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Aiming at Half of the Target: An Argument to Replace Poverty Thresholds With Self-Sufficiency, or “Living Wage” Standards

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The federal poverty “line,” established in the 1960s, has long been criticized as severely inadequate. Efforts to adjust it have ensued. As poverty is measured by income, it is logically linked to inadequate wages. Movements to establish a “living wage,” intended to ensure self-sufficiency, have also been pursued. The histories of these efforts are briefly examined, with attention to the working poor. The authors argue that using a living wage benchmark for measuring income inadequacy should replace poverty measures to better describe a continuum from the poorest households to those who have achieved at least minimal self-sufficiency.

KEYWORDS *poverty measurement, living wage, working poor*

INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of the United States, there has been an effort to account for the number of citizens who are “poor.” Nagging problems have persisted however, almost from the beginning of this venture. What is the definition of *poverty*? What are its causes and therefore its solutions? Various entities from federal and local governments to academic and political agencies have attempted to solve these problems. As public and private programs have been developed to assist those in need, deciding who deserves assistance has made finding ways to delineate exactly who needs aid, why they need it, and how it should be appropriated even more pressing.

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Running almost parallel to the search for these answers about poverty has been a quest to determine what is meant by a familiar phrase: “making a living.” What is a “living?” How much income is needed to fund a modest household and what are its components? Does it include home ownership? Does it include only what will fund the most basic of needs, or does a “living” include some measure that allows for modest luxuries, such as inexpensive entertainment, gifts, and so on?

In sum, at what level of income and resources does a household stop being “poor” and become supported by adult residents who “make a living?” The following is a brief history of the ongoing quests to answer these questions, and an argument that one of them, measuring poverty, should be dropped altogether in favor of using a living wage standard.

COUNTING AND DEFINING THE POOR

Another decennial census has been completed, and thousands of statistics are being generated about approximately 309 million U.S. citizens. The essential focus of the U.S. Census, however, is simply to take a head count. The practice of counting citizens every decade began in 1790, to comply with the new U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 2. The main purpose of the count, as it remains today, was to ensure proper apportionment of representation, per population size, in Congress. In 1790, census marshals were directed to count numbers of free persons and also slaves, who were counted as three fifths of a person. (Representation was then and is still determined by the entire population of an area, not just eligible voters.) However, as the United States grew, the instructions and format of each decennial census evolved, as it was determined that the census was an opportunity to obtain a great deal of useful demographic data. The 1850 census marshals were instructed to obtain a specific count of those who were “deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict” even though poorhouses were to be counted as one household (Gauthier, 2002, pp. 11–13).

It makes sense that the poor were specifically counted for reapportionment; there were many, many poor residents of the colonies. As historian Gary B. Nash (2004) reported,

For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, about two-thirds of all white immigrants arrived as indentured servants Adding enslaved Africans . . . we can estimate that at least 90 percent of all people disembarking in North America were impoverished and a large majority of them continued in penury for most of their lives. (pp. 6–7)

The reasons cited for poverty, or “pauperism,” in early America, mirror those still offered today. Puritans believed poverty was preordained by God,

and that poverty was the rule, not the exception. Others, notably Benjamin Franklin, came to believe that “poor relief” such as poorhouses, promoted “pauperism,” or dependency on others. But others reasoned that there were simply not enough good-paying jobs to allow the masses of poor and near-poor to sustain themselves—often in the face of compounding conditions such as epidemic-level outbreaks of yellow fever and smallpox, shortages of wood or other means of fuel during bleak winters, lack of sound nutrition, medical care, and poor fire control. And, like today, as men fell into poverty—it was that much worse for the women and children who depended upon their wages (Nash, 2004).

These social constructs did not go unnoticed:

As far back as 1776, Adam Smith noted the importance of social perceptions in determining what constitutes economic hardship . . . he defined the lack of “necessaries” as the experience of being unable to consume “not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.” (Iceland, 2006, p. 11)

Social workers, supported by economists and sociologists in the late-19th and early-20th centuries shifted public opinion of “pauperism” by explaining the causes of “poverty” more along the lines of Adam Smith’s observations. *Poverty* meant “insufficient income”—literally a poverty of resources, to maintain those “necessaries” mentioned above (Fisher, 1997, para. 27). Poverty, per Adam Smith and many early American social workers, was what we know today as a social construct and the result of poor wages and the rise and fall of labor demands.

A Poverty “Line”

In the late 19th century, following the lead of European statisticians, American sociologists and economists began to calculate standard subsistence-level budgets, to determine a “line of poverty.” However, these budgets were quite low and were criticized (as later modern poverty budgets would be) for requiring unreasonable standards of capability and resources (Iceland, 2006). For example, social scientist William Ogburn (1919) complained, “It cannot be assumed for instance that a housewife has the expert training of a domestic science expert” (p. 117).

Efforts at establishing poverty lines/budgets continued through the 1940s and 1950s with no national consensus (Iceland, 2006). Finally, in 1969, supporting President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, the famous 1963 “food basket” calculations (the cost of an “economy” supply of food multiplied by three) of Social Security researcher Mollie Orshansky were adopted

by the U.S. Bureau of the Budget (now OMB) as the first official poverty “thresholds” for various family sizes (Weinberg, 2006). These *same* thresholds are still calculated each year, drawing upon the U.S. Census Current Population Survey from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement—and are adjusted only by the consumer price index (Blank, 2008).

Mollie Orshansky (1965) warned that her figures (at best) were presenting levels of income inadequacy: “if it is not possible to state unequivocally ‘how much is enough,’ it should be possible to assert with confidence how much, on an average, is too little” (p. 3). However, use of these statistics by the popular press and politicians has long implied that families living “above” the so-called federal poverty thresholds are not living in poverty. It is important to note that there is a slight difference between poverty thresholds, and measures called poverty “guidelines”—sometimes referred to as the federal poverty “lines.” The poverty guidelines, which are calculated and published by the Department of Health and Human Services, use more simplified measure than the thresholds and are used for administrative purposes in certain federal programs. However, unlike the thresholds, which are the same for all 50 states, the guidelines for Hawaii and Alaska are adjusted higher than those of the 48 contiguous states (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2011). Many programs, such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP (Food Stamps), use multiples of these guidelines for program eligibility purposes (Blank, 2008)—a nod that higher guidelines are needed, perhaps?

In addition to being thought to undercount those living in poverty, the thresholds also failed to capture the success of major antipoverty policies, because it captures only cash transfers as income, leaving out the value of in-kind assistance such as Food Stamps, now called the SNAP, housing and medical benefits, and most recently, tax credits and refunds aimed at low-income families, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) (Blank, 2008). Serious reviews of the poverty threshold were undertaken almost immediately after it was adopted. An in-depth review was produced in 1976, but this resulted in only minor adjustments (Weinberg, 2006). The Census Bureau began to publish “experimental” measures that accounted for some in-kind benefits in the 1980s, but again, no official change has been made to the official poverty thresholds (Blank, 2008).

In the early 1990s, in response to continued criticism of the poverty thresholds, Congressional hearings led to the establishment of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) Panel on Poverty (Short & Garner, 2002). In 1995, this panel released a report edited by Constance Citro and Robert Michael that recommended changes to the official poverty measure. These recommendations included:

a budget for the three basic categories of food, clothing and shelter (including utilities), and a small additional amount to allow for other needs (e.g. household supplies, personal care, non-work-related

transportation). Actual expenditure data should be used to develop a threshold for a reference family of four—two adults and two children. Each year, that threshold should be updated to reflect changes in spending . . . over the previous 3 years and then adjusted for different family types and geographic areas of the country . . . resources should include most in-kind benefits and exclude certain other nondiscretionary expenses (e.g. work expenses). (Citro & Michael, 1995, pp. 3–4)

These NAS recommendations and subsequent updates have been generally well received, following some questioning and testing of certain component measures (D. Garner & Betson, 2010). But they were not adopted as replacements for the poverty thresholds.

The Census Bureau has also continued to produce revised measurements. In a sense, it is an embarrassment of riches—with no general agreement concerning which measures to settle on. In addition, the responsibility for the poverty thresholds lies with the OMB under the Executive Office of the President, which is quite unusual for a statistical calculation—so any changes would require a sign-off by the president—and are thus politically charged (Blank, 2008). Finally, Mark Greenberg, executive director of the Georgetown Center on Poverty, Inequality, and Public Policy, noted that 39 federal programs use the official guidelines, even in part, and that alone is prohibitive to such an enormous policy change until the newer measurements are determined to be absolutely a better choice, and therefore no longer “experimental” (Greenberg, 2009).

The Favored Alternative Poverty Measure—The NAS Method

On March 2, 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau announced plans, as part of the Obama administration’s 2011 budget request, to develop a “Supplemental Poverty Measure,” (SPM) based on previous research that has produced alternative poverty measures and the NAS recommendations as a basic format. The new measures include adjustments for geographic differences in the costs of living, household groups that include nonmembers and out-of-pocket medical expenses, while also accounting for tax credits and subsidies (Short, 2011b). This includes a successful pilot program in New York City using NAS-style poverty calculations. This is discussed below. A simple comparison of the measures is shown in Table 1. The information generated by the new measure is intended to “be an additional macroeconomic statistic, providing further understanding of economic conditions and trends” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p. 2). The Census Bureau is careful to note that the SPM, like previous experimental and alternative poverty measures, will not replace the federal poverty thresholds, which will continue to be the standard used in federal and state programs. Melissa Boteach and Jitinder Kohli (2010) of the Center for American Progress (a progressive think tank) wrote,

TABLE 1 Comparison of Current and Recommended Poverty Measures

	Current poverty measure	National Academy of Sciences recommendation
Thresholds	Established in 1960s at three times the cost of “Economy Food Plan.”	Equal to roughly 80% of median family expenditures on food, clothing, shelter and utilities, plus a “little more” for miscellaneous items.
	Adjusted annually by the Consumer Price Index.	Adjusted annually by change in the median family expenditures for items in the threshold.
	No geographic adjustment.	Adjusted geographically using differences in housing costs.
Resources	Total family pretax cash income.	Total family <i>after-tax</i> income. Includes the value of near-cash, in-kind benefits such as Food Stamps.
		Subtract work-related expenses such as childcare and transportation costs.
		Subtract medical out-of-pocket expenses

Source. Adapted with permission from *Establishing a Modern Poverty Measure*, 2008.

The new (SPM) measure could prove transformative if it becomes the central basis by which we establish whether we are making progress on reducing poverty. Public debate on poverty and policies to alleviate it should be focused on this measure because it will more accurately capture whether the actual resources families have available are enough to meet their most basic needs. (p. 1)

This decision by the Census Bureau essentially renders moot the need to pursue passage of the Measure of Poverty (MAP) Act of 2009, cosponsored by former Senator Christopher Dodd, (D-Connecticut) and Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Washington State). The MAP Act calls for a nearly identical measure to that of the new SPM (and uses NAS methodology), according to Margot Crandall-Hollick, legislative assistant to Senator Dodd. In addition to a new poverty measure, the MAP Act had also requested funding to develop studies of a “decent living standard” and a “medical care risk measure” (Measuring American Poverty Act, 2009). But as these two measures would have to be pursued legislatively, they were tabled due to lack of time remaining in the 2010 legislative session (M. Crandall-Hollick, personal communication, March 23, 2010). Although keeping in mind that the NAS recommendations have many “submeasurements” produced by additional research, the major differences in the two measures are summarized in Table 1, which is a comparison of the current poverty measures with the NAS recommendations for new measures.

What Is New About the New Census Bureau Measures?

The new measures were produced by the Interagency Technical Working Group, comprising representatives of various government agencies, including OMB, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Census Bureau. They

use different family compositions (the NAS uses a standard family of two parents and two children) to recognize a variety of “family units”—families who include foster children, or other nonrelative children and who also house other adults and/or their children. Sample data will be drawn from sets gathered over 5 years, to stabilize thresholds. The new measures will also use a range of housing costs, to include families who are able to live in homes without a mortgage (perhaps inherited from a family member). In addition, an attempt will be made to find a way to account for geographic differences in the costs of goods and housing, again acquiring statistics from a 5-year data set of consumer expenditures (T. Garner, 2011).

NAS Experiment in New York City

In 2006, New York City (NYC) Mayor Michael Bloomberg established a Commission for Economic Opportunity (CEO) charged with “crafting a new set of initiatives aimed at reducing poverty in New York City” (*Establishing a Modern Poverty Measure*, 2008). This included applying NAS-style poverty measurements to NYC data as well as accounting for geographically significant differences in rents. The first set of data did not produce great differences between outcomes using the NAS measure (about a 4% increase city-wide), with the exception of data about the elderly—2006 measurements calculated an elderly poverty rate of 32.0% compared to 18.1% using poverty threshold measurements. The Bronx was shown to be the only local area in NYC to have a statistically significant increase (+2.7%) in poverty from 2007 to 2008, and there were continued city-wide increases in poverty for African Americans. Particularly worrisome are the increases shown in the number of NYC’s working poor—accounted for in part by housing costs and despite the inclusion of EITC deductions (Levitan, D’Onofrio, Krampner, Scheer, & Seidel, 2010). The CEO influences antipoverty programs in NYC, by shedding light on certain aspects and needs of various impoverished groups previously unknown or underestimated. As the CEO has reported,

CEO’s successful policy initiatives at the local level include enacting a local Child Care Tax Credit, helping low-income households build assets and make the best use of their financial resources, and expanding access to healthy food, particularly in low-income communities. (New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, Public Policy, n.d.)

However many antipoverty programs have federal and state components and are still subject to the long-standing federal poverty thresholds and benefit levels, it is hoped that positive impacts from federal programs such as the EITC observed in local studies by the CEO will in turn affect future national policy, even if the official poverty thresholds remain unchanged (New York City Center for Economic Opportunity, 2011).

AN AMERICAN WAGE

Around the same time poverty lines were being first calculated, during the Progressive Era (roughly 1900–1914), worker-led movements to establish a “standard American wage” or “living wage” were also supported by many economists and sociologists of the day (Iceland, 2006; Luce, 2004). Henry Rogers Seager, PhD, a Columbia University economics professor, wrote in 1913,

If all workers had to be paid a living wage, a premium would be put on the light and well-equipped workshop and factory, and the type of employer who now thrives on the exploitation of helpless women and children would find himself at a disadvantage. (p. 11)

Famous labor leader Samuel Gompers touted “a wage that would enable workers to maintain the American standard of living; it should, he declared, prevent the breadwinner from becoming what he called ‘the non-consumer’” (as quoted in Glickman, 1997, p. 77). Further, Progressive movement supporters felt that an American or “family” wage was also necessary to prevent industry from continuing to take advantage of cheap labor by employing women and children (Longman & Boshara, 2009).

The “American wage” movement of the Progressive Era led to passage of a minimum wage, aimed at paying women and children more substantial wages, and as a potential first step toward a living wage—a movement that was revived in the 1990s and is discussed below. The first federal minimum wage was passed in 1938, under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), and included male workers as well. The act did not provide for automatic adjustments to the wage according to inflation; therefore, Congress must make changes to the minimum wage (Luce, 2004).

The Federal Minimal Wage

The American wage movement stalled after the passage of FLSA. The minimum wage has long been a source of controversy: whether to increase it, and to what amount. From its inception, researchers have also argued whether increasing the minimum wage benefits the poor “bread-winner” or actually raises unemployment by forcing businesses to cut jobs due to increased costs. There is no one answer to this debate.

As it was never attached to the Consumer Price Index–All Urban Consumers (CPIU), the real value of the minimum wage has fluctuated since 1938, as has its power to help low-wage earners. It reached its peak real dollar value in 1968 and was not raised at all during the periods from 1981 to 1990, and from 1997 to 2007 (Mulder, 2008). The current federal minimum wage of \$7.25 hour went into effect on July 24, 2009 (LaborLawCenter™, 2011).

Economists Richard Burkhauser and Joseph Sabia (2007) argued that the minimum wage is ineffective as a poverty-fighting strategy because the majority of those working for minimum wage do not live in poor families (such as teenagers working at fast-food type jobs), and that even the wage earners in poor families earn more than the federal minimum wage. (It is important to note, however, that many states pay a minimum wage above that of the federally mandated wage. Research capturing only the federal minimum wage would miss these increases.) They cited a number of studies that report that there is only a “weak relationship between minimum-wage increases and poverty” (p. 263). Opponents of this argument contend that increases in the minimum wage do indeed target those in the lowest end of the wage-earning cohort, do affect poverty levels, and that the majority of those benefitting are adult workers (Shulman, 2007). A report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities notes that the increase to a federal minimum wage of \$7.25 in 2009 (the raise was gradual over 2 years) would, indeed, help lift families out of poverty—but only with the addition of EITC monies and help from Food Stamps (Furman & Parrot, 2007). Burkhauser and Sabia also endorsed increases in EITC as an effective poverty-fighting tool.

The Working Poor

Regardless of how we measure poverty, the fact that there are millions of American “working poor” is frustrating and shameful. This is especially poignant in a time of ever-growing income inequality. Bernstein, McNichol, and Nichols, in a 2008 joint analysis from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Economic Policy Institute, reported that

On average, incomes have declined by 2.5 percent among the bottom fifth of families since the late 1990s, while increasing by 9.1 percent among the top fifth For very high-income families—the richest 5 percent—income growth since the late 1990s has been especially dramatic, and much faster than among the poorest fifth of families. (p. 1)

That inequality has continued to grow, and indeed is one of the major, if not primary, focus of the current “Occupy” movement. A 2011 Congressional Budget Office report states:

As a result of that uneven income growth, the distribution of after-tax household income in the United States was substantially more unequal in 2007 than in 1979: The share of income accruing to higher-income households increased, whereas the share accruing to other households declined. In fact, between 2005 and 2007, the after-tax income received by the 20 percent of the population with the highest income exceeded

the after-tax income of the remaining 80 percent. (Congress of the United States, Congressional Budget Office, 2011, p. ix)

Caught in a trap of low-wage employment with little or no benefits, the working poor belie the American dream—hard work does not necessarily result in upper mobility. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) or Welfare Reform Act of 1996, a huge neoliberal policy shift aimed at reducing the poor’s “dependency” on government assistance (recall the colonial definition of *pauperism*), has not proven to significantly reduce the incidence of poverty (Gabe, 2009; Li & Upadhyay, 2008) and has, in effect, created even more working poor. Pulitzer Prize winning author David Shipler (2004) wrote about welfare reform in *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*:

Those with luck or talent step onto career ladders toward better and better positions at higher and higher pay. Many more, however, are stuck at such low wages that their living standards are unchanged. They still cannot save, cannot get decent health care, cannot move to better neighborhoods, cannot send their children to schools that offer the promise for a successful future. These are the forgotten Americans, who are noticed and counted as they leave welfare, but who disappear from the nation’s radar as they struggle in their working lives. (p. 4)

The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics defines *the working poor* as individuals who spent at least 27 weeks in the labor force (working or looking for work), but whose incomes still fall below the federal poverty thresholds. In 2009, 10.4 million individuals were classified as working poor, using this definition (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Employment opportunities have lessened in the recent economic downturn, so these numbers will undoubtedly rise.

Professor Emerita Catherine Chilman (1991) concluded that the causes of the significant increase in working poor Americans during the 1970s and 1980s were many, including a poor economy and low wages, and added, “that the adverse situation of the working poor deteriorated further after 1981 because of cuts [by the Reagan Administration] in welfare supplements for this group” (p. 192). Others concur. Sar Levitan and Isaac Shapiro noted in 1987,

The number of working poor is much higher today than in the late 1970s due to weaker labor markets and less helpful federal policies. In 1985, 9.1 million poor adults worked, some 2 million of whom worked full time, year round. (p. 41)

President Reagan made clear, from the beginning of his first term, that he regarded welfare programs, especially mean-tested programs, as essentially

rewarding laziness. This marked a return to a rhetoric of blaming the poor for their plight, rather than the economic conditions that cause poverty itself (O’Conner, 1998). In 1985, Danziger and Gottshalk reported,

expenditures on income support, education and training programs are about \$38 billion lower in FY 1985 than they would have been if pre-Reagan policies had remained in effect. While most low-income people were affected by these cuts, the working poor were hit hardest. (p. 589)

This corresponds with the dramatic rise of the lower end of the service sector economy that began in the early 1980s and continued into the 21st century (Autor & Dorn, 2009). One study found that by 2000, 75% of the U.S. workforce was employed in this service sector, and many of those employees were women (Lee & Wolpin, 2006). This trend continues. According to a 2011 U.S. Bureau of Labor report concerning workers in 2009,

Individuals employed in occupations that typically do not require high levels of education and that are characterized by relatively low earnings were more likely to be classified a working poor Indeed, service occupations, with 3.2 million working poor, accounted for nearly one-third of all those classified as working poor. (p. 3.)

Low-skilled service sector jobs, even full-time positions, “offer few (or no) benefits, inadequate training, and few opportunities for advancement” (Bierema, 2010, pp. 103–104). For example, Wal-Mart (which sells non-U.S. manufactured products) now employs the most workers of any corporation in the United States, pays mainly minimum and low wages, and relies on part-time employment and minimal benefits packages (Mulder, 2008; Robinson, 2004). Pervasive poverty and low-wage, often tenuous employment opportunities have always been and continue to be inextricably linked—low wages increase profits, and maximizing profit is the prime objective of an unfettered market economy.

As previously indicated, working poor Americans tend to “go off the radar” as they leave statistical categories that are regularly tracked. But some of the working poor population has long lived off the radar—perhaps a bit above the poverty level, working at one or several low-wage jobs. They don’t qualify for government assistance, but there is no mistake that they are still the “working poor.” Poverty-level income plus \$1 is still poverty, regardless of the instrument used to measure it. Often these are families of full-time working adults, with high school degrees (Boushey, 2002). Additionally, poverty income measures alone don’t illustrate the lack of wealth, as defined as the lack of savings accounts, owned real estate, cars, investments, and higher educations. The solutions, then, must come from policy—but the American public seems to historically tolerate only limited government support for the poor (Iceland, 2006).

One solution could be to stop tracking economic upward mobility by poverty measures (either federal thresholds or NAS) and take a “top-down” approach by tracking those who earn income above or at a percentage of a “living wage” threshold. This suggestion is examined below.

THE LIVING WAGE MOVEMENT—A REFASHIONED AMERICAN WAGE

Like their predecessors of the Progressive Era, modern proponents of a “living wage” movement seek to encourage (via a host of strategies) employers to pay workers a wage that allows them to be “self-sufficient at a basic needs level” (Brooks, 2007, p. 438). The current living wage movement is typically dated back to a December 1994 agreement reached between the City of Baltimore, Maryland, and two co-organizers of the city’s living wage campaign: a church-lead coalition called Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) and American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, a powerful union for public employees (Brooks, 2007; Luce, 2004; Tilly, 2005). The city of Baltimore passed a living wage law that required employers with city contracts to pay workers about \$2 per hour more than the federal minimum wage. (This increase was just enough to put workers over the federal poverty threshold [Tilly, 2005], but as discussed above, this was not a “living wage” in the sense that it didn’t pull workers out of reliance on governmental programs.)

Since the Baltimore campaign, many more local governments, campuses, and school districts across the United States have passed similar ordinances (Lipp, 2002). Researchers Heidi Swarts and Ion Vasi found that,

Since 1994, approximately 140 ordinances have been passed by cities, counties, townships, and universities. By 2006, 88 policies were in cities and towns of over 10,000 people. Our database consists of all 1,072 U.S. municipalities with over 25,000 people, 77 of which have living wage policies. (We omit the 11 towns or villages under 25,000 with living wage policies). (p. 749)

These authors went on to note, “ultimately the most important actors in the LW [Living Wage] campaigns have been local. Ordinances are generally adopted because activists can build local coalitions of labor, religious, and community groups” (p. 750). An recent illustration of this is the February 2012 historic agreement between the New York Hotel and Motel Trades Council and the Hotel Association of New York that immediately raised the annual salary of hotel/motel housekeepers to \$46,000 with the promise of yearly raises to reach \$60,000 over the next 7 years, as well as providing free,

quality health insurance, in great part of which will be provided by industry-owned and -operated clinics. High-end tourist hotel operators realized that keeping workers happy keeps job quality high, which keeps tourists happy. Simple reasoning (“Kudos to New York’s Hotel Industry,” 2012).

Although the now-defunct Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) is mentioned in this study as having tried to get a national *minimum* wage movement going, its main contribution to the living wage movement was the establishment of its Living Wage Resource Center, which tracked the living wage movement and acted as a consulting resource. Unfortunately, the Living Wage Resource Center and its website are also gone (Swartz & Vasi, 2011). It does not appear that another organization has taken up the role of continuing to collect aggregate information on the living wage movement.

Although the impact of these gains have been small in scale, as one researcher observed, “the living wage’ battles might play some useful symbolic role and raise awareness of pay disparity issues” (Holzer, 2006, p. 21). Legal scholar MaryBeth Lipp (2002), after reviewing research on both sides of the living wage issue, as well its Constitutional implications, concluded that “living wage laws establish justice, promote the general welfare, and facilitate the pursuit of happiness for the working poor” (p. 527).

How Much Is a Living?

What is a living wage? The answer is similar to questions about a poverty line—it depends. Several organizations have developed instruments to calculate wages to cover the costs of basic needs for a “safe but moderate standard of living” (Lin & Bernstein, 2008, p. 2). These are higher than just above the federal poverty thresholds, but they do not allow for any assets such as cars, homes, or savings accounts. Like the NAS model for a new poverty measurement, these wage measurements attempt to account for differences in family composition, geographic areas, and reasonable expenses.

One such measure is the Self-Sufficiency Standard (SSS). Developed by Dr. Diana Pearce while she was a director at Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), a Washington, DC-based women’s workforce advocacy organization, and with funding from the Ford Foundation, the SSS “defines the amount of income necessary to meet basic needs (including paying taxes) in the regular “marketplace” without public subsidies . . . or private or informal subsidies” (Brooks & Pearce, 2000, p. 2). This standard is an attempt to calculate an adequate, decent wage for a family, and assumes affordable, standard housing, but it does not include assets such as a vehicle or savings/retirement accounts (Pearce, 2003).

Other instruments similar to the SSS are the Basic Needs Budget Calculator (BNBC), developed by the National Center for Children in Poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2012), and the Basic Family Budget

Calculator, developed by the Economic Policy Institute (Economic Policy Institute, 2012).

The BNBC is an online resource. Users are able to choose a specific state (currently limited to 15 states—more are being added) and county/city, a one- or two-parent household, the working status of a second parent (single parents are assumed to be full-time), and up to three children, whose ages can also be selected. Like the SSS, the BNBC methodology accounts for geographically linked averaged costs of rents and utilities, child care, health insurance premiums, transportation, food, and so on. Users can also substitute their own numbers for many of these variables (NCCP, 2010).

The Basic Family Budget Calculator, developed by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), is also an online resource. Users can currently choose from all 50 states as well as Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) within each state and also choose from a selection of family compositions. The methodology to calculate costs is similar to that of SSS and BNBC (EPI, 2010).

The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC; 2010) also releases a yearly Housing Wage. This wage is

based on the Fair Market Rate (FMR) . . . [which is] HUD's best estimate of what a household seeking a modest rental unit in a short amount of time can expect to pay for rent and utilities in the current market. Thus, the FMR is an estimate of what a family moving today can expect to pay for a modest rental home, *not* what current renters are paying *on average*.
(p. 8)

The wage allows that housing costs do not exceed 30% of a family's income, which is considered affordable. The national housing wage for 2010 is \$18.44/hour or \$38,360 annual income for a two-bedroom rental unit (NLIHC, 2010, p.14).

In 2011, WOW released a report, titled, *The Basic Economic Security Tables (BEST™) for the United States*, “calculating the monthly income necessary for families to cover their basic expenses, including childcare, housing, health care, transportation, savings and retirement” (p. 1). The wages calculated with the BEST™ method resulted in wages higher than comparable SSS wages but reflect the income needed for a family to achieve a modest level of self-sufficiency with the additional security of basic assets, such as 3% to 6% of total expenses for savings to offset unexpected costs and retirement (WOW, 2011). Because public transportation systems vary greatly across the United States, the national basic index includes the payment costs of a modest car per working adult (McMahon, Nam, & Lee, 2010). In addition, WOW (2010a) is working with several states and regions to develop local BEST™ indices (<http://www.wowonline.org/usbest/>).

Just as the SSS has been used to help support the passage of living wage ordinances, increased EITC benefits, and to advocate for other programs in

various cities and states (Brooks & Pearce, 2000), the BEST™ wages are intended to do the same, but as a more realistic benchmark against which to gauge income inequality. WOW and other living wage advocates have long understood that these comparatively high wages will be difficult if not impossible to achieve as an across the board “minimum wage”—but see this effort as “a starting point for workers who want to achieve financial stability, and for the policy-makers, advocates, researchers and service providers who help workers build security” (McMahon et al., 2010, p. 1.)

A LIVING WAGE AS THE NEW STANDARD MEASURE

In a paper titled, *Why Measure Inequality?* Louis Kaplow (2002) wrote,

compared to inequality measures, poverty measures have the added problem of being arbitrary: They ignore most of the income distribution and often give substantial weight to an individual being at or just below the poverty line whereas no weight is given to those slightly above the poverty line. (p. 9)

Dr. Diana Pearce (2003), who developed the SSS with WOW concurred: “Most often we turn to the federal poverty measure to determine that a family is ‘poor’ if their income is below the appropriate threshold, and ‘not poor’ if it is above that threshold” (p. 1). As discussed earlier, these observations point toward an increasingly obvious question: even if improved by NAS style measures, a poverty measure will set a level at which there will be a group that is not accounted for—those living above the poverty level but below a living wage level. Even by crude estimate that would be a substantial number of families. The 2010 SPM poverty level for two adults and two children (family paying rent) is \$24,391 (Short, 2011a, p. 4). The 2010 BEST™ national wage living wage level for the same family/circumstances is \$67,920 (Wider Opportunities for Women, 2010a, p.13). Using household income data from the 2009 U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder, it can be calculated that roughly 29 million households earned, between \$25,000 and \$49,999 (U.S. Census Bureau American Fact Finder, 2012, S1901) – somewhere on the continuum between poverty and making a modest living, using public transportation. This is, therefore quite a conservative estimate, using the closest wage levels available on the American Fact Finder report. The 2010 decennial census did not gather income data. This will now be reported through the ACS, using continuous surveys and extrapolations.

Using the gap between the highest poverty measure calculated and a comparable living wage as the benchmark of income inequality may be a more accurate “snapshot” of portion of the population caught between poverty and self-sustenance. Perhaps this could be called the “Income

Inequality Index.” Again, as Molly Orshanky (1965) asserted, “if it is not possible to state unequivocally ‘how much is enough.’” Even though it could be “equivocated,” if it is possible to reach consensus about a poverty level, it should be possible to reach consensus about a living wage *benchmark*; not implying to replace the minimum wage with a living wage. That would be all but fiscally and politically impossible.

Adding her support of the now stalled MAP Act’s request to consider developing a U.S. “decent wage,” then WOW Executive Director Jane Kuriansky concluded, “Now is the time to move past simply measuring what it means to be deprived to what it means to be secure” (WOW, 2010b, para. 6). In the *Annual Report of The White House Task Force on the Middle Class*, Vice-President Joe Biden (2010) stated, “If the coming recovery is to truly lift the middle class, these Americans must be connected to career-track jobs that offer real opportunities for advancement and wages and benefits that can support a family” (p. 17). In this report, a “middle class budget,” calculated by the Commerce Department is presented and looks a great deal like the BEST™ measures, in that this budget includes income that allows a family to “aspire to home ownership, a car, college education for their children, health and retirement security and occasional family vacations” (Biden, 2010, p. 10). Called by many names—a decent wage, BEST™ wage, a middle-class wage—these represent what the Progressives meant so long ago: an American Wage, a “living” above poverty.

Policy Implications

There is little doubt that a federal poverty level resulting from either the long-standing formula or newer NAS-style calculations is here to stay, at least for some time. As discussed above, the logistics involved in changing this measure are many—as so many entitlement and other federal and state programs are tied to this measure. But as with the SSS, an “Income Inequality Index” (based on the new BEST™ measures) could become a powerful tool to affect changes by educating the populace about the wage inequities in specific geographic areas and for various income and cost reasons. It could be a tool to attract workers or residents; a city/university with a favorable index could be seen as having a commitment to workers and open to hearing other community labor concerns. As Harvard’s MaryBeth Lipp (2002) noted, the idea of a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a right to work as well as living wage has been debated quite vigorously among legal scholars. She further argued,

Despite legal academics’ attempts to find the right to a living wage or other subsistence guarantees in the Constitution or to overcome the Supreme Court’s failure to protect the poor, this “underclass” remains unable to enjoy and realize other revered, non-economic rights, including

life, liberty and property, human dignity, or full civic and political participation in society—not to mention the pursuit of happiness . . . lawmakers possess a duty to bear the Constitution in mind. Giving voice to this substantive theory of justice through living wage legislation presents one plausible, and arguably compulsory, method of adhering to this constitutional obligation. (p. 479)

As Lipp indicated, legislators could also be persuaded of a duty to find ways to lift constituents out of poverty. Another legal scholar, Loyola Law School professor William Quigley (2001), who echoed Lipp's sentiments, noted that even "Conservative Pat Buchanan received wide support for his call for 'a standard of living that rises each year', and a 'family wage' that enables a single parent to feed, clothe, house, and educate a large family in decency" (p. 897). He went on to add that the "battleground" for living wages is most likely to continue on the local legislative level (Quigley, 2001)—and that is where policy can most likely be affected. As Adam Smith understood during the Colonial Era, perception is all important to raise consciousness about the plight of the poor and the working poor. An "Index of Inequality," even by name, indicates that there is a wrong to be redressed. Along with information reported from the 2010 Census, there seems almost a daily reporting of the ever-rising numbers of children and other populations living at or below the federal poverty threshold. In addition, unemployment, though stabilizing somewhat in early 2012, is at all-time high among many populations, college tuitions have been steadily rising, and home foreclosures continue. Many former self-described middle-class families are applying for governmental assistance and have even been forced out of their homes. The families in this group most likely fall in the "no-man's land" between the federal poverty threshold and the most conservatively calculated living wage. It seems ever more unfair that there is no easily accessible statistic to account for those who perhaps need the most visibility.

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