

Help Children Born into Poverty

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Abstract

In this commentary for Spotlight on Poverty, the authors address the issue that poverty often starts at birth, leading to unstable housing, schooling, and nutrition. As young adults, these children are more likely to drop out of school, have a child as a teen, and be underemployed. Taking action before the consequences of poverty accumulate is imperative. Health reform provides an opportunity for hospitals to connect poor families to insurance when a child is born. The United States can invest in poor children through social services as we invest in higher-income children through tax subsidies for homeownership and college.

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The past decade has been a troubling one for poverty rates and for children. As the United States entered the 2000s, one in six children was poor. Now that's true of one in five children.

Where does poverty begin? For many, it starts at birth. Roughly half of children born into poverty will be persistently poor, meaning they will be poor for at least half of their childhoods.

Year after year, these youngsters are stuck in unstable environments. That instability can come from many directions including housing, schools, and insufficient resources to buy nutritious food and meet other basic needs. Meanwhile, financial uncertainty can increase parents' stress and the odds that they'll be depressed, which can put additional weight on kids' shoulders.

The circumstances are far worse for black children. They are seven times more likely to be persistently poor than white children. Black children are both more likely to be born to poor parents and to have worse prospects for escaping poverty. Over two-thirds – 69 percent – of black children who are born poor are persistently poor, compared with 31 percent of white children.

Is this the best that the nation can do for its youngest poor?

The cost of doing nothing is high and the negative consequences are lasting. Those poor at birth are more likely than others to be poor as young adults (between ages 25 and 30). They are also more likely to drop out of high school, have a child outside of marriage while still a teen, and have patchy employment records as young adults.

While just four percent of individuals in non-poor families at birth end up spending at least half their early adult years in poverty, the share jumps to 21 percent for individuals who are born poor. This quagmire harms the next generation.

Being poor in a single year – at birth – does not cause these negative adult outcomes. Rather, being born poor is an early warning sign that indicates which children are more likely to face uphill battles as they grow up and become adults. And it's a warning sign that should prompt action.

For the current generation, the majority of whom are born in hospitals, children identified at birth as poor should, along with their families, get supports to help them avoid the poverty trap. Hospital and other social workers could be tasked with linking these families to safety net programs, as already happens in many places with Medicaid for children and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program. Help connecting with Medicaid for parents and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) would further support families. The mothers of [more than half](#) of all poor infants suffer from depression, jeopardizing their parenting ability and their child's development. This makes it imperative that poor mothers are connected with health insurance, an opportunity that will arise from health reform. This will allow poor mothers to address both their physical and emotional problems.

Home-visiting, parenting, and marital or relationship counseling programs could also give poor children a leg up by improving family functioning and their home environment. Recent increases in funding for home-visiting programs should be targeted at these poor families. And enough additional funding to meet current demand for Early Head Start, which provides intensive supports to both parents and children, would help families during the critical first three years of a child's life.

Providing education, training, and such work supports as child care subsidies could brighten these children's prospects through greater family economic security and stability. Beyond this, linking these parents to programs that help them retain jobs, advance in the workplace, and build skills can help protect them during weak economic times when low-skill jobs are often the first to go.

Ideally, of course, children shouldn't be born into poverty in the first place. Stopping that [means](#) reducing out-of-wedlock births, improving educational outcomes, and increasing work levels. But, while poverty remains entrenched, targeting resources to children born poor is practical—for them and, ultimately, for the economy.

Some claim we can't afford the investment. Yes, budgets are tight and the U.S. deficit is spiraling upward. But, it's a matter of priorities. Each year, the United States provides billions of dollars in tax subsidies that help well-off families buy a home and save for retirement and their children's education.

If the United States can afford to promote the economic well-being and security of high-income families, we should find a way to do it for poor families. All children are worth the investment.

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