

The War on Poverty Turns to The War of Words: Conflicting Views Regarding Poverty Among American Children

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INTRODUCTION:

For those who have spent the majority of their lives in schools, the topic of student poverty is vexing at best and at worst a major contributing influence to the (undeserved) reputation for underserving our kids. What follows is a highly interactive (many hyperlinks) point-counterpoint on the topic of poverty among American children. It is drawn from research, government studies, academic studies, and media analysis/accounts. No effort is made to “set the record straight” – what is left is the opportunity for the reader to decide for themselves – are poverty levels improving?

SOME DATA AND SOME CONFLICTING DATA

While many organizations champion the cause of accurately reporting the status of American children, several stand out. Decide for yourself of them which most accurately reflects what those in schools face daily.

The **Southern Education Foundation** sets the stage with the most recent (January 2015) estimates of low income students (<http://www.southerneducation.org/Our-Strategies/Research-and-Publications/New-Majority-Diverse-Majority-Report-Series/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now>). They conclude:

2015 - Low income students are now a majority of the schoolchildren attending the nation's public schools, according to this research bulletin. The latest data collected from the states by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), show that 51 percent of the students across the nation's public schools were low income in 2013.

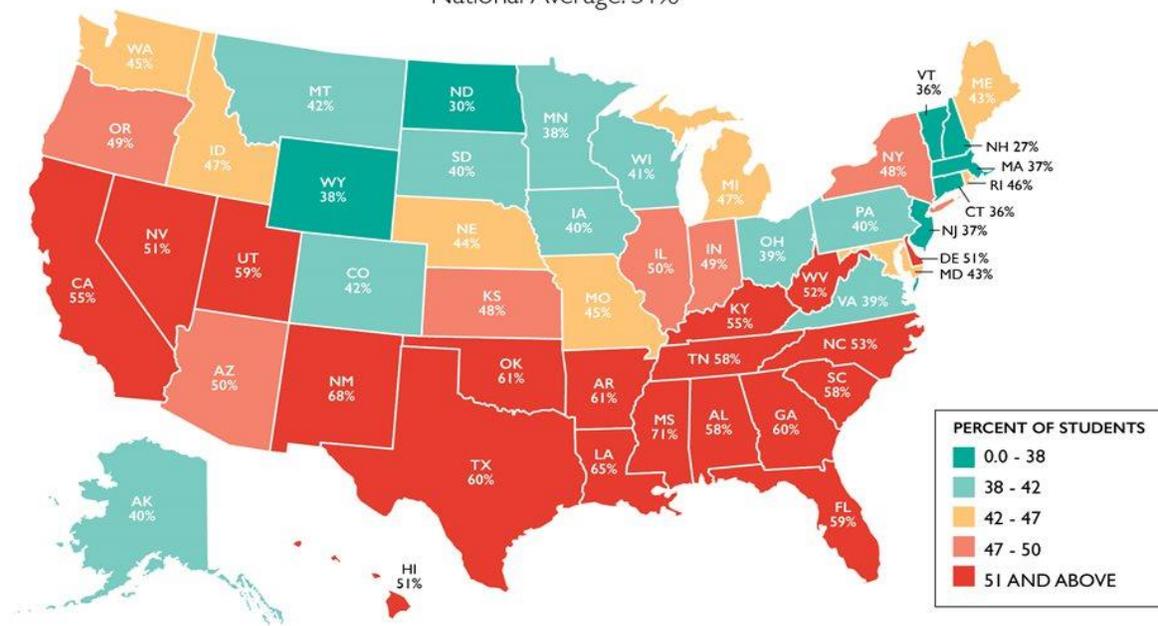
In 40 of the 50 states, low income students comprised no less than 40 percent of all public schoolchildren. In 21 states, children eligible for free or reduced-price lunches were a majority of the students in 2013.

Most of the states with a majority of low income students are found in the South and the West. Thirteen of the 21 states with a majority of low income students in 2013 were located in the South, and six of the other 21 states were in the West.

Mississippi led the nation with the highest rate: 71 percent, almost three out of every four public school children in Mississippi, were low-income. The nation's second highest rate was found in New Mexico, where 68 percent of all public school students were low income in 2013.

PERCENT OF LOW INCOME STUDENTS IN U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2013

National Average: 51%



SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION | SOUTHERNEDUCATION.ORG

Data Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data

The full text of their report is found at:

<http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/4ac62e27-5260-47a5-9d02-14896ec3a531/A-New-Majority-2015-Update-Low-Income-Students-Now.aspx>

The NAACP National Center for Children in Poverty, using 2013 data, (<http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>) concludes that: (please follow the embedded hyperlinks)

More than 16 million children in the United States – 22% of all children – live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level – \$23,550 a year for a family of four. Research shows that, on average, families need an income of about twice that level to cover basic expenses. Using this standard, 45% of children live in low-income families.

Most of these children have parents who work, but low wages and unstable employment leave their families struggling to make ends meet. Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor health and mental health. Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty.

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being. But effective public policies – to make work pay for low-income parents and to provide high-quality early care and learning experiences for their children – can make a difference. Investments in the most vulnerable children are also critical.

They highlight their discussion with numerous displays, a few of which are included below:

Figure 2: Adolescents living in low-income and poor families, 2007–2013

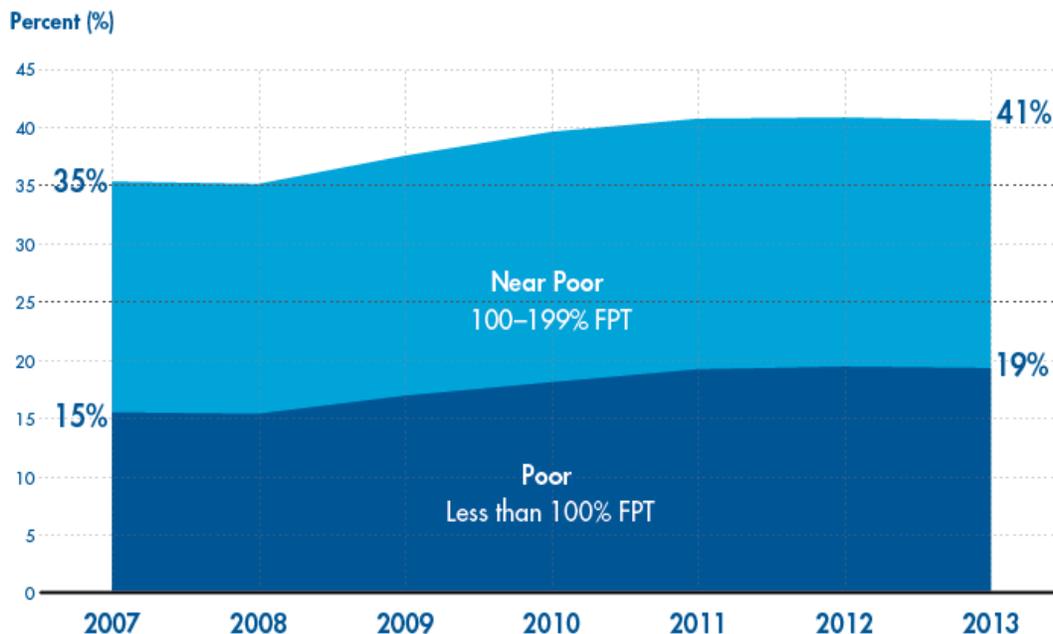
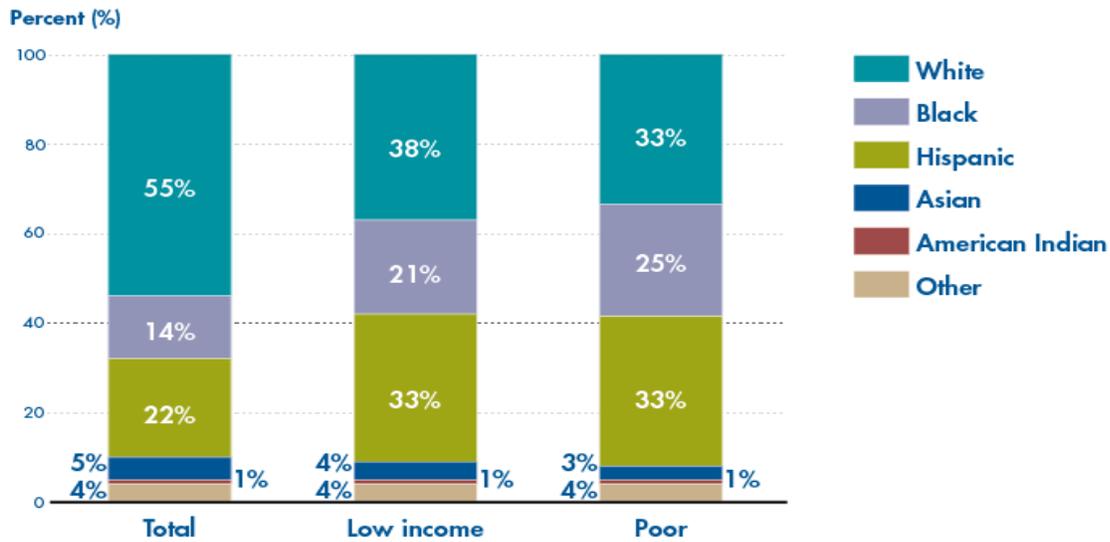


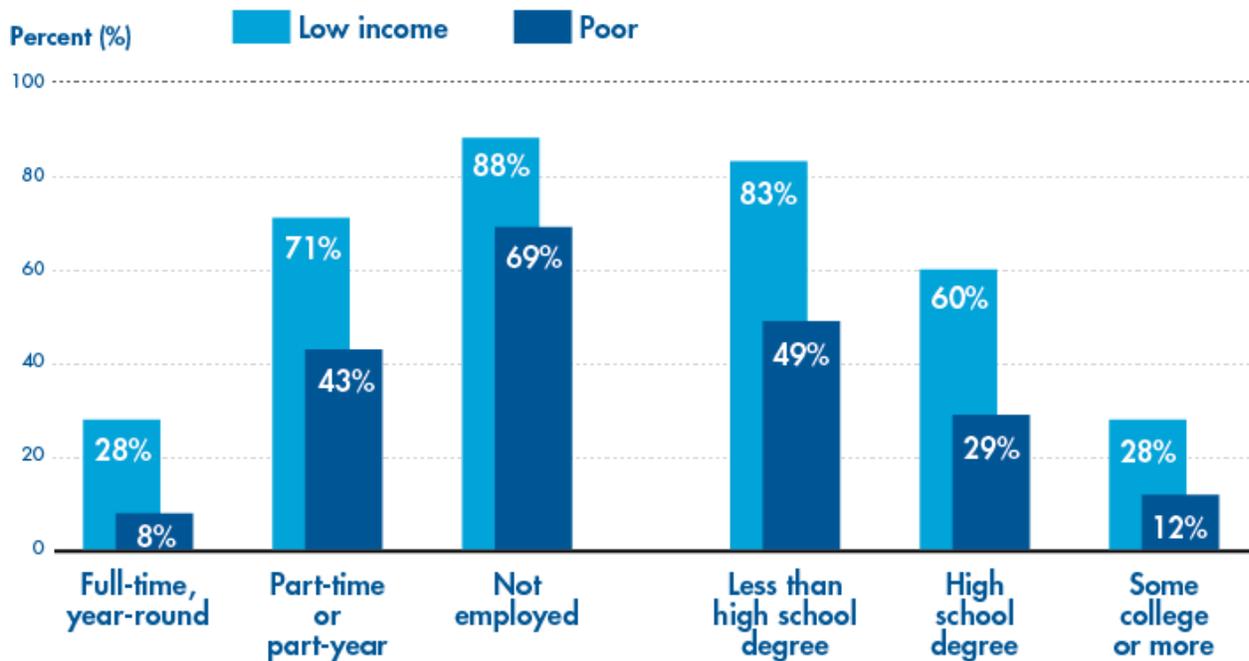
Figure 5: Race/ethnicity among adolescents by family income, 2013



Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

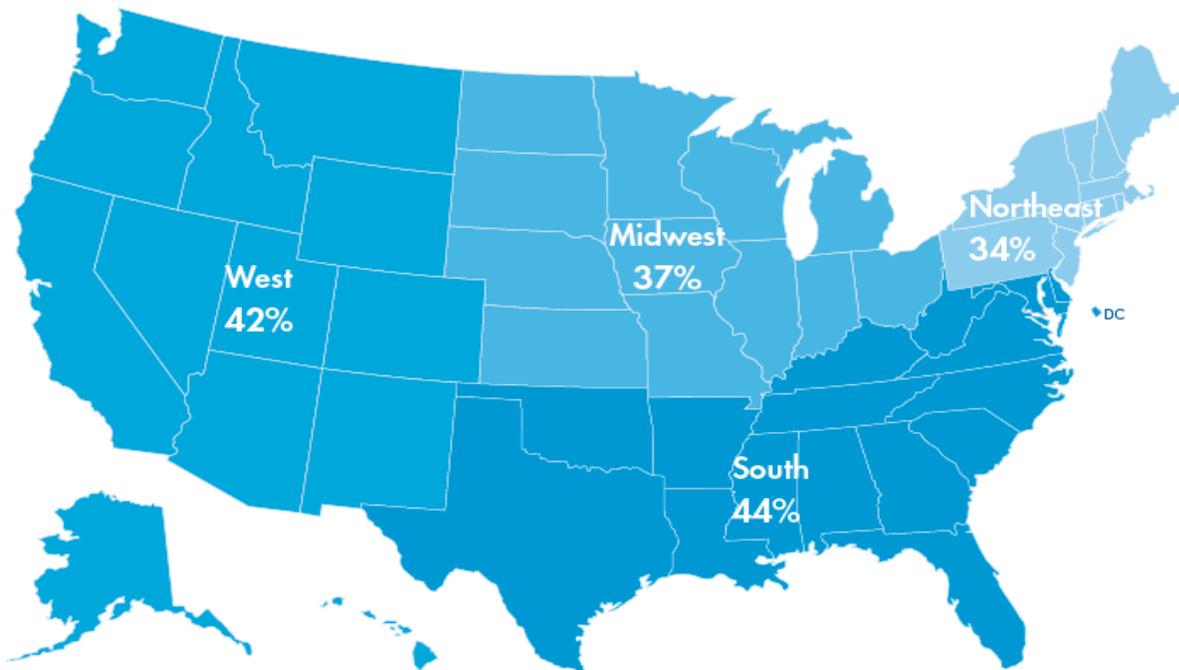
© National Center for Children in Poverty (www.nccp.org)
Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children 12 through 17 Years, 2013

Figure 7: Percentage of adolescents in low-income and poor families by parents' employment and education, 2013



© National Center for Children in Poverty (www.nccp.org)
Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children 12 through 17 Years, 2013

Figure 9: Percentage of adolescents in low-income families by region, 2013



©National Center for Children in Poverty (www.nccp.org)
Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children 12 through 17 Years, 2013

The *Washington Post*, in a series of articles on the topic offered the following banner headline:

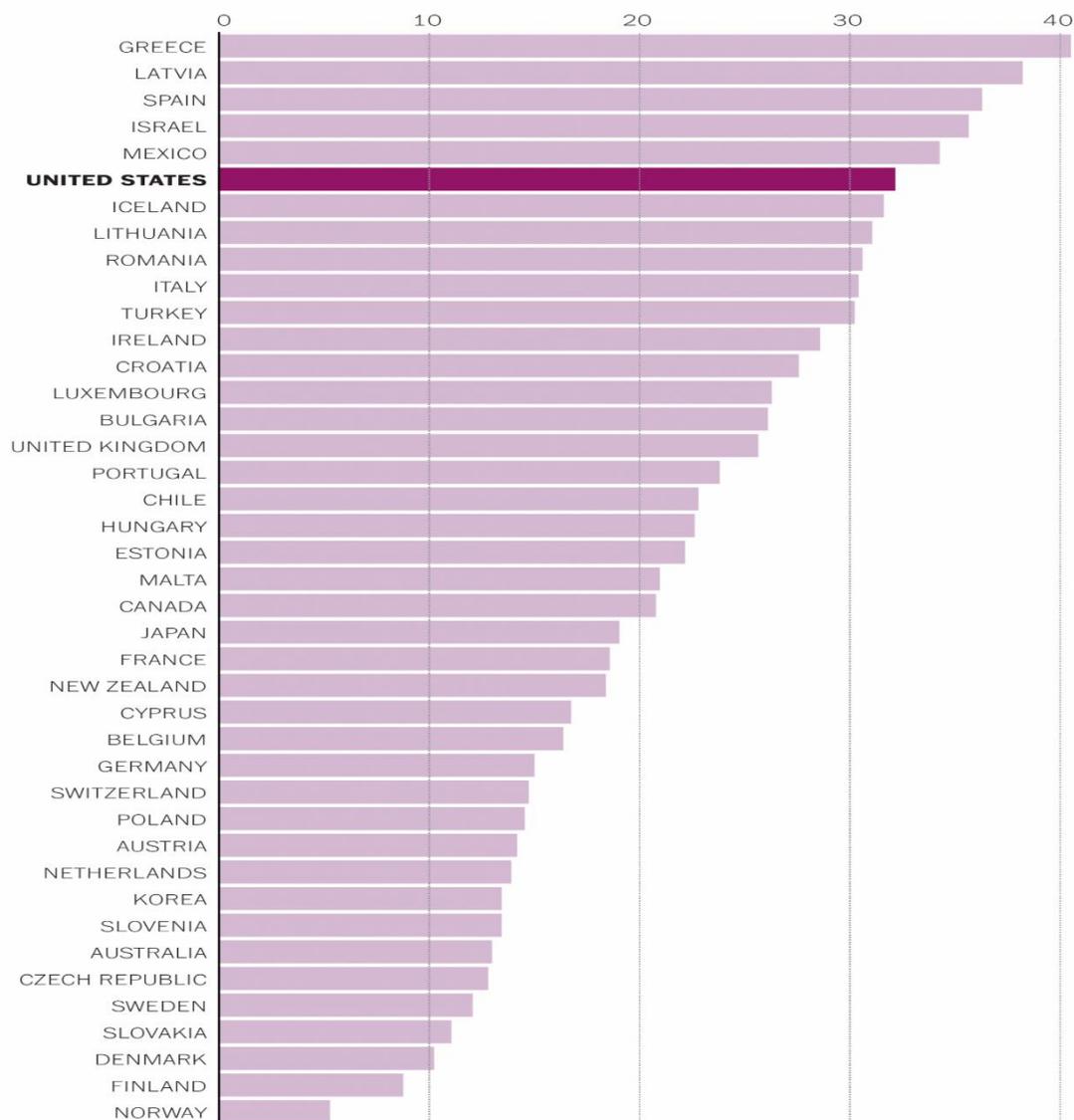
Child poverty in the U.S. is among the worst in the developed world

(<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2014/10/29/child-poverty-in-the-u-s-is-among-the-worst-in-the-developed-world/>)

Their report came from a new report from UNICEF (<http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/733>)

One in three U.S. children lives in poverty

% of children living in households earning less than 60 percent of the median income



WASHINGTONPOST.COM/**WONKBLOG**

Source: UNICEF

They conclude in the article:

With 32.2 percent of children living below this line, the U.S. ranks 36th out of the 41 wealthy countries included in the UNICEF report. By contrast, only 5.3 percent of Norwegian kids currently meet this definition of poverty.

More alarmingly, the share of U.S. children living in poverty has actually increased by 2 percentage points since 2008. Overall, 24.2 million U.S. children were living in poverty in 2012, reflecting an increase of 1.7 million children since 2008. "Of all newly poor children in the OECD and/or EU, about a third are in

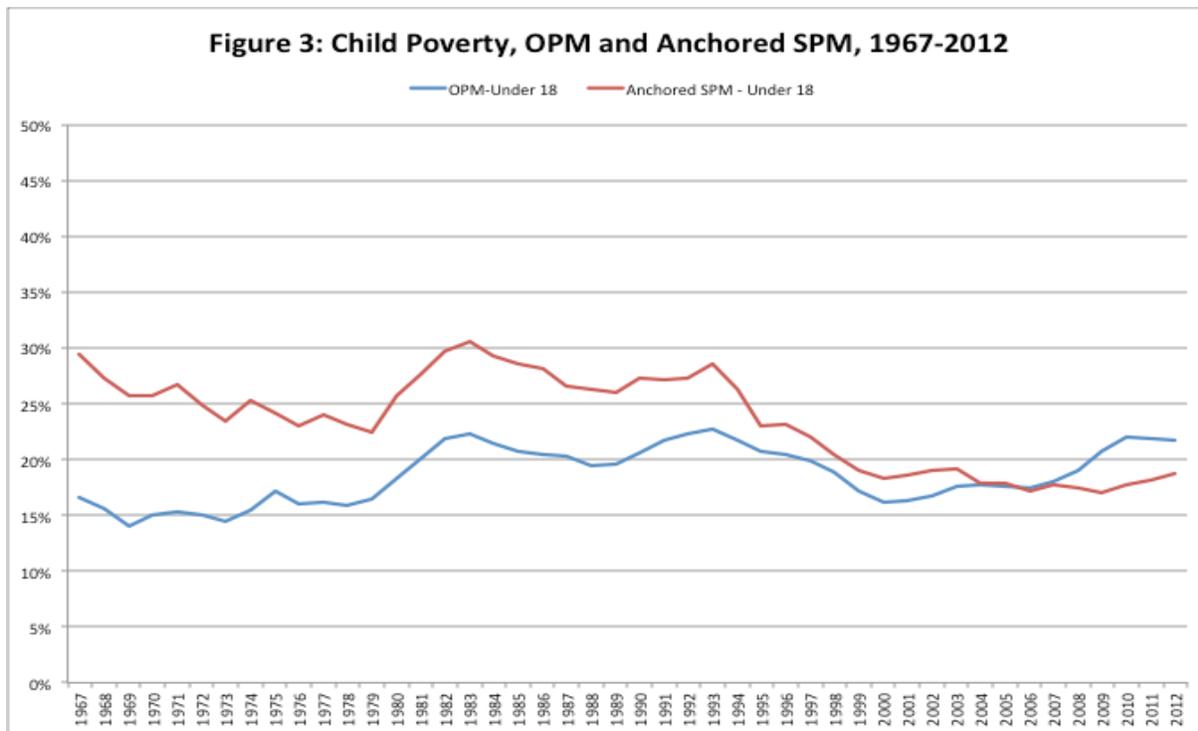
the United States," according to the report. On the other hand, 18 countries were actually able to reduce their childhood poverty rates over the same period.

The report finds considerable differences in childhood poverty at the state level. New Mexico, where more than four in ten kids live in poverty, has the highest overall rate at 41.9 percent. In New Hampshire only one in eight kids lives in a poor household, the lowest rate in the nation. Poverty rates are generally higher in Southern states, and lower in New England and Northern Plains states.

Ironically, in January 2014 **Dylan Matthews** of the same media outlet (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/01/08/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-war-on-poverty>) produced a fascinating retrospective article (with video links to President Johnson's War on Poverty speech) entitled "Everything you need to know about the War on Poverty." This scholarly article traced the 50 years of "progress" on President Johnson's vision. The format is simple and informative while not necessarily reflecting the sentiments of the previously cited analysis. He asked the following questions in his article:

- What was the war on poverty?
- What programs did it include?
- Why did it start when it did?
- How long did it last?
- Did it reduce poverty?
- Why don't people think it reduced poverty?
- What more could we be doing to fight poverty?

Relying on a 2013 study from Columbia, *Trends in Poverty with Anchored Supplemental Poverty Measure* (<https://courseworks.columbia.edu/access/content/group/c5a1ef92-c03c-4d88-0018-ea43dd3cc5db/Working%20Papers%20for%20website/Anchored%20SPM.December7.pdf>), he appears to accept the claim of a reduction in poverty rates from 1967 - 2012.



The National Center for Education Statistics in their 2015 *The Condition of Education* (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cce.pdf) added complexity to the conversation with their analysis that takes a look at poverty. Their data appears to take issue with others:

In 2013, approximately 10.9 million school-age children 5 to 17 years old were in families living in poverty. Research suggests that living in poverty during early childhood is associated with lower than average academic performance that begins in kindergarten and extends through elementary and high school. Living in poverty during early childhood is associated with lower than average rates of school completion.

The percentage of school-age children living in poverty in 2013 (21 percent) was higher than it was two decades earlier in 1990 (17 percent), even though the poverty rate for school-age children was lower in 2000 (15 percent) than in 1990. Between the two most recent survey years, 2012 and 2013, the poverty rate for school-age children did not change measurably.

While the national average poverty rate for school-age children was 21 percent in 2013, the poverty rates among the states ranged from 9 percent in New Hampshire to 33 percent in Mississippi. Some 23 states had poverty rates for school-age children that were lower than the national average, 16 states plus the District of Columbia had rates that were higher than the national average, and 11

states had rates that were not measurably different from the national average. Of the 17 jurisdictions (16 states and the District of Columbia) that had poverty rates higher than the national average, 13 were located in the South.

In 2013, some 37 states plus the District of Columbia had higher poverty rates for school-age children than in 1990, while 11 states had poverty rates for school-age children that were not measurably different from those in 1990. In two states (Louisiana and North Dakota), the percentage of school-age children living in poverty was lower in 2013 than in 1990. From 1990 to 2000, the poverty rate for school-age children decreased in 38 states, while it increased in 6 states plus the District of Columbia. In 2013, the poverty rate for school-age children was higher in 43 states than it was in 2000, and it did not change measurably in the remaining 7 states and the District of Columbia during this period.

In 2013, approximately 15.6 million, or 22 percent, of all children under the age of 18 were in families living in poverty; this population includes 10.9 million 5- to 17-year-olds and 4.8 million children under age 5 living in poverty. The percentage of children under age 18 living in poverty varied across racial/ethnic groups. In 2013, the percentage was highest for Black children (39 percent), followed by American Indian/Alaska Native children (36 percent), Hispanic children (32 percent), Pacific Islander children (27 percent), and children of Two or more races (21 percent). The poverty rate was lowest for White and Asian children (13 percent each). The percentage of children under age 18 living in poverty in 2013 was 4 percentage points higher than in 2008 (18 percent). For all racial/ethnic groups, except Pacific Islanders, the percentage of children under age 18 living in poverty in 2013 was higher than in 2008. The increases between 2008 and 2013 ranged from 2 percentage points for both White and Asian children to 7 percentage points for American Indian/Alaska Native children.

SO WHAT IS A PERSON TO DO?

While one might argue the mixing of terms “poverty” and “low income” contributes to controversy, others might conclude that it is a distinction without a difference. In any case, the data is interesting while the conflicting findings in where poverty is headed is equally interesting if not confounding. Maybe the reality resides with those who stand at the schoolhouse entrance, supervise breakfast and lunch programs along with stuffing weekend backpacks with food. Poverty and low income impair school effectiveness – a fact highlighted by President Johnson and serving as an essential element structuring ESEA, yet hungry kids, raised in “just getting by” households persist today. As clearly identified in the data, minority children are disproportionately overrepresented in poverty. So what happens when in 2020 America becomes majority minority?

As described in the opening paragraph, it is up to the reader to determine if the future of poverty in America is promising or perplexing. The answer is particularly important to those charged with education American youth each day.

RSMc