

Research Brief

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Poor, Unemployed, and Not on Welfare:

A STATISTICAL LOOK
AT "DISCONNECTED
FAMILIES"

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OVERVIEW

In the years since the federal welfare reform of 1996, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, the primary cash assistance program for poor families) caseloads nationally have declined by 50 percent.¹ Even during the Great Recession and throughout the ongoing recovery period, when substantial growth in TANF rolls might have been expected, increases have been modest or even, in some states, non-existent.² Given that TANF is now promoted primarily as a work support program for poor parents, particularly single parents, declining use raises important policy questions. Poor families that are neither in the labor force nor participating in TANF—a group we term here “disconnected”—may be at risk for a range of negative outcomes that are associated with poverty. Identifying and understanding the characteristics of this population are essential for improving efforts to reach these presumably vulnerable parents and children who may have eluded past outreach.

Most previous research on the disconnected population has focused on single mothers; however, in this brief, we use data from the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) to provide a statistical look at the children in disconnected families in the United States. The NSCH is representative of children at national and state levels, and the 2011/12 survey had a total sample of 95,677 children aged zero to 17. The survey is sponsored by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and collects data on a range of topics, including health, poverty, public assistance program participation, child well-being, and family functioning.

KEY FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

- As a group, children in disconnected families had parents with low levels of education. Given this, existing outreach methods may need to be modified to reach them more effectively.
- A high proportion (49%) of these children were Hispanic/Latino. This is consistent with other research that suggests Latinos underutilize a number of social services, which may reflect, in part, the concerns of undocumented immigrants.



- A relatively higher proportion were from first-generation immigrant households, compared with children from TANF households. Federal policy restricts immigrants' eligibility for public assistance to five years, but some research indicates that misconceptions about TANF may be an additional barrier even for eligible immigrant families.³
- Poor levels of family functioning were reported by relatively few parents in disconnected families. However, for a substantial proportion of these children, their parents were in fair or poor health.
- Although not receiving TANF, a large proportion of children in disconnected families lived in a household that was receiving two or three other types of public assistance, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly referred to as food stamps), Medicaid/State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and free and reduced-price school meals.

Although the findings presented here shed light on the kinds of families that are disconnected, more research is needed to understand how these families get by. The limited evidence that is available suggests that parents in disconnected families, particularly single mothers, may rely on informal assistance from their social networks, off-the-books work, and shared housing, in order to provide for their children.^{4,5}

CURRENT ANALYSIS

We defined "disconnected families" as those households with at least one child aged birth through 17, a household income at or below the federal poverty level, and with the following additional characteristics: 1) no one reported receiving cash assistance or TANF in the prior 12 months, and 2) no one was employed for at least 50 of the prior 52 weeks.

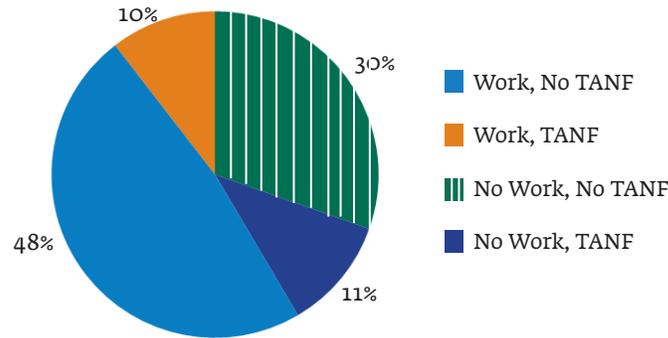
For the children in these disconnected families, we describe their demographic characteristics, receipt of other public assistance programs, family functioning, and parents' health status. We examine how children in disconnected families compare with children in other poor families. Specifically, four groups, all with household incomes at or below the federal poverty level, were compared (see Figure 1):

- **Disconnected:** as described above, in which no household members are working or receiving TANF; 30 percent of all families living in poverty are in this category.
- **No Work/TANF:** families that receive TANF, but no one in the household works; 11 percent of poor families are in this category.
- **Work/No TANF:** families with at least one household member who is employed, but where no one receives TANF; 48 percent of poor families are in this category.
- **Work/TANF:** families in which someone in the household is employed, and someone receives TANF; 11 percent of poor families are in this category.

We further compare children in disconnected families with all children in families nationally.



Figure 1: Percentage of poor children in families in each work/TANF group



FINDINGS

What were disconnected families like?

- Parents had minimal education (Figure 2). Half of children in disconnected families had parents who did not complete high school, a significantly higher proportion than was found among the other three groups of poor families (approximately 40 percent for each).
- Twenty-nine percent of children in disconnected families lived with two married biological parents; 22 percent lived with a divorced single mother; and another 20 percent lived with a single mother who was never married (Figure 3). In contrast, more than half of the No Work/TANF families were headed by single mothers, while more than half of the Work/No TANF families were headed by two parents who were either married or cohabiting.
- They were disproportionately Hispanic (Figure 4). Nearly half (49 percent) of children in disconnected families were Hispanic, more than in any other group (35 percent of No Work/TANF families, 41 percent of Work/No TANF families, and 39 percent of Work/TANF families). Forty-three percent of children in all poor families were Hispanic.
- They were somewhat more likely to be a household of first-generation immigrants. Eight percent of children in disconnected families were in a first-generation family, defined as those where both child and parents were born outside of the U.S. By comparison, less than five percent of children in families using TANF, and three percent of children in all U.S. families, were in first-generation households.



Figure 2: Highest grade completed by parents of children in poor households

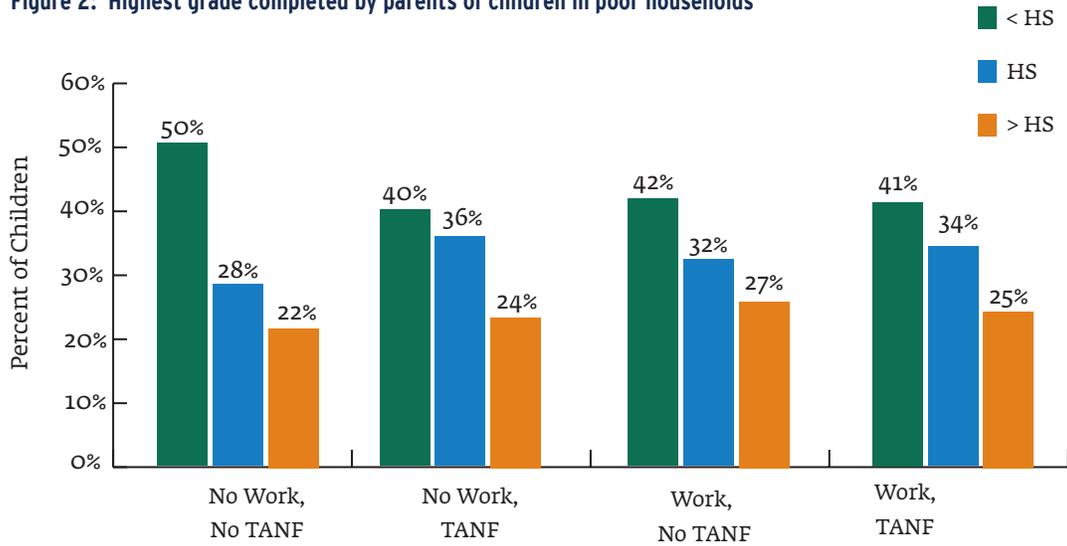


Figure 3: Family structure of poor households

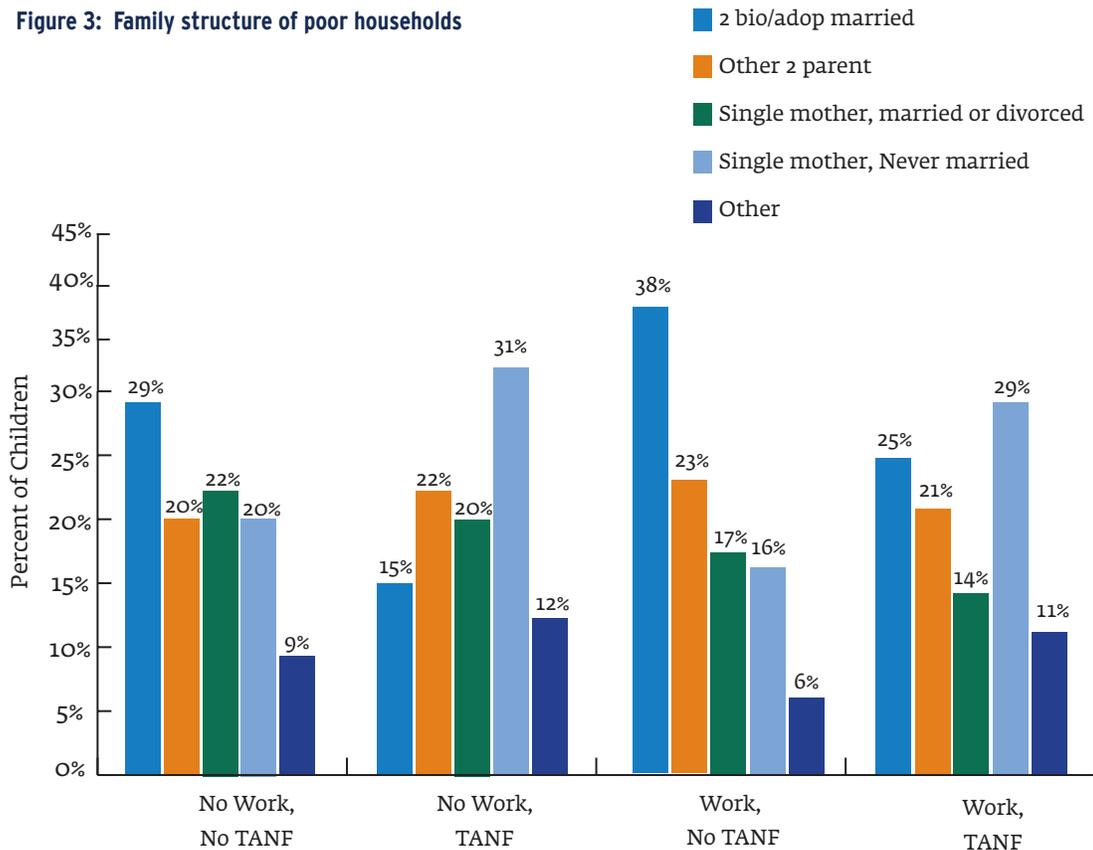
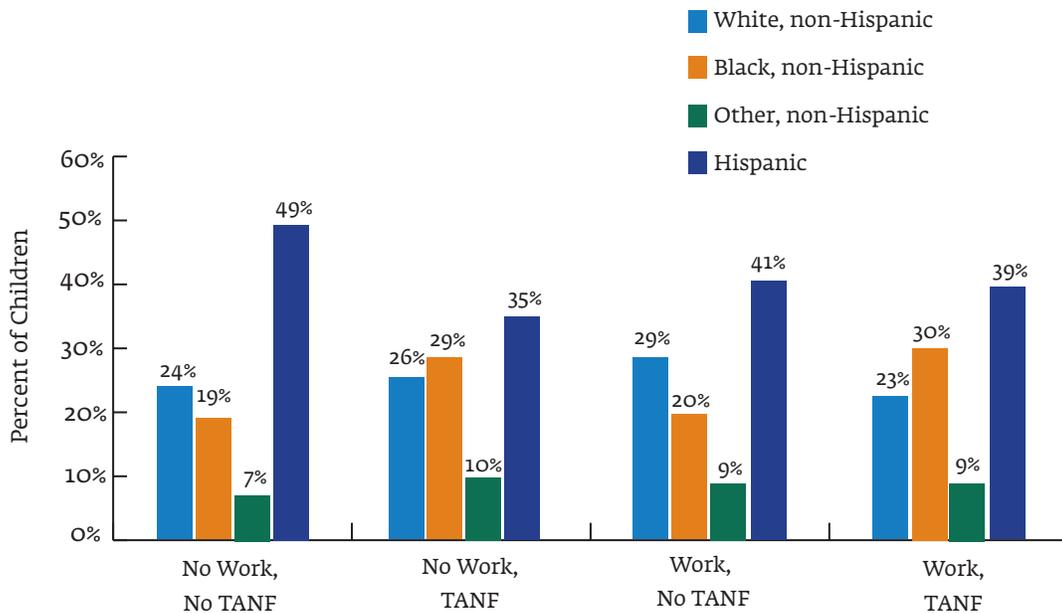




Figure 4: Race/ethnicity of children in poor households



What other public assistance programs do disconnected families use?

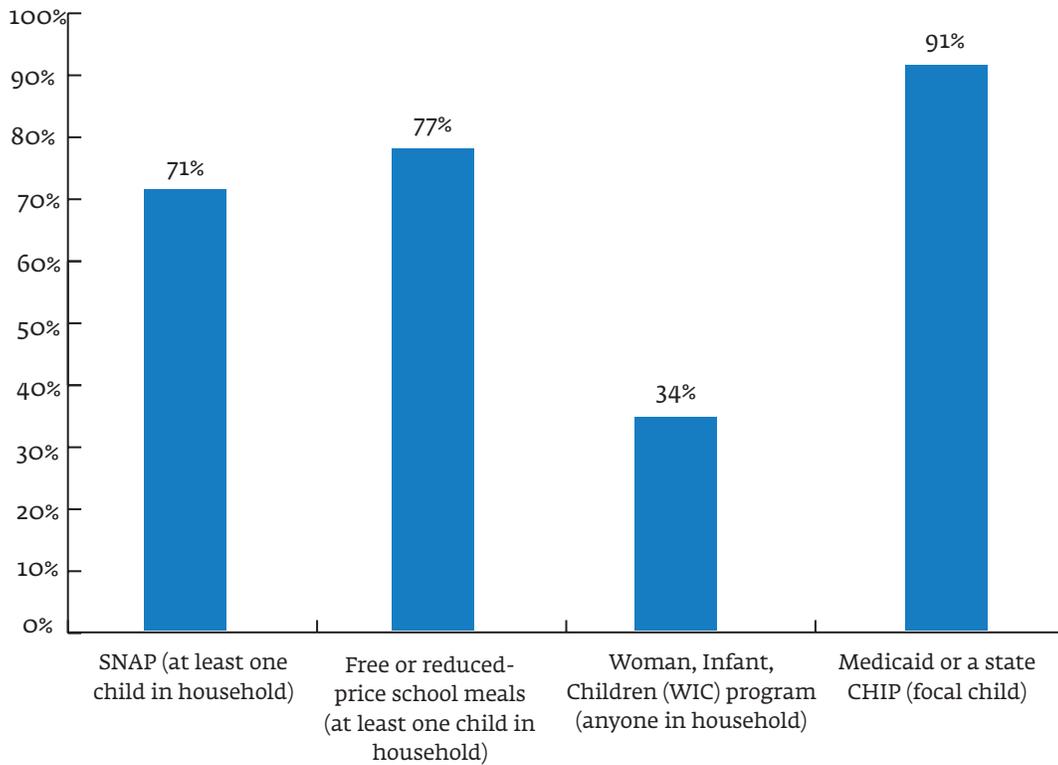
Although they did not receive TANF, substantial proportions of children in disconnected families were in households receiving other types of public assistance (see Figure 5).

- A little less than three-quarters received food assistance through SNAP (see Figure 5),ⁱ a slightly higher proportion than in the Work/No TANF group (65 percent). However, more than 90 percent of children in families using TANF – both those who had someone in the household who was working, and those that did not – received SNAP (data not shown).
- More than 75 percent of children in all four groups received free or reduced-price school meals, although more of the children in households in which someone was receiving TANF received these benefits (data not shown).
- More than 90 percent of children in disconnected families were insured by Medicaid or the state Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), a proportion similar to that in families receiving TANF. A slightly smaller percentage of children in the Work/No TANF families were covered by Medicaid or CHIP (86 percent; data not shown).
- Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of children in disconnected families received aid from two of the four selected non-TANF public assistance programs. Almost half (47 percent) received help from three programs, and another 16 percent received services from all four of the programs shown in Figure 5.

ⁱ In the NSCH, parents are asked whether any child in the household receives SNAP and free/reduced-price meals; thus, the percentages shown here are the percent of children in a household where at least one child was receiving these benefits. For readers’ convenience, in the rest of this brief we will refer to “children receiving SNAP” or “children receiving free or reduced-price meals.” See the Data and Methods section for more information.



Figure 5: Percent of children in disconnected families in households receiving public assistance programs



Family functioning

In general, parents of children in disconnected families reported reasonably good family functioning, as defined by three items. Figures 6 and 7 show how well parents felt they were coping with the demands of parenting, and how often they felt angry with their child in the past month, respectively. We also examined how frequently families eat meals together.

Figure 6: How parents report they are coping with the day-to-day demands of parenthood (percent of children)

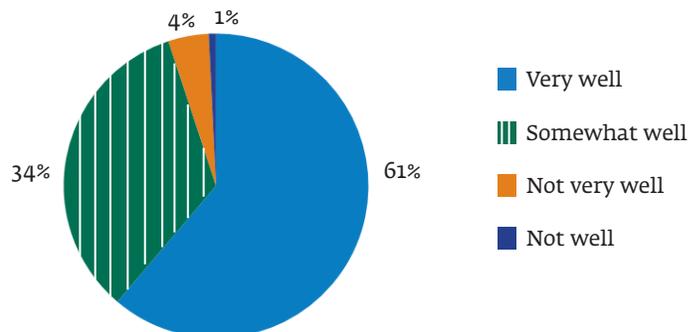
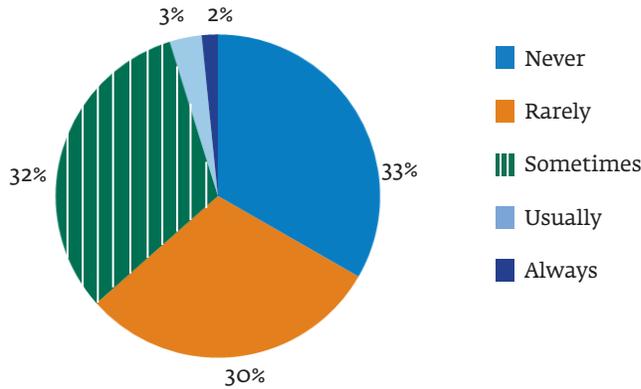




Figure 7: How often parents felt angry with their child in the last month (percent of children)



- One in 20 children (five percent) in disconnected families had parents who reported that they were not coping either “well” or “somewhat well” with the day-to-day demands of raising children. About one in three had parents who were coping only “somewhat well,” whereas nearly three in five had parents who were coping “very well.” This distribution was about the same among all four groups of poor children. Overall, two percent of all children in the U.S. had parents who report they are not coping either “well” or “somewhat well.”
- Similarly, five percent of children in disconnected families had parents who reported that they “usually” or “always” felt angry with their child in the last month. One-third had parents who reported that they “sometimes” felt angry, and the remaining two-thirds had parents who reported that they “rarely” or “never” felt angry with their child. In the Work/No TANF households, significantly fewer children had parents (three percent) who reported they “usually” or “always” felt angry; parents in the other two groups were not significantly different on this measure from those in the disconnected group. Nationally, three percent of all children have parents who report “usually” or “always” feeling angry.
- Disconnected families eat meals together frequently – more than five days a week, on average. More than 60 percent of children in disconnected families ate family meals together at least six nights a week. However, almost 70 percent of children in TANF/No Work families do so. This is one measure on which poor families are doing better than the national average: nationally, 51 percent of non-poor families ate dinner together at least six nights a week, compared with 61 percent of poor families.

Health status of parents

- About one-fourth of children in disconnected families had mothers or fathers who reported their health is “fair” or “poor” (see Figures 8 and 9).
- Compared with children in poor families having at least one employed adult, a higher proportion of children in disconnected families (30 and 27 percent, respectively, for mothers and fathers) had parents who reported being in “fair” or “poor” health (Figure 8 and 9). Among all U.S. families, only 12 percent of mothers and nine percent of fathers reported being in poor/fair health.



Figure 8: Mother's health status is fair or poor (percent of children)

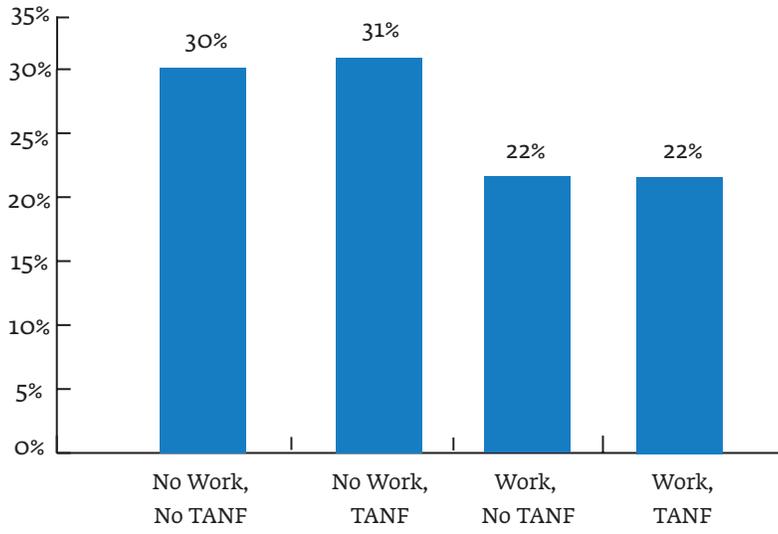
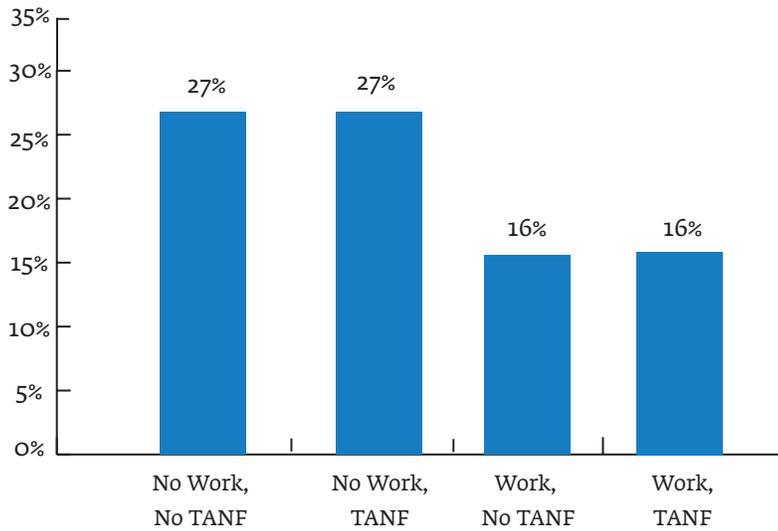


Figure 9: Father's health status is fair or poor (percent of children)





CONCLUSION

Nearly one in three poor children in the U.S. is living in a household where no adults are working or receiving cash assistance. While most of these families access programs such as Medicaid and SNAP for support, greater understanding of this potentially vulnerable group is critical for policymakers and others who seek to expand economic opportunities. Many children in these families are Hispanic, and more are first-generation immigrants than children in families receiving TANF. They are much more likely than other children to have parents with low levels of education, and to have parents in fair or poor health.

Understanding the characteristics of disconnected families and the barriers they face is essential to crafting and implementing policies that help parents become self-sufficient and improve children's outcomes.

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Data and Methods

The National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) was conducted in 2003, 2007 and 2011/12 in all 50 states and the District of Columbia by the National Center for Health Statistics, with funding from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Telephone numbers from a random sampling process were used to contact households, and one child in each household with children was randomly selected to be the focus of the study. An adult in the household knowledgeable about the child answered questions about the child and themselves. The survey is representative of children under 18 years old nationwide and also within each state. A total of 95,677 interviews were completed in 2011/12.

Family Functioning

Parental Coping

Parents were asked, in general, how well do you feel you are coping with the day to day demands of [parenthood / raising children]? Response options were: not well, not very well, somewhat well, and very well.

Parental Anger

Parents were asked, during the past month, how often have you felt angry with [your child]? Response options were: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Usually, Always.

Meals

Parents were asked, during the past week, on how many days did all the family members who live in the household eat a meal together?

Parental Health Status

Parents were asked to rate whether, in general, their health was excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor.

Public Assistance Programs

The use of TANF in the household was indicated by the following question:

- At any time during the past 12 months, even for one month, did anyone in this household receive any cash assistance from a state or county welfare program, such as [state TANF name]?

The use of Medicaid/CHIP, SNAP, and free/reduced-price meals was indicated by the following questions:

- During the past 12 months, did [[S.C.]/ any child in the household] receive Food Stamps or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits?
- During the past 12 months, did [[S.C.] / any child in the household] receive free or reduced-cost breakfasts or lunches at school?

The use of Medicaid/CHIP was indicated by the following two questions:

- Does [S.C.] have any kind of health care coverage, including health insurance, prepaid plans such as HMOs, or government plans such as Medicaid?
- [Is that coverage/Is [he/she] insured by] Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program, CHIP?

The use of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) was indicated by the following question:

- Does anyone who lives in the household currently receive benefits from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program?



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