

Understanding Very High Rates of Young Child Poverty in the South

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More children live in poverty in the rural South than in any other region of the country. In 2008, 17 percent of families with children under age 18 in the South lived in poverty, according to the American Community Survey (ACS) (see Table 1).¹ In contrast, an estimated 13 percent of families in the Northeast and 14 percent in the Midwest and West were living below the poverty line.

In 2008, the federal poverty threshold for a couple with two children in the United States was \$21,834.³

The very youngest children are particularly vulnerable. Nationally, the poverty rate for children under age 6 has been increasing slowly but steadily from 19 percent in 2000 to 21 percent in 2008.⁴ In the South, where young child poverty rates are consistently the highest, the percentage of children under age 6 in poverty stood at almost 24 percent in 2008. Poverty is alarmingly high in rural areas and central cities in the South, where nearly one in three children under age 6 now lives in poverty.⁵ Some southern states experience far higher rates. In this brief, we outline some of the demographic patterns associated with high poverty rates among children in the South.⁶

Young children are most vulnerable to the negative effects of being poor. Specifically, physical and emotional health, quality of education, and behavioral issues are all more frequent and severe among those who have experienced poverty as young children.⁷ Many poor preschool-age children do not have access to the variety of educational, nutritional, and social resources often provided through public school systems. Moreover, the deleterious effects of poverty often extend into older childhood and adulthood.⁸

Key Findings

- Poverty rates are significantly higher in the South for all families (11 percent), and for families with children under 18 (17 percent).
- In the South, 28 percent of families with children under age 18 are headed by single mothers. Thirty-eight percent of these families are in poverty.
- Black and Hispanic families make up 34 percent of the population in the South, and they are significantly more likely to be in poverty than their white counterparts.²
- In Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Mississippi, poverty rates for black, single-mother households exceed 40 percent.
- In Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas, poverty rates for Hispanic female-headed households are estimated at 40 percent or higher.
- When states in the upper South (Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia) are removed from calculations, the poverty rate for children under 18 jumps from 26 to 28 percent in rural areas and from 15 to 18 percent in suburban areas.
- Children under age 6 in the South are more likely to be in poverty if they reside in rural or urban areas. Suburban southern children are the least likely to be poor.

The Southern Region has More Risk Factors for Poverty

The southern United States differs from other regions of the country in poverty “risk” factors, such as family structure and education levels. The South, for example, has a higher share of minorities than other regions coupled with a legacy of slavery and racial discrimination that continues to adversely affect minority families and children, which contributes to its higher poverty rates. African Americans and Hispanics typically experience higher rates of poverty compared with whites. African Americans make up almost 19 percent of the population in the South, the highest of any region. In the Northeast, by contrast, only 10.9 percent of the population is

TABLE 1. POVERTY RATES BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE, BY REGION

		ALL FAMILIES		MARRIED COUPLES		FEMALE HEADED	
		Percent in poverty	Margin of error (+/-)	Percent in poverty	Margin of error (+/-)	Percent in poverty	Margin of error (+/-)
NORTHEAST	All families	8.3%	0.1	3.6%	0.1	24.8%	0.5
	With related children under 18 years	13.1%	0.2	4.8%	0.2	33.8%	0.7
MIDWEST	All families	8.8%	0.1	3.7%	0.1	29.6%	0.4
	With related children under 18 years	14.2%	0.2	5.1%	0.1	37.9%	0.6
SOUTH	All families	11.0%	0.1	5.4%	0.1	30.1%	0.3
	With related children under 18 years	16.9%	0.2	7.5%	0.2	38.2%	0.4
WEST	All families	9.3%	0.1	5.2%	0.1	25.1%	0.5
	With related children under 18 years	14.1%	0.2	7.5%	0.2	32.8%	0.6

Data: Based on 2008 American Community Survey estimates.

African American. Because of a rapid influx of immigrants, Hispanics now make up almost 15 percent of the total population in the South. In Arkansas, Georgia, and North and South Carolina, for example, the Hispanic population increased approximately 80 percent between 2000 and 2008.⁹ Combined, blacks and Hispanics make up more than one-third of South's population.

Low educational attainment also contributes to high rates of poverty. The South has the highest percentage of individuals (age 25 and older) who have less than a high school education, at almost 17 percent. This compares with about 13 percent in the Northeast, 12 percent in the Midwest, and 16 percent in the West. In the South, the percentage of the population that has finished college is also the lowest in the country.

The children of highly educated parents are less likely to be poor than children whose parents are less educated. In fact, more than one-quarter of individuals in the South without a high school diploma live in poverty, compared with 13 percent of people with a high school diploma and 8.5 percent of individuals with a bachelor's degree. Females without a high school diploma in the South also have the lowest median earnings of any region, at \$14,082.

High child poverty rates in the South are also exacerbated by divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing. Indeed, southern families are more likely than families in other regions to be headed by a female.¹⁰ Among all female-headed households in that region, an estimated 38 percent resides in poverty, compared with only 7.5 percent of married-couple families with children, as shown in Table 1. Overall, married-couple families experience much lower rates of poverty across all races, and among white, married couples, poverty rates are less than 7 percent in all but two southern states.

State-by-State Contrasts

The South is not one monolithic region. In most southern states, as well as the District of Columbia, and for all racial groups, poverty rates among female-headed households are significantly higher than those of married-couple households. Black and Hispanic families of all types have higher poverty rates than their white counterparts, although marriage appears to act as a protective factor against poverty among all three races. The poverty rates among black single mothers in Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Mississippi are 40 percent or higher. Poverty rates for all Hispanics in Kentucky are similarly high. Among whites, eight states have female-headed poverty rates greater than 25 percent. Likewise, poverty rates for young children vary widely:

- Young child poverty is very high in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia.
- In Florida, young child poverty is highest in rural places.
- In an additional eight states (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas), rural young child poverty is similar to urban child poverty yet significantly higher than in the suburbs.
- Poverty rates for young children in states that border the North (such as Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia) are considerably lower (and even less than the national average of 21.3 percent) than rates found in remaining southern states.

Conclusion

Much has been written about “at risk” children. The poverty gap between children living in female-headed households and other “high-poverty” groups has widened in recent years, as rates of poverty for other groups have declined while rates among single mothers have remained steady.¹² Occupational sex segregation, high rates of divorce, and more significantly, out-of-wedlock births have contributed to the feminization of poverty. Policy makers are sharply divided as to how to address the issue.

High rates of child poverty in the South are rooted in many factors. Historically, the region was home to destructive racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans. Today this segregation still exists in many forms, with many blacks in the Deep South living in segregated areas of concentrated poverty.¹³ In addition, with the recent economic recession, many of the jobs that drew immigrants have disappeared.¹⁴ Manufacturing work, once available to many in the South, has declined precipitously, replaced by service jobs that are less likely to provide stability, sufficient pay, and benefits. Further, unionization rates, often an indication of the presence of steady, well-paying jobs, are lowest in the South. In fact, the five states with the lowest union membership are all located in that region.¹⁵

ACS data also reveal a link between family structure and poverty. In all regions of the country, families with children headed by single women are more likely to be in poverty than married-couple families. Nationally, 28.7 percent of households headed by single women are poor, compared with 5.5 percent of married-couple families.¹⁶ In the South, a number of states report poverty rates among female-headed households that are higher than the national average, with many of the highest rates found among black and Hispanic single mothers and their children.

Given that non-whites, female-headed households, and the less educated are more likely to be in poverty, these groups are important to target when addressing child poverty. The intersection of education and household status, for example, means that children living in these families are at even higher risk. Female heads of households with children under 18 are more likely to be in the labor force in the South than in any of the other regions of the country, but they are less likely to have completed high school.¹⁷ Coupled with the difficulty many parents face in finding safe, affordable, and consistent child care, access to reliable transportation, and skills or training opportunities necessary to obtain dependable employment, providing income to meet basic needs and live above the poverty line often becomes an insurmountable task.

Poverty policy targeting families with young children should be a priority, with a focus on female-headed and minority families. Although the recent economic crisis has affected all regions of the country, children in the South

appear to be at increased risk for poverty. Given that many of the long-term adverse effects of poverty in children are known, more must be done in the South and elsewhere to reduce the incidence of poverty among these youngest citizens through improved educational, health, childcare, and nutrition programs and family friendly employment policies. Such policies may be most effectively developed and implemented initially at the community or county level through locally developed programs well tailored to suit the needs of the poor in that area. State and federal programs, although larger in scope and funding, often do not efficiently address the need for collective community action and the potential power embedded in local programs.

Finally, it is worth noting that this brief focused exclusively on those below the federal poverty threshold. In 2008, the federal poverty threshold for a couple with two children in the United States was \$21,834.¹⁸ Several studies, however, show that families often require much higher incomes than those set by federal poverty guidelines in order to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, and care, as housing, transportation, and child care costs can easily exceed this figure.¹⁹ Basic needs vary by location and family structure, as costs vary widely from place to place and among different family types. In fact, the number of American families not meeting this “basic needs” threshold is much higher than federal poverty levels indicate.²⁰ In Rapides Parish, Louisiana, for example, where the poverty rate stands at 48 percent for female-headed households with children under 18, the basic needs budget calculated by the National Center for Children in Poverty estimates that a single-parent family with two young children would need an annual income of \$30,816 to afford basic necessities.²¹ These figures translate to an hourly wage of \$15, or more than double the federal minimum wage.²² The official poverty threshold for this family size is only \$17,600.²³ Thus, benefits of policy efforts to alleviate poverty may well assist many more families who are struggling to make ends meet and who may be one crisis away from slipping into poverty.

Data

We used data released in 2009, reflecting patterns for 2008. This analysis is based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates from the 2008 American Community Survey released in fall 2009. The U.S. Census Bureau divides the United States into four major geographic regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. It releases demographic and poverty data via the American Community Survey (ACS) annually for these regions, as well as for individual states. The southern region consists of sixteen states and the District of Columbia. For more details or information, please refer to the ACS.²⁴ Tables were produced by aggregating information from detailed tables available on American FactFinder (http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en). These estimates are meant to give perspective on child poverty, but because they are based on survey data, caution must be used in comparing across years or places, as the margin of error may be high.²⁵ Differences highlighted in this brief are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Endnotes

1. Families, as defined by the ACS, include “a householder and one or more people living in the same household who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption. All people in a household who are related to the householder are regarded as members of his or her family. A family household may contain people not related to the householder, but those people are not included as part of the householder’s family in census tabulations. Thus, the number of family households is equal to the number of families, but family households may include more members than do families. A household can contain only one family for purposes of census tabulations. Not all households contain families since a household may comprise a group of unrelated people or one person living alone.” This is available through the American Community Survey, Definitions and Explanations.

2. The American Community Survey (ACS) is available at <http://bit.ly/btml11>.

3. For poverty thresholds of this and other family sizes, see U.S. Census Bureau, “Poverty Thresholds for 2008 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years” (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), available at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh08.html>.

4. Vanessa R. Wright and Michelle Chau, “Basic Facts about Low-Income Children, 2008: Children Under 6,” Fact Sheet (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, November 2009), available at http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/download_287.pdf.

5. Beth Mattingly, “Regional Young Child Poverty in 2008: Rural Midwest Sees Increased Poverty, While Urban Northeast Rates Decrease,” Issue Brief No. 6 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2009).

6. Note that owing to data limitations, we often look at the region as a whole in examining demographic patterns, as not all estimates are reliable by place given small sample sizes.

7. Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg J. Duncan, “The Effects of Poverty on Children,” *The Future of Children* 7 (1997), 55–71.

8. Anne Case, Angela Fertig, and Christina Paxson, “The Lasting Impact of Childhood Health and Circumstance” (Princeton, NJ: Center for Health and Well-Being, 2004).

9. See “Statistical Portrait of Hispanics in the United States 2008” (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2008), available at <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/hispanics2008/Table%2013.pdf>.

10. For female-headed rates of poverty in the South, see U.S. Census Bureau 2008 American Community Survey, “Poverty Status of Families” (Washington, DC: U.S. Census

Bureau, 2010), available at <http://bit.ly/c1dfp5>. Other regions are also available.

12. See Steven Pressman, “Feminist Explanations for the Feminization of Poverty,” *Journal of Economic Issues*, 37 (2) (2003): 353-361; and Karen Christopher et al., “The Gender Gap in Poverty in Modern Nations: Single Motherhood, the Market and the State,” *Sociological Perspectives*, 45 (3) (2002): 219–242.

13. William O’Hare, *The Forgotten Fifth: Child Poverty in Rural America*, A Carsey Institute Report on Rural America (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2009).

14. Julia Preston, “Latino Immigrants Hit by Jobs Shortage,” *New York Times*, June 5, 2008; Marc Lacey, “Money Trickles North as Mexicans Help Relatives” *New York Times*, November 15, 2009.

15. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “News Release: Union Members 2009,” (Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, January 2009), available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.

16. “Poverty in the United States: Frequently Asked Questions,” (Ann Arbor, MI: National Poverty Center, 2008), available at <http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>.

17. See 2008 American Community Survey Data Profiles, selected Economic Characteristics for the Southern region (detailing rates of employment), available at <http://bit.ly/9rFsRu>; and selected social characteristics for the southern region (detailing educational attainment), available at <http://bit.ly/9p8chA>. Other regions also available.

18. See <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh08.html>.

19. Basic needs budget methodology, detailing amounts needed for families to afford basic necessities, can be found at http://www.nccp.org/popup.php?name=budget_methodology.

20. See <http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/bp165/>.

21. See http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_858.html.

22. U.S. Department of Labor.

23. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008 Poverty Guidelines, available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/08poverty.shtml>.

24. U.S. Census Bureau 2008 American Community Survey, available at <http://factfinder.census.gov/>.

25. Refer to the U.S. Census Bureau’s published tables for detailed margins of error, found under “Accuracy of the Data,” available at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/Accuracy/Accuracy1.htm>.

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