

POVERTY FACT SHEET: IMPLICATIONS FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

One of the most consistent associations in the science of early childhood is between economic hardship and compromised child development.¹ Poverty can compromise every aspect of a child’s development, leading to short- and long-term effects on health, achievement in school, and success in life. This fact sheet provides an overview of poverty as it pertains to the healthy development of infants and toddlers.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT POVERTY?

There are two measures of poverty commonly used in the United States: *poverty thresholds* and *poverty guidelines*. The *poverty threshold* was the original poverty measure used by the federal government, and it is updated annually by the U.S. Census Bureau. The primary use of the *poverty threshold* now is for statistical purposes.²

The *poverty guidelines* are a simplified form of the poverty thresholds and are issued each year by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The primary purpose of the *poverty guidelines* is to determine eligibility for certain federal programs, such as Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children and the Children’s Health Insurance Program. Many programs use the federal *poverty guidelines* or a percentage multiple of the guidelines when determining a family’s eligibility for a program. The *poverty guidelines* are set based on the size of the family. When people use the term “federal poverty level” (FPL), they are most likely referring to the *poverty guidelines*.³

Family of:	Federal Poverty Level	Low-income ⁴
Two	\$14,570	\$29,140
Three	\$18,310	\$36,620
Four	\$22,050	\$44,100

Research indicates that families need an income equal to about two times the federal poverty level to meet their most basic needs. Families with incomes between 100% and 200% of the federal poverty level are referred to as low-income families.⁵

FAST FACTS

- 12 million infants and toddlers live in the United States; 24% are living in poor (<100%FPL) families and 46% are living in low-income families.⁶
- Infants and toddlers account for 25% of the population, yet have the highest poverty rates of any age group in the United States.⁷
- Between 2000 and 2009, the number of infants and toddlers living in low-income families increased by 41%.⁸

THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Developmental science consistently shows a strong association between economic hardship (poverty) and compromised child development. A child's earliest years are a period of tremendous brain development influenced predominantly by the family context (rather than interactions at school or with peers), suggesting that the family's economic condition in early childhood may be far more important in shaping children's ability, behavior, and achievement than conditions later in childhood.⁹ Exposure to poverty during this period of rapid brain development can lead to significant short- and long-term consequences for the healthy development of infants and toddlers.

SHORT-TERM RISK FACTORS

In the short-term, poverty is associated with multiple risk factors for infants and toddlers. Because poverty impacts all facets of a child's life, which in turn impact each other, it is difficult to isolate individual risk factors. However, it can be helpful to think about the risk factors associated with poverty as divided into three categories: those that directly and immediately impact the **physical health** of a baby; those that affect a baby at the **family level**, and those that affect a baby's **environment**.¹⁰ The risk factors associated with poverty are outlined in greater detail below.

Physical Health

Infants and toddlers living in poverty face conditions that can directly and immediately impact their physical health. Children in poverty:

- are more likely than non-poor children to have poor health and die from an infectious disease;¹¹
- are vaccinated at lower rates than nonpoor children;¹² and,
- experience increased rates of asthma and anemia¹³.

Family

Poverty has a significant impact on entire families, which can lead to increased risk factors for babies, such as:

- increased rates of parental depression associated with financial stress;
- heightened risk for maltreatment;¹⁴ and,
- increased exposure to alcohol and substance abuse.

Environment

Infants and toddlers living in poverty are often exposed to unsafe environments.

Environmental risk factors include:

- lack of access to safe play spaces;
- increased exposure to lead; and,
- increased exposure to community and interpersonal violence.¹⁵

LONG-TERM RISK FACTORS AND OUTCOMES

Exposure to poverty in early childhood also has implications for longer-term success as an adult. Research shows that major adversity, such as extreme poverty, can weaken

developing brain architecture and *permanently* set the body's stress response system on high alert.¹⁶ Poverty in the early years has been shown to have an impact on later childhood and adult outcomes, including in education levels, social and emotional health, and physical health. "Lower income infants and toddlers are at greater risk than middle- or high-income infants and toddlers for a variety of poorer outcomes and vulnerabilities, such as later school failure, learning disabilities, behavior problems, mental retardation, developmental delay, and health impairments".¹⁷

- More than one third of children from low-income communities enter formal kindergarten classes already behind their peers and by fourth grade, more than 50% of these children will not meet the standard for reading proficiency.¹⁸
- Children living below the poverty threshold are 1.3 times more likely than non-poor children to experience learning disabilities and developmental delays.¹⁹
- Poor children are nearly 50% more likely to become obese adults than non-poor children.²⁰
- A \$10,000 annual increase in the prenatal to age 5 income of low-income families is associated with nearly a full-year increase in completed schooling.²¹

CONCLUSION

"Poverty often leads to the presence of multiple risk factors, such as prenatal exposure to harmful substances, unsafe environments, low-quality child care, unresponsive caregiving, or inadequate access to ample nutritious food and regular health care. In combination, these risk factors can overwhelm an infant's coping mechanisms."²² Research has shown that these risk factors not only impact the health and development of infants and toddlers, but that such adversity during a period of rapid brain development has tremendous and lasting implications for adult outcomes.

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¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000.

² Institute for Research on Poverty, *What are poverty thresholds and poverty guidelines?* Institute for Research on Poverty, 2010, www.irp.wisc.edu.

³ Ibid

⁴ National Center for Children in Poverty, *Poverty and Brain Development in Early Childhood*. National Center for Children in Poverty, 1999, www.ncco.org.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cara Sklar, *Charting a New Course for Children in Poverty: The Reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program*. ZERO TO THREE, 2010, www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/tanf-june-16-2010.pdf.

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- ¹¹ Connecticut Commission on Children, *Children and the Long-Term Effects of Poverty*. The Connecticut Commission on Children, 2004, www.cga.ct.gov/coc/pdfs/poverty/2004_poverty_report.pdf.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Kristin Anderson Moore, Zakia Redd, Mary Burkhaures, Kassim Mbwana et al., *Children in Poverty: Trends, Consequences, and Policy Options*. Child Trends, 2009, www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2009_04_07_RB_ChildreninPoverty.pdf.
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- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *InBrief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development*, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011, http://developingchild.harvard.edu/library/multimedia/inbrief_series/.
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- ¹⁸ Connecticut Commission on Children, *Children and the Long-Term Effects of Poverty*. The Connecticut Commission on Children, 2004, www.cga.ct.gov/coc/pdfs/poverty/2004_poverty_report.pdf.
- ¹⁹ Jeanne Brooks-Dunn and Greg J. Duncan, "The Effects of Poverty on Children." *The Future of Children* 7 no. 2 (1997): 55-71, <http://futureofchildren.org/>.
- ²⁰ Greg J. Duncan, Kathleen M. Ziol-Guest and Ariel Kalil, "Early-Childhood Poverty and Adult Attainment, Behavior, and Health." *Child Development* 81, no.1 (2010): 306-325, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2009.01396.x/full>.
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