THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
NEW YORK, NY 10007

New York City Council

Committee on Community Development
Introduction No. 891 requiring the Mayor to submit an annual report on poverty

Testimony
Presented By

Dr. Mark Levitan

Director of Poverty Research, New York City Center for Economic Opportunity

December 11, 2013

Good morning. I am Mark Levitan, CEO's Director of Poverty Measurement. I would like to begin my remarks by thanking the Committee on Community Development for its continued interest in and support of our effort to create an improved measure of poverty for New York City.

My testimony will:

1. Review the reasons why CEO developed an alternative measure of poverty.
2. Describe how CEO measures poverty.
3. Offer some examples of how the CEO poverty measure provides new insights into the effects of public policies on poverty.

Why CEO Measures Poverty

The inadequacies of the official US poverty measure have been obvious to American social scientists for decades. In 2006, they became vividly clear to New York City policy makers. Mayor Michael Bloomberg had convened a Commission for Economic Opportunity and asked its members to develop new ideas for addressing poverty in New York. The Commissioners quickly discovered how little the current poverty measure could tell them about the degree of economic deprivation in the City, the effect of existing programs intended to alleviate it, or the potential impact of the initiatives they were considering. Commission members wanted to know, for example, how proposals such as increasing participation in the Food Stamp program or creating a New York City Childcare Tax Credit would affect the local poverty rate. What they learned instead was that efforts like these would have no discernible impact because in-kind benefits and tax credits are not accounted for in the official measure.

In their report to the Mayor, they concluded that, in addition to initiating new anti-poverty programs, New York City should develop a better method to count the poor. Mayor

Bloomberg embraced the idea and poverty measurement was placed on the agenda of the organization created to implement the Commission's recommendations: the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO).

The reasons for the widespread dissatisfaction with the current, official measure of poverty are easy to understand. It is woefully out of date. The only economic resource it recognizes is pre-tax cash. Although tax credits and in-kind benefits have been a growing share of government anti-poverty expenditures for decades, these supports to low-income families remain uncounted by the official poverty measure.

The official poverty threshold has also failed to keep up with a changing society and has become disconnected from any underlying rationale. The poverty line, which was based on the cost of food, no longer reflects family expenditures for necessities; housing has replaced food as the largest item in a typical family's budget. The threshold has also lost touch with the American standard of living. In 1964, the poverty line for a family of four equaled 50 percent of median income for a family of that size. The poverty line now comes to less than 30 percent of the median. Finally, the official poverty line is uniform across the country. The threshold that defines who is poor in Manhattan is the same as that in rural Mississippi. The need to account for New York City's relatively high cost of living is obvious in light of the tight squeeze that local housing costs put on family budgets.

If the primary reason for measuring poverty is to improve public policy, these weaknesses had to be addressed. The definition of resources would need to be expanded to include the effect of tax programs like the Earned Income and Childcare Tax Credits that support low-income working families. The value of in-kind benefits such as Food Stamps and housing subsidies that can be used, like cash, to secure more adequate food and shelter should also be included. The adequacy of a family's resources would also need to be measured against a more realistic set of poverty thresholds.

How CEO Measures Poverty

CEO concluded that it should base its measure on recommendations that had been developed by the National Academy of Sciences' (NAS) Panel on Poverty and Family Assistance. Since our inaugural report on poverty in 2008, interest in improving the poverty measure has grown. In the fall of 2011, the U.S. Bureau of the Census issued an initial report on poverty using a similar method called the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). Our subsequent annual reports include several revisions we have made to make our estimates of poverty in New York City comparable to the Census SPM poverty rates for the nation. CEO's method is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure One: Comparison of Poverty Measures

	Official	**CEO**
Threshold	Established in early 1960s at three times the cost of "Economy Food Plan." Updated by change in Consumer Price Index. No geographic adjustment.	Equal to the 33rd percentile of family expenditures on food, clothing, shelter, and utilities, plus 20 percent more for miscellaneous needs. Updated by the change in expenditures for the items in the threshold. Inter-area adjustment based on differences in housing costs.

Resources	Total family *pre-tax* cash income. Includes earned income and transfer payments, if they take the form of cash.	Total family *after*-tax income. Include value of near-cash, in-kind benefits such as Food Stamps. Housing status adjustment. Subtract work-related expenses such as childcare and transportation costs. Subtract medical out-of-pocket expenditures.

Drawing the New York City Poverty Line

The CEO and Census Bureau's SPM poverty thresholds are based on family needs for clothing, shelter, and utilities, as well as food. The dollar value of the poverty line is established by taking a point (the 33rd percentile) in the distribution of expenditures on these items by families that include two children. A factor equal to 1.2 is then applied to account for miscellaneous needs such as personal care, household upkeep, and non-work-related transportation. For 2011, this methodology produces a US-wide poverty threshold for a family composed of two adults and two children of $24,999.[1]

Then CEO adjusts this threshold to reflect inter-area differences in living costs. We compare the New York City metropolitan area Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment to the national average for a similar unit. In 2011, New York City rents for such apartments were

[1] Sources: The U.S.-wide threshold is created by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

1.48 times the national average. This factor is applied to the shelter and utilities share of the US-wide threshold (equal to 49.3 percent). When added to the non-shelter and utilities portion of the threshold (which remains unchanged) the total threshold for the "reference" family of two adults and two children comes to $30,945.[2] See Table 1.

Table 1

Creation of CEO Reference Family Threshold, 2011

U.S.-wide SPM Threshold	$ 24,999
Housing Portion of Threshold (49.3%)	$ 12,325
Geographic Adjustment Factor	1.48
Adjusted Housing Portion of Threshold	$ 18,270
CEO Threshold	$ 30,945

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

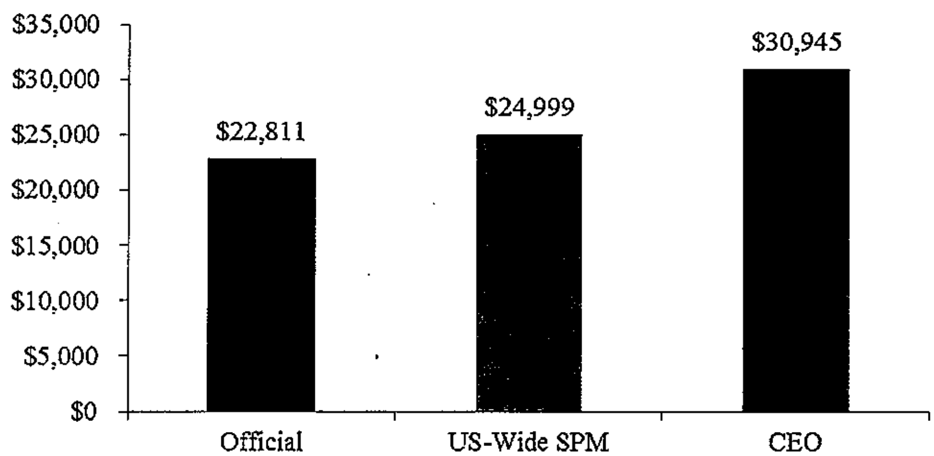
Note: See text for

[2] To avoid cumbersome language we use "family" to denote the unit of analysis in our studies. The term "family" includes one-person units, if the person is an unrelated individual. Unmarried partners are treated as spouses and are classified as family members.

explanation of concepts.

We refer to this New York City-specific threshold as the CEO threshold.[3] Figure 2 compares the US-wide SPM threshold and the New York City CEO threshold to the official poverty threshold. Most of the difference between the CEO threshold and the official poverty line is generated by the geographic adjustment. Compared to the official poverty line, the U.S.-wide SPM threshold is 10 percent higher. The CEO threshold is 24 percent higher than the SPM threshold and 36 percent higher than the official threshold.

Figure 2: Poverty Thresholds for Two-Adult, Two-Child Family, 2011



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and New York City Center for Economic Opportunity.

Measuring Family Resources

Once the appropriate poverty lines have been drawn, they must be compared against a family's resources to determine if its members are poor. CEO employs the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) both to represent the City's population and as the principal

[3] Adjustment of the reference family threshold for other families of other sizes and compositions is made using a three-parameter scale developed by David Betson.

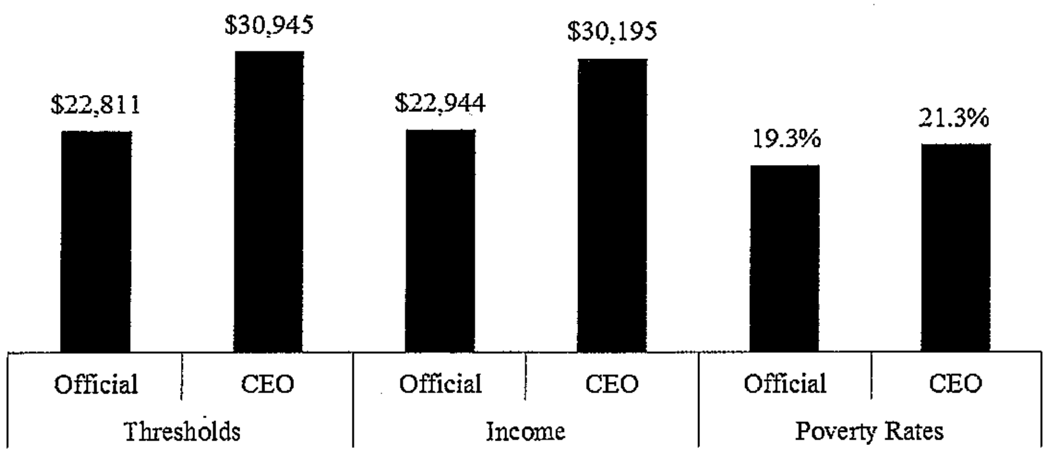
source of information for calculating family resources. The ACS is now the largest of the Census Bureau's annual demographic surveys; its sample is sufficiently large to analyze poverty across the City's demographic groups and neighborhoods. The ACS also contains much information relevant to poverty status, such as family composition, school enrollment, educational attainment, race, citizenship, and employment, as well as income from a variety of sources, such as earnings, social security, and public assistance.

Although the ACS provides data on pre-tax cash income, other elements of a family's resources that are vital to our poverty measure are not collected in the survey. As noted in Figure 1, this includes taxes, the value of nutritional assistance, an adjustment for housing status, commuting costs, childcare expenses, and out-of-pocket spending for medical care. These are estimated for each family through a variety of approaches utilizing program rules, administrative data, and imputation techniques. (A description of these techniques is beyond the scope of my testimony. They are detailed in CEO's reports, available at: http://www.nyc.gov/ceo).

We refer to this more inclusive definition of family resources as CEO income. Although this income measure consists of reductions as well as additions, CEO income is higher for families in the lower tail of the income distribution than the official resource measure of pre-tax income. In 2011, CEO income at the 20th percentile equaled $30,195. Pre-tax cash income at the 20th percentile was $22,944. This implies that if the only change we had made to the official poverty measure was to expand the definition of resources, the CEO poverty rate would be lower than the official rate. But when we apply the expanded definition of resources against the higher CEO thresholds, we find that 21.3 percent of the New York City population was poor in 2011.

This is 2.0 percentage points higher than the corresponding official poverty rate of 19.3 percent.[4] See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Official and CEO Thresholds, Incomes, and Poverty Rates, 2011



Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census and American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

Notes: Incomes are measured at the 20th percentile and stated in family size and composition-adjusted dollars. Official poverty rates are based on the CEO poverty universe and unit of analysis.

New Insights into Poverty and Policy

CEO's poverty measure consistently places a larger share of the City's population below the poverty line than does the official measure. This is an attention-getting difference, indicating that the effect of using a higher (more realistic) threshold outweighs the effect of using a more inclusive definition of family resources. But this is only the beginning of both a new understanding of poverty and a reassessment of the adequacy of anti-poverty programs.

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[4] To aid comparability, the official poverty rate is based on the poverty universe and unit of analysis used to create the CEO poverty rates.

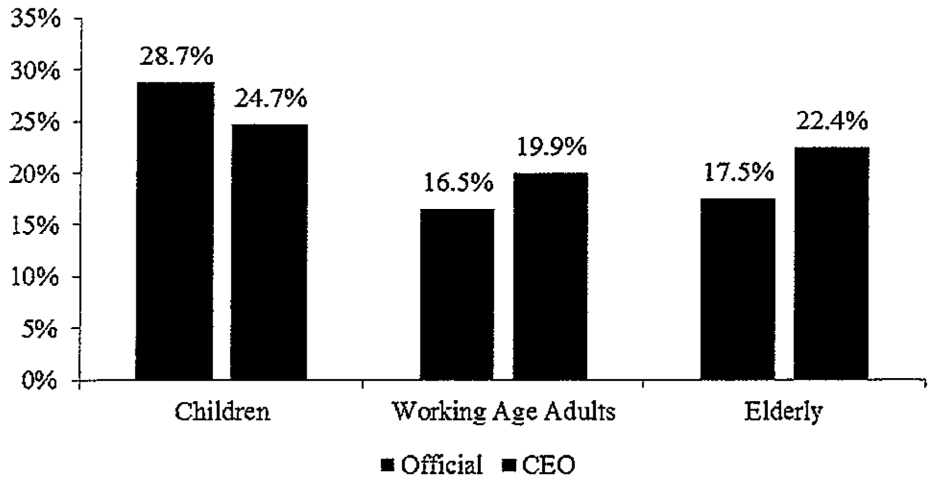
I will draw on findings from our most recent report for examples of what the new measure can tell us. Among the most salient are these:

1. Comparing the CEO to official poverty rates by age group, we find that tax credits and in-kind benefits have a considerable and hitherto underappreciated effect on the incidence of poverty among children.
2. The CEO poverty measure finds fewer New Yorkers in extreme poverty, but more City residents in near poverty than does the official methodology.
3. Federal economic stimulus programs, especially President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act blunted what would have otherwise been a very steep rise in the City's poverty rate.

Comparing the CEO to official poverty rate by age group

Although the CEO poverty rate exceeds the official poverty rate for the total New York City population, this pattern does not hold for all groups within the City. This is particularly notable when we consider poverty rates by age group. As depicted in Figure 4, children are the poorest age group in both measures. However, the CEO poverty rate for children was 4 percentage points below the official measure in 2011. The CEO poverty rate for working age adults (persons 18 through 64 years of age) and the elderly (persons 65 and older) exceeded the official rate.

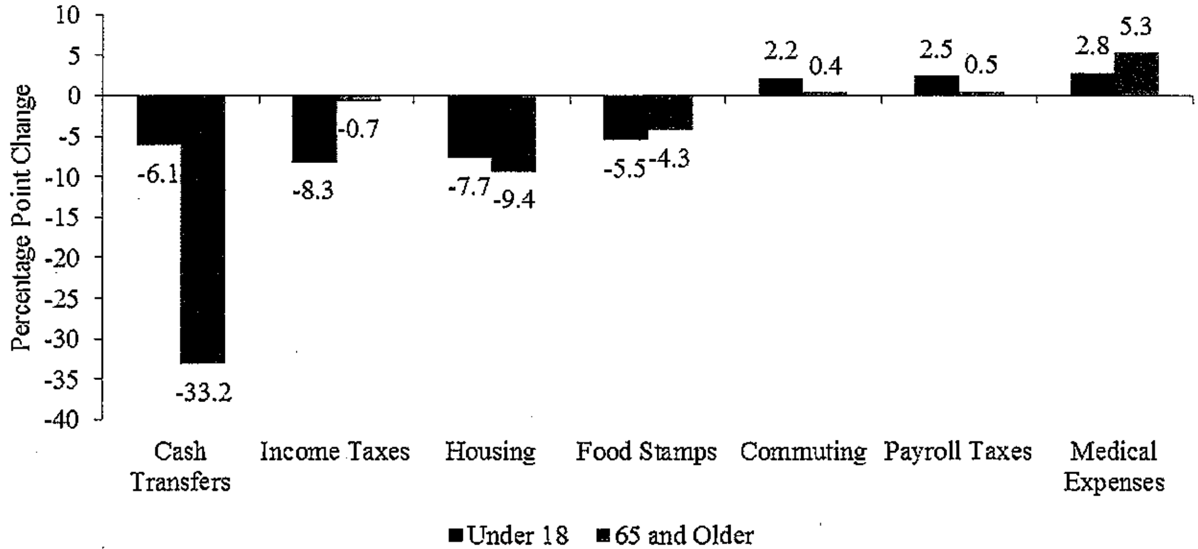
Figure 4: Poverty Rates by Age, 2011



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census and American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

The pattern in these differences is created by the more inclusive income measure used to calculate the CEO poverty rates. This can be illustrated by comparing how different forms of assistance influence the poverty rates for children compared to the elderly. The bars in Figure 5 indicate the degree to which the poverty rate is lowered or raised by individual elements of the CEO income measure. Transfer programs that take the form of cash are accounted for in both the official and CEO measures. They (Social Security in particular) have an enormous effect on the poverty rate for the elderly, but a more modest effect for children, reducing the two groups' poverty rates by 33.2 percentage points and 6.1 percentage points, respectively. Non-cash forms of assistance are uncounted in the official measure. Tax credit programs, and Food Stamps in particular, have a particularly powerful effect on the poverty rate for children. On the other hand, the poverty rate for the elderly is raised by their relatively high expenses for healthcare, which lifts their poverty rate by 5.3 percentage points.

Figure 5: The Effect of Cash and Non-Cash Resources on the CEO Poverty Rate

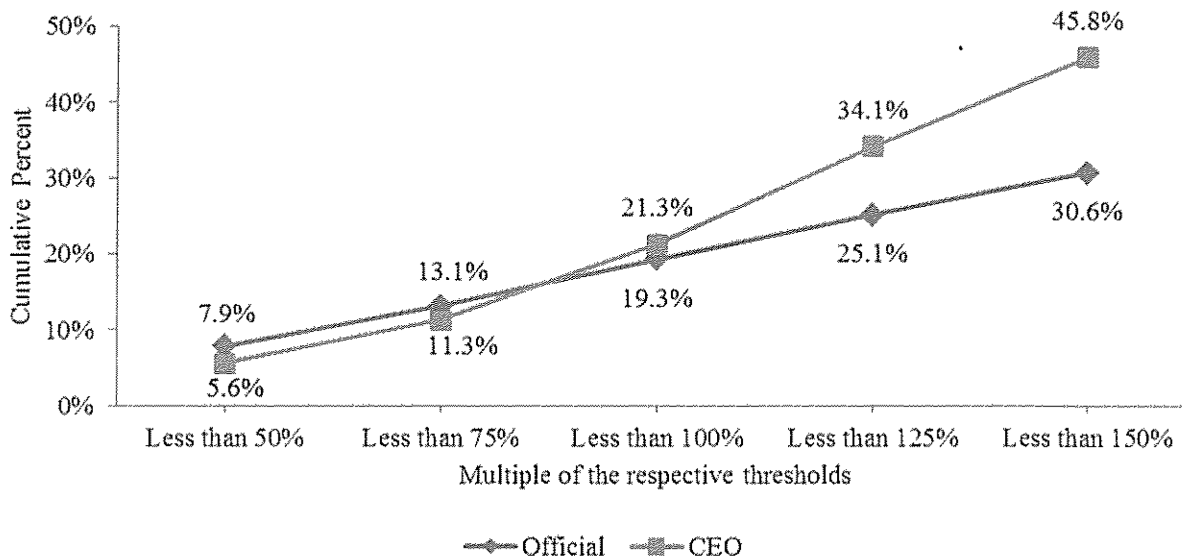


Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census and American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

Extreme Poverty and Near Poverty

The poverty rate tells us what proportion of the population lives below the poverty line. It does not tell us the extent to which the poor reside just under the line or far below it. Nor does it provide information about the share of the population that is above the poverty line, but is still uncomfortably close to it. One way to address this shortcoming is to calculate the share of the population that is living below multiples of the poverty line, below 50 percent of the poverty threshold (in extreme poverty), 75 percent of the threshold, and continuing up to 150 percent of the threshold. Figure 6 provides this categorization using both the official and CEO poverty measures. The figure shows that although a larger share of the population is characterized as poor (below 100 percent of the poverty threshold) under the CEO measure than the official measure, the CEO measure finds that a smaller proportion of the population is living below 50 percent and 75 percent of its poverty threshold than the official measure. On the other hand, the CEO poverty measure finds that a larger share of the population either is poor or near poor (living below 150 percent of its threshold) compared to the official measure, 45.8 percent rather than 30.6 percent.

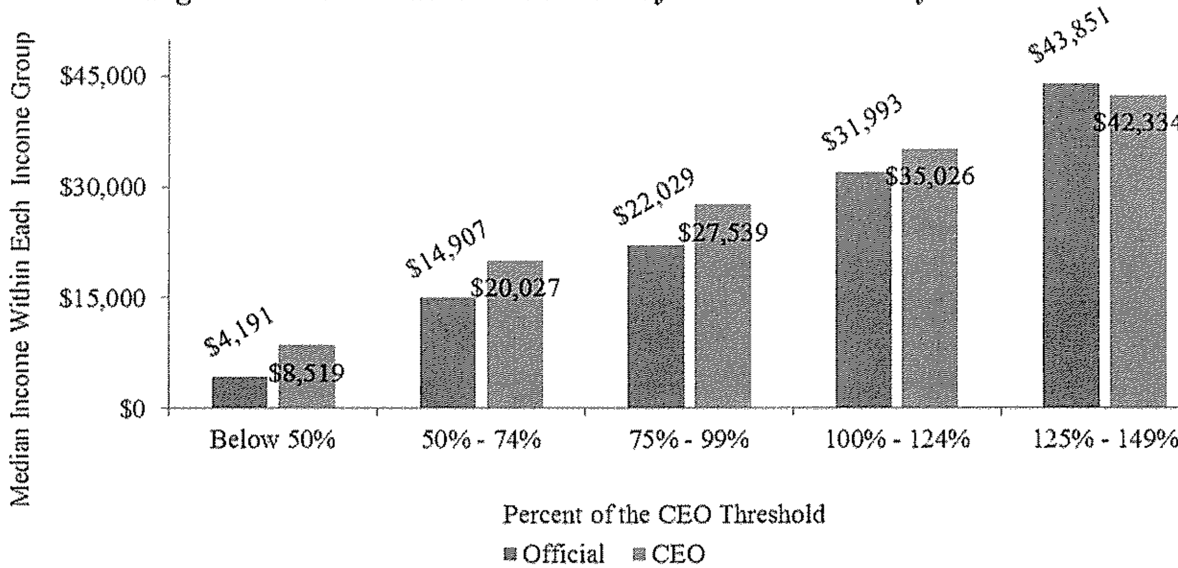
Figure 6: Share of the Population below Multiples of the Poverty Threshold



Source: American Community Survey as augmented by CEO.

Again, differences in income measures are responsible for differences in poverty rates. This is illustrated in Figure 7, which reports median incomes for families lying within intervals of the CEO poverty threshold. For the very poorest, persons below 50 percent of the CEO poverty threshold, CEO income far exceeds official income because it includes the non-cash assistance such as food stamps, housing subsidizes, and tax credits, that are uncounted by the official poverty measure. Further up the poverty threshold groups, the difference narrows. In the highest group, between 125 percent through 150 percent of the poverty threshold, official income exceeds CEO income because families are now in the phase out ranges of tax credit programs and are often too "rich" to qualify for means-tested assistance. After accounting for childcare, commuting, and out-of-pocket medical expenses their CEO income falls below their pre-tax cash income.

Figure 7: Official and CEO Income by Percent of Poverty Threshold

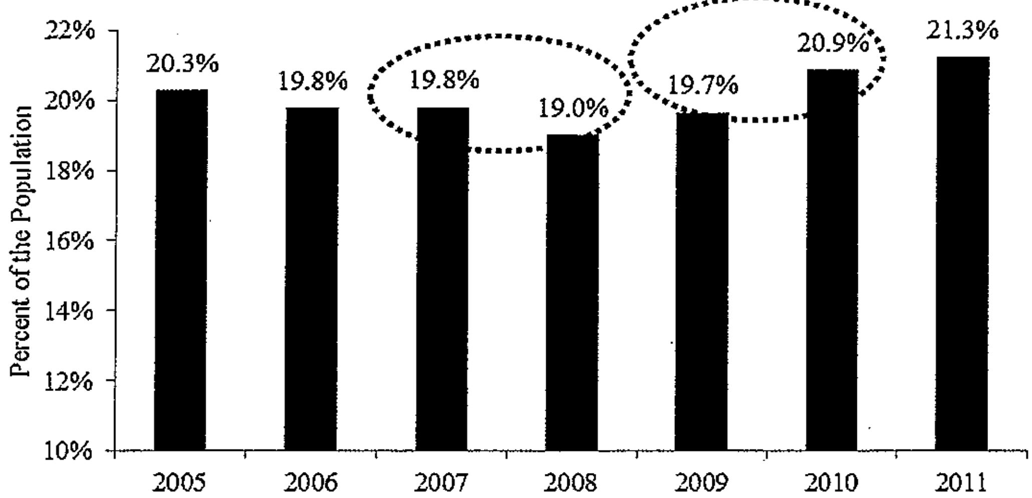


Source: American Community Survey as augmented by CEO.

Poverty in the Wake of the Great Recession

The CEO poverty rate has tracked trends in the labor market over the seven years for which we have data. From 2005 to 2008, the poverty rate dropped from 20.3 percent to 19.0 percent as the economy expanded. Then, in the wake of the Great Recession, the poverty rate rose, reaching 21.3 percent in 2011. See Figure 8. The 2011 poverty rate is not statistically higher than the 20.9 percent poverty rate in 2010. In light of the underlying trends in employment, earnings, and income (to be discussed shortly), the most recent data suggest a poverty rate that is at a turning point, not yet falling, but no longer climbing as a result of an economic contraction.

Figure 8: The CEO Poverty Rate, 2005 - 2011



Source: American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

Note: Ovals identify statistically significant year-to-year changes.

The Effect of Federal Stimulus Programs on the CEO Poverty Rate

Given our interest in how policy affects poverty, our last several reports have focused on the effect that the federal government's stimulus programs have had on low-income New Yorkers. Many of the initiatives were designed to directly bolster family income and several of them were clearly targeted at those most in need. The programs we have carefully scrutinized are those whose effects would not be captured by the official poverty measure – but are in the CEO measure – the expansion of tax credit programs and the increased generosity and participation in the Food Stamp program.

Federal Stimulus Programs under the Bush and Obama Administrations

President Bush:

Expansion of Unemployment Insurance

Economic Recovery Rebate

President Obama:

Continued Expansion of Unemployment Insurance

Expansion of Food Stamp Program

Increase in benefit levels by 13.6 percent

Outreach by City to eligible families

Expansion of tax credit programs

Earned Income Tax Credit

Child Tax Credit

American Opportunity Credit (for college tuition)

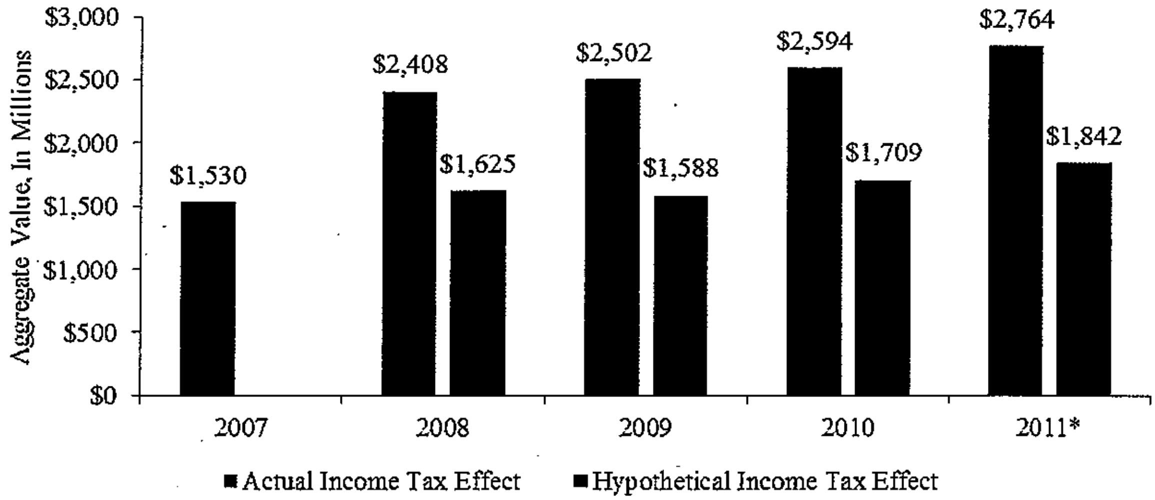
Recovery Payment

Making Work Pay

FICA (payroll) tax cut

To measure the impact of the expansions of the tax credit and Food Stamp programs, we created estimates, simulating what CEO incomes would have been absent the change in policy. For example, we calculate that in 2011 income tax filers with dependents and adjusted gross income below $50,000 received nearly $2.8 billion from the Federal, State, and City income system. These filers have negative taxes (they gain income) because of refundable tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. Without the expansion of the tax credit programs and the two percentage point reduction in payroll taxes, these filers would have only received $1.8 billion. See Figure 9.

Figure 9: Effect of Tax Programs for Filers with Dependents and AGI Below $50,000



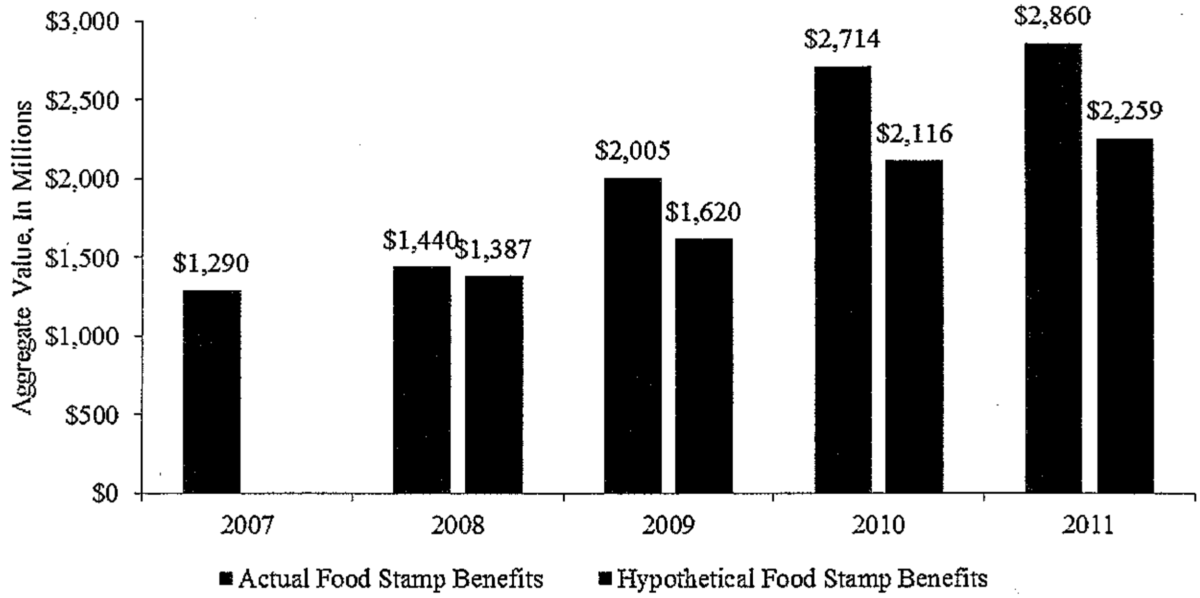
*2011 includes effect of two percentage point cut in the payroll tax.

Source: American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

Notes: Hypothetical assumes no change in policy and is not calculated for 2007.

We created a similar, alternative scenario for the Food Stamp program, assuming that there had been no large, one time, increase in benefit levels and that participation would have grown at a pace typical of a recession of similar magnitude, that is, without the effect of the City's effort to enroll eligible families. Figure 10 illustrates the actual and hypothetical value of Food Stamp benefits for the City's residents. The effects are large. In 2011, for example, New Yorkers received nearly $2.9 billion in benefits. Had it not been for the Federal and City policy initiatives, benefits would have totaled a little less than $2.3 billion.

Figure 10: The Effect of Food Stamps, 2007 - 2011

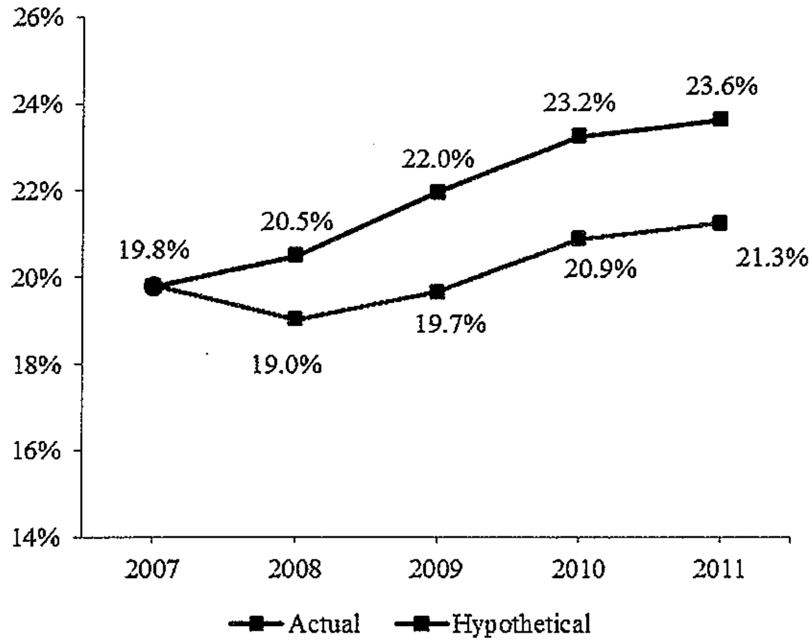


Source: American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

Notes: Hypothetical assumes no change in policy and is not calculated for 2007.

A final step in our analysis was to estimate what the CEO poverty rate would have been given the two hypothetical scenarios. As illustrated in Figure 11, absent the expansions in tax credits and the Food Stamp program, the CEO poverty rate would have climbed to 23.6 percent in 2011, 2.3 percentage points higher than its actual level of 21.3 percent.

Figure 11: Actual and Hypothetical CEO Poverty Rates



Source: American Community Survey Public Use Micro Sample as augmented by CEO.

Notes: Hypothetical assumes no change in policy and is not calculated for 2007.

In Conclusion

It has been a half century since the development of the current official measure of poverty. In the early 1960s the poverty measure represented an important advance and served as a focal point for the public's growing concern about poverty in America. But over the decades, discussions about poverty increasingly included criticism of how poorly it was being measured. Society had evolved, social policy had shifted, yet the Census Bureau was measuring poverty as if nothing had changed.

The official poverty measure has lost credibility as a broad social indicator and usefulness as a tool for understanding how well, or poorly, public policies are serving the needs of low-income families. A poverty measure that does not count income tax credit programs and in-kind benefits, or the toll that payroll taxes, childcare costs, and out-of-pocket medical care takes on family budgets is blind to both the current policy environment and contemporary needs.

The New York City Center for Economic Opportunity has developed a metric that offers insight into the effect of current policies on poverty. It can be used to estimate the effect of new initiatives, such as an increase in the minimum wage. It can also be employed to forecast and track the effect of cutbacks to programs vital to low-income families, such as those being contemplated in Congress for the Food Stamp program. The measure can restore credibility to the task of counting who and how many New Yorkers fall below the poverty line. Perhaps most important, it can help create accountability for how well our efforts to address poverty are succeeding or falling short.

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Introduction No. 891 requiring the Mayor to submit an annual report on poverty

Presented By

Kristin Morse
Executive Director
NYC Center for Economic Opportunity

December 11, 2013

Good morning. I am Kristin Morse, Executive Director of the NYC Center for Economic Opportunity. Thank you Chairman Vann, and distinguished members of the Committee on Community Development for the opportunity to testify today in support of Introduction No. 891. We are honored to have worked with you over the years, and look forward to continuing our productive relationship through the coming transition in City government. We particularly appreciate the continued commitment of this committee to confronting the challenge of poverty in New York City, and the role that its members have played in developing new strategies for employment and neighborhood improvement over the years.

I am joined today by Dr. Mark Levitan, who will testify on the methodology behind the CEO Poverty Measure: a more accurate measure of poverty in New York City which has become one of our most important accomplishments. The legislation being considered by the Committee today would cement the City's annual commitment to using this measure to report poverty data, and CEO supports its recognition of the CEO Poverty Measure as a critical gauge of poverty over time. In reporting this data to the City Council, Community Boards and borough presidents, New York City policymakers can assess the effectiveness of government supports for those living below the poverty threshold, as well as the very real concern surrounding those who fall between 100 and 150 percent of the poverty threshold – a population considered "near poor" according to the CEO measure.

The CEO poverty rate was 21.3 percent in 2011. Although this can at first appear to be a political liability to some, I would like to address the importance of maintaining the CEO Poverty Measure. Its sobering – though accurate – depiction of poverty in our City informs the work of policymakers while also helping to identify critical need.

Identifying what works to reduce poverty requires accurate information. A useful measure should serve as a broad social indicator that gauges deprivation while also identifying trends in the economy, and reflecting how changes in public policy affect the poor. The official poverty measure released by the federal government no longer does this well, and has been recognized by social scientists for decades as an ineffective and outdated indicator. Based on the cost of an average monthly "meal plan" for a family of four in 1962 – and adjusted only for inflation – the official federal measure fails to account for geographic differences in cost-of-living. When Mayor Bloomberg convened a Commission for Economic Opportunity in 2006, the shortcomings of the official measure became apparent to New York City policymakers, who quickly grew frustrated with how little the official measure could tell them about New York City's low-income population. The Commission concluded that, along with implementing new strategies, the City needed to improve its method of measuring poverty.

In 2008 CEO developed a measure that accounts for non-cash income and government benefits, and measures that income against New York City's high cost-of-living. The CEO Poverty Measure has since gauged poverty through both an economic expansion and a major recession. We are now better able to identify sources of poverty, better able to identify which programs are effective at reducing it, and know more about New Yorkers living in chronic poverty. The importance of an improved measure was reinforced at the federal level in 2010, when the Obama Administration directed the Census Bureau to issue the similar Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM). This new data is now released by the Census Bureau annually alongside the official measure.

Looking ahead, the CEO Poverty Measure will become an ever more useful tool for New York City policymakers. Political leaders at all levels of government will soon face pressures to address budget deficits. It is critical that we understand clearly and accurately the impacts that possible program cuts will have on the poor and near poor.

For example, New Yorkers should be very concerned about the future of the Food Stamp program. This is a program that served low-income populations well during the recession and the subsequent "jobless" national recovery. CEO research shows that food stamps, along with tax credits and housing assistance, reduce poverty. But benefit levels were recently reduced by Washington lawmakers. Because the CEO Poverty Measure accounts for the effects of such program cuts, it measures the critical impact of Food Stamps and accurately depicts its vital role in our social safety net. We need to understand the impact of government policy and we need to see where hardship continues to grow.

The CEO Poverty Measure gives us that understanding, and helps identify areas of greater need. In recent years it has become abundantly clear that we cannot await further assistance from Washington to alleviate poverty, and New York City has acted accordingly. Since 2009, HRA's efforts to expand Food Stamps have produced a $600 million increase in benefits paid out. CEO and its partners have led several efforts to build on the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC); to those New Yorkers who qualify, CEO together with the Department of Finance has mailed completed tax forms so that more families claim this important credit – long considered the most effective antipoverty program in the United States. This has resulted in over $30 million in credits claimed. New York City's Child Care Tax Credit also benefits tens of thousands of families each year, and has resulted in more than $84 million paid out to support child care expenses. CEO's newest project will test an expansion of the EITC for single adults, offering more generous benefits to support thousands of low-wage workers and "make work pay".

Our City's economy is currently marked by both continued high unemployment and a growing number of workers who remain poor or near poor. More than one-in-five New Yorkers live in poverty, but 46 percent are considered "near poor" and struggle with low-wage employment. Low-wage work represents 58 percent of jobs gained during the recent economic recovery, a trend unlikely to reverse in the coming years. By 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor estimates that 63 percent of new jobs created – whether in retail, food service, health or personal care – will be low-skill, low-wage jobs requiring only a high school diploma. This will perpetuate the inescapable reality confronting too many workers: full-time employment is still not enough to climb out of poverty. For many of these workers, tax credits, work supports, nutrition and housing strategies are critical.

New York City's progress in fighting poverty will depend on growing strength in the City's labor market, and the critical task of accurately measuring the true scope of the challenge will become ever-more important. The legislation before the Committee today takes an important step toward ensuring that future administrations have this vital tool at their disposal.

I now turn CEO's testimony over to Dr. Mark Levitan, our Director of Poverty Research. Dr. Levitan and his team have truly led the nation in measuring poverty, and the importance of their work is reflected by the legislation being considered this morning. Thank you.

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