

# **The Root Causes of Poverty and Its Effects on Children and Youth**

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What do we know about the nature and causes of poverty and its effects on the mental, emotional and behavioral health and development of children and youth? Poverty takes many forms: absolute poverty, relative poverty and subjective poverty among others. There is important variation in levels of poverty as well, ranging from extreme poverty to near poverty. Trends in national poverty rates reveal that while child poverty has declined over the last half century, it is still unconscionably high (21% in 2014). Exposure to poverty has negative influences on many dimensions of children's health (e.g. neonatal and post-neonatal mortality, injuries due to accidents or physical abuse and neglect, asthma) and development (e.g. developmental delays; lower reading and math achievement scores; grade repetition; mental, emotional and behavioral problems) and its effects persist into adulthood. The root causes of poverty are many including economic (e.g. structural labor market changes), social (e.g. racial discrimination) and policy (e.g. poor implementation, low investment) factors.

What do we know about the pathways by which poverty gets into kids' heads and under kids' skins? Over the last several decades, there have been great scientific advances in understanding the mechanisms by which poverty and related factors affect children's health and development. Pathways include: (1) the individual level - parent and child "toxic stress" and their effects on neurophysiological responses to environmental conditions?; (2) the level of interpersonal relations - harsh/punitive and disengaged/neglectful parenting; and (3) the level of institutions - low quality and unstable child care, classrooms, schools. To prevent poverty from adversely affecting children's health and development, prevention strategies can endeavor to (1) reduce poverty itself and/or (2) disrupt the pathways by which poverty exerts its negative effects. Taking a prevention science approach to understanding and combatting poverty holds great promise to advance the health and development of our nation's children.