

## New book: *Poverty Policy and Poverty Research*

Lyndon Johnson's declaration of "unconditional war on poverty" in his State of the Union message in 1964 promoted a series of legislative actions designed to create a Great Society. The fate of those antipoverty programs and the social and political changes that ensued have been well documented. What has not been recounted up to now is the way in which those developments affected the progress of the social sciences. A new volume by Robert Haveman, the Institute's second director (1971-75) and John Bascom Professor of Economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, describes and assesses the research that resulted from the political initiatives intended to eradicate poverty in America (see box, facing page).

Poverty research was launched in 1965, found an institutional home when IRP was established in 1966, and mushroomed throughout the country over subsequent years until 1980, when it underwent first retrenchment and then, following resurgence in the numbers of the poor, a renaissance. The first of the book's three parts measures the growth, from 1965 to 1980, in federal expenditures on poverty research studies as compared with spending in other research areas and with aggregate spending on federal antipoverty programs and social welfare activity in general.

Haveman evaluates the contribution of this research effort to basic knowledge and to research methods. He emphasizes three subject areas on which poverty studies have had a major impact: (1) the measurement of economic well-being, poverty, and inequality; (2) the nature and effects of public income transfer programs; and (3) the process of status attainment and social mobility. He also examines other social science research areas to which antipoverty efforts have contributed: discrimination, education and human capital, the operation of the labor market.

Poverty research also influenced the practice and methods of the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> Development of the field of policy analysis and evaluation research drew government, academe, and members of the interested public into closer communication, and it opened new career possibilities for those concerned with application of research findings. Social experimentation and econometric advances involving selectivity bias and microsimulation modeling advanced the disciplines along new paths.

The book's main focus is the period from 1965 to 1980. Its Epilogue reviews the years since, puts the entire story in perspective, and asks what lies ahead for poverty-related social science. Haveman's thoughts are represented by these excerpts from the Epilogue:

- First, the 1965-80 period was unique. Social scientists living now are not likely to again witness a burst of policy interest and support matching that which came with the Great Society initiatives.
- Second, it seems inevitable that a good deal of the next generation of research on the nature and causes of poverty and on the behavior of the poor will be more narrow and more focused than that of the earlier period. The next stage is likely to consist of a deeper and more careful sifting out of the issues and of the application of more reliable and sophisticated methods to the estimation of the relationships of interest.
- Finally, the next generation of social research on the poverty problem is also likely to contain an increased emphasis on directly understanding the condition of poverty and the attitudes and motivations of the poor. This research will be less narrow and measurement-oriented than much past poverty research—less dominated by economics and the estimation of formal causal models.
- The research gains attributable to the War on Poverty are large and impressive. But they do not answer all the questions. Future poverty research should build on these past advances, but do so recognizing both the ultimate limits of social research and its competition with ideology and politics in the making of antipoverty policy. ■

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the book was summarized in Haveman's essay, "Poverty Research and the Social Sciences," in the twentieth-anniversary issue of *Focus* (9:2, pp. 8-11).