



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Children, Youth & Family

background

Report # 1

The Risks of Growing Up Poor

Fall 1997

When Children Grow Up Poor

Poverty makes it more likely children will experience setbacks that threaten their health, development, and their futures

Nearly 23 percent of America's children are in trouble. They are growing up poor, 15 million of them, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 1995 count.

Regardless of how the debate over poverty is shaped, it is the future of these children that is at the heart of the issue of welfare reform and other fundamental changes in the nation's approach to helping the needy. The state of their well being is urgent. Child poverty is a problem of epidemic proportions in America. And the consequences of growing up poor are grave.

To be sure, some children show an amazing resiliency to the pitfalls of growing up poor and step from a childhood of poverty into productive, successful lives. But for many others, the risks poverty invites too often become a reality.

How does poverty affect children? The answer is complicated and difficult to measure precisely with so many factors converging to influence the lives of children and families living in poverty. It can be a direct cause of a problem, such as hunger. It can also be an indirect cause. For example, poverty might be the source

of stress within a family that leads to abusive parenting or divorce, both of which can have a profound impact on a child's development.

What researchers do know is that poor children face a greater risk than others of experiencing a range of setbacks that can affect their health, development, education, behavior, and prospects for a bright future than children.

Impact on Families

Parents and the home environment are strong influences on how children cope with being poor. But poverty tears at the family fabric, affecting the way parents parent and how children develop.

As a chronic stress, poverty is associated with acrimonious relationships between parents that lead to problems ranging from irritability to extreme hostility and physical abuse. Such distress can result in children modeling the harsh behavior they witness, or being the target of unpredictable or explosive behavior themselves.

Researchers have found, for example, that among poor African-American single mothers, unemployment and interrupted employment tend to affect their psychological outlook, leading them to punish their adolescent children more harshly. Their children, in turn, tend to suffer higher rates of depression.

Depression and anxiety among adolescents has also been found to be related to family economic stress that results in marital strife and hostility. And hostile behavior displayed by

parents has been shown to increase the likelihood that their children will become overtly aggressive and develop serious conduct problems.

Poverty is also related to the level of optimism found within families. Underscoring that relationship is evidence that with greater financial resources, families tend to be more optimistic of the future and are less likely to experience depression. And family optimism appears important. In one study of rural African-American families, a bright outlook of the future was found to help children do better in school.

Intellectual Development

When it comes to the cognitive development of children, growing up poor is not a benign factor.

IQ test scores are one barometer. The scores of low-income students show they are at a distinct disadvantage when compared to the scores of students from high-income families. And the finding holds even after differences such as family structure and the extent of the mother's schooling are taken into account.

Neighborhood income status is another factor reflected in IQ scores. Age five IQs, for example, have been found to be higher in neighborhoods where more affluent families live.

Another measure is language development. Again, poverty has been found to play a debilitating role. Among a group of Kansas children, for example, those who were poor had smaller vocabularies at age 3 and lower

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language and reading-related performance through the third grade.

Research also suggests that a developmental setback related to poverty tends to worsen the longer the child stays poor. In other words, the harm is cumulative. In fact, researchers estimate that persistent poverty inflicts twice the harm than does transient poverty.

Social Development

Poverty also plays a role in behavior. Children who grow up poor risk developing behavior problems for a number of reasons.

Research suggests, for example, that poor children are more likely to receive harsh discipline and less cognitive stimulation at home. Their parents are more likely than parents who aren't poor to feel they have less social support, to feel isolated, and to believe that aggression is an appropriate means of solving problems.

These children often live in neighborhoods where the likelihood of violence is higher than most. Poor children, therefore, are more likely to witness violence. When that happens, the chances of them adopting aggressive behaviors are increased.

Children who are poor also tend to have transient peer groups. And frequent changes in day care and living arrangements rob children of the opportunity to form stable friendships that can help them steer clear of problems, such as aggressive behavior.

Health

Hunger is the most recognized health problem related to poverty. But poor children are exposed to many other health risks. They are, for example, less likely than other children to receive timely immunizations against disease. And they have a greater frequency of asthma, bacterial meningitis, and rheumatic fever.

Among the health risks that confront poor children, low birth weight ranks among the most distressing.

Counties, a report published by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

Low birth weight presents many risks. In Pennsylvania, the number of low birth weight babies is rising.

Studies indicate that newborns have a higher likelihood of being born at a low weight when their mothers are poor. And low birth weight itself presents a number of risks, the most tragic being premature death. When infants born of similar weight are compared, those born to poor mothers have a higher incidence of post-neonatal mortality.

Low birth weight also poses serious obstacles to a child's development, whether the child's family is rich or poor. But poor low-birth-weight infants are the ones who are more likely to fail in school later on in life and are less likely to recover mentally.

In Pennsylvania, the number of low-birth-weight babies is rising. In 1995, there were 12,355 low birth weight births, an increase of 2.7% over 1990. The good news is that infant mortality dropped from 1,627 to 1,164 infant deaths, a decline of more than 18%, according to *The State of the Child In Pennsylvania: A 1997 Guide To Child Well-Being In Pennsylvania*

A Lingering Problem

When the U.S. child poverty rate is compared with those of other industrialized nations, the numbers are discouraging. In 1986-87, for example, 20% of America's children were poor, while 9% of Canada's children lived in poverty and only 2% of Sweden's children were poor.

Worse, child poverty in America has lingered at disturbing levels.

In 1960, almost 27% of children under age 18 were poor. By the end of the decade, there was a glimmer of hope. The child poverty rate dropped to 14%, due at least in part to the birth of a wide range of federal anti-poverty programs.

But the decline was short-lived. Since the end of the 1960s, child poverty has climbed 64%, placing millions of American children at risk of serious setbacks that threaten their futures.

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references

This article was based on the following publications:

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