

Deep poverty puts young children at risk for poor health and development

January 12 2016

Young children in deep poverty, whose family income is below 50 percent of the federal poverty line, fare even worse on health and development indicators than children in poverty, according to a study released by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. The study compared the well-being of children in deep poverty to children who are poor, but not in deep poverty, and to non-poor children.

Compared to other poor children, a higher percentage of young children in deep poverty suffer from obesity and elevated blood lead levels—a serious concern given their association with learning and behavior problems. The percentage of young children in deep poverty who have elevated lead levels is three times higher than the portion seen in poor children, and over 17 times higher than in non-poor children.

Using four nationally representative datasets for the years 2011-2013, the researchers focused their analyses on children under age 9. In most cases, the data collected in the surveys were based on parent report; exceptions are obesity and lead blood levels, which were directly measured.

Researchers found a higher percentage of young children in deep poverty compared to children in poverty had parents in poor or fair [health](#) or mental health, experienced frequent parenting stress, and perceived a lack of social support and security in their neighborhood. For example, 21 percent of parents in deep poverty reported frequent

parenting stress compared to 15 percent of parents in poverty. These family conditions have been shown to predict [poor health](#) and developmental outcomes, according to the authors.

Compared to other children in poverty, a lower percentage of children in deep poverty were judged by parents to be "flourishing," a composite measure that reflects parents' view of the child's curiosity, resilience, affection, and positive mood. Less positive views of children's wellness were especially common among parents of children who experienced frequent parenting stress. Only 22 percent of deeply poor, frequently stressed parents of children younger than age 5 reported their children were flourishing compared to 48 percent with low [parenting stress](#).

"Deep poverty, which affects approximately 3.9 million young children, clearly makes large numbers of U.S. children vulnerable to health and developmental problems that limit their life opportunities," said Sheila Smith, PhD, director, Early Childhood at NCCP. "To give [young children](#) a fair chance of life success, we need to strengthen basic safety net policies, including Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), expand Medicaid across all states so that [parents](#) will not be left in poor health without health coverage, and invest in programs that have proven effective in helping families overcome adversities so their [children](#) can thrive."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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