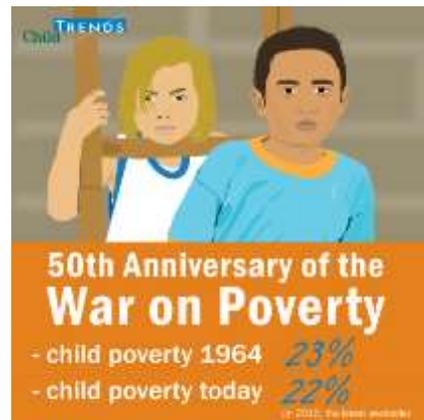


FIVE WAYS | Poverty Harms Children

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Fifty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty, and introduced legislation aiming to reduce the national poverty rate. As shown in [this chart](#), in 1964, 23 percent of U.S. children lived in poverty. Since then, the rate has fluctuated quite a bit, but the latest child poverty rate (22 percent, for 2012) is barely lower than it was when the War began. Poverty rates for black and Hispanic children (at 39 and 34 percent, respectively) are even higher. Below, we highlight five ways poverty is harmful to children, and why it's imperative to continue this fight.



1

Poverty harms the brain and other body systems.

How developmental science understands child poverty has changed a great deal in recent years. Poverty, for children, is not simply a matter of getting by with less of the essentials of life. Particularly at its extremes, poverty can [negatively affect](#) how the body and mind develop, and can actually alter the fundamental architecture of the brain. Children who experience poverty have an increased likelihood, extending into adulthood, for numerous [chronic illnesses](#), and for a [shortened life expectancy](#).

2

Poverty creates and widens achievement gaps.

Children growing up in poverty, when compared with their economically more secure peers, fall behind early. [Starting in infancy](#), gaps are evident in key aspects of learning, knowledge, and social-emotional development. When left unaddressed, these early gaps become progressively wider. Early optimal development tends to open doors to further optimal development, while impoverished development [tends to close](#) those doors. So, poor children [lag behind](#) their peers at entry to kindergarten, in [reading ability](#) at the end of third grade, in the important [self-monitoring skills](#) often called "executive functioning," and in [school attendance](#) in eighth grade. Poor children are more likely to [drop out](#) of school, or fail to obtain [post-secondary education](#).

3

Poverty leads to poor physical, emotional, and behavioral health.

Even when poverty doesn't directly alter human biological systems, we know that [growing up poor](#) increases the likelihood that children will have [poor health](#), including poor [emotional](#) and [behavioral](#) health. Poverty works in multiple ways to constrict children's opportunities and expose them to threats to well-being. Poor children are [more likely](#) to lack "food security," as well as have [diets that are deficient](#) in [important nutrients](#). [Rates of several chronic health conditions](#), such as asthma, are [higher among poor children](#). They are [less likely](#) to receive preventive medical and dental care.

4

Poor children are more likely to live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, which is associated with numerous social ills.

While direct causal links between neighborhood poverty and children's outcomes are challenging to identify in research, scholars have found that growing up in [neighborhoods with concentrated poverty](#) is associated with negative academic [outcomes](#), more social and behavioral problems, and poorer health and physical fitness outcomes. Poor children are [more likely](#) to live in neighborhoods where they are exposed to environmental toxins and other physical hazards, including crime and violence. In the case of [violence](#), even [indirect exposure](#) -- witnessing, or simply hearing of its occurrence -- has been linked with adverse developmental outcomes. Poor children are also disproportionately likely to attend [schools](#) in districts with fewer resources, with facilities that are grossly inadequate, and with school leadership that is more transient.

5

Poverty can harm children through the negative effects it has on their families and the home environment.

While the [strengths of poor families](#) are often overlooked, parents experience numerous challenges that can affect their own emotional well-being, as well as their children's. [Poor parents](#) report higher stress, [aggravation](#), and [depressive symptoms](#) than do higher-income parents. Parents with scarce economic resources face difficulty planning, preparing, and providing for their families' material needs. Children in poor families have fewer books and other educational resources at home, and they are less likely to experience family outings, activities, and [programs](#) that can enrich learning opportunities. Their families are more likely to experience [housing instability](#). Direct evidence that additional income can improve children's lives comes from several [experimental evaluations](#): programs that increased family income showed improvements in children's social and academic outcomes.

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For more information, please see [this list of resources on child poverty](#), and [this blog post](#).