



Evaluating 2019 U.S. Census Child Poverty Data in the Wake of COVID-19

Background

On September 15 and 17, the U.S. Census Bureau released national and state-level poverty estimates from 2019. However, these estimates [did not adequately capture our present-day realities](#) due to the impacts of COVID-19. The pandemic has not only disrupted the everyday lives of children and families, but also exposed and exacerbated the extreme racial, income, and wealth disparities in our nation. There is a glaring disconnect between federal poverty estimates and the real experience and extent of economic hardship in America. Moreover, the Census Bureau's data lacks timeliness, is not statistically relevant, and does not accurately estimate the income needed for children and families to meet their basic needs. While the [U.S. Census Pulse Survey](#) has provided some insight and information on changes in child well-being since the pandemic hit, the survey ends in October and fails to capture data on poverty.

Below is a summary of [child poverty in 2019](#) as measured by the **Official Poverty Measure (OPM)**. This data represents the share of children in the United States under age 18 who live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, which is used to determine eligibility for many public assistance and [means-tested federal programs](#). The federal poverty definition consists of a series of thresholds based on family size and composition. In 2019, poverty was defined as annual income below \$25,926 for a family of four with two children, while extreme poverty was defined as less than \$12,963 per year. As outlined briefly in this fact sheet, the effects and risks of child poverty are severely damaging to our children's behavioral, social, and emotional health. Child poverty also threatens short and long-term success, hurts academic outcomes, and diminishes a young student's capacity to learn, grow, and thrive.

1 in 7 children were living in poverty, making children the poorest age group in the nation.

Of the more than 72.6 million children in the United States, **10.5 million American children lived in poverty last year**—about 1.4 million fewer than in 2018. The national child poverty rate declined from 16.2 percent in 2018 to 14.4 percent in 2019.

Many families continue to experience hardship and inability to afford basic needs well beyond the 100 percent or below the poverty line. More than **25 million children**—34.5 percent—lived below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.

Seventy-one percent of children in poverty were children of color.

Historical, systemic racism and institutional barriers have left children and communities of color particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 and growing economic, income, and wealth inequalities. Black and Hispanic children experience some of the highest poverty rates in the country.¹

- Nearly 1 in 5 children of color in America (20.5 percent) were poor.
- Children of color were 2.5 times more likely to be poor than their White, non-Hispanic peers.
- More than 1 in 4 Black children (26.4 percent) and 1 in 5 Hispanic children (20.9 percent) were poor, compared with 1 in 12 white, non-Hispanic children (8.3 percent) and 1 in 14 Asian children (7.3 percent).²

Almost half of all children living in poverty lived in extreme poverty.

4.5 million children—about 1 in 16—lived in extreme poverty, defined as an annual income of less than half the poverty level, and living on expenses of less than **\$36 a day**. That's 6.2 percent of all children in our nation.

Our youngest children were the poorest during their years of greatest brain development.

Three million children under five were living in poverty in 2019. Nearly 1 in 6 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers ages 0-4 were poor (15.7 percent), a slight decrease from 17.7 percent in 2018.

More than 70 percent of poor children lived in working families in 2019,³ struggling to make ends meet despite being connected to the labor force.

More than two-thirds of poor children had at least one family member who worked in 2019, and more than one-third (33.7 percent) had at least one family member who worked full-time year-round.

Government programs help lift millions of children out of poverty.

The Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) expands on OPM by analyzing the impact of various government programs and resources and finds that 12.5 percent of children lived in poverty in 2019 compared to 13.7 percent in 2018. The SPM data shows how poverty would be far more widespread if not for key federal programs that help lift millions of children above poverty. Below are government programs included in the SPM and the number of children lifted out of poverty because of each program:

- **Refundable Tax Credits:** 4,015,000
- **SNAP:** 994,000
- **Social Security:** 1,436,000

¹ Data for American Indian/Alaska Native children is not reported in the Current Population Survey (CPS) Detailed Tables for Poverty and raw data is not yet available for analysis. However, historic data confirms American Indian/Alaska Native children also suffer poverty at disproportionate rates. In 2018, nearly 1 in 3 American Indian/Alaska Native children (29.1 percent) were poor.

² "Black" and "Asian" racial categories, as reported in CPS Detailed Tables for Poverty, include children of Hispanic ethnicity. "Hispanic" children can be of any race.

³ Working families are defined here as families with at least one working member.

- **Housing Subsidies:** 763,000
- **School Lunch:** 661,000
- **Child Support Received:** 365,000
- **SSI:** 536,000
- **TANF/General Assistance:** 160,000
- **WIC:** 127,000
- **Unemployment Insurance:** 133,000
- **LIHEAP:** 30,000
- **Workers' Compensation:** 18,000

COVID-19 deeply hurts our Black and Brown children and exposes our unequal and unjust society.

Children need consistent, stable, and supportive environments to grow and thrive. Yet children, particularly Black and Brown children, were the poorest Americans at the outset of the pandemic and are now being hit hardest, threatening their long-term growth and development. According to the most recent Census Pulse Survey in August:

- More than half of adults in households with children (51 percent) report that they or another member of the household have lost employment income since the start of the pandemic.
- Nearly 1 in 4 adults in households with children (22 percent) are behind on rent.
- 1 in 7 (14 percent) said their children are not getting enough to eat.
- Sixty-percent of the poorest households with children have been forced to hold off or postpone in-person healthcare visits to the doctor due to financial pressures.

A Research from the [Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development Survey - Early Childhood \(RAPID-EC\)](#) out of the University of Oregon finds that in August:

- Forty-two percent of households with young children anticipated having difficulty paying for basic needs.
- Fifty-nine percent of Black, 61 percent of Latinx, and 60 percent of single-parent households with young children had the highest rates of anticipated difficulty in paying for basic needs.
- Two-thirds of households with young children living below 150% (about \$36,000 for a family of four with two children) of the poverty line are having difficulty paying for basic needs.