

POVERTY GAPS IN THE U.S. BETWEEN THE RACES, AGE GROUPS, AND GENDERS DECREASED STEADILY SINCE 1995--- BUT STILL A WAYS TO GO

THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR KEEPS INCREASING

A study by Manchester College researchers used US Census data to compare poverty rates for different subgroups in the U.S population. The good news is that the difference in poverty rates for Whites vs. other racial-ethnic groups decreased five of the seven years since 1995, dropping 19% overall. Also, the inequality in poverty rate between children and adults decreased six of those same seven years (dropping 14% over that time period). While for gender, five of six years showed a decrease (with no change one year and a 3% decrease overall).

In one area, the news is not good. Inequality in income between the richest and the poorest households increased five of six years (with no data available for 2002 and an overall increase of 9%). "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, Ph.D. and Professor of Sociology and Social Work.

Even the good news of the narrowing race, age, and gender gaps is tempered by a continuing reality. Though there was a statistically significant downward trend regarding race (non-Hispanic Whites compared to Blacks, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics); non-Whites were still 162 percent more likely to be in poverty than Whites in 2002. In that year, 7.8 percent of non-Hispanic Whites lived below the poverty line, as opposed to 22.7 percent of Blacks, 10.2 percent of Asians and Pacific Islanders, and 21.8 percent of people of Hispanic origin. If the improvement found from 1995 to 2002 continued at that same, consistent pace, it would still take until 2018--or even 2031--for parity to be reached (depending on the mathematical model used).

Similarly, though there was a statistically significant downward trend for age, those under 18 years old were still 58% more likely to be in poverty in 2002 than those who were older (a poverty rate of 16.7% for the former and 10.6% for those adults 18 and over). While the gap between the genders generally decreased from 1995-2002, the trend did not reach statistical significance, with 13.3% of women versus 10.9% of men still remaining in poverty in 2002.

The government-calculated poverty threshold is \$9,183 for a single person, \$11,756 for a two-person household, and \$18,392 for a four-person household. The very poor--those living below 50 percent of poverty level--constituted 4.9 percent of the population in 2002, a decline from 5.3 percent in 1995. Yet, the gap between poor and rich increased significantly over that time. As noted by researcher James Brumbaugh-Smith, Ph.D. and Associate Professor of Mathematics, "The income gap between the top 5 percent and the lowest 10 percent of U.S. households is the greatest it has been since government tracking began in 1967."

As contended by Abigail Fuller, Associate Professor of Sociology at Manchester College. "We could conceivably end up with a society in which everyone has an equal chance of being rich, regardless of racial-ethnic background or gender or age—but in which everyone also has an equal chance of being poor, and there are a lot of poor people." "In fact, while Whites have a lower poverty rate, about 68 percent of all poor people are White. While affirmative action is important, these people will not be helped by poverty eradication efforts that focus only on racial or gender discrimination."

So, there is some good news and reason to hope for the future. At the same time, all is not well now and will not be for at least the immediate future. As lead researcher Neil Wollman, Professor of Psychology and Senior Fellow notes, "These income gaps are not good for a society which holds equality as a primary value. Happiness is affected both by how important values are played out in the world and how individuals feel that they stack up to their fellow citizens."

These figures come 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 base year of 1995. Two different scales and 19 variables are included. Personal violence and harm includes violence against others and against oneself, such as deaths from drug overdose and sexual assault. Societal violence and harm includes such factors as lack of health insurance, air pollution, and occupational death that result from overall societal forces or institutions related to government, corporations, or families. See complete details at: <http://www.manchester.edu/links/violenceindex/>

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