

Rethinking the Poverty Line:  
What Alternate Poverty Measures Indicate About Urban Poverty and Its Geographic Distribution

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In order to adequately address problems associated with poverty, definitions and measurements of the issue must first be understood. This goal is complex, as both the definitions and measurement of poverty are subjective and vary geographically and categorically. The commonly used American poverty measure (i.e. the “poverty line”) has recently received criticism because of its limitations as an absolute measure that fails to recognize the relative nature of poverty. Such criticisms have led to the development of alternate poverty measures. However, no single measure has the ability to account for all factors associated with poverty. As such, it is important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of various poverty metrics.

The aim of this study is to identify the benefits and limitations of several alternate poverty measures by examining each measure in relation to cultural and social indicators. In this study, several alternate poverty measures are identified and applied to the St. Louis Region. Principal component analysis and multiple linear regression techniques are used in conjunction with census data from the St. Louis metropolitan statistical area to identify the social and cultural factors that are concomitant to poverty as measured by each of the alternate poverty metrics. The poverty measures are then compared based on the significance of each identified concomitant. Additionally, alternate poverty metrics are compared through an examination of maps created to show variations in geographic distribution. The distribution of poverty is measured geographically for each alternate measure and subsequently standardized for meaningful comparison between measures by mapping the variance of distribution.