President Lyndon Johnson declares War on Poverty, January 1964.

The Office of Economic Opportunity adopts Mollie Orshansky’s poverty thresholds as a working definition of poverty for statistical purposes, May 1965.

An interagency Poverty Studies Task Force is established under the leadership of the Department of Health and Human Services (then Health, Education, and Welfare), 1974.


The Census Bureau holds a conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, on the measurement of noncash benefits, December 1985.

The Census Bureau issues its first report on experimental poverty measures responding to the NAS report.


The Census Bureau issues its first paper on the valuation of noncash benefits and poverty measures.


The current poverty thresholds use family size adjustments that are from increased labor force participation and from increased benefits and benefit programs such as the Food Stamp Program.

The Office of Management and Budget issues a memorandum that established the nation’s “official” poverty measure and charged the Census Bureau with responsibility for providing annual poverty estimates.

Over the past fifty years, there have been numerous efforts to improve the official poverty measure, including an Interagency Poverty Studies Task Force in the 1970s and a National Academy of Sciences expert panel in the 1990s. These efforts triggered research by economists at the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics resulting in the November 2011 publication of poverty estimates using a new “Supplemental Poverty Measure.” For the past three years, the Census Bureau has published two sets of national poverty estimates: one using the official method and one using the Supplemental Poverty Measure.

In response, the National Academy of Sciences convenes a panel of experts to conduct a study of statistical issues in the measurement and understanding of poverty, June 1992.

An Interagency Technical Working Group on Developing a Supplemental Poverty Measure is formed by Commerce Under Secretary Rebecca Blank and Office of Management and Budget Chief Statistician Katherine Wallman and charged with developing a set of initial starting points to permit the U.S. Census Bureau, in cooperation with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to produce a Supplemental Poverty Measure, December 2009.

The current income measure does not reflect the effects of key government policies. In their report, the NAS panel suggests that better reflects contemporary measurement policy. In their report, the NAS panel suggested that better reflects contemporary measurement policy.

President Johnson’s January 1964 declaration of his “War on Poverty” generated a new interest in measuring just how many people were in poverty and how those numbers changed from year to year. The next year the Office of Economic Opportunity adopted a working definition of poverty based on a methodology for counting the poor that had been proposed by Mollie Orshansky, an analyst at the Social Security Administration. In 1967, the Census Bureau published its first set of poverty estimates. Two years later, the Office of Management and Budget issued a memorandum that established the nation’s “official” poverty measure and charged the Census Bureau with responsibility for providing annual poverty estimates.

The Census Bureau issues its first paper on the valuation of noncash benefits and poverty measures.


The proceedings of the 1985 Williamsburg conference are published by the Census Bureau.


The Census Bureau publishes reports on the official poverty measure annually. The most recent in September 2013.


The Census Bureau releases a report on the Supplemental Poverty Measure. The Supplemental Poverty Measure provides information on the effects of government programs that are not included in the official poverty measure.

Short, Kathleen. The Research Panel on Poverty and Family Assistance publishes a report proposing a new approach for measuring poverty.


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