Regional Young Child Poverty in 2008: Rural Midwest Sees Increased Poverty, While Urban Northeast Rates Decrease

American Community Survey (ACS) data released by the U.S. Census Bureau on September 29, 2009, reveal interesting trends in poverty for young children—under the age of 6. For those young children living in the rural Midwest, poverty rates increased by 1.7 percent over the past year, while rates for young children in the urban Northeast dropped by 0.7 percentage point. Also striking is the very high rate of young child poverty experienced by those in the South: Nearly one-third of young children in the rural South are poor.

Although all children suffer consequences of being poor, young children are especially vulnerable. Women in poverty are more likely to have babies of low birth weight, a correlate of later health problems, infant mortality, and more cognitive and emotional problems. Other challenges include poorer health, lower quality education and programs, lower cognitive and behavioral functioning, and greater parental stress. There is also evidence that poverty is associated with a lower quality home environment and less effective parenting practices. Being poor also means that families may have trouble accessing adequate quality food and young children may experience stunted growth. Poor children live in lower-quality housing. In many communities, this means young children are exposed to lead paint. Prenatal exposure and exposure at young ages through inhalation and ingestion of paint chips can lead to a variety of health problems and decreased intelligence. The consequences of early poverty ripple through the life cycle for many children. Childhood health problems often follow into adulthood, and early childhood poverty is correlated with fewer years of completed schooling.

While changes from 2007 through 2008 are important, they cannot fully reflect the current recession. ACS data are collected throughout the calendar year, so the 2008 data reflect January through December 2008. When data are available for 2009, we are likely to see a bleaker picture for poverty and for children in particular. Consensus among experts is that 2008 does not capture the worst effects of the recession. As Robert Greenstein of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities noted, a further weakened economy coupled with higher unemployment in 2009 may lead to the highest poverty rate in 50 years. Emily Monea and Isabel Sawhill predicted future poverty rates given the economic climate and found a bleak picture for America’s children, suggesting that by 2011, between 5.4 and 6.1 million more children will be living in poverty without dramatic changes.

Table 1 is restricted to very young children and shows 2008 estimates of those in poverty, poverty rates, and the change in poverty rates since 2007 by region and for the United States. Poverty determination is based on the U.S.

Key Findings

- Significant changes in poverty rates among children under 6 in 2008 included the following:
  - Estimated young child poverty in the rural Midwest was 22.8 percent, significantly higher than in 2007 (21.0 percent).
  - The young child poverty rate in Northeastern central cities fell by 0.7 percentage point to 27.6 percent. However, Northeastern central cities continue to have higher young child poverty rates than Northeastern rural and suburban places.
  - Young children in the rural South remain the most likely to be poor. Nearly one-third of young children in the rural South are poor.
  - Estimates suggest more than one in five American children under age 6 was in poverty in 2008.
  - In no urban, suburban, or rural regional breakdowns did the number of young children in poverty decline significantly since 2007, and some areas saw increases in the number of children under age 6 living in poverty.
Office of Management and Budget income thresholds, which vary by family composition. In 2008, the poverty line for a family of four (two adults, two children) was $21,834.

Observed differences are likely driven by a host of factors not captured here. These include the demographics of the population (race, single motherhood, parental education and employment, and so on) and local characteristics, including access to services, housing quality, social capital, and job market conditions.

Data released earlier this month by the Census Bureau showed that while young children remain the most likely to be in poverty, this group did not see overall increases in the national poverty rate at 21.3 percent in 2008.7 However, the Census Bureau’s own report indicates that the overall U.S. poverty rate jumped significantly from 2007, and more people in the United States are living in poverty than in any year since 1960.8 The Census report indicates that children have been especially hard hit by this recession: The poverty rate for all children under age 18 reached 19 percent in 2008, up from 18 percent a year earlier. Of all ages, children remain the group most likely to be poor.9 According to the Census report, they represent 24.6 percent of the population but 35.3 percent of those in poverty.

The ACS data allow examination of the poverty rate by state and place.

Table 2 shows estimated child poverty—under age 18—numbers and rates for each state, each region, and the nation, by rate. Rates by state and place are presented for illustrative purposes to guide comparisons, but in most cases, differences since 2007 are not statistically significant.

Persistent child poverty indicates a need for policies that focus on children, particularly in the early years. In this “great recession,” while it may be tempting to cut services to children and families, this is a time when policies need to target these groups and do a better job of assisting those who are in poverty. Additionally, since this recession is not over, and we have seen dramatic declines in income, many families above the poverty line may need additional support to remain afloat. Investing in children is an essential priority to ensure their successful long-term outcomes. Expanding the provisions provided for in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act may be an important first step, but other measures to address child poverty and focus on poverty reduction are also important. While President Barack Obama’s administration has taken important steps to assist struggling families, there is still important work to be done at both the federal and state levels. Keeping poverty reduction as a top policy priority will enhance the well-being of America’s children.

Data
This analysis is based upon U.S. Census Bureau estimates from the 2008 ACS released on September 29, 2009. For more details or information, please refer to the U.S. Census American Community Survey.10 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 since they are based on survey data, caution must be used in comparing across years or places, as the margin of error may indicate that seemingly disparate numbers fall within sampling error.11 Regional differences highlighted in this brief are statistically significant (p<0.05).

ENDNOTES
## TABLE 2. CHILD POVERTY BY PLACE SIZE IN 2008

**2008 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>RURAL</th>
<th>SUBURBAN</th>
<th>CENTRAL CITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Population under age 18 for whom poverty is determined</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
<td>11,187,926</td>
<td>2,499,004</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
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<td><strong>Percentage point changes are based on unrounded poverty percentages and may differ slightly from those that would be obtained using rounded figures.</strong></td>
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**Notes:**
- N/A = Not applicable.
- Levels of urbanization are defined as follows: rural consists of ACS geographic components “not in metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area” and “in micropolitan statistical area”; suburban includes “in metropolitan statistical area - not in principal city” and central city includes “in metropolitan statistical area - in principal city”.
- Data are based on 2008 American Community Survey estimates. For corresponding margins of error, refer to the US Census American Community Survey.
- Percentage point changes are based on unrounded poverty percentages and may differ slightly from those that would be obtained using rounded figures.


11. Refer to the U.S. Census Bureau’s published tables for detailed margins of error.