A KIDS COUNT/PRB Report on

CENSUS 2000

The Risk of Negative Child Outcomes in Low-Income Families

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This paper is part of a series of reports on the 2000 Census prepared for the nationwide network of KIDS COUNT projects. These reports have been guided by the recommendations of an expert advisory group of data users and child advocates brought together in a series of meetings by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau. Members of the advisory group have provided valuable assistance about how to interpret and use data from the 2000 Census.

A list of the advisory group members can be found at the back of this report.

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Executive Summary

The child poverty rate has become one of the most widely used indicators of child well-being. In part, this stems from the strong association between poverty and children's social, emotional, and physical development.[1] Research has also shown that children growing up in poor families face significant obstacles in making successful transitions to adulthood.[2] Many federal, state, and local programs provide assistance to needy children and families based on family income levels relative to the poverty threshold.

Our analysis of 2000 Census data indicates that negative child outcomes are highly concentrated in poor families. However, our results suggest that poverty thresholds may not be the best way to determine eligibility for need-based programs. The following key points summarize our major findings:

- For most dimensions of child well-being, we found a highly linear association between family income levels and child outcomes. This suggests that families might be better served by programs that provide assistance in proportion to income, with the most assistance going to children in the poorest families.

- Overall, more than 25 million children (36 percent) lived in families with yearly income of less than $35,000 in 1999—roughly twice the poverty threshold.

- Because family economic distress is associated with negative social, economic, and health outcomes for children, these negative outcomes tend to be concentrated in poor and low-income families.

- There are significant racial, ethnic, and geographic differences in the proportions of children residing in poor and low-income families and in the concentrations of negative child outcomes.

- The concentration of negative outcomes is especially pronounced for African American children, who were four times more likely than non-Hispanic white children to reside in families with incomes of less than $10,000.

Introduction

Children are more likely to thrive in higher-income families. Children in poor families have worse health and educational outcomes, are more likely to experience parental divorce and live in single-parent families, and are more likely to experience violent crime compared to children growing up in more affluent families.[3] For many children, poverty persists into adolescence and adulthood, and is associated with greater risk of dropping out of school, teen childbearing, and lower earnings for young adults.[4] Although researchers agree that family income has positive, wide-reaching effects on child well-being, there is considerable debate about how these effects occur. Family income is closely linked to several other parental characteristics, including age, educational attainment, employment status, and marital status, making it difficult to disentangle the causes or sources of child outcomes.

Typically, children are classified as poor if they live in a family with yearly income below the official poverty threshold. In 1999, the poverty threshold for a family of four was about $17,000. Poverty thresholds are often used to determine eligibility for need-based programs, including Head Start, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and several food and nutrition assistance programs. Many programs provide benefits to families with children in proportion to family income (e.g., the School Lunch Program), while others, such as Head Start, provide "all-or-nothing" services. This means that families with incomes below the poverty threshold are eligible for full Head Start benefits, while those with higher incomes are not eligible to participate in the program.[5] The underlying assumption is that all of the children and families below a certain poverty threshold have similar needs, while those above the poverty threshold do not need assistance.

In this report, we present information for a broad range of income brackets in order to compare the relative risks for children living in different types of families. We present results in two different ways. First, we examine the *proportion* of children with negative outcomes (e.g., high school dropout rates) in families with different levels of yearly income, ranging from less than $10,000 to $100,000 or more. These results are used to show which dimensions of child well-being have linear or non-linear associations with family income levels. Second, we show the *distribution* of children with negative outcomes across families with different levels of income. These results—presented separately by race, ethnicity, and by state—indicate the extent to which negative outcomes are concentrated in poor families.

The estimates in this report are based on data from the 1990 and 2000 Census 5-Percent Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS). The PUMS files provide access to a random sample of more than 14 million individual records from the decennial census long form. The census provides broad coverage of geographic areas, but subject matter is limited to the content of the 2000 Census questionnaire.

In this report, we focus on six different dimensions of child well-being (for definitions of each of the measures, see the appendix):

- Children living in single-parent families;
- Children with no parents in the labor force;
- Children with one or more disabilities;
- Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school;
- Teens who are high school dropouts; and
- Teens not in school and not working (often referred to as "idle" teens).

Although these six measures are not intended to capture the full range of conditions shaping children's lives, we believe that these indicators reflect many of the key factors affecting child welfare.

Each of the six measures is constructed as a "negative outcome," so that higher values always indicate worse conditions for children. However, child well-being is not necessarily linked to each measure through a direct causal relationship. For example, residence in a single-parent family is associated with worse child outcomes primarily because children who grow up with one parent typically do not have access to the economic resources and "social capital"available to children growing up in two-parent families.[6]

Child Outcomes in Low-Income Families

Most families in the United States have sufficient resources to meet their children's basic needs, but each year, a significant share of families struggles to make ends meet. Overall, more than 25 million children (36 percent) lived in families with yearly income of less than $35,000 in 1999—roughly twice the poverty threshold (see Table 1). Of those, two-thirds lived in families with yearly income under $25,000 and two-fifths lived in families with incomes of less than $10,000.

Table 1
Distribution of Children by Level of Family Income in 1999

	Number	Percent
Children in families	70,494,694	100
Family income level		
Less than $10,000	5,673,664	8
$10,000-$24,999	11,509,687	16
$25,000-$34,999	8,361,239	12
$35,000-$49,999	11,643,797	17
$50,000-$74,999	15,299,935	22
$75,000-$99,999	8,193,013	12
$100,000 or more	9,813,359	14

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the Census 2000 5-Percent PUMS.

Data from the 2000 Census show that children living in lower-income families are disadvantaged on several dimensions of child well-being. We analyzed outcomes for children residing in seven different types of families, with income levels ranging from less than $10,000 (most disadvantaged) to more than $100,000 (most affluent). For most dimensions of child well-being, we found a highly linear relationship between family income levels and negative child outcomes. For example, nationwide, about 28 percent of children reside in single-parent families. But this proportion drops significantly for children living in the most affluent families (5 percent) and increases to 77 percent for children living in the poorest families (see Table 2). The results for children with no parents in the labor force are also striking. About 45 percent of the children in the lowest income bracket do not have any parents in the labor force, compared with only 3 percent of children in the most affluent families.

Table 2
Percent of Children With Negative Outcomes, By Level of Family Income, 1999

	Children in single-parent families	Children with no parents in the labor force	Children with one or more disabilities	Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	Teens who are high school dropouts	Teens not in school and not working
Total	28	10	6	51	10	9
Family income level						
Less than $10,000	77	45	10	56	21	22
$10,000-$24,999	56	18	8	57	17	16
$25,000-$34,999	37	10	6	58	13	12
$35,000-$49,999	23	7	5	56	11	9
$50,000-$74,999	12	4	5	49	7	6
$75,000-$99,999	7	3	4	42	5	4
$100,000 or more	5	3	4	32	4	3

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2000 Census 5-Percent PUMS.

Disabilities can affect children at all levels of income. However, research shows low-income children are at greater risk of experiencing the onset and symptoms of chronic health conditions, compared to children in higher-income families.[7] Data from the 2000 Census show that the

disability rate for children in the poorest families (10 percent) was more than twice the rate for children in the most affluent families (4 percent).

Preschool enrollment rates also vary for children at different levels of income. Only about a third of young children in the most affluent families were not enrolled in school in 2000, while more than half of children in families with incomes of less than $50,000 were not enrolled. Many higher-income families consist of two-income couples whose children attend preschool or day care centers while the parents work. Low-income families, in contrast, are more likely to rely on informal child care provided by relatives, friends, or neighbors.[8]

Results for high school dropouts and idle teens also show a much higher risk of negative outcomes for children in the poorest families. More than 1 in 5 teens in the lowest income bracket are high school dropouts, compared to 1 in 25 teens living in the most affluent families. Estimates of idle teens in the lowest and highest income brackets are similar to those for dropouts.

Although many programs targeting needy families use family income thresholds to determine program eligibility, the results in this report suggest that poverty thresholds may not be the best way to identify families at risk. Given the linear association between family income levels and several different dimensions of child well-being, families might be better served by programs that provide assistance in proportion to income, with the most assistance going to children in the poorest families.

Concentration of Negative Outcomes

Because family economic security is associated with negative social, economic, and health outcomes for children, these negative outcomes tend to be concentrated in low-income families. In 1999, only 8 percent of all children were living in families with incomes of less than $10,000,

compared with 22 percent of children in single-parent families, 34 percent of children with no parents in the labor force, 13 percent of children with disabilities, 10 percent of young children not enrolled in school, 14 percent of high school dropouts, and 16 percent of idle teens (see Table 3). Overall, children with negative outcomes were disproportionately concentrated in families with annual incomes of less than $35,000.

Table 3
Distribution of Children With Negative Outcomes, By Level of Family Income, 1999
Percent

	All children in families	Children in single-parent families	Children with no parents in the labor force	Children with one or more disabilities	Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	Teens who are high school dropouts	Teens not in school and not working
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Family income level							
Less than $10,000	8	22	34	13	10	14	16
$10,000-$24,999	16	33	28	22	20	25	26
$25,000-$34,999	12	16	12	13	14	15	14
$35,000-$49,999	17	14	11	16	19	17	16
$50,000-$74,999	22	9	9	18	20	17	15
$75,000-$99,999	12	3	3	9	9	7	7
$100,000 or more	14	3	4	9	8	6	6

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2000 Census 5-Percent PUMS.

Racial and Ethnic Differences

There are significant racial and ethnic differences in the proportions of children residing in poor and low-income families. In 1999, only 4 percent of non-Hispanic white children lived in families with incomes of less than $10,000, compared with 11 percent of Latino children, 16 percent of American Indian children, and 19 percent of African American children (see Table 4). In contrast, only 5 percent of African American and American Indian children and 6 percent of Latino children resided in families with incomes of $100,000 or more, while 18 percent of non-Hispanic white children and 22 percent of Asian children lived in such families.

Table 4
Percentage Distribution of Children by Race/Ethnicity, by Level of Family Income, 1999

	All children	White, non-Hispanic	African American, non-Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic	American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	Latino
All children	100	100	100	100	100	100
Family income level						
Less than $10,000	8	4	19	6	16	11
$10,000-$24,999	16	11	26	13	26	25
$25,000-$34,999	12	10	14	10	15	16
$35,000-$49,999	17	17	15	14	16	17
$50,000-$74,999	22	25	15	21	16	17
$75,000-$99,999	12	14	6	14	6	7
$100,000 or more	14	18	5	22	5	6

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of Census 2000 5-Percent PUMS.

Children in immigrant families—persons under age 18 who are foreign-born or who reside with at least one parent who was born outside of the United States—were also more likely to live in low-income families compared to children in U.S-born families (see Table 5). Children in immigrant families were overrepresented in the $10,000-$35,000 income brackets, but there were roughly equal proportions of children in immigrant families and U.S.-born families with incomes below $10,000. Relatively high employment rates keep most immigrant families out of the lowest income bracket, although underemployment and low wages are more common among immigrant groups, compared with U.S-born workers.[9]

Table 5
Percentage Distribution of Children by Immigrant Status, by Level of Family Income, 1999

	Children in immigrant families	Children in U.S.-born families
All children	100	100
Family income level		
Less than $10,000	8	9
$10,000-$24,999	21	15
$25,000-$34,999	14	11
$35,000-$49,999	17	16
$50,000-$74,999	18	22
$75,000-$99,999	9	12
$100,000 or more	12	14

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of Census 2000 5-Percent PUMS.

Our results also show that the concentration of negative outcomes in poor families is more pronounced for racial and ethnic minorities. For example, among children living in single-parent families, 64 percent of non-Hispanic white children lived in families with incomes of less than $35,000, compared with 79 percent of African American children, 78 percent of American Indian children, and 76 percent of Latino children (see Table 6). Asians were the only group with a lower concentration of negative outcomes than non-Hispanic whites.

Racial and ethnic differences in the concentration of children with disabilities were even more striking. Only 39 percent of non-Hispanic white children with disabilities lived in low-income families, while 69 percent of African American children resided in such families—a larger share than any other racial or ethnic group.

Table 6
Percent of All Children and Children with Negative Outcomes Living in Families with Incomes Less Than $35,000, by Race/Ethnicity, 1999

	White, non-Hispanic	African American, non-Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander non-Hispanic	American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	Latino
All children	26	59	29	56	53
Children in single-parent families	64	79	56	78	76
Children with no parents in the labor force	69	82	57	81	71
Children with one or more disabilities	39	69	38	59	61
Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	35	66	32	61	58
Teens who are high school dropouts	46	68	39	64	55
Teens not in school and not working	47	68	43	65	60

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of Census 2000 5-Percent PUMS.

Results for children by immigrant status are mixed (see Table 7). Overall, children living in immigrant families are more likely to live in low-income families than children in U.S.-born families (43 percent vs. 36 percent). Yet immigrant children in single-parent families are roughly equally likely to live in low-income families (70 percent) as children in U.S.-born families (72

percent). Moreover, immigrant children with no parents in the labor force are substantially *less* likely to reside in low-income families (65 percent), compared to children in U.S.-born families (76 percent). A different approach to family finances may explain the variation. Immigrant families may be more likely than U.S.-born families to pool income from additional family members, such as older children or extended family members. Among preschool-age children not enrolled in school, the pattern is reversed. Fifty percent of immigrant children not enrolled in school lived in a low-income family compared to 43 percent of children in U.S.-born families.

Table 7

Percent of All Children and Children with Negative Outcomes in Families with Incomes Less Than $35,000, by Immigrant Status, 1999

	Children in immigrant families	Children in U.S.-born families
All children	43	36
Children in single-parent families	70	72
Children with no parents in the labor force	65	76
Children with one or more disabilities	50	48
Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	50	43

Note: We did not construct estimates for high school dropouts or idle teens because we limited our analysis of immigrant children to persons under age 18.

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of Census 2000 5-Percent PUMS.

State Patterns

Our analysis of state-level data shows that there are wide variations in the proportions of children living in families with incomes of less than $35,000. These differences range from less than 25 percent in Connecticut and New Hampshire to more than 50 percent in Mississippi, New Mexico, and West Virginia (see Table 8). High poverty rates in the Deep South and Southwestern United States contribute to worse child outcomes those regions. For example,

Mississippi ranks at or near the bottom of the 50 states on many key indicators of child well-being.[10]

States in the South also tend to have the highest concentrations of negative outcomes in low-income families. In West Virginia, two-thirds of children with disabilities lived in low-income families in 1999, a higher share than in any other state. In contrast, only one-third of disabled children in New Hampshire resided in low-income families. West Virginia also had the highest proportion of high school dropouts residing in low-income families (74 percent). In several other states—Hawaii, Minnesota, Vermont, and Utah—the proportion was less than 40 percent. Mississippi had the highest concentration of low-income single-parent families (84 percent), while low-income children with no parents in the labor force were most concentrated in North Dakota, Maine, and West Virginia.

Several states, such as North Dakota, rank high in overall child well-being but have high concentrations of negative child outcomes in low-income families. For example, 35 percent of North Dakota's children lived in low-income families in 1999, but the corresponding figure for such children with no parents in the labor force was 87 percent. In Delaware, 31 percent of children lived in low-income families in 1999, but 42 percent of young children not enrolled in school lived in such families. And in Connecticut, less than one-fourth of all children lived in low-income families, compared to half of Connecticut's high school dropouts. Many of these dropouts consist of racial and ethnic minorities living in urban areas, or teens living in immigrant families.[11]

Table 8

Percent of All Children and Children with Negative Outcomes Living in Families with Incomes Less Than $35,000, by State, 1999

State	All children	Children in single-parent families	Children with no parents in the labor force	Children with one or more disabilities	Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	Teens who are high school dropouts	Teens not in school and not working
United States	36	71	73	48	44	53	56
Alabama	46	82	82	57	55	65	67
Alaska	31	64	71	34	37	42	44
Arizona	41	70	72	50	47	58	61
Arkansas	48	83	81	61	54	66	64
California	38	65	67	48	46	51	53
Colorado	29	64	66	39	38	47	49
Connecticut	24	64	70	37	30	50	50
Delaware	31	66	67	35	42	43	46
District of Columbia	52	70	78	60	61	61	61
Florida	40	73	72	52	48	53	58
Georgia	38	74	74	47	46	52	55
Hawaii	31	61	58	41	39	39	46
Idaho	38	77	76	50	47	55	54
Illinois	30	66	66	44	36	45	48
Indiana	32	72	72	44	41	46	52
Iowa	32	77	72	47	37	53	56
Kansas	33	72	71	45	41	51	53
Kentucky	45	80	85	60	53	64	68
Louisiana	49	82	81	60	58	67	69
Maine	36	78	86	51	44	53	64
Maryland	26	60	65	35	34	41	50
Massachusetts	26	66	74	40	32	47	52
Michigan	31	70	71	45	38	46	46
Minnesota	25	66	71	37	32	39	44
Mississippi	52	84	84	64	56	67	69
Missouri	38	76	79	49	45	56	62
Montana	45	81	79	63	51	60	64
Nebraska	33	75	70	44	37	44	47
Nevada	34	63	60	43	42	47	46
New Hampshire	23	63	72	33	30	42	44
New Jersey	25	61	63	37	31	48	46
New Mexico	51	79	79	61	61	65	65
New York	37	70	75	53	46	54	55
North Carolina	39	77	78	53	48	52	58
North Dakota	35	80	87	48	38	56	51
Ohio	34	74	79	49	40	52	56
Oklahoma	46	80	80	61	53	63	64
Oregon	35	71	78	46	44	54	55
Pennsylvania	34	73	78	49	42	49	53
Rhode Island	34	75	82	48	42	55	60
South Carolina	42	79	78	54	50	58	62
South Dakota	38	81	83	47	42	57	60
Tennessee	42	78	81	55	50	59	61
Texas	43	74	73	51	52	57	59
Utah	27	67	64	35	35	36	39
Vermont	33	72	84	49	39	38	47
Virginia	32	70	73	41	41	52	57
Washington	32	66	73	43	40	50	48
West Virginia	51	82	86	67	58	74	71
Wisconsin	28	71	74	43	32	44	44
Wyoming	38	73	75	47	48	60	52

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the Census 2000 5-Percent PUMS.

Conclusion

The results in this report show the importance of family economic resources for several different dimensions of child and adolescent well-being. Children who live in low-income families are at substantially higher risk of negative economic, educational, and health outcomes compared with children who live in more affluent families. This concentration of negative outcomes is especially pronounced for African American children, who were four times more likely than non-Hispanic white children to reside in families with incomes of less than $10,000.

These results also point to the importance of tracking trends in income and poverty over time for states, local areas, and subgroups of the U.S. population. Any increases or decreases in children's access to family resources are likely to be associated with changes in other dimensions of child and family well-being. The relatively new American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau will enable researchers to track socioeconomic trends annually at the national, state, and local levels.[12]

The numbers presented here indicate that more needs to be done to ensure that children grow up in healthy and supportive environments. We hope that this research will help policymakers and child advocates target resources to children living in America's most vulnerable families.

Appendix: Definitions

Children living in single-parent households
In this report, children in single-parent households are defined as people under age 18 who are the sons or daughters of a householder—male or female—without a spouse present in the home.

Children with no parents in the labor force
For children in single-parent families or subfamilies, "no parents in the labor force" means that the resident parent is not in the labor force. For children in married-couple families or subfamilies, it means that neither of the resident parents is in the labor force.

Children with one or more disabilities
Children ages 5 to 15 with one or more long-lasting physical, mental, or emotional conditions are defined as having a disability. Responses to the questions about disability represent either the person's own perceptions or, in the case of most children, the perception of the household member who fills out the census form.

Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school
Enrollment rates are calculated for 3- to 4-year-olds and includes enrollment in either a public or private school.

Teens who are high school dropouts
High school dropouts include people ages 16 to 19 who are not enrolled in school full- or part-time and are not high school graduates. Those who have a GED or equivalent are considered high school graduates.

Teens who are not in school and not working
Also referred to as "idle teens," this measure includes people ages 16 to 19 who are neither enrolled in school nor working full- or part-time.

References

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[10] The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *2005 KIDS COUNT Data Book* (Baltimore, MD: 2005).

[11] William O'Hare, Mark Mather, and Melissa Scopilliti, "State Rankings on the Well-Being of Children in Low-Income Families: Some Preliminary Findings," A *KIDS COUNT Working Paper* (October 2005).

[12] For more information about the American Community Survey, see www.census.gov/acs/.

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