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Introduction

THE AMOUNT of income received by individuals and families reflects, more than any other single economic measure, the net impact of economic circumstances upon them. Dissatisfaction or satisfaction with the distribution of income is responsible in large part for much of the economic and political behavior of individuals and groups. Initiative, enterprise, business practices, both competitive and monopolistic, trade union regulations and policies, political lobbying, and other pressure group activities are all motivated in considerable part by the desire to alter the distribution or to keep it as it is.

Until recent years the distribution of income among the entire population or even among large groups had to be estimated from scanty data.¹ Lately federal programs of taxation and social insurance, state taxation and unemployment compensation, and numerous sample studies have led to the accumulation of many statistical series directly pertaining to income distribution.

Neither the continuous sources of data nor the numerous but discontinuous sample studies yield information from which a comprehensive and periodic distribution of income by size among individuals or families in this country could easily be derived. The data vary in coverage, income concept, definition of recipient unit, time period, and completeness with which the basic information is revealed. It was thought that a critical review of the most important and recent bodies of information would serve to familiarize students with the data, and lay the foundation for a basic study of this neglected area of national income measurement.

This study surveys the principal sources of income distribution

data that have been developed within the last decade. Dealing primarily with comparative methodology, it is designed neither to present nor summarize the data. Rather, it is concerned with the chief differences in definition and technique that have been or are currently used in their collection and tabulation, the comparability of the results, and the segments inadequately represented.

The major segment of the survey, Part II, consists of sixteen chapters, each dealing with one or a related group of studies or bodies of income data, written by persons who have participated in the planning and direction of the studies or in the collection and analysis of the data or who are otherwise familiar with the material. Part I views the data as a whole, analyzing the purposes that may be served by size distributions of income, summarizing the sources and methods, discussing the data from the viewpoint of estimating how income is distributed among the entire population and suggesting how future income studies may be made more comparable and useful.

N O T E

¹ See C. L. Merwin, Jr., *American Studies of the Distribution of Wealth and Income by Size*, *Studies in Income and Wealth*, Volume Three, pp. 3-77.