

Study challenges way poverty is measured

By [Jolayne Houtz](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

Sylvia Sabon's monthly budget is carefully scripted, but there's still room for tough choices:

Food for her family or gas for the car? School supplies or a minimum payment on her maxed-out credit card? A two-bedroom apartment in a safer neighborhood or a car and a smaller place in a seedy area?

Even crammed into a rundown, one-bedroom apartment in the Rainier Valley, the single mother of two daughters struggles to get by every month. Unexpected expenses, such as the cost of repairing her car after a recent accident, threaten to unravel her tenuously balanced budget.

"Sometimes I do sit and cry. I hate telling the kids no all the time," said Sabon, 38, who earns \$10 an hour as a full-time receptionist at a Seattle mortgage company. Sabon is not poor. The government says so.

Her annual income of about \$20,000 puts her family of three well above the government's federal poverty guideline, which defines poverty as \$14,630 or less for a family that size.

But a new economic study that examines the real cost of living across Washington state says families with children need up to four times the amount calculated by the federal government to support themselves without public or private help.

Tomorrow, the Washington Association of Churches and a coalition representing community groups, labor and social-service agencies will release the study, produced by a University of Washington sociologist as part of a nationwide analysis.

"It really tells us what people need to have, and below that, we know they're going to have to make choices — less-than-adequate child care, not reporting extra income, doubling up (in an apartment) ... staying with an abusive partner," said the study's author, Diana Pearce, who teaches at the UW School of Social Work.

Pearce argues her "self-sufficiency standard" is a far more accurate reflection of the cost of getting by than the government's poverty formula, which she calls hopelessly outdated.

Yet the federal poverty line has become the nation's official yardstick for deciding whether a family qualifies for food stamps, child-care subsidies, free school lunches and Medicaid, among other aid.

The self-sufficiency standard says even a no-frills existence on the Eastside, the most expensive area in Washington, requires a single parent with two young children to earn \$22.93 an hour or \$48,419 a year to cover rent, child care, food, transportation and other essentials. It's a Spartan budget, with no money left over for movies, takeout food, restaurant meals, cable TV or savings.

The self-sufficiency standard for Seattle rates only slightly less



JIMI LOTT / THE SEATTLE TIMES
Sylvia Sabon, center, and her children, Xia Frazier, 6, left, and Sonya Frazier, 8, live in a one-bedroom apartment in Rainier Valley.

For more information

Contact Michael Ramos at the Washington Association of Churches: 206-625-9790. The full report will be available beginning tomorrow at www.sixstrategies.org

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expensive. A single mother with two children would need to earn \$19.81 an hour or \$41,843 annually to make ends meet without help.

"I can tell you it's very hard and stressful, even scary, being a single mom in Seattle," said Sabon, the Rainier Valley woman.

Between paychecks, "we eat a lot of rice and canned food," she said. Clothes come from Value Village. Big expenses like school supplies go on her credit card and "put me in the hole for six months," she said.

"Take your income and divide it by two — could you do it?" Sabon asked.

Even in the cheapest area of the state, Douglas County in Central Washington, a single parent of two young children needs to earn \$14.10 an hour or \$29,773 a year, more than twice the government's poverty guideline for a family that size.

Pearce's report lays out a detailed monthly budget based on family size, location and how old the children are for every county and metro area in the state. It even accounts for taxes paid and tax credits earned and tallies total income required for 70 different family configurations.

About 10 percent of Washington residents live below the federal poverty line. But about twice that many may be living below the self-sufficiency level, according to a rough estimate by Pearce.

"This is not about people making bad choices or doing bad budgeting," she said. "It's about having enough to support a family."

Washington is the 16th state analyzed by Pearce. She created the self-sufficiency standard in the mid-1990s and is receiving money from the Ford Foundation to complete similar reports on 35 states in time for next year's congressional debate on the reauthorization of welfare-reform legislation.

The federal poverty line, created in the 1960s, is based solely on the cost of food. It assumes a fixed ratio between food costs and all other needs and doesn't take into account the rapid escalation of housing costs and other basics, Pearce argues.

It's based on a two-parent, stay-at-home-mom, a demographic model that doesn't factor in the significant costs of child care most families face today, she says.

And it doesn't account for regional differences — a family of three earning more than \$14,630 is not considered poor, regardless of whether they live in Snoqualmie or San Francisco.

In other states, Pearce's self-sufficiency standard has been used to focus job-training programs, to evaluate policy and rule changes affecting who is eligible for government assistance and to help people make career choices.

Advocates for the poor in Washington hope Pearce's report will sharpen the debate about welfare reform by illustrating families need more than low-wage jobs to take care of themselves.

"It's going beyond a job, any job, and declining (welfare) rolls as the sole criteria for judging the success of welfare reform," said Michael Ramos of the Washington Association of Churches.

Families caught in the middle — above the poverty line, below a self-sufficiency wage — say they routinely make tradeoffs and cut corners to make ends meet.

Bonnie Chambers of Lynnwood wrote a note last week to her daughter's teacher: "Please excuse my daughter for not having these school supplies — we had to eat."

She and her husband both have vocational-college training. Until she hurt her back recently, Chambers said she earned \$9 an hour as a nurse's aide while her husband earns \$11 an hour as a drafter.

It still wasn't enough to support their family of six. "It's always a game of, 'Gee, do we pay for the lights? Do we buy food?' " said Chambers, 30, who sometimes eats just one meal a day.

She knows some people might question why she chose to have a large family, with three school-age children and a toddler. "It's not about the number of kids. I have friends with one kid who aren't making it," Chambers said. "It's just so expensive here. This stretches into middle-class families, the suburbs. We're all going through this."

Her family makes do with no car, lives in subsidized housing, asks for help from churches and family members, visits food banks and thrift stores and shops the ads at grocery stores.

"I'm using all the programs — and I'm still not making it," she said.

Sabon, the Rainier Valley mother, lets her two daughters, ages 6 and 8, share the bedroom of their \$510-a-month apartment. She sleeps on a thin mattress on the living-room floor. A pink towel serves as a curtain on one window.

She's embarrassed to invite friends over. She lets the girls ride their bikes in the courtyard, but not out of her eyesight. At night, they're frequently awakened by the sound of police sirens.

Their last apartment in Tukwila was bigger and in a better neighborhood, but it cost \$200 a month more. Sabon moved to be closer to her child-care provider and to lease a car to trim her two-hour daily bus commute.

She gets help from the state with a child-care subsidy and health insurance for the girls. The girls' father doesn't pay child support or participate in their lives. Pearce's data says Sabon would need to make \$33,116 a year to support herself and her school-aged daughters without help, more than 1½ times her current salary.

Sabon, a petite woman with thick, black hair that reaches down her back, said she was on welfare and struggling with a drinking problem four years ago when she decided she wanted a better life for her girls. She left the girls' father, entered a treatment program, found a job and left welfare in 1998. She's been sober since and said she's determined not to go back on welfare.

She struggles to provide a glimpse of "normal life" for her daughters. On pay day, they occasionally go to McDonald's for a treat. There have been layoffs recently at the mortgage company where she's worked for 3½ years, and Sabon worries a lot about her job and isn't sure how to get training she thinks would help her get ahead.

Yet she also worries about making more money — a pay raise would cause her child-care co-pay to increase dramatically, and she might lose her eligibility for other assistance.

"I have just enough," Sabon said, "nothing more."

Jolayne Houtz can be reached at 206-464-3122 or jhoutz@seattletimes.com.

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