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978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

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THE COST OF LIVING IN AMERICA

Since the late nineteenth century, the “cost of living” has been a prominent part of debates about American political economy. By the early twentieth century, that prominence had taken a quantitative turn, as businessmen, unions, economists, and politicians all turned to cost-of-living statistics in their struggle to control and reshape the American economy. Today, the continuing power of these statistics is exemplified by the U.S. Consumer Price Index, whose fluctuations have enormous consequences for economic policy and the federal budget (including the allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars annually through cost-of-living escalator clauses in programs such as Social Security). In this book, Thomas A. Stapleford interweaves economic theory with political history to create a novel account of this quantitative knowledge. Demonstrating that statistical calculations inevitably require political judgments, he reveals what choices were made in constructing and using cost-of-living statistics and why those choices matter, both for our understanding of American history and for contemporary political and economic life.

Thomas A. Stapleford is an assistant professor in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame, where he also teaches in the Graduate Program in the History and Philosophy of Science. He has published related work in the *Journal of American History*, *Labor History*, and *Labor: Studies in the Working-Class History of the Americas*. Research for this book was supported by the National Science Foundation, the Notre Dame Faculty Research Program, and the Harvard Center for American Political Studies.

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THOMAS A. STAPLEFORD

University of Notre Dame



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Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To Cathy, who made this book possible

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Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Here in this group we are colleagues who can speak with candor. Let us therefore candidly recognize that statistical truths, like the other truths about man's social life, are created rather than discovered.... [W]hen it comes to unemployment or poverty or price inflation or mental disease, we are dealing with social phenomena. It is man who invents and defines these categories. It is man who selects a few dimensions which are capable of measurement and uses them to characterize complex social conditions and relationships. It is man who decides how much effort should be expended in measuring these dimensions or others which might be selected.¹

– Arthur M. Ross, Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,
Speech before the Washington Statistical Society, January 1966

¹ Published in Arthur M. Ross, "Living with Symbols," *The American Statistician*, vol. 20, no. 3 (1966): 16.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures, Charts, and Tables</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
Introduction	1
A Note on Terminology and Technical Theory	16
PART I. STATISTICS AND LABOR REFORM, 1880–1930: CENTRALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS	
1. Before There Were Indexes: The “Labor Question” and Labor Statistics, 1880–1910	22
2. The Cost of Living in Peace and War: Statistics and Economic Management, 1910–1918	59
3. Searching for Normalcy: Cost-of-Living Statistics and Industrial Relations in the 1920s	96
PART II. RATIONALIZING THE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL ORDER, 1930–1960: COST-OF-LIVING STATISTICS IN THE HEART OF THE NEW DEAL	
4. The Nature of a Revolution: The Bureau of Labor Statistics in the New Deal	145
5. Tracking an Elusive Home-Front “Enemy”: Price Indexes and Wage Adjustment	184
6. Statistics from the Bottom Up: Union Research on the Cost of Living	219

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

7. Bounded Conflict: Collective Bargaining and the Consumer Price Index in the Cold War 253

PART III. THE CPI AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, 1960-2000: A "WELFARE" INDEX FOR THE WELFARE STATE

8. Accounting for Growth: Macroeconomic Analysis and the Transformation of Price Index Theory 297

9. From Workers to the Welfare State: The Consumer Price Index and the Rise of Indexation 342

Epilogue: Governance and Economic Statistics 382

Technical Appendix: A Brief Primer on Cost-of-Living Indexes 395

Index 401

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

List of Figures, Charts, and Tables

FIGURES

4.1: Regional Population Weighting for Cities in the Food Index, 1935	<i>page</i> 164
6.1: Pummeled by the Cost of Living	223
6.2: The Wisdom of Housewives	229

CHARTS

3.1: Retail Prices in the United States through December 1929	122
4.1: The Old and Revised Indexes, 1935	166
4.2: The New and Original Cost-of-Living Indexes, 1940	167
7.1: The CPI and COLA Coverage, 1955–1995	255

TABLES

1.1: The Retail Price Indexes of the Aldrich Reports	45
1.2: U.S. Index of Food Prices, c. 1904	52
3.1: The 1917–1919 Market Basket for the BLS Cost-of-Living Index	103
4.1: The 1934–1936 Market Basket	162
5.1: Alternative Ways of Categorizing Factors that Affect Family Expenditures	206
8.1: Hypothetical Comparison of Automobiles, 1925 vs. 1935	327
9.1: Persons Receiving Payments Escalated by CPI, 1975	343

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xiii

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Cambridge University Press

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Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Abbreviations

ORGANIZATIONS AND TITLES

AARP	American Association of Retired Persons
ACSL	Advisory Committee to the Secretary of Labor
ACW	Amalgamated Clothing Workers
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AFL	American Federation of Labor
ASA	American Statistical Association
BAE	U.S. Bureau of Agricultural Economics
BHE	U.S. Bureau of Home Economics
BLS	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
BRAC	Business Research Advisory Council
CEA	U.S. Council of Economic Advisers
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CIR	U.S. Committee on Industrial Relations
COGSIS	Committee on Government Statistics and Information Services
COLA	cost-of-living adjustment
CPI	U.S. Consumer Price Index
CRIW	Conference on Research in Income and Wealth
EFC	Emergency Fleet Corporation
FESAC	Federal Statistics Advisory Committee
GM	General Motors
GNP	Gross National Product
JEC	U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee
LRAC	Labor Research Advisory Council
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NCF	National Civic Federation

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

Abbreviations

NCL	National Consumer League
NICB	National Industrial Conference Board
NRC	National Resources Committee
NWLB	National War Labor Board
OEO	U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity
OPA	U.S. Office of Price Administration
OAA	Old-Age Assistance
OASDI	Old-Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance
OASI	Old-Age and Survivors' Insurance
SLAB	Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board
UAW	United Auto Workers
UE	United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers
USWA	United Steelworkers of America

PERIODICAL LITERATURE AND BOOK SERIES

AER	<i>American Economic Review</i>
BLS Bulletin	Bulletin of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
HOPE	<i>History of Political Economy</i>
ILR	<i>International Labour Review</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of American History</i>
JASA	<i>Journal of the American Statistical Association</i>
JPE	<i>Journal of Political Economy</i>
MLR	<i>Monthly Labor Review</i>
NABL	Proceedings of the annual convention of officials from state bureaus of labor statistics. The titles of both the organization and its proceedings changed several times; in the notes, the latter is abbreviated as <i>NABL</i> (the most common later title being "National Association of Officials of Bureaus of Labor Statistics").
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
PASA	<i>Publications of the American Statistical Association</i>
QJE	<i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i>
SIW	Studies in Income and Wealth

ABBREVIATED ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

FDR Library	Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York
NARA	U.S. National Archives II, College Park, Maryland

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Abbreviations*

xvii

RBML	Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, New York
WRL	Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan
WSHS	Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin

ABBREVIATED MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS (INDENTED ABBREVIATIONS ARE SERIES TITLES FROM WITHIN AN ARCHIVAL COLLECTION)

BLS	Bureau of Labor Statistics, RG 257, NARA
ACF 1941–62	Records of the Commissioner of Labor Statistics, Advisory Committee Files, 1941–62
GCS 1934–50	General Correspondence and Subject File, 1934–1950
GCS 1946–72	General Correspondence and Subject File, 1936–1972
LRAC	Records of the Labor Research Advisory Council
PFAC	Program Files of the Office of the Associate Commissioner, Office of Prices and Living Conditions, 1946–1979
RCL-PPF 1950–1975	Records of the Commissioner of Labor Statistics, Program and Policy Files, 1950–1975
Wickens correspondence	Correspondence of Deputy Commissioner Aryness J. Wickens, 1939–1950
DOL	Department of Labor, RG 174, NARA
Ida Merriam papers	Papers of Ida Merriam, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.
Lubin papers	Papers of Isador Lubin, FDR Library
NRPB	National Resources Planning Board, RG 187, NARA
NWLB	National War Labor Board, RG 2, NARA
OHC-CU	Oral History Collection, RBML
OMB	Office of Management and the Budget, RG 51, NARA

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-71924-7 - The Cost of Living in America: A Political History of Economic Statistics, 1880-2000

Thomas A. Stapleford

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

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CSB-ACSL	Central Statistical Board, Records of Cooperating Agencies, Advisory Committee to the Secretary of Labor
CSB-General Records SR 1940–68	Central Statistical Board, General Records Statistical Records Relating to Particular Subject Areas, 1940–1968
Perkins papers	Papers of Frances Perkins, RBML
Stewart papers	Papers of Ethelbert Stewart, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
U.S. Shipping Board	U.S. Shipping Board, RG 32, NARA