

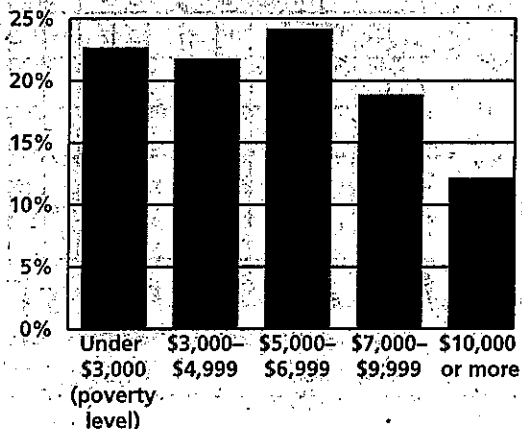
Poverty Amidst Plenty

The 1950s and 1960s were a period of growing prosperity. Family incomes were going up, and people were enjoying comfortable lives. This prosperity did not touch every American, however.

In 1959, the federal government said that an annual income of \$2,973 was the poverty line. That meant a family of four earning less than that amount lived in poverty. The government found this number by figuring out how much it would cost a family of four to eat. Then that amount was multiplied by three—because people typically spent one-third of their income on food.

The graph below shows the percentage of families that earned different levels of income in 1959. As the graph shows, more than three-quarters of American families had incomes above the poverty line. Still, more than 22 percent of families did not.

Family Income Levels, 1959



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1910*

In the postwar boom times, people living in poverty were often overlooked. Social critic Michael Harrington brought them to the country's attention, however. In 1962, Harrington published a book called *The Other America*. It highlighted the problems of the poor. Harrington wrote the following.

The poor live in a culture of poverty. . . . The poor get sick more than anyone else in the society. . . . When they become sick, they are sick longer than any other group in the society. Because they are sick more often and longer than anyone else, they lose wages and work, and find it difficult to hold a steady job. . . . Their prospect is to move to an even lower level . . . toward even more suffering.

Harrington also pointed out the large numbers of poor people in the country. His book shocked many and spurred President John F. Kennedy to begin developing an antipoverty program. When Lyndon B. Johnson became president after President Kennedy's assassination in 1963, he vowed to end poverty. Saying that his goal was to create the Great Society, he sent Congress a number of antipoverty programs, which Congress passed. Some of the most important programs still exist.

- **Medicare** provides hospital and medical insurance for the elderly.
- **Medicaid** sends money to the states for health care for people receiving welfare.
- **Project Head Start** provides early education for poor children to prepare them better for school.

However, the Great Society had mixed success. The number of poor people did go down, and Project-Head Start has been successful in preparing poor children for school. But several of the programs were ineffective. When the nation entered the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s, Congress spent less money on programs to fight poverty. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that the war on poverty was "shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam."

Activity

Find out what income is defined as the poverty level for a family of four today. Find out how many American families fall below that income.