A CONTRAST OF BLACK AND WHITE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

Emily M. Northrop
Southwestern University

INTRODUCTION

The phrase "feminization of poverty" is attributed to sociologist Diana Pearce [1978]. It refers to the increased concentration of poverty among individuals living in female-headed households. Explanations of the phenomenon span a wide range. At one extreme is a total focus on the "economic and social consequences of being female that result in higher rates of poverty" [Pearce, 1978, 28]. At the other is the conclusion that "the feminization of poverty has its origins exclusively in the growth of female-headed families" [Smith and Ward, 1989, 20].

This paper contrasts the trends in the feminization of poverty of whites and blacks from 1959 to 1991. It employs a statistical decomposition to discern to what extent the process resulted from changes in poverty status and to what extent from demographic shifts into female-headed households. It finds that for both whites and blacks those factors were almost equal in their importance. In addition, both contributing factors were amplified among blacks, yielding a more extreme trend for them.

TFR FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY TRENDS

Presented in Figure 1 are the black and white feminization of poverty trends for 1959 through 1991. "Poverty" refers to the federal government gross cash income poverty definition. Also, female-headed households (or "FHH") consist of two groups: families headed by women with no spouse present, plus unrelated adult females. The rest of the population lives in "other-headed households" (or "OHH") including families headed by men with no spouse present, married couple families, and unrelated adult males.

Figure 1 indicates that the feminization of poverty was not a consistent process. For both groups the 1959-91 years can be divided into two periods. During the first, 1959-78, there was a significant increase in the percentage of the poor living in FHHs. Among whites this grew from 25 percent in 1959 to a peak of 45 percent in 1978. Among blacks the ratio climbed from 29 percent to 71 percent. Later, when measuring the factors contributing to the feminization of poverty, I will emphasize the 1959-78 period.

During the second period, 1978-91, the ratios temporarily fell before reaching 1991 levels comparable to those of 1978. Among whites the percentage dropped to 38 before climbing back to 44, and among blacks it fell to 65 percent before reaching a new high in 1991 at 73 percent. The net result was little change in the percentage of the poor living in female-headed households.

Eastern Economic Journal, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall 1994
poor. This ratio, denoted \(\%POORinFH\), has previously [Northrop, 1995] been shown to be equivalent to:

\[
(\text{DEMO} \cdot \text{FIHPR}) / ([\text{DEMO} \cdot \text{FIHPR}] + (1 - \text{DEMO} \cdot \text{OHHPR}))
\]

where

- \(\text{DEMO}\) = the percentage of the total population living in FHIs,
- \(\text{FIHPR}\) = the poverty rate among individuals in FHIs, and
- \(\text{OHHPR}\) = the poverty rate among individuals in OHHs.

From this expression one can determine that, ceteris paribus,

- a decrease in the poverty rate of individuals in FHIs will decrease \(\%POORinFH\);
- a decrease in the poverty rate of individuals in OHHs will increase \(\%POORinFH\); and
- an increase in the percentage of the total population living in FHIs will increase \(\%POORinFH\).

Table 1 shows values of these three variables for 1969, 1978, and 1991. For example, between 1969 and 1978 and again between 1978 and 1991, both blacks and whites shifted into households headed by women. This resulted from increased divorce, more single women having children, and an aging population in which the women live longer.

To measure the individual effects of the variables, I utilized the \(\%POORinFH\) expression and employed a statistical decomposition. To illustrate, in determining the impact of the demographic shift from 1969 to 1978, I obtained a hypothetical \(\%POORinFH\) for 1978 by substituting the 1978 \(\text{DEMO} \cdot \text{value}\), and the 1969 poverty rates. Thus,

\[
\text{HYPOTHETICAL } \%POORinFH_{1978} = \left(\frac{\text{DEMO}_{1978} \cdot \text{FIHPR}_{1978}}{\text{DEMO}_{1978} \cdot \text{FIHPR}_{1978} + (1 - \text{DEMO}_{1978} \cdot \text{OHHPR}_{1978})}\right)
\]

This hypothetical ratio indicates what fraction of the poor would have lived in female-headed households in 1978 if poverty rates had remained at the 1969 levels and only the demographic shift had occurred. The value of this expression for whites is 34.8 percent. The difference between this hypothetical value and the actual white \(\%POORinFH\) for 1978 of 25.0 percent, reflects how much white poverty would have become feminized solely due to the changed demographics. This difference is 9.8 percent. The analysis was repeated to determine for both groups the impacts of all three factors over the 1959-78 period. The results are presented in Table 2.

Ceteris paribus, the improved white FH poverty rate would have reduced the \(\%POORinFH\) by 9.2 percent, i.e., from the actual 25.0 to a hypothetical 15.8

---

FACTORS UNDERLYING THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

Counter to intuition, the feminization of poverty has coincided with a decrease in the poverty rates of female-headed households. While the portion of all white poor in FHIs grew from 1959 through 1978, the poverty rate of white individuals living in female-headed households actually declined from 44 percent to 25 percent. The feminization of black poverty from 1959 through 1978 occurred despite a drop in the black FH poverty rate from 70 to 53 percent.

This paradox can be solved with the help of algebra. Mathematically, the trend reflects an increase in the ratio of poor individuals in FHIs to the total number of

---

*The 1960 to 1965 data for blacks include all "possible."*

percent. The improved black FHH poverty rate would have reduced the fraction of black poor in FHHs by 5.4 percent, that is, from 29.3 percent to 23.9 percent. The improvement in the poverty rate of OHHs contributed greatly to the feminization of white poverty, increasing the ratio by 21.9 percent. Among blacks the improved poverty rate of othet-headed households had an even larger impact, increasing the %POORinFHI 28.9 percent. As already indicated, the shift of the population into female-headed households increased the percentage of poor in white FHI by 9.8 percent. For blacks the demographic shift raised the %POORinFHI 19.4 percent.

Returning to Table 1, the fourth columns indicates the percentage changes in the poverty rates between 1969 and 1978. The 45.2 percent improvement in the poverty rate white FHI was exceeded by the 62.5 percent reduction in the white OHH poverty rate. This involved a relative deterioration of white FHI poverty status. Among blacks, FHI and OHH saw reduced poverty rates of 24.1 percent and 70.2 percent respectively. This yielded an even greater relative decline in the poverty status of black female-headed households.

To what extent did the feminization of poverty result from this relative deterioration of FHI poverty status? This impact was measured using the decomposition analysis and substituting both 1978 poverty rates and the 1959 demographic mix. The results appear in Table 2 as the combined poverty rates. For whites the improved poverty rates together raised the %POORinFHI by 8.4 percent. Thus for whites and blacks the feminization of poverty was very much the result of both changed poverty rates and demographic shifts.

The magnified trend among blacks from 1959 through 1978 reflects two underlying differences. As previously noted, the relative decline in poverty status of black FHI exceeded that of white FHI. The consequence was a combined poverty rate impact that was nearly three times as strong for blacks as for whites. A second contrast is the magnitude of the demographic shift into FHI. The more pronounced shift among blacks yielded an impact roughly twice as powerful for blacks as for whites.

The analysis was repeated for the years 1978-91 to observe contrasts between blacks and whites in the period of little net change in the %POORinFHI. Over this period poverty rates increased for all groups excepting black FHI, who did experience a minuscule poverty rate decline (Table 1). The chief contrast between whites and blacks was that the poverty rate increases were higher among whites, especially among OHHs. This worked against the feminization of white poverty. Among blacks there was relatively little change in poverty rates causing a very small combined poverty rate effect. As for the continued demographic shifts into FHI, the impacts were comparable.

CONCLUSIONS

It is now apparent that the feminization of poverty is a measure of the poverty status of individuals in FHI relative to the poverty status of others and not an absolute measure of the poverty of women. In fact, the 1959-78 feminization of poverty was concurrent with improving poverty rates of white and black female-headed households, and the 1978-91 net mitigation of the process among whites occurred while their FHI poverty rate rose. For blacks the trend was more pronounced reflecting a smaller decline in the FHI poverty rate, a larger decline in the OHH poverty rate, and a more dramatic demographic shift into households headed by women. Thus to explain the exaggerated feminization of poverty among blacks, we need to know why blacks became more likely to live in households headed by women. There have, of course, been volumes published on the decline of the black two-parent
family written from a wide range of ideological perspectives [Meynihan, 1968; Murray, 1984; Wilson, 1967].

To complete our understanding of the exaggerated trend among blacks we need to learn why the poverty rate gap between black FHHs and OHHs expanded so dramatically. The pertinent questions are: Why did the black FHH poverty rate improve less than the white FHH poverty rate? Why did the black OHH poverty rate improve more than the white OHH poverty rate? While a partial answer may be that occupational desegregation helped black men more than black women [Pearce, 1983], this is an area where more focused study is needed.

NOTES

I wish to thank anonymous referees, the editor, and Stuart Goff for helpful comments.

1. All data in the paper represent the number of individuals living in female-headed and other-headed households, and not the number of households.
2. The univariate analysis ignores the link between the decision to form a female-headed household and the probability of becoming poor.
3. This decomposition analysis was applied to the feminization of poverty by Bane [1986] and Northrup [1986].

REFERENCES


HOW NOT TO GET YOUR ARTICLE PUBLISHED

David J. Smyth
Journal of Macroeconomics and Louisiana State University

Why do you want to publish articles? Presumably to maximize your utility function, which includes income with a big weight attached to it. The reason most of us write articles is to get tenure, promotion and salary increases. A mass of empirical studies show that there are substantial rewards from publishing. Some of you at schools with zero or negligible salary increases over the last few years may doubt this finding.

Our founding father, Adam Smith, wrote: "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for Merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices." This session today has been organized to help us conspire to raise the price for which we sell our labor.

I have two major qualifcations for the task of telling you how to optimize your publication activity. First, I have edited the Journal of Macroeconomics since 1979 and have made decisions on almost 3000 papers. Second, I write a lot of articles and I am willing to wager a considerable sum that I have had more papers rejected than anyone in this room. So I have received more ridiculous, stupid, biased, unfair, incompetent and unintelligible referee reports and letters from editors after waiting months and months and sometimes years and years, than anyone else here. I can give you lots of horror stories from the trenches.

How can you ensure that your article will be rejected?

1. First, send it to the wrong journal. Don't bother researching what type of articles different journals publish. Don't bother asking for advice from your friends. Send a paper on microeconomics to the Journal of Macroeconomics.

2. Make sure that the paper is very long. Referees love reading a 50- or 60-page paper and immediately put it on the top of the pile. It takes me less than 30 seconds to recognize a paper that is part of a Ph.D. dissertation. New Ph.D.s have to realize that article writing is different from dissertation writing. Don't expect a referee to take a chunk of your dissertation and convert it into an article—that's what dissertation supervisors are for.

3. Make sure that physical aspects of the paper are unsatisfactory. Don't bother to proofread it. Don't bother using your word processor's spell checker or grammar checker—put in many grammatical errors, misspellings and typos.

1 These rather informal notes were prepared for presentation at a session at the Eastern Economic Association meeting, Boston, March 1994.

Eastern Economic Journal, Vol. 20, No. 4, Fall 1994

471