

# Millions of Americans Remain Desperately Poor in Midst of Plenty

**Editor's note:** The Labor Department announced last week that U.S. employment rose in July to a record total of nearly 71 million jobs. But 55 out of every 1,000 persons who need jobs don't have them. And many who do have jobs earn barely enough to keep them alive. This is a report on the other side of the tracks—on poverty.

**By LOUIS CASSELS**  
Washington—The average American family had an income of \$7,140 last year. One family out of five had an income larger than \$10,000. These are spectacular figures. They thoroughly justify the cliché that Americans are living in an "affluent society," enjoying the highest living standards the world has ever known.

But they do not justify the assumption—widely held today even among well-read people—that mass poverty has virtually disappeared from this country. In the midst of plenty, millions of Americans remain desperately poor. They may not be as close to actual starvation as some of the people who live in underdeveloped countries. But their poverty is real and grinding, and all the harder to accept because it contrasts so painfully with the prosperity that surrounds them.

How many poor people are there in America? The answer depends on what income level you choose as a dividing line between mere deprivation and actual poverty.

Dr. Robert J. Lampham, a University of Wisconsin economist now on the staff of President Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisers, believes it is conservative to say that poverty prevails in any household where a single person is living on less than \$1,250 a year, a couple on less than \$1,750, or a family of four on less than \$2,700. 34 Million in Poverty

Applying this yardstick to the latest official figures on income distribution, he calculates that more than 34 million Americans are now living in genuine poverty. Others say that Lampham's figures are too low. In a study published earlier this year, entitled "The Other America" (MacMillan, Michael Harrington), estimates that from 40 million to 50 million Americans are "existing at levels beneath those necessary for human decency." The conference on economic progress asserts that at least 38 million persons fall into the "really poor" category. The AFL-CIO puts the figure at upwards of 42 million.

Pinpointing a precise number of poor people is not terribly important. The significant fact on which all investigators agree is that a great many Americans—from one-

fifth to one-fourth of the total population—are not sharing in the prevailing abundance.

Who are the American poor? Why are they missing the gravy train? Before joining the White House staff, Dr. Lampham conducted a lengthy study of these questions for the Joint Congressional Economic Committee.

He found that about one-fourth of the very poor—some 8.5 million persons by his present calculations—are over 65 years of age. They are liv-

ing on inadequate retirement pensions, on the charity of relatives, or on "old age assistance" checks from public welfare agencies, which during 1962 averaged just a little over \$75 a month.

Another segment of the world of poverty is populated by Negroes. Because they often are under-educated, or because they lack the skills demanded by an increasingly technological society, or simply because they happen to have dark skins, Negroes are the "last to be hired and the first to be fired" in the North

and education level of the breadwinner. Only one American family out of 10 is headed by a woman. But these fatherless households—whether made so by death, divorce or desertion—constitute 24 per cent of the families living on incomes of less than \$2,000 a year.

A woman who is trying to support young children without a husband or other male relative to earn a living is usually entitled to public welfare under the ever-controversial "aid to dependent children" program. Some Amer-

icans have formed an unshakable opinion that families on ADC have it pretty soft. This may be. But the figures show that the average ADC payment currently is about \$128 per month for a family of four. This comes to about \$1,500 a year and is way under Lampham's "conservative" cut-off line for real poverty.

**Most Poorly Educated**  
Any American youngster who is thinking of dropping out of school—or who is merely wondering why he should work so hard to get an edu-

cation—should ponder another of Dr. Lampham's findings. About two-thirds of the very poor families in the nation are headed by breadwinners who have no education beyond grammar school. This figure includes persons of both races and both sexes, and thus overlaps with some of the previous categories.

It is obvious, of course, that none of the factors cited by Dr. Lampham—age, sex, race or educational level—directly cause poverty. What they do is to make it hard to get and keep a good job. The

immediate cause of poverty in nearly every instance is the unemployment or underemployment of the family breadwinner. Even in a "full employment" economy, there would be some people who could not earn a decent living. The farther a nation slips from full employment—or, to put it differently, the higher its rate of chronic unemployment—the bigger become its "pockets" of poverty.

That's why Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz calls unemployment "our No. 1 domestic problem." It is a problem that has been growing steadily worse in recent years. Its ramifications will be explored in another dispatch.

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