

Chapter 1

Addressing Poverty–Related Trauma in School Children

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the effects of poverty on education. The chapter is divided into three sections: “Understanding Poverty and Homelessness,” which provides formal definitions and current evidence-based data; “Children’s Experience of Poverty”; and “Addressing Poverty-Related Trauma in the Classroom,” an examination of innovative educational programs and resources that seek to mitigate the effects of poverty-related trauma.

UNDERSTANDING POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS

Poverty is a chronic social issue that adversely impacts family stability, parent-child relationships, and child outcomes. Living without adequate and stable economic resources, even for short periods of time, presents numerous challenges both in the immediate and long-term. To understand the extent of poverty, and its related outcomes for children, we need first consider some basic questions:

- How are poverty and poverty thresholds defined?
- How are measures of poverty limited?
- How do we define homelessness?
- What is meant by the felt experience of poverty?

Defining Poverty and Poverty Thresholds

At its core, poverty refers to extreme economic depravity. Initial attempts to formally conceptualize the notion of poverty, and determine poverty rates in the United States, began in earnest during the mid-20th century. Poverty was first conceptualized by economist Mollie Orshansky employing a measure of ad-

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equate food consumption. This effort was the basis for establishing the first national poverty thresholds. Poverty thresholds refer to a specific minimum dollar amount necessary to meet a family's basic needs. By employing these measures, Orshansky, and subsequent researchers, were able to gauge, not only how many families were living in extreme economic depravity, but also those who were living on the brink of poverty. Identifying these families allowed researchers valuable insight into the lived experience of poverty and its associated immediate and longer-term risks. In subsequent years, Orshansky's initial efforts to conceptualize poverty using measures of food consumption were broadened to account for additional consumption patterns as well as income (Merriam, 1967; Kilpatrick, 1973). To this day, there exists no standard definitive economic threshold that accounts for *all* basic goods and services (e.g., housing, health care, transportation) (Fisher, 1992). In other words, we do not yet know what magic dollar amount a family requires to meet all of their needs. Researchers' attempts to fully conceptualize poverty, and the notion of 'well-being' more broadly, remain inadequate. Presently, government officials and researchers largely rely on two measures for establishing whether individuals and families are living in poverty: the official poverty measure and the supplemental measure of poverty.

Official Poverty Measure

On a yearly basis, the U.S. Census Bureau measures poverty based on estimates of the level of income needed to cover basic needs (e.g., shelter, food, transportation). This is known as the official poverty measure. The official measure of poverty assesses cash income while accounting for family size and composition, to determine the percentage of individuals and households living in poverty. Income thresholds are determined by tripling the cost (adjusted for inflation) of a minimum food diet in 1963, and accounting for family size, composition and age of the householder. When a family's total income falls below the specified threshold that family is considered to be living in poverty. Income thresholds provide a more nuanced picture of poverty by identifying those households that are above the poverty line, near poverty, in poverty, and in severe poverty. Households with incomes above 100% of the poverty threshold fall into the first category of 'above' the poverty line. Households earning above >100-125% of the poverty threshold are considered 'near' poverty. Incomes at or below 100% of the poverty threshold are considered 'in poverty', and those below 50% are considered in 'severe' poverty. When the official measure of poverty was first implemented in 1959 the poverty rate was estimated to be approximately 22% (Fisher, 1992). In 2017, the poverty rate in the United States was approximately 12% based on official measures (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018). An estimated 40 million Americans were living in various conditions of poverty that year. Individuals experiencing "severe" poverty account for nearly half (46.7%) of all those living below the poverty line (Fontenot et. al., 2018). The official measure of poverty is a meaningful tool for determining receipt of federal income-based social support eligibility and identifying families in need, but it doesn't tell the whole story of poverty.

Supplemental Poverty Measure

The supplemental poverty measure was established as a complement to the official poverty measure. It is a more nuanced means to assess poverty that takes into account income from numerous sources (including government assistance) and estimates of household expenditures. This measurement, while not the formal determinant of federal income-based support, provides a broader assessment of household-

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