



# What Docs Should Know About...The Impact of Poverty on Young Children

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## **Millions of children in this country are living in poverty, with millions more considered "low-income."**

- In 2001, almost 12 million children (16%) were living in poverty, meaning their parents' income was at or below the federal poverty level. The federal poverty level for a family of four was \$18,850 in 2004. In 2001, 27 million children (38%) lived in "low-income" families, which are defined as families whose income is at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.
- Research suggests that families typically need twice the federal poverty level to be able to provide basic food and housing.<sup>1</sup>
- Children from racial and ethnic minority groups, children from single-parent families, and children with parents with lower levels of educational attainment are all more likely to be living in poverty.

## **Poverty can have profound detrimental effects on children's development.**

- Research indicates that children may be especially vulnerable to the effects of poverty during the prenatal period and through the child's first year of life. Poverty presents multiple risk factors to typical brain development during this period, including inadequate nutrition, maternal substance abuse, maternal depression, environmental toxins, risk of trauma and abuse, and the quality of daily care.<sup>2</sup>
- Poverty continues to effect children across a range of outcomes. For young children, poverty status is associated with: low birth weight, exposure to lead, lower scores on measures of cognitive ability, as well as increased internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. The effects of poverty seem to be most marked when it is long-term poverty, and when the poverty is experienced early in the child's life.<sup>3</sup>

## **Intensive early childhood interventions have been found to combat some of the negative effects of poverty.**

- Research demonstrates that programs such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, the Carolina Abecedarian Project, and the Infant and Health and Development Program, which combined early education with comprehensive health and social services, have had lasting effects on children's cognitive scores, behavioral problems, school retention, and special education placement. In addition, cost benefit analysis suggests that every dollar spent on the Perry Preschool Project resulted in a savings of \$7.16.<sup>4</sup>

## **Government programs that make up the "safety net" help lift children and families from poverty and provide important support services to poor children and families.**

- The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) lifts approximately 2.6 million children from poverty---more than any other government program.<sup>5</sup> The EITC reduces the income tax liabilities of low-income working families and serves as a wage supplement to families with low earnings.
- Programs that provide nutrition assistance—primarily the Food Stamp program and The Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—have been linked to increased expenditures on food (Food Stamps), as well as positive outcomes in the areas of utilization of prenatal care, and infant health (WIC).<sup>6</sup>
- A major barrier to sustained employment is the availability and cost of child care, especially for low-income families. Families can receive child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF).

## **Docs can get involved by helping families access support services and advocating for legislation aimed at helping children living in or near poverty.**

- Docs can advocate for the expansion of support services and programs to help reduce the poverty rate. To become involved in advocating for programs to reduce child poverty, contact Docs For Tots for help.
- Docs can get involved at the local level with efforts such as Comprehensive Community Initiatives, programs which use multifaceted approaches to better the lives of poor children and families, ranging from neighborhood building and transformation, to improving coordination among social service providers.<sup>1</sup>

## **Additional Resources for Docs**

- What Docs Should Know About... Welfare, Child Care, and Head Start, [www.docsfortots.org](http://www.docsfortots.org)
- National Center for Children in Poverty, <http://www.nccp.org>
- The David and Lucille Packard Foundation, *The Future of Children*, Special Issue: Children and Poverty, [http://www.futureofchildren.org/pubs-info2825/pubs-info.htm?doc\\_id=72141](http://www.futureofchildren.org/pubs-info2825/pubs-info.htm?doc_id=72141)

<sup>1</sup> Lu, H.H. (2003). *Low-income children in the United States*. [http://www.nccp.org/pub\\_cpf03.html](http://www.nccp.org/pub_cpf03.html)

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty. (1999). *Poverty and brain development in early childhood*. <http://www.nccp.org>

<sup>3</sup> Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G.J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *The Future of Children*, 7, 55-71.

<sup>4</sup> NGA Center for Best Practices. (2000). *Research findings on early childhood intervention programs*. [http://www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C\\_ISSUE\\_BRIEF^D\\_1747,00.html](http://www.nga.org/center/divisions/1,1188,C_ISSUE_BRIEF^D_1747,00.html)

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, N., Llobrera, J., & Zahradnik, B. (2003). *A hand up: How state earned income tax credits help working families escape poverty in 2003*. <http://www.cbpp.org/3-3-03sfp.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Currie, J. (1997). Choosing among alternative programs for poor children. *The Future of Children*, 7, 113-131.