

# A CONTRAST OF BLACK AND WHITE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

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## 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 these factors were almost equal in their importance. In addition, both contributing factors were amplified among blacks, yielding a more extreme trend for them.

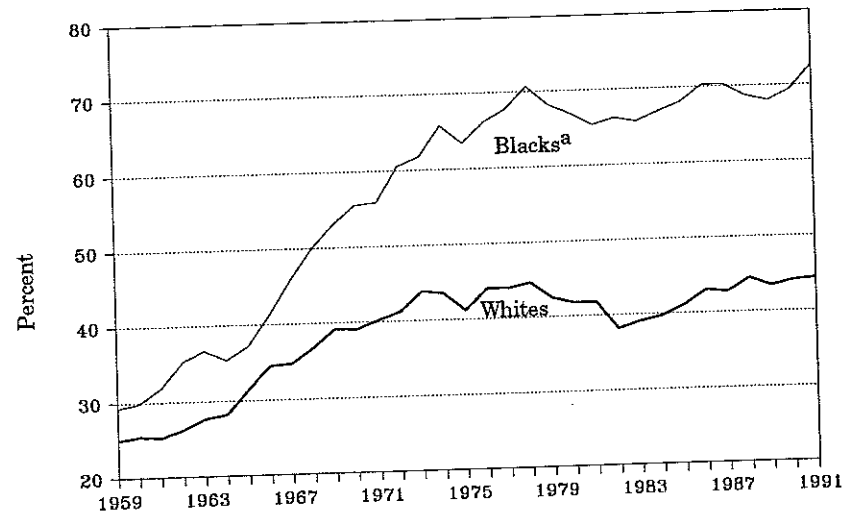
## THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY TRENDS

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 live in "other-headed households" (or "OHH") including families headed by men with no spouse present, married couple families, and unrelated adult males.<sup>1</sup>

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 peak in 1991 at 73 percent. The net result was little change in the percentage of the poor living in female-headed households.

**FIGURE 1**  
Percent of Poor in FHHs



<sup>a</sup> The 1960 to 1965 data for blacks include all "nonwhites."  
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, various years.

It is apparent that the trend has been more pronounced among blacks than among whites. In 1959 when 25 percent of white poor and 29 percent of black poor lived in female-headed households, the discrepancy between the two groups was 4 percent. In 1978 the difference reached 26 percent and in 1991 it had grown to 29 percent. Also, it is interesting to note that the highest concentration of white poverty among female-headed households was 45 percent in 1978, a ratio exceeded among blacks as early as 1967. National attention focused upon the feminization of poverty after 1978 (following Pearce's article) when the trend for whites finally reached levels comparable to those among blacks a decade earlier.

### 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 FHHs 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 FHH 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 FHHs to the total number of

poor. This ratio, denoted  $\%POORinFHH$ , has previously [Northrop, 1990] been shown to be equivalent to:

$$\frac{(DEMO)(FHHPR)}{(DEMO)(FHHPR) + [(1-DEMO)(OHHPR)]}$$

where

$DEMO$  = the percentage of the total population living in FHHs,  
 $FHHPR$  = the poverty rate among individuals in FHHs, and  
 $OHHPR$  = 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 FHHs will decrease  $\%POORinFHH$ ;
- a decrease in the poverty rate of individuals in OHHs will increase  $\%POORinFHH$ ; and
- an increase in the percentage of the total population living in FHHs will increase  $\%POORinFHH$ .<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 shows values of these three variables for 1959, 1978, and 1991. For example, between 1959 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  $\%POORinFHH$  expression and employed a statistical decomposition.<sup>3</sup> To illustrate, in determining the impact of the demographic shift from 1959 to 1978, I obtained a hypothetical  $\%POORinFHH$  for 1978 by substituting the 1978  $DEMO$  value, and the 1959 poverty rates. Thus,

$$HYPOTHETICAL \ %POORinFHH_{1978} = \frac{(DEMO_{1978})(FHHPR_{1959})}{(DEMO_{1978})(FHHPR_{1959}) + [(1-DEMO_{1978})(OHHPR_{1959})]}$$

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 1959 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  $\%POORinFHH$  for 1959 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 FHH poverty rate would have reduced the  $\%POORinFHH$  by 9.2 percent, *i.e.*, from the actual 25.0 to a hypothetical 15.8

TABLE 1

	1959	1978	1991	Percentage Change	
				1959-78	1978-91
<b>Whites</b>					
<i>FHHPR</i>	43.8	24.9	27.4	-43.2	+10.0
<i>OHHPR</i>	15.2	5.7	7.4	-62.5	+29.8
% of Pop in FHHs	10.3	15.6	18.4	+51.5	+17.9
<b>Blacks</b>					
<i>FHHPR</i>	70.0	53.1	52.9	-24.1	-0.4
<i>OHHPR</i>	50.7	15.1	15.6	-70.2	+3.3
% of Pop in FHHs	23.1	40.7	44.9	+76.2	+10.3

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, various years.

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 other-headed households had an even larger impact, increasing the %*POORinFHH* 28.9 percent. As already indicated, the shift of the population into female-headed households increased the percentage of poor in white FHHs by 9.8 percent. For blacks the demographic shift raised the %*POORinFHH* 19.4 percent.

Returning to Table 1, the fourth column indicates the percentage changes in the poverty rates between 1959 and 1978. The 43.2 percent improvement in the poverty rate of white FHHs was exceeded by the 62.5 percent reduction in the white OHH poverty rate. This yielded a relative deterioration of white FHH poverty status. Among blacks, FHHs and OHHs 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 FHH 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 rate effect. For whites the improved poverty rates together raised the %*POORinFHH* by 8.4 percent. This is comparable to the effect of the demographic shift, which raised the ratio by 9.8 percent. For blacks the poverty rate improvements raised the %*POORinFHH* 22.1 percent, while the demographic shift acting alone raised the ratio 19.4 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 FHHs exceeded that of white FHHs. The consequence was a combined poverty rate impact that was nearly three times as strong for blacks as for whites. A second

TABLE 2

	1959-1978		1978-1991	
	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks
Hypothetical net change in % <i>POORinFHH</i> caused by change in:				
<i>FHHPR</i>	-9.2	-5.4	+2.3	-0.1
<i>OHHPR</i>	+21.9	+28.9	-6.4	-0.7
Combined poverty rates <sup>a</sup>	+8.4	+22.1	-4.1	-0.8
Demographic mix	+9.8	+19.4	+4.9	+3.4

a: Due to the large changes in the poverty rates and because of non-linear relationships among the variables, it is incorrect to simply sum the *FHHPR* and *OHHPR* effects to obtain the "combined poverty rates" effect. Instead the "combined poverty rates" impact is found by calculating a hypothetical %*POORinFHH*<sub>1978</sub> using second year poverty rates and initial year *DEMO* percent, e.g.,  $HYPOTHETICAL \%POORinFHH_{1978} = (DEMO_{1959})(FHHPR_{1978}) + [(1 - DEMO_{1959})(OHHPR_{1978})]$ . Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, various years.

contrast is the magnitude of the demographic shift into FHHs. 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 %*POORinFHH*. Over this period poverty rates increased for all groups excepting black FHHs, 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 FHHs, the impacts were comparable.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is now apparent that the feminization of poverty is a measure of the poverty status of individuals in FHHs 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 FHH poverty rate rose. For blacks the trend was more pronounced reflecting a smaller decline in the FHH 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 [Moynihan, 1965; Murray, 1984; Wilson, 1987].

To complete our understanding of the exacerbated 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. This *ceteris paribus* 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 Northrop [1990].

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