

The Unequal Distribution of Child Poverty: Highest Rates among Young Blacks and Children of Single Mothers in Rural America

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This brief reports poverty rates by race and family structure for all children and by place and region for young children (those under age 6).¹ We use the U.S. Office of Management and Budget income thresholds. In 2009, the poverty line for a family of four (two adults, two children) was \$21,756.²

For all children, especially the youngest, the highest rates of poverty are among blacks, followed by Hispanics and whites (see Table 1).³ This pattern persists across urban, suburban, and rural places, with estimated rates for children under age 18 as high as 48.9 percent for rural black children and 36.6 percent for rural Hispanic children. The rates for rural white children are significantly lower at 18.5 percent—although still higher than national averages.

Although all children suffer consequences of being poor, young children are particularly vulnerable, and the consequences of early poverty ripple through the life cycle in the form of poorer life-long health, fewer years of completed schooling, and other disadvantages.⁴ Our analyses reveal that poverty rates are typically higher among the very young. Further, young white, black, and Hispanic rural children are more often poorer than their urban and suburban counterparts. More than one in five young rural white children are poor, as are more than two in five young rural Hispanic children; however, this affects a staggering one in two young rural black children.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, nearly 17 million children live in single-mother homes. Indeed, 50.2 percent of black children, 24.9 percent of Hispanic children, and 17.7 percent of white children are living with only their mothers.⁵ In all place types, across all regions, single-mother families have dramatically higher poverty rates (40 percent) than married couples with children (8 percent) (see Table 2). There are also important local and regional distinctions. Nearly one in two rural single-mother families are poor, and rates are

Key Findings

- Poverty rates are consistently highest among black children, followed by Hispanic and white children.
- Children under age 6 who live in rural areas are more likely to be poor than young children in other locales, regardless of race.
- Rural poverty rates are as high as 55.8 percent among young black children, 40.4 percent among young Hispanics, and 22.2 percent among young white children.
- In central cities, poverty rates are significantly lower than in rural places, at 45.3 percent for young black children, 37.3 percent for young Hispanic children, and 14.1 percent for young white children.
- The lowest poverty rates are in the suburbs (31.3 percent of young black children, 24.9 percent of young Hispanic children, and 11.0 percent of young white children are poor).
- Single-mother families (including divorced, separated, or widowed) in rural America face the highest poverty rates (49.4 percent), often nearly five times higher than married couples with children in the same areas.
- Nearly one in ten married couples with children in rural and urban America are poor.

highest in the rural South, where more than 54 percent of such families live in poverty. Poverty among single-mother families is high in the Midwest as well, where rates approach 50 percent in urban and rural areas. For both family types, poverty is lowest in the suburban Northeast, although the

TABLE 1. CHILD POVERTY BY PLACE TYPE AND REGION IN 2009^a

	TOTAL POPULATION		Central City		Suburban		Rural	
	Percent estimate	Margin of error	Percent estimate	Margin of error	Percent estimate	Margin of error	Percent estimate	Margin of error
CHILDREN UNDER 6								
White	14.0	+/- 0.24	14.1	+/-0.53	11.0	+/-0.27	22.2	+/-0.56
Black	41.0	+/-0.51	45.3	+/-0.77	31.3	+/-2.79	55.8	+/-1.80
Hispanic	33.6	+/-0.41	37.3	+/-0.62	24.9	+/-0.58	40.4	+/-1.52
CHILDREN UNDER 18								
White								
United States	12.0	+/-0.12	12.6	+/-0.29	9.4	+/-0.27	18.5	+/-0.29
Northeast	9.7	+/-0.23	14.8	+/-0.78	7.4	+/-0.25	16.4	+/-0.65
Midwest	13.1	+/-0.22	15.6	+/-0.61	10.0	+/-0.26	20.0	+/-0.45
South	13.0	+/-0.21	11.2	+/-0.47	10.6	+/-0.25	20.6	+/-0.48
West	10.5	+/-0.26	10.8	+/-0.44	9.2	+/-0.32	15.3	+/-0.73
Black								
United States	36.3	+/-0.34	41.0	+/-0.97	27.0	+/-0.53	48.9	+/-1.03
Northeast	31.1	+/-0.78	34.9	+/-1.06	24.5	+/-1.31	25.2	+/-5.63
Midwest	44.1	+/-0.74	49.7	+/-0.90	32.0	+/-1.38	39.9	+/-3.65
South	36.2	+/-0.45	40.9	+/-0.77	26.6	+/-0.65	50.3	+/-1.08
West	30.3	+/-1.16	33.2	+/-1.52	26.6	+/-1.88	26.4	+/-7.70
Hispanic								
United States	30.8	+/-0.25	34.8	+/-0.37	25.1	+/-0.39	36.6	+/-0.88
Northeast	32.1	+/-0.72	39.7	+/-1.00	23.0	+/-1.01	30.3	+/-8.85
Midwest	30.5	+/-0.76	36.5	+/-1.25	22.8	+/-1.18	34.3	+/-1.95
South	33.1	+/-0.42	36.3	+/-0.72	28.3	+/-0.53	42.2	+/-1.94
West	28.7	+/-0.76	31.6	+/-0.57	25.4	+/-0.92	31.1	+/-3.43

a. Unit of analysis is children.

b. 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.”

c. Data are based on 2009 ACS estimates.

d. Percentage points and margins of error are based on rounded percentages and may differ slightly from those that would be obtained using unrounded figures.

rate there for single mothers is 29.9 percent, nearly ten times the rate for married couples (3 percent).

Young children face high rates of poverty in America, especially if they are children of color living in rural areas or in lone-parent families. Research has shown that access to social programs, such as Women, Infants, and Children’s (WIC), Medicaid, and home visiting can limit some of the negative effects of poverty.⁶ In addition, certain educational

programs, such as Early Head Start, are shown to have positive effects on child development,⁷ which could set children up for long-term educational success. For children in single-mother homes, focusing on increased compliance with child support orders may be critical for lowering poverty.⁸ Overall, access to these types of programs should be improved, particularly for families in rural areas, to provide support for these very young children who are already facing a challenging future.

TABLE 2. POVERTY BY FAMILY STRUCTURE, PLACE TYPE, AND REGION IN 2009^a

	TOTAL POPULATION		CENTRAL CITY		SUBURBAN		RURAL	
	Percent estimate	Margin of error	Percent estimate	Margin of error	Percent estimate	Margin of error	Percent estimate	Margin of error
MARRIED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN								
United States	7.5	+/-0.11	10.0	+/-0.27	5.5	+/-0.14	9.9	+/-0.34
Northeast	5.0	+/-0.26	10.1	+/-0.73	3.1	+/-0.22	6.5	+/-0.56
Midwest	6.5	+/-0.20	9.6	+/-0.51	4.4	+/-0.22	8.6	+/-0.52
South	8.5	+/-0.20	10.3	+/-0.48	6.5	+/-0.26	12.0	+/-0.57
West	8.6	+/-0.25	9.9	+/-0.40	7.4	+/-0.33	9.7	+/-0.87
SINGLE MOTHERS								
United States	40.0	+/-0.36	43.8	+/-0.58	33.2	+/-0.49	49.4	+/-0.87
Northeast	36.6	+/-0.65	43.6	+/-0.84	29.9	+/-1.11	39.8	+/-2.05
Midwest	42.2	+/-0.72	48.3	+/-1.37	34.1	+/-1.14	46.8	+/-1.42
South	42.1	+/-0.53	44.7	+/-0.68	34.5	+/-0.68	54.0	+/-1.38
West	36.4	+/-0.80	38.2	+/-1.13	33.0	+/-1.07	43.9	+/-2.57

a. Unit of analysis is families.

b. 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.”

c. Data are based on 2009 ACS estimates.

d. Percentage points and margins of error are based on rounded percentages and may differ slightly from those that would be obtained using unrounded figures.

Data

This analysis is based on U.S. Census Bureau estimates from the 2009 American Community Survey released on September 28, 2010.⁹ 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 because 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.¹⁰ Differences highlighted in this brief are statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

ENDNOTES

1. The American Community Survey (ACS) data released in September 2010 allow nuanced analyses of child poverty.
2. See <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/measure.html>, and “U.S. Census Bureau, September 2010 Poverty: 2009 Highlights.”
3. Sampling size limitations preclude racial/ethnic breakdowns more refined than the three groups (white, black, Hispanic) we use.
4. See Robert H. Bradley et al., “The Home Environments of Children in the United States, Part I: Variations by Age, Ethnicity, and Poverty Status,” *Child Development* 72 (2001): 1844–1886; Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg. J. Duncan, “The Effects of Poverty on Children,” *The Future of Children* 7 (1997): 55–71; Vonnie C. McLoyd, “Socioeconomic Disadvantages and Child Development,” *American Psychologist* 53 (1998): 185–204; Anne Case, Angela Fertig, and Christina Paxson, “The Lasting Impact of Childhood Health and Circumstance,” *Journal of Health Economics* 24 (2005): 365–389.
5. See U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Family and Living Arrangements: 2009, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Table C9,” available at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2009.html.

6. See Caroline Ratcliffe and Signe-Mary McKernan, “Help Children Born into Poverty” (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2010).
7. John M. Love et al., “Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impacts of Early Head Start” (Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2009).
8. Kristin Anderson Moore et al. “Children in Poverty: Trends, Consequences, and Policy Options,” Research Brief No. 2009-11 (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2009).
9. For more information, see http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTGeoSearchByListServlet?ds_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_&_lang=en&_ts=268570514748.
10. Refer to the U.S. Census Bureau’s published tables for detailed margins of error.

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