

Census Shows Dramatic Drop in Child Poverty – the #1 Driver of Child Abuse

Catching most experts by surprise, a census-based [study by Child Trends](#) shows that child poverty decreased by 59% between 1993 and 2019, from one child in four to one in 10.

The authors attribute this largely to increased minimum wages, fewer teen births, low unemployment, single mothers entering the workforce, children living with grandparents on social security, and federal programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit and housing subsidies. BIPOC children benefitted similarly to White children.

As caveats, most experts don't think the federal poverty level covers basic needs. Also, children in deep poverty, defined as less than 50% of the federal level, made fewer gains. Nevertheless, this appears to represent major progress.

Since poverty is the biggest driver of child maltreatment, rates of abuse and neglect should also have declined. In fact they have. More on that next week.

For a more detailed analysis of this Child Trends study including impact on racial disparities listen to our podcast or read the podcast narrative here.

Podcast Script

First, for some context, this information about lower levels of poverty was made possible by what is called the [Supplemental Poverty Measure](#) (SPM) which the Census Bureau began using in 2009. It takes into account additions to the incomes of poor families. On the plus side this includes food stamps, or SNAP as it is now called, child support, housing subsidies, and lower housing costs for homeowners, and minuses for expenses such as commuting costs and taxes.

This Child Trends study of child poverty, as I said, seems to have taken experts by surprise. I was curious about why that would be since there are so many experts continuously pouring over both census data and related studies. Unlike the census, the SPM is released every year and the [chart on this measure](#) shows a fairly steady decline since about 2014, so the reason wasn't that people were unaware of the statistics until they got the 2020 census in hand. I have no theories to offer about why this trend wasn't being talked about earlier except the possibility that it was not as visible from the year-to-year incremental changes, and perhaps the release of the census data made researchers more comfortable concluding that there was actually a long-term downward trend.

There have been a number of well vetted, credible studies showing that there is a strong relationship between poverty, especially deep poverty, and child maltreatment. Deep poverty refers to families with less than 50% of the federal poverty level income. So one would think that the rate of child maltreatment would have tracked downward with reductions in poverty. In fact, according to the annual federal Department of Health and Human Services Maltreatment Report, that is the case, and we will talk about that in more detail in a future podcast. Briefly

today though, the data on child maltreatment starts to track a bit more closely with the reduction in child poverty in the 2015 federal Department of Health and Human Services annual Maltreatment Report. It shows that from 2009 to 2014 for example the number of total reports of child maltreatment per 1000 children in the population ranges from 41.6 to 50. Then in 2015 to 2019 this number drops to between 30 and 32 and stays there. That is a drop of a little more than one third, not as big as the 59% drop in child poverty, but quite large, and it is surprising that some of the experts watching these numbers didn't start to ask some questions sooner.

I have a couple of hypotheses, none of which will be particularly easy to get definitive data on, but you have to start somewhere with an idea to check out.

One thought is related to the fact that child welfare researchers probably don't pay much attention to the Supplemental Poverty Measure, and the census comes out only once every 10 years. During this past decade child welfare in particular has been heavily focused on racial disparities in the system and not looking as much at other issues. So maybe the experts just weren't paying attention to the numbers that would cause them to start raising the right questions.

Also, this trend towards reduced child maltreatment might have not been as evident in the 2010 census. In a 2015 article on child poverty entitled "[The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement](#)", by Leroy Pelton, he did observe that the child poverty rate was down from 23% to 17% between 1993 and 2006 but the overall rate of abuse was unchanged, although the rate of emotional neglect nearly doubled. He asks the correct question, namely "If child neglect is so strongly related to poverty, one might ask, why didn't it decline along with child poverty?"

Part of the problem is that his starting point of 1993 is the same as the Child Trends study but he uses the 2006 data is from the National Incidence study rather than the census. So Pelton did not use the 2010 census or apparently the annual Supplemental Poverty Measure. Based on the data he used, during that period the decline in child maltreatment statistics had not yet caught up with the decline in poverty. So Pelton spends a fair amount of time trying to analyze why child maltreatment did not decline proportionately. He suggests that it has to do with changing standards and patterns of what is considered child maltreatment.

By the way I apologize that I'm not able to put the Leroy Pelton article on our website. It is an important document but it is behind a pay wall and I don't have a way to share public access to it. The script for this podcast does have a link to a webpage where you can purchase the study or read an abstract of it.

So the first question I want to ask is why didn't the drop in child maltreatment track more closely with the reduction in child poverty, with one dropping nearly 60% and the other by just one third. That is an issue for someone with more academic chops than I to dig into. But Child Trends suggests that one factor is that the federal definition of poverty is too low. Their analysis gives an example of a woman who is making \$3 per hour above the Ohio minimum wage but after taxes and work expenses only has disposable income of about \$13,200 per year. The safety net programs raise that to about \$25,000, just above the \$23,200 in disposable income that is the federal poverty level. The gist of the analysis is simply that this is not enough to actually live on.

So if poverty is a driver of child maltreatment, being at or near the poverty level may not significantly reduce abuse and neglect.

This brings us back to the Pelton article, which is a 20-year update to a previous study he did in 1994. Both studies he claimed that, in his words, “there is overwhelming evidence that poverty and low income are strongly related to child abuse and neglect... There is also further evidence that decreases in child maltreatment follow increases in material supports....” Regarding racial disparities in the child welfare system, he states that there is “no doubt that racial disproportionalities within the system are overwhelmingly related to racial disproportionalities in the poverty population”. What this means in non-academic language is that racial disparities in the child welfare system are driven more by societal-wide systemic racism that drives Black families into poverty than by racial bias within the child welfare system itself, though of course that is a factor as well. This is an issue we will also explore in an upcoming podcast in more detail when we look at another widely cited article by Emily Putnam-Hornstein in which she examines poverty and factors behind racial disparities in the child welfare system.

The Child Trends analysis does not provide as much detail as we might like about some of the individual factors that they say have put a dent in child poverty, for example the role of grandparents’ Social Security benefits in reducing child poverty. As mentioned they cite increased state level minimum wages, low unemployment during significant stretches of the period from 1993 to 2019, and more single mothers entering the workforce as accounting for about one third of the decline in child poverty. Would like to know more about what is behind those factors, particularly what is driving more single mothers to employment. Federal supports provided through the Earned Income Tax Credit, food stamps now known as SNAP and housing subsidies accounted for 44% of the reduction in child poverty. Fewer teen births did not have a big impact on reducing poverty overall but did account for 52% of the decrease in deep poverty.

Surprisingly other research that they cite suggests that the welfare so-called “reform” provisions implemented by President Clinton, which instituted work requirements and ended public assistance supports to families after five years, were significantly offset by some of these other factors. The report implies that the work requirements in public benefit programs like public assistance helped increase employment, a conclusion that will please Clinton and conservatives, but does not give us a lot of context for understanding how this happened.

The report indicates that the economic status of most racial and demographic groups increased similarly, so most BIPOC children benefitted to the same degree as White children. Those that were left behind were children in deep poverty, which included largely immigrant families, Hispanics without a stably employed parent, and Asian Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders.

Some conclusions need further explanation. For example the contention that housing subsidies played an important role in reducing poverty isn’t consistent with what we usually hear about that area. In Minnesota the wait lists for the majority of Section 8 housing programs across many municipalities are simply closed. In these cities there is no subsidized housing for families. Also, according to a study done by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities last year, if you want to look it up it is written by Sonya Acosta and Erik Gartland, the wait list for the 50 largest

housing agencies in the United States averaged 2 ½ years, some were as long as eight years, and only two had a wait list of less than one year. So what is happening to those families and children during that time? They are either doubled or tripled up in housing or they are homeless – exactly the kinds of deep poverty pressures that grind people down and contribute to child abuse and neglect.

Overall though, it is hard to see how this report by Child Trends has major holes in it, and therefore as something other than a very welcome development. But at the same time it is important to recognize that there are still many millions of families and children in poverty and deep poverty in this country, and millions of children being abused and neglected. We mourn for the loss of the child tax credit that so briefly was in place in President Biden's administration and hope that Congress comes to its senses and reinstate it. But there's not much reason to think that will happen.

We also want to point out that the number of reported and substantiated cases of child maltreatment are really a small proportion of the number of children who are being abused and neglected. We will talk in an upcoming podcast about the data from the National Incidence Study and other sources documenting that a small proportion of children who are being maltreated get reported to and subsequently accepted for service by child protection agencies, and many of those children are diverted to Alternative Response programs that have no teeth.

In addition, the almost overwhelming emphasis given to family preservation by current child welfare policies means that those children who are in trouble often stay in trouble until they are either severely damaged for life or even killed. So even if we assume that there is significantly less child maltreatment going on in society because people are less poor, the children who are being abused are still numerous, and neither mandated reporters nor the child welfare system are doing what they are supposed to do to protect them.

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