

generation, the authors note that the same factors are at work in the other three countries. Because the decrease in civic involvement is limited to women, Andersen and colleagues suggest that the “greater demands” on American women’s free time may be responsible. Women’s child-care duties have increased in the United States, while declining in Canada and the Netherlands, for example. “The larger time commitment American women now make to paid work, combined with their increased time for child care, could be the principal explanation behind the decline in civic association activity of Americans,” the authors say.

SOCIETY

The Poverty Conundrum

THE SOURCE: “The Mismeasure of Poverty” by Nicholas Eberstadt, in *Policy Review*, Aug.–Sept. 2006.

WHEN THE CENSUS BUREAU reported in August that the U.S. poverty rate essentially held steady at 12.6 percent of the population in 2005 instead of rising, as it had every year since 2000, the Bush administration hailed the news, while Democrats charged that it proved once again that the economy

EXCERPT

Ah! Old Age

I am old and I feel and look old. . . . Ever since I have inhabited old age . . . I have looked and listened, mostly in vain, for news of what it is like for other people who inhabit it as I do. Naturally, I'm interested in its well-known depredations, the physical and mental ones that people in their forties and fifties so publicly dread. . . . The pills and sticks, the shrieking hearing aids and dental weaponry, the tricks for countering the loss of names and threads and glasses and for circumventing insomnia, the visits to the back shop. But that's not all. I have a fond hope that there may be new kinds of time and new kinds of pleasure, perhaps even new kinds of vitality, and that though we forget and muddle and fail to hear things, there may be moments when we understand what's going on for the first time.

—JANE MILLER, author and poet,
in *Raritan* (Summer 2006)

was failing to lift the downtrodden.

The annual announcement of the number of Americans living in absolute poverty—now defined as less than \$19,806 a year for a family of four—has turned into a political circus. Nicholas Eberstadt, a demographer at the American Enterprise Institute, writes that the poverty rate has become “an ever less faithful and reliable measure with each passing year.”

The statistic is a relic of the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty. Developed in 1965 by Mollie Orshansky, an economist at the Social Security Administration, it is set at roughly three times the cost of the Agriculture Department’s

“thrifty food plan,” a nutritionally adequate but bare-bones diet, adjusted for family size.

It’s hard for Eberstadt to believe that all the social spending of the last three decades has failed to budge the poor out of conditions in which “everyday living implied choosing between an adequate diet of the most economical sort and some other necessity,” as Orshansky put it. Although statistics show that some groups, such as the elderly and African Americans, are better off now than they were in 1973, the official poverty rate has bobbed steadily above 11.1 percent for 32 consecutive years. Last year, 37 million Americans were classified as poor.

Year after year, the number has stubbornly failed to fall—even as the nation’s per capita income rose 60 percent, the percentage of working-age people with jobs went up by six points, the proportion of Americans with a high school diploma increased 24 points, and government spending on the poor tripled. By 2001, more than half of all poverty-level homes had cable television and two or more TV sets. One in four households had a personal computer, and by 2003, nearly three out of four poverty-level households had some sort of motor vehicle. And yet, with nearly every increase in statistical well-being, the poverty rate has gone up. “Something is badly

amiss," Eberstadt writes.

A very different picture emerges when government researchers ask people about what they spend rather than about their income. Household expenditures for the poorest fifth of the population have increased greatly since 1973, even accounting for inflation. In 1960, the poorest quarter of the population spent 12 percent more than their annual income; by 2002, the poorest fifth were spending double their reported annual income.

How can this be? Are poor Americans sinking deeper and deeper into debt? Eberstadt says the more likely explanation is something economists call "transitory variance." Nine out of 10 people are poor only temporarily. Like other people, they base their consumer behavior on the long, not the short, term, and they spend accordingly. "Transitory variance" better fits the growing discrepancy between spending and income because year-to-year income variability is rising.

Eberstadt notes that criticizing the official poverty measure is sometimes taken as proof of indifference to the poor. To say that Americans are incontestably better off "is not to assert that material progress for America's poverty population has been satisfactory, much less optimal," he says.

The nation's official measure of poverty is biased, flawed, and inconsistent with almost every other gauge of well-being, he writes. It fails the test of common sense.

PRESS & MEDIA

Covering Corruption

THE SOURCE: "The Corruption Eruption in East-Central Europe: The Increased Salience of Corruption and the Role of Inter-governmental Organizations" by Alexandru Grigorescu, in *East European Politics and Societies*, Summer 2006.

CORRUPTION IS DRAWING more news media attention around the world than it did only a couple of decades ago, but in no region has there been so radical an increase as in east-central Europe. Between 1996 and 2004, the number of stories on political and economic corruption rose seven-fold in the region's six countries.

"Today all of the major newspapers from the area run, on a regular basis, multiple stories about everyday corrupt practices, high-level corruption scandals, or governmental and non-governmental declarations regarding the fight against corruption," writes Alexandru Grig-

orescu, a political scientist at Loyola University in Chicago. About seven percent of the region's print and broadcast news stories in 2004 that were included in his study dealt with corruption. And there has been action: tougher prison sentences for bribery in the Czech Republic, civil service reform in Poland, and many other measures. High officials accused of illicit activities in Bulgaria and Slovakia have lost their jobs.

Yet Grigorescu isn't about to rhapsodize about the glories of a free press. News media coverage of corruption in other parts of the world has not increased since the mid-1990s, even in areas where the problem is more severe, such as East Asia and Latin America. Nor has there been much change in global media, such as *The New York Times*. A few local factors explain the performance of the east-central

European news media, including the special concern with fairness in these countries after decades of communist egalitarianism. But Grigorescu thinks the decisive factor was the role of the European Union. It's no mystery why. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia were all slated to join the EU in 2004; Bulgaria and Romania will enter in 2007.

In part because of fears of a contagion effect introduced by new members, the EU has zealously promoted anticorruption efforts. Its annual country progress reports have been especially effective in drawing attention to the problem, Grigorescu says, and it made membership contingent on certain systemic reforms. About 80 percent of the region's news stories on corruption mentioned the EU.

With the region's accession to the Union now nearly complete, Grigorescu worries that the EU will take its eye off the ball, and that the news media will consequently lose interest. The region's track record—a score of only 3.8 on Transparency