

SENIOR EDITORS

David Grusky
Christopher Wimer

ART DIRECTOR

Robin Weiss

COPY EDITOR

Liz Hogan-Stalnaker

PROOFREADER

Christine Sabooni

WEBSITE MANAGER

Alice Chou

EDITORIAL BOARD

Kenneth Arrow, Stanford University
Peter Bearman, Columbia University
David Card, University of California at Berkeley
Joshua Cohen, Stanford University
Dalton Conley, New York University
Greg Duncan, University of California at Irvine
Kathryn Edin, Harvard University
Paula England, New York University
Robert Frank, Cornell University
Mark Granovetter, Stanford University
Robert Hauser, National Research Council
Michael Hout, University of California at Berkeley
Jon Krosnick, Stanford University
Glenn Loury, Brown University
Hazel Markus, Stanford University
Douglas Massey, Princeton University
Susan Mayer, University of Chicago
Charles Murray, American Enterprise Institute
for Public Policy Research
Katherine Newman, Johns Hopkins University
Thomas Piketty, Paris School of Economics
Woody Powell, Stanford University
Barbara Reskin, University of Washington
Richard Saller, Stanford University
William Julius Wilson, Harvard University

STANFORD CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Building 370, 450 Serra Mall, Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-2029

Tel: 650-724-6912 Fax: 650-736-9883

Email: inequality@stanford.edu

Website: www.inequality.com

The Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality is a program of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences. Funding from the Elfenworks Foundation gratefully acknowledged. For more information, go to www.elfenworks.org.

This publication was supported by Grant Number AEO0101 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and awarded by Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration.

Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and awarded by Substance Abuse Mental Health Service Administration.

Editors' Note

Why devote an issue of *Pathways* to the seemingly arcane topic of poverty measurement? It might be assumed, after all, that issues of measurement are best left to the wan statistician hunkered down at her or his computer. The contrary premise behind this issue is that the measurement of poverty, however unsexy it may seem, affects how we view and address poverty and that it shouldn't therefore be treated as mere sidebar statistics.

It bears noting that the United States was once an innovator in measuring and conceptualizing poverty. To be sure, most nations care deeply about the low-income population, but the United States and the United Kingdom are the only countries with state-mandated measures of poverty. Although poverty measurement is, in this sense, a distinctively U.S. commitment, that's not to suggest that we've done an especially good job of it of late. The first official U.S. poverty measure was developed in the 1960s and has essentially remained fixed over the last half century despite fundamental change in (a) our social programs and how they take on poverty; (b) our health care system and its role in generating poverty; and (c) the gender composition of the labor force and, as a result, how children are reared and childcare is afforded. The purpose of this issue is to explore how these and other changes should be taken into account in measuring poverty.

Why has our official poverty measure remained frozen for so long? The simple answer: politics. We haven't developed a politics-protected process for revising and changing our measurement of poverty to the extent that we have for other equally crucial labor force statistics. The resulting paralysis in poverty measurement means that the government doesn't have the high-quality data it needs to make those decisions that *are* properly political. If we measured poverty with a well-crafted tool, we would then have the opportunity to take the poverty implications of major policy decisions into account. We would also have the opportunity to choose *not* to take those implications into account. In the absence of a well-crafted measure, that crucial political choice is, by default, wrested away from all of us.

There is, of course, much good news on this front. In our opening piece, we've asked Rebecca M. Blank, Acting Secretary of Commerce and Under Secretary for Economic Affairs, to describe the new Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), a carefully revised measure that overcomes many of the problems that have long plagued the official measure of poverty. The next article, authored by a team from New York City's Center for Economic Opportunity, shows how a local SPM-style measure works in practice and, in particular, how it can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of local, state, and federal antipoverty policies. In the third and final piece, a team from the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality weighs in to discuss the near- and long-term future of poverty measurement, with a special focus on how the SPM, revolutionary though it is, might yet be improved.

The development of a credible state-mandated definition of poverty is critical precisely because there isn't any intrinsic dividing line that separates the poor from the non-poor in the way that, say, serfs were distinct from lords in the feudal period. As such, it's an important task of the government to fix that line, to give it some institutional backing, and thereby allow the rest of us to assess what generates poverty and how best to reduce it. Although the SPM won't play any role in administering U.S. welfare programs, it does nonetheless provide much-needed weight behind a given set of measurement decisions. We've dedicated this issue to assisting that historic process in some small way.

—David Grusky & Christopher Wimer, Senior Editors