In September 2015, the Census Bureau released 2014 poverty data from the American Community Survey (ACS), the only regular source for reliably estimating child poverty in geographic areas below the state level using the official poverty measure. In this brief, we use ACS data to explore child poverty rates across the United States by region, state, and place type (rural, suburban, and city). We also examine data on children who are deeply poor (those in families with incomes below half of the poverty line), as well as low-income children (those in families with incomes less than twice the poverty line). We find that while child poverty declined nationwide between 2013 and 2014, that drop was not felt uniformly across the country: several states saw declines, a few states saw increases, and others saw no change at all. We also found substantial differences in the magnitude of change across rural places, suburbs, and cities.

Child Poverty Rates Vary by State

While child poverty declined overall, rates still vary tremendously across states, regions, and place types (see Table 1). Nationwide, 21.7 percent of children lived in poor families in 2014 (that is, with incomes below $19,073 for a single parent with two children), down 0.6 percentage point since 2013. Regionally, the Northeast retains the lowest child poverty rate, at 19.0 percent, while the highest rates continue to be found in cities (28.5 percent), followed by rural places (25.2 percent), and suburbs (16.8 percent). While child poverty declined in all place types between 2013 and 2014, declines across regions were not as consistent: the Northeast’s child

**KEY FINDINGS**

- In 2014, more than four in ten children (44.1 percent) lived in low-income families, defined as families with incomes below 200 percent of the official poverty line.

- More than one-fifth of children (21.7 percent) were poor, that is, lived below the poverty line, and nearly one-tenth (9.6 percent) lived in deep poverty, defined as having incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line.

- The share of children living in deep poverty, poor, and low-income homes declined between 2013 and 2014.

- The share of children living in low-income families did not rise in any state between 2013 and 2014, but the share of children living in poor families rose in four states that traditionally have low child poverty rates (Alaska, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and North Dakota). The share of children living in deep poverty rose in just two states: North Dakota and Maine.

- In all regions and place types (rural, suburban, and city), the share of poor and low-income children was higher in 2014 than at the official end of the Great Recession in 2009. In twenty states, child poverty rates were similar to post-recession levels, and in two states (Colorado and Montana), child poverty was lower than in 2009.

- In every state the poverty rate remained at or above where it stood in 2007, before the start of the Great Recession.
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Note: Change is displayed in percentage points and based on unrounded percentages. Results may differ slightly from those that would be obtained using rounded figures. Bold font indicates a statistically significant change (p<0.05). Margins of error (“+/-”) refer to the 95 percent confidence interval around the 2014 estimated percent. Source: American Community Survey, 2009, 2013, and 2014 1-year estimates.
poverty rate remained stable between 2013 and 2014 whereas other regions experienced a decline. Child poverty remained higher than in 2009 (post-recession) in nearly every region and place type, with the sole exception of the rural Midwest, where the 2014 child poverty rate was similar to the 2009 rate.

State-by-state variations in child poverty rates are illustrated in Figure 1. States with poverty rates below 15 percent included Connecticut, Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. At the other end of the spectrum, rates in Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington DC were above 25 percent. Between 2013 and 2014, changes in child poverty were not consistent across states: while fourteen witnessed a decline in child poverty over the year, four experienced a significant increase. Looking over a longer period—from the end of the Great Recession in 2009 until 2014—twenty states had child poverty rates similar to those at the end of the Great Recession, and two states—Colorado and Montana—had rates that were lower. Worth noting, however, is that the poverty rate has not fallen below its pre-recession rate in any state (data available upon request).

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY, 2014, OFFICIAL POVERTY MEASURE

Source: American Community Survey 2013 and 2014 1-year estimates.
Place-Based Patterns Persist in Other “Poverty” Measures

In addition to tracking trends in child poverty over time, the analysis of other income-based measures in conjunction with children’s designation as poor or not poor can further improve our understanding of children’s economic well-being. For instance, there is considerable evidence that the official poverty measure is an inadequate indicator of need, and multiple methods for improving assessments of income, including the U.S. Census Bureau’s Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM),² have been proposed. Although the data used here allow us to examine sub-state geographies, they do not provide SPM measures or the information necessary to compute the SPM. Instead, we expand our exploration of children’s economic well-being by documenting the share of children who live not only below 100 percent of the poverty line, as above, but also below 50 percent of the federal poverty line (“deeply poor”) and below 200 percent (“low income”).³

These categorizations have measured implications for children. First, we chose a “low-income” indicator of less than 200 percent of poverty based on research which has found that families require incomes between 1.5 and 3.5 times the federal poverty threshold to meet their most basic household needs.⁴ For a single parent with two children, the 200 percent threshold equates to $38,146 per year, $3,179 per month, or $34.84 per person, per day. Families with incomes below those levels very likely have difficulty meeting basic day-to-day needs, and parents may curtail spending on certain necessities like nutritious food or medications in order to pay rent or utilities. Second, we incorporate a measure of deep poverty, as research identifies a concentration of the deleterious effects of poverty, including worse cognitive scores and greater behavioral problems, at incomes at or below 50 percent of the poverty line.⁵ For a single parent with two children, this equates to $9,536 per year, $795 per month, or $8.71 per person, per day.

As shown in Table 2, 44.1 percent of children live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line. The share of children living below this threshold varies substantially across the nation. For instance, more than half of children in cities and rural places live in low-income families (52.9 and 51.7 percent, respectively), compared with just 36.9 percent of suburban children. In suburbs and cities, the share of children who were in low-income families fell between 2013 and 2014, though rates were stable in rural places and remain elevated compared to post-recession levels in all place types. The Midwest and West experienced declines in low-income rates between 2013 and 2014. Rates of low-income children were more stable than child poverty rates between 2013 and 2014, with only five states (California, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Utah) experiencing declining shares of children in low-income families, and no states experiencing increases.

Figure 2 on page 6 shows the share of children by state who lived in deeply poor families (incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line) in 2014.⁶ As with other patterns in child economic well-being, the states with the highest rates of deep poverty tend to be clustered in the South. Nationwide, nearly one in ten children (9.6 percent) lived in deeply poor families, down 0.3 percentage point since 2013 but still nearly a full percentage point above 2009 post-recession levels. In most states, the share of children who were deeply poor remained stable between 2013 and 2014. However, higher shares of children were deeply poor in Maine and North Dakota, while rates dropped in seven other states (Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, and North Carolina).

Poor Children Can Be Clustered in States Where Poverty Rates Are ‘Low’

Finally, although rates of children living below 200, 100, and 50 percent of the poverty threshold are especially high in the South, it is important to also consider how the size and distribution of the child population shapes where vulnerable children are concentrated. For example, California is home to more low-income children (4.1 million) than are the twenty-three states with the fewest low-income children combined (see Figure 3 on page 7), despite its near-average low-income rate of 46.0 percent. In contrast, New Mexico has among the highest shares of children in low-income families, at 55.5 percent, but is home to just 274,000 or 6.6 percent as many, low-income children as California.
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Note: “Low-income” is defined as children in families with incomes below 200 percent of the official federal poverty level. Change is displayed in percentage points and based on unrounded percentages. Results may differ slightly from those that would be obtained using rounded figures. Bold font indicates a statistically significant change (p<0.05). Margins of error (“+/-”) refer to the 95 percent confidence interval around the 2014 estimated percent. Source: American Community Survey, 2009, 2013, and 2014 1-year estimates.
Implications

Not only are higher shares of children living in poverty than prior to the Great Recession, but nearly one in ten children live in families with incomes below half of the poverty line, that is, with incomes below $12,004 for a family of two adults and two children. That nearly 7 million American children are living in such deeply poor homes highlights the necessity of the social safety net. It is important to note that although policy interventions like tax credits or other work supports may improve the quality of life for many children, the impact of these interventions may not show up in official poverty statistics, since official statistics do not consider these supports in their calculations. As a result, policy makers might consider using innovative measures like the Supplemental Poverty Measure or additional calculations using the official poverty measure in assessing the efficacy of safety net efforts. In calculating the SPM, the U.S. Census Bureau has identified an important role for programs like refundable tax credits, albeit only for children whom such programs reach.7

Further, despite tremendous variation in the cost of living across the nation, the official poverty measure does not make adjustments for family income purchasing power. That is, poor families may be able to afford better housing or more nutritious food in relatively inexpensive states like Indiana or Kentucky.
than in more expensive places like California or New York, or in less-expensive rural places than in costlier urban centers. Nonetheless, research suggests that, depending on geography, families need between 1.5 and 3.5 times the poverty line to meet their basic needs of housing, food, child care, health insurance, medical care, transportation, and taxes. That more than four in ten of the nation’s children live in low-income homes highlights the critical importance of both improving access to opportunity and of making work pay for America’s most vulnerable families. Given dramatic differences in the cost of living across the nation, it may be worthwhile to consider making or increasing geographic adjustments to a host of safety net programs.

**Data**

This analysis is based on estimates from the 2009, 2013, and 2014 American Community Survey. Tables were produced by aggregating information from detailed tables available on American FactFinder (http://factfinder.census.gov). These estimates give perspective on child poverty, but they are based on survey data, so caution must be exercised in comparing across years or places. All differences highlighted in this brief are statistically significant (p<0.05).

**Box 1: Definition of Rural, Suburban, and City**

Definitions of rural and urban vary among researchers and the sources of data they use. Data for this brief are derived from the American Community Survey, which identifies each household as being within one of several geographic components. As used here, “city” designates households in the principal city of a given metropolitan statistical area, and “suburban” includes those in metropolitan areas but not within the principal city of that area. “Rural” consists of the addresses that are not within a metropolitan area.
Endnotes


3. We use these terms for purposes of brevity, though, unlike “poor,” there is no official definition of “deeply poor” or “low income.” However, there is precedent for these terms as applied here. See, for example, Serena Lei, “The Unwaged War on Deep Poverty” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2013), www.urban.org/features/unwaged-war-deep-poverty, and Gordon M. Fisher, “Standard Budgets (Basic Needs Budgets) in the United States Since 2006” (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), www.census.gov/hhes/povmeas/publications/other/udusbd3.pdf.


6. Unlike for the tables, this figure does not provide state estimates broken down by place type. We omit these estimates due to insufficient sample size among the lowest-income children.

7. See Short 2015.


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Acknowledgments
This work was supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and anonymous donors. The authors thank Barbara Cook, Sarah Leonard, and Jennifer Clayton for research assistance; Michele Dillon, Michael Ettinger, Curt Grimm, and Amy Sterndale for their feedback on earlier drafts; Laurel Lloyd and Bianca Nicolosi at the Carsey School of Public Policy for their layout assistance; and Patrick Watson for his editorial assistance.