

**“The High Giving Poor: Who are the Low Income
People Who Make High Contributions?”**

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Introduction

In a 1990 article Auten and Rudney noted that "total giving in each income class is highly concentrated among a small proportion of the most generous givers" (84). They also noted that average percentage of income contributed plotted against annual income produced a U-shaped curve in which the highest percentages of income contributed are found at both the low and high ends of the income spectrum. Because median percentage of income contributed plotted against annual income produced a downward sloping line, Auten and Rudney go on to conclude that "it appears that the reputation of the wealthy for generosity is largely the results of exceptional generosity of the part of a minority of high-income givers rather than widespread generosity among the wealthy" (89). It is important to note, however, that this conclusion assumes that low income is equivalent to low wealth. While this may be true for the majority of low income households, it need not be true for all, nor especially for those low income households making contributions. As Schervish and Havens note,

Preliminary analysis suggests that low-income households contain a large subgroup of persons who are over age 60 and retired. This subgroup further subdivides into a surprisingly sizeable fraction of people who are fairly wealthy--as measured by their net worth--and another fraction, as expected, made up of those who are quite poor....The wealthy subgroup accounts for a moderately large number of the households with little or no income who make charitable contributions....Such contributions mathematically would raise the average percentage of income contributed by the low-income group. If this turns out to be the case, the implication is that the high giving by low-income households found in the survey data is not evidence of a very generous low-income poor but of a somewhat generous low-income wealthy (1995:103).

In this paper we attempt to shed further light on the issue of the variability in giving behavior through an analysis of the characteristics of low income households which contribute relatively large proportions of their income to charity, a group we call "the high giving poor." Who are these people and how can they afford to give such large percentages of the income to charity? Are they indeed poor or do they have other resources at their command? If they do have such resources, then estimates of the relative generosity of the poor need to be modified to account for the different levels of wealth among low-income households.

Data Source

In this analysis we look at the differences between two groups of households: (1) those that are low income (income less than or equal to \$20,000) and high giving (percentage of income contributed greater than or equal to 5%); and (2) those that are low income and low giving (percent contributed less than 5%). We identify characteristics that may explain why low income households have very different levels of giving as a percentage of income, and why some low income households are able to give relatively large proportion of their income to charity. In addition, we indicate how descriptive statistics on the giving behavior of low income households may be distorted by the inclusion of households which are indeed low income, but which are also relatively rich in assets.

The data for this analysis come from the 1995 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), conducted by the Federal Reserve Board. The SCF uses a dual frame sample design that incorporates both a standard multistage area-probability sample and a special list sample that provides an oversample of wealthy households (Kennickell, et al. 1997). The 1995 sample consists of 4,299 individuals who were surveyed for the Federal Reserve by the National Opinion Research Center at University of Chicago. All missing data were imputed, so that the final public use dataset contains no missing data although some values were topcoded and otherwise altered to prevent identification of individual cases. The wealthy oversample, along with the detailed questions on household assets and liabilities make the SCF a particularly useful dataset for analyses involving wealth estimation. In order to correct for the oversample, we use the population projection weights provided by the Federal Reserve in this analysis (unless otherwise noted).

Certain problems complicate the use of the SCF to analyze giving behavior. The amount contributed variable provides data only on those who gave \$500 or more. Since our cut off point for high giving is 5 percent of income, this means that there may be some households with incomes less than \$10,000 that actually did contribute more than 5 percent of their income, yet these will not appear in our high giving group if their contributions are less than \$500 since these are coded as zero

in the SCF. This means that the SCF data will tend to underestimate the number of low income families giving more than 5 percent of their income to charity, and overestimate the number of low-income households giving less than 5 percent of their income to charity. We can estimate the degree of the overestimate. Households with positive incomes less than \$10,000 make up about 17% of the weighted cases (about 16.5 million households). Using data from the 1996 General Social Survey, Schervish and Havens estimate that about 10% of households with less than \$10,000 contribute 5 percent or more of their income to charity (1997:6). Thus, we would expect about 1.65 million of these households to contribute 5 percent or more of their income to charity. The SCF data yield an estimate of about 850,000 households with incomes less than \$10,000 contributing 5 percent or more. Thus, while all of our low-income/high giving cases are correctly classified (our estimate is 2,470,622 households), our estimate of low-income/low giving households (estimated to be 33,780,582) will contain about 800,000 incorrectly classified households. Or about 2 percent. We do not believe this seriously biases our analysis, especially since our focus is on the low-income/high giving cases, all of which are correctly classified.

Organization of the Paper and Methodology

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section presents univariate profiles of low-income/high givers as compared to low-income households that are not high givers. We examine the distributions of several demographic variables (age, marital status, education, etc.), wealth variables (net worth and its components), and income variables (total household income and its components) of the high giving poor compared to the low giving poor.¹ The results of this analysis begin to identify major differences between the two groups. These findings inform the development of a two-stage model which is presented and analyzed in the next two sections

The first stage of the model uses logistic regression to estimate the relationship between demographic and financial resource characteristics and membership in the low-income/high giver

¹ Our measure of net worth is based on the measure used by the Federal Reserve in its analysis of wealth. It is the value of all assets minus the value of all liabilities.

group. The goal of the analysis is to ascertain how individual attributes affect the odds of a low income household being a high giver, that is, to determine the effects of the independent variables on the odds that the low income household will be high giver rather than a low giver. The dependent variable is dichotomous (being in the high giving group or not), so the appropriate statistical method is logistic regression. The independent variables in this section are age of head of household, household income (for 1994), net worth (at time of the interview in 1995), number of people in the household, years of education of head of household, the value of any expected inheritances, and dummy coded variables for marital status (1=married, or living with a partner), retirement status (1=retired, or retired and doing some work), gender of head of household (1=male), race of head of household (1=white), expectation of major expenses (including charitable expense) in the next 5-10 years (1=yes), home owner (1=yes), whether the household spent less than their income in the last year (1=yes), whether the household's income exceeded prices in the last 5 years (1=yes), whether the head of household expects the economy to improve (1=yes), and whether the head of household expects their income to exceed prices in the following year (1=yes).

The second stage of the model uses multiple regression to estimate the relationship between the demographic and financial resource characteristics of low-income, high givers and the amount of their contribution. Here we want to ascertain which variables affect the amount contributed by the high giving households.² We use the same set of independent variables as in the logistic regression analysis.

In the fourth section we assess the effect of households with high net worth on contributions of the full group of low-income households. We make this assessment by excluding low income households with high net worth from the analysis and report the resulting changes in participation rates, mean percent of income contributed, total contributions, and mean contributions.

The fifth and final section presents our discussion of our findings.

² In breaking down giving behavior into two decisions--the decision to give, and the decision of how much to give--we are using a technique similar to that used by Bradley and McClelland (1997), and also used by the Social Welfare Research Institute (1981).

Findings

Univariate Profiles of Low-Income High Givers vs. Non-High Givers

Overall, we find that the low income/high giving group is more likely to be older, married, retired and own more wealth than the low income/low giving group. In Table 1 we use the SCF weights to estimate population parameters. We see that low income households make up about 37 percent of the 99 million total households, and that high giving households make up about 8 percent.³ The low income/high giving group comprises about 2,470,622 households, which is about 2.5 percent of all households, and about 7 percent of all low-income households, but is almost 31 percent of those households contributing more than 5 percent of their income to charity.

Table 2 summarizes several demographic and financial characteristics of the different groups. Although we are primarily concerned with the low income group of givers, we have included a column containing information for the high income/high giving group. The low income/high giving group tends to be headed by older individuals. Its median age is 65 compared to a median of 50 for the low income/low giving group. Put differently, over 53 percent of the former group is 65 or older, compared to only 34 percent of the latter group. The groups are similar in terms of the percentage of respondents who are workers only (i.e., they are not working and also retired, or working and a student, etc.) but the former group has a much higher percentage of respondents who are retired only (48% vs. 26%). If we include people who are retired but do some work, then the difference between the groups becomes slightly larger (52% vs. 27%). The low income/high giving group is more likely to be headed by a male, and it is more likely than the low income/low giving group to have a spouse/partner in the household. The marital status variables give further support for this, showing that nearly 48% of the former group are presently married, compared to only 25% of the latter. The head of households among the low-income high givers are more likely to be white (76%) than the low givers (69%).

The low income/high giving group is more likely to have more than 12 years of education, and they have higher mean and median values for highest grade completed. The former also are more likely to report that they are spending less than their income, perhaps suggesting that they have more disposable income to give to charity. Perhaps most important for this analysis, high givers are better off in terms of possession of assets--that is, they are more likely to own their home, and to have income from businesses, investments, dividends, sales of stocks, and pensions and annuities. Conversely, they are less likely to be receiving child support, ADC, AFDC, etc. Data on the amounts of these financial resources are reported below, but the point can be made here that a major difference between the two low income groups is that the high givers own more assets and wealth. In short, the low income/high giving group is more likely to be older, married, retired and own more wealth than the low income/low giving group. They also own more assets and have more income from pensions. Conversely, the low-income/low giving group tends to be younger, headed by a female, not married, less educated, renting rather than owning a house, and less likely to possess wealth.

Table 3 presents detailed differences between the groups in terms of financial resources, (e.g., assets, liabilities, and components of income). We find that the low income/high giving group has a higher mean net worth than the low income/low giving group. In addition, the former group shows higher values for all components of assets. Moreover, while having only slightly higher wages and salaries, members of the low income/high giving group have substantially higher levels of income from business, investments, dividends, and stock and real estate sales. Again, this is consistent with a group that is more likely to be retired and thus has accumulated a larger stock of assets over their working lives. Given that this group tends to be older and retired, we also see that there is a higher mean level of income from pensions. Conversely, the low income/low giving group, which tends to be younger and single, shows higher levels of income from ADC/AFDC and child support.

³ Noting again that the estimates of high giving households will be lower due the SCF contribution variable only

Table 4 shows the median values for the same variables presented in Table 4. While the overall interpretation remains the same, this table indicates that the distributions of many of these variables are positively skewed. In this case, median values are usually seen as better measures of central tendency. Two points can be made about the interpretation of these median values. First, we see that for net worth and its components, the values are lower, but the differences between the first two groups are more pronounced. For example, the low income/low giving group had a mean net worth that was about 36% of the value of the low income/high giving group, but its median net worth is only 16% of the latter. Second, except for wages and pensions, the median values for the other components of income are zero, suggesting that these components are highly concentrated among a smaller number of low income households, as they are in the overall population.

Logistic Regression

As shown in table 5, the overall predictive model was statistically significant (model chi-square equals 92.316, $p < .001$). Five of the predictor variables were significantly related to the likelihood of a low income person being a high giver: net worth (coded here in units of \$10,000), marital status, retirement status, expectation of having a major expense in the next 5-10 years, and education. That is, having greater net worth, being married, being retired, expecting a major expense, and having more education each tend to increase the odds of a low-income household being a high giving household. These results are consistent with the results of the univariate analysis presented above. Final estimates of the effects were obtained using a reduced model containing only the five statistically significant independent variables. These results are given in Table 6. The odds ratio indicates the factor by which the odds change for a one unit change in the independent variable. In our analysis, they help us to determine which variables have the greatest effect in increasing the likelihood that a low income household will be a high giver. When we have an odds ratios greater than 1 it indicates that an increase in that variable will increase the likelihood that a low-income household will be a high giver. Conversely, an odds ratio less than 1 indicates that an increase in that variable will reduce the likelihood that a household will be a high giver. We see in Table 6 that the odds of being a high giver were over two times as great among those who were married than those who were not (odds ratio = 2.186), and nearly three times as great among those who were retired than those who were not (odds ratio = 2.921). Because a one unit change in net worth and education are small amounts we also present the odds ratios for net worth and education using larger values. These are presented in table 7. We see that a \$50,000 increase in net worth increases the odds of being a high giver by a factor of 1.12, or about 12 percent. We calculated the change in odds for the mean difference in net worth between our groups, which is about \$86,000, and find that such an increase in net worth increases the odds of being a high giver by a factor of 1.215. We find that a five year increase in education more than doubles the odds of being a high giver (odds ratio = 2.184).

Regression

Table 8 shows that the overall model predicting amount contributed by the low-income, high giving households was statistically significant ($F=15.028$, $p<0.001$), and explained about 26% of the variance in the dependent variable (adjusted R-Square = .26), but only three of the predictors were significant: age, net worth, and the value of the household's expected inheritance. Final estimates of these effects were obtained using a reduced model containing only the three statistically significant independent variables. These results are given in Table 9, which presents the unstandardized regression coefficients. We find that net worth has a positive effect on amount contributed (0.003), but age (-10.416) and expected inheritance (-0.014) have negative effects.

Effects on Estimates

In order to see the effect of including households with high net worth in an analysis of the giving patterns of low income households, Table 10 presents population estimates for giving behavior with high net worth families excluded. The figures on the bottom line represent population estimates for all low income households. The top two lines represent these same estimates but only for households with net worth below \$150,000 and \$300,000 respectively. We find that over 90 percent of the low income households have net worth less than \$150,000. While the percentage of households contributing \$500 or more does not change much from the overall estimate, the mean percent of income contributed changes dramatically. For contributing households, the overall estimate of 19.62 percent has been reduced by more than half. Similarly, the estimate across contributing and non-contributing households is 2.19 percent overall, but falls to 0.67 percent for the households with less than \$150,000 in net worth.

Discussion

The univariate analysis presented in the first section of this paper suggested that the low income/high giving group is more likely to be older, married, retired, better educated and own more wealth than the low income/low giving group. The differences between the groups were especially pronounced in

the area of wealth--assets and liabilities. The low-income/high giving group had an average net worth that nearly three times that of the low-income/low giving group (\$133,919 vs. \$47,910). The former also had financial assets that were over three times as large as the latter (\$50,095 vs. \$14,755). The implication is that while both groups are indeed low-income, the high giving households are more wealthy. We need to be careful about applying the label of "the poor" to this particular subset of low-income households.

The logistic regression analysis in the second section of the paper provide further support for this implication in that the five variables that most strongly affect the odds of being in the low-income/high giving group are net worth, marital status, retirement status, education, and expectation of a major expense (which could be a charitable expense) in the next 5-10 years. The effects of the first four variables are consistent with the previous analysis in that having more net worth, being married, being retired, and having more education each increases the odds of being a high giver. It is interesting to note the other variables that did not serve to discriminate between high and low givers. Thus, we found that the age, race, and gender of the head of household, and the number of people in the household do not serve to discriminate when in a model with our five significant variables, nor did income, homeowner status, and several economic expectation variables.

Our regression analysis looks only at the high giving low-income households and identifies three statistically significant predictors of amount contributed. Not surprisingly, with an increase in net worth we would expect an increase in amount contributed. Age and amount of expected inheritance had negative effects on amount contributed. We need to recall, however, that the high giving households tend to be older. Thus, one possible interpretation of the negative age effect is that households within this older group may have already begun the process of making contributions, and thus have less to contribute as they age. A similar interpretation may apply for the negative coefficient for expected inheritance. Older households may have already inherited, and thus have no expected inheritance, that is, their amount of expected inheritance is zero. Those that do expect an

inheritance may be less likely to make larger contributions until they have secured this asset. Thus, they may be simply delaying their contribution.

Finally, in our section looking at the effects on giving estimates of excluding higher net worth households, we see that the generosity of this group looks different when we exclude high net worth households. Among all those low-income households those contributing \$500 or more to charity, the mean percent contributed is 19.62 percent, but when we exclude those households who also have net worth greater than \$150,000, this estimate drops to 7.33 percent.

Conclusion

Based on our analysis of the SCF data we reach several conclusions:

First, the speculations made by Schervish and Havens which are presented in the introduction are substantially borne out: the high-givers among low income households tend to be retired, married, well-educated, and relatively wealthy. Moreover, they tend to be oriented toward spending money since they tend to expect to spend substantially in the near future.

Second, for these households wealth is a central component of their financial resources. They rely on their wealth supplemented by a low income for their financial support --support not only of their daily lives but support enabling larger than average charitable contributions compared with other households at the same income level.

Third, wealth is also a major determinant of how much low income, high givers actually contribute to charity. In this group, it is the more wealthy, less elderly (although retired) families who are not still anticipating an inheritance (because they already received it or never expected one) who give the largest amounts to charitable causes.

Fourth, neither income (to the extent it varies below \$20,000), gender, race, or size of household discriminate high-givers from non-high-givers as well as does wealth, education, retirement status, marital status, and expectations to spend substantially. Moreover neither income, gender, race, or size of household is related to the amount low income, high givers donate to charity, once wealth, age, and anticipated inheritance are taken into account. We conclude that issues of gender and race are not directly relevant to high giving behavior among low income households, but wealth and stage of life cycle are.

Fifth, among all households that contribute to charity there is roughly a U-shaped relationship between their income and the percentage of that income they contribute to charitable causes. If we eliminate relatively wealthy households from analysis of the low income group we find that the left side of the U-shape curve drops substantially. Our data, however, do not support a re-estimation of the curve, since the data ignore contributions of less than \$500.

Sixth, the analysis presented in this paper can readily be extended from low income households to the population of all households. This is the next logical step in this research effort.

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TABLE 1. Income Groups by Percent of Income Contributed to Charity

Frequency Percent Row Pct. Column Pct.					
	Percent Contributed				
	Negative	0%	0-5%	>=5%	TOTAL
Income Group					
Negative	25,300 0.03 2.88 100.00	853,798 0.86 97.12 1.22	0 0.00 0.00 0.00	0 0.00 0.00 0.00	879,099 0.89
<=\$20,000	0 0.00 0.00 0.00	3.22E7 32.52 88.82 46.11	1,582,355 1.60 4.36 7.48	2,470,622 2.50 6.82 30.84	3.625E7 36.61
>\$20,000	0 0.00 0.00 0.00	3.678E7 37.14 59.43 52.67	1.956E7 19.76 31.62 92.52	5,540,349 5.60 8.95 69.16	6.188E7 62.50
TOTAL	25,300 0.03	6.983E7 70.53	2.115E7 21.36	8,010,971 8.09	9.901E7 100.00

**Table 2. Profiles of Selected Demographic Characteristics by
Income/Giving Groups**

	Low Income High Giving (1)	Low Income Low Giving (3)	High Income High Giving (2)
Mean Age	59	51	56
Median Age	65	50	54
% 65 years or older	53.82	34.01	37.71
% Worker Only	36.36	38.28	54.00
% Retired Only	47.51	26.19	28.85
% Retired OR Worker+Retired	51.55	27.39	35.93
% Male (Resp=Economically Dominant Individual)	57.49	47.83	84.15
% w/No 2nd Person in HH	50.48	68.13	22.46
% Married	47.69	25.32	76.43
% Never Married	8.49	22.52	7.45
% White	76.44	68.86	88.66
% Owning Home	61.51	36.12	79.62
% Renting	26.31	46.95	14.19
% Reporting Wages/Salaries	48.76	50.43	67.93
% Reporting Business Income	12.75	4.88	18.59
% Reporting Non Taxed Investment Income	4.97	0.96	14.92
% Reporting Other Interest Income	24.23	16.96	51.23
% Reporting Dividends	26.03	6.05	35.44
% Reporting Sale of Stocks, Bonds, etc.	7.13	1.74	18.04
% Reporting Child Support	2.46	6.59	2.40
% Reporting AFDC, SSI, etc.	5.42	26.59	0.00
% Reporting Pensions/Annuities	58.42	43.26	44.42
% Education <=12 Years	48.43	69.68	32.82
Mean Grade Completed	13	12	14
Median Grade Completed	13	12	14
% BA Degree	19.45	6.99	24.15
% Spending less than Income	32.48	24.82	52.91

Table 3. Mean Values of Financial Resources by Income/Giving Groups

	Low Income High Giving (1)	Low Income Low Giving (3)	High Income High Giving (2)
Networth	133,919	47,910	577,814
Liabilities	18,083	8,853	55,303
TOTAL Assets	152,002	56,763	633,117
Financial Assets	50,095	14,755	254,533
Nonfinancial Assets	101,907	42,009	378,585
Nonfinancial, Non-Housing Assets	43,104	12,593	250,057
Wages/Salaries	6,961	6,224	39,616
Business/Farm	1,745	402	10,758
Investments/Bonds	93	11	1,684
Other Interest Income	509	244	2,773
Dividends	1,576	96	7,483
Gain/Loss from Sale of Stocks/Bonds/RE	1,296	64	3,574
Net Rent/Royalties	150	108	3,417
Unemp. Ins./WC	183	109	150
Child Support/ ADC, AFDC, etc	20	156	121
Soc. Sec./Pensions/ Annuities/Disability	36	911	0
Other Income	6,173	3,604	10,055
TOTAL Income	104	241	429
	13,134	11,393	65,613

Table 4. Median Values of Financial Resources by Income/Giving Groups

	Low Income High Giving	Low Income Low Giving	High Income High Giving
Networth	70,200	11,100	172,300
Liabilities	200	450	21,300
TOTAL Assets	72,400	16,490	206,800
Financial Assets	9,450	1,000	53,400
Nonfinancial Assets	62,000	10,000	142,600
Nonfinancial, Non-Housing Assets	10,680	3,080	25,500
Wages/Salaries	0	400	29,000
Business/Farm	0	0	0
Investments/Bonds	0	0	0
Other Interest Income	0	0	10
Dividends	0	0	0
Gain/Loss from Sale of Stocks/Bonds/RE	0	0	0
Net Rent/Royalties	0	0	0
Unemp. Ins./WC	0	0	0
Child Support/ ADC,AFDC,etc	0	0	0
Soc.Sec./Pensions/ Annuities/Disability	5,600	0	0
Other Income	0	0	0
TOTAL Income	14,000	11,000	42,000

Table 5. Logistic Regression—Full Model, Predicting Likelihood of Being in High Giving Group, Low Income Respondents Only

Independent Variables	Estimate	Odds Ratio
Age	0.009	1.009
Income	2.3E-5	1.000
Net Worth	0.0227***	1.023
Marital Status	1.145***	3.144
Retired	0.687**	1.987
Gender	-0.362	0.696
Race	-0.265	0.767
Major Expenses	0.576**	1.779
# in Household	-0.053	0.948
Education	0.164***	1.179
Home Owner	-0.034	0.966
Spend LT Income	0.153	1.165
Economy Better	0.239	1.270
Income GT Prices Last 5 Yrs	0.128	1.136
Income GT Prices Next year	-0.482	0.617
Expected Inheritance	-7.98E-6	1.000
Intercept	-6.045***	
Model Chi-Square	92.316	
DF	16	
P Value	0.0001	

Notes:

** = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .01$.

Table 6. Logistic Regression--Reduced Models, Predicting Likelihood of Being in High Giving Group, Low Income Respondents Only

Independent Variables	Estimate	Odds Ratio
Net Worth	0.0227***	1.023
Marital Status	0.782***	2.186
Retired	1.072***	2.921
Major Expenses	0.458**	1.581
Education	0.156***	1.169
Intercept	-5.640***	
Model Chi-Square	79.232	
DF	5	
P Value	0.0001	

Notes:

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .01$.

Table 7. Additional Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression Estimates

	Odds Ratio
Net Worth	
+\$50,000	1.120
-\$50,000	0.893
+\$86,000	1.215
-\$86,000	0.823
+\$250,000	1.762
-\$250,000	0.567
+\$500,000	3.106
-\$500,000	0.322
Education	
+5 years	2.184
-5 years	0.458

Table 8. Regression—Full Models, Predicting Amount Contributed, Low Income/High Givers Only

Independent Variables	Estimate
Age	-10.39**
Income	0.012
Net Worth	0.003***
Marital Status	331.975
Retired	121.309
Gender	-185.283
Race	-166.188
Major Expenses	173.256
# in Household	23.492
Education	-26.774
Home Owner	-30.999
Spend LT Income	-142.940
Economy Better	-71.599
Income GT Prices Last 5 Yrs	-253.496
Income GT Prices Next year	-135.776
Expected Inheritance	-0.013***
Intercept	1423.97***
Model R-Square	.26
F-Value	15.028
P Value for F	0.0001

Notes:

** = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .01$.**Table 9. Regression—Reduced Model, Predicting Amount Contributed, Low Income/High Givers Only**

Independent Variables	Estimate
Age	-10.416***
Net Worth	0.003***
Expected Inheritance	-0.014***
Intercept	1220.519***
Model R-Square	.250
F-Value	71.829
P Value for F	0.0001

Notes:

* = $p < .10$; ** = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .01$.

