

The Statistical Picture of Poverty

In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson declared “war on poverty.” Almost simultaneously the U.S. poverty threshold definitions and formula were established. The definitions and formula were established by Mollie Orshansky of the Social Security Administration. The formula calculates the income needed to provide the least expensive, nutritionally sound diet for everyone in a household and multiplies it by three. Each year the formula is adjusted for inflation, but the method has remained virtually unchanged for over 40 years. <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/poverty/papers/hptgssiv.htm>

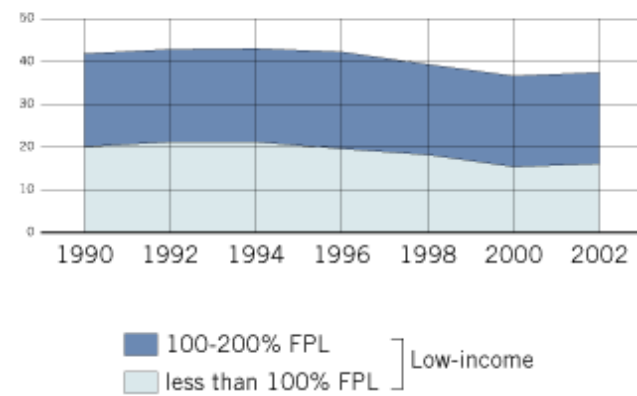
The statistics cited are based on this formula.

More than one-third of children in the United States live in low-income families meaning their parents earn up to double what is considered poverty in this country. The federal poverty level (fpl) for a family of four (2004) is \$18,850.

- 16% of American children—more than 11 million—lived in poor families in 2002, meaning their parents’ income was at or below the federal poverty level. These parents are typically unable to provide their families with basic necessities like stable housing and reliable child care.
- 37% of American children—more than 26million—lived in low-income families in 2002. Their parents made less than 200% of the federal poverty line (FPL). These families often face material hardships and financial pressures similar to those families who are officially counted as poor.

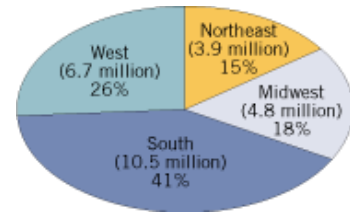
After a decade of decline, the rate of children living in low-income families is rising again, a trend that began in 2000.

Percent of children in low-income families, 1990-2002



Two out of three children in low-income families live in either the South or the West.

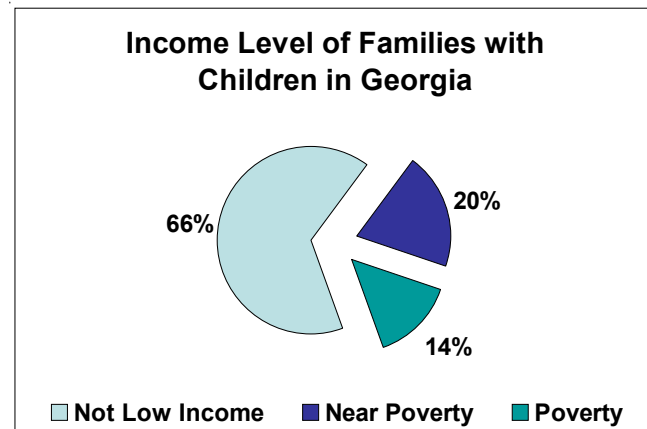
- In the Northeast and Midwest, children in urban areas are more likely to live in low-income families.
- In the South and West, children in rural areas are more likely to live in low-income families.



In Georgia, the statistics are:

Low-Income Families: 34% (382,754) of families with children are low-income (National: 34%).

Families in Poverty: 14% (157,390) of families with children are poor (National: 14%). National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health. www.nccp.org/pub_cpf04.html



Perspectives on Poverty

A different and interesting approach to characterizing children from poor homes is that children from poor homes lack four types of social capital. They do not have a sense of academic initiative, knowing, connectedness, and well being.

Social Capital	Explanation
Academic Initiative	Many students lack a school work ethic, good study habits, and a high level of self discipline. Academic success is not perceived as relevant to their future lives.
Sense of Knowing	Students do not have a solid foundation upon which to build success in schools. They do not have opportunities to thrive, which include pre-school attendance, travel, summer camps, home computers, tutors, music lessons, exposure to the arts, and visits to colleges.
Sense of Connectedness	Students feel alienated and do not have a sense of belonging to their community, neighborhood or school. They do not feel that they belong at their schools and do not perceive schoolwork to be of great value
Sense of Well-being	Students feel emotionally and psychologically insecure. Worries about the future, little hope and low levels of self confidence and self respect negate a feeling of well-being.

G. Maeroff, “Altered Destinies: Making Life Better for Children in Need” *Phi Delta Kappan*, February, 1998; 424-432.

Some researchers believe that the poor adopt belief systems that make their lives tolerable while living in an affluent society. These beliefs become inculcated in the society uniting its members and preventing them from seeking a more middle class lifestyle. An example of such a belief is having many children and having them young. Another belief is that money is an expression of one’s personality and should be used for entertainment and relationships and not for emergencies or to improve one’s economic status.

Significant Barriers Associated with Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

One of the most significant barriers associated with breaking the poverty cycle is a student’s attitude and beliefs. Low personal expectations and low self efficacy perpetuate low achievement and failure. Teachers have an unconscious middle-class mindset about how students should talk, behave and dress. Any departure from that paradigm reflects negatively on the student’s ability and potential. High mobility, low education level of parents, job instability, number of persons in the home, and lack of basic necessities result in students being detached from learning and focusing their thoughts on survival. The school culture is viewed by students as being unsupportive and uncaring. Students do not feel they are wanted and valued in the learning environment. Bamburg suggests that new thinking is needed to educate children of poverty (J. Bamburg. NCREL Monograph: Raising Expectations to Improve Student Learning, 2000). www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrs/le0bam.htm.

Additional research suggests that high levels of poverty within the community can adversely affect children’s development regardless of the quality of the individual family’s life. In a study conducted in Georgia and Iowa on 10 and 11 year old African American children, it was found that children who lived in disadvantaged communities, whether urban or rural, were more likely to associate with antisocial peers than children of more affluent areas, even when the children came from supportive nurturing families. (G. Brody & et.al., The Influence of Neighborhood Disadvantage, Collective Socialization, and Parenting on African American Children’s Affiliation with Deviant Peers. *Child Development*, 72 (4), 1231-1246).

Another study examined how community poverty affects high school completion rate. The data showed that African American students were more adversely affected by high poverty environments than Caucasian or Asian American students. African American students in high poverty areas had a graduation rate of 50%, the lowest level among the racial and ethnic groups studied. (C. Swanson. Who Graduates? Who Doesn’t? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001, Washington, D.C. The Urban Institute, 2004). <http://urban.org/> Look under left hand section, Most Downloaded Reports, Who Graduates? Who Doesn’t?

The Rural School and Community Trust

The Rural School and Community Trust is a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve rural schools and strengthen the relationship between schools and the communities they serve. In 1999 Georgia participated with three other states, Montano, Ohio and Texas, in a study to determine if smaller schools could reduce the damaging effects of poverty on achievement. The researchers, Craig Howley of Ohio State University and Robert Bickel of Marshall University analyzed 29 different standardized test scores from 1, 626 of the approximately 1,800 schools in Georgia. The data showed strong evidence that smaller schools had a positive impact on reducing the effects of poverty on achievement, i.e. the lower the income of the community, the more student achievement was benefited by smaller schools. www.ruraledu.org/docs/sapss/nat_sum.html

	Traditional	New Thinking
Learner	A child who is poor and belongs to an ethnic minority has deficiencies.	A disadvantaged student’s experiences may have gaps, but build on the foundation and expand the repertoire of skills and competencies.
Curriculum	Reading, writing and mathematics is taught in fixed sequence from simplest to most complex concepts, and mastery is achieved by linear progression through the sequence.	The curriculum is to be focused on meaning and understanding. Routine skill learning should be balanced with novel and complex tasks. Clear reasons for learning must be established and skills and concepts related and interrelated.
Role of Teacher	Direct teacher instruction has been the predominant mode of instruction.	The most effective learning occurs when a balance exists between teacher-directed and student-directed instruction
Classroom Management and Academic Work	Classroom management has stressed the need for establishing a classroom climate with clear routines and consequences for disruptive behavior.	The basis for order and classroom management should emanate from academics and the establishment of learning atmospheres rather than generic rules and consequences for behavior.
Classroom Organization	The traditional patterns for grouping students for instruction are ability, tracking and group-based supplemental services.	Flexible and temporary heterogeneous groupings, integration of supplemental services into regular classroom activities and maximizing individual help to low-performing students holds more promise for at-risk learners

J. Bamburg (2000) NCREL Monograph: Raising Expectations to Improve Student Learning.

Public School: Key to Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Poverty is one of America's most persistent problems and impacts learning and achievement in school perhaps greater than any other single factor. Success in raising achievement in high diversity, low income, low-achieving schools and school systems can be accomplished if it is acknowledged and understood that students must learn even though poverty is present and persistent. For schools and school systems to break the cycle of poverty, it means that teachers and administrators must have some

understanding of the many dimensions of poverty, its effects and be trained in techniques and skills to help high-risk students achieve and free themselves from the limitations of poverty. Requiring all children to learn has been mandated by the U. S. government, but most of all, it must become the passion and the voice of conscience for school administrators and classroom teachers because the public school has been and remains the most available and inclusive means for helping children break the cycle of poverty. ■

Issue Brief

Professional Association of Georgia Educators
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Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

Bamburg, Jerry D. Raising Expectations to Improve Student Learning. North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Monograph, 1994. www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0bam.htm.

Beegle, Donna. Overcoming the Silence of Generational Poverty, *Talking Points*, 15 (1) October/November 2003, 11-20.

Behrman, Richard E. (ed.) The Children of Poverty, *The Future of Children*, 7 (2) Summer/Fall, 1997.

Bempechat, Janine. Learning from Poor and Minority Students Who Succeed in School. *Harvard Education Letter*, May/June, 1999. www.edletter.org/past/issues/1999-mj/learning.shtml

Brody, Gene H. & et.al. The Influence of Neighborhood Disadvantage, Collective Socialization, and Parenting on African American Children's Affiliation with Deviant Peers, *Child Development*, 72, (4), July/August, 2001, 1231-1246.

Craig, Paul. Crossing Poverty Lines. The News Review Online. January 24, 2004. www.newsreview.info/ In Search Box type in Crossing Poverty Lines.

Douglas-Hall, Ayana and Koball, Heather. Low Income Children in the United States, National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, 2004. www.nccp.org/pub_cpf04.html

Fisher, Gordon M. The Development and History of the U. S. Poverty Thresholds-A Brief Overview, Newsletter of the Government Statistical Section and the Social Statistics Section of the American Statistical Association, Winter 1997, 6-7. <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/poverty/papers/hptgssiv.htm>

Holloway, John H. How the Community Influences Achievement, *Educational Leadership*, 61 (8), May 2004, 89-90.

Howley, Craig and Bickel, Robert. School Size, Poverty, and Student Achievement, The Rural School and Community Trust, February 2000. www.ruraledu.org/docs/sapss/nat_sum.html

Renchler, Ron. Poverty and Learning. *Eric Digest* 83 May, 1993. <http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest083.html>

Swanson, Christopher B. Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001. Education Policy Center, The Urban Institute, 2004. <http://urban.org/> Look under left hand section, Most Downloaded Reports, Who Graduates? Who Doesn't?

Victims of Generational Poverty May Use Hidden Rules of Conduct, *California Educator*, 8 (8) May, 2004. www.cta.org/CaliforniaEducator/v8i8/MTC_1.htm. Article is reporting on presentation by Ruby Payne in which she is referencing her work, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*.

It has been 50 years since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law for the purpose of offsetting the disadvantages students from poor or impoverished neighborhoods and families bring to the classroom. Since the 1960s a variety of federal and state programs have been designed and implemented to help the slow learner, the high risk student and the low socio-economic student to have more equity in the classroom. Title I, the major program of ESEA, has shown some decrease in narrowing the achievement gap between students from higher income and lower income families, but the gap remains too wide.

New technology and statistical methods are providing data to school systems that will be beneficial in targeting funds, designing instructional activities, and tracking progress. Data systems are now improving which will help schools systems track achievement by school and by subgroups. Census data are also available to help define the level and scope of poverty in the community.

The research on the effects of poverty has also become more sophisticated and is helping teachers and administrators understand the effects of poverty on learning, achievement and behavior. Poverty is the strongest predictor of student success with the exception of a student's prior achievement record.

Unfortunately, research repeatedly confirms that teachers have low expectations of students who come from impoverished homes. No Child Left Behind mandates all teachers to make sure that all children learn, but more importantly, it is the professional responsibility of educators to hold low income children to high educational standards because only then can they break the cycle of

poverty. Poverty does not mean that students can't learn, but it does mean that teachers and schools must do more and do it differently to help these students achieve.

Poverty

Poverty is a generic term for describing many conditions in which students and their families live. It usually means that a person or family has insufficient income and resources to sustain healthy living. Poverty can predictably be identified when there is a coalescence of factors such as low educational level among significant adults, significant number of minority/racial group(s), lack of job skills, one-parent homes, and low income. These factors combine and interact to form an environment often worsened by the involvement of drugs and crime.

Poverty is generally divided into two types: generational poverty and situational poverty. Generational poverty is when the economic level of a family drops and stays in a low economic state for more than two generations. It is very likely that the 25 million generational poverty individuals will remain there and be joined by their children. Many researchers and public health and social service providers think that

generational poverty creates a belief in children that they cannot change their circumstances. Moreover, they become comfortable in their culture and do not want to change (Victims of Generational Poverty May Use Hidden Rules of Conduct, *California Educator*, 8 (8) May, 2004. www.cta.org/CaliforniaEducator/v8i8/MTC_1.htm. Donna Beegle, author and lecturer on poverty and a generational poverty product, says that poverty creates a student that teachers don't always know how to teach. (Donna Beegle, Overcoming the Silence of Generational Poverty, *Talking Points*, 15 (1) October/November 2003, 11-20).

Situational poverty is the decline in resources because of the loss of a job, a death, a divorce or other catastrophic event that forces a family to change their style of living temporarily—one to five years. Children usually rebound from situational poverty, but their self-esteem, self efficacy and confidence usually need attention and reparation. Specific attention must be paid to a student's coping skills and academic progress during this stressful time. Failure to help a student cope with this new and devastating situation can result in generational poverty for the student and his/her future children.

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