



The Basic Facts About Children in Poverty

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Introduction and summary

In America, nearly 11 million children are poor. That's 1 in 7 kids, who make up almost one-third of all people living in poverty in this country. This number should be unimaginable in one of the world's wealthiest countries, and yet child poverty has remained stubbornly high for decades. Across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which is made up of 37 countries including Denmark, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the United States is consistently ranked as one of the worst in child poverty rates.¹

As the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession continue to devastate the United States, children are facing the consequences of failed leadership. Since April 2020, the share of children with at least one unemployed parent has consistently remained above reported rates during the peak of the Great Recession.² More than 4 in 10 children live in a household struggling to meet basic expenses, and between 7 million and 11 million children live in households in which they are unable to eat enough because of the cost.³ When the pandemic forced schools to shift to distanced and virtual learning, it worsened the barriers to quality education for low-income children⁴ and pushed their parents, particularly mothers, to choose between caregiving and employment.⁵ Without serious interventions, an economic recovery will leave low-income and marginalized people—and their children—behind. Already, some calculations are finding that the child poverty rate has increased dramatically since the onset of the coronavirus crisis.⁶

While the pandemic has exacerbated and highlighted the economic precarity of too many children and families, the issues that cause such high rates of child poverty in the United States existed long before the public health crisis. Systemic inequalities stretching back to even before the country's founding⁷ contribute to disproportionate rates of poverty for Black and Latinx children in particular. And ultimately, joblessness, caregiving responsibilities, single parenthood, and other common life events only put children at risk of economic insecurity because U.S. policies have allowed that reality.

Child poverty is solvable. Some recommendations set forth in this report include:

- Securing the right to basic needs for all families with reforms to food assistance, housing supports, and health care programs
- Easing financial burdens through strengthened unemployment insurance, permanent paid family and medical leave, higher minimum wages, affordable child care and universal preschool, and better tax credits that cover all low-income families
- Prioritizing structural reforms that address generational poverty and historic marginalization with policies that target the racial wealth gap and inequitable school systems

Basic statistics about children in poverty

In 2019, 14.4 percent of all children under the age of 18 in the United States were living below the official poverty measure. About 6 percent were living in deep poverty, defined as 50 percent of the federal poverty measure, and almost one-quarter were living in poverty or at risk, defined as 150 percent of the official measure. When using the SPM, which counts noncash benefits from government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and measures poverty more comprehensively, the child poverty rate in America is 12.5 percent.

Measuring poverty

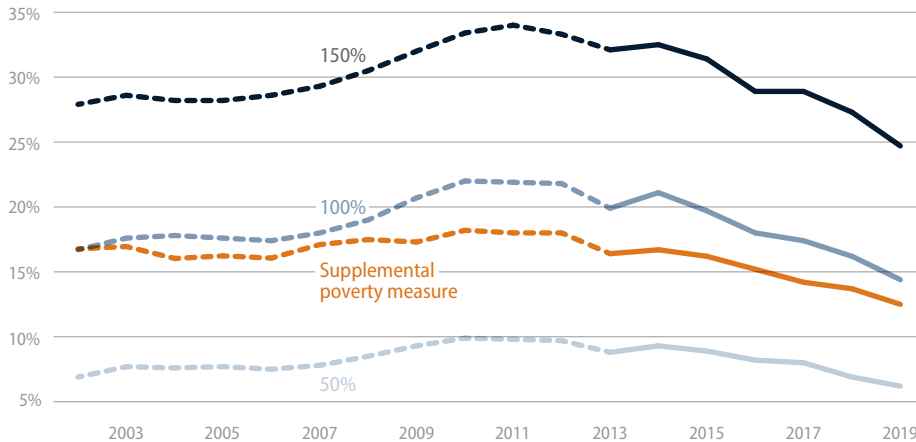
America's child poverty problem is persistent and structural—and in many ways, the official statistics undercount the severity of need across the nation.⁸ The official poverty measure, as calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau, has long been criticized as narrow and outdated, in large part because it determines the resources a family needs based on a bare-bones food budget from the 1960s. It does not take into account major expenses such as housing or child care, nor does it account for geographical differences in costs of living.

Because of this recognized failure in capturing the experiences of people facing economic deprivation, another measure, known as the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), was introduced in 2011. That measure counts resources such as nutrition benefits and housing subsidies, along with costs such as taxes and out-of-pocket medical expenses; it also determines a poverty threshold using a more diverse set of necessary expenses—not just food. The SPM isn't perfect either, but it does help show the impact that government programs can have on reducing poverty.

FIGURE 1

Child poverty rates have fluctuated over the last decades but remained relatively steady

Child poverty rates by 50%, 100%, and 150% of the official poverty measure and by the supplemental poverty measure, 2002–2019



Notes: 2013 data are from the traditional Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) questions distributed to 68,000 participants and are not directly comparable to data from 2014 and afterward; data from 2017–2019 reflect implementation of an updated Current Population Survey ASEC processing system.

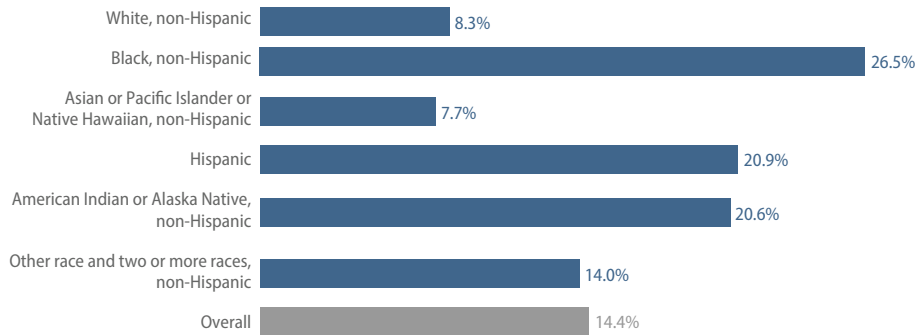
Sources: Data for 50 percent and 150 percent of the official poverty measure from 2002–2017: U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey (CPS) CPS Table Creator," available at <https://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html> (last accessed December 2020). Data for 50 percent and 150 percent of the official poverty measure from 2018–2020: U.S. Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey (CPS) Publications: Income and Poverty in the United States, Table B-3," available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/library/publications.2019.html> (last accessed December 2020). Data for 100 percent of the official poverty measure from 2002–2019: U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families - 1959 to 2019: Table 3," available at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-03.html>. Data for the supplemental poverty measure from 2002–2008: Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University, "Historical SPM Data," available at <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/historical-spm-data-reg> (last accessed December 2020). Data for the supplemental poverty measure from 2009–2017: U.S. Census Bureau, "Supplemental Poverty Measure Publications," available at <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/supplemental-poverty-measure.html> (last accessed December 2020).

Children of color across most racial categories are more likely to experience poverty than their white counterparts. (see Figure 2) Black, Hispanic, and American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) children have the highest rates of poverty. And while the broader category of Asian American and Pacific Islander children have lower rates of poverty, disaggregated data from past years show that serious disparities based on ethnicity persist with significantly higher rates for Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Burmese, and Hmong children, for example.⁹

FIGURE 2

Children of color are more likely than white children to experience poverty

U.S. child poverty rates by race and ethnicity, 2019



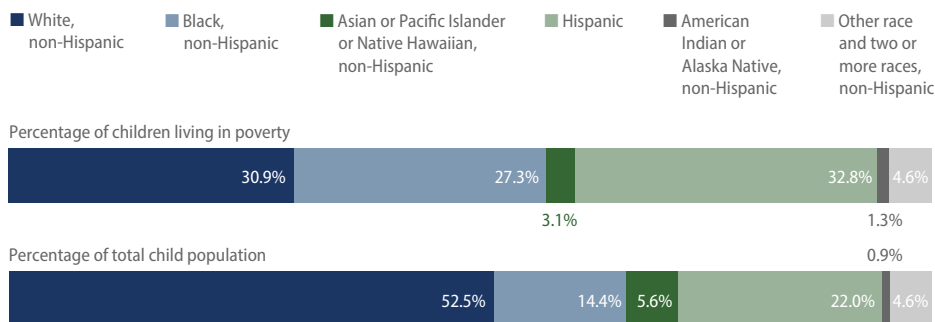
Note: The authors used 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic Supplement, data to create broader race and ethnicity categories by combining the CPS' separate ethnicity category with its more detailed race category.

Source: Authors' calculations are based on the official poverty measure using the 2020 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement. See Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, 2019 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V10.0>.

FIGURE 3

Children of color are disproportionately represented among children in poverty

Total U.S. population of children compared with share of children living in poverty by race and ethnicity, 2019



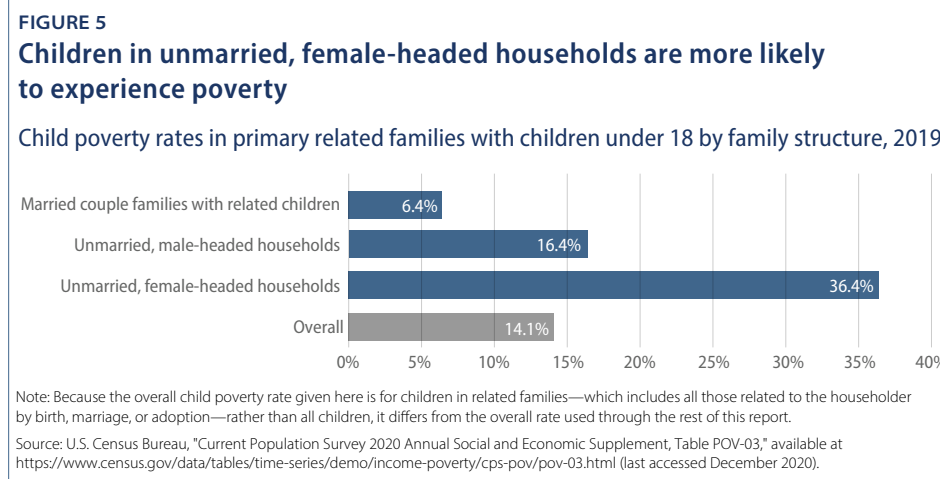
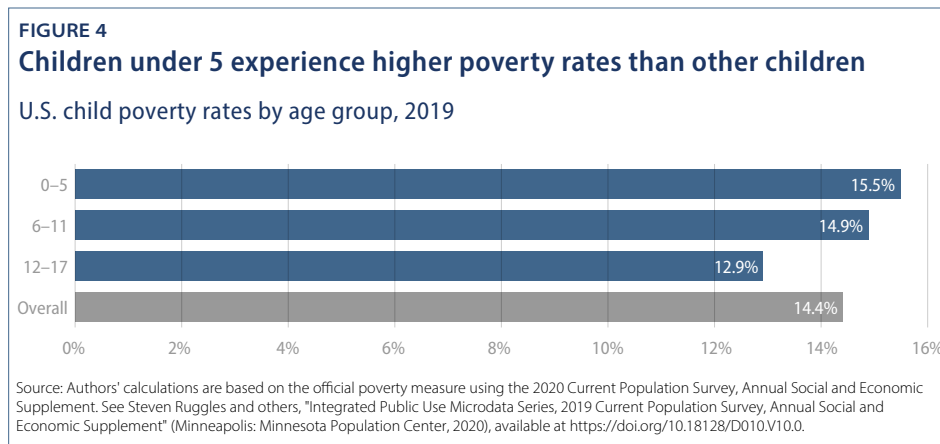
Note: The authors used 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economic Supplement, data to create broader race and ethnicity categories by combining the CPS' separate ethnicity category with its more detailed race category.

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Black, Hispanic, and AIAN children are also disproportionately represented among children living in poverty. For example, while around 14 percent of children in the United States are Black, they make up more than one-quarter of children living below the poverty line.

The poverty rate for children also differs by age, with the youngest children most likely to live under the official poverty line. (see Figure 4) Children under the age of 5 have a poverty rate of 15.5 percent, compared with 14.9 percent for children between ages 6 and 11 and 12.9 percent for those between ages 12 and 17. Those differences are due, in part, to the higher expenses associated with younger children, such as child care, and because parents tend to be earning less earlier in their careers, when their children are younger.

Child poverty rates differ greatly depending on their family structure. (see Figure 5) At a rate of 36.4 percent, more than one-third of children living in households headed by an unmarried woman live in poverty, while 6.4 percent of children in married couple households do.



The analysis: Why are so many children poor in the United States?

The causes of child poverty cannot be separated from those of adult poverty. Expenses associated with raising children are one of the many reasons that families fall into poverty, along with job losses and pay cuts, a transition from a two-parent household to a single one, and a family member developing a disability.¹⁰

Factors that make it difficult for people to meet their basic needs mean their children also grow up with economic instability and deprivation. The United States does not have a comprehensive social safety net to fully shield kids from the emotional, physical, neurological, and generational impacts of such instability.

The following are just some of the reasons why the United States' poverty rate is so high.

America's economic systems are not designed to support all families

Raising children is expensive; by some estimates, costs over the years can total more than \$200,000 on average, even before the cost of higher education.¹¹ The addition of new family members necessarily means increased costs, but families often face the highest expenses long before their peak earning years.¹² This is an issue for families across income levels, but the most significant financial consequences are felt by those with the fewest resources.

Because America's current policies do not guarantee a reasonable standard of living, a child's economic security is deeply intertwined with their caregivers' experience in the labor market. Changes in caregivers' work have largely driven changes to the child poverty rate over the past several decades.¹³

Persistent economic inequality

Despite cycles of economic growth over recent decades, child poverty rates, calculated using only earned income, have remained high.¹⁴ That so-called growth is not being experienced equally by everyone. Income inequality has increased dramatically since the 1970s, and as a consequence, in 2019, the poorest 20 percent of Americans received about 3 percent of total household income, while the richest 20 percent received more than half.¹⁵ And in 2016, the richest 5 percent had 248 times as much wealth as those in the median of the distribution, while the poorest 20 percent had zero wealth, or even negative wealth as a result of debts.¹⁶

Rising inequality is directly related to the persistent poverty that families across the country face; if all families' incomes had grown at the average rate, poverty would have been significantly lower.¹⁷ According to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report, 93 percent of the rise in rural child poverty between 2003 and 2014 can be attributed to income inequality.¹⁸ And that inequality has ramifications that are more than just financial—it also contributes to learning gaps and disparities in markers of child development.¹⁹

Stagnant wages

For the millions of low-income children in families with at least one worker, employment is not enough to protect them from economic precarity. More than 15 million low-wage workers are raising children, and 1 in 10 are single parents.²⁰ Their jobs are also characterized by unpredictable schedules, unstable employment, and inadequate or nonexistent benefits.²¹ Job quality has declined, and projected job growth is centered in the service sector, where those working in hospitality, restaurants, and care jobs are often paid lower wages with fewer employer-provided benefits and less opportunity for promotions.²² And although low-wage workers saw the most wage growth in states that increased their minimum wages, the federal minimum wage has not been updated in more than a decade.²³

If wages had increased at the same rate as broader economic productivity, more than 4 million fewer children would be in poverty in a full-employment economy.²⁴

Labor market discrimination and other economic forces

Since the early 1990s, family structure has played a much lesser role in child poverty rates than some experts claim. And in those decades, the profile of unmarried parents has shifted; parents are now more likely to be fathers raising children alone or cohabiting with a partner than in previous years, and the share of single mothers raising children without a spouse or partner now hovers at around 50 percent, compared with 88 percent in 1968.²⁵

Racist and sexist narratives such as the notable myth of the “welfare queen”—a term popularized by President Ronald Reagan to invoke white Americans’ racial resentment and tie welfare to an image of undeserving Black women receiving government assistance—permeate rhetoric and perpetuate the lie that poverty is a result of personal and cultural, rather than structural, failings.²⁶ However, high rates of child poverty in what the census defines as “single, female-headed households” and disproportionate rates of poverty for children of color can be attributed, in large part, to the many manifestations of racism, sexism, ableism, and other discrimination in the labor market.

Occupational segregation and the resulting wage gaps

Women and people of color—and women of color in particular—are disproportionately represented in jobs with low pay and inadequate workplace benefits and protections.²⁷ This stratification is the result of systemic inequities that have pushed those with the least economic power to the margins of the labor market.²⁸ Jobs commonly associated with women and women of color—for example, caregiving and service sector jobs—are largely underpaid and undervalued. Two-thirds of those making the federal minimum wage are women, as are almost 70 percent of tipped workers; if the minimum wage were increased to \$15, almost one-third of working women of color would get a badly needed raise.²⁹ Workers of color are also more likely than white workers to be paid a poverty-level wage. While 8.6 percent of white workers can expect to be paid a poverty-level wage, 19.2 percent of Hispanic workers, 14.3 percent of Black workers, and 10.9 percent of Asian or Pacific Islander workers can expect the same.³⁰

This occupational segregation, along with other factors of discrimination, also contributes to racial and gender wage gaps. For example, Black men, on average, earned 70 cents for each dollar earned by white, non-Hispanic men in 2019; Black women earned 63 cents.³¹ Those cents compound over a lifetime, depressing savings and limiting day-to-day expenses to the detriment of those workers’ children.

Lack of work-family policies to support caregivers

For caregivers, and especially solo mothers, a lack of paid leave and child care support can force people to cut back on the hours they work, leave the workforce entirely, or sacrifice necessary time with their families in order to pay the bills.

Nearly half of low-wage workers, meaning those in the bottom quarter of earners, do not have access to a single paid sick day to protect their health or care for a sick family member without risking a paycheck.³² More than 90 percent of low-wage workers and part-time workers do not have access to paid family leave through their employer.³³ The disparities are also stark across race and gender: Less than half of Black workers and just one-quarter of Latino workers had access to paid leave, and Black and Hispanic women were more likely than white women to lose or leave their jobs after giving birth.³⁴

Those disparities are exacerbated by a lack of affordable child care, which is one of the biggest expenses for families today.³⁵ Without better options, parents must consider working fewer hours, taking a pay cut, or leaving their jobs to ensure their children are cared for. For families in poverty, whose jobs already tend to be unstable, inflexible, and inadequately compensated, the decisions surrounding child care can have dire consequences for their family budgets and potential future employment.

Unemployment

Low wages are not the sole factor perpetuating child poverty and making it difficult for families to make ends meet; other labor market factors such as unemployment play an important role as well. Losing a job is one of the leading triggers for falling into poverty. The United States' inadequate safety net for jobless people leaves millions of children vulnerable to the prolonged negative impacts of poverty. And, once again, discrimination and systemic racism built into the labor market means that Black people face persistently higher rates of unemployment than whites, contributing to racial disparities in the poverty rates among their children.³⁶

Barriers to employment

Formerly incarcerated people (and those involved in the justice system even without a conviction),³⁷ immigrants and refugees regardless of citizenship status,³⁸ LGBTQ individuals,³⁹ and people with disabilities⁴⁰ often face serious barriers to employment. Widespread discrimination and exclusionary policies that target those communities, paired with the broader issues listed above, leave them and their children more vulnerable to poverty and deprivation.

Racial and gender wealth gaps

Savings and assets help people to invest in their own futures and those of their children; they help families endure difficult times, support economic mobility, and have been tied to better outcomes for children.⁴¹ However, institutional racism and sexism have created large disparities in wealth. Black and Latino families are twice as likely as their white counterparts to have zero or negative wealth, and almost 40 percent of Black families had negative or zero wealth in 2016.⁴² Women with children—and women of color most of all—also tend to have less wealth than others.⁴³ The racial and gender wealth gaps mean that already marginalized people facing difficult financial situations have very little room to respond to the economic emergencies that often trigger poverty.⁴⁴

Reaching basic living standards is tied to work

Children do not work and cannot earn their way out of poverty, but they face long-term harm because the right to having their basic needs met is not guaranteed. No child, regardless of their caregivers' experience with the labor market, should experience poverty. Yet the social safety net, in its inadequate and fragmented current form, includes burdensome work requirements, excludes those with no or very little income, and leaves jobless people and their families with few stable options.

This reality is no accident. It is the result of concerted efforts over the past 50 years to decentralize and defund programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, and unemployment insurance (UI) as well as a prevailing false narrative that insists that the jobless and others facing hardship are undeserving of comprehensive government support. One particularly egregious example is the federal program formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a New Deal-era cash assistance program targeted to low-income children. When the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act converted it to a more restrictive—and underfunded—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant to supposedly encourage work, participation in the program decreased dramatically.⁴⁵ In 1996, the AFDC reached more than two-thirds of poor families; in 2019, TANF reached less than a quarter.⁴⁶

Other structural inequities compound harm for children experiencing poverty

Children living in poverty don't just experience financial instability that is detrimental to their development, but they are also more likely to attend underresourced schools, reside in neighborhoods subjected to chronic disinvestment,⁴⁷ experience adverse health outcomes,⁴⁸ and become involved in the child welfare and criminal justice systems.⁴⁹

Such circumstances exist because economic inequality is inextricably linked to other structural inequities in incarceration, education, housing, health, and more. And those inequities are inextricably linked to America's long history of racism and discrimination, compounding barriers particularly for children of color across the country and severely limiting economic mobility.

For example, more than 1 in 10 children live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, and African American and American Indian children are seven times more likely than their white counterparts to live in neighborhoods that, due to histories of redlining and chronic underinvestment, are less likely to have job opportunities for parents and safe places to play.⁵⁰ Children living in poverty are also more likely to face housing instability, with more than a quarter of those children experiencing an eviction before the age of 15.⁵¹ Recent research has connected a child's neighborhood to their long-term outcomes and overall economic mobility, meaning that better wages or work standards alone do not address all the factors that perpetuate child poverty.⁵²

The same forces that created segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty have also resulted in the segregation of primarily low-income students and students of color into underresourced schools that struggle to meet their needs. In the absence of a strong federal role, the vast majority of states have distributed educational funds through systems that do not target schools with higher rates of student poverty.⁵³ While education has been hailed as an equalizer of opportunity, the legacy of institutionalized racism and inequitable investments across race, income, and geography have contributed to persistent educational achievement gaps and hindered upward mobility for generations.⁵⁴

In some ways, the institutions charged with supporting children and keeping them safe have contributed to cycles of criminalization and hardship instead. For example, disciplinary practices in American schools disproportionately target low-income, disabled, and Black students and can ultimately lead to incarceration in what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline.⁵⁵ Definitions of neglect used by child welfare agencies can align with the consequences of living in poverty, namely parents having difficulty affording their children's basic needs; rather than supporting those families, the child welfare system surveils, burdens, and sometimes ultimately separates them.⁵⁶

These examples of the many structural inequities in U.S. policy underscore the need to understand child poverty as a result of lawmakers' decisions even beyond the narrow definition of the economy.

Recommendations: How to end child poverty in America

While America's disastrous child poverty rate is the result of a complicated structure of economic and social systems, the solutions to the problem are actually quite simple. Policymakers need to make sure every child has access to the basics—food, housing, and health care—and ease the financial burdens that families face when raising children. The millions of children living in poverty right now do not have the luxury of waiting for changes that can take decades to fully realize. Thus the push for more immediate assistance must be paired with a forward-thinking strategy to fix policies that promote inequality, limit economic mobility, and perpetuate marginalization.

These solutions must be available to all children and families; policy barriers based on one's involvement with the criminal justice system, immigration status, ability, and other factors only ensure that attempts to end child poverty will fail.

The following recommendations are just some of the policy solutions that can contribute to ending child poverty in the United States.

Secure the right to basic needs for all families

Strengthen food assistance programs

Programs such as SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) are fundamental in ensuring that families can afford to eat. Both programs have been tied to positive outcomes for mothers and infants, and children with access to the programs can experience significant health gains and improved long-term health, educational, and economic outcomes.⁵⁷

Despite the clear advantage of funding and supporting nutrition assistance programs,⁵⁸ they have been the target of regulatory attacks⁵⁹ and budget cuts.⁶⁰ SNAP's current design means that it is efficient—lifting 2.5 million people out of poverty in 2019⁶¹—and targeted in times of crisis, but its restrictive eligibility requirements and inadequate benefit amounts limit the program's reach.⁶² The WIC program provides nutrition assistance and support programs for more than 4.5 million infants and children,⁶³ but

analysis shows that less than half of all eligible children actually participate, in part due to barriers such as transportation and misconceptions about eligibility, as well as stigma around receiving benefits.⁶⁴

To strengthen the program to better meet the needs of all children, Congress must increase SNAP benefits to more reasonably match a household's food budget (and recognize the differing food needs depending on a child's age), eliminate restrictive asset limits, consider expansions to the goods that SNAP benefits can buy, and address barriers to participation. Lawmakers must also ensure that the WIC program is fully funded and that all of its benefits, including those beyond food assistance such as breastfeeding counseling, are available to all eligible families.

Ensure universal free meals at school

Another vital program for ensuring that children are guaranteed the food they need, the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs serve almost 30 million students each day. Those with family incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level receive free lunch; those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level pay a reduced price (30 cents for breakfast and 40 cents for lunch); and all other students pay full price for their meals.⁶⁵ Receiving free or reduced-price lunch at school has been linked to lower rates of food insecurity and better health and educational outcomes for children⁶⁶—and making sure everyone has access to food is simply the right thing to do.

Instead of a means-tested program that can add burdens for both families and school administrators, with complicated paperwork for applications and reimbursements, lawmakers should enact a universal free lunch program at public schools and child care centers.

Fully fund the Section 8 housing voucher program to reach all eligible families

Three-quarters of very low-income families pay more than half of their incomes on rent,⁶⁷ in 2018, almost 1.5 million children under the age of 6 were experiencing homelessness.⁶⁸

To ensure that all children and their families are housed, policymakers must invest in fair and equitable housing policies. One of the most effective investments would be in what is already the country's largest rental assistance program: Section 8 housing choice vouchers. The program is intended to help very low-income people rent, lease, or purchase safe housing in the neighborhoods of their choice, but its potential is marred in part by widespread discrimination against voucher holders and a

years-long waiting list.⁶⁹ Even with those policy failures, research shows that families with children that receive housing vouchers are less likely to experience homelessness, food insecurity, domestic violence, and separation from their families.⁷⁰

Due to the program's funding structure, it only receives as much funding as Congress allocates to it each year, even if there are more eligible families than there is money. As a result, millions of low-income families are often left with limited options and impossibly long waits for a voucher to become available.⁷¹ Fully investing in the program so that all eligible families receive a voucher—paired with better enforcement and mechanisms against discrimination—would help millions of children live with a roof over their heads.

Ensure affordable health care for all children

Children in low-income families tend to have worse health outcomes than other kids, with even short stays in poverty being associated with higher rates of asthma, malnutrition, trauma, and other chronic diseases. Health care costs also drive millions of families into poverty, forcing them to make difficult financial trade-offs to afford care.⁷² Low-income families in employee-sponsored health plans use almost twice as much of their income on out-of-pocket medical expenses than other families.⁷³ While 70 percent of low-income children (defined as living below twice the official poverty measure) are covered by Medicaid or other government-assisted plans, including for those with low incomes or disabilities, almost 8 percent of children across the country are uninsured. That percentage is higher than 15 percent in states such as Texas and Wyoming that have not chosen to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA).⁷⁴

The federal government must ensure that all children, no matter their household incomes, have access to comprehensive and affordable health care. Doing so would not only create better health outcomes and future opportunities for those children but would also remove a financial burden for parents.

Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), as well as reforms to health coverage under the ACA, have all been instrumental in supporting the health needs of children in poverty.⁷⁵ However, these programs are not quite enough—children are vulnerable to losing any coverage from employer-sponsored plans for their caregivers if they lose their jobs. And for the many low-wage workers who do not receive health care through an employer, stable coverage for their children is even harder to find. Recent attacks on Medicaid and CHIP have increased bureaucratic burdens, narrowed eligibility, and discouraged immigrant families from applying even when eligible—all of which contribute to increasing rates of uninsurance.⁷⁶

Future changes to the health care system must ensure stable, affordable coverage for low-income children and provide early and consistent screening, diagnostic, and treatment services so that children have access to the comprehensive and preventive health services that they need.⁷⁷

Ease financial burdens and provide money to help families

Expand and strengthen unemployment insurance

Losing a job is one of the most common experiences pushing families into poverty, but it doesn't have to be that way. While UI programs are intended to help families make up for lost wages, they are often characterized by state variations, burdensome application processes, and inadequate benefit amounts.⁷⁸ Additionally, some workers are ineligible for the programs altogether because they haven't worked enough hours or had enough previous earnings to qualify—rules that exclude many low-wage workers who are at most financial risk without support.⁷⁹

Despite its flaws, there is proven evidence that the program works. In 2009, during the Great Recession, UI benefits lifted almost 1 million children out of poverty.⁸⁰ To strengthen the anti-poverty effects of UI, lawmakers must expand eligibility; increase the amount and duration of the weekly benefit; create a Jobseeker's Allowance for those left out of traditional UI, as the Center for American Progress has previously proposed; reduce variations across states; and ensure that it can become more responsive to economic downturns.⁸¹

Ensure access to permanent national paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave

Policies that support workers' health and caregiving responsibilities also protect children from economic insecurity and instability. The United States is the only industrialized country without a national paid leave program, leaving many low-wage and part-time workers—who are disproportionately women—without a viable option for paid time off in times of need.⁸²

A permanent national paid sick leave law would help workers protect their health and care for sick family members without risking their livelihood. A permanent national paid family and medical leave program, with comprehensive reasons for leave and a progressive wage replacement, would allow workers to take time off to welcome a new child or care for themselves and their families during illness without experiencing a massive decline in income or losing their job completely.⁸³ A study of

California's paid leave program tied the benefits to a 10 percent decrease in the risk of new mothers falling below the federal poverty threshold; similar federal legislation such as the Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act could continue to decrease the risk of poverty for new parents and their children across the country.⁸⁴

Raise the minimum wage and eliminate subminimum wages for tipped and disabled workers

America's minimum wage has not changed in 10 years—and for longer than that time, it has not kept up with inflation, productivity,⁸⁵ or the rising costs families face.⁸⁶ Gradually raising the federal minimum wage to \$15, as proposed in the Raise the Wage Act,⁸⁷ would help almost 10 million parents, including 4.6 million single working parents who need a living wage to ensure financial stability for their kids.⁸⁸ The legislation would also phase out the subminimum wage for tipped workers and workers with disabilities. According to a Congressional Budget Office analysis, more than 500,000 children would be lifted over the federal poverty line by increasing the minimum wage alone.⁸⁹ And already, evidence from state-level minimum wage increases show that the policy can create record-breaking reductions in the child poverty rate.⁹⁰

Ensure affordable child care and universal preschool for all children

For poor families, paying for child care can amount to almost one-third of their already limited budgets.⁹¹ The federal government subsidizes child care for low-income families through programs such as TANF and the Child Care and Development Fund, but that funding reaches fewer than 1 in 6 children eligible to receive it.⁹² And while some states have instituted universal preschool options, a federal expansion would support all low-income children's cognitive and emotional development and help alleviate the burden that child care costs place on families.⁹³

Investing in affordable, high-quality child care and universal preschool is a smart decision—not just for the economy and families as a whole but also as a strategy to reduce child poverty in the coming years.

Expand and strengthen child tax credits

Study after study has shown that cash transfer programs can make a big difference in alleviating poverty. These programs allow people to spend the money where it makes the most sense for their families rather than dictating how or when they can use it.⁹⁴ The American tax code already includes a program, known as the child tax credit, to disperse payments to low-income families with children. Although it is meant to help offset the cost of raising children, the phase-in structure of the credit means it intentionally excludes the lowest-income families who stand to benefit the most.

To strengthen the child tax credit, lawmakers must pass legislation to increase the benefit and make it fully refundable, disbursed monthly rather than as a one-time lump sum, and indexed to inflation. Most importantly, they must eliminate the minimum earnings requirement to ensure that the most vulnerable children are able to receive the benefit. This would allow the credit to function much like a child allowance that offers cash benefits to families to help them raise children, a policy used in countries that have more successfully reduced child poverty such as Australia, Germany, and Canada.⁹⁵ Changes to America's credit are essential for helping families achieve financial security and stability—and research shows that these changes alone would reduce child poverty substantially.

A supplemental young child tax credit targeting additional funds to families with kids under the age of 6—and created with the same conditions as the expanded child tax credit above—would provide support during some of a child's most formative years.

Make structural changes to address generational poverty and marginalization

Fixing existing programs to better serve families in poverty is necessary, but lawmakers must also commit to tackling the deep-rooted racism and inequity that makes poverty possible. They can do that by building a more equitable public education system with strong federal oversight and emphasis on ending the disparities that exist for low-income students and students of color;⁹⁶ closing the racial wealth gap with targeted policies and long-overdue reparations for centuries of structural racism and injustice;⁹⁷ ending mass incarceration and disenfranchisement; and other changes that address the many causes of systemic and generational poverty.

Conclusion

Child poverty in America is persistent, structural, and solvable, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only made it clearer that the existing structures to address child poverty and protect children from hardship are inadequate. Policies that tie basic living standards to a narrow definition of work and exclude families with the lowest incomes only serve to exacerbate the negative impacts of living in poverty—but it doesn't have to be that way.

To ensure that all children are able to thrive, policymakers must focus on supporting children and their families by tackling inequality and discrimination in the labor market, strengthening the social safety net, and addressing structural marginalization across policy areas. The recommendations outlined in this report all tackle those goals; with political will and moral clarity, an America where no child is poor can become a reality.

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The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

