In 2003 poverty rates grew for the third straight year and women were once again much more likely to be poor than men. Indeed, there has been a large gender poverty gap in every year since the official poverty standard was create in the 1960’s.

The Census Bureau unfortunately has done little to publicize this gap. While the Bureau’s annual report highlights poverty rate differences based on categories such as age and race,\(^1\) the Census Bureau has so far resisted giving similar attention to poverty rate differences based on gender, and this failure distorts the public perception of poverty in this country.\(^2\)

Legal Momentum has compiled the information in this report from the detailed poverty tables that the Census Bureau posts on its website.\(^3\) These statistics reveal a deep gender gap in poverty rates, even when factors such as work experience, education, or family structure are taken into account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Increased incidence of poverty among women compared to men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All adults (18 or above)</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 65 or above</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Extreme Poverty</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School only</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College less than 4 yrs</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College 4 yr degree</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>(-02%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Overall Poverty
Poverty is measured by comparing annual income with the federal poverty standard which the federal government updates annually for inflation. In 2003, the poverty standard was $9,393 for an individual, $12,015 for a family of 2, $14,680 for a family of 3, and $18,810 for a family of 4.

Women were about 40% more likely to be poor than men in 2003, with a poverty rate of 12.4% compared to 8.9% for men. Almost one of every eight women was poor, compared to about one of every eleven men. The gender gap was even larger among the aged, with aged women over 70% more likely to be poor than aged men.

While the gender poverty gap remains large, it has been declining. From 1987 to 1998, the ratio of women’s poverty rate to men’s poverty rate fluctuated between 1.51 and 1.58. The ratio fell to 1.48 in 1999, to 1.47 in 2000, to 1.42 in 2001, to 1.41 in 2002, and to 1.39 in 2003.

Extreme Poverty
Almost 60% of adults who were extremely poor -- income less than half the poverty standard -- in 2003 were women. Women were 34% more likely to be extremely poor than men, with an extreme poverty rate of 5.1% compared to 3.8% for men. About one of every twenty women was extremely poor, compared to about one of every twenty-six men.

Work Experience
Work outside the home reduced the likelihood of being poor for both men and women. However, women who worked outside the home in 2003 were 41% more likely to be poor than men who worked outside the home, with a poverty rate of 6.9% compared to 4.9% for men. About one of every fifteen working women was poor, compared to about one of every twenty working men.

Education
While education reduces the likelihood of being poor for both men and women, women without a four year college degree are much more likely to be poor than men with the same level of education. In 2003, women with a high school diploma but no college were 43% more likely to be poor than men with a high school diploma but no college, with a poverty rate of 13.2% compared to 9.2% for men. By contrast, the 4.7% poverty rate for women with a bachelor’s degree (or more) was actually slightly lower than the 4.8% rate for men with such a degree.

Family Structure
The 32% poverty rate for solo parents in 2003 was about 4.5 times the 7% poverty rate for cohabiting married parents. However, comparing married parents with all solo parents gives a misleading impression of the significance of family structure by concealing the sharp difference in poverty rates between solo fathers and solo mothers. The 35.5% poverty rate for solo mother families was almost twice the 19.1% rate for solo father families.

(continued)
BEYOND THE SIMPLE NUMBERS

Child Care Costs
Poverty is measured based on gross income, rather than on income net of child care expenditures, perhaps because mothers were much less likely to be in the paid labor force when the poverty standard was formulated in the 1960’s. If poverty were measured based on income net of child care expenditures in order to exclude income that is not available for other basic needs, many more women (and men) would be counted as poor. In 1999, the most recent year for which this Census Bureau data is available, child care expenditures for employed mothers with child care costs averaged $340 a month.4

Hardship
Poverty is strongly associated with real hardship. A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) found that in a given year about 30% of those below the poverty line experienced critical hardship, defined as being evicted, having utilities disconnected, doubling up in others’ housing due to lack of funds, or not having enough food to eat; and that an additional 30% to 45% of the poor experienced other serious hardships.5

International Comparisons
Many studies have found that poverty rates in the United States are much higher than in other rich countries. One recent study concluded that the United States had the highest poverty rate for female-headed households among the 22 countries studied, 30.9% compared to the 10.5% average for the group.6 This study defined poverty as an income less than 50% of the median income and was based on national income surveys conducted in the early 1990’s.

Rising Living Standards
There is a broad consensus that poverty should be defined relative to contemporary living standards and consequently that any poverty line must be revised periodically. However, the official U.S. poverty line has not been adjusted in response to the rise in real income and the changes in general living standards since it was formulated over 35 years ago. If the poverty standard were adjusted to reflect the 30% increase in real household median income since 1967, many more women (and men) would be counted as poor.

For further information, contact Timothy Casey, Senior Staff Attorney: (212) 413-7556 or tcasey@legalmomentum.org
Notes


2. For example, the August 27, 2004 article about the new Census report in *The Washington Post -- Poverty Rate Up 3rd Year In a Row* -- highlights racial and regional differences in poverty but does not mention gender differences in poverty.

3. These more detailed reports are available at [http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/pov/toc.htm](http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/pov/toc.htm).

