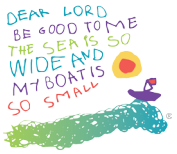
September 14, 2020



children's defense fund

Poverty Messaging Guidance: Five Points to Hit on U.S. Census Poverty Data

On September 15 and 17, the Census Bureau will release national and state level poverty estimates from 2019. However, these estimates will not adequately capture our present-day realities due to the impacts of COVID-19 since early 2020. The pandemic has not only disrupted the everyday lives of children and families, but also exposed and exacerbated the extreme racial, income and wealth gaps in our nation. The disconnect between federal poverty estimates and the real experience and extent of economic hardship in America today has never been more apparent.

So, what can advocates and policymakers learn from and say about the 2019 poverty data in light of COVID? Here are some key points and themes to emphasize.

Point 1: Children need consistent, stable, and supportive environments to grow and thrive. Yet children, particularly Black and Brown children, were the poorest Americans at the outset of the pandemic and are now being hit hardest, threatening their long-term growth and development.

- **Year after year, children, particularly children of color, are the poorest Americans** and we expect this will remain true in 2019, with vast racial disparities for Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American/Pacific Islander children.
    - Centuries of divestment in communities of color have left our Black and Brown children most vulnerable and susceptible to harm during and even before COVID-19.
- Now, our youngest Americans are being hit hardest during their years of greatest development. Households with children are stressed and stretched thin, facing greater risk of hunger and housing displacement. According to the most recent Census Pulse Survey data, **more than half of adults in households with children (51 percent) report that they or another member of the household have lost employment income** since the start of the pandemic. **Nearly 1 in 4 adults in households with children (22 percent) are behind on rent and 1 in 7 (14 percent) said their children are not getting enough to eat.**
- Sixty-percent of the poorest households with children have experienced an enormous amount of continued financial pressure and been forced to hold off or postpone in-person healthcare visits to the doctor.
- 1.3 million children living in poverty do not have consistent access to the internet for educational purposes and 574,000 do not have access to the internet at all, which completely interrupts children's learning as remote schooling is essential during the pandemic.

Point 2: Economic conditions have changed drastically since this data was collected in 2019. To help advocates and policymakers better understand and meet children's needs now and in the future, the Census Bureau must conduct more routine and robust data collection.

- The COVID-19 crisis has revealed how rapidly and drastically economic conditions can change and

underscores the need for real-time data collection and reporting.

- In light of the pandemic, these newly released poverty estimates are already outdated. While the U.S. Census Pulse Survey has provided some insight and information on changes in child well-being since the pandemic hit, the survey ends in October and fails to capture data on poverty.
- Advocates and policymakers need consistent, non-partisan, evidence-based, statistically relevant and timely data on child poverty and family income to better respond to this economic crisis and insulate children and families from harm. We need to better understand how our federal policies either help or fail to reduce child poverty and its racial disparities. Without continuous monitoring of child poverty by the federal government during this crisis and recovery, we risk irreparable harm to our youngest children, especially children of color.
- During this crisis and beyond, we urge the federal government to continuously monitor and report on child poverty and whether current policies help reduce it.

Point 3: Official poverty estimates vastly understate the extent of hardship in America.

- Official poverty estimates fail to fully and meaningfully capture all households without adequate income to support a family and do not fully capture the extent of racial disparities. While 38.1 million people were officially counted as poor in 2018, studies suggest at least 3.2 million additional people experienced poverty that year.
- Our current poverty measurement was created in 1963 and has been adjusted only for inflation since. This measure hasn't kept pace with the cost of living and does not accurately reflect what a family needs to survive and thrive. It also fails to take into account what a family needs physically, mentally, and socially.
- According to the EPI Family Budget Calculator, for example, a family of four with two children would need an annual income of $105,539—four times the poverty line—to meet their basic needs in the District of Columbia. The official poverty line for a family of four, as outlined by HHS, is only $26,200.
- Given many federal, state, and local programs use the poverty line to determine eligibility for programs like SNAP, school meals, CHIP, Head Start and more, we must ensure it captures all families who need help.

Point 4: This pandemic has exposed how unequal our pre-COVID economy was, and how many families were suffering. Children want to succeed, but our political leaders have built an unjust and unequal economy that leaves millions of children behind.

- The Trump administration and the GOP will tell you the pre-COVID economy was strong, but that economy left nearly 12 million children in poverty and millions more on the edge.
- Families were working to take care of their children, but the economy wasn't working for them. The overwhelming majority of poor children lived in working families, struggling to make ends meet despite being connected to the labor force. For too many parents and caregivers, having a job did not guarantee stability or security.
- Even at the height of our economy, millions of Americans not counted as poor were living on the edge—just one missed paycheck or financial shock away from hunger, housing displacement and stress. Nearly 4 in 10 American adults didn't have enough resources on hand to cover an unexpected $400 expense in 2019.

- The pandemic has further exposed our longstanding economic vulnerabilities and disparities.

  Millions of families and children are striving for a better future, but the decks are stacked against them due to our leaders' failure to invest in our children—especially children of color.

- Historical, systemic racism and institutional barriers over centuries have left our Black and Brown communities without the resources they need to survive and thrive, and politicians' divestments in our communities have only made it worse.

Point 5: Child poverty and racial disparities will continue to rise if Congress does not immediately pass robust COVID relief for families and expand basic needs programs to help kids learn, grow, and thrive during this pandemic and beyond.

- Without robust support from Congress, COVID-19 will push millions more children into or deeper into poverty. Relief measures like cash assistance, child allowances, rental and housing support, SNAP, and unemployment insurance all need to be expanded to mitigate this crisis and help families get by.
    - For example, another round of $1,200 cash assistance to most adults and up to three dependent children, as outlined in the HEROES Act, would keep 8.3 million people out of poverty.
- Investing in children and their healthy development not only helps our economy, but helps reduce racial disparities and improve opportunities for children in the long-run.