

# Jewish Poverty: Measurement Problems

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## Choice in Approaches

TO develop an adequate program to alleviate the plight of the poor, it is necessary to have some objective yardstick defining poverty for measurement purposes.

Two methods are generally utilized. One is concerned with "distribution estimates." It measures the way in which the total available supply of resources is distributed among the various segments of society. A basic procedure is to divide the total income of a given population into five parts and then to compare the degree of departure of the bottom 20 percent with various income levels. Such a measurement would ascertain answers to the following questions: What percent of the total population falls within the bottom 20 percent of income? What is the proximity between the average income of the lowest group and the total average income? How has the composition and proportion of the lowest group changed throughout the years? These distribution estimates provide an element of stability in terms of measurement, yet, do not tell us anything about the nature of poverty itself. No understanding is given to the misery or plight of the lowest 20 percent. It concentrates upon income levels and disregards the human factor. It views remedies in terms of guaranteed incomes rather than human needs and actual people to be helped. Most important, it does not identify the actual needs of the poor.

A second yardstick is the "market-

basket" approach. This method measures poverty by estimating a basket of goods and services considered necessary for a decent minimum standard of living. Such items as food, clothing, shelter, transportation, education, etc. are included. Basic to this approach is the understanding that needs fluctuate with family size and place of residence. As a result, it provides a more precise definition of poverty and human needs. It identifies the amount and type of resources necessary for decent standards and sets up different categories for different types of families in diverse regions. The poor are, thus, not lumped together in a distribution statistic. Once the specific basket of goods is priced on the market place, the money sum becomes a yardstick for measuring poverty.

Central to the "market-basket" approach is the recognition that in a consumption oriented productive society, the minimum basket of resources constantly is enlarged to include items once believed to be luxuries. Is a telephone a necessity or a luxury today? As a result, comparative historical studies using such a yardstick cannot precisely measure the proportion of the poor who realistically climbed out of or fell into the poverty level. Basically, it would be a comparison of apples and oranges.

In addition, the market-basket may constantly lag behind actual increases in the total standard of living in a region. This may create undue hardship to the poor.

Another prime issue not generally noted is that the basket of goods does

not take into consideration specific cultural requirements. Religious Jews, for example, purchase kosher food and send their children to day schools or parochial schools for an intense Jewish education. Such families' would do without certain basic necessities rather than forgo their cultural-religious observances. These increased costs are not reflected within the basic basket budget of goods. As a result, certain segments of society may actually be poor even though their incomes are above the officially accepted yardstick level.

This directs attention to the key problem in developing any market-basket measurement. Basically, who arbitrarily determines the minimum needs of society and what criteria are utilized for such a determination?

To meet the needs of the Jewish poor, serious consideration must be given to the above problems. The primary concern should be the acquisition of hard data detailing the minimum market-basket of poor Jews of varying family sizes in different residential areas of our country. This market-basket should then be compared to official yardstick utilized for the measurement of poverty of governmental programs and aid. Also, analysis should be made of official budgets to ascertain whether they truly meet the minimum standards necessary for living in specific areas.

### **Developing a Proper Market Basket Budget for Jews**

The concept of a poverty market basket defined on the basis of ethnic or cultural considerations generates a unique orientation towards the entire concept of poverty and poverty programs. It sustains an element of cultural pluralism and equates cultural needs with minimum standards. Whether such an approach may be developed on

an official national scope is a matter in which the Jewish community should express interest. For practical immediate purposes, the Jewish community must re-evaluate the "market poverty basket" utilized by Jewish resources and services directly aiding the Jewish poor. At least the Jewish community should not victimize our needy by using official poverty standards that exclude vast numbers of Jewish families from vitally needed services. The following is a basic list of standards that must be developed to provide suitable services to the Jewish poor.

#### *1. A Standard for General Dietary Adequacy*

The first step in the development of any budget should be some form of a definitive standard of dietary adequacy. This standard may be based upon a minimum, optimum or an intermediate level of need.

The minimum standard may be considered that level of dietary consumption which prevents clinical symptoms of dietary deficiencies. The elimination of any element from such a standard would create a form of malnutrition. This minimum level would not generally allow for individual variations of requirements. In addition, it would tenuously equate poverty with subsistence and, therefore, not adequately care for the unique form of poverty in affluence manifested in our metropolitan areas. This means that an intermediate standard must be established allowing for individual variations as well as environmental and social conditions in metropolitan areas.

#### *2. A Standard of Cultural-Religious Dietary Adequacy*

Two distinct budgets should be developed for the Jewish poor. One should deal with the religious requirements of kosher food, two sets of dishes, need for *Glatt* kosher provisions, as well as the tradition of having a Friday eve-

ning and Sabbath morning meat meal.

The second budget should relate to that element of the Jewish population who do not eat kosher foods but will only consume kosher-style (Jewish type) foods. Some arbitrarily dietary standard and budget must be developed based upon market prices in various communities and consumption standards of dietary adequacy.

### 3. *A Standard for Minimum Shelter Allowances*

It is necessary to rethink the budgetary allowances for shelter provided to religious Jews. Chassidic Jews, in particular, will cluster their residence within a walking distance of their spiritual leader or other members of their sect. This will localize their residence in specific neighborhoods which may or not manifest minimum rentals. Allowances for shelter should reflect this phenomena.

### 4. *A Standard For Minimum Educational Allowance*

The official standard of poverty set up by the Social Security Administration as well as the lower income level of the "City Workers Budget" developed by the Department of Labor should be checked to ascertain the amount provided for educational purposes. This should be compared to the tuition required by various parochial and/or day schools utilized by religious Jews for the education of their children. Average allowances for such tuition should be developed for different communities. To the extent that such an education is essential to religious Jews, provision should be made for such an item within the minimum market budget. Consideration should be given to the number of children attending such schools.

### 5. *A Standard for Minimum Charitable and/or Synagogue Allowance*

Attendance at synagogue or temple on the High Holy Days is believed to

be a concern of great importance to a large majority of the aged Jewish poor. To the religious, or Chassidic oriented Jewish poor, regular Sabbath and weekday attendance is also a necessity. Such attendance requires some contribution and allowances should be made for this.

In addition, the process of giving to others is ingrained in the Jewish personality. Maimonides maintained that the obligation to give charity is incumbent even upon the poor. Generations of Jewish women grew up with the tradition of giving charity before they kindled the Friday evening Sabbath candles. The *pushke* is part of the "essential furniture" of most Jewish homes.

Consideration for these items must be provided in any budget dealing with Jews. For, to Jews, giving is part of life.

### 6. *A Standard Minimum Transportation Allowance*

Jews are unique in that they tend to seek out Jewish-oriented medical and health care facilities. Transportation allowances should, therefore, include not only transportation to and from a place of employment but also to and from Jewish medical and health services. Notice should be given of communities living within double fare zones and proper provision should be made for transportation to and from religious or cultural events.

To implement the above considerations, a coordinated endeavor of the Jewish community is required. In New York, a viable step has been made by the formation of the Metropolitan New York Coordinating Council on Jewish Poverty. This is an historic coalition of major and grass root leadership organizations to coordinate the Jewish communal response to Jewish poverty. A prime responsibility of the Coordinating Council is to provide research on the issues of poverty.

This article is but a means of bringing to the public arena some of the fundamental issues that must be considered. It is a firm hope that the leadership of Jewish communal and social welfare agencies will commence immediate action to redefine radically

Jewish poverty for the resources available through the Jewish community. We cannot walk backwards into the future. We cannot permit national guidelines to define Jewish problems. We also cannot permit Jewish intellectualization to delay action.