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# UNITED WAY ALICE Report FAQs

## WHY DID UNITED WAY UNDERTAKE THE ALICE STUDY?

### Is there a need for this report since it uses data available from other public sources?

- The individual data sets speak to specific issues such as employment, changes in population or average food costs, however, they do not provide context and comparison.
- The formula to calculate the federal poverty level has not been updated since 1965 and does not differentiate between counties in the mainland US. This has resulted in it being a radically inadequate tool for measuring the true scope of financial need in the country.
- As a result, many government and social service agencies have relied on an inflated percentage of federal poverty (125%, 150%, 200%) as thresholds for establishing need.
- United Way sought a research-based model that provided standard local analysis to highlight the needs of our communities and inform public policy, business practices and community services.
- The ALICE report compiles and analyzes existing sources and presents the data in an integrated way, offering a more complete and clear picture of our communities' challenges and opportunities.

### What's different about the ALICE report from other data reports?

Many of the other compelling reports including the MIT Living Wage Calculator or the EPI Family Budget Calculator create budgets where independent survival is possible. The ALICE Survival Budget creates a more conservative threshold tied to basic needs. Even with this more careful calculation it still highlights a significant population in every community. The more generous standards MIT and EPI use would exaggerate who is actually living on or over the edge; putting their families, employers and community at greater risk.

## WHAT / WHO IS ALICE?

As a population ALICE is above the Federal Poverty Level yet still has a difficult time affording the basics of housing, food, health care, child care, and transportation, despite working. As a framework, ALICE is an opportunity to remove the stigmas/stereotypes that are attached to other terms, such as the working poor, and see these individuals as our family members, neighbors and friends.

### Common ALICE characteristics?

- ALICE represents the hardworking, tax-paying individuals who get up every day to go to work like the rest of us, but who aren't sure how they will make ends meet.
- ALICE represents workers who provide invaluable services we all rely on in our daily lives.
- ALICE is living paycheck to paycheck, unable to set aside savings for an emergency and forced to make short-term choices that can result in long-term consequences. Do I get a payday loan to get the kids ready for school? Do I pay the utilities or pay rent? Do I buy my medications or put dinner on the table? Do I pay for car insurance? Do I live farther away from my job?
- ALICE is vulnerable to just one emergency – one health incident, one car repair, one harsh storm. When that emergency occurs, ALICE may not be able to get to work, which has a domino effect. ALICE can quickly spiral into poverty. Meanwhile, our child loses that teacher who's built a rapport in the preschool class, our parent loses that home health aide who made sure they took their proper medications, and we lose the mechanic who made sure our cars run smoothly.
- When ALICE suffers, we all suffer and our local economies suffer. If ALICE can't afford the basics, that household cannot help to stimulate the economy with purchasing power. If ALICE falls into poverty, that puts a greater strain on local services. If ALICE cannot save for the future, we will all bear the cost.

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## What are some of the terms used by others that signal they are talking about ALICE (e.g. working poor, paycheck-to-paycheck, etc.)?

- Working poor
- Paycheck-to-paycheck
- Walking a financial tightrope
- Hand-to-mouth
- Barely making ends meet
- Scraping by
- Meager existence
- Needy
- 150% of poverty; 200% of poverty

## WHAT IS UNITED WAY DOING FOR ALICE?

United Ways across the country are engaging businesses, community groups, government entities and concerned citizens in a dialogue about how to help everyone in our communities thrive. United Ways are pursuing three overarching strategies:

**Build Awareness** – The ALICE population is not new, but the ALICE Report documents their struggles in ways that often was sensed but left unquantified. The ALICE Report is an important tool for us all to consider as we define ourselves, our businesses and our economy. Helping leaders and organizations adopt more accurate and helpful frameworks for seeing and serving the community is essential.

- Framing – most Americans consider themselves middle class even when they are not financially stable because there is no positive alternative identifier. Words like ‘poor’ or ‘struggling’ often lack real context or meaning and often their use unintentionally creates judgement and separation.
- People – outdated perceptions and words also create caricatures of people who work hard but fall short so helping make ALICE relatable often unlocks people’s natural compassion and good sense.
- Business Leaders – recognizing the challenges some employees face despite offering the wages and benefits you believe they can sustainably offer leaves many leaders conflicted. Even some of the best employers have employees that struggle and thankfully there are many opportunities to make that less common or damaging on the employee and the workplace.
- Policy Leaders – prevention is almost always more efficient and effective than cure. Understanding the ALICE population can help lead to more of the community sustainably meeting their own needs and contributing to economic and civic vitality.

**Improve Access** – Opportunities exist to help ALICE become more stable yet some are underutilized because of insufficient or incorrect information and others have more demand than their resources can support.

- Individuals – ALICE families often are ready to do all they can to help others yet are hesitant to seek help or do not know where to go for safe, affordable and effective help.
- United Ways – the report and ALICE framework help us to more strategically, equitably and effectively invest the funds we raise to stabilize and strengthen our local communities.
- Employers and Community Partners – there is a tremendous opportunity for employers, congregations, cities and others to share timely resources as well as reminders of where to go to find more.

**Advocate for Change** – Improved awareness and access can achieve a great deal, yet policies and practices based on inaccurate data and assumptions often do not achieve the intended purposes. A true understanding of the ALICE Report and population will eventually move from personal introspection to external action and cooperation. United Way is engaging its diverse stakeholders at the local and state level to identify the easiest as well as most impactful private and public system changes that can help everyone in our communities and state thrive.

## HOW TO UTILIZE THE ALICE REPORT

- **Business Engagement:** Organizations can use the ALICE Report to engage business leaders in discussions about corporate social responsibility and community engagement. The report's data can underscore the importance of businesses playing a role in supporting their local communities, potentially through employment opportunities, fair wages, and initiatives that benefit ALICE households.
- **Program Development:** The data from the ALICE Report can guide the development of targeted programs and services aimed at supporting ALICE households. Organizations can design initiatives that address specific challenges faced by these households, such as affordable housing, childcare assistance, financial literacy, and workforce development
- **Media and Public Relations:** Organizations can use the report's findings to generate media coverage and raise public awareness about the issues faced by ALICE households. This can attract attention from a wider audience and put pressure on stakeholders and business leaders to take action.
- **Employee Engagement:** For businesses, the ALICE Report can be used to engage employees in community-focused initiatives. Companies can organize volunteer opportunities, donation drives, and fundraising campaigns to support ALICE households in their local communities.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** The ALICE Report's data can inform organizations' strategic planning and decision-making processes. By understanding the economic challenges faced by ALICE households, organizations can tailor their efforts to have a more meaningful impact.

## A MORE CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION

If we have personal conversations, speak as a leader or inform as a journalist it is essential that we do not use or silently support old and inaccurate terms and perspectives. Changing our own tone when talking about ALICE and respectfully and graciously helping others do the same will lead to more accurate and constructive conversations and solutions.

### **“They are takers not givers... they are a drain”**

- These individuals have jobs; many do not qualify for government services or support.
- Despite working, ALICE is not earning enough to make ends meet. This is not only demoralizing for ALICE, but destabilizing for our economy.
- ALICE holds jobs that are critical to the success of our communities – child care workers, home health aides, and office assistants – yet, they aren't sure if they'll be able to cover their basic needs.
- Many ALICE are forced to work multiple jobs to care for themselves and those they love.

### **“If they just knew how to manage their money better...”**

- The household survival budget is a bare-minimum budget, not a get-ahead budget. Every line item in the budget is the most conservative estimate based on the cost of living in each county.
- The small miscellaneous category, 10 percent of all costs, covers overflow from the five basic categories; it is not enough to provide for clothes, cell phone, cable, or automotive or appliance repairs. It does not allow for dinner at a restaurant, tickets to the movies, or travel.
- There is no room in this budget for financial indulgences – holiday gifts, a vacation, new television, or a bedspread – something many households take for granted.
- This budget also does not allow for any savings, leaving a family vulnerable to any unexpected expense, such as a costly car repair or health issue.
- As such, the household survival budget is just surviving.
- How many of us perfectly manage our money? When we are stressed and under pressure for longer periods do we make better or worse choices. ALICE often has the knowledge of how to make the most of what they have yet the pressures of life and the lack of a financial or emotional buffer force people to go from crisis to short-term solution and back to crisis.

### **“They're too poor to make a difference in the economy...”**

- As such a large portion of the population (41 percent nationwide) they have incredible buying power. They feed the local economy by paying for even the basics – food, housing, transportation, child care, health care, and taxes.
- While there is some relief for the elderly and lowest income earners, most ALICE households pay about 15 percent of their income in taxes.
- The conventional view may be that low-income households are takers, but the ALICE Report makes it clear that they contribute to the economy by working in jobs essential to the local economy.

### **Is more education, a potential solution for ALICE?**

- Traditionally, education has been the best guarantee of higher income. The two are certainly correlated. However, short- and long-term factors may be changing the equation.
- For many ALICE households, going back for additional education means having to reduce hours or quit a part time job. Reducing income while adding tuition, books, transportation and additional child care costs is a daunting and often unmanageable situation for any of us and especially ALICE.
- Tuition has increased beyond the means of many Americans and the amount of student debt rose significantly over the last decade.
- The majority of new jobs are in the low-skill, low-wage arena and while there is growth of medium- and high-skilled jobs it is limited. As a result, individuals with student loans are significantly more likely to default than counterparts in other states.
- Bottom line, ALICE households are more likely to have less education than households above the ALICE Threshold, but higher education alone is no longer a guarantee of a self-sufficient income.

### **What the ALICE Report is NOT...:**

- Simply an income problem.
- A political position, but a body of data that helps us understand the economic realities of this population.
- A stance on raising the minimum wage. This alone would not help ALICE rise above challenging circumstances
- A finger pointing – or finger wagging – to area businesses. The engine of local economics knows that in order for their business to thrive, their community has to as well.