NCCP National Center for Children in Poverty
Columbia University
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Identifying and promoting strategies that prevent child poverty in the U.S.
and that improve the lives of low-income children and families.

Where Do Children in Low-Income Families Live?

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INTRODUCTION

Where low-income children live is changing. Two-thirds of children in low-income families live in the West or the South, a substantial increase in those regions from a decade ago. Immigration, jobs, and housing are among the biggest reasons for the geographical changes.

- In the South and West, children in rural areas are more likely to live in low-income families.
- In the Northeast and Midwest, children in urban areas are more likely to live in low-income families.
- 45% of children in low-income families who moved to different regions did so for the parents jobs.
- Children in low-income families who moved within regions usually did so for housing-related reasons; the most commonly cited was wanted better housing.

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The number of America's children who live in low-income families is growing.[1] In addition, where they live is changing. Children in low-income families are twice as likely to have faced moving in the previous year, compared to children in higher-income families.

Two-thirds of children in low-income families live in the West or the South—a substantial increase in those regions from a decade ago.[2] Immigration has fueled some of the change in the West—37 percent of children of recent immigrants lived there. While the vast majority of the children in low-income families move within regions, the majority who move inter-regionally settle in the South.

Forty-five percent of children in low-income families who moved to different regions did so for the parents' jobs. Children in low-income families who moved within regions usually did so for housing-related reasons—the most commonly sited was "wanted better housing."

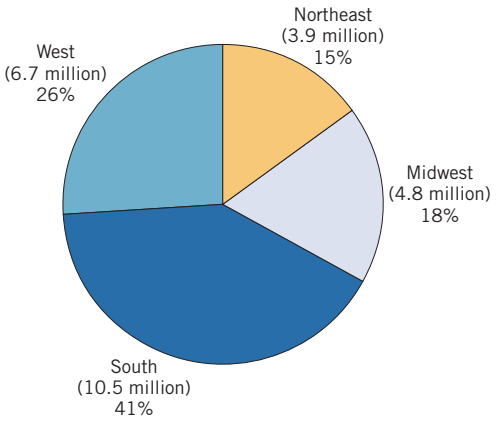
In the South and West, children in low-income families are more concentrated in rural areas, but they are more likely to live in urban areas in the Midwest and Northeast. Poverty is growing in suburban areas,[3] although they are substantially less likely to be home to the children of low-income families.

This report looks at where children in low-income families live, where and why their families move, and the implications for public policy.

South and West More Likely Home to Children in Low-Income Families

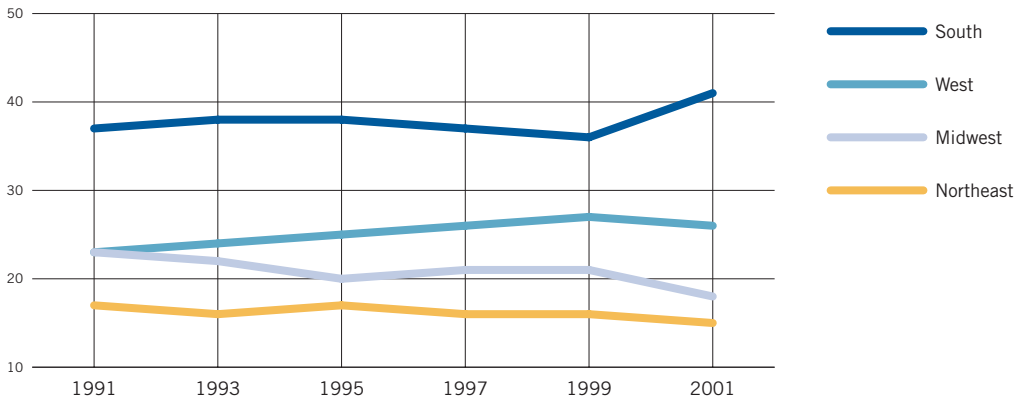
Two out of three children in low-income families live in either the South or the West (see Figure 1).[4] Forty-one percent of children in low-income families live in the South and 26 percent live in the West. Only one in three children in low-income families live in either the Northeast or the Midwest.[5]

Figure 1: Distribution of Children in Low-Income Families by Region, 2001



The percent of children in low-income families who live in the West or the South has increased over the past decade, particularly in the past two years (see Figure 2). A decade ago, 23 percent of children in low-income families lived in the West and 37 percent lived in the South. This proportion rose significantly in the West throughout the decade.[6] In the South, the proportion stayed fairly steady, until 1999, after which it jumped significantly.

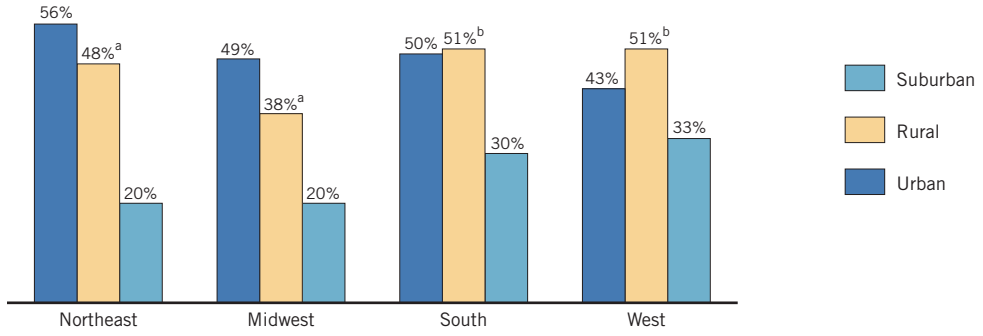
Figure 2: Percent of All Low-Income Children Who Live in Each Region, 1991–2001



Higher Numbers in Urban and Rural Areas Than Suburbs

In the Northeast and Midwest, children in urban areas are more likely to live in low-income families, while in the South and West children in rural areas are more likely to live in low-income families (see Figure 3).[7] In the Northeast, 56 percent of children in urban areas live in low-income families, while in the Midwest, 49 percent do. In the South, a similar proportion of children in urban areas live in low-income families (50 percent); however, rural Southern children are significantly more likely to live in low-income families (51 percent). In the West, 51 percent of children in rural areas live in low-income families, compared to 43 percent in urban areas. In every region, children in suburban areas are significantly less likely to live in low-income families; however, even within suburban areas, 20 percent to 33 percent of children live in low-income families.

Figure 3: Percent of Children in Low-Income Families, by Region and Urban, Rural, and Suburban Residence, 2001



[a] Significantly lower than the percent in urban areas, p<=.10, two-tailed t-test
[b] Significantly higher than the percent in urban areas, p<=.10, two-tailed t-test

Low-Income Children's Families More Likely to Move

Children in low-income families were twice as likely to have been moved in the past year compared to children in higher-income families[8] (see Table 1). About one out of five children in low-income families moved in the previous year, while only about one of ten of their more affluent peers did. Children in the Northeast were significantly less likely to have been moved, regardless of income, than were children in other regions.

Table 1: Percent of Children who Moved in the Previous Year by Region and Family Income Level, 2001

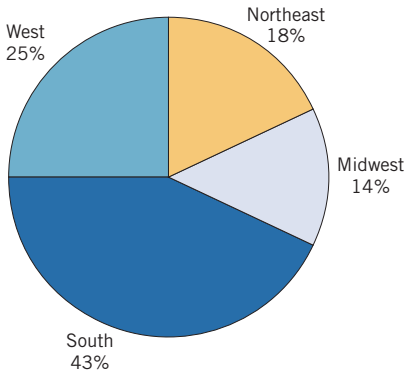
	Low-Income Children	*Higher Income Children*
Northeast	16%[a]	8%
Midwest	21%[a]	10%
South	23%[a]	12%
West	21%[a]	14%

[a] Significantly higher than above low-income children, p=.10, two-tailed test

South Most Likely Destination

The South was the most common destination of children whose low-income families moved to a new region in the previous year (see Figure 4). Over 40 percent of children in low-income families who made an inter-regional move in the previous year moved to the South. The movement of low-income children into the South primarily reflected that, regardless of income, most inter-regional movers relocated to the South. The most common reason for moving to a new region for children in low-income families was for their parents' new job or job transfer; 45 percent of children in low-income families moved for their parents' jobs.

Figure 4: Destination of Children Whose Low-Income Families Moved to a New Region in the Previous Year, 2001



Motivations for Within-Region Move is Housing-Related

Over 90 percent of children who moved in the previous year moved within a region. The reasons for moving differed by family income. Children in low-income families were significantly more likely to face moves for family-related reasons than were children in higher-income families (see Table 2). The specific family reason most often cited by low-income parents was "to form an independent household." This may be because many low-income families "double up" with extended family or with roommates to reduce housing costs.[9]

Table 2: Reasons Given by Parents for Moves Within Regions, by Family Income Status, 2001

	Low-Income Children	*Higher Income Children*
Family	29%	19%
Job	10%	15%
Housing	58%	64%
Other	4%	2%
Total	100%	100%

Housing related reasons were the most common reason for moves within regions, regardless of income level. Among children in families who moved for housing-related reasons, finding better housing was the most common reason cited by parents of children in both low-income and higher-income families (see Table 3). However, children in low-income families were more than twice as likely to have moved so their parents could find cheaper housing. Children in low-income families were 40 percent *less* likely to have moved so their parents could buy a home.

Table 3: Specific Reasons for Moving, Among Children who Moved Within a Region for Housing-Related Reasons, 2001

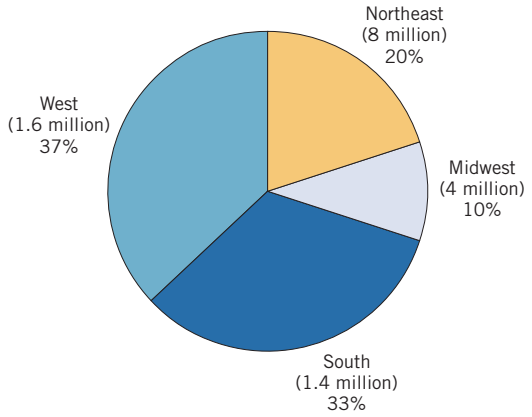
	Low-Income Children	*Higher Income Children*
Buy a Home	15%[a]	26%
Better Housing	38%[a]	44%
Cheaper Housing	13%[b]	6%
Better Neighborhood	10%[b]	8%
Other Housing	24%[b]	16%
Total	100%	100%

[a] Significantly lower than higher-income children, p=.10, two-tailed t-test
[b] Significantly higher than higher-income children, p=.10, two-tailed t-test

Children of Recent Immigrants Most Likely Live in West

The West was the most common residence of children of recent immigrants (see Figure 5).[10] Thirty-seven percent of children of recent immigrants lived in the West. Similarly, 33 percent of children of recent immigrants lived in the South. Only 10 percent of children of recent immigrants lived in the Midwest.

Figure 5: Regional Residence of Children of Recent Immigrants, 2001



Recent Immigrant Parents in West Have Lower Incomes, Less Education

The characteristics of children of recent immigrants vary by region. In the West, children of recent immigrants are more likely to live in low-income families than are children of recent immigrants in the other three regions (see Table 4). This likely reflects the lower education levels of recent immigrant parents in the West.[11] Forty-six percent of children of recent immigrants who live in the West do not have a parent who holds a high school degree, compared to 26 percent in the Northeast. In every region, children of recent immigrants are quite likely to have parents who work full-time and year-round. At least two-thirds of children of recent immigrants in every region have at least one parent who is working full-time and year-round.

Table 4: Characteristics of Children of Recent Immigrants by Region, 2001

Percent	*Northeast*	*Midwest*	*South*	*West*
Living in Low-Income Families	58%	54%	65%	69%[a]
Parents without High School Degree	26%	28%	34%	46%[a]
At Least One Parent Works Full-Time/Year-Round	69%	73%	72%	65%

[a] Significantly higher than the Northeast, Midwest and South, p=.10, two-tailed test

Policy Implications

This report examines regional differences in the residence of children in low-income families. One major reason for the concentration of these children in the South and West appears to be the migration of low-income families to the South and immigration to the West.

These trends reinforce the importance of state policies that support low-income working families. The most prevalent reason that children in low-income families were moved to the South was for their parents' jobs. This level of commitment to work indicates the need for work and income supports, such as an expanded federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), refundable state tax credits, and affordable child care.[12] Despite a general notion that poverty is concentrated in urban areas, over half of the children in the rural South live in low-income families, which highlights a particular need for services that support rural working families.[13]

In the West, 69 percent of children of recent immigrants live in low-income families, even though 65 percent have at least one parent who works full-time and year-round. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 sharply restricted legal immigrants' access to key income and work supports, such as food stamps, cash assistance, and public health insurance. While parts of the 1996 legislation have been reversed, for example immigrant children's access to food stamps was restored this year, much remains to be done.[14]

Limiting recent immigrants' access to the social safety net increases the vulnerability of their children. Increasing the income and work supports available to immigrant families will help them to become financially stable.

Low-income children's higher mobility rates are cause for concern. Moving is associated with family turbulence and difficulties in school.[15] Children in low-income families are more likely to move so that their parents can find less expensive housing. State policies that assure affordable housing (e.g., through voucher programs) can potentially increase residential stability among children and employment among their parents.[16]

Endnotes

1. Low-income is defined as family income that is less than twice the federal poverty level, or $36,800 for a fmily of four (2003).

2. The U.S. Census Bureau's definitions of regions are used in this report.

3. U.S. Census Bureau. (2002). *Poverty highlights: 2001.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce <www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/poverty01/pov01hi.html>.

4. Data for all figures and tables in this report come from NCCP analysis of the Current Population Survey, March 2002 supplement.

5. The percent of children in the South and West who live in low-income families is also higher than in the Northeast and the Midwest. In the West, 39% of children live in low-income families and in the South 41% do, compared to 33% in the Northeast and 32% in the Midwest.

6. Throughout this report, the term "significant" is used to indicate statistical significance at the .10 level, using a two-tailed t-test.

7. Living in an urban area is defined as living in a central city, suburban is defined as living in a metropolitan statistical area (as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau), but not in a central city, and rural is defined as living outside a metropolitan statistical area.

8. Higher income is defined as income ≥ 200 % of the poverty threshold

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10. Recent immigrant is defined as an individual moving to the United States for good within the last 10 years.

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14. See NCCP's LIFT policy database on the NCCP web site: <www.nccp.org> for more information on benefits available to immigrant families.

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