

HR 2909: The Measuring American Poverty Act of 2009

Introduced by Rep. Jim McDermott

Modern Poverty Measure

- The Modern Poverty Measure would largely follow the recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to improve and update the current poverty measurement. This new measure would continue to track income deprivation, but it would be based on current consumption patterns rather than patterns from the 1950s. The measure would be calculated and reported by the Census Bureau.
- Instead of multiplying the cost of a minimally adequate diet by a factor of three (the initial formula for the present poverty measure), this measure would set the poverty threshold at a level of minimal income allowing the purchase of basic physical necessities—primarily food, clothing, and shelter. This level would be determined by calculating the income needed to reach the 33rd percentile of spending on these basic goods, plus 20% more for additional personal expenses.
- When calculating the income available to purchase basic necessities, the Modern Poverty Measure would count both income assistance (e.g., Earned Income Tax Credit, nutrition assistance and housing assistance) and necessary expenses (e.g., federal taxes, work expenses and out-of-pocket medical expenses) not considered in the current official poverty measure. Finally, the new measure would account for geographic differences in the cost of living (unlike the current measure).

Traditional Poverty Measure

- In addition to publishing poverty rates under the new measure, the Census Bureau would continue to publish poverty rates as currently calculated. The present official measure would be renamed the Traditional Poverty Measure. No change would occur for Federal programs that presently determine individual eligibility or broader allotments based on the current measure.

Decent Living Standard and Medical Risk Measures

- Some needs and deprivations that are not fully captured by the proposed Modern Poverty Measure require additional research to establish national standards. Therefore, the NAS would be commissioned to establish two separate panels to make recommendations regarding the creation of a decent living standard (measuring a higher level of subsistence than the Modern Poverty Measure, but still only permitting a person to meet basic expenses for a modest standard of living) and a medical care risk measure (assessing the risk of being unable to afford needed medical care and services).