Poverty Matters

The Cost of Child Poverty in America

by

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Children’s Defense Fund
The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) exists to provide a strong and effective voice for all the children of America, who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor and minority children and those with disabilities. Our goal is to educate the nation about the needs of children and encourage preventive investment in children before they get sick, drop out of school, suffer family breakdown, or get into trouble. In 1998, CDF will celebrate 25 years of advocacy, service, and leadership to build a movement to Leave No Child Behind and to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start in life with nurturing families and in caring communities.
Contents

Key Findings and Recommendations 1

Chapter 1: The Odds Against Poor Children 5

Chapter 2: Can Ending Poverty Really Help? 9

Chapter 3: Economic Costs of Children’s Poverty: Updated Estimates 14

Chapter 4: Why Does Poverty Hurt Children? 22

Chapter 5: How to End Child Poverty 33

Endnotes 37
In this prosperous nation, it is sometimes hard to picture why a secure family income matters. What could more money buy for a typical poor child in America that middle-income children rarely do without?

For some poor children, the answer is nutritious food. For others, it is safe shelter. For others, a children’s book and a quiet well-lit room where they can learn to read it. Or a functioning car that carries them to a dependable child care center or a doctor’s office, or to a music lesson or sports practice if they’re older. Or just the quiet home and peace of mind that allows a parent and child to spend attentive time together, playing, talking, or listening.

Thanks to their parents’ incomes, most American children are sheltered from hunger. They do not live with crumbling plaster and rats in their bedrooms, in small apartments crowded by people saving on rent. They do not skip breakfast from necessity or shirk English class because they cannot afford new notebooks. They do not fall hopelessly behind in high school for lack of new eyeglasses to see the blackboard or drop out in order to earn a few extra dollars for their families. They do not give up on ever having careers because they see no hope of going to college.

Why Does Growing Up Poor Matter?
Rather than a single answer, research suggests a cascade of reasons — some large, some small, but so many and so varied that virtually no corner of a poor child’s life is entirely safe. Together they add up and multiply to fill a child’s life with heightened barriers, narrowed horizons, and deepened risks.

Figure 1 shows just some of the detailed reasons why low income appears to hurt children. Each of the arrows in the diagram represents a risk factor that is documented further in Wasting America’s Future.

More Stress, More Conflict
For example, stress and conflict related to low income can undermine the strength of a family. Lower income parents report feeling more economic pressure, argue more about money, and use more harsh and inconsistent discipline with their children. These family effects can account for most of the association between low income and bad grades in school, according to a study of Iowa 10th-graders and their families.48

Economic strain can even result in family breakup. Poor married parents not only argue more but they also break up at twice the rate of nonpoor families. During recession years, moreover, children enter mother-only families at twice the rate of nonrecession years. Growing up in a single parent family is associated with psychological, behavioral, and other problems later on.49

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Examples of documented pathways from poverty to adverse child outcomes

**Poverty**
- Poor nutrition
  - Iron deficiency
  - Anemia and problems with problem-solving, motor coordination, attention, concentration, and lower long-term IQ scores

**Family stress**
- Perceived financial hardship
- Parental stress and depression
- Family conflict, less effective parenting behavior, marital strain, and breakup
- Child behavior problems, aggressiveness, delinquency, and learning problems

**Lesser resources for learning**
- Inferior child care
- Child must work or care for siblings
- Fewer books and lessons, fewer family trips and extracurricular activities
- Financial barriers to college

**Housing problems**
- Homelessness
- Frequent moving
- Utility shut-offs
- Water leakage
- Peeling paint, falling plaster, and fewer opportunities to clean and repaint

- Infant mortality, chronic diarrhea, asthma, delayed immunizations, family separation, and missed school
- Not completing high school
- Home fire deaths
- Mold and cockroaches
- Lead poisoning
- Low birthweight, hearing loss, brain and kidney damage, reading disability, lower IQ scores, dropping out of school, and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder

Limited Learning Opportunities at Home
Nationwide interviews and in-home observations have found fewer learning materials, strained parent-child interactions, and physical problems such as bad lighting in poorer children’s homes. A composite measure of these differences can account for about one-quarter to one-third of the lower reading, math, and vocabulary scores among poorer preschoolers and elementary schoolchildren, scholars Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn have noted. Previous research in Atlanta had found that disadvantaged children had fewer books or computers and were less likely to attend camp, have athletic or music classes, or go on family trips; each of these shortfalls was related to lower academic achievement.50

Lower Quality Child Care
Good quality child care centers charge an average of $4,800 a year for a 4-year-old in full-time care, according to a 1990 government study. This is more than half of the income of the average poor family with children and far above what poor families can afford to pay. As a result, many low-income children wind up in low-quality care that offers them few opportunities for learning.

“A sizable minority of care arrangements available to low-income children falls into a range of quality that some conclude may compromise development,” warned the National Academy of Sciences.52 One government study found that “child care homes where poor infants were cared for... provided relatively few social and environmental supports for the children’s development” compared with homes that cared for nonpoor children.53

Poor Nutrition
Figure 1 also traces some the results of inadequate nutrition. One is higher rates of iron deficiency among poor children. Low iron is associated with lifelong learning and behavior problems, such as lower IQ or showing signs of depression years later. Iron deficiency is also the major cause of anemia, which means the blood cells cannot carry enough oxygen throughout the body. More than one million low-income young children have anemia, which is a strong predictor of learning and behavior problems later on.54

Bad Housing
Other problems stem from bad housing (see Figure 2). For example, faulty pipes and other water leakage (affecting 22.5 percent of poor children in 1989 compared with 14.5 percent of the nonpoor) can result in mold and roach infestation. These in turn cause many children to develop respiratory diseases (like asthma), which are the major chronic diseases causing children to miss school.55

Lead Poisoning
Low-income children also have more than triple the risk of lead poisoning, which causes neurological damage and has been linked to lower IQ and long-term behavior problems, ranging from inability to concentrate to violent behavior such as attacking teachers with knives or scissors.

Many poor families cannot afford to test their homes for lead paint or to move into a safer home. Nor can they afford to maintain their homes and have them repainted.
Consequently more old lead paint is exposed, and gradually it comes off the walls as dust. Children who get the dust on their fingers and eat it are poisoned. (See One Example of the Costs of Child Poverty on page 16.)

**Unaffordable Housing**

Housing affordability problems can likewise have serious consequences (see Figure 3). Nearly three out of four poor families with children cannot afford their rent or mortgage and utility payments based on federal housing affordability guidelines. These guidelines specify that no more than 30 percent of income should be spent on housing, in order to leave money for food and other needs. Inability to afford housing and utilities is one reason why poor families move frequently from home to home and from school to school, as parents are forced to seek cheaper housing, double up temporarily with friends and family, or try to stay ahead of eviction notices and bill collectors. Children who move and change schools tend to have lower math and reading scores and are significantly less likely to finish high school on time.56

**Homelessness**

The worst housing affordability problems result in homelessness. In 1995, for example, nearly one in 10 poor young
Children in New York City spent time in the city’s public homeless shelters — a higher proportion than any other age group. Children who become homeless are exposed to the communicable diseases and chaos found in shelters and suffer increased infant mortality, chronic diarrhea, asthma, delayed immunizations, family separation, missed school, and other damage.  

**Fewer Transportation Options**

Even tasks as simple as looking for a job, shopping for cheaper food, or bringing a child to sports practice or well-child checkups are more difficult in poverty. Poor families are eight times more likely than the nonpoor to have no car or truck (23 percent versus 3 percent in 1993).

**Greater Isolation**

Many poor families have no telephone (23 percent versus 3 percent in nonpoor families in 1992). Even cashing a paycheck can be costly for poor families, who may have to rely on expensive check-cashing establishments because they cannot afford...
the transportation to a bank or the minimum monthly balance required to maintain a bank account.

**Brain Development and the Early Years**

Duncan and Brooks-Gunn have noted that young children may be particularly vulnerable to some of poverty’s enduring effects. In a study of how many years of education children eventually complete, they found evidence that family income matters much more during the earliest five years of childhood than in middle or late childhood.\(^5\)

The findings appear to be consistent with recent research emphasizing the long-lasting importance of children’s early brain development. Some experts believe that poverty-related problems — such as lack of stimulating opportunities for infants and toddlers to learn in the home or while in child care, poor nutrition, or stressful family and child care situations — may contribute to understimulation, elevated levels of stress hormones in the brain, or other problems that in turn may interfere with some poor children’s early brain development.\(^5\)

**Problems That Add Up and Interact**

Picture a seventh-grader struggling to do well in school. Perhaps child poverty means she cannot concentrate properly on her homework one night because the power company has shut off the lights. The next night she cannot concentrate because she’s hungry. The night after that she cannot concentrate because people are shouting and arguing in her crowded apartment building. The next night she cannot concentrate because her brother’s asthma has flared up and the family must make a long nighttime trip to the emergency room by bus. By the end of the week, she is tired and has fallen further behind in her studies.

The number and breadth of problems assailing poor children wears down their resilience by forcing them to fight battles on many fronts at once. A child with a wealth of resources can absorb a minor illness or other setback and then compensate or catch up. But for poor children who are faced with more setbacks than other children, the cumulative weight of assaults can be overwhelming.

Some experts believe that the number of setbacks a child suffers often matters as much or more than what the setbacks are (see Figure 4). In one study, for example, more than half of adolescent delinquents

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**Respiratory problems and bad housing**

When 5-year-old Jose and his 3-year-old sister Maria suddenly developed breathing problems, their doctor was puzzled. The usual medical treatments didn’t work, and the symptoms persisted even after their mother followed instructions to rid the apartment of rugs, dust, and cockroaches. The pediatrician initially disregarded the mother’s frustration with her neighbor’s smoking — until she realized that the smoke flowed right into the family’s apartment through a large hole in the living room wall.

*From Not Safe at Home: How America’s Housing Crisis Threatens the Health of Its Children*  
The Doc4Kids Project, Boston Medical Center and Boston Children’s Hospital
and half of adolescents with severe mental health problems had grown up with five or more separate setbacks — such as being born to a poor family, having health problems at birth, having unmarried parents, and having a low IQ. Among children who were neither delinquent nor seriously mentally disturbed, the majority had no more than two setbacks. If having many different setbacks is in turn the result of having many unmet basic needs, then a recent government analysis should sound a dire warning. The analysis concluded that Americans living in poor families are four times more likely than the nonpoor (55 percent versus 13 percent) to have at least one of the following basic deprivations: utilities shut off, no phone at all or phone disconnected, housing with upkeep problems, not enough food in the past four months, crowded housing, no refrigerator, or no stove. Moreover, poor

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**Poverty and schools**

Poverty can thwart children’s right to equal education in many ways. Because of where they are compelled to live, “students from poor families usually receive their education in the poorest schools,” according to the National Academy of Sciences. “These schools have fewer financial and material resources, and they are often unable to retain the most skilled administrators and teachers. Student achievement levels in these schools are significantly lower on virtually all measures than for students in suburban schools.”

Poor students have less access to computers at school as well as at home, and, nationwide, third-grade teachers in the poorest schools are two to four times more likely to report inadequate supplies of textbooks, workbooks, and audiovisual equipment compared with teachers in the schools with the least poverty.

Thirty-four states allow schools to charge fees for academic or extracurricular activities. Although some states require schools to waive fees for poor students, a student’s reluctance to admit to poverty, as well as noncompliance by school administrators, can mean that fees are charged anyway.

In Utah, one parent recounted:

> My daughter was told that this year the fees couldn't be waived. They threatened to withhold her grades and diploma, and they always hounded her for money. I didn't have a job, and we didn't have any money, but every couple of weeks they would pressure my daughter for the money. She finally gave up and dropped out of school.
family members are nine times more likely (27 percent versus 3 percent) to have at least two of these deprivations. And the poor are 12 times more likely to have at least three of these deprivations at once.

Does it matter if poverty keeps a young child from having a well-lit, uncrowded home in which to learn?

Maybe not very much by itself — that is, if the child has the kind of high-quality child care that stimulates learning outside the home. In turn, not having good child care may not be as crucial if one's parents can pay the bills and avoid prolonged bouts of depression so they can provide steady discipline, attention, and emotional warmth. Having distressed parents may not matter as much to a healthy, well-nourished, good tempered child because most parents relate better to such children and find them easier to nurture. And not being healthy and good tempered may be less important if a child has regular care from a good family doctor because ongo-

**Figure 4**

**Number of selected deprivations among poor and nonpoor Americans**

![Diagram showing the percentage of poor and nonpoor Americans with different numbers of deprivations.](image)

Deprivations included: utilities shut off, no phone at all or phone disconnected, housing with upkeep problems, not enough food in the past four months, crowded housing, no refrigerator, or no stove.

‘I had to work starting when I was 10’

It was hard to focus on school when you were worrying about survival — things like how to get home from school safely and how we were going to eat that night. In high school, I was a D student. I grew up in the projects, sharing my bedroom with two older sisters, with plenty of crime and poverty around us.

I had to work starting when I was 10. My whole life focus was not on learning; it was on staying alive. I had two or three odd jobs, from cutting grass to working in a janitorial service. That was not for saving for a bicycle but to help to pay for rent and food. The bills don’t stop coming in because you’re poor; they have to get paid. I couldn’t sit back and complain.

But having to get up the next morning to go to school was hard. Athletics really saved me. Before the ninth grade I had to work multiple jobs. Then in the ninth grade my older sister got a job in a textile factory. That money let me have just one job after school, instead of two or three. That let me start playing sports, which I was never able to play before.

My grades didn’t get better, but at least I had something that kept me coming to school. I didn’t learn how to study because school wasn’t as important as survival. Also being in remedial classes and low-level special ed classes made it hard. Still, I showed I had talent in class and in sports. I went to Hampton University on a full athletic scholarship. It took me well into my junior year of college to realize I was finally in a nurturing environment, where it wasn’t about survival. Where I could find material that related to my life and described people who looked like me, an African American. Where I could focus on my studies.

And I began to get all As.

Charles Kinard, MSW, ABD
Connecticut Department of Children and Families

Children living in poverty experience double jeopardy. First, they are exposed more frequently to such risks as medical illness, family stress, inadequate social support, and parental depression. Secondly, they experience more serious consequences from these risks than do children from higher socioeconomic status.

Sometimes the risks associated with poverty clearly do more than add up — they interact in ways that multiply the damage to children still further. This interaction can explain why poor children at times seem more vulnerable to particular
harmful influences, or suffer worse consequences than wealthier children from the very same illnesses and setbacks.

One example is the virulent interaction between lead poisoning and iron deficiency. Because of bad housing and poor nutrition, poor children suffer more from both of these conditions. By themselves, these two illnesses are bad enough. When they interact in a child’s body, however, the damage to the brain and nervous system is much worse. Blood cells need iron, and, failing to find enough of it, they will bond to other, similar metals, including lead in the child’s bloodstream. As a result, iron-deficient children absorb more of the poiso-

Shame, fear, and anger

Susan was raised in poverty, and I am still learning the many ways it hurt her. I am her mother. Susan was born two weeks after my 18th birthday, and by the time she was 12 we had moved more than 30 times, always one step ahead of or behind the eviction notices, gas and light disconnect notices, and various other bills haunting our mailbox. We laughed a lot and tried to make it an adventure, like the time she was 6 and the two of us had to move our bed across town on a bus.

But then I would cry and cry and cry for days at a time. Being poor made me crazy, and Susan learned to be my support, caretaker, and defender before she could read. She made herself into a model child so that people would say I was a good mother and let us stay together.

A few times I tried to kill myself out of fear and shame at not being able to keep a roof over our heads, out of anger over not being able to keep a job, and needing to return over and over again to welfare out of desperation whenever the welfare department would cut off my eligibility by mistake. Whenever I was put into a mental hospital, Susan would stay with my mother and father. What I didn’t know until she was grown was that my brother was forcing sex on her each time she stayed with them. She was so afraid of what would happen to our little family that she hid her pain.

Poverty was more than not having enough. It was about not having any control over the most intimate parts of our lives, and, for me, about feeling shame, fear, and anger all the time. After more than 20 low-wage jobs, I enrolled in college when Susan was 8. A few years later we received a rent subsidy that allowed us to stay in one place. Things got a bit better. For the first time in either of our lives, we had community, permanent friends, and a sense of belonging. Today, Susan and I are successful professionals, and best friends. It didn’t take much: a rent subsidy, a generous state university admissions policy, and access to mental health services. The rest we did on our own.

Anne, an employment training manager in Oregon
nous metal than would healthier children who ingest the same amount of lead.

Other interactions happen, not in the bloodstream, but in the child’s family or neighborhood. Even the parents’ role in nurturing their own children appears to be weakened by the interacting effects of economic stress and poor social support. Poor parents tend to treat their children more harshly than other parents—a finding accounted for in a number of studies by poor parents’ greater feelings of economic stress.

The harsher treatment vanishes, however, if poor parents have strong social support, according to one nationwide study. The study defined strong social support as having at least three people the parent can call in a crisis or in the middle of the night. Poor parents who lack strong social supports are twice as likely as nonpoor parents to admit yelling or slapping their children very often. But among poor parents with strong support, yelling and slapping are virtually no more common than among the nonpoor. Unfortunately, however, poor parents are less likely than wealthier parents to have strong support. Many even lack phone service, as well as a job, a working car, or other ways of keeping in touch with a support network of family, coworkers, and friends.

Whether occurring on the molecular level or the family or neighborhood level, the accumulating and interacting effects of poverty too often strain the capacity of poor children and their families to recover from the multiple problems that poverty strews in their path.