

FIVE MILLION CHILDREN

A Summary of Findings

National Center for Children in Poverty

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, approximately 32.5 million people were poor in the United States in 1987. Of that number, 13 million were children under the age of 18, and 5 million were children under six. The federal government classifies a family as poor if its pretax cash income falls below a certain minimum standard. In 1989 this standard, the poverty line, was \$9,890 for a family of three, and \$12,675 for a family of four. In 1987 the poverty line was \$9,056 for a family of three, and \$11,611 for a family of four.

Some of the findings in *Five Million Children* help to illustrate the breadth and depth of child poverty in the United States.

Nearly one out of every four children under six years of age lives in poverty.

In 1987, 23 percent of U.S. children under six were living at or below the poverty line. While the number of poor people in the United States has declined in recent years, the number of poor children under six has grown.

Children under six are more likely to be poor than any other age-group.

The 23 percent poverty rate for children under six in 1987 was higher than the rate for any other age-group in the United States. It was more than double the rate for adults aged 18-64, nearly double the rate for the elderly, and higher than the poverty rate for older children and adolescents.

While 42 percent of the 5 million children under six in 1987 were white, 58 percent were from minority groups. Minority children under six are much more likely to be poor than white children under six.

About 2.1 million, or 42 percent, of the 5 million poor children in the United States in 1987 were non-Hispanic white. About 1.6 million, or 32 percent, were non-Hispanic Black; 1 million, or 21 percent, were Hispanic; and 250,000, or 5 percent, were from other racial or ethnic minorities, predominantly Asian and Native American. The rates of poverty for each racial/ethnic group vary greatly. For Black children under six in 1987, the poverty rate was 48 percent. For Hispanics, the rate was 42 percent. For other minorities, the rate was 29 percent, and for whites, 13 percent.

Child poverty rates are highest in central cities, but more poor children live outside them.

In 1987 the poverty rate among children under six living in the central cities of U.S. metropolitan areas was 31 percent. The rate was 13 percent in suburban areas and 28 percent in rural areas. Child poverty is more prevalent in the South than in other regions, but it is growing fastest outside the South.

For want of affordable housing, many U.S. children are homeless.

Three national studies of homeless children aged 16 and under estimate that between 41,000 and 106,000 children are literally homeless at any given time (i.e., living in shelters, churches, or public places), and many more are precariously housed.

Children under six living with single mothers are much more likely to be poor than those living with two parents, but 38 percent of poor young children live in married-couple families.

Since 1987 there has been a gradual upward trend in the proportion of all poor children living with single mothers. By 1987, more than half of all poor children under six lived with single mothers. Children born outside of marriage living with single mothers are at the greatest risk of long-term poverty. The birthrate among teenagers has declined over the past several decades, but the proportion of births to teenagers occurring outside of marriage increased from 15 percent to 61 percent from 1960 through 1986.

Children living in large families are more likely to be poor than are children in small families. However, far fewer poor children live in large families today than did in the recent past. In 1986, 51 percent of all poor children under six lived in families with one other or no other child. The average number of related children under 18 living in poor families fell dramatically between 1970 and 1986.

The educational level of parents is closely associated with child poverty. Parents who have not completed high school are less likely than parents with more education to be employed steadily, or at all. They also tend to earn less when employed.

In 1987 the poverty rate was 62 percent for children under six living in families where the only parent or the better-educated parent had not completed high school. That same year the poverty rate was 19 percent for young children with at least one parent who had graduated from high school.

More than half of all poor children under six have at least one parent who is either working or looking for work. Even so, full-time, full-year employment does not guarantee that families will not be poor.

Among children under six in poor married-couple families, 72 percent had at least one parent employed full- or part-time. Among poor children under six in mother-only families, 20 percent had parents who were employed full- or part-time. Children whose mothers work are less likely to be poor, whether they live with one or two parents.

Fewer than one-third of all poor children under six live in families that rely exclusively on welfare.

In 1987 only 28 percent of children under six lived in families whose sole source of income was welfare. Some 16 percent lived in families who supplemented their earnings with public assistance, and 19 percent lived in families who received a mix of earned and unearned income. More than one-third, 37 percent of all poor children under six, lived in families who relied exclusively on earnings from employment.

Poor children are at greater risk of impaired health than are other children.

Poor women are more likely than nonpoor women to deliver low-birthweight babies, and their children are more likely to have growth retardation and anemia because of poor nutrition. Compared with nonpoor children, poor children are exposed to higher doses of lead in their environments, which can cause adverse central nervous system effects. There is also a high rate of accidental injury among poor children, and the risk of prenatal drug exposure and exposure to AIDS appears to be much higher for infants born to poor women.

Early childhood experiences contribute to poor children's high rates of school failure, dropout, delinquency, early childbearing, and adult poverty.

Developmental risks are significantly greater, on average, for poor than for nonpoor children. These risks vary according to the physical and mental health of parents, the availability of social support from outside the family, place of residence, the resilience of children, and other circumstances. Higher maternal education is associated with higher levels of cognitive and emotional support for child development.