POVERTY IN TOMPKINS COUNTY:

CORRECTING INFLATED RATES DUE TO MISCLASSIFICATION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

Benjamin Currens and Thomas A. Hirschl

Program in Policy Education and Action for Fighting Poverty and Economic Hardship in Upstate New York
Department of Development Sociology
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
http://devsoc.cals.cornell.edu/cals/devsoc/people/faculty.cfm?netId=tah4

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Official U.S. Census Bureau poverty calculations include undergraduate students that reside outside their parents' home. Since college students tend to report low earnings, including them in poverty calculations inflates the poverty rate in towns with large student populations. However, the majority of college students share parents’ family income, yet the Census Bureau does not include parents’ income when calculating poverty status. Thus there are many college students misclassified as below poverty despite belonging to families with income above the poverty line.

In this report we adjust the Census Bureau's poverty data by utilizing information on school enrollment for undergraduate students. Our adjustment removes college students from the poverty calculation, and thus provides a more accurate estimate of poverty in Tompkins County, using a method that has been applied to college towns more generally (Policy Blog NH 2011).

Poverty data provided by the Census Bureau gives the poverty Rate of Tompkins County as 18.8% (American Factfinder 2012), with census tract rates as high as 73% (Fig. 1). To adjust the poverty rate the total number of undergraduates is subtracted from the total population for each census tract within Tompkins County, and then an adjusted poverty rate is re-calculated.

![Fig. 1 - Poverty Rate by Census Tract within Tompkins County, NY](image-url)
By removing the undergraduate population the countywide rate drops to 12.4% and the highest census tract rate is 39.1%.

In addition to adjusting the poverty population countywide, the removal of students alters where poverty is concentrated. With undergraduates included the areas surrounding the Cornell and Ithaca College campuses have high poverty rates (the highest is 73% in Collegetown). After accounting for the undergraduate population the poverty rate in the census tracts surrounding the colleges drops significantly (the Collegetown area drops from 73% to 39%). Although Collegetown retains a high poverty rate, the concentration of poverty shifts to other census tracts, namely downtown, and the Route 79 corridor. Data published by the Census Bureau misrepresents poverty within Tompkins County, unless adjusted for the students. When the student population in Tompkins County is included, only two New York State counties have higher rates (Bronx and Kings Counties in New York City). Adjusting for this population reduces the countywide rate downward by 6.5%, moving Tompkins County from the 3rd to the 37th (out of 62) most impoverished county within NYS. Finally, it is known that some college students live below the poverty line. However Census Bureau data do not provide an adequate means for measuring the extent of poverty among college students within Tompkins County.
References
