

## Chapter 43

# Two Americas

*Why did poverty persist in the United States in an age of affluence?*

### 43.1 Introduction

In September 1956, Vice President Richard Nixon gave a speech in which he predicted a prosperous next few years for the United States. In the “not too distant” future, he said, a four-day workweek would become the norm. The “remaining pockets of [economic] distress” would be wiped out. “These are not dreams or idle boasts,” he stated confidently. “Our hope is to double everyone’s standard of living in ten years.”

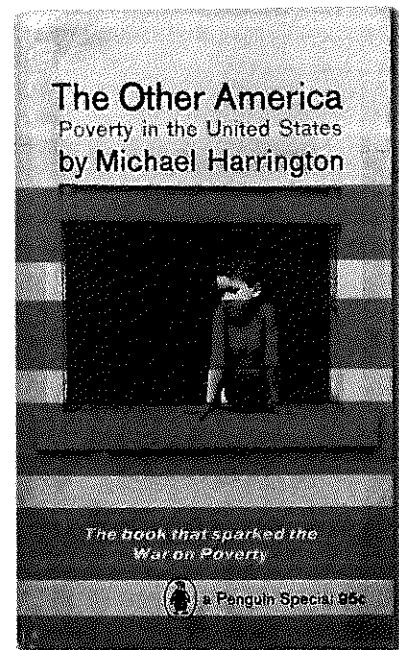
Nixon was not alone in his optimism. Booming economic growth since World War II had led many government officials and leading intellectuals to believe that poverty would soon be eradicated. Although some voiced concern that not all Americans shared in the general prosperity, most of the public ignored the existence of poverty in the United States. *Time* magazine went so far as to forecast “the elimination of poverty as a fact of human life.”

In 1962, a new book called *The Other America* jolted the nation out of its complacency. Written by social activist Michael Harrington, the book described two Americas—one affluent, the other impoverished:

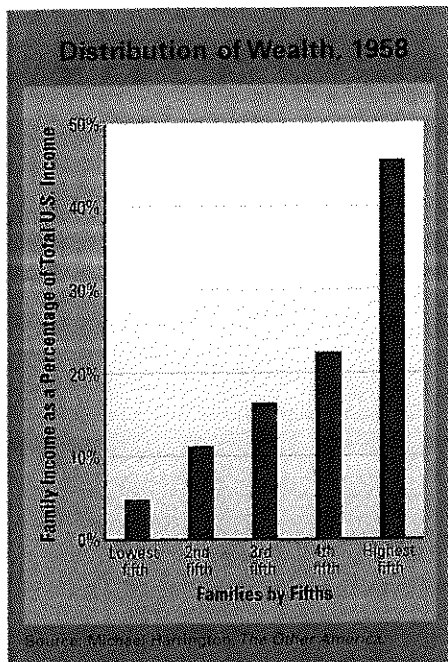
There is a familiar America. It is celebrated in speeches and advertised on television and in the magazines. It has the highest mass standard of living the world has ever known. In the 1950s . . . the familiar America began to call itself “the affluent society” . . . [Meanwhile] there existed another America. In it dwelt somewhere between 40,000,000 and 50,000,000 citizens of this land. They were poor. They still are.

—Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, 1962

Harrington’s book shocked readers with the details of what he called the “enormous and intolerable fact of poverty in America.” It was a wake-up call for the American people. *The Other America* generated a national discussion about the responsibility of government to address gross inequalities in American society.



Michael Harrington was a social and political activist who became best known for writing *The Other America*. This book stunned readers with its portrayal of poverty in the midst of American affluence. It helped inspire a government antipoverty program—called the War on Poverty—in the 1960s.



During the 1950s, the United States prospered, but all Americans did not benefit. This graph shows that in 1958, the top fifth of American families received almost half of the nation's income. The bottom fifth received less than one twentieth of all income.

## 43.2 The Persistence of Poverty in an Affluent Society

Greenwood, Mississippi, was one of countless towns in which the two Americas existed side by side. During the 1950s, playwright Endesha Ida Mae Holland grew up there, raised alongside her three siblings by a hardworking single mother. Holland later wrote a memoir about her childhood in which she described the contrast between poverty and prosperity in Greenwood. The well-to-do whites, she wrote, lived on quiet, shady boulevards in houses "with many big rooms and bright, soft rugs on the floors." Each house had a neatly trimmed lawn, "with pretty flowers set in borders along the walkway." In these neighborhoods, "the streets were paved and no open window was without its screen."

Holland herself lived in the "respectable" black section of town. Her home was a small, ramshackle house infested with cockroaches. The roof leaked, the walls were plastered with newspaper, and the packed earth showed through between the floorboards. Holland was poor, but others were poorer. She wrote that "the poorest black people lived" near the railroad tracks, where "in places the tracks were almost hidden by the smelly black mud that oozed from the 'bayou,' an open cesspool that held the waste from outhouses."

**Different Ways of Defining Poverty** Most people understand poverty as the lack of means—money, material goods, or other resources—to live decently. But what does it mean to live decently? There has never been a single standard for measuring economic deprivation. What people think of as poor depends on where and when they live.

For much of U.S. history, many Americans felt poverty to be as much a moral condition as an economic problem. They looked down on people, known as paupers, who did not work and who lived on public charity. Many viewed **pauperism**, or dependency on public assistance, as a moral failing. "Pauperism is the consequence of willful error," wrote a leading clergyman in 1834, "of shameful indolence [laziness], of vicious habit."

At the same time, society recognized that poverty could result from misfortune. People who could not work—such as the elderly, the disabled, and children—could not help being poor. Many Americans also realized that most poor people did work, but their wages were too low to lift them out of poverty. Known today as the **working poor**, these Americans were once referred to as "the poorer sort." Although the working poor hold a more respectable place in society than did paupers, economically, there is little difference between the two.

In the late 1800s, social scientists began examining poverty more objectively, viewing it in economic rather than moral terms. For the first time, they defined poverty as a lack of income. They used the term **poverty line** to refer to the minimum amount of income one would need to meet basic needs. However, scholars disagreed about exactly where to draw the poverty line.

In 1949, the Subcommittee on Low-Income Families proposed a poverty line of \$2,000 per year for families of all sizes. This unofficial line was widely used until 1958, when the government began to adjust the amount based on family size. An official poverty line was not established until 1965. It was determined by calculating a minimal family food budget and then tripling that figure, because food typically made up about one third of a family's total budget.

**The Poor in Postwar America: An Invisible Class** By the end of the 1950s, about one in four Americans lived below the poverty line. According to *The Other America*, this meant that about 50 million people existed “at levels beneath those necessary for human decency.” Middle-class readers of Michael Harrington’s book were shocked to discover the extent of the country’s poverty. How could they not have noticed such widespread misery? They had not, wrote Harrington, because

The other America, the America of poverty, is hidden . . . Its millions are socially invisible to the rest of us . . . Poverty is often off the beaten track. It always has been. The ordinary tourist never left the main highway . . . The traveler comes to the Appalachians in the lovely season. He sees the hills, the streams, the foliage—but not the poor.

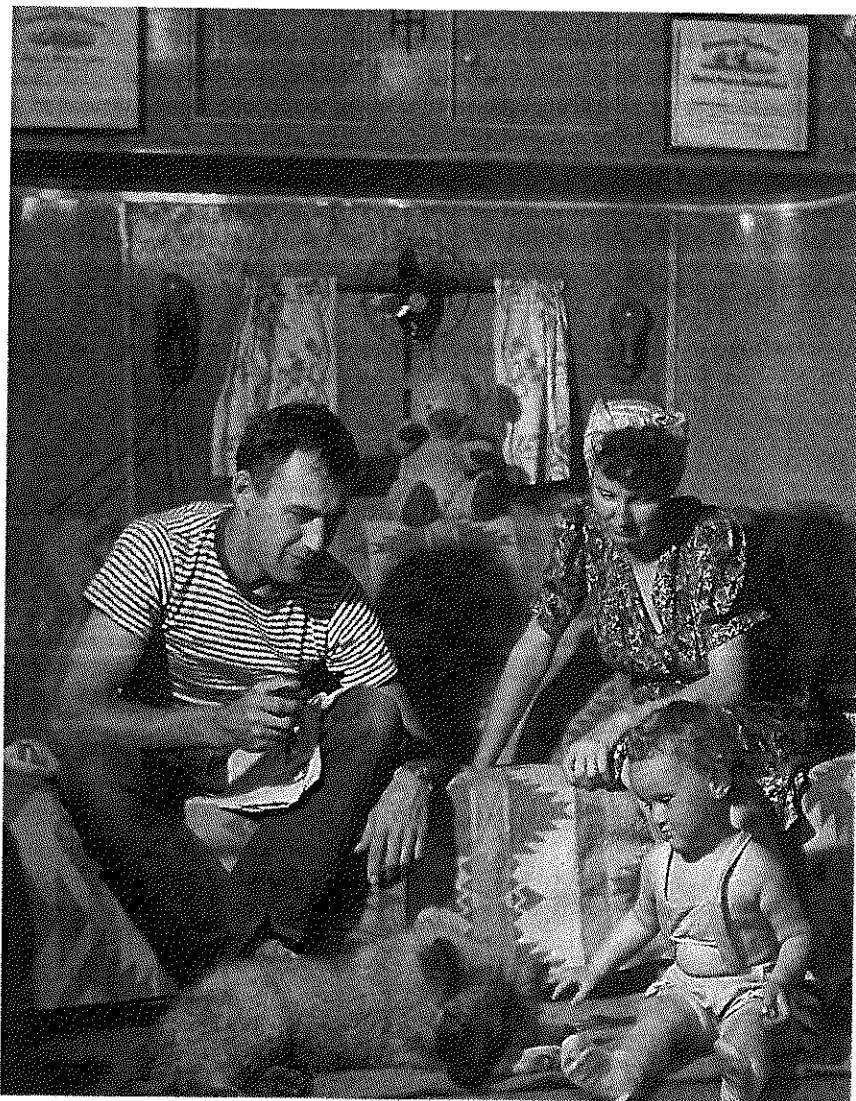
—Michael Harrington, *The Other America*, 1962

Harrington contended that the movement of middle-class families to the suburbs after World War II was one reason for the general lack of knowledge about America’s poor. Middle-class workers commuting to urban business districts seldom encountered the poor people left behind in old city neighborhoods. “Living out in the suburbs,” Harrington wrote, “it is easy to assume that ours is, indeed, an affluent society.” The availability of inexpensive clothing also helped hide the poor from view. He observed that “America has the best-dressed poverty the world has ever known.”

Age was another factor that made the poor hard to see. “A good number of them (over 8,000,000) are sixty-five years of age or better; an even larger number are under eighteen,” Harrington noted. Elderly poor people seldom strayed from their rented rooms or homes in older urban neighborhoods. “One of the worst aspects of poverty among the aged,” Harrington wrote, “is that these people are out of sight and out of mind, and alone. The young are somewhat more visible, yet they too stay close to their neighborhoods.”

In addition, the poor wielded no political power. This made it easy for others to ignore them. “The people of the other America do not, by far and large, belong to unions, to fraternal organizations,” Harrington wrote, “or to political parties. They are without lobbies of their own; they put forward no legislative program.” Without a political voice, the poor went unheard.

Michael Harrington argued that “poverty is invisible.” The growing availability of cheap clothing and consumer goods helped create this impression. A family with a television or a car might not appear poor. But a closer look might show telltale signs of poverty, such as poor health, a rundown home, and a decaying neighborhood.





Dilapidated city housing, such as this apartment building in Chicago, became the target of urban renewal programs, which aimed to clear slums and provide the poor with better housing. Many residents were forced into low-income housing projects. According to critics, this resulted in the loss of many poor but vibrant neighborhoods.

### 43.3 The Landscape of Poverty in a “Land of Plenty”

The “other America,” the land of the poor, had no geographic or cultural boundaries. It reached into cities and rural areas in every state. Its “inhabitants” belonged to every racial, ethnic, and age group in the country. In 1959, more than one fourth of the nation’s poor were children, and one third were elderly. In a decade marked by prosperity, how did so many get left behind?

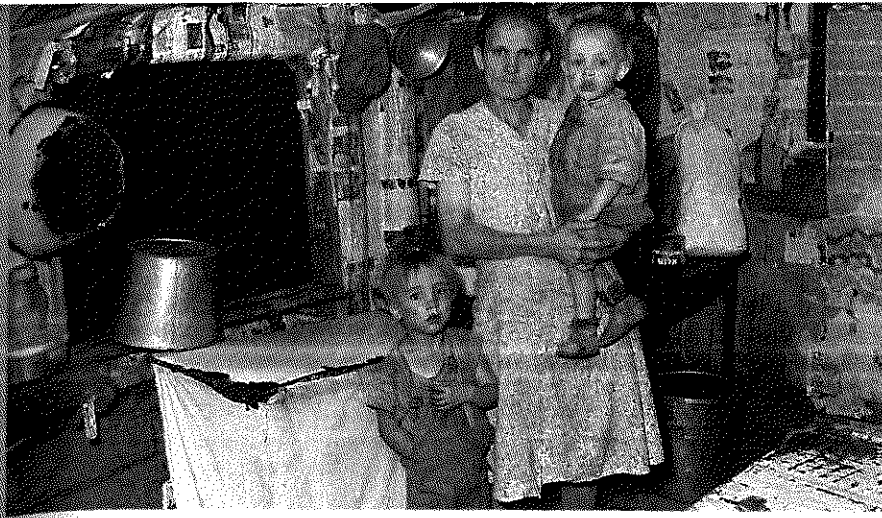
**Left Behind in the Inner Cities** As middle-class whites moved out of cities in the 1950s, poor people moved in. From 1945 to 1960, about 5 million African Americans left the South for northern cities. By 1955, nearly 700,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland, mostly to New York City. In the West, large numbers of Mexican immigrants moved to Los Angeles and other cities.

Many of the new arrivals came in search of manufacturing jobs. However, as industries relocated to the suburbs, the jobs disappeared. Housing discrimination limited where minorities could live and work. “When I went . . . to look for apartments,” a Puerto Rican in Philadelphia recalled, “they throw the door in my face. They don’t want no colored people, you know, my skin is dark.” Black and Latino populations became concentrated in decaying, inner-city areas that were being abandoned by whites. These blighted neighborhoods turned into overcrowded slums with high rates of poverty and unemployment.

To rectify this problem, Congress passed the **Housing Act of 1949**. Its goal was to provide “a decent home . . . for every American family” by funding public housing and **urban renewal** programs. Under urban renewal, the government demolished many slums and replaced them with high-rise apartments, offices, and civic buildings. Despite its lofty-sounding goal, however, the Housing Act of 1949 made urban poverty worse. Hundreds of thousands of poor people lost homes when their neighborhoods were bulldozed. The government intended low-income public housing projects to provide an alternative, but not enough housing was built to accommodate all the displaced households. In many cities, the overcrowded and impoverished “projects” became the new slums.

**Trying to Live Off the Land** American farmers also faced poverty. After World War II, new agricultural technology contributed to the growth of **agribusiness**—the industry of food production by large corporations or wealthy individuals. Agribusiness holdings were vast in size and produced huge quantities of food very efficiently by applying industrial production techniques to farming. Agribusiness was profitable, but its earnings accumulated at the expense of the rural poor. Small farmers could not compete with the giant corporate farms, and many sank into poverty. As a result, thousands of poor rural whites and blacks moved off the land and into cities in search of work.

On large corporate farms, migrant workers endured low pay and wretched living conditions. Many were Mexican *braceros* who came to the United States between 1942 and 1964. Other Mexicans came illegally. In 1954, the government organized Operation Wetback to expel undocumented Mexican immigrants. As a result, officials seized and deported several million Mexicans. Of the Mexican immigrants who remained in the United States in the 1950s, one in three lived below the poverty line.



In the 1950s, Appalachia was one of the poorest regions in the country. Many of the poor were unemployed coal miners and their families. They struggled to make ends meet through subsistence farming or by working low-wage jobs. The living conditions shown here were typical of the region's severe poverty.

**Appalachia**, a mountainous region in the South, was another rural outpost of poverty. Because of the steep terrain there, living off the land by farming was difficult. Coal mining, the region's once-dominant industry, declined after World War II, as the demand for coal fell. The decrease in demand and the mechanization of mining led to job losses for miners. In the 1950s, more than 2 million impoverished people left Appalachia. Harrington described those who remained as "a beaten people, sunk in their poverty and deprived of hope."

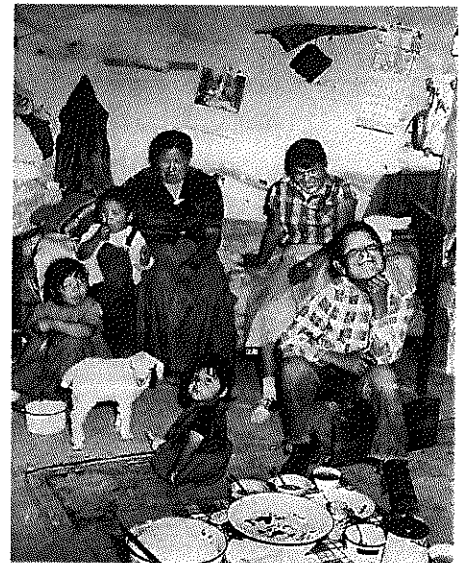
**America's Poorest Citizens** Perhaps the poorest U.S. citizens were American Indians. A 1949 study of conditions on American Indian reservations found "hopeless poverty and slum squalor." Indeed, those living on reservations seemed the most invisible poor of all, so much so that Michael Harrington omitted them—"quite wrongly" he later wrote—from *The Other America*.

In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act had affirmed American Indians' right to govern themselves. It had also affirmed their status as wards of the federal government. This meant the government held responsibility for protecting their lands and providing them with economic aid and social services.

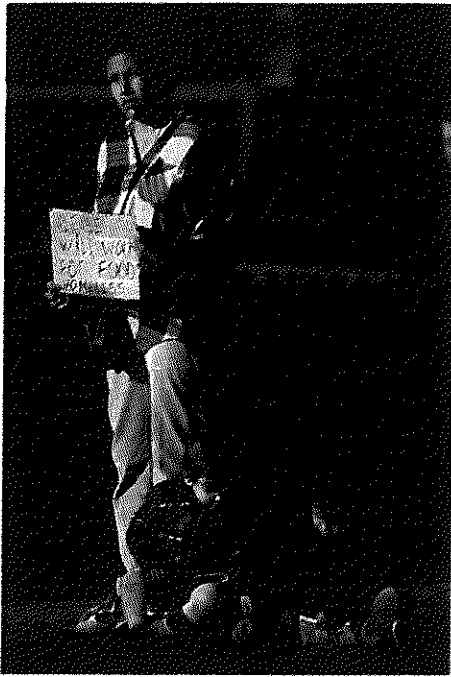
After World War II, the government wanted to end this relationship. As a practical matter, "getting out of the Indian business" would save money. Many people also thought that releasing American Indians from federal supervision would allow them to assimilate and become economically self-reliant. "Set the Indians free!" was their slogan. Others believed American Indians were not ready to be self-sufficient and would be vulnerable to exploitation. They feared that the tribes would be "freed" of the few assets—mainly land—they had left.

In 1953, Congress voted to terminate the government's responsibility for American Indians. The **termination policy** ended federal aid to tribes, withdrew federal land protection, and distributed tribal land among individuals. The **Voluntary Relocation Program** encouraged American Indians to move to cities. It provided transportation and initial help with finding housing and a job. By 1960, about 30 percent of American Indians lived in urban areas. However, many who relocated struggled to adapt to city life.

More than 100 Indian tribes and bands were eventually "terminated." Without economic aid, their poverty grew worse. Destitute tribes were forced to sell their land, resulting in the loss of more than 1 million acres of land. Termination eventually proved to be a failure, and in 1963, the policy was abandoned.



Termination agreements signed during the 1950s ended federal support for many American Indian tribes. Relocation centers were established in cities such as Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles to encourage Indians to migrate to urban areas. Many who made the move either joined the urban poor or later returned to their tribal area.



The most visible face of poverty today is homelessness. In 2007, the Department of Housing and Urban Development estimated the number of homeless people at between 444,000 and 842,000. "The driver in homelessness is the affordable housing crisis," said Nan Roman, head of the National Alliance to End Homelessness. "If we don't do something to address the crisis in affordable housing, we are not going to solve homelessness."



## Current Connections

### 43.4 The Changing Face of Poverty in America

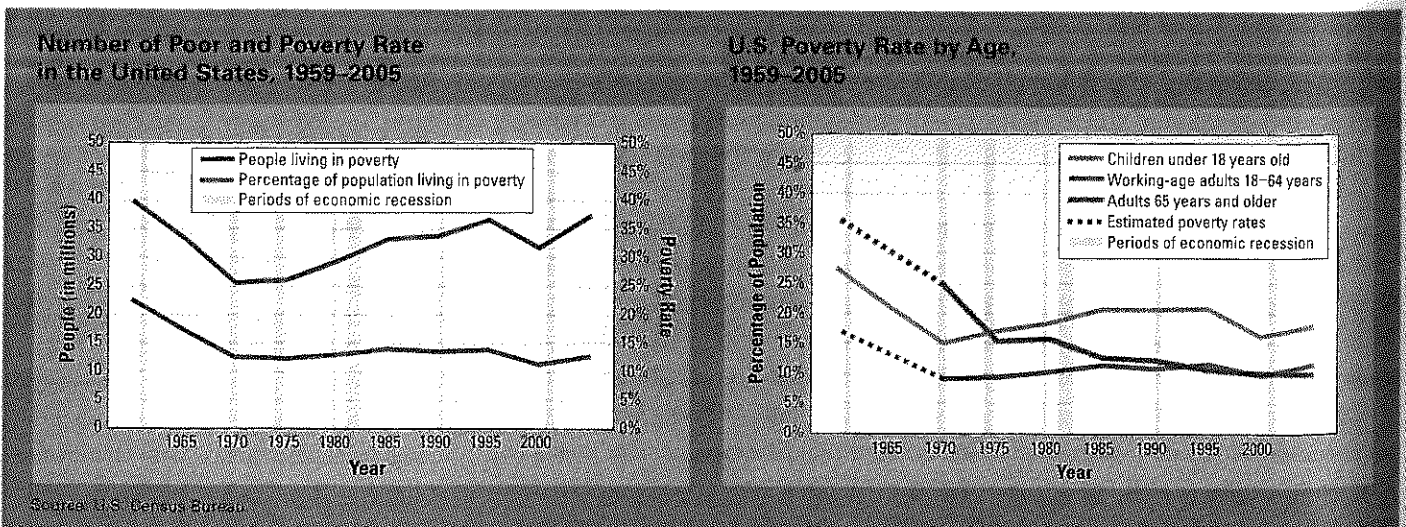
More than 40 years have passed since *The Other America* drew attention to poverty in the United States. Despite decades of economic growth and government programs to help the poor, the "other America" has not disappeared. Over time, however, the face of poverty has changed. Today's poor are younger and more diverse than were the poor of the 1960s. Those who are homeless are also more visible and are readily seen in cities and suburbs across the country.

The graphs in this section show how poverty affects various U.S. populations today. But numbers alone do not answer certain age-old questions about poverty: Why are people poor? What should be done to end poverty? Who should take on the responsibility of ending it?

**Poverty by the Numbers** Since the publication of *The Other America*, the United States has made progress in reducing poverty. By 2000, the overall poverty rate, or percentage of people living in poverty, had decreased by almost half. But following a recession that began in 2001, the poverty rate began to inch upward again. From 2003 to 2004, the poverty rate rose from 12.5 to 12.7 percent. Two tenths of a percent may not sound like much, but that increase represents 1.1 million people who became impoverished that year. An estimated 37 million Americans lived in poverty in 2005—a figure not all that different from the number in 1960.

**Poverty by Age and Education** The age groups most likely to be poor have changed over the past half century. In 1960, at least three out of ten older Americans were poor. Thanks largely to rising Social Security payments, the poverty rate among the elderly dropped to less than one in ten by 2005. The poverty rate for children also decreased, but not as quickly.

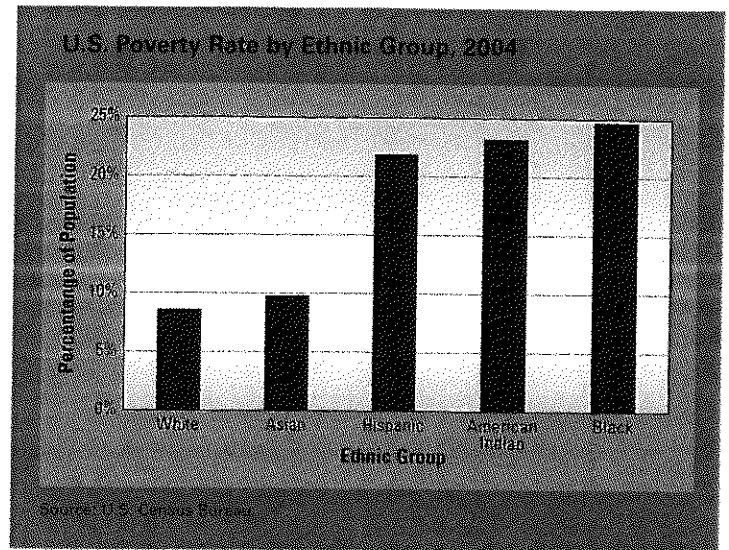
Among working-age adults, the poverty rate has not changed dramatically since 1965. In this group, poverty decreases as level of education increases.



In 2004, the poverty rate for adults aged 25 or older with college degrees was only 4 percent. The rate for those without high school diplomas was six times as high.

**Poverty by Ethnic Group and Country of Origin** As was true when Michael Harrington wrote *The Other America*, whites make up the largest group of poor Americans. Among all ethnic groups, African Americans have made the most dramatic gains since Harrington's time. In 1959, more than half of all blacks lived in poverty. By 2005, that figure had dropped to about one in four. Even so, African Americans' poverty rate is almost three times higher than that of whites.

Beginning in the late 1960s, immigration into the United States increased rapidly. By 2005, the poverty rate for all foreign-born people in the United States was somewhat higher than that for native-born Americans. Over time, however, immigrants' income levels tend to rise. In fact, naturalized citizens have a lower poverty rate than native-born Americans.



## Summary

Michael Harrington's *The Other America* revealed that despite the general affluence of the 1950s, millions of "socially invisible" Americans lived in poverty. Although people's views and understanding of poverty have changed over time, the problem persists.

**Defining poverty** Pauperism was once considered a moral failure. Today, poverty is defined in terms of income. People below the poverty line do not have enough income to live decently.

**An invisible class** In *The Other America*, Michael Harrington argued that the poor were "invisible" for many reasons. They lived apart from the middle class but looked much the same. They also played no role in politics.

**Urban poverty** Impoverished minorities became concentrated in decaying cities when the middle class moved out. The Housing Act of 1949 launched urban renewal programs to clear out slums and build new housing. However, many of these housing projects became slums.

**Rural poverty** The growth of agribusiness harmed many farmers. Migrant workers on corporate farms were not paid enough to lift them out of poverty. One of the poorest rural regions, Appalachia, suffered from poor farming conditions and a declining coal industry.

**American Indian policy** Efforts by the federal government to "terminate" its responsibility for Indian tribes led to increased poverty among Native Americans. The Voluntary Relocation Program helped Indians move to cities, but many had trouble adapting to urban life.

**The "other America" today** Despite government efforts, poverty is still a significant problem in the United States. About 37 million Americans lived in poverty in 2005. Today's poor are younger and more diverse than those of the past. They are also more visible in society.