe, most American cities are surrounded by hinterlands that can be developed for suburban housing, and ever since World War Two, real estate developers and the federal government have been promoting suburbs around those sites where White families with similar incomes and outlooks can live in proximity. This process has created residential ghettos for both those who move to the suburbs and those who are left behind in urban cores. Among the latter, discriminatory procedures followed by many real estate firms, lending practices common in banks, and federal government policies have long promoted segregated urban housing, and public funds have often been used to erect clusters of high-rise

Exhibit 2.6. Percent of Children in Poverty: 2000
(data reflect poverty in 1999)



Source: Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003).

housing units designed for impoverished families from specific minority groups, so urban poverty ghettos in the U.S. are overwhelmingly populated by Blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants. One would think this distressing, but American discrimination-based, urban poverty ghettoization has actually *increased* since the 1980s. This process has been prompted by shifts in federal policies regarding desegregated schooling, and a fuller description of it appears in Chapter Seven.

Poverty ghettos are not unique to the United States, of course; indeed such enclaves appeared years ago in some European cities, for example. But whenever poverty ghettos are tolerated, they are associated with at least two nasty outcomes: Residents of those ghettos lack resources and cannot afford to maintain their own public facilities and social services, so either those facilities and services rot or they must be supported by reluctant largess from the wider society. And, by physically isolating those who are poor, they allow middle-income and affluent citizens to turn their backs and look away from poverty problems. These outcomes are well known, and many advanced nations now take steps to dismantle or prevent the growth of poverty ghettos. But as a rule, the United States does *not* take such steps, indeed American poverty ghettos, mostly populated by minorities, are now more prevalent and segregated than before World War Two, or indeed a decade ago,³⁸ and this means that—in sharp contrast with most other advanced nations—*many impoverished youths in America now face problems stemming, not only from their homes, but from the poverty ghettos where they often live.*

This does not mean that the problems faced by youths are identical in all types of poverty ghettos. As was suggested earlier, urban, suburban, and rural ghettos differ somewhat in the problems they pose, and young Americans who are crowded into high-poverty, central-city ghettos may face truly awful challenges. Chapter Five examines some of the effects of ghetto-associated poverty problems.

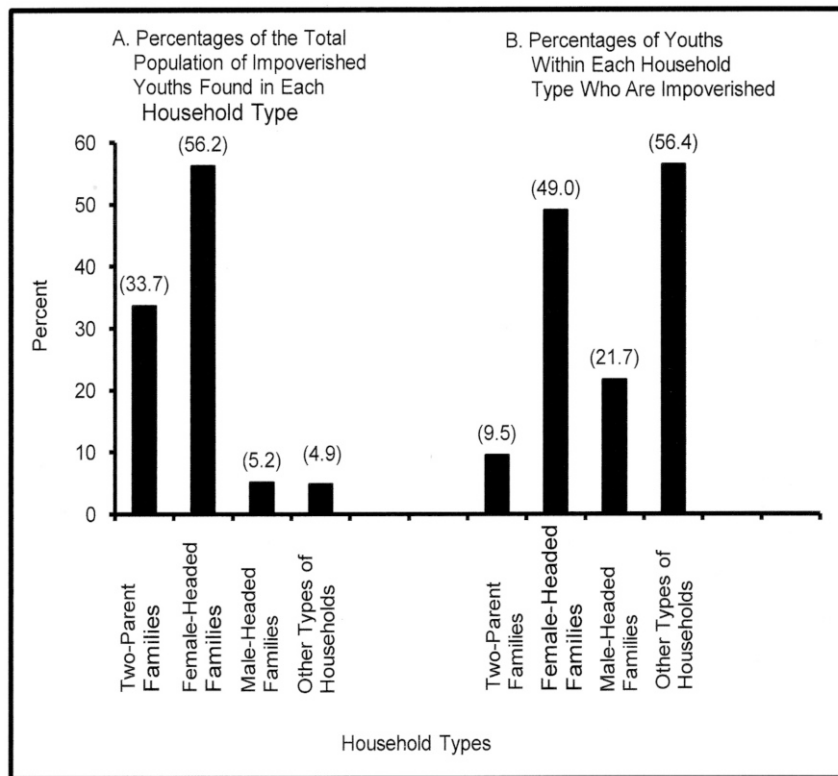
Youth Poverty and Single-Parent Families

Another media-promoted stereotype has it that poverty is largely confined to families headed by single, unmarried mothers. (After all, single-parent families have but one breadwinner, and many single mothers have only restricted opportunities for employment.) Moreover, this idea has also been embraced by far-right propagandists who sometimes claim that America's youth poverty problems could be "solved" if only unwed mothers could be induced to (re)marry.³⁹ Do such ideas hold up when we look at the evidence?

Partial answers for this question may be found in Exhibit 2.7 which displays Official 1997 youth poverty rates, obtained again from the U.S. Census Bureau, for four types of households—those families headed by *two parents*, a *single mother*, a *single father*, and "*other*" types of households. (Two-parent families included those where youths were living with both a "father" and a "mother," whether those persons were married, were unmarried biological parents, or were stepparents of the youths. "Other" types of households included those headed by

grandparents or two adults of the same sex, those embedded within larger household units, foster-parent households, and orphanages or other nonstandard living venues.)

Exhibit 2.7. Proportions of Impoverished Youths in Various Types of Households



Source: U.S. Census Bureau data accessed through the web at census.gov/macro/031998/new2_001.htm

As can be seen in Section A of the exhibit, in 1997 more than half of all impoverished youths were indeed living in homes headed by a single mother, so since poverty rates for 1997 were not dissimilar to those for other recent years, the stereotype which associates youth poverty with single mothers is partially supported. However, two exceptions to this generalization should also be noted. For one, in 1997 large numbers of impoverished youths—indeed more than one third of the total—were living in *two-parent* families! Thus, forces beyond those associated with divorce and unwed motherhood also now help to generate

American youth poverty. As well, Section B of the exhibit suggests that—although poverty rates are indeed high for female-headed families, male-headed families and “other” types of households may be relatively rare in the United States, youths living in these two types of venues are *also* likely to suffer impoverishment.

Youth poverty rates for household types during recent years seem to be a straightforward matter, but if we look at the historical record, we learn that the story is more complex. If we look at data for 30 years ago, for example, we discover that fewer American families were then headed by single parents, particularly single mothers, and data documenting such changes are also available from the U.S. Census Bureau.⁴⁰ To illustrate, in 1968 fully 88% of all American families with children were headed by a father and a mother, 11% had only a mother, and 1% had a single father. In contrast, by 1997 the proportion of dual-parent families had fallen to 71% while those for families headed by single mothers and fathers had risen to 24% and 6% respectively. These historic shifts are widely discussed and have provided fuel for far-right propagandists who have fulminated about “the ‘decline’ (sic) of the traditional American family.” Other, more balanced analysts have thought they might reflect higher rates of female employment, hence more financial independence among wives, less tolerance for marital discord and spousal abuse, and more acceptance of single parenthood in today’s America. Although the latter interpretations differ sharply from those of far-right pundits, most authors writing about the issue have stressed that families headed by only one parent are likely to face unrelieved responsibilities, restricted incomes, and the problems those events generate.

Such problems apply to all single parents, regardless of gender. However, single mothers in America bear an additional burden. For years, women in the United States have been paid less than men. Data bearing on this issue come again from the U.S. Census Bureau which provides annual figures for salaries earned by men and women.⁴¹ These data show that in the late 1960s the average woman earned less than 60% of the average salary earned by men for full-time, year-round work. This disparity has shrunk slightly over the years, and recently the typical woman receives as much as 70% as does the typical man for full-time work, but this still represents a huge gulf between the salary prospects of men and women. Moreover, women hold the majority of low-paid jobs in America, and of those who hold low-paid jobs, women are also paid more poorly than men.⁴²

Many processes have helped to create disparities in salaries for American men and women, among them the fact that women have traditionally been slated for entry into low-paying occupations, lack of needed services for working mothers such as tax-supported child care centers and paid maternity leaves, salary-setting practices that make promotions less likely for women who take time off to rear children, and outright discrimination against women who are denied promotions open to men or are paid lower wages for equivalent work. Most of these processes are shameful and have been challenged in other advanced nations where equal salaries for men and women are often mandated by law, but Americans have so far failed to ratify a proposed constitutional amendment that

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would guarantee such rights, and it seems likely that, as of now, women in the United States will continue to receive the short end of the salary stick. And this means, in turn, that many American families headed by single mothers will continue to experience poverty simply because those mothers cannot find jobs that pay a living wage. This reasoning also helps us understand why youth poverty rates shot upwards after the mid-1970s, for this was a period of sharp growth in the number of families headed by single mothers, and although many of those mothers worked at full-time jobs, they were paid only poverty-level wages.

To summarize then, *recent years have brought sharp increases in the numbers of American families headed by single parents (particularly mothers), a process that has burdened parents with additional problems—particularly mothers who have fewer opportunities to earn a living wage—and this process has been a major reason for the spike in youth poverty rates that began in the 1970s.* However, *American youth poverty rates are also high among families headed by two parents and single fathers, and this suggests that additional forces creating youth poverty are also at work.* (Regarding the contention that youth poverty would disappear if only single women were induced to (re)marry, no research seems yet to have addressed this absurd thesis.)

Youth Poverty and Parental Employment

Yet another stereotype bearing on youth poverty appears only occasionally in the mass media but is heavily promoted by far-right ideologues—the notion that impoverished parents are lazy and simply don't work enough; thus many of America's "poverty problems" would disappear if only impoverished parents could be persuaded (or were forced) to work for a living. Is this nasty stereotype accurate, and might it help us understand America's huge rate of youth poverty?

Actually, it is blatant nonsense. In today's America, the bulk of parents in impoverished families are *employed*, and their employment tends to be in full-time, year-round jobs. Recent results supporting this picture have come from the National Center for Children in Poverty, again making use of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, concern low-income households earning less than 200% of Official Poverty Thresholds, and are displayed in Exhibit 2.8. (In this figure, employment rates for two-parent families apply to the major breadwinner of the family.) As can be seen in the figure, *American employment rates differ for households headed by two parents, a single father, and a single mother—but none of these family types is likely to be headed by an unemployed person; rather the "typical" parent in such households is employed in a full-time, year-round job.* In addition, when parents (particularly mothers) work only part of the year, more than half of those persons report that they are unable to find year-round employment, more than a third of those who work part-time complain that they cannot find full-time work, and the bulk of low-income parents who do not work at all say that they have to take care of family members or report that they are disabled.⁴³

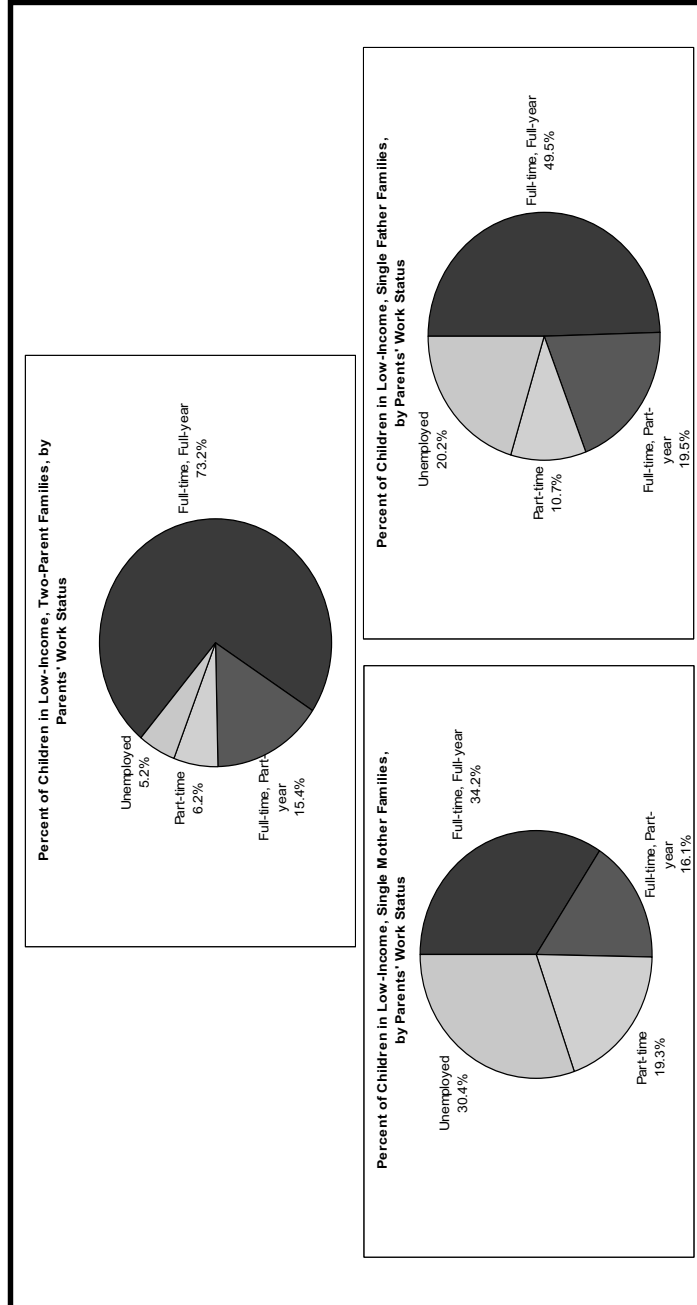
Parental Salaries and Youth Poverty

But if most parents in impoverished American families are employed—and often in full-time, year-round jobs—how can we account for the fact that so many of those families are impoverished? Unraveling this puzzle begins with a simple truth—those parents are paid *miserable* wages. One of the saddest economic facts of American society is that the bulk of its low-income parents are paid poverty-level salaries, and the buying power of those salaries has been shrinking for a generation.

It is easy to document these claims. For 10 years, from 1997 to 2007, America's federal minimum wage was mired at \$5.15 per hour, but it was recently raised in three small steps and was then again frozen in the summer of 2009 at \$7.25. Such figures are remarkably stingy. Never, since the federal minimum wage was first established in 1938, has it “been sufficient to raise a family [of four] out of poverty if only one family member works” full time, and the inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage is now sharply less than in 1968, when it was most generous.⁴⁴ Why should such policies have prevailed? Raises in the federal minimum wage require congressional action in the United States, and those changes have always provoked opposition from conservative forces that value profits over poverty relief. Moreover, Congress has always made certain that minimum wage legislation would not apply to all jobs in the country. So it remains true that if a parent works full time, is the sole wage earner in a family with children, and can only find a job paying the federal minimum wage, that person does *not* earn enough to keep his or her family above the Official poverty threshold.

But is this scenario likely? Right-wing economists like to claim that the typical wages earned by unskilled workers are largely set by market forces, and that raising the federal minimum wage has little impact on average wages but, rather, limits employment and throttles economic growth.⁴⁵ Thus it is appropriate that we look also at figures for the actual salaries of low-income parents and the funds available in their families. I begin with salaries earned. According to analyses of census data reported by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), during each year since 1973, 25 to 30% of American workers earned not more than a “poverty-level wage”; i.e. a wage “that a full-time, year-round worker must earn to sustain a family of four at the poverty threshold.”⁴⁶ True, the wage threshold figure cited by EPI is greater than the federal minimum wage, but EPI analyses indicate that a single wage earner would have to earn \$9.04 per hour for a family of four—expressed in “equivalent 2003 dollars”—to keep his or her family out of poverty. This suggests, in turn, that low-income families of four persons can “make it” in America as long as *both* parents work and their combined incomes exceed the “poverty-level wage” threshold, but such families sink quickly into poverty if one parent drops out of the labor force for any reason—such as illness, loss of a job, or the need to provide care for infants or sick children. Since events such as these occur frequently, this sounds like a recipe for disaster, and too often that disaster cannot be avoided in the United States.

Exhibit 2.8. Percent of Children in Low-Income Families by Parents' Work Status



Source: Ayana Douglas-Hall (with kind assistance from Heather Koball, March, 2005).

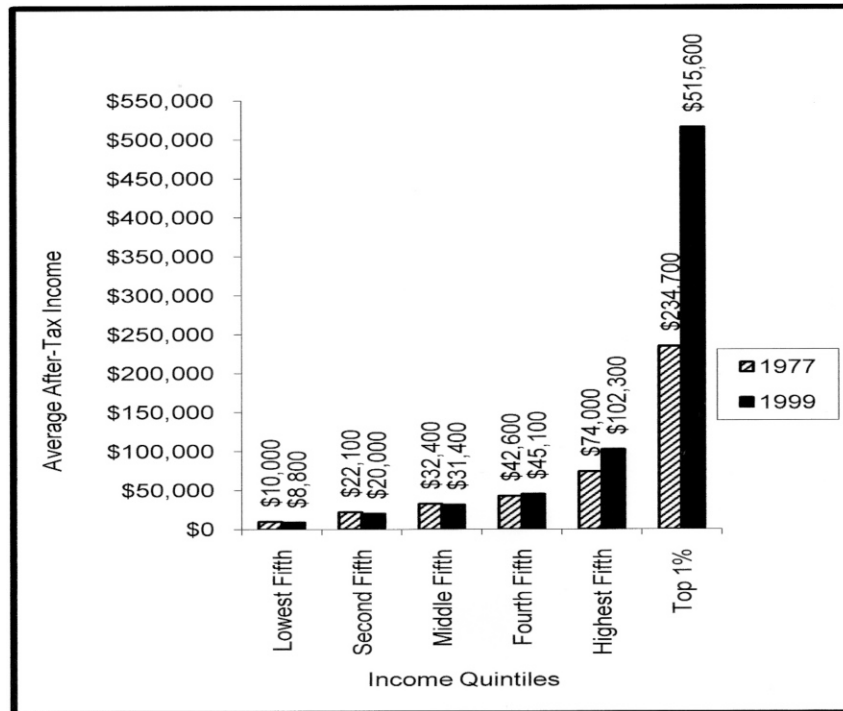
Is there no alternative to this cruel picture? Indeed there is. As we shall see in Chapter Three, other advanced nations differ from America in that their low-paid workers receive higher average salaries, and this means that their low-income families are less likely to be driven into poverty when one parent loses employment. So one obvious way to change the American picture would be to pay better salaries to low-income workers.

How does America's miserable salary performance translate into funds available for low-income families? Another report from The Economic Policy Institute, based on data for 1997-1999, estimates that among families headed by one or two parents with earned income and containing one to three children under the age of 12, more than 28% had total incomes which fell below 200% of Official Poverty Thresholds.⁴⁷ At first blush, this does not sound alarming, but careful analysis reveals that many of these families could *not* afford to pay for their basic needs. Although both parents worked at full-time jobs, they were paid such low wages that they could not bring home the income needed to provide "a minimum 'decent' standard of living" for themselves and their children.

But has this picture changed in recent years? Until the onset of America's current deep recession, federal statistics and mass media images in the United States painted glowing portraits of economic growth, and many Americans assumed that the standard of living for all persons has been steadily improving since World War Two. Moreover, for a generation or so this belief was based on reality; indeed, for three decades beginning at the end of World War Two, America's per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew each year at a comfortable 1 to 2% rate, and both high-income and low-income Americans benefitted from this growth. In the mid-70s, however, comfortable annual growth in per capita GDP came to an end, and since then America's national economy has *not* grown in per capita terms. Instead, subsequent years have produced little real growth, and the richest of Americans—long used to annual gains in their own incomes—have since maneuvered to create a redistribution of resources so that the inflation-adjusted incomes for their families would continue to *rise* (which meant, of course, that incomes for families earning low- or middle-level wages would *decline*.)

Many Americans are still unfamiliar with this redistributive process, for until recently it was not often discussed in the mass media (let alone propaganda from far-right sources). Let us portray it visually. Exhibit 2.9 displays average after-tax incomes (adjusted for inflation) that were earned by households in each quintile of the American population in 1977 and 1999. As can be seen in the exhibit, households in the bottom three income categories all *lost* purchasing power during this 22-year period, while those in the two highest categories *gained* purchasing power, and incomes enjoyed by the 1% of households *shot ahead* astoundingly. (In percentage terms, typical households in the lowest income category lost 12% of their purchasing power, those in the next lowest category lost 10%, and middle-income households lost 3%. Average households in the second-highest category gained 6%, those in the highest quintile gained

Exhibit 2.9. Estimated Average After-Tax Household Income in 1977 and 1999



Sources: Congressional Budget Office data analyzed by Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Reprinted in the *New York Times*, September 5, 1999, p. 16. See also *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (Phillips, K., 2002, p. 129).

Note: Incomes adjusted for inflation and expressed as 1999 dollar values.

38%, and those few who were already Super-Rich in 1977 enjoyed incomes in 1999 that were 120% greater!)⁴⁸

Many problems are generated for a society when those who are very rich earn ever-larger incomes at the expense of poor and middle-income workers, and the redistributive process now taking place in America has been condemned by many wise commentators.⁴⁹ A host of forces have helped to generate this process (many of them associated with organized far-right pressures on the federal Congress),⁵⁰ but to explore them here would divert us from youth poverty and its problems. For the present, it is sufficient to note that low-income Americans have been hit hard by this process, and the purchasing power of their already meager incomes has been *slipping* since the 1970s.

Taken alone, the data in Exhibit 2.9 suggest that poverty rates should have increased for all types of low-income Americans, but since the mid-70s *older* Americans have been sheltered from income loss by social security and Medicare benefits, and many *adults* have dealt with it by working more hours during the day or more days during the year. Such supports and options are not available to most low-income youths, however, so the major burden of America's ongoing redistribution of incomes has fallen on its *youngest* citizens. And this fact also helps us understand why youth poverty rates began to spike in the mid-70s and has since remained so high. As purchasing power in low-income families has declined, poverty for youths in those families has ballooned.

To sum up then, we've now examined several aspects of parental income that bear on youth poverty issues. Taken together, they paint a sad picture in which *the bulk of low-income parents in America are paid poverty-level salaries, and the buying power of those salaries has been shrinking for a generation, thus miserable parental wages also play a major role in creating and sustaining high rates of youth poverty in America.* Low parental wages also do not fully explain youth poverty, however, since they focus solely on *incomes* available in impoverished families. Youth poverty is also created by *unfairly high tax bills* and *lack of social benefits* for youths and their families, and I've not yet provided reviews of these two issues. (Nor will I do so here. Effective tax relief for low-income families and tax-supported social benefits appear more often in other advanced countries, so it is more convenient to discuss them in Chapter Three which explores youth poverty in comparative perspective.)

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

It's now time to take stock. What have we learned about youth poverty, its assessment, its causes, and its scope in America? And what follows from the findings we have unearthed?

"Poverty" normally connotes lack of tangible resources but is usually assessed by comparing funds available in a family (or household) unit with some threshold indicating a minimal, acceptable standard of living. Controversies have arisen over how to tally available funds and how to set poverty thresholds, and several methods are now used to estimate American poverty rates, but those methods generate findings about youth poverty that complement one another.

Those findings contradict a number of stereotypes about poverty commonly expressed in the United States. Above all, they confirm that youth poverty poses a massive challenge in America, that its scope is both wide and deep, and that it affects not only single-parent families and Black, Hispanic, or immigrant households from urban ghettos but also two-parent families and White households from suburban and rural venues throughout the nation. And because impoverished youngsters often live in poverty ghettos and attend schools where challenges are great and funding is restricted, they are burdened by problems—often severe—stemming not only from their homes, but also from their neighborhoods and schools. Middle- and upper-income Americans who have not

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personally experienced poverty are sometimes tempted to dismiss it as a rare or aberrant state, an unfortunate product of personal deficiencies or “local conditions,” a minor inconvenience, a type of event that has largely disappeared in the “World’s Most Successful Democracy,” or a challenge that can be overcome by all persons who have sufficient “get up and go.” But when it comes to young Americans, such images are wildly off-the-mark. Rather, youth poverty should be recognized as a condition that creates grinding, relentless problems which engulf the lives of millions of America’s youngest, most vulnerable, least blameworthy citizens.

Moreover, youth poverty generates huge costs for the United States. Many of those costs are born by those who experience the ravages of poverty, of course. In 1994 the Children’s Defense Fund published a frightening review of evidence concerning the effects of poverty among America’s youths. In her summary of that evidence, Marion Wright Edelman wrote:

As [the evidence shows,] poverty stacks the odds against children before birth and decreases their chances of being born healthy and of normal birthweight or of surviving; it stunts their physical growth and slows their educational development; frays their family bonds and supports; and increases their chances of neglect or abuse. Poverty wears down their resilience and emotional reserves; saps their spirits and sense of self; and subjects them over time to physical, mental, and emotional assault, injury, and indignity.

Poverty even kills. Low-income children are:

- 2 times more likely to die from birth defects.
- 3 times more likely to die from all causes combined.
- 4 times more likely to die in fires.
- 5 times more likely to die from infectious diseases and parasites.
- 6 times more likely to die from other diseases.

[And] child poverty stalks its survivors down every avenue of their lives. It places them at greater risk of hunger, homelessness, sickness, physical and mental disability, violence, educational failure, teen parenthood, and family stress, and deprives them of positive early childhood experiences that help prepare more affluent children for school and then college and work.

—Marion Wright Edelman (1994, pp. xvi-xvii)

But the costs of youth poverty are borne, not only by its obvious victims, but also by the society at large. When American teenagers respond to poverty by dropping out of school, engaging in early and unprotected sex, embracing illegal drugs, and joining violence-prone street gangs, they become major actors in dramas that generate the country’s huge rates of early pregnancy, venereal diseases, addiction, murders, incarceration in prisons, and early deaths. These problems create major costs for the society at large, and middle- and upper-income Americans also pay for those latter costs when youth poverty is ignored.

As I draft this chapter, a presidential election is again underway, and Americans are being asked again to address serious challenges that threaten their nation—a stubbornly persisting recession, escalated global warming, declining supplies of cheap fuel, a decaying infrastructure, spiraling medical costs, an exploding national debt, devastations wrought by massive storms and unregulated greed in the financial market, and excessive costs of the world’s largest military machine and questionable foreign wars. These challenges are real, but so is the challenge posed by American youth poverty. For when the United States allows a fifth or more of its young people to bear the burdens of poverty, it tolerates a huge horror. Youth poverty is *not* a small matter in America. Rather, it is a massive, ongoing social tragedy that poses problems for both millions of young Americans and the nation at large. It is long since time that youth poverty and the problems it creates be added to the list of serious challenges that threaten the United States.

NOTES

- ¹ Ruggles (1990, p. 15).
- ² Useful discussions of the concept of poverty may be found in Betson and Michael (1997); Bradbury, Jenkins, and Micklewright (2001); Citro and Michael (1995, pp. 19-23); Farmer, Ilvento, and Luloff (1989); Ruggles (1990, pp. 15-16); and Tomaskovic-Devey (1988).
- ³ See, for example, Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen, and Bernstein (2001, pp. 5-7); Callan and Nolan (1991); Citro and Michael (1995, pp. 24ff); Förster (1994); Garner, Short, Shipp, Nelson, and Paulin (1998); Glennerster (2002); Orshansky (1988); Renwick and Bergmann (1993); Ruggles (1990); Sawhill (1988); Smeeding (2002a, b); Smeeding, Rainwater, and Burtless (2001); U.S. Census Bureau (1999); Watts (1986).
- ⁴ For details, see Orshansky (1963, 1965).
- ⁵ See Fisher (1992) for a history of the Orshansky thresholds and their subsequent use by government agencies.
- ⁶ The figures appearing in Column One are “simplified” versions of a more complex set of “statistical poverty thresholds,” prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, that reflect the exact numbers of children and adults in each household. These “simplified” figures are used to determine eligibility for federal support programs; the more complex “statistical poverty thresholds” are used for computing poverty rates. Separate poverty thresholds are prepared for the states of Alaska and Hawaii.
- ⁷ Burtless (1994, 2000), Eberstadt (2002), Short, Garner, Johnson, and Doyle (1999).
- ⁸ See, for example, Citro and Michael (1995), Dalaker and Naifeh (1998), Danziger and Weinberg (1994), Garner, Short, Shipp, Nelson, and Paulin (1998), Proctor and Dalaker (2002).
- ⁹ Cauthen and Lu (2003).
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen, and Bernstein (2001), Citro and Michael (1995), National Priorities Project and Jobs with Justice (1999), Renwick and Bergmann (1993).
- ¹¹ See, for example, Berrick (1995), Ehrenreich (2011), Kozol (1995), Newman (1999), Polakow (1993), and Schein (1995).
- ¹² According to Mark Levinson (2012, p. 43): “Several organizations have attempted to quantify what a family requires to meet basic needs. The Economic Policy Institute has created Basic Family Budgets for more than 600 localities across the country. Wider Opportunities for Women has developed a Self-Sufficiency Standard for different family types in more than 80 localities and 36 states, and the National Center for Children in Poverty has designed Basic Needs Budgets.” All of these efforts show that families must have an average income of at least twice the current poverty level to cover basic expenses.
- ¹³ In recent years the thresholds set for “free” and “reduced-price” lunches have been based on the “simplified” thresholds for each household size that are provided by the U.S. Census Bureau.

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Under this procedure, children and adults are weighted equally when computing household size. Gunderson (1971) provides a useful history of federal programs that have provided nutritional support for students over the years.

- ¹⁴ See, for example, Bradbury, Jenkins, and Micklewright (2001); Förster (1994); and Vleminckx and Smeeding (2001).
- ¹⁵ Citro & Michael (1995, pp. 58-61).
- ¹⁶ See de Lone (1979, p. 7). Interestingly, the European Union has recently “been using a measure of 60 percent of median [net] incomes as its poverty line” see Glennerster (2002, p. 87). This means that when the LIS group or UNESCO adopts a standard of one half of median net income for comparative studies, this standard is less stringent than that now commonly used in European countries.
- ¹⁷ From its inception, the social security system has also been attacked by right-wing ideologues, and during his second term President George W. Bush proposed partial “privatization” of the system, but this scam was not accepted by Congress or the American people.
- ¹⁸ See Huston (1991, p. 310).
- ¹⁹ Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, and Wolfe (2000).
- ²⁰ Pugh (2007).
- ²¹ See Books (2004, p. 37) who provides a good summary of the topic. In addition, Books cites reviews of problems associated with poverty among youths reported by the Children’s Defense Fund (2002), Duncan & Brooks-Gunn (1997a, 2001), the National Commission on Children (1991), Polakow (1993, 2003), and Sherman (1997).
- ²² Note that both Iceland (2003) and O’Hare (1996) refer to poverty stereotypes as “myths” that apply to all poor persons, but I prefer to leave open the question of whether they apply to poverty among *young* Americans.
- ²³ Gilens (1999, p. 68).
- ²⁴ See Gilens (1999), Chapter Three; and Neubeck and Cazenave (2001), Chapter One.
- ²⁵ See particularly Turner (1993) and Piven and Cloward (1971/1993).
- ²⁶ For details, consult Gilens (1999), Chapter Five.
- ²⁷ A truly odious example of this type of reasoning may be found in a recent column by Charley Reese (2005)
- ²⁸ See, for example, Gilens (1999) and Neubeck and Cazenave (2001).
- ²⁹ Nevertheless, these studies *can* provide valuable information about how poverty affects the school achievements of American teenagers, and I cite results from several of them in Chapter Four.
- ³⁰ See Hill (1992) or Rank (2004, p. 91).
- ³¹ See especially Duncan (1984, pp. 38-40). Since the initial PSID sample did not include immigrant families, higher rates of poverty among those families may account for part of the effect.
- ³² Note that only a few PSID studies have focused on *youth* poverty—see, for example, Ashworth, Hill, and Walker (1994), Corcoran and Chaudry (1997), Duncan and Rodgers (1988, 1991), Gottschalk and Danziger (2001), and Rank and Hirschl (1999)—and I have drawn heavily from these sources. When needed, I have used additional information from PSID analyses of poverty among *all* families in America—see especially, Bane and Ellwood (1986), Duncan (1988), Duncan and Rodgers (1988), Iceland (2003, pp. 48-51), and Stevens (1994, 1999).
- ³³ Iceland (2003, p. 49). Also see Magnuson and Votruba-Drzal (2009, pp. 153-155).
- ³⁴ See, among other sources, Orland (1990).
- ³⁵ Also see Iceland (2003, pp. 51-59).
- ³⁶ See Coulton and Pandey (1992), Jargowsky (1997), or Wilson (1987), for example.
- ³⁷ Edelman (1994).
- ³⁸ See Jargowsky (1996, 1997), and Kneebone, Nadeau, and Berube (2011).
- ³⁹ Robert Rector, writing for the Heritage Foundation, has asserted that America’s youth problems would largely disappear if single mothers could be induced to (re)marry and go to work!
- ⁴⁰ Dalaker and Naifeh (1998, Table C-3).
- ⁴¹ Current Population Reports, Series P60, U.S. Census Bureau (various years).
- ⁴² Kim (2000); U.S. Census Bureau (2002).
- ⁴³ Douglas-Hall and Koball (2004).
- ⁴⁴ Oregon State University (2008).

- ⁴⁵ Such contentions have been challenged by Card and Krueger (1996) who provide data showing that increases in minimum wages mandated by various states have led to *larger* average salaries and *no* loss in jobs.
- ⁴⁶ Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto (2005, p. 125). Figures for “poverty-level” wages are provided in Table 2.9 from the same source.
- ⁴⁷ Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen and Bernstein (2001, p. 13).
- ⁴⁸ Nor have such trends faltered in the years since 1999. More recent data released by the Congressional Budget Office (2011, Summary, p. 5) indicate that, between 1979 and 2007, real shares of net income (after federal benefits and federal taxes were taken into account) *fell* by 2-to-3% for households in each of the four lowest income quintiles, whereas those for the top income quintile *grew* by 10%, and those for the top 1% of households more than doubled.
- ⁴⁹ See, for example, Duncan and Murnane (2011), Phillips (2002), and Winnick (1989). Citing evidence from Aaronson and Mazumder (2007), Duncan & Murnane also note that intergenerational mobility has also declined sharply in the U.S. since 1980, which means that it is now increasingly likely that children of poor families will have “to repeat that experience” (p. 3).
- ⁵⁰ See also Hacker and Pierson (2010).