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Poverty, by outdated numbers

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IT'S TIME for a new look at poverty, one that doesn't presume a Beatles-era economy.

It was the 1960s when Mollie Orshansky, a federal government worker, used the price of food to come up with an estimate for the minimal cost of living. This work became the basis for the federal poverty line.

The world has changed, but the official definition of poverty is woefully antiquated. This year, the federal poverty level for a family of four is \$21,200. That's a pittance for many parents who are trying to provide for themselves and their children - especially in Boston and other high-cost cities. The price of housing, healthcare, transportation, and child care - which have soared over the years - are not included.

Fortunately, efforts to modernize federal measures of poverty are percolating in Congress. A bill filed Thursday by Representative Jim McDermott, a Washington state Democrat, calls on the US Census Bureau to work with the Bureau of Labor Statistics to devise new ways to measure poverty.

This approach would include the costs of housing and clothes as well as food. It would account for the ways that prices of goods and services vary across states. And rather than letting a new poverty tool gradually wizen into uselessness, the bill calls on the two agencies to review and improve the measurement on a regular basis.

Getting an accurate poverty level is critical because it triggers eligibility for many federal aid programs, from Head Start to heating assistance. And the more Americans understand about 21st-century poverty, the more pressure there will be to fight it by modernizing antipoverty programs.

This won't be easy. In Boston, for example, the Crittenton Women's Union, a local nonprofit, uses a **self-sufficiency standard** to estimate that a family of four with one toddler and one school-aged child actually needs \$62,000 a year to pay for housing, healthcare, food, transportation, child care, and other costs.

Implicit in this calculation is a daunting challenge: Government shouldn't just try to push people out of poverty. Instead, public policy should push people above the line of self-sufficiency. This could mean helping hard-working people find higher-paying work. It also means helping people who can seem hard to help, including single mothers, high school dropouts, former drug addicts, and people mired in several generations of poverty.

The first step, however, is to update federal poverty guidelines, so that the country can see what poverty actually looks like today. Then efforts can be made to pave new roads to prosperity.

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