

# Poverty in Early Childhood



## Poverty in Early Childhood by the Numbers

Young children are the most likely to experience poverty among all age groups in the U.S.

- 1 in 5, or 4.2 million, children under age five experienced poverty in 2015.
- 2.1 million children under age five experienced deep poverty in 2015 – half of all the young children who experienced poverty.
- Early childhood poverty grew during the Great Recession, and has remained high through the recovery, remaining above 20 percent.

**Poverty:** In 2015, a family of three with one parent and two children lived in poverty if the family earned less than **\$19,096** per year

**Deep Poverty:** In 2015, a family of three lived in deep poverty if it earned less than **\$9,548** per year, or half the poverty threshold.<sup>i</sup>

Annual wages for one full-time, full-year worker earning the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour are \$15,080. In comparison, the Economic Policy Institute estimates that a household consisting of one adult and two children needs a median annual income of \$56,839 to attain an adequate standard of living.<sup>ii</sup>

## Poverty does not impact all children equally

Children of color are significantly more likely to be affected by poverty than white children in the U.S. In 2015:<sup>iii</sup>

**12.8** percent of white children under age five lived in poverty

**11.9** percent of Asian children under age five lived in poverty<sup>\*</sup>

**30.2** percent of Hispanic or Latino children under age five lived in poverty

**39.1** percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native children under age six lived in poverty<sup>iv</sup>

**45.5** percent of black children under age five lived in poverty

**30.4** percent of Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander children under age six lived in poverty<sup>v</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>While the poverty rate for Asian children is relatively low compared to other racial groups, this figure masks deeper levels of poverty experienced by certain ethnic groups. For example, 30.2 percent of Hmong children lived in poverty in 2015.<sup>vi</sup>

By 2020 more than half of all children in the U.S. will be children of color,<sup>vii</sup> and already half of all children under five are children of color.<sup>viii</sup> As racial disparities in early childhood poverty expose increasingly larger segments of the young child population to poorer outcomes, policymakers and early childhood stakeholders should find it increasingly urgent to address both the causes and the symptoms of racial disparities in poverty rates.

## Poverty impacts development in early childhood

Early childhood is a critical period of physical and social-emotional development. In the first years of life, 700 to 1,000 new neural connections are formed every second, shaping the brain's architecture in a way that influences learning, health and behavior for a lifetime.<sup>ix</sup> Poverty influences this process by bringing a host of stressors and hardships into a child's life and influencing relationships with caregivers and others in a child's social network. In the absence of adequate buffering relationships and supports, such stressors can adversely impact the architecture of a young child's rapidly developing brain.

# Poverty has cumulative effects that undermine health, learning and social-emotional development

Growing up in a household with material hardship creates inequitable opportunities and increased exposure to risk factors for young children, when compared to children who do not live in poverty. This in turn leads to inequities in opportunities for optimal health, learning and social-emotional development for young children living in poverty.

## Health

Early childhood poverty is a health concern even before a child is born.

- Children born to families experiencing poverty are more likely to be born premature and at a low birth weight, and more likely to have their health rated as fair or poor by their caregivers.<sup>x</sup>
- Children who are born preterm or with a low birth weight are more likely to develop chronic diseases like obesity, diabetes and heart disease as adults.<sup>xi</sup>
- Children who experience poverty are more likely to develop asthma.<sup>xii</sup>
- Inadequate or unsafe housing – where families experiencing poverty are often forced to live – is associated with asthma, lead exposure and injuries,<sup>xiii</sup> as well as reduced opportunities for play and exercise.
- Lack of safe spaces to play and poor nutrition both contribute to an increased risk of obesity in early childhood, which can impact physical and mental health for a lifetime.

## Learning and Academic Achievement

The strain poverty creates on families negatively impacts a young child's ability to learn.

- Young children who experience poverty in the first years of life are approximately 30 percent less likely to complete high school than children who don't experience poverty until later in life.<sup>xiv</sup>
- Family income is closely associated with academic achievement. In fact, family income is now considered as nearly as strong a predictor of a child's academic success as parental education level.<sup>xv</sup>
- Young children living in poverty often experience chronic stress which can lead to elevated cortisol levels, adversely impacting their executive function and ability to learn.<sup>xvi</sup>
- In instances when young children experiencing poverty display cognitive, speech or language delays, they may also be less likely to have access to critical services that can quickly identify such delays and help to address them.

## Social-Emotional Development

Young children's social-emotional development can also be impacted by the stressors associated with poverty, putting them at an increased risk for behavioral and emotional problems.

- Parents of children experiencing poverty are twice as likely to report that their children are at-risk for developmental delays as parents of children who are not experiencing poverty.<sup>xvii</sup>
- Only 48 percent of parents experiencing deep poverty reported that their child was "flourishing"<sup>xviii</sup> developmentally, compared to 72 percent of parents of children not experiencing poverty.<sup>xix</sup>
- Poverty also affects a caregiver's ability to create a stable environment for a young child. When parents and caregivers experience significant stress and uncertainty in daily life, and must dedicate considerable time and energy to meeting a child's basic needs with limited means, their ability to parent optimally may be diminished.

## Poverty in childhood increases the likelihood of poverty in adulthood

Over time, greater exposure to poverty in childhood – either cyclical or chronic – makes it more likely that a child will have a hard time escaping poverty in adulthood, feeding an intergenerational cycle of poverty. Children who experience poverty for at least half of their childhood are 37 percent less likely to be consistently employed as young adults than children who experienced shorter durations of poverty or did not experience poverty at all.<sup>xx</sup>

## How Can We Better Support Young Children and Their Families?

Local leaders have several opportunities to ensure that all young children have the support they need to thrive. The consequences of poverty in early childhood can be prevented and mitigated through the provision of high-quality, accessible and responsive programs and services. However, to address the root causes of poverty, a broader shift in policy is also needed. To learn more, read CSSP's brief [Supporting Young Children: Addressing Poverty, Promoting Opportunity and Advancing Equity in Early Childhood](#).

For citations, please visit <http://www.cssp.org/policy/2016/Poverty-in-Early-Childhood-Citations.pdf>.