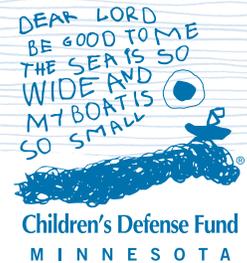


10 Things You Need to Know About Children and Poverty in Minnesota



1. Children need a strong foundation.

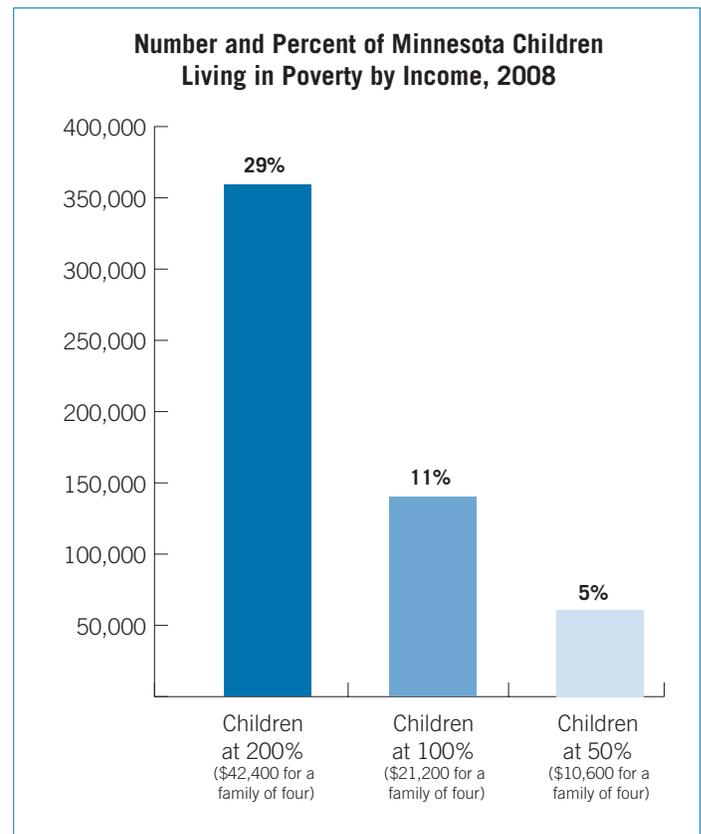
Children's brains are built through an interactive process that starts before birth and continues into adulthood. Similar to the construction of a home, the process begins with a solid foundation. Early interactions shape how the brain is developed. To increase the probability of positive outcomes, building a strong foundation in the early years is critical. Conversely, a weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. Children in poverty are more likely to experience various interactions that can increase their odds for a weak foundation. Insufficient nutrition, unhealthy housing, and limited access to early childhood education and health care can inhibit brain development. Brain development is particularly critical for children ages 0-5, years when foundations are first formed. In Minnesota, 47,000 children under age 5 were living in poverty in 2008.

2. Children need wise investments or our future is at risk.

The economic success of Minnesota depends on a prepared workforce. We cannot afford to overlook the future returns to society when wise investments are made in children. Investing in children produces a skilled workforce and responsible citizenry. Education is seen as the key to preparing children for the future, yet children in poverty arrive at kindergarten an average of 18 months behind their peers academically. Quality, affordable early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, are essential in preparing children for kindergarten so that they start on equal footing with their peers. Early childhood education provides a significant and positive early experience that fosters brain development and jumpstarts a child's curiosity for learning. Research clearly states that more investments in these programs are needed. In 2008, only 32 percent of all income eligible children were enrolled in Head Start, leaving 30,651 eligible children at risk for going without a quality early childhood experience.

3. Children need economically stable families.

For children, household income is directly related to healthy development. Even for children as young as 9 months old, income levels directly relate to developmental outcomes. Because low-income families must choose between medical attention, food, and heat when the family budget falls short, children can be negatively affected. Nationwide, an alarming 51 percent of infants live in households with incomes at or below 200 percent of poverty. The consequences are tremendous for children, as



low-income households often face additional stressors, which further weaken their opportunities for success. With few assets or resources, these families are one medical emergency or job loss away from poverty.

4. Children need healthy minds and bodies.

When children do not have access to health care, they are less likely to see a doctor and many times are not seen until an emergency. Due to the high costs of health care, children living in poverty are at greater risk for being uninsured and unhealthy. Because of this, poverty places children on a trajectory for poor health that remains with them throughout adulthood. In 2008, 88,000 children were without health care coverage in Minnesota. While the average cost of a pediatric hospital visit is \$11,000, the Minnesota Department of Health estimates that health care coverage for a child would cost \$2,250 annually. The benefits of providing health care coverage for children would be paid back in future earnings, decreased health care expenditures, and improved health in adulthood.

5. Children need adequate nutrition.

Adequate nutrition is an essential part of the solid foundation children need to grow. Even before birth, adequate nutrition is critical to a child's development as the immune system is developing strength to fight diseases and infections. Nutritious foods help children's physical growth, brain development, and cognitive functioning. Programs that provide free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches allow children to stay focused and ready to learn. With adequate nutrition children are better able to pay attention, miss fewer days of school due to sickness, and show fewer behavioral problems. In Minnesota, 33 percent of children receive free and reduced-price school lunches and this percentage has been steadily growing since the beginning of the decade. In addition, the Food Support Program allows families to have regular access to nutritious food to promote healthy development. Nearly 80 percent of food support beneficiaries are children, and in Minnesota, children's participation in the Food Support Program has grown 43 percent from 2000 to 2008.

6. Children need warm, healthy homes.

Home is where children first learn to explore and trust the world around them. It is the most valuable place for children, where they take their first steps and speak their first words. However, for Minnesota children living in poverty, home can be an unhealthy place. It can expose them to toxic lead, mold, or asbestos causing health problems that can lead to chronic asthma or developmental delays. Energy costs can also be a struggle, forcing families to turn down the temperature to unhealthy levels. Research has shown that families living in poverty must choose to heat or eat during the winter months and that on average poor adults and children are forced to reduce caloric intake during the coldest months by about 200 calories. Specifically, a 20 percent increase in energy expenditures translates to a 10 percent decrease in food expenditure. These tradeoffs have serious consequences for a child's developmental and health outcomes.

7. Children need equal opportunity.

Children need neighborhoods with community resources such as high quality schools, parks, libraries, and community centers. These environments allow children to explore and interact in a positive way that supports and fosters their development. Unfortunately, children of color live in neighborhoods that often lack these important resources. Without strong community supports and programs, children of color living in poverty are more vulnerable to the stress of living in an underserved community.

The percent of Minnesota children living in poverty by race and ethnicity:

- 36% (27,000) Black or African American
- 25% (21,000) Hispanic or Latino
- 22% (13,000) Asian or Pacific Islander
- 7% (67,000) White or non-Hispanic

In addition, children in greater Minnesota experience poverty differently than in the metro area. Rural families in poverty may encounter barriers such as isolation, stigma, lack of transportation and job opportunities combined with fewer community resources. While less than half of Minnesota's children living in poverty lived outside of the seven-county metro area (68,000) in 2008, the highest concentrations of child poverty were located in the northern counties of Minnesota.

8. Children need measures that reflect basic needs.

According to national experts, the current federal poverty measure falls short. Developed in the 1960s, it has not been adjusted to reflect the current costs that make up a family's budget. Out-of-pocket costs like transportation, utilities, and child care, which have grown significantly since the 1960s, are not included in the poverty measure. The measure also excludes geographic differences across the country and in-kind benefits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and Food Support. In addition, it fails to consider assets that are used to deal with unforeseen emergencies and build security for the future. While the poverty threshold for a family of four in 2009 is \$22,050 a year, the JOBS NOW Coalition estimates it would take an annual income of \$60,000 for a Minnesota family of four to meet their basic needs.

9. Children need systems of support.

Inadequate funding, cumbersome requirements, long forms, and limited outreach keep eligible families and their children from participating in programs like energy assistance, food support, health care, and child care. Since most public programs are federally funded, when families receive assistance, money flows to Minnesota, stimulating the economy while supporting Minnesota families. Despite the positive impacts on families and local economies, none of these programs are being fully utilized. To assist with this problem, CDF-Minnesota developed a web-based screening tool called Bridge to Benefits to help families enroll in public programs. The tool is free and open to anyone to use at www.bridgetobenefits.org. Bridge to Benefits works with community-based partners to help inform and encourage families to apply for public programs. In 2009, nearly 93 percent of families screened through Bridge to Benefits were found to be potentially eligible for at least one of the programs included on the site.

10. Children need a public commitment to solve poverty.

With a strong public commitment, eliminating child poverty is possible. There are many examples of programs doing exceptional work to give children the essential foundations they need to grow and become positive adults. Across the country, there are programs that are making a difference. For example, the award-winning Children's Zone in Central Harlem holistically serves children and adults by addressing the social, health, and educational development of children. The program has seen positive results by offering early childhood programs, parent education classes, and a variety of social supports. Also the Minnesota Commission to End Poverty by 2020 has made several recommendations to alleviate poverty such as increasing the minimum wage, providing universal health coverage, fully funding child care assistance, and creating more jobs. Implementing models that support families and children are key solutions to ending child poverty.

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