

The Times-Picayune

New Orleans, Louisiana

Federal poverty level far too low, study says

No-frills analysis focuses on plight of single moms

Tuesday September 16, 2003

By Lynne Jensen

Staff writer

<http://www.nola.com/news/t-p/capital/index.ssf?/base/news-1/106369194656750.xml>

The federal government says a family of three earning more than \$15,260 isn't poor, but a new study says a single parent raising an infant and a preschooler in Orleans Parish needs to earn \$27,660 a year to meet basic expenses without government assistance.

The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Louisiana is being issued today by Agenda for Children, a state child-advocacy group, and Wider Opportunities for Women, a national organization based in Washington, that is concerned with economic independence and equality of opportunity for women and girls.

The study was prepared by the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington, which is devoted to furthering the economic interests of women and their families.

The study, which examines the cost of living for a variety of family types in all 64 Louisiana parishes, shows "what it takes to live and work in this state," said Agenda for Children spokeswoman Shannon Johnson.

The study takes into consideration the cost of housing, transportation, health care, food, taxes and miscellaneous expenses. It's a no-frills estimation of living expenses, said Maureen Golga, director of the Family Economic Self Sufficient Project. "There's not a takeout pizza or a movie at Blockbuster" included in the evaluation, she said.

"The most significant shortcoming of the federal poverty measure is that for most families, in most places, it is simply not high enough," the report says. "The general public also considers the poverty line to be too low."

A single adult with two children living in Orleans Parish needs to earn \$12.60 an hour to support the family, based on a wage earner using public transportation, the study shows.

The report is "a wake-up call" for policymakers, Golga said.

"Self-sufficiency means maintaining a decent standard of living and not having to choose between basic necessities," such as "whether to meet one's need for child care but not for nutrition, or

housing but not health care," the study says.

A main concern for Agenda for Children and WOW is single women raising children, Golga said. The report shows these women "need better access to education and training and to work supports," such as child care.

The report is "a great counseling tool" that can help show workers what they need to get by, she said. "It can really help you think, 'What kind of training and education do I need?' "

Sitting down with a counselor and learning about the study could guide women to train for higher-paying jobs that are usually filled by men, such as construction, Golga said.

The study "offers Louisiana a brand-new tool for really defining what it takes to live and work in this state," Johnson said.

Louisiana is one of 34 states in which self-sufficiency reports have been issued. Reports also were issued for New York City and Washington.

Golga said the long-term goal of the report is to show government officials, business leaders and the community at large that "everybody has a responsibility here. . . What we are really talking about is reshaping our economy."

.....

For information about the standard and the Louisiana Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project, call Johnson at 586-8509, ext. 28. The report is available online at www.SixStrategies.org .

Lynne Jensen can be reached at ljensen@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3310.