

NARROWING POVERTY GAPS BETWEEN RACES AND AGE GROUPS ARE HALTED; WIDENING GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR CONTINUES LONG TERM TREND

NORTH MANCHESTER, Ind. (October, 2004) Several statistically significant trends emerged in a study of U.S. Census data by Manchester College researchers. Poverty rates were examined from 1995-2003 for four sub groups in the U.S. population.

The difference in poverty rates between whites and other racial-ethnic groups decreased five of the last eight years, dropping 18 percent overall. The poverty disparity between children and adults decreased six of those same eight years (dropping 11 percent overall). Between genders, the poverty gap showed a decrease in six of seven years, with no change one year and a 3 percent decrease overall.

However, the news is not all good. Inequality in income between the richest and the poorest households increased seven of eight years, with an overall increase of 13 percent. According to research team statistician James Brumbaugh-Smith, Associate Professor of Mathematics, "Not only is the income gap between the top 5% and the bottom 10% the widest it has been since the Census Bureau began publishing such data in 1967, but the increase from 2002 to 2003 (3.6 percent) was the third largest ever recorded and the highest since 1986."

The researchers noted that the growing rich-poor gap has important implications for U.S. society. "Do we really want a divided society, where people live in different neighborhoods, have different friends, and their children attend separate schools, depending on how much money their family has? Because that is the consequence of high income inequality," said researcher Bradley Yoder, Professor of Sociology and Social Work.

Even the good news of the narrowing race, age, and gender poverty gaps is tempered by a closer look at the data. Though there was a decline in the racial gap from 1995-2003 (comparing non-Hispanic whites to blacks, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics), the trend appears to have been halted. For the last two years, the gap actually increased by small amounts (1.1 percent in 2002 and 1.4 percent in 2003). And, non-whites are still 2.7 times more likely to live in poverty than whites in 2003. 8.2 percent of non-Hispanic whites lived below the poverty line, as compared to 24.3 percent of blacks, 11.8 percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders, and 22.5 percent of people of Hispanic origin.

Similarly, despite the downward trend in poverty disparity between adults and children (comparing those 18 and over with those under 18 years of age), there was a dramatic reversal in 2003. The gap rose 4 percent that year after narrowing for six of the seven previous years. Whether this signals a new trend will be determined by future data. And even with the overall decline in disparity from 1995-2003, children were still 1.6 times more likely to be poor than adults in 2003. The poverty rate for those under 18 was 17.6 percent, while the rate for adults was 10.7 percent.

For gender, the narrowing of the poverty gap continued in 2003 for the sixth straight year. Nevertheless, 13.7 percent of women remained in poverty in 2003, compared with 11.2 percent of men.

The researchers note that while some of the results are cause for hope for the future, they also contain warning signs. Lead researcher Neil Wollman, Professor of Psychology and Senior Fellow of the Peace Studies Institute, observes, “These income gaps are not good for a society that holds equality as a primary value. Happiness is affected both by the way that important values are played out in the world and how individuals feel that they stack up to their fellow citizens.”

These figures are from the National Index of Violence and Harm, constructed to measure trends in the levels of violence and harm to individuals in the United States. The index is calculated yearly by professors and students at Manchester College in Indiana, by comparing current figures to the baseline year of 1995. Two different scales and nineteen variables are included. Personal violence and harm includes violence against others and against oneself, such as sexual assault and deaths from drug overdose. Societal violence and harm is measured by such factors as lack of health insurance, air pollution, and occupational injuries. Complete details can be found at <http://www.manchester.edu/links/violenceindex/>.

The researchers are Neil Wollman (primary contact), Ph.D., Senior Fellow of the Manchester College Peace Studies Institute and Professor of Psychology (260.982.5346, njwollman@manchester.edu); Bradley L. Yoder, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Social Work: (260.982.5366, blyoder@manchester.edu); James P. Brumbaugh-Smith, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Mathematics (260.982.5011, jpbrumbaugh-smith@manchester.edu); and Heidi G. Gross, B.S., Peace Studies Intern (260.982.5343, hggross@manchester.edu). Manchester College students involved in the research are Benjamin E. Leiter of New Windsor, MD.; Amy L. Fry-Miller of Fort Wayne, IN., and Erin H. McCourt of Fremont, CA.

IF YOU WISH TO RECEIVE PERIODIC UPDATES ON THE NATIONAL INDEX OF VIOLENCE AND HARM, WRITE NJWOLLMAN@MANCHESTER.EDU, WITH “SEND NIVAH UPDATES” IN THE SUBJECT LINE.