

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services



OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY
FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION

POVERTY GUIDELINES

01/25/2016

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U.S. FEDERAL POVERTY GUIDELINES USED TO DETERMINE FINANCIAL ELIGIBILITY FOR CERTAIN FEDERAL PROGRAMS

There are two slightly different versions of the federal poverty measure: poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines.

The **poverty thresholds** are the original version of the federal poverty measure. They are updated each year by the **Census Bureau**. The thresholds are used mainly for **statistical** purposes — for instance, preparing estimates of the number of Americans in poverty each year. (In other words, all official poverty population figures are calculated using the poverty thresholds, not the guidelines.) Poverty thresholds since 1973 (and for selected earlier years) and weighted average poverty thresholds since 1959 are available on the Census Bureau's Web site. For an example of how the Census Bureau applies the thresholds to a family's income to determine its poverty status, see "How the Census Bureau Measures Poverty" on the Census Bureau's web site.

The **poverty guidelines** are the other version of the federal poverty measure. They are issued each year in the Federal Register by the **Department of Health and Human Services** (HHS). The guidelines are a simplification of the poverty thresholds for use for **administrative** purposes — for instance, determining financial eligibility for certain federal programs.

The poverty guidelines are sometimes loosely referred to as the "federal poverty level" (FPL), but that phrase is ambiguous and should be avoided, especially in situations (e.g., legislative or administrative) where precision is important.

Key differences between poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines are outlined in a table under Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). See also the discussion of this topic on the Institute for Research on Poverty's web site.

The January 2016 poverty guidelines are calculated by taking the 2014 Census Bureau's poverty thresholds and adjusting them for price changes between 2014 and 2015 using the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The poverty thresholds used by the Census Bureau for statistical purposes are complex and are not composed of standardized increments between family sizes. Since many program officials prefer to use guidelines with uniform increments across family sizes, the poverty guidelines include rounding and standardizing adjustments in the formula.

When the change in the CPI-U is positive but small, it is possible that the poverty guidelines drop for certain family sizes due to these adjustments. This occurred in 2016, when the change in the CPI-U between 2014 and 2015 was small enough so that the rounding and standardizing adjustments in the formula resulted in small decreases in the poverty guidelines between 2015 and 2016 for households with 7 or more members (8 or more for Alaska and Hawaii). In order to avoid a decrease in the poverty guidelines when inflation was not negative, a small adjustment was made to the 2016 guideline formula which fixed the 2016 poverty guidelines at the 2015 guidelines for the affected family sizes, which are households of 7 or more (8 or more for Alaska and Hawaii).

This means that the increments are not exactly the same between some family sizes for the January 2016 poverty guidelines. For example, the increments for family sizes one through six for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia is \$4,140. The poverty guideline for family size of six is \$32,570 (i.e., the same as the 2015 guidelines) and the increments for family sizes of eight and larger is \$4,160, which are the same increments used for the 2015 guidelines. For more detailed information on the calculation of the guidelines visit: Computations for the 2016 Poverty Guidelines.

HHS POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR 2016

See also the Federal Register notice of the 2016 poverty guidelines, published January 25, 2016

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR THE 48 CONTIGUOUS STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	
PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$4,160 for each additional person.	
1	\$11,880
2	16,020
3	20,160
4	24,300

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR THE 48 CONTIGUOUS STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
5	28,440
6	32,580
7	36,730
8	40,890

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR ALASKA

PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$5,200 for each additional person.	
1	\$14,840
2	20,020
3	25,200
4	30,380
5	35,560
6	40,740
7	45,920
8	51,120

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR HAWAII

PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
For families/households with more than 8 persons, add \$4,780 for each additional person.	
1	\$13,670

2016 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR HAWAII	
PERSONS IN FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD	POVERTY GUIDELINE
2	18,430
3	23,190
4	27,950
5	32,710
6	37,470
7	42,230
8	47,010

The separate poverty guidelines for Alaska and Hawaii reflect Office of Economic Opportunity administrative practice beginning in the 1966-1970 period. Note that the poverty thresholds — the original version of the poverty measure — have never had separate figures for Alaska and Hawaii. The poverty guidelines are not defined for Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Palau. In cases in which a Federal program using the poverty guidelines serves any of those jurisdictions, the Federal office which administers the program is responsible for deciding whether to use the contiguous-states-and-D.C. guidelines for those jurisdictions or to follow some other procedure.

The poverty guidelines apply to both aged and non-aged units. The guidelines have never had an aged/non-aged distinction; only the Census Bureau (statistical) poverty thresholds have separate figures for aged and non-aged one-person and two-person units.

Programs using the guidelines (or percentage multiples of the guidelines — for instance, 125 percent or 185 percent of the guidelines) in determining eligibility include Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and the Children's Health Insurance Program. Note that in general, cash public assistance programs (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Supplemental Security Income) do NOT use the poverty guidelines in determining eligibility. The Earned Income Tax Credit program also does NOT use the poverty guidelines to determine eligibility. For a more detailed list of programs that do and don't use the guidelines, see the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).

The poverty guidelines (unlike the poverty thresholds) are designated by the year in which they are issued. For instance, the guidelines issued in January 2016 are designated the 2016 poverty guidelines. However, the 2016 HHS poverty guidelines only reflect price changes through calendar year 2015; accordingly, they

are approximately equal to the Census Bureau poverty thresholds for calendar year 2015. (The 2015 thresholds are expected to be issued in final form in September 2016; a preliminary version of the 2015 thresholds is now available from the Census Bureau.)

The poverty guidelines may be formally referenced as “the poverty guidelines updated periodically in the Federal Register by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the authority of 42 U.S.C. 9902(2).”

RESOURCES

- [Prior Poverty Guidelines and Federal Register References Since 1982](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\) on the Poverty Guidelines and Poverty](#)
 - [Poverty guidelines — gross or net income](#)
 - [A chart with percentages \(e.g., 125 percent\) of the guidelines](#)
 - [The poverty line for a state or city](#)
 - [The number of poor people in a state or city](#)
 - [How the poverty line was developed](#)
- [Further Resources on Poverty Measurement, Poverty Lines, and Their History](#)
- [Computations for the 2016 Poverty Guidelines](#)
- [Mollie Orshansky’s career, achievements, and publications](#)
- [ASPE research on poverty](#)
- [The Census Bureau's Poverty Home Page](#)

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Form Approved OMB# 0990-0379 Exp. Date 8/31/2017

osaspeinfo@hhs.gov

