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Poverty Measurement: A Social Work Perspective

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Requirements of Departmental Honors in Social Work

Bridgewater State University

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## Poverty Measurement: A Social Work Perspective

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to determine the information given to BSW students about poverty measurement and alternative measures via standard social work textbooks. Poverty measurement is rarely discussed in the national conversation about poverty in the United States. The poverty rate, guidelines and threshold are regularly used by policy makers and communicated to the public, but the formulas behind the calculations of these measures are not well known. The calculations of these measures are based on outdated assumptions and have not been updated in more than half a century. This study presents a literature review on poverty measurement in the United States. The findings of a content analysis of 18 introductory and policy social work textbooks for the discussion of poverty measurement and alternative measures reveals gaps in the presentation of this important information. The correlation between the lack of discussion in BSW textbooks and lack of advocates for change is discussed and suggestions for amendments are given in the conclusion of the study.

### **Introduction**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 14.5 percent of all individuals in the U.S. are living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This number, also known as the poverty rate, is used to simplify the major problem of poverty in the United States. Numerous individuals look at this statistic, take it at face value and seldom look into the formula that was used to conclude the number. However, an adequate formula for measuring poverty is necessary to accurately assess the problem of poverty in the United States. As it stands, the formula used to determine whether or not an individual or family is living in poverty, known as the federal poverty threshold, is outdated and insufficient (Short, 2014). This equation has not been amended in decades and it is

affecting the poverty guidelines, which are used to determine eligibility for aid programs, and the poverty rate. Thus, many individuals are going without basic necessities everyday without aid because they are not deemed as poor by the federal government based on inadequate measurements. Subsequently, the public and advocates, such as social workers are unaware of this injustice (Center for Women's Welfare, 2014).

Social workers comprise many of the advocates fighting for social justice. They encounter diverse populations that need assistance with many social issues. Among the numerous problems their clients face, almost all difficulties stem from or are exacerbated by a lack of adequate income and financial resources. The problems that stem from poverty include, but are not limited to, poor education, drug or alcohol abuse and criminal behavior. Social workers support and advocate for clients experiencing all of these problems. Social workers advocate for people experiencing poverty by finding appropriate services and pathways to economic security (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

Although most people in the social work profession are personally dedicated to making a change in the world, social workers are also mandated to advocate for their clients. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) holds social workers to an advocacy standard. The guidelines of this standard are stated in the NASW Code of Ethics. This guide calls social workers to increase the resources available to their clients, which includes lobbying and advocating for new legislation, which in this case would be to amend federal poverty measures (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

The social work profession allows people to make a change at macro and micro levels. Social workers can make a difference in the lives of many people with macro social work by advocating for a change in poverty measurement. Whereas micro social workers can help

individual people manage the issues that stem from poverty. Both types of social work are important, but to change the lives of numerous people living in poverty, a macro change must be made to the federal poverty measurement. In order to effectively advocate and change the federal poverty measurements, social workers need to be educated about how poverty is measured and used to determine eligibility for aid programs (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

Many social workers, i.e. potential advocates for change in poverty measurement, have received their Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) degree from a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited program. The CSWE accredited Baccalaureate programs are designed with curriculum that includes ten competencies that social work students must be proficient in before graduation. One of the competencies is “engaging in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being” (CSWE, 2010). Another competency is “to advance human rights and social and economic justice” (CSWE, 2010). Social workers need to be proficient in these two competencies to become future advocates for changing the federal poverty measurement (CSWE, 2010).

These two necessary competencies are taught in social work introductory and policy courses. The textbooks used for these courses contain most of the information that social work students will take into the field and use to advocate for their clients. Therefore, the area for examination was concluding the information about the measurement of poverty in current social work textbooks commonly used in accredited BSW introductory and policy courses. As discussed, the main interest of this research is for advocacy and macro-level change among the U.S. poverty measurement.

### **Definitions of Poverty and Poverty Measurement**

Poverty can be measured numerically using income or it can be measured qualitatively using basic needs. Therefore, it is difficult to achieve a universal definition of poverty.

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), poverty refers to “the state of not having sufficient money and resources to maintain the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing and shelter” (Rank, 2008, p. 387). However, the Encyclopedia of Social Work defines poverty as “the state of being poor or deficient in money or means of subsistence” (Rank, 2008, p. 390).

There are also definitions of absolute poverty and relative poverty, which are subcategories of poverty. Absolute poverty refers to “individuals and families that fall at or below a certain income threshold deemed the minimum needed to meet basic needs is considered poor, and everyone above this threshold is not poor” (Marx, Broussard, Hooper & Worster, 2011, p. 140-141). While, relative poverty “measures the extent to which an individual’s or family’s income falls below the average income threshold for the economy” (Marx, Broussard, Hooper & Worster, 2011, p. 141).

With all of the definitions of poverty, a simple measurement of poverty seems unfathomable. However, the federal government enacted a simple measurement over 50 years ago based on minimal calculation. The government has maintained this formula despite arguments that it fails to adequately address multiple aspects of poverty in the United States (Short, 2014). The current measurement of poverty contains elements such as the federal poverty threshold, the federal poverty guidelines and the poverty rate. These aspects of poverty measurement are often used interchangeably but all have different meanings (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

- **Federal poverty thresholds** are “dollar amounts the Census Bureau uses to determine a family's or person's poverty status” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, p. 1). As shown in Table 1, if a person’s personal income before taxes is lower than the poverty threshold for their family size then they are considered to be in poverty. Thus, if their income is above the threshold then they are considered to not be in poverty.
- The U.S. government uses the information gathered from the federal poverty threshold to determine the **poverty rate**, which is “the percentage of people (or families) who are below poverty”, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, p. 1). The federal poverty threshold and poverty rate are used by the U.S. Census Bureau to measure poverty status for statistical and informational purposes. As stated, the federal poverty rate was 14.5 percent in 2014 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). These calculations allow the government and the public to understand the extent of poverty in the United States.
- The federal government also publishes the **federal poverty guidelines** that are used by the Department of Health and Human Services to determine eligibility for many federal aid programs. Numerous programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Weatherization Assistance Program for Low-Income Persons (WAP) among others use multiples of the federal poverty guidelines to determine eligibility, which are demonstrated in Table 2 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The guidelines are multiplied to allow people in absolute and relative poverty to be eligible for services (Fisher, 1996).

Number of Family Members	Federal Poverty Threshold
1	\$11,770
2	15,930
3	20,090
4	24,250
5	28,410
6	32,570
7	36,730
8	40,890

*Note.* Adapted from U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015

Household Size	FPG <sup>a</sup> (100%)	School Lunch <sup>b</sup> (130%)	WIC <sup>c</sup> (185%)	WAP <sup>d</sup> (200%)
1	\$11,670	\$15,171	\$21,590	\$23,340
2	15,730	20,449	29,101	31,460
3	19,790	25,727	36,612	39,580
4	23,850	31,005	44,123	47,700

<sup>a</sup>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

<sup>b</sup>Source: Department of Agriculture, 2015

<sup>c</sup>Source: U.S. Department of Energy, 2015

<sup>d</sup>Source: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015

### History of Poverty Measurement

Before the federal poverty threshold was created in August 1969, there was no nationally recognized measurement to determine poverty status (Fisher, 1992). However, the earliest measurement of poverty dates back to the early 1900s when a group of social workers became interested in measuring poverty at the Hull House in Chicago, IL. They wanted to calculate a cost that would provide “adequate relief” for families experiencing poverty. The measurement they developed later became the Chicago Standard Budget. The Chicago Standard Budget, along



with similar budgets, influenced the Economy Food Plan of 1961, which determined the dollar amount needed for food to survive. This measurement was used to determine eligibility for food stamps (Rose, 2007).

In 1963-1964, Mollie Orshansky used the Economy Food Plan to develop the current federal poverty threshold measurement. Conversely, her measurements were not originally meant to be the primary federal measurement of poverty. She was initially trying to develop a measure of poverty to assess the risks of low-economic status among families with children. Consequently, her thresholds were exclusively for families with children; however, she later added individuals and families without children, which made it possible for the federal government to use her system as the federal measurement of poverty (Fisher, 1992).

In January of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared the “War on Poverty” by creating an initiative to improve conditions for people who were living in poverty (The Council of Economic Advisors, 2014). After President Johnson addressed the poverty crisis, he needed to quickly discover a way to measure poverty in the United States. The “War on Poverty” initiative began shortly after the publication of Orshansky’s first article, which contained her method of measuring poverty. Orshansky’s method came from her conclusion that food cost one-third of the average family’s income so she multiplied the economy food plan (an emergency survival dollar amount for food) by three to determine the overall survival costs for a poor family to create a poverty threshold. At the time, President Johnson found this method sufficient and implemented this method to calculate the federal poverty threshold that was nationally recognized in 1969 (Fisher, 1992).

## **Limitations**

Since the implementation of the federal poverty threshold, there has been no change in the formula. Although the federal poverty guidelines factor in inflation using the Consumer Price Index, the 1963 formula based on three times the economy food plan is still in place. The current federal poverty threshold measurement is extremely limited because it is solely based on basic food expenses and the food to income ratio in the 1960s. Current estimates conclude that the cost of food is closer to a seventh of an average family's income today. This suggests that the poverty threshold should be more than double if this formula was used according to modern food to income ratios (DiNitto, 2011; Marx, Broussard, Hopper & Worster, 2011).

Nevertheless, the measurement of poverty, which is solely based on food costs, does not factor in any other basic need costs such as housing, clothing, transportation, etc. Neither does it take into consideration the geographical location of a family or individual (Short, 2014). For example, individuals living in a city such as Boston, MA with higher costs of living may have an income above the poverty guidelines but still do not make enough money to afford housing for themselves or their family (Ames, Lowe, Dowd, Liberman & Youngblood, 2013). Thus, adjustments to the formula must be made to provide a comprehensive measurement of poverty.

Throughout the U.S. numerous individuals and families are not making enough money to meet their basic needs. However, many of them are not considered to be poor by the federal definition because their income is greater than the federal poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Even some individuals who receive Social Security or disability benefits do not make enough to satisfy their needs. These individuals are known as the working poor because they are not eligible for most programs as they have an income greater than the poverty guidelines, but they do not make enough to provide the basic needs for themselves and their families (Segal,

2013). If the poverty thresholds and guidelines measurements were consistent with the NASW definition of poverty, which includes the lack of resources for food, clothing and shelter, then there would not be a working poor (Rank, 2008, p. 387). Therefore, it is clear that the current poverty threshold and guidelines are not an adequate measure of who is poor.

The insufficient poverty threshold and guidelines measurement is leaving millions of U.S. citizens unaccounted for in the U.S. Census Bureau's calculation of the poverty rate. Thus, it does not effectively demonstrate the enormity of the problem of poverty in the United States. This also severely limits the amount of services social workers can provide to the working poor and others who are not seen as "poor" by government standards, as they are not eligible for most services based on their income. Therefore, it is nearly impossible for the working poor to get the help they need to escape poverty (Rank, 2008).

### **Attempts to Update**

If the measurement of poverty is updated, millions of people living in poverty could be nationally recognized and given the help they need to become self-sufficient. A new measurement has the potential to raise the poverty rate, which would force the federal government to address the situation. As it stands, the poverty rate seems manageable; poverty is not seen as a national crisis. Furthermore, a stigma has been placed on individuals living in poverty, which claims that they do not work but live off of other people's tax money. Considering that almost a fourth of people living in poverty have full or part-time employment, most social workers call this "blaming the victim". Blaming the victim puts blame on individual flaws rather than the societal problem (Erler, 2012). It is essential to update the federal poverty measurements to provide an adequate poverty rate, which will bring awareness to the public and increased public support in aiding individuals living in poverty. However, the U.S. government

is refusing to change the current measurement of poverty because they do not want this crisis to rise to the public's attention (Blank, 2008; DiNitto, 2011).

If a president approved a change in the measurement and the poverty rate increased, he or she would be blamed for it (Blank, 2008). Oddly, it could also reflect poorly on a political leader if the poverty rate decreased or stayed the same because it could be seen as dismissing the problem (Blank, 2008). No political leader wants to diminish their career to change a measurement that is not seen as a problem in the public eye. Typically, the government deals with issues as they rise in public interest. Thus, as the measurements stay the same and the actual poverty rate is not apparent to the public, most will continue to blame individuals and the government does not have to handle the major issue of poverty in the U.S. (Blank, 2008; DiNitto, 2011).

Within the past 50 years, the federal measurements of poverty have had little to no change despite efforts from the Expert Committee on Family Budget and the National Research Council. Molly Orshansky, the founder of the current measure, continues to be appalled that her equation, which was solely based on food plans and no other basic needs costs, is being used to determine the U.S. poverty rate and eligibility for numerous federal aid programs (Glennerster, 2002). Fortunately, social workers and other advocates can bring the flaws in the measurement of poverty to the public's attention, forcing action and macro-level change to take place within the government. In order for social workers to advocate for this change, they must be well informed about the limitations of current poverty measures in the United States (DiNitto, 2011).

Although, as discussed, it is difficult to change the federal poverty measurement, consideration of alternative measurements is a stepping-stone to permanent change. Alternative measurements encompass factors that the current poverty measure lacks and provide a more

adequate measurement of poverty. These measurements have been created for generating statistics locally as well as state and nationwide. These alternative measures could be used in the future as the new federal poverty measure if advocates, such as social workers, lobbied for them to be enacted into law by the government. If the government utilized these alternative measures, it could benefit millions of individuals and families living in poverty (Short, 2014).

### **Alternative Measures**

Several alternative measures for calculating poverty have been created and used to gather statistical information. These alternative measures are used to establish a more adequate poverty rate and/or to determine eligibility for monetary and resource aid among families that are experiencing poverty. The alternative measures aim to include all families and individuals who are in poverty even if they are not classified as poor by the federal poverty guidelines. Three well-known alternative measures are the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), the Living Wage policy, and the Self-Sufficiency Standard. There are other alternative measures that have been produced but these three have been accepted as the most comprehensive measures to date (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

### **Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)**

The Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) is an additional measurement made to improve the accuracy of the current federal poverty threshold. In 1990, an independent study questioned the adequacy of the federal poverty measurement by focusing on the concepts, measurement methods, and information needed for a poverty measure (Short, 2014). In the spring of 1995, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) established the Panel on Poverty and Family Assistance, which published “Measuring Poverty: A New Approach” in response to the concerns of measurement inadequacy (Citro & Michael, 1995; Renwick, 2011). Most recently, in

March of 2010, an Interagency Technical Working Group (ITWG) working on developing a supplemental poverty measure gave suggestions for a new measure that would enhance the current federal poverty threshold (Renwick, 2011; Short, 2014).

The first suggestion of the SPM was that the income of a family or individual should include the value of noncash benefits and in-kind benefits such as nutritional assistance, subsidized housing, and home energy assistance. The second specification was that the SPM should include the cost of all basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, utilities and transportation (Meyer & Sullivan, 2012; Short, 2014). Another stipulation was that the SPM should be calculated using Consumer Expenditure Survey data and it should be amended according to family size and geographic differences. In 2010, these suggestions were submitted to the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The result of their suggestions led to the release of the SPM each year along with the official poverty threshold and guidelines (Renwick, 2011; Short, 2014).

The SPM was designed to better estimate the prevalence of poverty in the United States. It includes geographical adjustments to better estimate the cost of housing for individuals. It also includes cash and noncash assistance given by government programs to estimate family and individuals' precise financial need. The SPM also includes the cost of food, clothing, shelter, utilities and transportation, which addresses the limitation of only including the cost of food in the federal poverty threshold and guidelines measurement. Overall, the SPM provides additions that create a more modern and complete measurement of poverty. The acceptance of this alternative measure and yearly publication also displays government recognition of the inadequacy of the current poverty measurement (Short, 2014; Meyer & Sullivan, 2012).

**Limitations of the Supplemental Poverty Measure.** Although the Supplemental Poverty Measure is a more comprehensive measurement of poverty, it includes the minimum value of basic needs then subtracts the monetary and in-kind benefits that individuals or families should receive from the government. Consequently, this measurement is not aiming for self-sufficiency of individuals and families. It suggests that every person needs to be receiving all types of government assistance in order to be in poverty and does not provide a pathway for escaping poverty. Currently, this measurement has not been implemented to determine who is considered poor and/or eligible for aid programs. The SPM is only used to develop statistics and knowledge of the extent of poverty in the United States. The federal poverty guidelines continue to be the basis of eligibility for most financial assistance programs (Meyer & Sullivan, 2012).

### **Living Wage Policy**

The Living Wage policy consists of non-universal measurements adopted by individual cities to provide an estimated wage that would cover all of an individual's basic needs. The living wage is not based on family size or number of adults in the home. The living wage is commonly based on the cost of housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, taxes and other necessities in a certain city. The living wage is also geographically calculated because it is based on the city's cost of living (Neumark & Adams, 2000).

If the minimum wage was set according to the living wage estimates, this policy could reduce the poverty rate and the working poor population. The living wage policy expectation is for individuals to work full-time and make enough money to provide for themselves and their family based on that wage. The living wage is projected to encompass what is needed for individuals and families to be self-sufficient and not need government assistance to sustain themselves (Neumark & Adams, 2000).

**Limitations of the Living Wage Policy.** The living wage is limited because it is not based on family size, thus, for larger families it does not always meet their basic needs. Another concern about the living wage is that there is no universal measurement or standard. Each city calculates their own living wage, which leaves room for imbalanced wages across the United States. In 2007, the federal minimum wage was raised, which helped high-skilled workers get out of poverty but pushed low-skilled workers into poverty from hour cuts or job loss (Sabia & Burkhauser, 2010). A similar situation could happen when cities enact living wage policy, which could lead to little change in the poverty rate (Sabia & Burkhauser, 2010). However, the government could address these issues by giving employers tax incentives to continue hiring and employing full-time employees to cities that implement a living wage. Social workers can advocate for the implementation of the living wage policy and tax incentives for employers as another alternative measurement to decrease poverty among individuals and families.

### **Self-Sufficiency Standard**

The Self-Sufficiency Standard (Standard) is estimated average income, calculated for each state that is needed to provide the basic needs for an individual and his or her family without government or private assistance. Dr. Diana Pearce, Former director of the Women and Poverty Project at Wider Opportunities for Women, created the Self-Sufficiency Standard in the mid-1990s. The Self-Sufficiency Standard provided data on the basic needs that need to be met to be self-sufficient. The Standard was originally calculated for Iowa in 1996 but expanded with funding by the Ford Foundation in the early 2000s. Now, the Self-Sufficiency Standard has been calculated for 37 states (Center for Women's Welfare, 2014).

Similar to the Supplemental Poverty Measurement (SPM) and Living Wage Policy, the Self-Sufficiency Standard measurement includes the cost of housing, childcare, food, healthcare,



transportation and taxes. It also uses geographic information to determine the housing costs. But the Self-Sufficiency Standard is updated annually and adjusted by age of children. Unlike the SPM and comparable to the living wage policy, the Standard provides a measurement that does not include government assistance (Center for Women's Welfare, 2014).

Community organizations, advocates, and state and local officials are currently using the Self-Sufficiency Standard as a tool when creating and analyzing policy. It gives an adequate measurement for self-sufficiency that can be seen as a goal for individuals in poverty. Social workers can advocate for this measurement to replace the current poverty measurements, because it gives a dollar amount, not including government assistance, that individuals need to be self-sufficient based on each state (Center for Women's Welfare, 2014).

**Limitations of the Self-Sufficiency Standard.** The Self-Sufficiency Standard has been calculated on a state level, which is improvement of the living wage policy as there is less room for imbalanced wages statewide. However, the Standard has not reached a national level nor been implemented as a basis for eligibility for any financial assistance programs. This is an alternative measurement of poverty that calculates a precise dollar amount needed to afford all of the basic needs of an individual or family. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a superior measurement that could replace the federal measurement of poverty, which would allow individuals that are not self-sufficient to receive assistance until they reach their goal of becoming self-sufficient (Center for Women's Welfare, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Despite the creation of alternative measures, the government refuses to adopt a new poverty measurement. The current federal poverty threshold and guidelines allow the poverty rate to remain low and seem manageable. Therefore, the government is unwilling to change this

measurement. Until more advocates such as social workers become informed and lobby for change, there will be no implementations of alternative measures. Numerous people will continue to live in poverty with no hope of getting relief from their fellow citizens (Meyer & Sullivan, 2012).

After reviewing several articles on the measurement of poverty, it is clear that the current formula to calculate poverty is insufficient. The measurement of three times the Economy Food Plan of 1963, even including inflation, does not correctly estimate the income that individuals need to afford all of their basic needs. The difference between the current poverty guidelines and the alternative measurements, such as the Living Wage Policy and the Self-Sufficiency Standard are shown in Table 3. The Supplemental Poverty Measurement could not be compared, as it incorporates in-kind and cash benefits into the calculation unlike the rest of the measures.

The Living Wage Policy and the Self-Sufficiency Standard conclude that a person living in Boston, MA would need to have over double the income as determined by the current poverty guidelines to be self-sufficient. Therefore, if the government adopted a measurement that includes monetary value of all basic needs rather than exclusively food, then the poverty rate would double, displaying the actual amount of individuals and families living in poverty in the U.S. (Fisher, 1992). This reinforces political leaders' lack of incentive to change the current poverty measure. However, until the government implements a more comprehensive measurement of poverty, such as the Living Wage Policy or the Self-Sufficiency Standard, millions of individuals and families will continue to live without basic needs and continue to be dependent on the federal government for their livelihood with no hope of ever becoming self-sufficient (Marx, Broussard, Hopper & Worster, 2011).

<b>Form of Measurement</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Annually</b>	<b>Monthly</b>	<b>Hourly</b>
Federal Poverty Guidelines <sup>a</sup>	Nationwide	\$11,770	\$980	\$6.13
Living Wage Policy <sup>b</sup>	Boston, MA	\$24,288	\$2,024	\$12.65
Self-Sufficiency Standard <sup>c</sup>	Boston, MA	\$25,874	\$2,156	\$12.25

<sup>a</sup>Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014

<sup>b</sup>Source: Living Wage Coalition, 2014

<sup>c</sup>Source: Center for Women's Welfare, 2014

## Analysis

### Methodology

In order for social workers to effectively advocate for change in the current poverty measurement, they must understand the current and alternative measurements and formulas as well as their limitations. A common method that social workers receive information about injustices is through textbooks while earning their undergraduate degree. Thus, a textbook analysis was conducted to discover if social workers are being informed of the current federal poverty measurement and/or alternative measures in BSW programs.

The 18 textbooks that were examined are currently used in introductory and policy social work courses within accredited BSW programs. All textbooks were published within the last 10 years. The textbooks used in this study were identified using social work policy and introductory course syllabi from accredited Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programs in the United States. The syllabi were obtained using the online search engine, Google, using the key phrases: undergraduate social work policy syllabi, undergraduate introduction to social work syllabi,

BSW introduction to social work course syllabi and BSW policy course syllabi. The syllabi contained the title(s) of the textbook(s) used in each policy course. The textbook titles were also identified from social work publishers' websites such as Pearson, Routledge and Sage publishing. All of the textbooks were retrieved from social work professors at Bridgewater State University and are listed in Appendix A.

The goal of reviewing textbooks was to find the information on poverty measurement social work students were exposed to in policy and introduction BSW courses. The textbooks were analyzed by searching in the contents of the text to see if there was a chapter dedicated to poverty. If there was a chapter on poverty, the chapter was examined for content containing poverty measurement. Next, the index was searched for the terms: poverty, poverty measurement, alternative measures, federal poverty guidelines, federal poverty threshold, Supplemental Poverty Measurement, Self-Sufficiency Standard, and Living Wage Policy to find the pages of the text that mentioned these areas of poverty. The pages that included any of the terms were scanned for information on poverty measurement, such as types of poverty measurement, alternative measures, examples of measures and the history of poverty measurement. All of the information found on poverty measurement and alternative measures in the textbooks was recorded and is discussed in the findings.

## **Findings**

After close review of the textbooks, it was found that nearly all of the texts had numerous references to poverty. Table 4 lists the textbooks analyzed, along with documentation of any mention of the history of poverty, poverty measurement and/or alternative poverty measures. If the textbook mentioned any part of the criteria, there is a check (✓) under the specified section in Table 4. When scanning the texts for references to poverty and poverty measurement, it was

noted that many texts had a section about the political history of poverty in the United States. Therefore, a section was made in Table 4 to display this finding.

The history of poverty measurement included the “War on Poverty” and welfare reform during the Reagan presidency. It also included numerous government benefit programs were discussed in detail such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Old Age, Survivor and Disability Insurance (OASDI). Table 4 includes record of the textbooks that mentioned any of these topics in the history of poverty measurement section. As displayed in Table 4, the research revealed that 10 out of 18 textbooks mentioned at least one part of the history of poverty measurement.

The textbooks that contained information on poverty measurement are displayed in the next section of Table 4. Although the table shows that 13 out of 18 textbooks mentioned poverty measurement, most of the texts only included a table of the Federal Poverty Guidelines comparable to Table 1. Less than half of the analyzed textbooks discussed how the poverty threshold or guidelines were created or described the method of measurement. Many of the texts contained an entire chapter on poverty but encompassed little information about poverty measurement. Many of the texts discussed government aid programs within the history but the texts rarely discussed how eligibility was determined for the programs, such as using multiples of the federal poverty guidelines as shown in Table 2.

The final section of Table 4 displays the textbooks that mentioned the alternative measurements of poverty. Over half of the texts did not mention any alternative measurements of poverty. None of the texts discussed the Living Wage Policy or the Supplemental Poverty Measure and only 2 of the texts discussed the Self-Sufficiency Standard (Cummins, Byers & Pedrick, 2011; DiNitto, 2011). There were texts that considered the working poor and explained

the flaws with minimum wage but they did not discuss the official Living Wage Policy. There were also texts that discussed being self-sufficient as opposed to living with government assistance but they did not discuss the Self-Sufficiency Standard. Table 4 displays that 8 out of the 18 texts discussed alternative ways of measuring poverty, which include the texts that mentioned Absolute and Relative poverty, any of the three main alternative measures discussed in the literature review and/or any alternative way of measuring poverty (Ambrosino, Heffernan, Shuttlesworth & Ambrosino, 2012; Axinn & Stern, 2008; Chaplin, 2014; Cummins, Byers & Pedrick, 2011; DiNitto, 2011; Marx, Broussard, Hopper & Worster, 2011; Popple & Leighninger, 2005; Segal, 2013).

The majority of the eight texts that mentioned alternative measures of poverty discussed absolute and relative poverty. For example, *Policy Practice for Social Workers: New Strategies for a New Era* contained an article by John E. Schwartz called “Raise Poverty Line to Reflect Economic Reality”, which discussed the gap between the federal poverty threshold and the median income for a family in the United States (Cummins, Byers & Pedrick, 2011, p. 214).

The research also showed that four out of 18 textbooks, revealed nothing about the history of poverty, poverty measurement nor alternative poverty measurements, which is shown in Table 4 (Hoefler, 2012; Jansson, 2014; Jimenez, Pasztor, Chambers & Fugii, 2015; Rocha, 2007). These texts mainly discussed abstract policy and strategy without giving examples. In contrast, there were four texts that thoroughly discussed the current poverty measurements and their limitations (Cummins, Byers & Pedrick, 2011; DiNitto, 2011; Marx, Broussard, Hopper & Worster, 2011; Segal, 2013). These texts also discussed alternative measurements and solutions for poverty.

For example, *Social Work and Social Welfare: An Introduction* offers criticisms of the federal poverty measurement formula stating, “one common criticism is that food occupies a smaller portion of the average U.S. household budget than it did in the 1960s. Current estimates suggest that the average household food expenditure has dropped to one-seventh of total household expenditures; thus multiplying the average low-cost food budget by three underestimates the income needed to meet basic needs, and thus underestimates the number of poor individuals and families in the U.S.” (Marx, Broussard, Hopper & Worster, 2011, p. 142). This textbook along with the other three texts, offer more critiques and alternative methods to the current poverty measurement (Cummins, Byers & Pedrick, 2011; DiNitto, 2011; Marx, Broussard, Hopper & Worster, 2011; Segal, 2013).

Overall, some textbooks did recognize the inadequacy of the current measurement of poverty but other texts did not cover poverty at all. This displayed a gap in the information on poverty measurement that is documented in undergraduate BSW policy and introductory textbooks. As discussed, many of the texts displayed a table of the poverty guidelines, but did not include the formula of measurement. If the poverty guidelines are shown in the textbooks without the method of measurement, then it is difficult to question their adequacy. However, if the guidelines are shown with the current formula of measurement then there is room to analyze the method and therefore, question the precision of the poverty guidelines.

Text	Material Included		
	Poverty History	Poverty Measurement	Alternative Poverty Measurement
Ambrosino & et al, 2012	√	√	√
Axinn & Stern, 2008	√	√	√
Chaplin, 2014	√	√	√
Cummins & et al, 2011		√	√
DiNitto, 2011	√	√	√
Gilbert & Terrell, 2010	√	√	
Haynes & Michelson, 2010	√		
Hoefler, 2012			
Jansson, 2014			
Jimenez & et al, 2015			
Kirst-Ashman, 2013	√	√	
Marx & et al, 2011	√	√	√
Popple & Leighninger, 2005	√	√	√
Popple & Leighninger, 2011		√	
Rocha, 2007			
Segal, 2013		√	√
Segal & et al, 2013		√	
Van Wormer, 2006	√	√	
Total (count)	10	13	8
Percent	56%	72%	44%

*Note.* Appendix A includes full references for all textbooks.

### Analysis

The analysis of poverty measurement in a selection of social work introductory and policy textbooks revealed that BSW policy and introductory texts have diverse discussions of poverty measurement. The research demonstrated that there is not a unified discussion of the history of poverty, poverty measurement, the adequacy of the formula or alternative measures. Few texts discussed all areas of poverty in depth and four texts did not discuss any form of poverty. This is concerning as poverty is the root to many of the issues affecting social workers’



clients. The measurement of poverty directly affects clients, as it will set the poverty guidelines that will determine who is considered poor in the U.S. This classification is crucial to clients because it will also determine if they will receive adequate support and aid, as it is the basis for the eligibility of many cash and in-kind assistance programs. If social workers are unaware of this correlation and inadequacy of the measurement of poverty, then their clients will continue to struggle to become self-sufficient.

The review of the textbooks showed that the measurement of poverty is mentioned in over two-thirds of the textbooks. However, less than half of the texts that mention poverty measurement give the details of how the poverty guidelines are calculated. The findings also noted that within those texts, most did not mention limitations to or alternatives for the current federal poverty threshold and guidelines. This is a concern because when the methods and limitations of the current poverty measurement are not included in social work textbooks, BSW students may never be exposed to inadequacy. Therefore, these students can become social workers without the knowledge that they need to successfully advocate for change in poverty measurement within the United States.

If the policy and introductory textbooks clearly and universally explained the deficiencies in the current poverty measurement, then BSW students would be exposed to the need of advocacy for improvement of the measurements. The addition of alternative measures, such as the Living Wage Policy and the Self-Sufficiency Standard, to BSW policy and introductory textbooks would also let future social workers know that there are other, more sufficient methods to measuring poverty that they can lobby on behalf of for their clients.

## **Conclusion**

Social workers comprise a large proportion of advocates in the United States. They are dedicated to achieving social justice and equal opportunity for their clients. Social workers are required by the NASW Code of Ethics to fight for social justice and advocate for their clients (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). The CSWE's guidelines also require that BSW students have social justice, economic justice and policy practice competencies in order to graduate from an accredited university undergraduate social work program (Council on Social Work Education, 2010). This means that professors must give students the tools to understand and become competent in all of these areas.

After analyzing 18 textbooks used in BSW policy and introductory courses, the gaps and diversity among the textbooks can potentially leave future social workers without the competencies necessary to effectively advocate for change within federal poverty measurement. The textbooks mentioned the history of poverty and aid programs but discussed little about poverty measurement and eligibility standards. Some of the textbooks also had a table of the poverty guidelines but did not discuss the formula by which they are calculated. These findings could argue that most social workers are coming out of BSW programs without the knowledge of the injustice in the way the U.S. government measures poverty.

The federal poverty measurement has not changed in decades, despite its outdated formula because not enough people are advocating for change in the federal poverty measurement. This could be due to the fact that numerous social workers are unaware that they should be lobbying for change within this area. Thus, a universal discussion of the current federal poverty measurement including the history of poverty, the formula used to calculate the threshold and guidelines, the limitations of it and the alternative measures would make more

social workers aware of the issues and would create more advocates for change in the current federal poverty measurement.

### **Limitations of the Method**

A limitation of the method was that BSW students are not exclusively exposed to the information in introductory and policy course required textbooks. Some of the course syllabi had assigned articles that went into more detail about poverty measurement. Those articles were not accounted for in this study. Though textbooks are a major way that information is shared in a BSW course, there is still information that comes from outside sources. Therefore, the decision to only collect data from social work policy and introductory textbooks could have affected the findings because social work students may be exposed to more knowledge about the current poverty measurement and its limitations in sources other than in the analyzed textbooks.

There were also textbooks that were not included in this study that could contain more information about the measurement of poverty. The texts analyzed were not randomly sampled and came from similar publishers, which could have influenced the findings. The texts were also limited to those available without additional cost.

Despite the research limitations, the evidence found in the textbooks and literature suggests a possible lack of social worker knowledge about injustice of poverty measurement. Although the textbooks did not reveal every piece of information available to BSW students, the issue still stands that the inadequate poverty measurement has not been modified in over fifty years. This suggests that the importance of this issue is not being conveyed to BSW students because not enough social workers are advocating for change to this inadequate measurement.

### **Importance to Social Work Education & Practice**

Changing the way the federal government measures poverty could bring the enormity of the problem to the public's attention. The poverty rate would increase if the current measurement were replaced with a measurement that accounted for all basic needs as well as geographical location, such as the Living Wage Policy or the Self-Sufficiency Standard. This spike in the poverty rate would make it difficult for society to continue to rationalize the number of people in poverty. The public would become aware of the prevalence of poverty in the U.S. and the government would be forced to step in (DiNitto, 2011).

As it stands, budgets for welfare programs are getting cut every year while consuming less than 5 percent of the national budget (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The stigma placed on people in poverty, such as laziness, is far from the truth for most individuals and families. One in five people living in poverty work part-time or full-time at minimum wage jobs to support themselves and their families (Segal, 2013). These are not lazy people, many are working harder with less appealing jobs just to sustain shelter and food. People on welfare are not living glamorously with hard working taxpayer dollars as another stigma suggests. They are using that money to barely sustain a life that upholds the standards of living in this nation (Segal, 2013).

Publicizing the insufficiency of the current poverty measurement will give the public an understanding of how vast the problem of poverty is in America. This will help the public to see that the problem does not only lie within the people accepting welfare but within the economy and society at large (Segal, 2013). This understanding will create more advocates for reform and may consequently facilitate change within the government. Thus, it is crucial for social workers to gain knowledge of the inadequacy in the current federal poverty measurement, as they will be

the steadfast activists for changing the way poverty is measured and bringing the true poverty rate to the attention of the public.

### **Conclusion**

The current federal poverty measurement was never meant to determine the fate of numerous people's lives. It was meant strictly for research over fifty years ago and does not provide an adequate assessment of poverty (Fisher, 1992). It only includes the measurement of one basic item, food, and assumes the rest from a now irrelevant mathematical equation (the cost of food times three). Yet, this is still the measurement being used by the federal government to determine who is living in poverty in the United States, despite more suitable alternative measures surfacing over past decades.

Social workers are committed to advocate and provide social justice to all people. This inadequate measurement of poverty directly affects the lives of their clients. If all social workers were aware of the affects that this insufficient measurement has in their clients' lives, more social workers would be lobbying for change. Social workers need this information so they can understand how to best advocate for individuals and families experiencing poverty. According to the research, most BSW textbooks are not giving the proper information needed to convey the importance of this reform. Therefore, many social workers are not concerned with lobbying for change, as they become social workers unaware of this injustice.

In order to help those in poverty, the nation must know who is poor. The federal measurement of poverty should adequately calculate the number of people suffering in poverty each year. People are unable to get aid if the federal government does not recognize that they are in need of assistance. Unless there is a change in the way poverty is measured and portrayed to the public, this epidemic will continue to devastate America.

Advocating and lobbying for amendments of the current poverty measure is the primary method of enacting change within the government. This can be done by voting on legislation, signing a petition and/or volunteering at an organization that advocates for poverty measurement reform. Numerous organizations are advocating for change in the federal poverty measurement everyday. Many people are aware of this crisis and are trying their best to bring it to the attention of the nation, but they need more support and advocates to enact change (Center for Women's Welfare, 2014; Living Wage Action Coalition, 2014).

Education is also a main priority in enacting change. The more that people understand that this is a major issue that links with many other social problems, the more people there will be lobbying for reform. Therefore, the universal addition of poverty measurement and alternative measurements in introductory and policy social work textbooks would positively affect the amount of advocates aware of the necessity of this change. The alternative measurements that have been examined and implemented have made a huge impact on the way people see the current poverty measurement (Short, 2014). Organizations are constantly advocating for alternative measures to get adopted by the federal government as replacements for the current poverty measure. Until this happens, social workers and advocates can educate, lobby and be overall activists in order to enact this necessary federal poverty measurement reform.

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## Appendix A: Textbooks

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