

THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

BRIEF

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Washington State

SUMMARY:

The impact of poverty on children and families is far reaching and has been found to have lasting negative effects. Investments and policies that do not consider the “whole child” will continually fall short, resulting in poor outcomes for our most vulnerable children. Children and families are less likely to succeed if their most basic needs go unmet and the long-term impacts will continue to keep families interacting with multiple systems. The research on poverty now tells us just how devastating these impacts can be for families, in the short-term and the long-term:

- Poverty has long-term negative impacts for children and families, and disproportionately affects children of color.
- Family poverty is associated with increased child welfare involvement, housing instability, food insecurity, and chronic illness.
- Extreme poverty in childhood is associated with toxic stress, which negatively impacts early brain development and may lead to long-term consequences for learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.
- Poor children are often less ready for kindergarten and face academic hardships in school; they are also less likely to complete high school and pursue post-secondary education.

CHILDHOOD POVERTY IN WASHINGTON STATE

Current research shows that the rates of child poverty have increased nationally in the past several years. The federal poverty level is defined as follows: A family of two adults and two children fall within the “poverty” category if their annual income is below \$22,479.¹ According to KidsCount, Washington children fare somewhat better than children elsewhere in the US, yet in 2021, 12% of Washington children were living at or below the federal poverty level.² There are significant differences in child poverty by race and ethnicity; almost 1 in 4 of Native American, African American, and Hispanic/Latino children in Washington live in poverty.³ Poverty is the most prevalent Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) reported nationally and at the state level; this is significant in that ACEs are potentially traumatic events in childhood that researchers have found to be strongly predictive of negative health and well-being outcomes in later years, including obesity, depression, heart disease, and alcoholism.⁴ These compromise individual quality of life and create costly public health burdens.

POVERTY AND CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Child Welfare System Involvement

Extensive research has been conducted to link children and families experiencing poverty and their interaction with the child welfare system. It is no surprise that economic hardships limit the resources available for families to create healthy environments for a child’s development.⁵ In fact, it has been shown that families with an income of \$15,000 or less were 22 times more likely to experience an incidence of child maltreatment than families with an income above \$30,000.⁶ The impact of poverty on a family’s interaction with the child welfare system is most evident in the fact that, among households investigated by DCYF in Washington State, 65% were investigated due to reasons associated with neglect and not abuse.⁷ Among families with children who are placed into out-of-home care, economic hardships further inhibit a parent’s success in overcoming barriers to reunification.⁸ The impact on children of color is even worse in Washington, where African American children were in out-of-home care at twice the rate of

white children, and Native American children were in care at more than three times the rate.⁹

Housing Instability

Poverty has been shown to be an important determinant for children and families who experience housing instability or homelessness. Research indicates the rates of homelessness for children and families have increased over the past decade, and Washington is doing work to become better. In December 2022 it is estimated that 6,486 families with children were still experiencing homelessness in Washington, which is a small improvement from 2013.¹⁰ Homelessness is particularly high among children of color, with rates of homelessness two to three times greater than their white counterparts.¹¹ According to a survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the leading causes of homelessness for children and families are: lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, and low wages.¹² Homelessness is also associated with various negative outcomes of well-being for children and families, such as poor health, poor nutrition, educational disadvantage, sexual abuse, and increased risk of death.¹³

Health

Poverty negatively impacts the health and well-being of children and families and inhibits their ability to achieve optimal health outcomes. Living in poverty, families struggle to put food on the table, and 1 in 5 children in Washington lives in a household that is food insecure.¹⁴ These same families struggle to have access to healthy, nutritious foods, and the long-term impacts of an unhealthy diet can lead to chronic illnesses over a child's lifetime.¹⁵ In addition, science now shows us that exposure to "toxic stress," or the unrelenting stress caused by extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse, can impact brain development in young children and have long-term consequences.¹⁶ Toxic stress can also lead to negative physical and mental health outcomes amongst all family members, thereby disrupting family structure and stability.¹⁷

Education

Poverty is also a key factor in predicting educational outcomes of children. Children experiencing poverty are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, disciplinary action, underdeveloped cognitive function,¹⁸ and are more likely to attend lower-quality

schools with fewer learning opportunities.¹⁹ The cumulative impact of these factors is resulting in negative outcomes for Washington students, particularly for students of color. In 2015, students who had on-time high school graduation rates in Washington varied by race: White (81%), Asian (87%), Pacific Islander (65%), African American (68%), Hispanic/Latino (67%), and Native American (53%). Our most vulnerable youth are faring even worse when it comes to graduation rates: low-income students (66.4%), homeless students (46.1%), and foster youth (42%).²⁰ Children experiencing poverty, compared to their peers from higher-income households, are not meeting kindergarten readiness benchmarks, are underperforming throughout their K-12 experience, and have less success in higher education.²¹ In recent years, post-secondary institutional enrollment among low-income high school graduates has declined, and this, in turn, is linked to lower earnings and income potential in adulthood.²² Vulnerable children from poor families are entering and leaving the K-12 education system under-prepared and under-supported.

FUTURE IMPACT

In the last few decades, the body of research surrounding poverty and its impacts on children and families has grown considerably. These impacts have been shown to persist not only throughout the life development of a child, but through generations of families. Intergenerational poverty becomes a cyclical process whereby children who experience long-term poverty, without sufficient intervention, are more likely to stay in poverty as adults and raise their children in poverty.²³ Poverty has lasting effects on the long-term outcomes for children and families in terms of education, nutrition, housing, health, and well-being.

CONCLUSION

Poverty currently affects roughly 200,000 children and families in Washington, and one in four of African American and Hispanic or Latino children in our state are poor. Poverty has long-lasting impacts on child and family well-being and is often associated with homelessness, child welfare involvement, and poor educational and health outcomes. Conversely, policies aimed at reducing childhood poverty can yield positive benefits for Washington in terms of improved individual and family functioning, and increased economic self-sufficiency for future generations.

ENDNOTES

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