

THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: WHAT IS THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD?

A: The Self-Sufficiency Standard defines the income working families need to meet their basic necessities *without private or public assistance*. Basic minimum needs include: housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, miscellaneous expenses (clothing, telephone, household items), and taxes (minus federal and state tax credits). The Standard is calculated for 719 different family types (originally 70) for each county or area in a state.

Q: HOW IS THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD DIFFERENT FROM THE OFFICIAL FEDERAL POVERTY GUIDELINES (FPG)?

A: The Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) are a five-decades-old calculation based on the cost of food, and assumes that food is one-third of a family's budget. The Standard is based on the costs of all basic needs of a working family—not just food, but also housing, child care, health care, transportation, miscellaneous costs, plus taxes and tax credits. Unlike the FPG's one-size-fits-all model which varies costs just by the size of the family and number of children, the Standard costs also vary by the age of the children—for example, child care costs differ dramatically by age. Finally, while the FPG is the same throughout the entire continental U.S. the Standard varies for each county or area in a state.

Q: HOW CAN I USE THIS DATA?

A: The data was developed to provide a more accurate measure of what families must earn in order to meet their basic needs in a county and family specific manner. The Standard has been used by government entities, advocates and service providers to assess and to change policies and programs in a number of ways including: as a benchmark for evaluation and program improvement; as a guideline for determining eligibility and need for services; as a counseling tool; to create online calculators; as a public education tool; and as a guideline for wage-setting and living wage campaigns. For more examples of the ways organizations apply the Self-Sufficiency Standard in their work please visit www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/standard-practice. Whenever a state is funded, Self-Sufficiency Standard data is released and available to the public on www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/. We just ask that you cite the University of Washington, Center for Women's Welfare, Self-Sufficiency Standard.

Q: WHERE DOES THE DATA COME FROM?

A: In general, for each category, data comes from scholarly or credible sources, such as the U.S. Census Bureau; are updated annually; and are age- and geographically-specific, as appropriate. Whenever available, the Standard uses government-calculated numbers of what is minimally adequate, such as the USDA food budgets based on nutrition requirements, or HUD's Fair Market Rents for housing assistance.

Q: HOW IS THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD CALCULATED?

A: First, the basic costs for each family type (which vary by number and age of children, and by number of adults) are added in each county. Ten percent of this total is added for miscellaneous costs. Finally, taxes and tax credits are calculated using formulas that calculate the state and federal income and payroll taxes as well as sales tax (where applicable).

Q: WHAT STATES HAVE CALCULATED SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARDS?

A: The Standard has been calculated for 41 states, Washington D.C. and New York City. Standards are available for Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York City, New York State, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington State, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

Q: THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY WAGES SEEM TOO HIGH FOR MY REGION, ARE THEY?

A: No. Because the Self-Sufficiency Standard is calculated using the real costs of goods and services purchased in the regular marketplace, it reflects the real expenses consumers face. The Self-Sufficiency Standard is a no-frills budget that does not allow for entertainment, carry-out or fast food, savings, or emergency expenses such as car repairs. Nevertheless, many families lack a Self-Sufficiency level income and manage to survive. If they do, however, it is reasonable to assume that they are either receiving assistance meeting their needs with public or private subsidies, or they are foregoing one or more needs such as using less desirable child care, doubling-up or living in substandard housing, obtaining free food or doing without, or not obtaining needed health care.

Q: ISN'T THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD UNREALISTIC FOR MOST WORKERS?

A: No. The Self-Sufficiency Standard sets a goal for workers. Achieving self-sufficiency is a process that involves not just finding a job with certain wages and benefits, but achieving income security over time. There are several ways—separately or in combination—that workers can achieve self-sufficiency. They can receive temporary work supports until their wages increase. In addition, they can obtain training or education that will prepare them for higher-wage jobs. Finally, they can combine low-wage jobs with self-employment initiatives.

Q: ISN'T IT UNREALISTIC TO EXPECT EMPLOYERS TO PAY WORKERS THESE WAGES?

A: Yes, sometimes it is unrealistic. Yet it is reasonable to hold employers responsible for paying decent wages and providing benefits, such as health insurance and benefits to their workers. At the same time, employers are only one of several stakeholders who have a role in ensuring that families have incomes sufficient to cover their costs. The government has a role in ensuring that job training and education, as well as public supports such as child care assistance, are affordable and accessible to families.

Q: DOES THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY STANDARD OFFER HISTORICAL ANALYSIS? WAGE ADEQUACY MODELING?

A: Yes, the Self-Sufficiency Standard reports provide both a historical analysis and wage adequacy modeling of locally available work supports in reports funded by our partners (see [Washington State's 2020 report](#)). The historical analysis reviews how the Self-Sufficiency Standard changes over time from previous year calculations. The historical analysis also offers a comparison of the Self-Sufficiency Standard change over time with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation, often showing that CPI underestimates the real cost of living increases. Additionally, the Center for Women's Welfare also provides wage adequacy modeling, demonstrating how essential public benefits can increase wage adequacy so families are able to make ends meet.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Information about the Self-Sufficiency Standard and related research and methodology can be found at www.selfsufficiencystandard.org or by contacting the Center for Women's Welfare at the University of Washington (206) 685-5264 or cwss@uw.edu.