

POVERTY

Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality

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The purpose of this article is to examine the “gender gap” in poverty. Are women or men more likely to be in poverty? Are women or men more likely to experience the direst forms of poverty? And how are these gender gaps in poverty changing over time?

Because women are more likely than men to be single (custodial) parents, they cannot always work long hours in the formal labor market, which reduces their income and increases their chances of being in poverty. Moreover, because of discrimination and the gender gap in wages, women face further labor market disadvantages that again may raise their poverty rates. But low-educated men face labor market problems of their own. Men bore the brunt of the takeoff in incarceration, which in turn affects their capacity to invest in human capital and subjects them to post-release discrimination and other labor market problems. Additionally, the gender gap in college graduation also favors women, which means that men are now less likely than women to benefit from the protective effect of a college degree.

In this article, we examine long-run trends in both poverty and deep poverty, allowing us to assess how these various forces are playing out. We also provide a more detailed portrait of men’s and women’s economic circumstances in the present day (using data from 2016, the most recent year for which data are available).

Trends in Poverty

Throughout our analyses, we will examine official poverty rates for adults who are aged 25 years and older, as doing so ensures that they have had adequate time to complete their education and become attached to the labor force. Because married women and men who live in the same household have the same poverty status, a main source of any gender gap in the poverty rate will be differences in the economic circumstances of women or men who are not married.

KEY FINDINGS

- Under the official poverty measure, the poverty rate for women is higher than that for men, although this gender gap shrank slightly in the 1990s.
- The gender gap in poverty is evident for all gradations of poverty. The share of women in deep poverty, regular poverty, and near poverty is greater than the corresponding share of men. Women also experience higher levels of food insecurity.

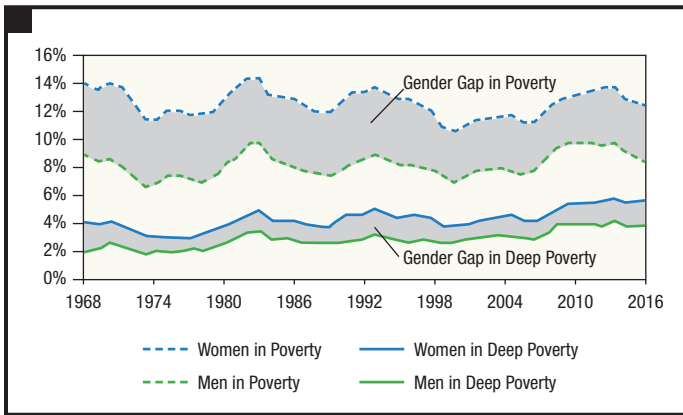
We begin, in Figure 1, by showing the official poverty rates of women and men from 1968 to 2016. As shown here, women have consistently higher rates than men, with the gap remaining quite constant even in the context of recessions, changing labor force participation rates, and other disruptions.

The only notable change in the size of the gender gap is a slight narrowing in the latter part of the 1990s. During this period, the poverty rate for women declined from 13.8 percent in 1993 to 10.6 percent in 2000 (i.e., a decline of 3.2 points), while the poverty rate for men declined more modestly from 8.7 percent to 6.9 percent (i.e., a decline of 1.8 points). The gender gap remained roughly constant in size during the years after this slight narrowing in the 1990s. Over the full period covered in Figure 1, women thus experienced a slight decline in their poverty rate, whereas men did not.

Trends in Deep Poverty

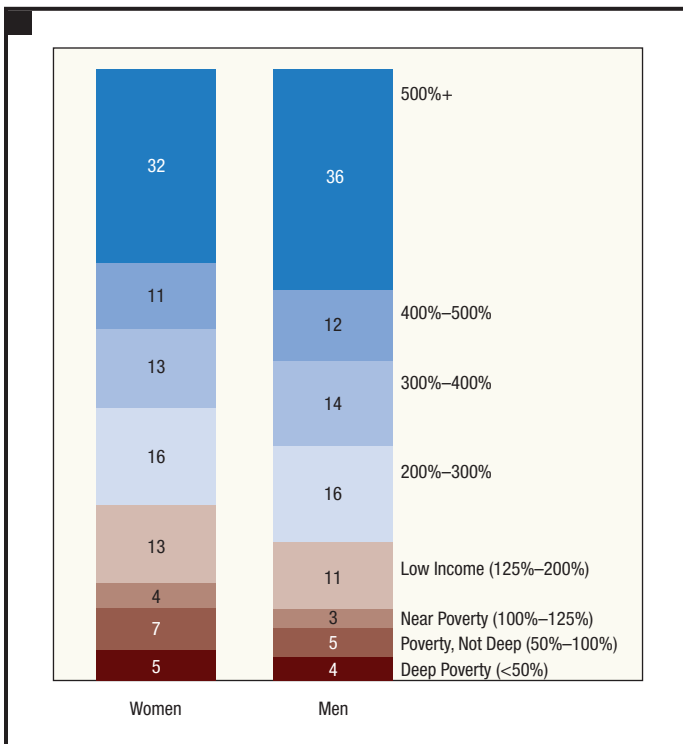
It is also important to examine the gender gap in more extreme forms of deprivation.¹ Here we examine rates of deep poverty, released by the Census Bureau, defined as those with cash income below half the official poverty threshold.² Deep poverty is associated with greater levels of material hardship—particularly food insecurity—than is poverty closer to the poverty threshold.³ Deep poverty

FIGURE 1. Poverty and Deep Poverty by Gender, 1968–2016



Note: Limited to those aged 25 years and older. Estimates are unweighted because of historical changes in weight construction.
 Source: Unless otherwise noted, statistics cited in this article are based on the authors' analyses of the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey, accessed via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

FIGURE 2. Poverty Level by Gender, 2016



Note: Limited to those aged 25 years and older. Analyses are weighted to adjust for sampling.

TABLE 1. Measures of Economic Need by Gender, 2016

	Women	Men
Official Poverty Measure	12.1	8.6
Supplemental Poverty Measure	13.9	11.7
Food Insecurity	11.1	9.6

Note: Limited to those aged 25 years and older. Food insecurity includes those who reported low or very low food security. Analyses are weighted to adjust for sampling.

appears to be more “sticky” as well, in the sense that those experiencing it tend to remain in it for longer spells.⁴ A recent study indicates that 40 percent of those born into deep poverty land in the bottom quintile of income as adults, compared with 30 percent of those living closer to the official poverty threshold (i.e., those who are poor but not deeply poor).⁵

As Figure 1 shows, women consistently experience higher rates of deep poverty than men, with no evidence of any change in the size of this gap. For women and men alike, deep poverty increases by almost 2 percentage points over the course of the time period covered here, with the result that the gap itself remained largely unchanged.

Other Measures of Poverty

Next we recalculate the gender gap under an additional suite of poverty measures. Thus far we have considered two gradations of poverty under the official poverty threshold, but we have not considered categories that, although above the official threshold, might still entail economic hardship.⁶ In Figure 2, we show how women and men fare across the income distribution by introducing new categories pertaining to near poverty (100%–125% of the official poverty threshold), low income (125%–200% of the official poverty threshold), and four other higher multiples of the official poverty level.

We find that for each of the four lowest income categories, the share for women is consistently higher than the corresponding share for men. Although we have already documented this result for the deep and regular poverty categories, Figure 2 reveals that there’s also a larger share of women than men in the near-poor category (i.e., 4.1% versus 3.3%) and in the low-income category (i.e., 12.5% versus 10.9%). The share of women and men is roughly the same in the next-highest category (i.e., 200%–300% of the official poverty threshold). In all three of the highest categories, there are, by contrast, substantially higher shares for men than for women. This result demonstrates that women consistently experience more hardship than men across the many gradations of hardship.

Are these results in part an artifact of the way in which official poverty is measured? The Official Poverty Measure (OPM) treats the family unit as those related by blood or marriage, yet we know that unmarried partners are increasingly cohabiting. If a single mother lives with an unmarried partner who has a good job, his (or her) income will not count in the single mother’s family income for the purpose of determining poverty. In addition, much of the safety net comes in the form of in-kind transfers and refundable tax credits, also

not included in OPM calculations, and much of this aid targets single mothers. Recently, the Census Bureau began to release estimates using the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which counts income from non-married partners and adds resources from non-cash and post-tax transfers.⁷ We can thus use the SPM to determine whether the gender gap is attributable to these features of the OPM.

In Table 1, we report official and supplemental poverty rates for men and women from 2016. We find that for both measures, women have higher rates of poverty than men. However, the gap is smaller under the SPM. While women have 1.4 times the poverty rate of men under the OPM, they have only 1.2 times the poverty rate of men under the SPM.

Which is more reflective of hardship? The household food insecurity rate is offered as a partial test. This measure, which is taken from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement in December, covers roughly the same time period as poverty estimates. We find that women have a household food insecurity rate that is about 1.2 times that of men, a ratio that is in line with the SPM ratio. This result might lead one to prefer an SPM-based measure of the gender gap, insofar as one is obliged to rely on any single measure, although it is also possible that women are more successfully buffered against food hardship in particular through greater access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other nutrition assistance programs.

Conclusions

Across a series of indicators, we find that women have higher rates of poverty and hardship than men, although the degree of the disparity varies. This result holds for measures of deep poverty, regular poverty, near poverty, and our low-income category. It holds for measures of official and supplemental poverty alike (although the gap is smaller under a supplemental poverty measure). And it holds for a household food insecurity measure.

There is, however, one domain in which it surely does not hold. Because we have relied on household survey data, we have not been able to include institutionalized populations, including those who are incarcerated or in homeless shelters. Although our results suggest that rates of “non-institutionalized hardship” are higher for women than men, it is well documented that rates of “institutionalized hardship” (in the form of incarceration or residing in a homeless shelter) are higher for men than for women. This latter result, a very important one, reveals that men and women vary in the way in which hardship is experienced.

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NOTES

1. There is a growing body of research, for example, on those living on cash incomes below \$2 per person per day. See Edin, Kathryn J., and H. Luke Shaefer. 2015. *\$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

2. See, for example, Semega, Jessica L., Kayla R. Fontenot, and Melissa A. Kollar. 2017. “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2016.” U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/P60-259.pdf>.

3. Cuddy, Emily, Joanna Venator, and Richard V. Reeves. 2015. “In a Land of Dollars: Deep Poverty and Its Consequences.” The Brookings Institution; Anderson, Patricia M., Kristin F. Butcher, and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach. 2015. “Changes in Safety Net Use During the Great Recession.” *American Economic Review* 105(5), 161–165; Gundersen, Craig, and James P. Ziliak. 2014. “Childhood Food Insecurity in the U.S.: Trends, Causes, and Policy Options.” *The Future of Children*, Princeton-Brookings.

4. Lei, Serena. 2013. “The Unwaged War on Deep Poverty.” Urban Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.urban.org/features/unwaged-war-deep-poverty>.

5. Cuddy et al., 2015.

6. See livingwage.mit.edu.

7. See <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/demo/p60-261.pdf> for a discussion of all differences between the SPM and OPM.