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The Failures of American Poverty Measures

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How we think about need or deprivation—how we judge its severity, its causes and effects, and the progress we have made (or not made) over time in reducing it—has much to do with how we define and then measure it. And, we measure it poorly. The insufficiencies of official data on American poverty are reasonably well known, yet they continue, nonetheless, to be the principal means by which we gauge need in the United States. After a review of such official measures, this article discusses alternative means of evaluating need in the United States, highlighting the benefits of examining poverty across the life-course, and attending to inequality and other indicators of a relative poverty; it then discusses the advantages of turning toward human rights- and human development-based frameworks for better defining and quantifying deprivation. It concludes with a brief review of the political obstacles to such policy reform.

Key words: deprivation, need, poverty, measures, human development, policy

Official Poverty

There may be no measure so universally acknowledged to be inadequate—and so resistant to change—as the official measure of American poverty. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a family of three was poor in 2005 if its annual income was below \$16,090; it was

not poor if it had income above that. For a single person, the number was \$9,570; for a family of five, \$22,610. So, by official Census Bureau measures, which use that threshold, 37 million Americans were poor in that year, 12.6 percent of the population—the equivalent of the combined populations of California, Alaska and Wyoming (U.S. Census Bureau; Glasmeier, 2006). The official rates were substantially higher among African-Americans (1 in 4 was poor that year), Hispanics (1 in 5), and children under eighteen (nearly 1 in 5). Those over age 65, by contrast, had a poverty rate of just over 10 percent. Rates vary by geography, too: fully one-third of all Detroit residents were poor, as were a quarter or more of people living in Philadelphia, Buffalo, Milwaukee, Long Beach, Atlanta, Newark, Miami, and El Paso. According to the Community Service Society of New York, in 2005 “the number of poor people in the five boroughs would form the fifth-largest city in the United States” (Levitan, 2006). At the time of the hurricane that devastated the American gulf coast in that same year, almost 40 percent of all New Orleans children lived in poverty; throughout the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, over 40 percent of black children lived in poor families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2005). While these data might still have some power to shock the conscience, they nonetheless likely underestimate the problem.

The method of calculating this “poverty line” has remained largely unchanged since it was devised in the 1960s by the Social Security Administration’s Molly Orshansky. Even then she warned that her calculation was a “research tool” that would inevitably minimize poverty, and that it was “not designed to be applied directly to an individual family with a specific problem” (Katz, 1989, p. 116). That’s nonetheless how we use it now. She took the Department of Agriculture’s estimate for the cost of an emergency survival-level food budget, adjusted it for family size, and multiplied it by three, since it was then estimated that food represented one third of a family’s total expenses. That’s the poverty line. Critics of the left and right find legitimate fault with this method. The former argue that it understates the problem of poverty: its design presumed a minimal budget only practicable for short-term emergencies, yet it now forms the basis for evaluating longer-term

well-being; food now typically represents much less of a family's budget (with housing costs often 40 percent or more; in some locales transportation alone can be 20 percent of household expenditures) [Center for Neighborhood Technology, 2005]; it doesn't take into account unavoidable out-of-pocket expenditures (especially for medical care) that can make it impossible for a family to provide for basic needs even if their income is above the official threshold; and the index doesn't vary by region, so the poverty line is the same dollar amount in San Francisco as it is for rural Mississippi, despite large differences in their relative costs of living. Other critics, by contrast, argue that the measure overstates the extent of American poverty, notably because income calculations do not include the value of "in-kind" government benefits like Medicaid, housing subsidies, or food stamps.

One in a series of alternative official measures developed by the Census Bureau (from studies done by the National Academy of Sciences), adds in most in-kind benefits and the Earned Income Tax Credit and deducts expenses for health care and payroll taxes: this had the effect of raising the 1999 poverty rate by 3.2 percentage points, and similar alternatives add an average of about two percentage points to the official calculation each year from 1999-2003 (Mishel, Bernstein, & Boushey, 2003, p. 323; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, p. 12). Given just how poorly the official thresholds capture what is required to adequately support a household, many public aid programs use cut-offs of between 125-200 percent of poverty to determine eligibility; indeed, one effort to create a typology of four hundred separate family budgets found that the median family need in the U.S. was about twice the official poverty rate (Boushey et al., 2002; Lu et al., 2003).

Yet even these alternatives fail to account for how poor poor Americans are; in 2004, while almost 13 percent were officially poor, 5.4 percent were *very poor*, with income at or below one-half the poverty line. By 2005, deep poverty had reached a 32-year high (Pugh, 2007). And, as with any absolute measure with an essentially arbitrary cut-off, official poverty lines cannot account for the fact that families just above the line may experience the same hardships as those just below, but a binary poor/not-poor definition identifies one as a social and political

problem (and captures it in the data), but excludes the other. Official data will not get us far in evaluating or understanding the lived experience of poor Americans, or of adequately gauging their numbers.

Poverty over the Life-Course

There is another problem with poverty data, which also serves to obscure the extent of poverty in America. Official rates are “snapshots”: they seek to count how many people are poor at any one point in time. But Americans move in and out of poverty over the course of their lives—the line between working class, working poor, and poor can be very thin indeed. Many families are poor one year, not poor (at least officially so) the next, and then poor again the following year. One harsh winter, fire or natural disaster, epidemic or illness (cholera, smallpox and yellow fever swept through the ghettos in the past; today poor households face AIDS, diabetes, asthma, tuberculosis, or gun violence), divorce, the death or incarceration of the main breadwinner, an injury or disability, or the sudden loss of a job—these can push a family from just getting by into dire crisis (McKernan and Ratcliffe, 2002).

Thus, it would seem productive to ask how many American are *ever* poor, and perhaps to factor that into our thinking about the scale and scope of the poverty problem and the urgency with which it should be addressed. For many years now, Mark Robert Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl have sought to do just this, and their research findings strike at the heart of the claim that poverty is a state confined to a minority of Americans (Rank, 2004; Rank & Hirschl, 1999, 2001a, 2001b). They find that between the ages of twenty and seventy-five, 58.5 percent of Americans will be officially poor at least once, with income at or below 100 percent of the Orshansky poverty line. The numbers are even more striking if we take seriously the extent to which the official line understates poverty, as discussed above: some 68 percent of Americans will survive at some point on 125 percent of the official standard, and fully three-quarters of American adults will have incomes below 150 percent of the poverty line at least once. Worse, by age seventy-five, almost one-third will be *very* poor, with incomes at only

half the official poverty line. And, lest we conclude that these are isolated incidents of one-time hardship (or data distorted by the “voluntary” poverty of college students), of those adults over twenty who are poor at least once, for some 30 percent it is for five years or more. This is not some measure of a very brief episode these data magnify beyond reason. For a majority, it’s an event, and for nearly a third, a durable condition.

Still we misdiagnose the problem, for these are data about the entire population, and it is worse for particular groups of Americans. As Rank and Hirschl also show, by the time they reach age seventy-five, over 90 percent of African Americans can expect to have experienced poverty. If you are black and female, expect to be among the 98.8 percent of your peers who will be poor at least once. For people with less than a high school education, the lifetime poverty-incidence rate is over 75 percent, and we can expect one-third of all American children to live in poverty at some point. If they are black, the number is 69.5 percent (compared to 25.9 percent for white children). If they are raised by a single mother with less than a high school diploma, 99.4 percent will be poor. And while we make much (and rightly so) of the advances that Social Security has brought us, between the ages of sixty and ninety, over 40 percent of Americans will nonetheless be poor at least once.

When we move away from point-in-time analyses and examine the incidence of poverty throughout the life spans of Americans, a much larger problem emerges, for we see that Americans move in and out of poverty more frequently than official data can reveal. Hardships are part of our national experience, and poverty is not the exception, but the rule; no anomaly confined to some marginal and marginalized population, poverty in America is endemic.

Relative Poverty and Inequality

Some will insist, however, that poverty isn’t what it used to be. For instance, according to Robert Rector and his colleagues at the Heritage Foundation, by the late 1990s, 41 percent of all households who were officially poor nonetheless owned their own homes, almost 70 percent owned a car or a truck (and 27 percent owned two or more), 60 percent had a washing

machine, 48 percent had a clothes dryer, 66 percent had air conditioning, almost all had a refrigerator, 87 percent had a telephone, and more than half had a stereo, color television, VCR, or microwave. For these reasons, and more, "we have triumphed over poverty," they claim (Rector, Johnson & Youssef, 1999).

There's much that we might find wrong with the implication and this method of argumentation, however. First, people do not compare themselves to their ancestors, but to their neighbors. To suggest that because poor families today have televisions and microwaves they are therefore less poor than their nineteenth century cousins is a nonsensical comparison. And as Timothy Smeeding (2005) notes, "lower-income Americans are no better off and often worse off than low-income persons in other nations." That is, looking not to the past, but to other nations in the present, living standards for many are better elsewhere. Second, few of these indicators shed light on the quality of life of the family under investigation—owning a car, for example, is now a necessity in most parts of America if one is to work (a lesson that poor and welfare-reliant families have tried to tell policymakers over and over again, as their ability to hold down a job is hampered by transportation expenses and car problems). Moreover, having a car is at best a double-edged sword, for with it comes a monthly payment, mandated insurance expenses and licensing fees, the cost of gasoline, and maintenance expenses. Does commuting in a car indicate a better quality of life than taking a streetcar to the factory, or walking to the mill? Similarly, homeownership should not be read as meaning too much, since it too can be as much burden as opportunity, and we should be careful about what we mean by ownership—for most Americans what we really mean is that they possess not a home but an enormous mortgage, which, if paid regularly for three decades, will result in ownership. It's an important distinction if we are going to suggest that home ownership rates should be used to suggest that poverty today is of a different kind than in the past, and a claim rendered even more problematic by the recent crises in the residential mortgage market.

Nonetheless, it seems accurate to suggest that the nature of material poverty has changed, and, even while perhaps

disagreeing, it is not hard to understand how the Heritage Foundation could elsewhere say that:

To the average man on the street, to say someone is poor implies that he is malnourished, poorly clothed, and lives in filthy, dilapidated and overcrowded housing. In reality, there is little material poverty in the U.S. in the sense generally understood by the public. (Albelda, Folbre, & CPE, 1996, p. 12)

In the 1300s, to take a most extreme contrast, up to one third of the population of Western Europe was killed by plague, while well into the 1500s and beyond most all people lived in constant fear of hunger (Geremek, 1994). We face many grave public health threats today—gun violence and exploding AIDS caseloads in low-income communities being perhaps the most dramatic—but nowhere near a third of our population will die of sudden disease. It can serve as one reminder of how far we have, in fact, progressed. More recently, in Colonial Philadelphia, perhaps 25 percent of all free men (whom one would presume to be the richest of residents) were what we might call poor or near poor. Jacob Riis reported that in late nineteenth century New York, “in a population of a million and a half, very nearly, if not quite, half a million persons were driven, or chose, to beg for food.” By 1900, fully 40 percent of all Americans were still poor, and even by 1950 the American poverty rate was likely 30 percent. Only very recently has any sustained reduction below this level occurred in official measures. By the mid-fifties, U.S. poverty had declined to 25 percent; the rate was at 17 percent in 1965, and by the early 1970s, hit 11 percent. While that rate has now climbed again, and still understates the problem, the official estimate is nonetheless some 300 percent lower than its equivalent at the beginning of the century (Trattner, 1994; Riis, 1890; Patterson, 1994; Jansson, 2001; Jencks, 1992).

One might plausibly argue that never before in human history has so much real progress been made, and made so quickly. Compared to feudal societies, early industrial economies, or even America at the beginning of the last century, we no longer have widespread incidence of abject poverty in

the U.S., as the Heritage Foundation claims. But we don't live in a feudal or early industrial era, of course, nor do we live at the turn of the century. We live here, now. While historical comparisons of official poverty rates may reveal general trends (though they may not, given the historical variation in methods used to count poor persons), such measures are, at best, of limited practical use if our goal is to evaluate the degree of want that faces Americans. And again it does not "reckon with the tendency of men to compare themselves with their contemporaries rather than their ancestors," in the words of historian Robert Bremner (1956, p. 13).

Moreover, living standards may be subject to what Richard Layard (2005) calls the "hedonic treadmill." As he puts it, it's "like alcohol or drugs. Once you have a certain experience, you need to keep on having more of it if you want to sustain your happiness." People adapt and adjust to their surroundings and to their living standards, and we know that people feel a loss more acutely than an equivalent gain (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). As Amartya Sen observes, "in a generally opulent society, more income is needed to buy enough commodities to achieve the *same social functioning*" (Sen, 1999, p. 89).

This is why many seek definitions of poverty that move beyond mere brute calculations of money income. One relative measure, and the one often used in international comparisons of poverty, sets the line at half the median income. By this way of counting, poverty in the U.S. was 17 percent in 2000 (almost 6 percentage points higher than the official measure, or some 16 million more people who would be counted as poor) [Luxembourg Income Study, 2000]. For much of its life, the Orshansky measure actually equaled about one-half the median income; but it is about one-third now, and if current trends continue it will soon be one-fourth median income—yet another indication that our official measure does not fully capture the extent of poverty in the U.S. (Glennerster, 2002).

Any relative measure requires us to think differently about need, and to understand human deprivation within a social context. Such efforts have a long pedigree. For example, the 1986 National Conference of Catholic Bishops' report *Economic Justice for All* defined poverty not in terms of absolute money

income but as the “denial of full participation in the economic, social and political life of society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one’s life” (in Katz, 1989, p. 180). Economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1958, p. 323) wrote similarly:

People are poverty-stricken when their income, even if adequate for survival, falls markedly behind that of the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency, and they cannot wholly escape, therefore, the judgment of the larger community that they are indecent. They are degraded for, in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable.

Dwight MacDonald (1963), in a *New Yorker* review of Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* and Michael Harrington’s seminal *The Other America*, said it more succinctly: “Not to be able to afford a movie or a glass of beer is a kind of starvation—if everybody else can.” Even Adam Smith (1776) concedes the utility of such an approach: “Every man is rich or poor according to the degree to which he can afford to enjoy the necessaries, conveniences, and amusements of human life.” He elaborates later in *Wealth of Nations*:

By necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order to be without. A linen shirt is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. (quoted in Sen, 1999, p. 73)

Smith won’t go as far as MacDonald, and explicitly excluded beer, ale, and wine from the list, since “Nature does

not render them necessary for the support of life, and custom nowhere renders it indecent to live without them," but he did have a notion of poverty that would make him something of a wild-eyed radical today, given the value he placed upon "the ability to appear in public without shame."

Such ideas of a relative poverty—a poverty defined by one's relation to others and one's freedom to act as others do—are not widely accepted in the United States today. That is to say, we don't apply middle-class standards of living to poor people on relief, and don't expect our relief programs to attempt the kind of egalitarianism of status or social functioning suggested in the poverty definitions just highlighted, even Adam Smith's. Quite the opposite—most Americans relief programs are designed and implemented to provide minimal benefits to as few as possible, thereby abiding by English Poor Law standards of "less-eligibility" (Piven and Cloward, 1987; Somers and Block, 2005).

Yet poor Americans nonetheless aspire to more than mere subsistence, and in a culture in which advertising businesses earn some \$63 billion in annual revenue, it is perhaps not rational to expect those messages to inspire non-poor households to purchase goods they don't strictly need and simultaneously expect poor people to resist those same enticements (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). One may well enter dangerous territory by presuming to know what constitutes "necessities" for a poor black woman in New York if you are a rich white man in Washington, D.C., and vice versa, for that matter. Poverty can't be assigned an absolute measure, for what we think of as poverty not only varies over time, it is relative among people at any point in time. As has been said of power, perhaps poverty is a relationship, not a thing unto itself.

Thus, if poverty is best thought of as a relative measure, it is inevitable that if some have great wealth while many have little or none, those with little will perceive themselves to be more poor than they would if everyone were in the same boat: in this way, inequality exacerbates poverty. And income inequality is higher in the United States than in any other advanced nation, and has been increasing for the past forty years, after a brief period in the mid-twentieth century when it was in decline (Smeeding, 2005). While official poverty has declined

over the past forty years (from 17.3 percent in 1965 to 12.6 percent in 2005), inequality is worse, of late at levels not seen since the Gilded Age or on the eve of the Great Depression. From 1947 to 1973, incomes of all Americans rose, with those of the poorest rising the most, but since 1973 income gains have been concentrated among the top wage-earners, with incomes stagnant or declining for the rest (Smeeding, 2005). This has not been lost on the public—a late 2004 poll by the Maxwell School at Syracuse University (2005) found that more than two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that “we are becoming a society of the haves and have-nots” and half thought that government should do more to reduce inequality. Less than one-third thought that “everyone in American society has an opportunity to succeed.”

The causes of growing inequality are likely complex and varied—some combination of the declining value of the minimum wage, falling rates of unionization, regressive changes to tax policy, the declining real value of welfare and other public benefit programs, the effects of international trade and immigration, and changes in the labor market wrought by deindustrialization (Lenz, 2003; Page & Simmons, 2000). The effects of inequality are pernicious: as British sociologist T. H. Marshall asked, “how can equality of citizenship coexist with capitalism, a system based on social class inequality?” (in Quadagno, 1987). One recent study of 129 countries found that inequality even increases corruption (the use of public power used for private gain). It both legitimizes it and makes it easier to achieve; and that corruption, in turn, exacerbates inequality. This dynamic is especially true in democratic societies—and makes clear that without economic equality, political equality is in jeopardy (Yoo & Khagram, 2005). Similarly, as economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis write:

Economic inequality—particularly when overlaid with racial, ethnic, language, and other differences—increases social distance, which in turn undermines the motivational basis for reaching out to those in need. Indeed, surveys consistently reveal that the support for those in need is stronger in societies whose before-tax and -transfer incomes are more equal. (Bowles & Gintis 1988/1999; see also Uslaner & Brown, 2003)

The American Political Science Association convened a Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy in the fall of 2002. Their report, published in December of 2004, was generally a measured, cautious affair, yet they concluded:

We find disturbing inequalities in the political voice expressed through elections and other avenues of participation. We find that our governing institutions are much more responsive to the privileged than to other Americans. And we find that the policies fashioned by our government today may be doing less than celebrated programs of the past to promote equal opportunity and participation. Indeed, trends in all three areas—citizen voice, government decision making, and public policy—may together be amplifying the influence of the few and promoting government unresponsiveness to the values and needs of the many. (APSA, 2004)

In short, inequality matters, and may itself exacerbate conditions that limit policy changes that could ameliorate poverty. Attending to both, poverty and inequality can be justified not merely on humanitarian or moral grounds, but as a necessary means toward maintaining a democratic polity. Just as by focusing on point-in-time analyses we have underestimated the extent of American poverty, by failing to pay attention to the causes and consequences of inequality or of relative poverty measures, we have understated the dangers posed to the health of the republic itself. Poverty and inequality are matters of concern for a majority, not a minority, of Americans, something else that is obscured by our reliance upon official poverty measures.

Poverty, Freedom, and Independence

Traditional poverty measures are blunt instruments, generalized efforts to define and quantify the abstraction that we call poverty. To take seriously, by contrast, a “bottom-up” approach to poverty analysis (Schram, 1995; Pimpare, 2007, 2008), that is, to shift analysis away from mere poverty policy to an examination of the varied, lived experience of those who are poor and otherwise marginalized, we might attend

to economist Amartya Sen's (2000) re-definition of poverty as lack of freedom, or capability deprivation. Freedom here is the "capacity of people to live the kinds of lives they value—and have reason to value." To shift our thinking about what constitutes poverty in this manner would focus our attention upon how well Americans have managed to survive and thrive, and how that has differed for different groups, in different places, at various times throughout our history. For Sen:

Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states. (p. 3)

Thus, the United Nation's Millennium Development goals include reducing poverty and hunger, as we might expect, but also encompass 48 distinct criteria focused upon such things as child and maternal health, combating disease (especially HIV/AIDS), environmental sustainability, improving education (especially for women), and forging ties between rich and poor nations, all within a larger commitment to expanding civil and political liberty (U.N. Millennium Development Goals, 2008). Poverty matters, but is insufficient alone if we truly seek to improve people's freedom in the way Sen understands it. One way in which the World Bank has thought of this is through the ostensibly simple move from "ill-being" to "well-being," or from what they identify as powerlessness, bad social relations, insecurity, material poverty, and physical weakness to freedom of choice and action, good social relations, security, having resources enough for a good life, and physical well-being (Narayan et al., 1999, Figure 1). This reveals one means by which relative poverty measures seek to expand the evaluation of an individual's well-being to much broader effect, acknowledging that poverty must be judged by how one person's or family's circumstances relates to the well-being of others, and by how well any person or family fares according to their reasonable aspirations.

Similarly, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Population Reference Bureau have evaluated the well-

being of women throughout the world not only in terms of wealth or income, but along such dimensions as women's lifetime birth rates; their access to and use of contraception; the share of all births attended by trained medical personnel; maternal deaths per 100,000 live births; AIDS/HIV, literacy, and school enrollment rates; the percentage of women in the labor force; their percentage in national legislatures; and more (BRIDGE, 2008). These, too, give us a richer sense of capabilities, of freedom, than mere poverty data can. Or, looking just at the United States, Heather Boushey and her colleagues (2002) broaden the traditional poverty measure by evaluating instances of *critical* hardships (missing meals, eviction, disconnected utilities, or not receiving essential medical care) and *serious* hardships (lack of child care, worries about access to food and stable shelter, missing utility payments, disconnected phone).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2008) has tracked children's well-being since 1990 for all 50 American states along 75 measures, and created an index comprised of 10 key indicators: infant mortality, low birth rate, child death rate, teen death rate, teen birth rate, high school drop-out rate, parents' employment, number in two-parent households, number not in school, number employed or in the military, and the child poverty rate. Similar national-level efforts have been undertaken by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (since 1997) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (since 1996), among others, all in the belief that aggregate measures of poverty, whether absolute or relative, convey too little information (Lippman, 2005). Whether these more complicated approaches enable us make sense of the world is another matter. The Federal Interagency Forum's 2005 report, for example, showed that since its previous report, the child population was up, births to unmarried women were up, child poverty was up, food security was down, incidences of overweight were up, immunizations were up, low birth weight and infant mortality were both up, but child mortality was down, as were births to adolescents, and drug use was down, while the number of young people who were victims or perpetrators of violence were both up (Child Stats, 2008). But, of course, the goal is to create richer measures of well-being,

not simpler ones.

American organizations are also turning to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to make evaluations about well-being in the United States. The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative goes so far as to identify an American "Human Rights Crisis":

Civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights have all been attacked and undermined in the courts, legislatures, workplaces and the streets. Economic and social rights in particular are virtually unrecognized in the U.S. The United States faces: the highest rate of child poverty among industrialized nations, over 45 million people without health insurance, over 36 million people suffering food insecurity, a shortfall of 5 million affordable housing units and 14% of households with critical housing needs, 20% of the population being functionally illiterate, the longest working hours in the industrialized world, and working families that cannot afford basic needs such as housing and health care. (National Economic & Social Rights Initiative, ¶4)

It's not traditionally the way in which we think about poverty (FDR's failed Economic Bill of Rights notwithstanding), but this broader look at citizens' well-being may be a more useful way to judge the effectiveness of the welfare state. Other organizations throughout the United States have adopted international human rights claims in order to try to change policy, whether it's advocating for increased funding for and easier access to food stamps by citing Article 25 of the Universal Declaration (*everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care*), or by seeking reform of domestic violence and child custody laws in the language of both the Universal Declaration (*no one shall be subject to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment*) or the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (which requires that governments *protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment*). Others use similar frameworks to focus on the rights of immigrants and indigenous peoples, gender and race-based

discrimination, environmental justice issues, or the rights of workers or prisoners (Massoud, 2006; Neubeck, 2006; New York City Welfare Reform and Human Rights Documentation Project, 2000; Wellesley Centers for Women, 2002; Ford Foundation, 2004; Williams, 2006, Chs. 1-3).

Such multi-faceted efforts to evaluate the needs and rights of people might help us better make sense of poverty and highlight the virtues of moving away from our narrow income- and wealth-based measures toward something like Sen's conception of poverty as the lack of freedom. In comparative welfare state analyses, a similar idea of *independence*, as measured by the extent to which it permits citizens to survive apart from the labor market ("decommodification") or their ability to establish autonomous households ("defamilialization"), has been a useful heuristic (Esping-Andersen, 1990; O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999). But decommodification fails to account for the fact that poor people historically have not sought to be independent of the labor market; and defamilialization elevates autonomy to the status of virtue, and leaves out those who choose dependence, who do not wish to be entirely self-sufficient, and who expect to live as part of a family or as a community. Sen's standard of freedom might thus be a better measure than Esping-Andersen's now standard focus on dependence/independence.

Whatever the relative merits of redefining poverty along any of the lines described above, or according to other approaches, there are profound impediments to change. A shift to any new poverty measure, even those that have been sanctioned by the Census Bureau, like the NAS-based alternatives, would have implications for some 82 federal programs (Blank, 2008). And any new measure that overcame the failure of current tools to account for geographic variation across states would have to contend with bitter legislative battles as those whose constituents would stand to lose fought to maintain the status quo. The possibility for positive change is further limited by the fact that, unlike most other formal, national statistics, control of the poverty line rests in the Executive Branch, within the Office of Management and Budget. Given that virtually any change in the official measure would increase poverty in an instant, and have massive implications on all programs that used it to

calculate eligibility for and the generosity of government aid programs, it would be the rare President indeed who would be willing to adjust the measure (Blank 2008; Glennerster, 2002). Indeed, the political pressure is likely to push in the opposite direction, and in 2006 the Bush Administration's Census Bureau appeared to have abandoned the NAS measures, publishing only an alternative that better calculated income, but took no realistic account of expenses, having the effect of reducing the poverty rate without any of the complicated and expensive measures necessary to reduce poverty itself.

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