

# Definitions of 'poor' differ

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Don't tell Yolanda Sanchez, but the federal government says she and her children are not poor.

According to the 2004 federal poverty standard, a family of three needs just \$15,670 a year to avoid being counted as poor.

So Sanchez, who earns \$22,000 a year, doesn't qualify as poor, even though she cannot meet basic family expenses without help.

Her case illustrates the failure of the federal poverty standard to accurately count the poor, said David Blatt, director of public policy for Community Action Project of Tulsa, a non-profit agency that focuses on the problems of the poor.

The federal standard was established in 1963, when groceries comprised about a third of the average family's expenses. The formula, which multiplies a food budget by three, has never changed — even though housing costs and health care have long since eclipsed groceries as a family's big-ticket expense.

Another problem is that the poverty standard allows for no regional variations other than adjustments for Alaska and Hawaii, Blatt said.

"The reality is, we know very well that actual living expenses vary enormously between locations, particularly when it comes to housing costs and child care costs," Blatt said.

Today, many experts consider anyone with an income below about 200 percent — or double — the poverty level to be poor. Many state and federal aid programs set eligibility at that level. A family of three at 200 percent of the poverty level would have an income of \$31,340.

By the 200 percent criteria, Sanchez' family is, indeed, poor. Her income is 134 percent of the poverty level for a family of three.

Rather than grapple with percentages based on an outdated model, social scientists for years have been devising alternatives to the federal poverty level. One is the **Self-Sufficiency Standard for Oklahoma**. The standard, summarized in a 79-page booklet published in 2002, determines how much a family in a given Oklahoma community needs to meet basic needs without public or private assistance.

It was compiled for Community Action Project of Tulsa by an organization called **Wider Opportunities for Women**, which collected and analyzed county-level data on housing, child care, food, transportation and health care costs.

Based on the **self-sufficiency standard**, Sanchez needs to earn \$16.66 an hour to provide the barest essentials. At \$10.50 an hour, it is easy to see why she falls short every month.