

# Seattle Post-Intelligencer

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## Measures needed to assess poverty

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The new census results showing an increase in poverty aren't a shock, but they are cause for worry.

That's especially so in Washington, where the fall in median income was as severe as in any place in the nation.

The numbers released this week fit with other evidence of difficult times for the state. We consistently have high rates of hunger, with many low-income adults skipping at least one meal a month to feed their children. And our unemployment rate is bumping around the top of the nation's ranking month after month.

The U.S. Census Bureau's poverty and income figures for last year show the troubled economy has hit a lot of people. The poverty rate grew from 11.3 percent to 11.7 percent, actually a relatively modest increase for a recession. Median household income fell 2.2 percent. The gap between the richest and poorest Americans grew larger.

There also were reasons for reassurance. The gains of the '90s still left most people ahead of where they were in the recent past. Welfare reform seems to have helped hold down the increase in poverty rates by putting more single mothers into jobs that provide more income than public assistance

Behind the statistics, though, are real people. More than 32.9 million live in poverty. And there is reason to believe that the traditional measures of poverty underestimate the amount of need. That's because the income and expense formulas date back to the mid-'60s.

Since then, housing and transportation costs have become much bigger factors. And the number of families with two working parents has risen, making child-care expenses a much more important category than envisioned decades ago.

Americans traditionally want to look ahead toward better times. That sensible attitude is needed as we consider poverty in the midst of plenty. Developing new poverty measures, such as a self-sufficiency index aimed at showing what families really need, would help.

By having a clearer understanding of the challenges that face too many families, we can improve how we help people work -- and learn -- their way out of poverty.

More immediately, Americans who have decent jobs and incomes must focus on helping those in need. In Washington state, the challenges are clear -- as is the tradition of generosity in hard times.