Reasons for not working: poor and nonpoor householders

Compared with their nonpoor counterparts in 1986, poor male householders were more likely to cite inability to find full-year work, illness, or disability as reasons for working part year or not working, and poor female householders with young children were more likely to indicate family responsibilities

Mark S. Littman

Despite a great deal of discussion about what the work activity of the poor is and should be, there is no consensus. Published views range from implying that none of the poor work to implying that they all work year round, full time or have unquestionable reasons for not doing so.[1]

This article compares the work experience of poor (income below the poverty level) and nonpoor (income above the poverty level) heads of family households (hereafter called "householders") between 1959 and 1986.[2] It also examines how the reasons given by the poor for not working or for working part year differ from those given by the nonpoor. The data are based on the official poverty figures from the Bureau of the Census and labor force activity as measured in the Current Population Survey (CPS).[3]

Work rates

In 1986, about 80 percent of nonpoor family householders worked, down from 90 percent in 1959, but unchanged overall in the 1980's. Although several reasons for the decline have been expounded, none has been universally accepted.[4] For example, earlier retirement (before age 65) has been one reason given, but even when the age universe is restricted to householders of preretirement age (22–64), the proportion working in the preceding year declined from about 95 percent of the nonpoor in 1959 to 91 percent by 1986.

In comparison, about 50 percent of the poor worked at all in 1986, down from 68 percent in 1959. Although the proportion of the working poor has been rather stable in the 1980's, it fell precipitously in the 1960's and 1970's. (See table 1.) Several factors are responsible for the different work rates of the poor and nonpoor, but the increase in the proportion of poor families headed by women is the largest single factor explaining the drop in the work force participation of poor householders.[5]

Poor families maintained by women have not shared in the increased labor force participation of women that has characterized the past quarter of a century. Families maintained by women have increased from 23 percent of all poor families in 1959 to 51 percent in 1986. Nonpoor families maintained by women represented 7 percent of all nonpoor families in 1959, and 12 percent in 1986. While the proportion of families maintained by women who worked in the previous year has increased for nonpoor women, it has decreased for poor women. For nonpoor women maintaining families with no spouse present, the proportion working increased from 64 percent in 1959 to 75 percent in 1986; for poor women, the corresponding proportions were 43 percent and 40 percent. (See table 1.)

Mark S. Littman is a sociologist at the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Census Bureau. The statistical assistance of Eleanor F. Baugher is gratefully acknowledged.

While the percent of poor female householders who work has decreased only slightly since 1959, the decline has been more pronounced for their male counterparts. Three of four poor men maintaining families worked in 1959, compared with 3 of 5 in 1986, a proportion that has remained fairly constant during the 1980's. (See table 1.) The proportion of poor male householders working year round, full time has also remained fairly constant, varying only between 24 percent and 27 percent since the mid-1970's. This figure had been 38 percent in 1959. (See table 2.)

Reason for work status

Study of reasons for not working or for working part year is a means of listening to the poor describe the causes of their present work status. Apparently, there have been no studies to investigate the validity of the reasons for the "not working" and "working part year" responses which have been elicited in the CPS for many years as part of the standard questions on weeks worked in previous calendar year. Some analysts believe these data are biased—not because there is evidence to suggest that poor respondents are more prone to give false responses, but because of the belief that survey respondents, regardless of poverty status, tend to give responses which they deem will be accepted without questions by the enumerator or by society.[6]

Table 1. **Percent of poor and nonpoor male and female family householders who worked, selected years, 1959–86**

Year	Poor			Nonpoor		
	Total	Male[1]	Female	Total	Male[1]	Female
1959	67.5	74.9	42.9	89.7	90.9	63.8
1965	60.7	68.7	40.7	88.2	90.0	66.8
1969	54.6	61.4	42.7	87.3	89.1	67.3
1972	53.5	64.9	38.1	85.7	87.6	67.5
1975	50.4	61.5	36.5	82.9	84.5	68.8
1978	49.0	57.6	40.6	82.8	84.1	72.5
1979	48.7	57.1	39.7	82.3	83.5	73.4
1980	49.4	59.5	38.5	81.7	82.6	74.0
1981	50.7	61.0	39.4	80.9	81.8	74.0
1982	48.7	59.2	36.3	80.2	81.1	73.0
1983	49.3	59.7	37.3	79.7	80.5	73.7
1984	49.1	59.8	37.5	79.8	80.5	74.5
1985	50.3	60.1	39.6	79.4	80.0	74.4
1986	49.8	60.1	40.1	79.7	80.4	74.7

[1] Data are for families in which no spouse was present and for all married-couple families.

Table 2. **Percent of poor and nonpoor male and female family householders who worked year round, full time, selected years, 1959–86**

Year	Poor			Nonpoor		
	Total	Male[1]	Female	Total	Male[1]	Female
1959	31.5	37.6	10.9	68.8	70.5	40.5
1965	29.3	36.3	11.6	71.5	73.6	42.6
1969	21.6	29.4	7.9	70.0	72.5	42.1
1972	19.8	29.4	6.9	67.6	70.0	43.3
1975	15.9	24.2	5.6	63.0	65.2	43.6
1978	16.1	26.7	5.6	65.1	67.2	48.2
1979	16.4	25.8	6.4	64.3	66.3	48.5
1980	16.2	25.6	6.0	62.9	64.5	50.2
1981	17.5	27.0	7.1	62.0	63.4	50.5
1982	15.7	23.5	6.5	59.9	61.0	50.6
1983	16.9	26.2	6.2	60.7	61.8	52.2
1984	17.1	26.1	7.3	62.3	63.6	53.1
1985	16.4	25.5	6.5	62.1	63.5	52.2
1986	16.6	25.4	8.3	62.3	63.5	53.0

[1] Data are for families in which no spouse was present and for all married-couple families.

Male householders. Of the 1.3 million poor male householders who did not work in 1986, 36 percent said they were ill or disabled, 37 percent were retired, 13 percent were unable to find work, 9 percent were "keeping house," 3 percent were in school, and 3 percent gave "other reasons." (See table 3.) No further elaboration of these responses is elicited in the CPS. The responses were quite different for nonpoor male householders who did not work in 1986. Three of four of them were retired, 16 percent were ill or disabled, 2 percent were unable to find work, 1 percent were going to school, 6 percent gave "family reasons," and 1 percent gave "other reasons." Thus the retired and ill and disabled categories alone covered about 73 percent of nonworking poor male householders in 1986 (compared with 91 percent of the nonpoor), with about twice as many poor as nonpoor indicating they were ill or disabled.[7]

The retired and ill and disabled categories alone covered about 73 percent of nonworking poor male householders in 1986, compared with 91 percent of the nonpoor.

If, as some analysts maintain, work alone prevents poverty, then the poverty rate would have been very low in 1959 when 75 percent of poor male householders worked. But, that was the year their poverty rate was the highest ever recorded. Clearly, then, working sufficient hours and at sufficient wage levels are important in eliminating poverty.[8]

It would appear that insufficient wages are nearly as important as part-year or part-time work for poor families headed by men: the male householder in 870,000 poor families worked year round, full time in 1986. These men represented 42 percent of poor male householders who worked at all. Including those who did not

Table 3. **Poor and nonpoor family householders who did not work or worked part year, by reason, selected years, 1976–86**

Work status and reason	Poor						Nonpoor					
	1976	1978	1979	1983	1985	1986	1976	1978	1979	1983	1985	1986
All householders												
Worked part year:												
Number (thousands)	1,502	1,595	1,543	2,168	2,147	2,048	8,864	8,104	8,271	8,732	8,002	8,404
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	11.5	13.7	13.4	7.3	9.4	8.8	14.6	14.4	14.3	9.4	10.7	12.0
Keeping house	25.6	29.5	29.2	16.4	17.7	19.2	6.1	7.4	10.0	5.8	7.1	7.1
Going to school	6.3	5.3	5.9	4.2	4.5	4.9	4.6	5.0	4.5	3.7	3.8	4.2
Unable to find full-year work	43.3	36.7	37.1	58.1	54.4	55.0	48.5	40.7	41.3	54.2	47.1	46.6
Other reasons	13.4	14.9	14.3	14.1	14.0	12.1	26.3	32.5	29.9	26.9	31.3	30.1
Did not work last year:												
Number (thousands)	2,745	2,657	2,706	3,845	3,535	3,491	8,120	8,402	8,737	10,369	10,835	10,889
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	29.5	30.8	31.5	23.5	23.9	23.9	26.4	26.6	25.2	21.0	18.4	17.2
Keeping house	41.9	39.2	40.1	37.5	40.3	40.5	12.4	10.5	13.1	10.3	10.0	9.9
Going to school	3.7	3.3	3.1	3.9	3.8	3.9	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.3	1.2	1.4
Unable to find work	8.8	6.8	6.0	19.2	14.5	13.1	2.5	1.3	1.2	3.3	1.7	1.8
Retired	13.5	16.2	16.9	14.3	15.2	16.9	56.1	58.6	58.3	63.6	67.9	69.0
Other	2.6	3.7	2.1	1.5	2.3	1.7	1.6	1.7	1.1	.6	.8	.7
Male householders[1]												
Worked part year:												
Number (thousands)	823	759	791	1,232	1,157	1,066	7,756	6,992	7,098	7,754	6,905	7,339
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	14.7	19.1	18.6	6.7	8.5	8.3	14.5	14.7	14.6	9.2	10.8	11.7
Keeping house	2.8	3.7	5.2	2.8	4.4	4.3	1.8	2.5	5.7	3.7	4.7	5.2
Going to school	6.4	4.6	5.3	3.7	2.9	3.9	4.7	5.0	4.4	3.6	3.7	3.9
Unable to find full-year work	55.3	47.6	46.1	70.2	69.0	69.5	50.3	42.4	42.2	55.2	48.0	47.6
Other reasons	20.8	25.0	24.7	16.6	15.3	14.0	28.8	35.5	33.0	28.3	32.9	31.7
Did not work:												
Number (thousands)	1,093	1,080	1,154	1,615	1,436	1,328	6,565	6,810	7,152	8,705	9,108	9,160
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	46.2	49.4	45.9	32.6	33.7	36.2	27.9	27.5	25.8	20.3	17.5	16.4
Keeping house	1.7	1.7	6.0	8.9	9.3	9.1	.6	.8	5.3	5.3	5.9	5.5
Going to school	4.6	2.3	2.7	3.6	3.6	2.7	1.1	1.0	.9	1.2	1.1	1.3
Unable to find work	10.9	5.5	5.3	23.9	18.0	12.5	2.6	1.2	1.2	3.3	1.6	1.8
Retired	32.0	36.7	36.3	29.0	31.8	37.0	66.1	68.0	65.7	69.5	73.1	74.4
Other reasons	4.6	4.5	3.7	1.9	3.6	2.5	1.7	1.5	1.1	.5	.7	.6
Female householders												
Worked part year:												
Number (thousands)	678	835	752	937	989	982	1,109	1,112	1,172	976	1,098	1,065
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	7.5	8.7	8.0	8.0	10.4	9.5	15.2	12.8	12.5	10.9	10.5	14.6
Keeping house	53.3	52.9	54.5	34.3	33.2	35.4	36.2	37.9	36.0	22.7	22.3	20.4
Going to school	6.0	5.7	6.5	4.8	6.5	5.8	4.6	5.2	4.9	4.4	4.6	6.1
Unable to find full-year work	28.6	26.8	27.7	42.2	37.4	39.3	35.8	30.2	35.8	46.2	41.3	40.0
Other	4.4	5.7	3.3	10.8	12.5	10.0	8.2	13.8	10.8	15.8	21.3	18.9
Did not work:												
Number (thousands)	1,652	1,577	1,552	2,230	2,099	2,163	1,555	1,591	1,585	1,663	1,727	1,729
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	18.5	18.1	21.2	16.9	17.1	16.3	20.2	23.0	22.5	24.8	23.0	21.2
Keeping house	68.5	64.9	65.5	58.3	61.5	59.7	61.9	52.0	48.6	36.4	31.6	33.5
Going to school	3.1	3.9	3.4	4.2	4.0	4.7	1.4	2.3	2.0	1.7	1.3	2.1
Unable to find work	7.4	7.8	6.4	15.8	12.1	13.5	1.9	1.5	1.1	3.1	2.1	1.6
Retired	1.2	2.2	2.5	3.6	4.0	4.6	13.6	18.7	24.9	33.0	40.8	40.3
Other reasons	1.3	3.0	.9	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.2	2.4	.9	1.1	1.2	1.2
Female householders with children under age 6												
Worked part year:												
Number (thousands)	356	448	433	473	493	554	244	312	284	180	254	257
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	3.1	6.9	8.5	4.7	9.7	7.4	12.7	7.4	10.6	10.0	7.9	14.0
Keeping house	61.8	59.8	56.6	42.9	41.2	39.5	43.4	44.6	38.7	30.6	24.4	19.8
Going to school	6.5	5.6	6.5	5.1	7.3	6.3	6.1	5.8	6.0	5.0	8.3	6.6
Unable to find full-year work	26.4	23.4	24.7	39.1	31.0	36.3	35.2	28.5	37.7	43.3	43.7	44.4
Other reasons	2.2	4.2	3.7	8.2	10.8	10.5	2.5	13.8	7.0	11.1	15.7	15.2
Did not work:												
Number (thousands)	791	813	768	1,136	1,106	1,082	173	148	156	131	146	135
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Reason:												
Ill or disabled	9.0	11.4	11.8	7.5	9.8	7.6	25.4	16.2	22.4	22.1	25.3	13.3
Keeping house	77.1	73.6	76.6	71.1	72.7	73.9	62.4	63.5	63.5	55.0	41.8	56.3
Going to school	4.2	3.9	3.0	4.8	3.6	4.1	5.8	6.8	7.7	3.1	2.7	5.9
Unable to find work	8.2	6.3	7.3	14.2	10.8	12.7	3.5	3.4	2.6	4.6	1.4	7.4
Retired	0	1.4	.5	1.3	1.3	1.1	2.9	6.1	2.6	16.8	27.4	15.6
Other reasons	1.4	3.3	.8	1.9	1.9	.7	0	4.1	1.3	0	0	1.5

[1]Data are for families in which no spouse was present and for all married-couple families.

work, these year-round, full-time workers represented 25 percent of all poor male householders, a proportion that has changed little since 1969. The proportion of poor male householders able to find year-round (but not necessarily full-time) employment—48 percent—was considerably smaller than among the nonpoor (82 percent). Conversely, a much higher proportion of poor male householders worked less than half of the year than did the nonpoor, and a higher proportion usually worked part time.

Do the reasons the 1.1 million poor male householders who worked fewer than 50 weeks differ from those of the nonpoor who also worked part year? The majority (70 percent) of these poor male householders said they were unable to find full-year work, 8 percent were ill or disabled, 4 percent listed family reasons, 4 percent were in school, and 14 percent gave "other reasons." The proportion of part-year workers who said they were "unable to find full-year work" has increased dramatically for the poor, from 48 percent in 1978 to 70 percent in 1981, where it has since remained. In contrast, a much lower proportion of the nonpoor indicated inability to find work as the reason for working part year (only 48 percent in 1986). This indicates that the poor male householders' reported desire to work certainly was no less than that of nonpoor householders.[9] A much higher proportion of nonpoor male householders (32 percent) than poor male householders (14 percent) gave "other reasons" for working part year.

Poor male householders are a diverse lot. The possible solutions for the poverty of those who are of retirement age or who have a work disability are distinct from the 51 percent of the poor male heads who are already working year round or are working part year but want full-year employment. Combined, individuals working year round, those who did not work because they were retired, ill, or disabled, and those who worked part year because they were unable to find year-round work represented 83 percent of all poor families with a male householder in 1986. (See table 4.)

Female householders. The distribution depicted for poor male householders differs considerably from that for poor women maintaining families without a spouse. (See table 4.)

As noted, about 40 percent of poor female householders worked in 1986, about the same proportion as in 1978, but higher than the 36 percent who worked in 1982. (See table 1.) About 8 percent worked year round, full time, a figure only one-third that of poor male householders, and considerably below that for non-

Table 4. **Work status of poor and nonpoor family householders in 1986, by reason**

Work status and reason	Poor		Nonpoor	
	Number (thousands)	Percent	Number (thousands)	Percent
All householders				
Total	7,023	100.0	57,468	100.0
Worked year round	1,452	20.7	37,424	65.1
Worked part year:				
Unable to find full-year work	1,127	16.0	3,916	6.8
Ill or disabled	181	2.6	1,011	1.8
Family reasons	393	5.6	598	1.0
Other reasons[1]	347	4.9	2,879	5.0
Did not work:				
Ill or disabled	833	11.9	1,868	3.3
Retired	591	8.4	7,512	13.1
Family reasons	1,413	20.1	1,082	1.9
Other reasons[1]	654	9.3	428	.7
In Armed Forces	32	.5	752	1.3
Male householders[2]				
Total	3,410	100.0	50,636	100.0
Worked year round	984	28.9	33,386	65.9
Worked part year:				
Unable to find full-year work	741	21.7	3,490	6.9
Ill or disabled	88	2.6	855	1.7
Other reasons[1]	237	7.0	2,994	5.9
Did not work:				
Ill or disabled	481	14.1	1,501	3.0
Retired	492	14.4	6,815	13.5
Other reasons[1]	356	10.4	843	1.7
In Armed Forces	32	.9	752	1.5
Female householders				
Total	3,613	100.0	6,832	100.0
Worked year round	468	13.0	4,038	59.1
Worked part year:				
Unable to find full-year work	386	10.7	426	6.2
Ill or disabled	93	2.6	156	2.3
Family reasons	348	9.6	217	3.2
Other reasons[1]	155	4.3	266	3.9
Did not work:				
Ill or disabled	352	9.7	367	5.4
Retired	100	2.8	696	10.2
Family reasons	1,292	35.8	580	8.5
Other reasons[1]	420	11.6	85	1.2
Female householders with children under age 6				
Total	1,801	100.0	1,170	100.0
Worked year round	165	9.2	778	66.5
Worked part year:				
Unable to find full-year work	201	11.2	114	9.7
Ill or disabled	41	2.3	36	3.1
Family reasons	219	12.2	51	4.4
Other reasons[1]	93	5.2	56	4.8
Did not work:				
Ill or disabled	82	4.6	18	1.5
Retired	12	.7	21	1.8
Family reasons	800	44.4	76	6.5
Other reasons[1]	189	10.5	20	1.7

[1] For part-year work, this category includes "going to school" and other uncoded responses. For those who did not work all year, this category includes "going to school," "unable to find work," and other uncoded reasons. For male householders, "family reasons" also are included in this category.

[2] Data are for families in which no spouse was present and for all married-couple families.

poor female householders, 53 percent of whom worked year round, full time in 1986.

The reasons for not working for poor female householders differed considerably from those for poor male householders, as might be expected. The reasons also differed considerably from those of nonpoor women, in part because of the different life cycle stages of poor and nonpoor female householders. For example, 40 percent of nonpoor female householders gave retirement as the reason for not working in 1986, compared with only 5 percent of poor female householders. (See table 3.) Poor female householders were less likely than their nonpoor counterparts to report illness or disability as the reason for not working (16 percent versus 21 percent in 1986), unlike the distributions for poor versus nonpoor men. The majority (60 percent) of poor nonworking women gave "taking care of home or family" as the reason for not working; only 34 percent of nonpoor women who did not work gave this as the main reason. This proportion, although holding fairly steady in the 1980's, has declined since 1978 for both the poor and nonpoor. In 1978, 65 percent of poor and 52 percent of nonpoor female householders who did not work gave family responsibilities as the reason.

Poor female householders were less likely than their nonpoor counterparts to report illness or disability as the reason for not working.

Restricting discussion to female family householders with children under age 6 helps control for the life cycle differences between poor and nonpoor female householders. In 1986, only 40 percent of poor women with children under age 6 worked, compared with 88 percent of nonpoor women. The proportion for the nonpoor has increased from about 73 percent in the mid-1960's, while that for the poor is about the same as in 1965, having fluctuated only little. Families with children under age 6 and a female householder accounted for about 1 of 4 poor families and for about half of all poor families with a female householder. In contrast, families with children under age 6 and a female householder are only about 2 percent of the nonpoor families. One could argue that the norm is not the work experience of nonpoor women, but rather of poor women in this family type, given that 61 percent of women with children under age 6 and no spouse present had incomes below the poverty level in 1986. For those who did not work at all, poverty was almost universal, with 89 percent below the poverty level.

About 6 percent of poor female householders with children under age 6 worked year round, full time, 13 percent worked part year because they could not find year-round work or were ill or disabled, and 5 percent did not work at all because of disability or illness or were retired. In contrast, of the nonpoor women, 61 percent worked year round, full time, 13 percent worked part year because they could not find full-year work or were ill or disabled, and 3 percent did not work because of illness, disability, or retirement.[10] In fact, the percent of nonpoor women with children under age 6 who worked year round in 1986 was actually as high as that for nonpoor male householders. Forty-four percent of the poor women with children under age 6 gave family responsibilities as the reason for not working at all, and an additional 12 percent gave a similar response for working part year.

Conclusion

Combined, 83 percent of poor men maintaining families in 1986 either worked full year; worked part year because of illness, disability, or inability to find full-year work; or did not work because of retirement, illness, or disability. An additional 7 percent worked part year for other reasons. Only 10 percent of poor male householders did not work at all for reasons such as going to school, "family reasons," and unspecified reasons.

For poor women maintaining families with no spouse present, only about 39 percent either worked full year or had reasons similar to those for poor men for working part year (illness, disability, or inability to find full-year work) or for not working (retirement, illness, or disability). More than half of those with children under age 6 gave family reasons as the cause of their limited work year or their total lack of work outside the home during 1986. Only 11 percent of nonpoor women with children under age 6 gave a similar rationale.[11]

Society may be philosophically ambivalent about whether mothers with young children should work, but the actions of nonpoor women householders raising children with no spouse to assist them are clear: The vast majority work and work year round, usually full time. In 1986, about 1.5 million children under age 6 were in families with a female householder (no spouse present) who did not work and gave family responsibilities as the reason. Despite child support for some and Federal aid to others, virtually all such children (96 percent) were in poor households.

The data indicate, however, that requirements to work for welfare program eligibility will not alone end poverty in the United States. The majority (at least 60 percent) of poor family householders already work year round, full time; work part year because they cannot find full-year employment, are ill, or disabled; or do not work because of retirement, disability, or illness. □