



Basic Facts about Low-Income Children

Children under 18 Years, 2012

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Children under 18 years represent 23 percent of the population, but they comprise 34 percent of all people in poverty.¹ Among all children, 45 percent live in low-income families and approximately one in every five (22 percent) live in poor families. Being a child in a low-income or poor family does not happen by chance. Parental education and employment, race/ethnicity, and other factors are associated with children's experience of economic insecurity. This fact sheet describes the demographic, socio-economic, and geographic characteristics of children and their parents. It highlights the important factors that appear to distinguish low-income and poor children from their less disadvantaged counterparts.



National Center for Children in Poverty

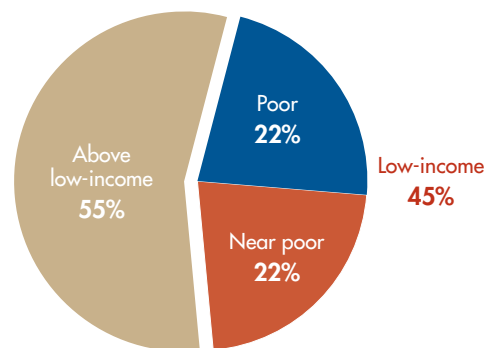
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How many children under age 18 years in the United States live in low-income families?

There are more than 72 million children under age 18 years in the United States.

- ◆ 45 percent – 32.3 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 22 percent – 16.1 million – live in poor families

Figure 1: Children by family income, 2012



Note: Above low income is defined as at or above 200% of the federal poverty threshold (FPT), poor is defined as below 100% of FPT, and near poor is between 100% and 199% of the FPT. The low-income category includes both the poor and the near poor.

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

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What is the 2012 federal poverty threshold (FPT)?²

- ◆ \$23,364 for a family of four with two children
- ◆ \$18,480 for a family of three with one child
- ◆ \$15,825 for a family of two with one child

Is a poverty-level income enough to support a family?

Research suggests that, on average, families need an income equal to about two times the federal poverty level to meet their most basic needs.³ Families with incomes below this level are referred to as low income:

- ◆ \$46,728 for a family of four with two children
- ◆ \$36,960 for a family of three with one child
- ◆ \$31,650 for a family of two with one child

These dollar amounts approximate the average minimum income families need to make ends meet, but actual expenses vary greatly by locality. In 2010–2011, the cost of meeting basic needs for a family of four was about \$64,000 per year in Los Angeles, California; \$57,000 in Newark, New Jersey; \$46,000 in Indianapolis, Indiana; and \$42,000 in Jackson, Mississippi.⁴

Has the percentage of children living in low-income and poor families changed over time?

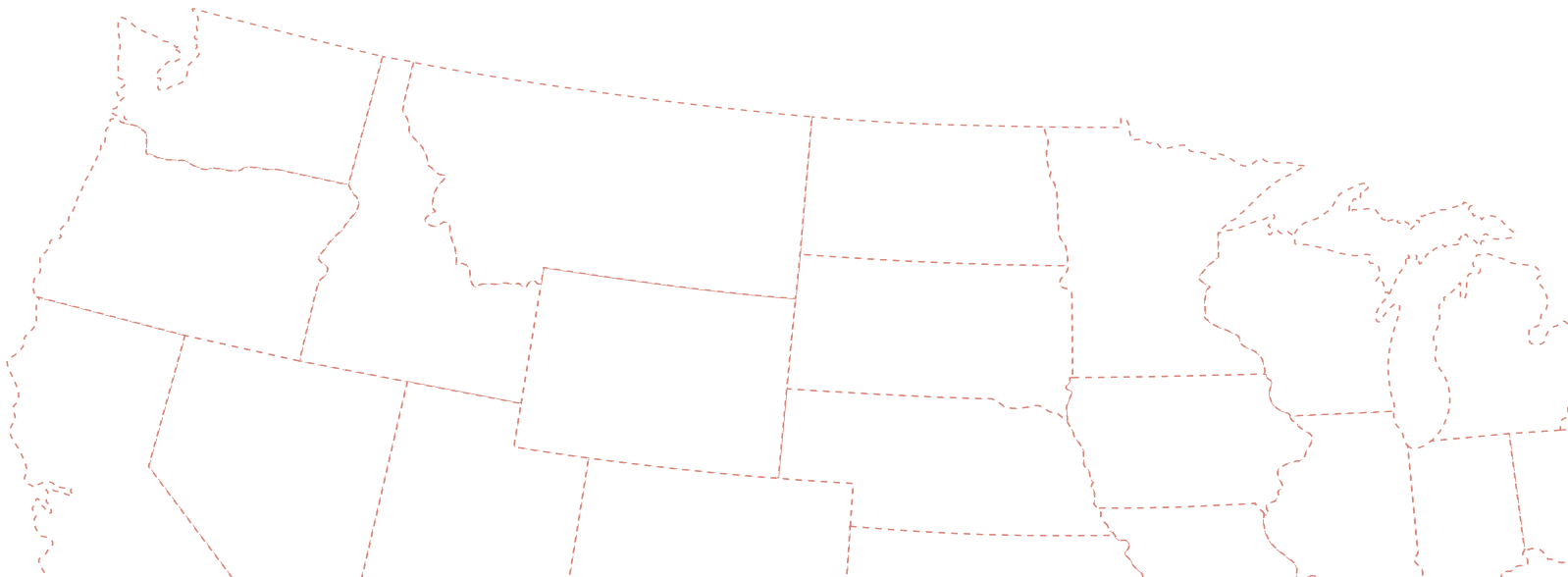
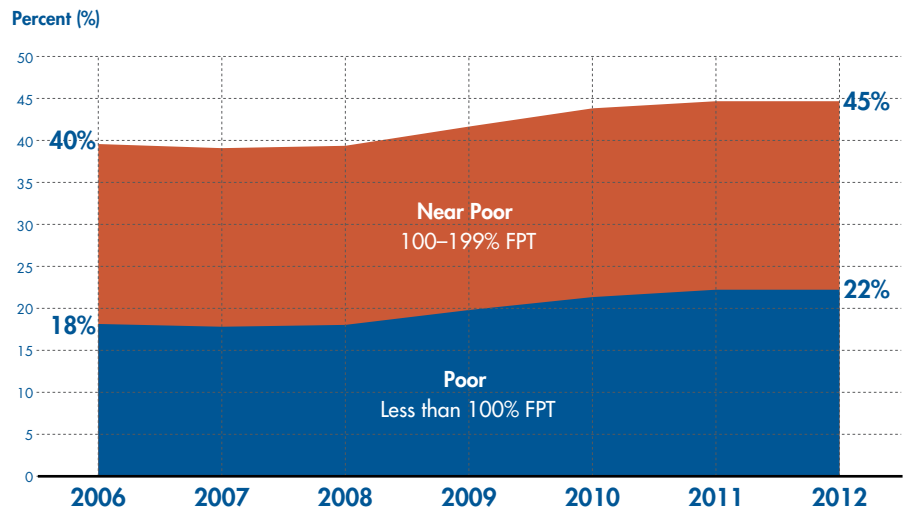
The percentage of children living in low-income families (both poor and near poor) has been *on the rise* – increasing from 40 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2012 (Figure 2). During this time period, the overall number of

children of all ages increased by less than one percent, while the numbers who were low-income and poor increased by 13 percent and 23 percent, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage change of children living in low-income and poor families, 2006–2012

	2006	2012	Percent change
Low-income	28,530,186	32,264,642	13%
Poor	13,078,106	16,132,463	23%

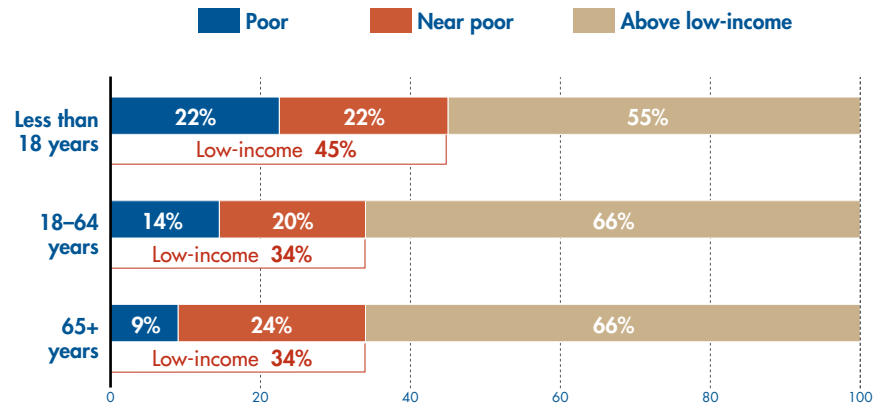
Figure 2: Children living in low-income and poor families, 2006–2012



How do children compare to the rest of the population?

The percentage of all children under age 18 years in low-income families surpasses that of adults. In addition, children are more than twice as likely as adults 65 years and older to live in poor families (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Family income by age, 2012



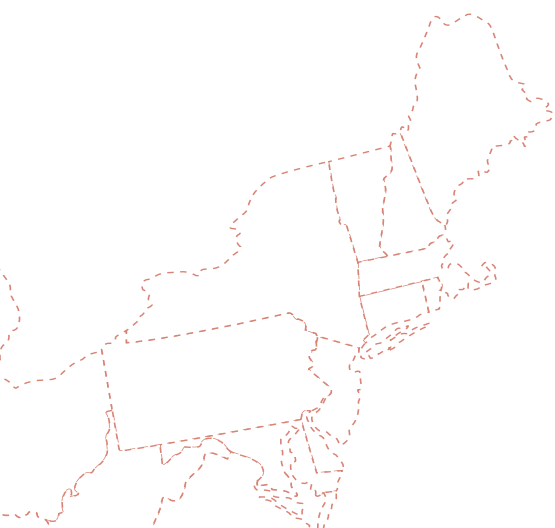
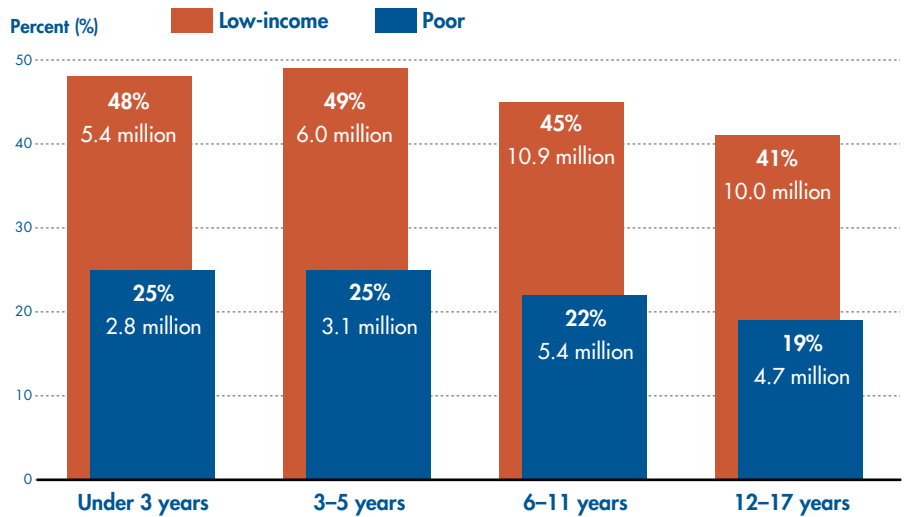
Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Does the percentage of children in low-income families vary by children's age?

The overall percentages of children under 18 years who live in low-income and poor families are 45 percent and 22 percent respectively, yet there is variation by age group. Younger children are more likely to live in low-income and poor families than older children (Figure 4).

- ◆ 48 percent of children under age 3 years – 5.4 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 49 percent of children age 3 through 5 years – 6.0 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 45 percent of children age 6 through 11 years – 10.9 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 41 percent of children age 12 through 17 years – 10.0 million – live in low-income families

Figure 4: Percentage of children in low-income and poor families by age, 2012



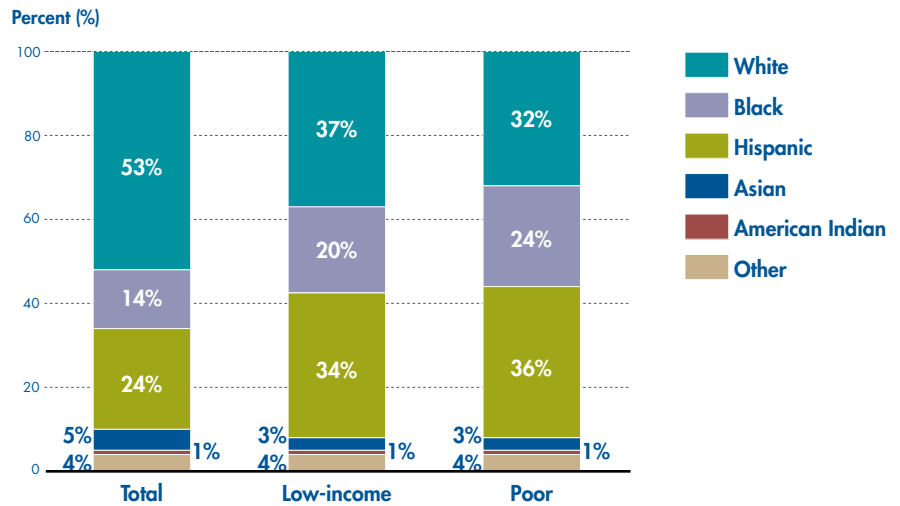
Does the percentage of children in low-income families vary by race/ethnicity?

As Figure 5 illustrates, the percentages of low-income and poor children under 18 vary by race and ethnicity: whites comprise the largest share of all low-income children (37 percent, 12.0 million) while Hispanics make up the largest share of poor children (36 percent, 5.8 million).⁵

But black, American Indian, and Hispanic children are disproportionately low-income and poor (Figure 6).

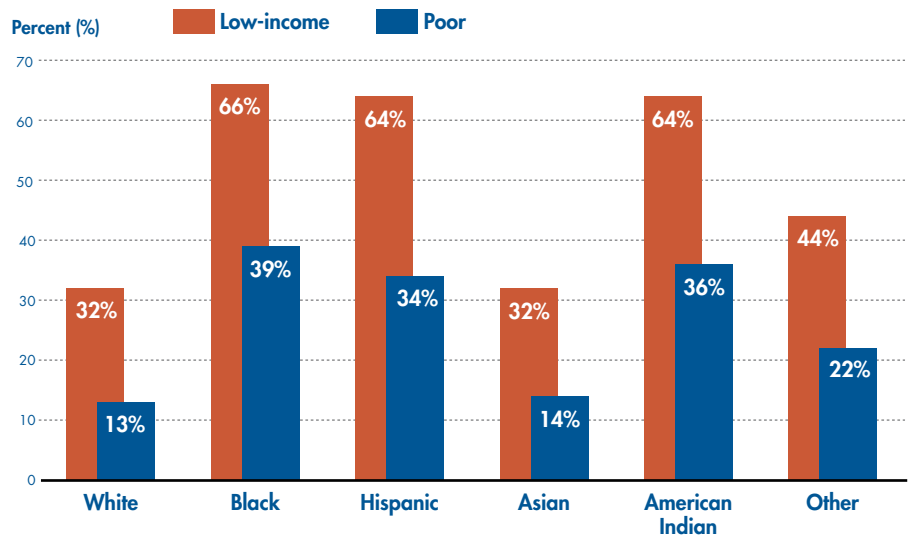
- ◆ 32 percent of white children – 12.0 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 66 percent of black children – 6.5 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 64 percent of Hispanic children – 11.0 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 32 percent of Asian children – 1.1 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 64 percent of American Indian children – 0.3 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 44 percent of children of some other race – 1.4 million – live in low-income families

Figure 5: Race/ethnicity by family income, 2012



Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 6: Percentage of children in low-income and poor families by race/ethnicity, 2012



Does the percentage of children in low-income families vary by parents' country of birth?⁶

- ◆ 55 percent of children of immigrant parents – 9.8 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 41 percent of children of native-born parents – 22.5 million – live in low-income families

What are the family characteristics of low-income and poor children?

Parents' Education⁷

Higher levels of parental education decrease the likelihood that a child will live in a low-income or poor family. Among children with at least one parent with some college or additional education, 31 percent live in low-income and 13 percent in poor families. By contrast, among children whose parents have less than a high school degree, 86 percent live in low-income and 57 percent in poor families (Figure 8).

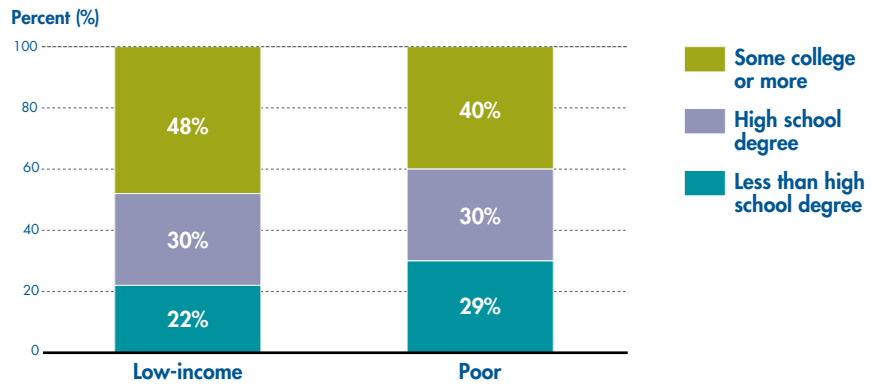
- ◆ 86 percent of children with parents who have less than a high school degree – 7.1 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 67 percent of children with parents who have a high school degree but no college education – 9.5 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 31 percent of children with at least one parent who has some college or additional education – 15.6 million – live in low-income families

At the same time, significant shares of low-income and poor families with children are headed by parents with at least some college education, as shown in Figure 7.

Parents' Employment⁸

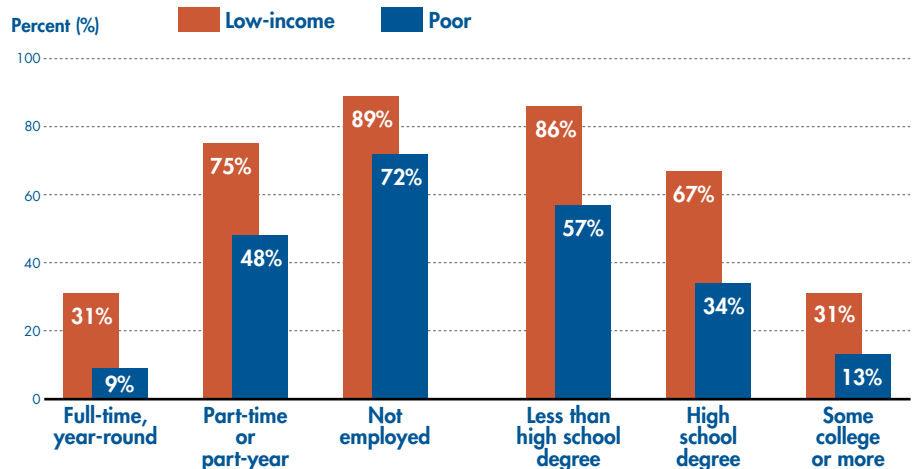
Children with a full-time, year-round employed parent are less likely to live in a low-income family, compared to children with parents who work part-time/part-year or who are not employed (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Parents' education by family income, 2012



Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Figure 8: Percentage of children in low-income and poor families by parents' employment and education, 2012



- ◆ 31 percent of children with at least one parent who works full-time, year-round – 15.9 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 9 percent of children with at least one parent who works full-time, year-round – 4.5 million – live in poor families
- ◆ 75 percent of children with no parent who works full-time, but at least one parent who works part-time or part-year – 10.1 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 48 percent of children with no parent who works full-time, but at least one parent who works part-time or part-year – 6.5 million – live in poor families
- ◆ 89 percent of children with no employed parents – 6.3 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 72 percent of children with no employed parents – 5.1 million – live in poor families

Nevertheless, many low-income and poor children have parents who work full time. Almost half (49 percent) of low-income children and 28 percent of poor children live with at least one parent employed full-time, year-round.

Family Structure

About one-half of children (48 percent) in low-income families – 15.4 million – and 36 percent of children in poor families – 5.9 million – live with married parents. Children who live with two married parents are much less likely to be poor or low-income compared to children who live with a single parent.

- ◆ 32 percent of all children residing with married parents – 15.4 million – live in low-income families

- ◆ 12 percent of all children residing with married parents – 5.9 million – live in poor families
- ◆ 69 percent of all children residing with a single parent – 13.0 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 41 percent of all children residing with a single parent – 7.8 million – live in poor families

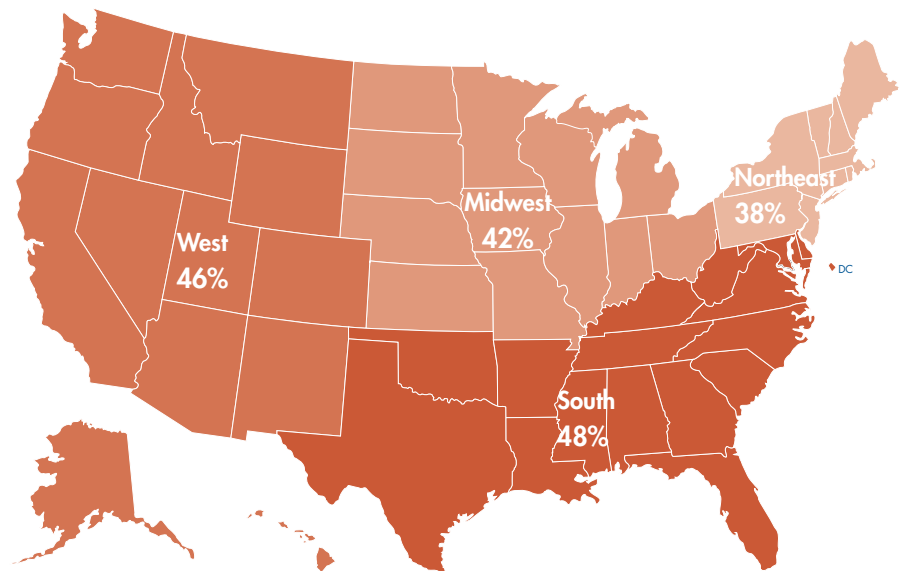
Does the percentage of children in low-income families vary by where they live?

Region

The percentage of children in low-income families varies substantially by region.

- ◆ 38 percent of children in the Northeast – 4.5 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 42 percent of children in the Midwest – 6.5 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 48 percent of children in the South – 13.2 million – live in low-income families
- ◆ 46 percent of children in the West – 8.0 million – live in low-income families

Figure 9: Percentage of children in low-income families by region, 2012



Residential Instability and Home Ownership

Research suggests that stable housing is important for healthy child development.⁹ However, children living in low-income families are twice as likely as other children to have moved in the past year and three times

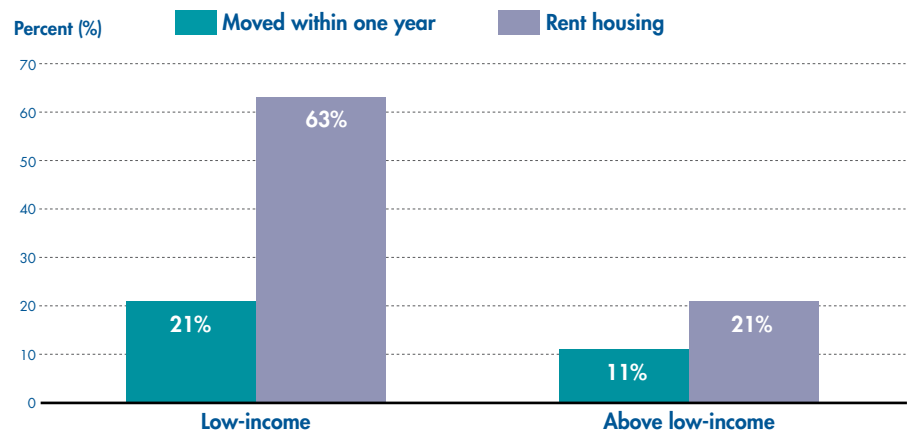
as likely to live in families that rent, rather than own, a home (Figure 10).

- ◆ 21 percent of children in low-income families – 6.6 million – moved in the last year

- ◆ 11 percent of children in families above the low-income threshold – 4.3 million – moved in the last year
- ◆ 63 percent of children in low-income families – 20.3 million

- live with a family that rents a home
- ◆ 21 percent of children in families above the low-income threshold – 8.5 million – live with a family that rents a home

Figure 10: Residential instability and home ownership by family income, 2012



Are children in low-income families covered by health insurance?

Among all children under age 18, approximately 10 percent living in low-income families and 9 percent living in poor families are without health insurance coverage.¹⁰ Consistent with research suggesting older children in general are particularly at risk of being uninsured, children age 12 through 17 years in low-income and poor families are more likely to be uninsured compared to younger children in low-income and poor families (Figure 11).¹¹ Public insurance reaches the largest share of economically disadvantaged children, covering 68 percent of low-income children and 81 percent of poor children (Figure 12).

- ◆ 10 percent of children living in low-income families – 3.2 million – are uninsured
- ◆ 27 percent of children living in low-income families – 8.7 million – are covered by private insurance
- ◆ 68 percent of children living in low-income families – 21.9 million – are covered by public insurance

Figure 11: Percentage of children uninsured in low-income and poor families by age, 2012

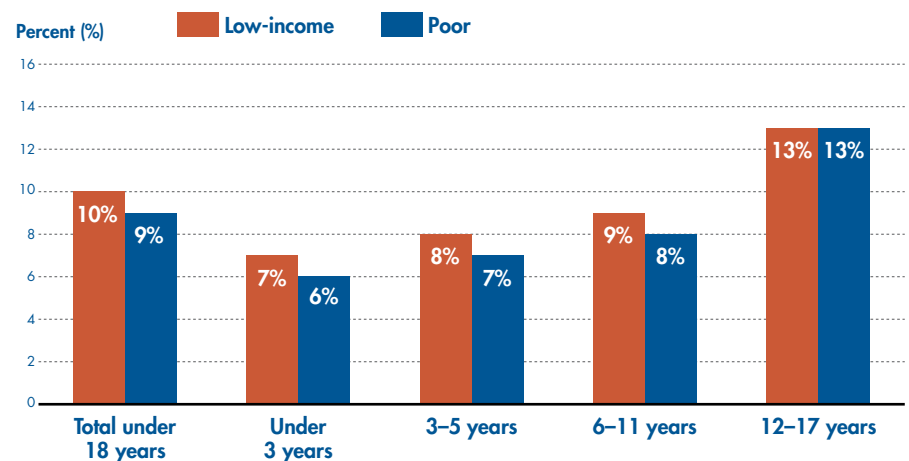
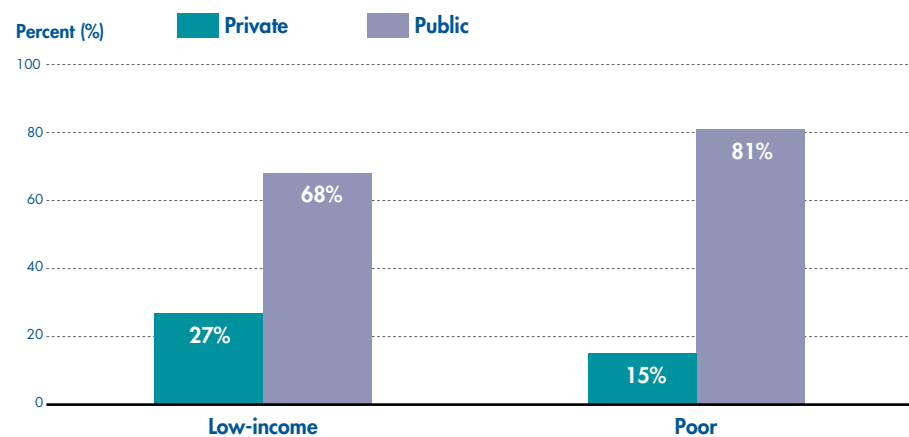


Figure 12: Type of health insurance coverage among all children by family income, 2012



To find comparable information for infants and toddlers, see *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children under 3 Years, 2012*; for young children, see *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children under 6 Years, 2012*; for middle children, see *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children 6 through 11 Years, 2012*; for adolescent children, see *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children 12 through 17 Years, 2012*.

Endnotes

This fact sheet is part of the National Center for Children in Poverty's demographic fact sheet series and is updated annually. Unless otherwise noted, analysis of the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS) was conducted by Yang Jiang and Mercedes Ekono of NCCP. Estimates include children living in households with at least one parent and most children living apart from both parents (for example, children being raised by grandparents). Children living independently, living with a spouse, or in group quarters are excluded from these data. Children age 14 years and under living with only unrelated adults were not included because data on their income status were not available. Among children who do not live with at least one parent, parental characteristics are those of the householder and/or the householder's spouse. We would like to thank Renée Wilson-Simmons, NCCP director, for her advice on this fact sheet. Special thanks to Telly Valdellon for layout and production.

1. In this fact sheet, poverty is defined as family income less than 100 percent of the federal poverty threshold, as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau; low income is defined as family income less than 200 percent of the poverty threshold.
2. The U.S. Census Bureau issues the poverty thresholds annually. Thresholds vary by family size and composition. See <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/12poverty.shtml> for the complete 2012 poverty thresholds.
3. Cauthen, Nancy K. & Fass, Sarah. (2008). *Measuring Income and Poverty in the United States*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health.
4. These figures were derived from NCCP's Basic Needs Budget Calculator.
5. In the most recent ACS, parents could report children's race as one or more of the following: "White," "Black," "American Indian or Alaska Native," or "Asian and/or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander." In a separate question, parents could report whether their children were of Hispanic origin. For the data reported, children whose parent reported their race as White, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Asian and/or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and their ethnicity as non-Hispanic are assigned their respective race. Children who were reported to be of more than one race were assigned as Other. Children whose parent identified them as Hispanic were categorized as Hispanic, regardless of their reported race.
6. The variable "native-born parents" is defined to mean that both parents in the family were born in the U.S. or its

territories, or born abroad to American parent(s). The variable "immigrant parents" is defined to mean that at least one parent in the family is either a U.S. citizen by naturalization or is not a citizen of the U.S.

7. Parents' education is defined as the education level of the most highly educated parent living in the household. Parents can either have no high school degree, a high school degree but no college, or some college or more.

8. Parents' employment is defined as the employment level of the parent in the household who maintained the highest level of employment in the previous year. Parents can either have no employment in the previous year, part-year or part-time employment, or full-time, year-round employment. Part-year or part-time employment is defined as either working less than 50 weeks in the previous year or less than 35 hours per week. Full-time, year-round employment is defined as working at least 50 weeks in the previous year and 35 hours or more per week.

9. Aratani, Yumiko. (2009). *Homeless Children and Youth*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health.

10. People can report more than one type of insurance coverage. Children not covered by private or public health insurance at the time of the survey are considered uninsured.

11. Schwarz, Susan Wile. (2009). *Adolescent Mental Health in the United States*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health.