

Brief Report: Measuring Poverty in the United States from 1967 to 2024

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ABSTRACT

Measuring poverty is critical for assessing long-term population trends in economic well-being and is also useful for understanding the role of policy in shaping these trends. This brief report updates and extends work on long-term trends in the poverty rate in the United States using two measures of poverty: (1) the historical Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM); and (2) a fully-relative poverty measure, based upon the SPM's definition of resources. The SPM shows a substantial decline in income poverty over time, by about one third, and this decline is almost entirely driven by resources from government policies and programs. Notably, despite five and a half decades of economic growth, the SPM poverty rate without counting resources from policies and programs never falls below 20%. In contrast to the SPM, the relative poverty rate has increased modestly over the period, though policies and programs have buffered against this increase. In addition, long-term gaps in the poverty rate have declined by sex, age, and to a lesser extent by race/ethnicity.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The poverty rate is a key indicator of both the level of and trends in economic well-being of a society (Chaudry & Wimer, 2016). Poverty is also an important predictor of other indicators of economic and social well-being, ranging from birth weight (Blumenshine et al., 2010) to academic success and child development (Hair et al., 2015; McLoyd, 1998), to long-term mobility (Corcoran, 1995). Thus, measuring and tracking poverty across geographies, demographic groups, and time is key for understanding the health and well-being of the population. But measuring poverty consistently and appropriately across places and over time is challenging, and measurement decisions are critical for determining estimates of economic disadvantage and understanding its changes over time. The United States stands out among wealthy democracies for having an “official” measure of income poverty (OPM; Citro and Michael, 1995). This measure was created in the 1960s and captures the percent of the U.S. population whose pretax, cash incomes fall below a specified level of need. Need is defined by a poverty threshold, and if an individual’s or family’s income falls below this threshold then that individual or family is considered to be poor. The poverty threshold varies primarily by family size and is updated each year only for changes in inflation rather than broader changes in societal incomes and living standards. The United States’ official measure of poverty has been critiqued for decades, and in 2011 (Short, 2011) these critiques culminated in the creation of a new measure – dubbed the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) – which embodied a number of improvements recommended by experts to better capture U.S. poverty levels and trends (Citro and Michael, 1995; ITWG 2010; Short 2011).

The SPM makes numerous improvements to the official measure. Among these, the SPM updates the poverty threshold calculation using a moving average of expenditures on a core

basket of necessities, which include food, clothing, shelter, and utilities (and in recent years, internet expenditures) plus a multiplier to account for other necessities. The SPM is considered “quasi-relative,” as thresholds are updated each year, adapting to both changing living standards and changes in prices. Unlike the official poverty threshold, the SPM threshold is geographically-adjusted to account for differences in housing costs across the United States. The SPM also broadens the definition of the family from just those related by blood, marriage, or adoption to include cohabiting partners, their relatives, foster children, and seemingly unrelated children living in a household. Perhaps most importantly, the SPM broadens the definition of resources that are compared to the poverty threshold, including not just pretax cash income but also tax liabilities, tax credits, in-kind resources, and non-discretionary expenses like work, child care, and medical expenses. Though not all of these decisions are universally accepted (e.g., Fremstad, 2020; Meyer & Sullivan, 2012), the SPM is widely thought to be an improvement upon the official measure, with a recent National Academies report on poverty measurement even calling for the SPM to replace the official measure as the nation’s “Principal Poverty Measure” (Ziliak et al., 2023).

The United States Census Bureau, in collaboration with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, began releasing the SPM in 2011 – covering calendar years 2009 and 2010 – and now releases the SPM each year along with the official poverty estimates (Short 2011, Creamer et al. 2022). A group of researchers based out of Columbia University created a historical version of the SPM retroactively calculated to 1967 (Fox et al., 2015) in order to re-assess long-term trends in U.S.

poverty with this more comprehensive measure.¹ A series of subsequent papers by the Columbia group and others documented changes for subpopulations including children (Wimer, Nam, et al., 2016), young adults (Wimer et al., 2020), and foster children (Pac et al., 2017), with additional research investigating differences by race (Nolan et al., 2016b), family structure (Wimer et al., 2021), and geography (Nolan et al., 2016a, 2017). Though results varied by subgroup, these articles collectively found that long-term trends in poverty show a steeper decline when using the SPM than when using the official measure. Moreover, they found that any declines from 1967 to the early 2010s were driven predominantly by resources from government policies and programs.

In this brief report, we harness updates to Columbia’s historical SPM data to examine long-term trends in poverty through 2024, extending the literature by a full decade beyond previous analyses. We further document long-term poverty trends by age, sex, and race and ethnicity to assess how disparities in poverty have evolved over the past five decades. Finally, we provide new evidence on how trends differ when using a fully-relative poverty threshold, which is more common in international contexts, to evaluate how measurement choices alter our understanding of long-term poverty trends and the growing role policies have played in driving those trends.

DATA AND METHODS

¹ A related paper (Wimer, Fox, et al., 2016) showed these trends when using an “anchored” SPM poverty threshold while keeping all other components of the SPM constant. The authors define an anchored threshold as one where poverty thresholds are set in a specific year (in their case, 2012) and are then carried forward and backward in time only for inflation, as in the case of the U.S.’ official measure. This is in contrast to the SPM’s quasi-relative poverty thresholds that change over time with patterns in societal expenditures on the basket of necessities described above.

We use data from the *historical Supplemental Poverty Measure* series, made public by researchers at Columbia University’s Center on Poverty and Social Policy (Wimer et al., 2024). The underlying data is the United States Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), which is the source of official poverty statistics and the SPM since 2009. As described in Fox et al. (2015), the historical SPM calculates a version of the SPM in each year back to 1967 using a combination of CPS ASEC data, Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE) data, and imputation methods that result in a comprehensive time series of SPM poverty data where the SPM is measured as consistently as possible using contemporary measurement definitions. As described in Fox et al. (2015), this involved the construction of: (1) *resource-sharing units*: which add to the Census definition of a family unmarried cohabiting partners, their relatives, foster children, and unrelated children in the household under the age of 15; (2) *poverty thresholds*: which are based on a five-year moving average of expenditures on a core basket of necessities that include food, clothing, shelter, and utilities; and (3) *resources*: which are defined as post-tax cash income plus the value of in-kind government benefits minus out-of-pocket expenditures on non-discretionary expenses such as medical care, work, and child care expenses. We use data from the 1968 to 2025 CPS ASECs retrieved from IPUMS (Flood et al., 2023), which cover the calendar years of 1967 to 2024.

In this article, we use two measures of income poverty that we create from the historical SPM time series. First, we use the *historical SPM*, which implements the fullest SPM methodology possible in each year to best match the Census Bureau’s definitions. Second, we use a *fully relative* poverty measure, similar to that used in most wealthy democracies (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2018). Here, poverty is defined at the household

level and is defined by having an income that falls below half of median household resources (equivalized using the square root of household size).

In both measures we use the same definition of resources, post-tax cash income *plus* resources from in-kind programs *minus* medical, work, and child care expenses as conceptualized in the SPM. We calculate both measures with and without the inclusion of resources from government policies and programs, which here include resources from: (a) cash welfare; (b) unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, veteran's payments, and government pensions; (c) Social Security; (d) Supplemental Security Income; (e) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps in earlier years of the series); (f) the federal School Lunch Program; (g) the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); (h) public housing and government rental assistance vouchers; (i) energy assistance programs; and (j) broadband internet subsidies (beginning in 2021). Resource measures without government policies and programs also back out tax credits, tax liabilities, payroll taxes, and temporary cash payments administered by tax agencies, like rebates or stimulus payments.

RESULTS

[Insert Figure 1 here]

We begin by presenting trends from 1967 to 2024 using the historical SPM. Figure 1 shows these trends among the total U.S. non-institutionalized population. From 1967 to 2024, poverty in the United States has fallen by 30%, from 18.5% in 1967 to 12.9% in 2024. Note that 2020 and 2021 represent sharp declines in SPM poverty driven by large increases in income

support provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Creamer & Unrath, 2023). The period from 2012 to 2024 continued a long-term trend of gradual decline in poverty from the late 1960s (the rate in 2012 was 16.0 percent), though the poverty rate has increased following its historic low in 2021. Figure 1 also shows that this long-term decline was driven by increased resources from government policies and programs. Absent these resources, SPM poverty would have been slightly *higher* in 2024 than in 1967 (23.7% vs 21.9%). Lastly, the SPM poverty rate absent resources from government policies and programs has *never fallen below 20%* over five and a half decades of tremendous economic growth in the United States, meaning that since this time series began, more than one in five people have been classified as poor before considering their resources from government policies and programs.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

While most scholars agree that the SPM is an improvement over the United States' official measure of poverty, some would prefer a fully relative measure akin to common practice in international contexts (e.g., Brady, 2021). In this tradition, poverty is measured against a fixed percentage of a country's median income, typically 50% of the median. In Figure 2, we show how long-term trends in the U.S. would look using a fully relative measure, based on 50% of median household-level² SPM resources aggregated to the household level. Here the picture looks very different. Though we again see the role of government policies and programs growing over time, the long-term trend is one of poverty increasing, not decreasing. Post-tax and transfer, poverty under the fully relative measure grows from 15.1% to 18.2% between 1967 and 2024, a rise of about 21%. Absent resources from government policies and programs, this rise would be

² Results are substantively similar if we use the SPM unit, rather than the household, when calculating relative poverty trends (available upon request). Yearly relative poverty rates are generally 0.1 to 0.7 percentage points higher when applied to the SPM unit rather than the household.

even steeper, from 19.4 to 26.6%, or a rise of just over 37%. Using a fully relative measure, the story about long-term trends in poverty is not a story of government policies combating poverty across decades, but one of policies somewhat, but not fully, buffering against a long-term and gradual erosion in the economic position of individuals and families. Thus, the choice of how to measure poverty has consequences not just for the count of how many people are poor in any given year, but also the interpretation of how economic disadvantage is changing over many decades, and how well policy is (or is not) succeeding in combating poverty.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Tables 1 and 2 present poverty trends for demographic groups across a select set of years using the historical SPM (Table 1) and the fully relative measure (Table 2). We focus on sex, age, and race/ethnicity. We utilize 3-year averages to allow us to bring in smaller subgroups in the data when possible, for example American Indian/Alaska Natives beginning in 1988. The quality of survey data on race and ethnicity varies over time, with the CPS ASEC not having detailed breakdowns in early years of the time series, which is why 1968 is not available for all race/ethnic groups and 1978 is also not available for Asian/Pacific Islanders and American Indian/Alaska Natives.

Beginning with Table 1, poverty has fallen using historical SPM for both sexes, with larger declines for the female population (in both absolute and relative terms). In 1968, female poverty was 3.2 percentage points higher than male poverty, whereas by 2024 this gap has narrowed to 1.1 percentage points. Female poverty declined by roughly one third while male poverty declined by about a quarter. Turning to age, we see that the long-term declines in poverty using the historical SPM are driven primarily by declines among older adults age 65 and over, whose poverty rates fall by 60%, and children under age 18, whose poverty rates fall by

over a third. In contrast, poverty rates for working-aged adults are similar in 2024 and 1968. These declines in poverty among older adults and children have also led towards an equalization of poverty rates across age groups over time. In 1968, poverty rates were much higher for children and older adults relative to working-aged adults, but by 2024 all three groups are within three percentage points of one another (12.2% to 14.5%). Lastly, turning to race/ethnicity, where all race categories examined are exclusive of those who identify as Hispanic origin, we do see some convergence in poverty rates over time. In 1971, the poverty rate of Black individuals was over three times higher than that of White individuals (38.8% vs 12.2%) and more than 13 percentage points higher than the poverty rate of Hispanic individuals. The poverty rate among Black individuals fell by more than 50% between 1971 and 2024, but the Black poverty rate remained over twice the White poverty rate in 2024 (19.5% to 8.8%). The poverty rate of Black individuals has also fallen below that of Hispanics, whose poverty rate in 2024 stands at 20.7%, 1.2 percentage points higher than that of the Black population. For Asian/Pacific Islanders (API) and American Indian/Alaska Natives (AIAN), starting in 1988, SPM poverty fell by about a third since 1988. Whereas in 1988, the API poverty rate was nearly twice that of the White poverty rate (18.5% vs. 9.7%), by 2024 the API poverty rate was about 40% higher than the White poverty rate (or 4 percentage points) and remained well below Black or Latino poverty rates. The poverty rate of AIAN individuals³ more closely tracks the poverty rate of Black individuals over the period, falling from around 30% in 1988 to around 20% in 2024. While large and significant gaps by race and ethnicity persist, these gaps are smaller in 2024 in both absolute and relative terms as measured by the historical SPM.

³ Results when using a broader definition of AIAN that does not exclude people of Hispanic/Latino descent produces very similar trends (available upon request).

[Insert Table 2 here]

Table 2 depicts the same trends by subgroup but for a fully-relative poverty measure. We again see a modest convergence by sex but rising relative poverty rates for both sexes. Poverty rates decline for older adults but rise for children and working-age adults, leading to a modest convergence of relative poverty rates by 2024 despite older adults continuing to have the highest poverty rates. We also see a convergence by race/ethnicity, with initial relative poverty rates being twice as high in 1971 for Hispanic individuals and three times as high for Black individuals relative to White individuals, and these ratios falling in both absolute and relative terms by 2024. API and AIAN poverty rates also fell from 1988 to 2024, leading to API relative poverty rates similar to White rates in 2024 and an AIAN rate similar to Black rate in 2024.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this brief report, we extend and re-examine long-term trends in poverty in the United States with a focus on the role of poverty measurement in characterizing and interpreting these trends. Using historical data created by Fox and colleagues (2015), we show long-term trends in poverty using the historical SPM, and a fully-relative measure commonly produced in international contexts.

Two central findings emerge from this extension and re-examination. First, measurement matters. Using the SPM, we find substantial declines in poverty in the United States over the past five and a half decades. Though rates rise and fall year to year, over the 55-year period the historical SPM falls by about a third. Under a fully-relative measure, however, the long-term arc of trends in poverty is quite different. Instead of falling substantially as under the SPM, relative

poverty has somewhat increased over the period. Relative poverty is measured at the household-level against median household incomes, so using this measure shows that when set against the median household in the United States, there is a growing percentage of people falling below half this median. Proponents of relative measures tend to see median income as a marker of full inclusion in a society, and poverty as a measure of exclusion from full participation (see Iceland, 2013; Ravallion, 2020). Critics of relative measures argue that they ignore absolute standards of living and function more as measures of inequality within a society. This article shows that the choice is consequential for interpreting long-term trends. But rather than one series being “right” and another “wrong,” we argue that these different measures answer different questions and tell us different facts about long-term changes in Americans’ economic well-being. Thus, both are important to produce and understand.

The second central finding is that policies matter. Regardless of the measure we choose, the SPM’s concept of resources is more comprehensive in its definition of income than the measure of pretax cash income underlying the country’s official measure. With this more comprehensive accounting of resources, we see a growing role of income from government policies and programs in reducing poverty over time. Indeed, without counting resources from government policies and programs, the historical SPM *never falls below 20%*, despite five and a half decades of economic growth. Policies still matter under a relative measure, but rather than driving reductions in poverty, they instead buffer against what would have been a larger increase in poverty levels. From a strict accounting perspective, there is little doubt that policies lift many individuals and families in the United States above the poverty line. Nothing about this invalidates critiques of how policies could be better designed or implemented, or leave fewer

people behind, but policies do matter for reducing levels of income poverty and this role has grown substantially over time, regardless of the measure.

Our study is not without limitations. We rely on measures of income poverty, which entails tabulating incomes across a calendar year period and comparing them to a specified level of need in the form of the poverty threshold. But income is not the only measure of economic disadvantage. Some scholars, for example, prefer consumption-based measures of poverty (Meyer & Sullivan, 2012) on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Others look at measures of material hardship, which are direct reports of struggles affording key goods and services (Nelson, 2011; Rodems & Shaefer, 2020; Iceland et al., 2021). Still others prefer so-called “multi-dimensional” measures of poverty that combine numerous indicators of disadvantage into an index (Alkire et al., 2015). One common critique of income-based poverty measures is that income is difficult to measure and is measured with considerable error, and that this mismeasurement has grown over time (Meyer et al., 2015).

We have also shown that poverty trends vary across different segments of the population, but we only focus on differences by broad groups defined by sex, age, and race/ethnicity, and there is much more variation to understand. Importantly, the data we rely upon only covers the non-institutionalized population and thus misses groups such those who are currently incarcerated at the time of the survey or segments of the population experiencing homelessness. Household surveys may also fail to adequately represent groups like undocumented immigrants who may be reluctant to participate in surveys or otherwise hard to reach. To the extent that those groups are growing or shrinking over time, and how changes in these populations vary by sex, age, and race/ethnicity, relying on the non-institutionalized population in U.S. households may skew or obscure important trends.

Despite these limitations, measuring income poverty with rigorous and advanced methods provide important insights into both the level and trend of economic disadvantage in the United States, as well as the role that policies play in reducing that disadvantage. Certainly no measure is perfect, and there are calls to further modernize the United States' poverty measure to better capture things like health care, child care, and housing needs (Ziliak et al., 2023). As measures continue to be refined or changed, it will be critical to also estimate these measures consistently over time to understand how economic need is changing and whether policy is effectively reducing that need.

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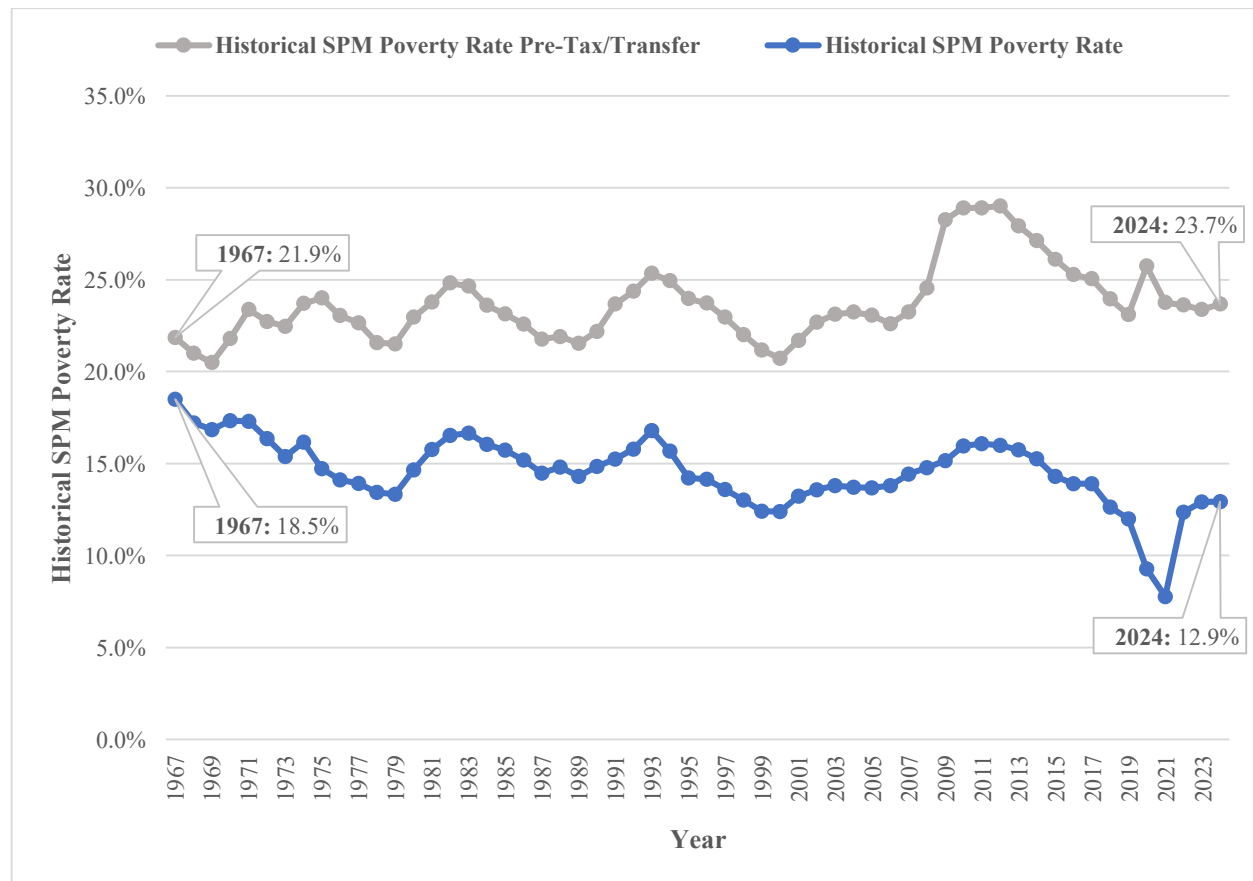
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Figure 1

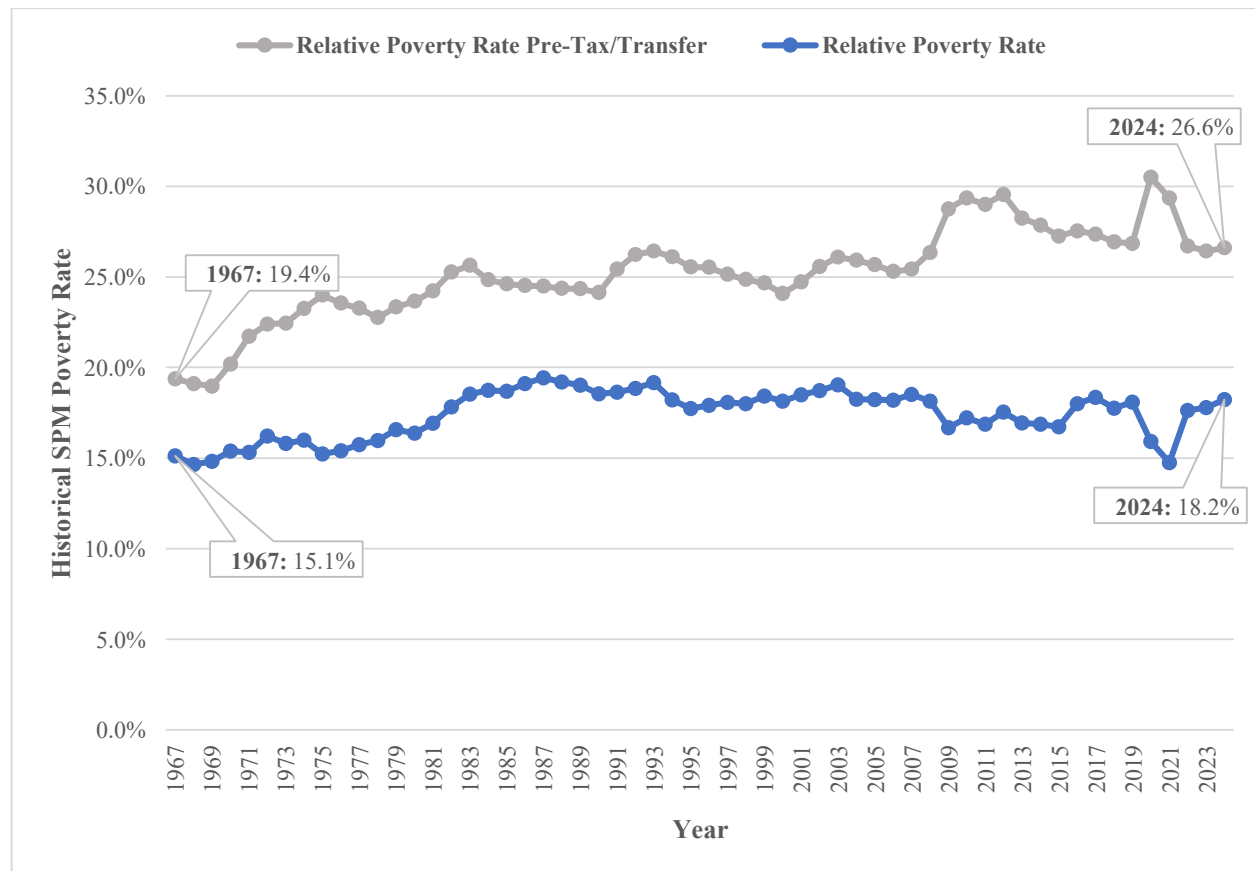
Historical SPM Poverty Rates for the Overall U.S. Population (1967-2024)



Note. Figure 1 depicts the historical SPM poverty rate before and after taxes/transfers from 1967 to 2024 using the 1968 to 2025 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements and historical Supplemental Poverty Measure series (Wimer et al., 2024). Estimates exclude observations housed in group quarters. The series breaks reflect changes related to various updates to the SPM methodology: redesigned income questions in 2013, updates to the processing system in 2017, and methodological changes in 2019. For additional details, see the historical footnotes of Table B-2 in Shrider (2024). For survey years 2019 to 2021, we use the entropy balance weights generated by Rothbaum and Bee (2021) to account for pandemic nonresponse.

Figure 2

Relative Poverty Rates for the Overall U.S. Population (1967-2024)



Note. Figure 2 depicts the relative poverty rate before and after taxes/transfers from 1967 to 2024 using the 1968 to 2025 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements and historical Supplemental Poverty Measure series (Wimer et al., 2024). Estimates exclude observations housed in group quarters. The series breaks reflect changes related to various updates to the SPM methodology: redesigned income questions in 2013, updates to the processing system in 2017, and methodological changes in 2019. For additional details, see the historical footnotes of Table B-2 in Shrider (2024). For survey years 2019 to 2021, we use the entropy balance weights generated by Rothbaum and Bee (2021) to account for pandemic nonresponse.

Table 1*Historical SPM poverty rates for select subgroups by decade (1968 to 2024)*

	1968	1978	1988	1998	2008	2018	2024	Relative Change in Poverty: 1968 to 2024
Sex								
Female	19.1%	15.1%	15.7%	14.2%	15.6%	13.5%	13.5%	-29.3%
Male	15.9%	12.0%	13.3%	11.8%	14.0%	12.1%	12.4%	-22.0%
Age								
0-17	19.7%	17.7%	20.5%	16.9%	17.2%	14.0%	13.6%	-31.0%
18-64	13.1%	10.6%	11.9%	11.1%	13.5%	12.2%	12.2%	-6.9%
65 and older	35.1%	18.8%	15.3%	14.0%	16.4%	13.6%	14.5%	-58.7%
	1971	1978	1988	1998	2008	2018	2024	Relative Change in Poverty: Earliest Year to 2024
Race/Ethnicity								
Black, non-Hispanic	38.8%	30.9%	30.7%	23.5%	23.5%	20.2%	19.5%	-49.7%
Hispanic	25.7%	23.5%	32.6%	28.4%	28.0%	20.3%	20.7%	-19.5%
White, non-Hispanic	12.2%	9.9%	9.7%	8.3%	9.7%	8.8%	8.8%	-27.0%
Asian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	-	-	18.5%	15.8%	17.2%	14.0%	12.8%	-30.8%
American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	-	-	27.4%	22.1%	20.9%	17.3%	19.6%	-28.5%

Note. Analysis of the 1968 to 2025 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC) and historical Supplemental Poverty Measure series (Wimer et al., 2024). Poverty rates represent three-year averages of annual poverty rates, where the year referenced in the table represents the midpoint of the three calendar years in which poverty is measured (e.g., 1968 represents the average poverty rate from calendar years 1967 to 1969). The exception is rates for 2024, which are produced using data on poverty from calendar years 2023 and 2024. Data on ethnicity were collected beginning in the 1971 CPS ASEC and racial categories for Asian or Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaska Native were not added until the 1988 ASEC. Data by individual years, as well as data that disaggregates Asian and Pacific Islander categories (when possible) is available in the Online Supplement (Tables S1 and S2).

Table 2*Relative poverty rates for select subgroups by decade (1968 to 2024)*

	1968	1978	1988	1998	2008	2018	2024	Relative Change in Poverty: 1968 to 2024
Sex								
Female	16.4%	18.1%	21.1%	20.0%	19.2%	19.4%	19.2%	17.1%
Male	13.2%	14.0%	17.3%	16.3%	16.3%	16.7%	16.8%	27.3%
Age								
0-17	15.8%	19.7%	25.8%	23.0%	20.5%	20.3%	20.0%	26.6%
18-64	11.0%	11.9%	14.9%	14.5%	15.1%	15.8%	15.4%	20.0%
65 and older	34.0%	29.9%	27.2%	26.3%	25.9%	23.6%	24.5%	-27.9%
	1971	1978	1988	1998	2008	2018	2024	Relative Change in Poverty: Earliest Year to 2024
Race/Ethnicity								
Black, non-Hispanic	35.2%	34.8%	38.3%	32.0%	29.1%	28.7%	27.8%	-21%
Hispanic	22.7%	25.6%	35.2%	33.0%	27.7%	24.5%	24.5%	7.9%
White, non-Hispanic	11.4%	12.3%	14.2%	13.2%	13.4%	14.1%	14.1%	23.7%
Asian/Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic	-	-	18.6%	15.6%	14.6%	14.0%	13.1%	-29.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	-	-	35.8%	30.6%	28.4%	28.3%	28.9%	-19.3%

Note. Analysis of the 1968 to 2025 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC) and historical Supplemental Poverty Measure series (Wimer et al., 2024). Poverty rates represent three-year averages of annual poverty rates, where the year referenced in the table represents the midpoint of the three calendar years in which poverty is measured (e.g., 1968 represents the average poverty rate from calendar years 1967 to 1969). The exception is rates for 2024, which are produced using data on poverty from calendar years 2023 and 2024. Data on ethnicity were collected beginning in the 1971 CPS ASEC and racial categories for Asian or Pacific Islander and American Indian or Alaska Native were not added until the 1988 ASEC. Data by individual years, as well as data that disaggregates Asian and Pacific Islander categories (when possible) is available in the Online Supplement (Tables S3 and S4).

Supplementary Files

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