

# Poverty and Women

## The "Feminization of Poverty" Issue

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**[More recent treatments of this issue are discussed at the end.]**

What do we care about more, the proportion of persons in female-headed families who are poor or the proportion of the poor who are in female-headed families? The answer ought to be obvious. Nevertheless, ever since the phrase "the feminization of poverty" was first coined by sociologist Diana Pearce in 1978, the concern for the perceived increase in the proportion of the poor who are in families headed by women has been the major theme in discussion of poverty in America.

In 1980, the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity made the frequently quoted pronouncement that "[a]ll other things being equal, if the proportion of the poor who are in female-headed families were to increase at the same rate as it did from 1967 to 1977, they would comprise 100% of the poverty population by about the year 2000!"

A 1983 article by Washington Post columnist Judy Mann questioning the Reagan administration's concern for the economic situation of women illustrates the way the theme was pursued in the ensuing years. Stating that "[w]omen have become much more economically vulnerable in the past 30 years than is generally understood," she noted: "In 1959 only 14.8% of [whites] below the poverty level were [in families] headed by women; in 1980, more than a quarter of them were. The figures for black families are even more staggering; 24.4% of [blacks] below the poverty line in 1959 were [in families] headed by women, but 58.6% of them were by 1980."

More recently, conservative commentators have emphasized similar changes between 1959 and 1984, blaming those increases on feminism, welfare and easy divorce.

Generally ignored, however, in this preoccupation with the provocative are certain critical features of the feminization of poverty. Most significant is the fact that as a rule the feminization of poverty varies inversely with the amount of poverty, including the amount of poverty in female-headed families.

### A STATISTICAL DISTINCTION

That is, when there is much poverty, female-headed families will comprise a certain proportion of the poor; as

poverty decreases female-headed families, being those most susceptible to poverty, will comprise an increasing proportion of the poor, even as the poverty rate for such families is also declining.

Thus, the major reason for the dramatic increase in the feminization of poverty, which actually occurred between 1959 and the middle 1970's, was an unprecedented reduction in poverty that included a dramatic reduction in the poverty of female-headed families. Among whites, for example, between 1959 and 1974, as the overall poverty rate declined from 18% to 9%, the poverty rate for persons in female-headed families dropped from 40% to 28%. Though far less poverty prone than in 1959, female-headed family members had almost doubled their representation among the poor (from 15% to 27%) while their representation among the white population had grown by only about a quarter.

The inverse relationship between the amount of poverty and the feminization of poverty may also be illustrated by reference to different geographic areas. In Massachusetts, because it is a wealthy state, female-headed families, who make up only 16% of white families with children, comprise 63% of poor white families with children; by contrast, in the very poor state of Mississippi, although female-headed families make up 35% of black families with children, they comprise only 54% of such families in poverty.

It is important to understand that the tendency of a decrease in poverty to increase the feminization of poverty does not simply reflect that female-headed families do not share fairly in the reduction of poverty, as certain features of the data might suggest. Rather, it is in the nature of normal distributions that a group that is poorer on average will make up a larger proportion of each increasingly more poverty prone group.

In 1979, for example, female-headed families comprised 17% of persons with incomes between 150% and 125% of the official poverty line, 20% of persons between 125% and 100% of the poverty line, 25% of persons between 100% and 75% of the poverty line, and 35% of persons below 75% of the poverty line. Thus, it can be seen that when there are changes in the total amount of poverty, there will be changes in the proportion that female-headed families comprise of the poor without any actual change in the

relationship of the income status of female-headed families to that of other persons.

The same underlying phenomenon manifests itself in other mathematical relationships that similarly misleadingly suggest a change in the relative well-being of two groups having different income distributions. Whenever there is a decrease in poverty, the poorer group will have a smaller percentage decrease in its poverty rate than other groups, and the ratio of the poverty rate of the poorer groups to that of other groups will increase.

For example, using the 1979 data discussed above, were there a general reduction in poverty such that only the persons previously below 75% of the poverty line remained in poverty, the poverty rate for female-headed families would be reduced by 26% (from 34.4% to 25.3%), while the poverty rate for all other persons would be reduced by 36% (from 9.6% to 6.1%), and the ratio of the poverty rate in female-headed families to that of other persons would increase from 3.6 to 1 to 4 to 1.

Thus, when the National Advisory Council in its 1980 report cited as an illustration of the "deepening inequality between men and women, that "in 1967, a woman heading a family was about 3.8 times more likely to be poor than a man heading one, [but by] 1977, after more than a decade of antidiscrimination efforts, she was about 5.7 times more likely to be poor," it was noting a change the direction of which was inexorably compelled by an underlying benign truth—namely, that the economic circumstances of male and female family heads improved measurably during this period.

The same properties of normal distributions will also tend to create the impression that female-headed families are less affected by increases in poverty—such as those observed in the years after 1979—whether or not such is actually the case.

These mathematical principles apply as well to a variety of comparisons between groups, such as black/white unemployment and black/white infant mortality. In 1983, for example, white and black infant mortality rates each reached an all-time low; correspondingly, the ratio of black to white infant mortality reached an all-time high.

This is not to deny significant changes in the relative economic status of female-headed families. At various times such changes no doubt have occurred, both in the same and the opposite direction of the apparent changes that are the (mathematically) natural consequences of overall changes in the poverty rate. But in the numerous commentaries that speak as if there have been real changes in the relative well-being of female-headed families, none indicates a complete understanding of the underlying functional relationships much less carries out the complex analysis required to separate the real from the apparent.

## NEW TRENDS IN POVERTY

Two other aspects of the feminization of poverty require mention. First, by and large, the consistent trend toward the increasing feminization of poverty ended more than a decade ago. After a striking increase between 1959 and 1974, with the economic stagnation in the late '70s and the substantial rise in poverty that ensued in the early '80s, the proportion of the poor who were in female-headed families actually declined, despite further growth of such families.

While decreases in poverty since 1983 have increased somewhat the feminization of poverty for both whites and blacks, in 1985 the proportion of the white poor who were in female-headed families, at 26.2%, was still slightly lower than it had been in 1973 (26.4%); for blacks, at 59.8%, that proportion remains significantly lower than the 1978 high of 61.8%. This however, has been almost entirely ignored in most commentary, which presents the differences between 1959 and the present as if they reflect a continuing trend.

Second, in addition to being strongly influenced by an overall decrease in poverty that must be regarded as a good thing, the feminization of poverty is, of course, much influenced by the increase in the proportion of the population that is in female-headed families, an increase that most would consider a bad thing (although it too, is something different from the worsening in the relative economic status of such families suggested in much of the commentary).

The influence of this factor has varied for whites and blacks and varied over time. It accounted for less than a third of the initial, uninterrupted 1959-1974 feminization of white poverty, but almost half of the black increase. In counteracting somewhat the "defeminizing" tendency of subsequent increases in overall white poverty, changes in family composition have become the predominating factor in the remaining long-term (i.e., post 1959) increase in the feminization of white poverty, while the influence of such changes on the black feminization of poverty has changed little. But the consistency with which in any year a material change in the overall poverty rate has been attended by an opposite change in the feminization of poverty, notwithstanding the influence of all countervailing factors, attests to the overriding importance of that factor.

In any case, the fact that increases in the feminization of poverty are principally reflections of two things, one good and one bad, and the relative influence of which may vary over time and from group to group, is itself an important reason why the feminization of poverty is such an unfortunate focus of the poverty debate.

This is not to deprecate the significance of the poverty-proneness of the female-headed families. Society has a strong interest in mitigating that poverty, in part because it is to some extent a result of injustice, and in part because it is a proper concern of society regardless of whether it is caused by injustice. But in endeavoring to address the

problem (or the separate problem of the proliferation of female-headed families) it is essential that we are able to evaluate the efficacy of policies implemented for that purpose—that is, accurately to measure change over time.

The feminization of poverty theme, more often than not leading us to exactly the opposite of the truth, ill-serves us in this regard.

*More recent treatments of this issue include:*

"The Perils of Provocative Statistics," *Public Interest* 102 (Winter, 1991), 3-14 (reprinted in the Course Reader for "Quantitative Reasoning and Statistical Methods in Planning I" at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology):

[http://jpscanlan.com/images/The\\_Perils\\_of\\_Provocative\\_Stat.pdf](http://jpscanlan.com/images/The_Perils_of_Provocative_Stat.pdf)

"Comment on McLanahan, Sorensen, and Watson's 'Sex Differences in Poverty, 1950-1980,'" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Spring 1991) 16(2), 409-13:

[http://www.jpscanlan.com/images/Signs\\_Comment.pdf](http://www.jpscanlan.com/images/Signs_Comment.pdf)

"Race and Mortality," *Society* 37(2) (Jan/Feb 2000), 29-35 (reprinted in *Current* (Feb. 2000)):

[http://jpscanlan.com/images/Race\\_and\\_Mortality.pdf](http://jpscanlan.com/images/Race_and_Mortality.pdf)

"Can We Actually Measure Health Disparities?," *Chance* 19(2) (Spring 2006) :47-5.1 :

[http://www.jpscanlan.com/images/Can\\_We\\_Actually\\_Measure\\_Health\\_Disparities.pdf](http://www.jpscanlan.com/images/Can_We_Actually_Measure_Health_Disparities.pdf)

The last item addresses different issues. But its Table 1 presents data on black and white rates of falling above or below various ratios of the poverty line that are akin to those one would observe for female-headed families and married couple families. The [Feminization of Poverty](#) page of jpscanlan.com also presents a summary of this issue. See also pages 9-11 of the [Harvard University Measurement Letter](#), which shows how universally misunderstood is this pattern as of the end of 2012