

Basic Facts About Low-Income Children

CHILDREN UNDER 18 YEARS, 2019

Heather Koball, Akilah Moore, and Jennifer Hernandez



April 2021



National Center for Children in Poverty

Bank Street Graduate School of Education



Among all children under 18 years in the US, 38 percent live in low-income families and 17 percent—approximately one in five—are poor. This means that children are overrepresented among our nation's poor; they represent 23 percent of the population but comprise 32 percent of all people in poverty. Many more children live in families with incomes just above the poverty threshold.¹

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 experiences of economic insecurity. This fact sheet highlights disparities in children's experiences of economic insecurity by race, geography, and other factors.

What is the 2019 federal poverty threshold (FPT)?²

- \$25,926 for a family of four with two children
- \$20,578 for a family of three with one child
- \$17,622 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 threshold to meet their most basic needs.³ Families with incomes below this level are referred to as low income:

- \$51,852 for a family of four with two children
- \$41,156 for a family of three with one child
- \$35,244 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.

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

There are more than 27 million children under age 18 years who live in low-income families in the United States. 38 percent of those children live in low-income families.

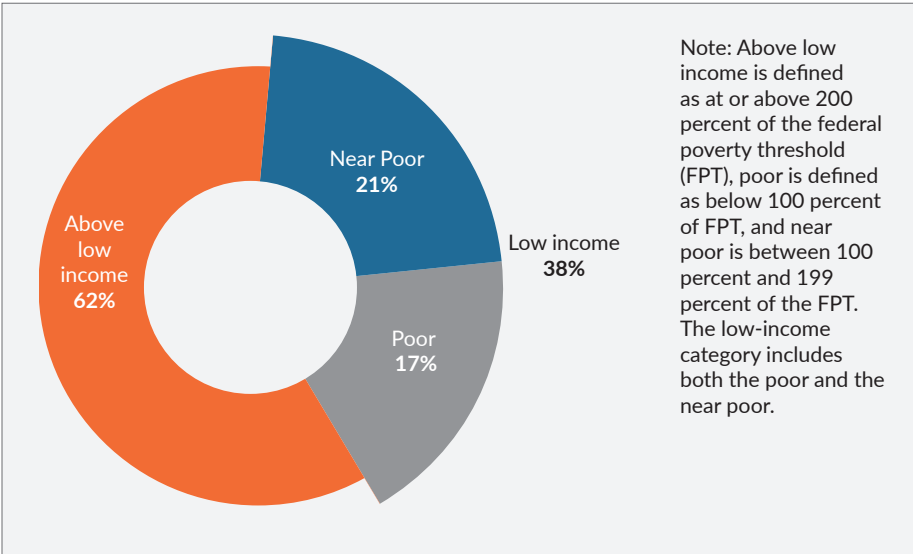


Figure 1: Children by Family Income, 2019

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

The percentage of low-income children (both poor and near poor) decreased from 45 percent in 2010 to 38 percent in 2019, and has decreased from a high of 46 percent in 2012 (Figure 2).

Between 2010 and 2019, the overall number of children (children under age 18) decreased from 74.1 million to 71.6 million. The number of low-income children decreased from 33.2 million to 27.1 million, the number of poor, children decreased from 16.8 million to 11.9 million, and the number of children living in deep poverty, defined as less than 50 percent of the federal poverty threshold, decreased from 8.1 million to 5.2 million (Table 1).

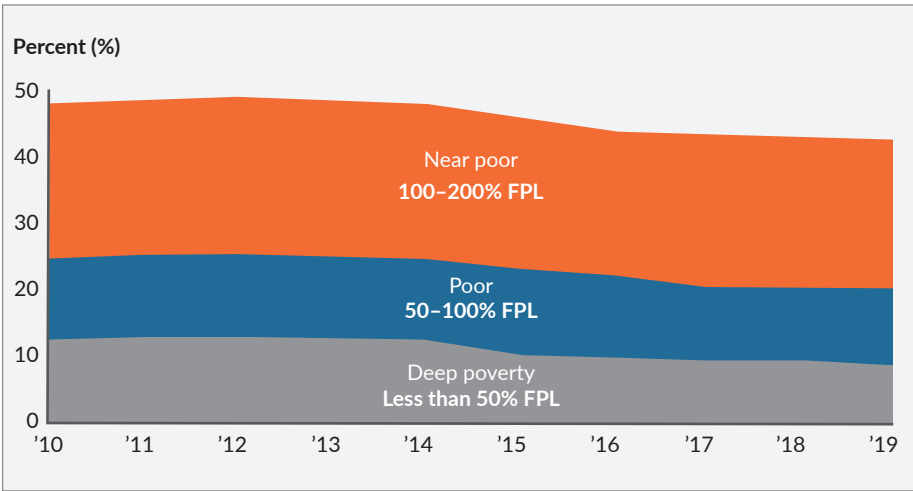


Figure 2: Children Living in Low-Income and Poor Families, 2010–2019

	2010	2019
Low income	33,216,701	27,149,328
Poor	16,810,053	11,899,951
Deep poverty	8,139,897	5,246,089

Table 1: Number of Children Living in Low-Income and Poor Families, 2010–2019

How does the poverty status of children compare to the rest of the population?

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

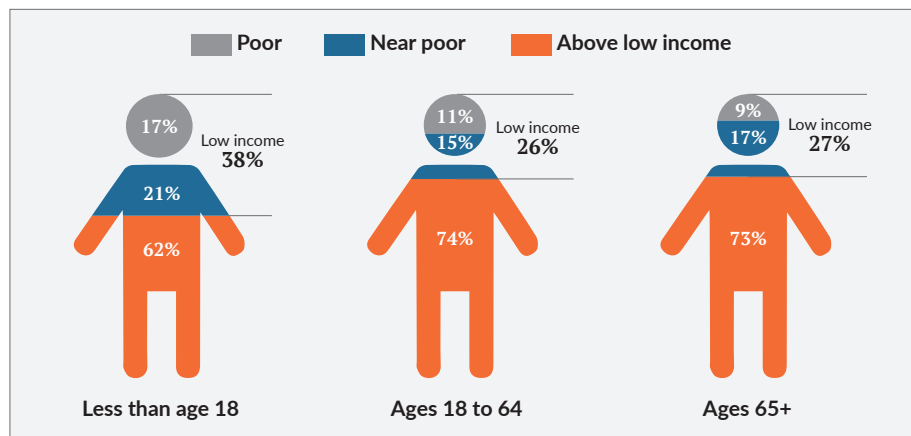


Figure 3: Family Income by Age, 2019

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

Younger children are more likely to live in deep-poor, poor, or low-income families (Figure 4).

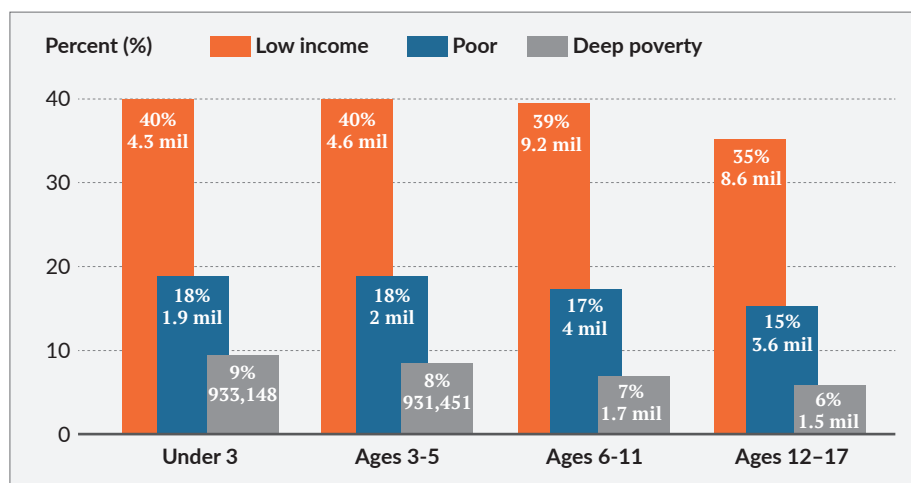


Figure 4: Percentage of Children in Low-Income and Poor Families by Age, 2019

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 varies by race and ethnicity. Latino and White children comprise the same share of children living in low-income families (36 and 35 percent, respectively). Latinos comprise the largest share of children living in poor families in this age group (36 percent).⁵ However, Black, Native American, and Latino children are disproportionately low income and poor. Further, Black and Native American children are over three times as likely to experience deep poverty compared to White children (Figure 6).

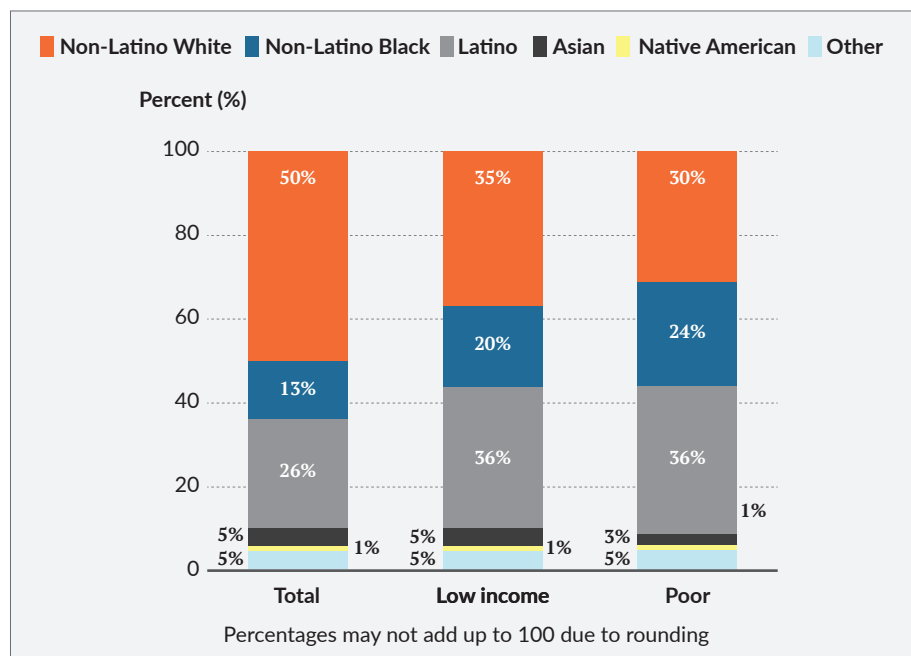


Figure 5: Race/Ethnicity Among Children by Family Income, 2019

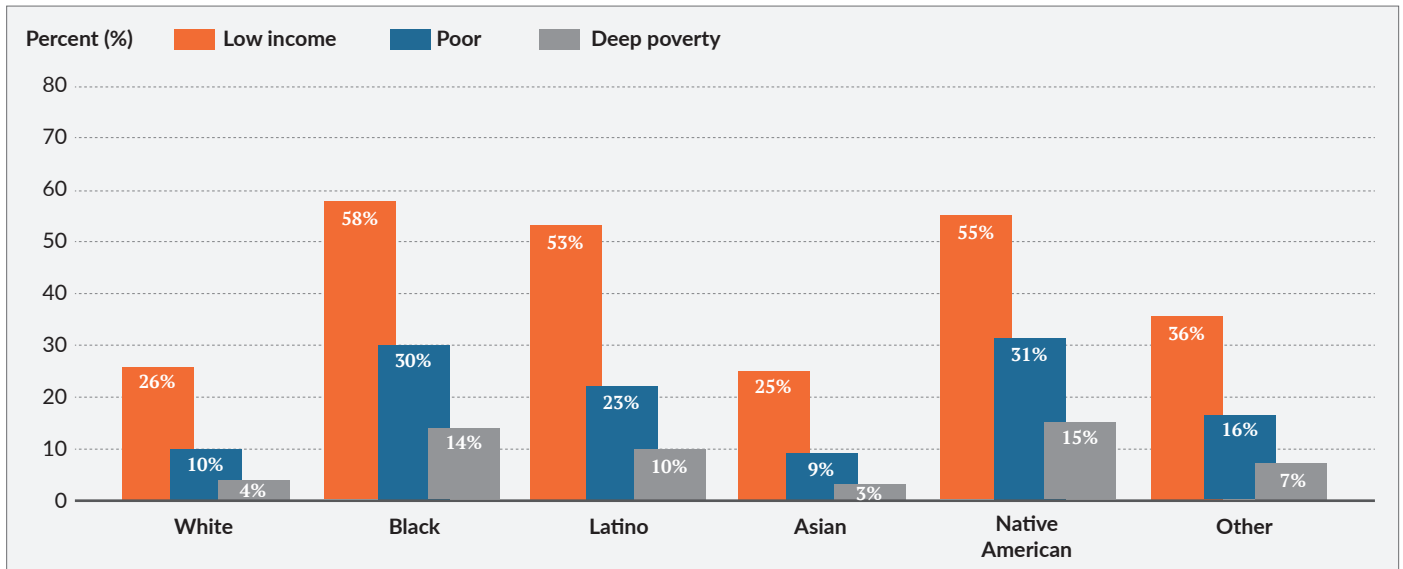


Figure 6: Percentage of Children in Low-Income and Poor Families by Race/Ethnicity, 2019

Does the percentage of children in low-income families differ by their parents' immigration status?⁶

Children of immigrants are more likely to be low-income than children of US-born parents (Figure 7).

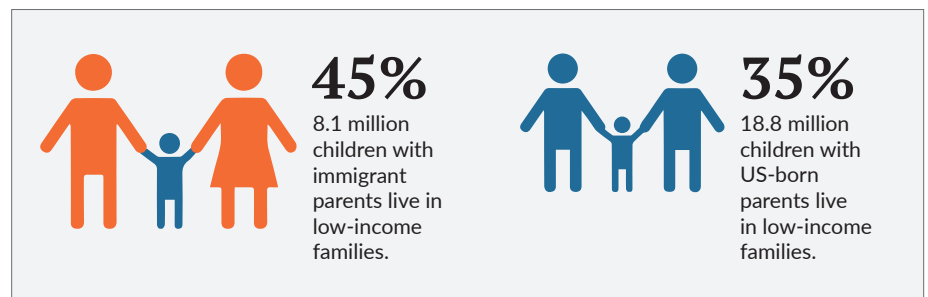


Figure 7: Percentage of Children in Low-Income Families by Parents' Immigration Status, 2019

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

PARENT EMPLOYMENT⁶

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). Nevertheless, many low-income and poor children have parents who work full time. About 57 percent of low-income children and 36 percent of poor children live with at least one parent who is employed full time, year round (Figure 9).

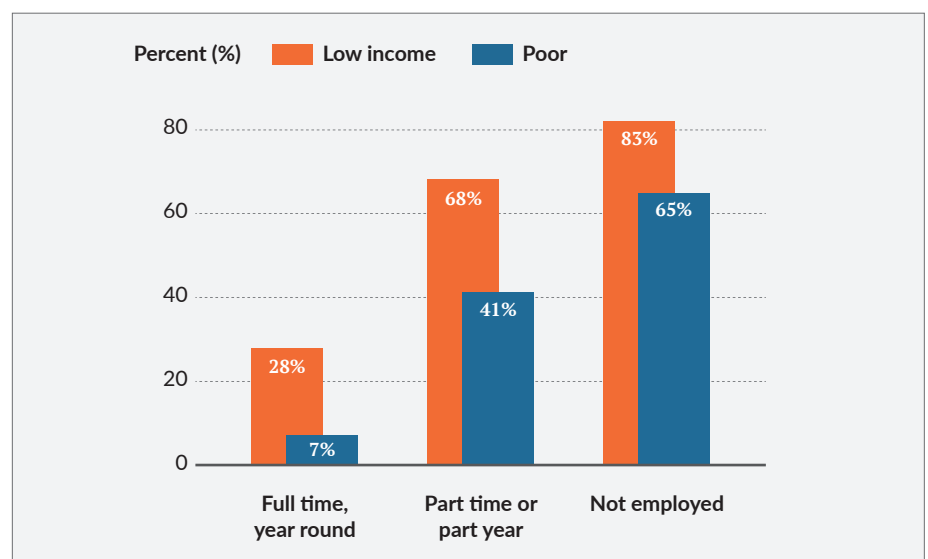


Figure 8: Percentage of Children in Low-Income and Poor Families by Parent Employment, 2019

PARENT 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, 26 percent live in low-income families and 10 percent live in poor families. By contrast, among children in this age group whose parents have less than a high school degree, 77 percent live in low-income and 44 percent live in poor families (Figure 10).

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 11.

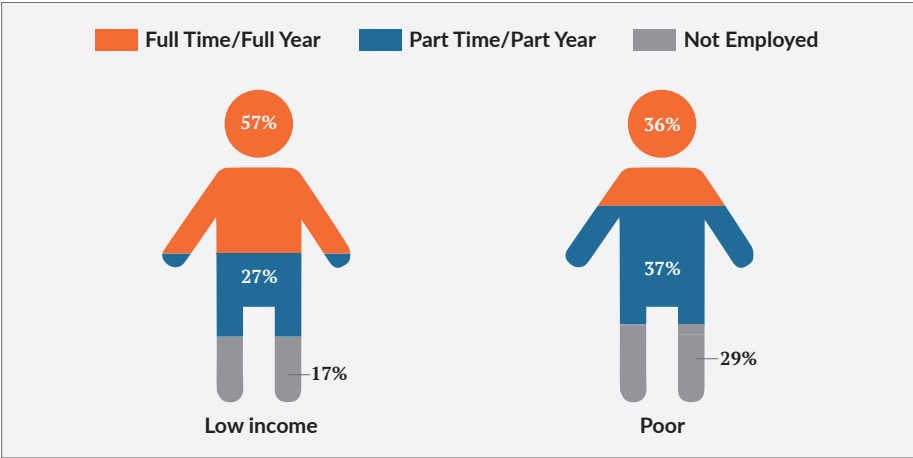


Figure 9: Parent Employment Among Children by Family Income, 2019

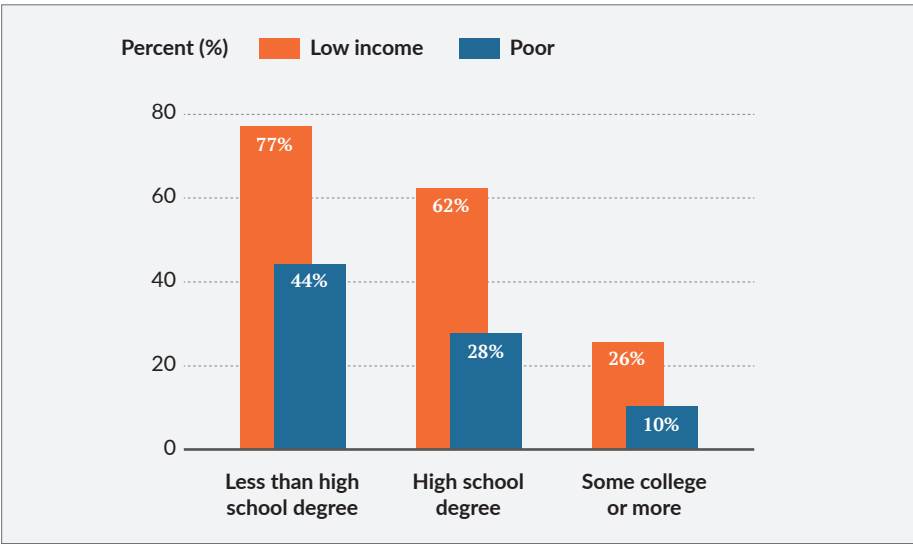


Figure 10: Percentage of Children in Low-Income and Poor Families by Parent Education, 2019

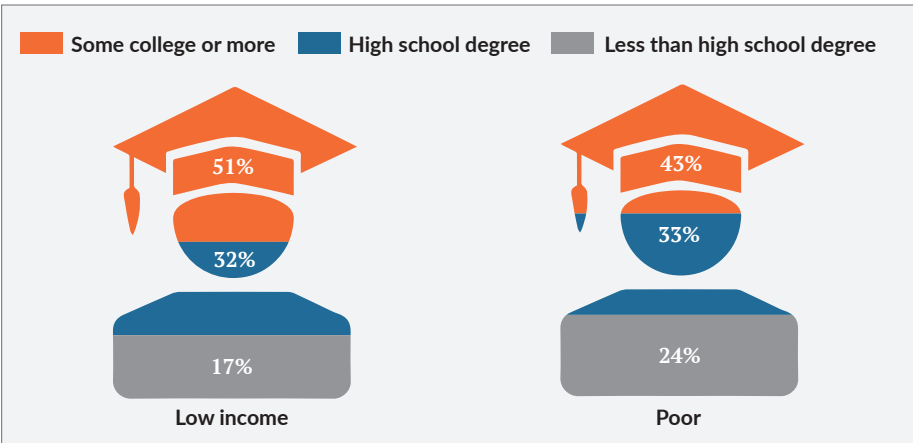


Figure 11: Parent Education Among Children by Family Income, 2019

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

REGION

The percentage of low-income children varies substantially by region (Figure 12).

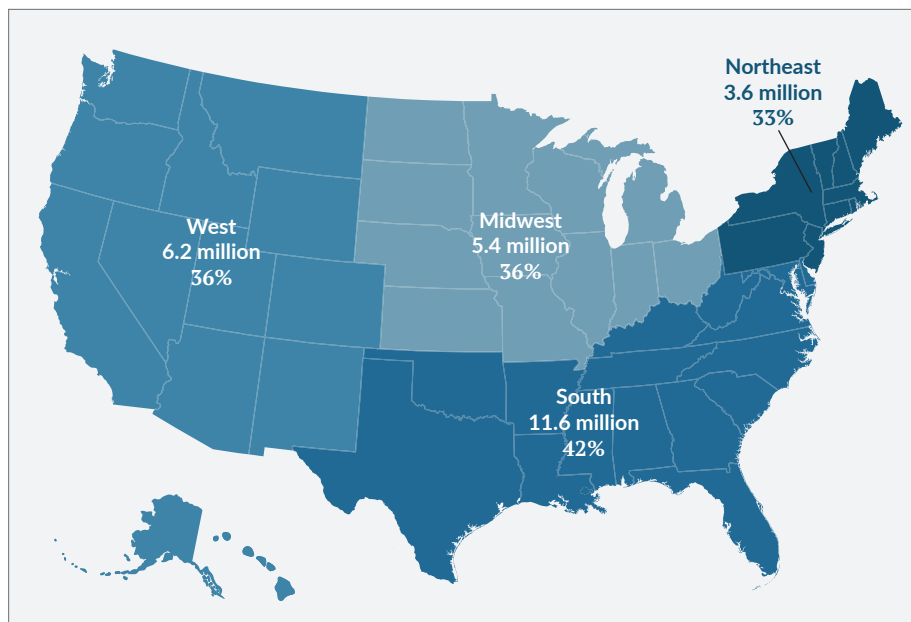


Figure 12: Percentage of Children in Low-Income Families by Region, 2019

RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY AND HOME OWNERSHIP

Research suggests that stable housing is important for healthy child development.⁸ However, children living in low-income families are more likely than other children to have moved in the past year and to live with families who rent, rather than own, their homes (Figure 13).

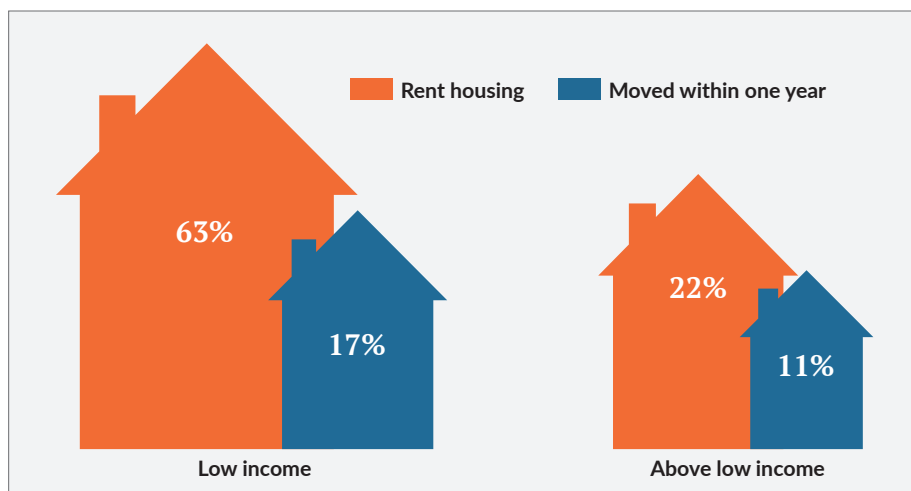


Figure 13: Residential Instability and Home Ownership by Family Income, Families With Children, 2019

HOUSING AND ENERGY INSECURITY⁹

A much larger percent of low-income children experience housing and energy insecurity (Figure 14). Housing and energy insecurity means that their families have difficulty paying these expenses each month, leading to additional stress in the family.⁹

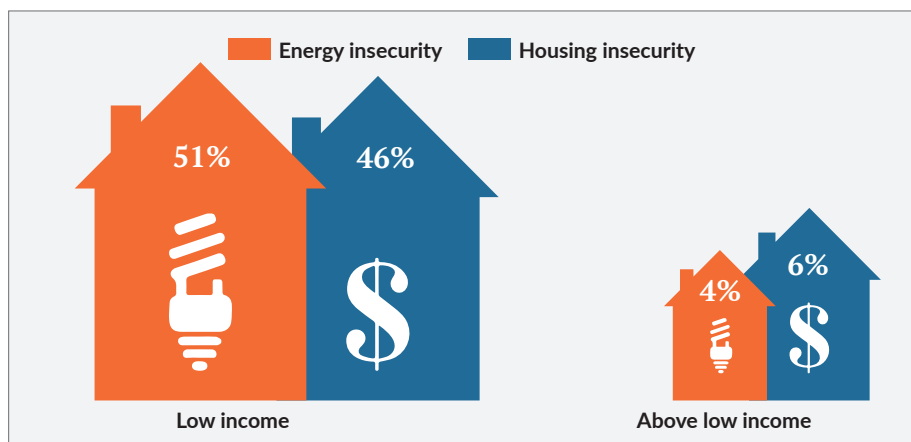


Figure 14: Housing and Energy Insecurity by Family Income, Families With Children, 2019

What proportion of low-income children are covered by health insurance?¹⁰

Among children under age 18, 7 percent of low-income children and 7 percent of poor children are uninsured.¹⁰ Public insurance programs cover 38 percent of children, a slight increase since 2010 (Figure 16). They reach many more economically disadvantaged children than private plans, covering 72 percent of low-income children and 82 percent of poor children.

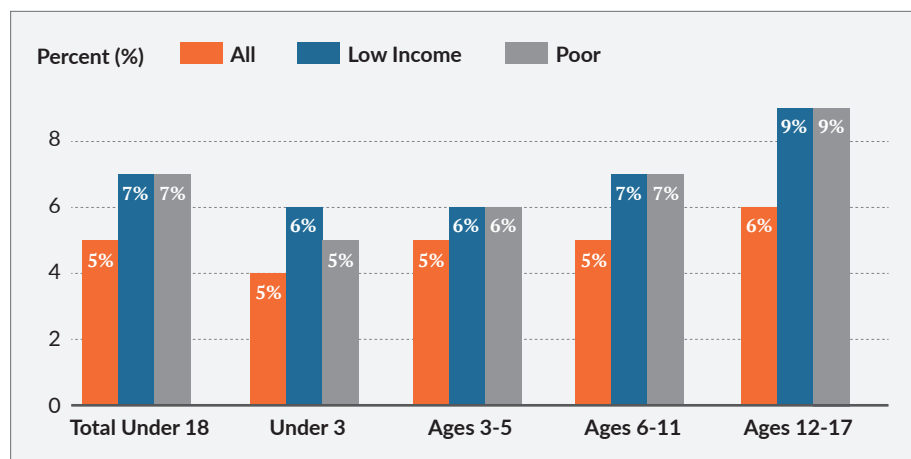


Figure 15: Percentage of Children Uninsured in Low-Income and Poor Families by Age, 2019

What proportion of children in low-income families receive support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)?

Among low-income children under age 18, less than half (42 percent) receive SNAP benefits (Figure 17). This percentage is lower than the 51 percent of children who received SNAP benefits in 2010, but represents a significant decline from the 55 percent of children who received SNAP benefits in 2012 and 2013.

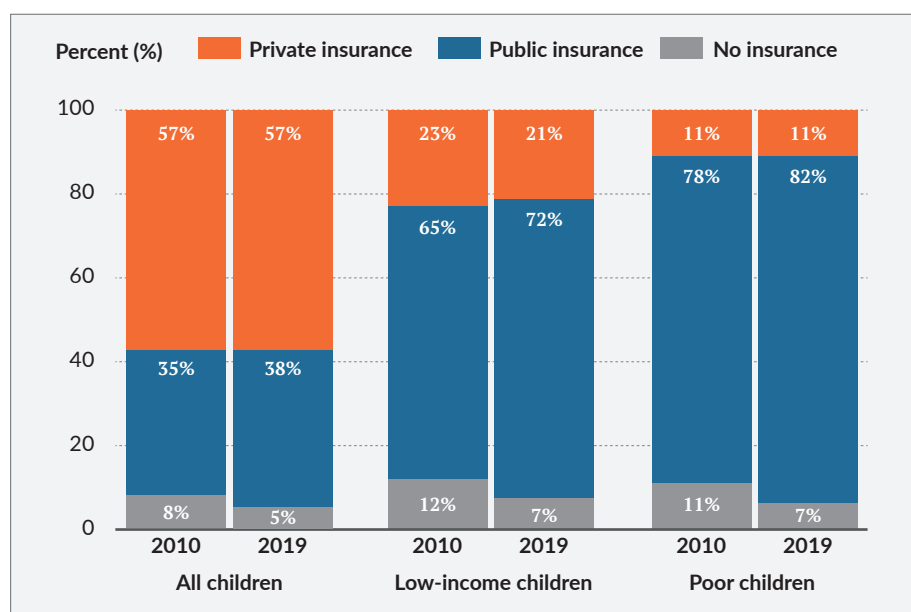


Figure 16: Type of Health Insurance Coverage Among Children by Family Income, 2010 & 2019

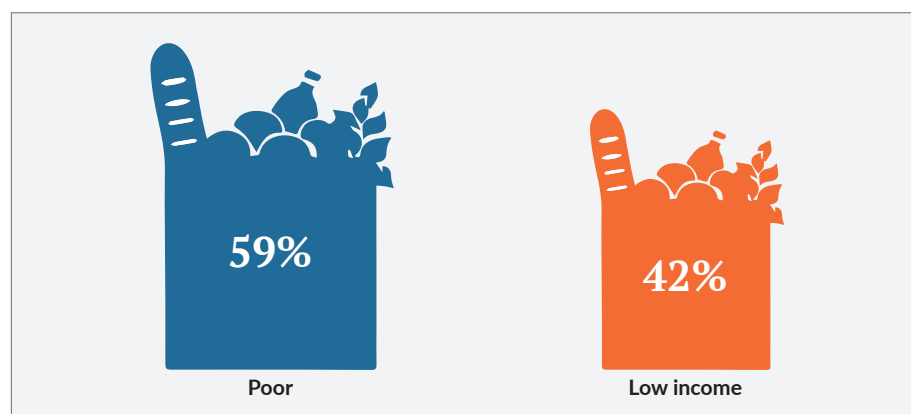


Figure 17: Low-income Children Who Receive Support From the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, 2019

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT:

- What states can do to support low-income children, see NCCP's [Early Childhood Profiles](#) and [50 State Policy Tracker](#)
- NCCP's efforts to improve supports for lower-income families, see NCCP's [Family Resource Simulator](#) Projects
- Racial disparities in deep poverty, see [Young Children in Deep Poverty: Racial/Ethnic Disparities and Child Well-Being Compared to Other Income Group](#)
- State-level estimates of the demographic information contained in this report, see NCCP's [50-State Demographic Generator](#)
- Comparable information for all children, see [Basic Facts About Low-Income Children: Children Under 9 Years, 2019](#)

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 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) was conducted by Jennifer Hernandez. Estimates include children living in families with at least one parent and children living apart from both parents. For children who do not live with at least one parent (for example, children being raised by grandparents), parental characteristics are calculated based on those of the householder and/or the householder's spouse. Children living independently, living with a spouse, or in group quarters, and children ages 14 years and under living with only unrelated adults, are excluded from analyses of parental characteristics. Special thanks to Debra Rudick and Mona Rayachoti for layout and production. Support for this work was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

- 1 United States Census Bureau, 2019 American community survey 1-Year Estimates: Poverty Status In the Past 12 Months. (2019). Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau. Retrieved January 2021 from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>. 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; deep poverty is defined as family income less than 50 percent of the poverty threshold.
- 2 The US Census Bureau issues the poverty thresholds annually. Thresholds vary by family size and composition. See <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html> for the complete 2019 poverty thresholds.
- 3 Cauthen, N.K., & Fass, S. (2008). *Measuring income and poverty in the United States*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Retrieved January 2021 from <https://www.nccp.org/publication/measuring-poverty-in-the-united-states/>
- 4 In the ACS, parents can report children's race as one or more of the following: "White," "Black or African American," "American Indian or Alaska Native," or "Asian and/or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander." In a separate question, parents could report whether their children were of Latino origin. For the data reported, children whose parent reported their race as White, Black, Native American or Alaska Native, or Asian and/or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and their ethnicity as non-Latino were assigned a non-Latino category of their race. Children who were reported to be of more than one race were assigned as Other. Children whose parent identified them as Latino were categorized as Latino, regardless of their reported race.
- 5 The variable "US-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 US citizen by naturalization or is not a citizen of the US.
- 6 Parent 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.
- 7 Parent education is defined as the education level of the most highly educated parent(s) 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 Aratani, Y. (2009). *Homeless children and youth: Causes and consequences*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Bank Street Graduate School of Education. Retrieved December January 2021 <https://www.nccp.org/publication/homeless-children-and-youth-causes-and-consequences/>
- 9 Hernández, D., Jiang, Y., Phillips, D., Carrión D., & Aratani, Y. (2016). Housing hardship and energy insecurity among native born and immigrant low-income families with children in the United States. *Journal of Children and Poverty*. 22(2): 77-92. Retrieved January 2021 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5016025/>
- 10 People can report more than one type of insurance coverage. Children who were covered by both private and public insurance were categorized as having public insurance. Children not covered by private or public health insurance at the time of the survey are considered uninsured.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Koball, H., Moore, A., & Hernandez, J. (2021). *Basic facts about low-income children: Children under 9 years, 2019*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Bank Street College of Education.