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# Child poverty in the United States from the perspective of conflict theory

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes social problems linked to child poverty in the United States from the perspective of social conflict theory. Specifically, this article depicts the poverty measurements used to evaluate poverty issues in the United States. It also describes the United States' efforts to reform social welfare policies to decrease child poverty. This article aims to educate social work students about factors directly connected to child poverty, such as unemployment, low wages, family structure, education, and immigrants. In doing so, this article uses social theories such as social conflict theory to understand what aspects of American culture are linked to the persistence of child poverty. Finally, this article discusses the long-term plans and massive efforts required to reduce the causes of poverty.

**Keywords:** poverty, welfare, factors, immigrants, conflict theory education, low-wages, Unemployment.

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## Introduction

There is no consensus regarding the specific causes of poverty, though scholars generally agree that a lack of access to resources plays a significant role (Segal, 2013). According to experts' studies on social problems and policymakers' perceptions of the issue, impoverished individuals' lives do not meet the desired quality of life in their communities (NASIBOV, 2012). Thus, general poverty is a term that relates to individuals who cannot meet the basic needs for survival—that is, they do not have access to necessities such as food, clothing, and a safe place to live.

According to Segal (2013), two types of measures can define poverty: absolute and relative (p.173). Absolute measures of poverty use a specific amount of money to define an individual as poor, while relative measures are based on cost of living standards. According to these measures, people whose income cannot support a basic standard of living are considered poor.

The United States uses an absolute measure that was developed in 1960 (Segal, 2013). This measure assesses poverty based on a narrow income standard—specifically, it defines the poverty line as one's food costs multiplied by three (Cauthen & Fass, 2008). This official measure of poverty was later subjected to reforms. These reforms account for the number of people in a family and define poverty based on the family's total income before taxes (Short, 2016). Thus, the United States Official Poverty Measure (OPM) uses three elements—income, poverty threshold, and family size—to determine whether a person is poor (IRP, 2018).

The United States defines an impoverished individual as “an individual with an income of less than \$31 per day or a family of four with an income of less than \$63.00 per day” (Federal Safety Net, n.d). According to the OPM measure, “the United States Census Bureau reported that 12.7% percent of U.S. residents

and 17.8% of U.S. children lived in poverty in 2004” (Frank, 2004).

## Poverty in the United States

According to a United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report in 2008, the child poverty rate in the United States places the country nearly last among advanced countries (The United Nations Children's Fund, 2007). Furthermore, based on a study conducted by Koball and Jiang (2018), of the 72.4 million children (under 18 years old) living in the United States, 41% live in low-income homes and 19% are poor. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011, 16.4 million Americans under 18 (22%) were poor (Fay, 2011).

The table below depicts the distribution of child poverty in the united states (figure 1). According to a national analysis of child poverty conducted in 2018 by the United States Census Bureau, in 2017, 12.8 million Americans under 18 (17.5%) lived in poverty. These poor children were classified as either living in poverty (one in five American children are in this group) or extreme poverty (one in 12 American children are in this group). Children living in poverty were further separated as follows: 10.9% were White, 28.7% were Black, 25.0% were Hispanic, 12.2% were Asian, and 31. % were American Indian and Alaskan. Children younger than five years old were separated as follows: 17.7% were White, 33.7% were Black, 26.2% were Hispanic, 15.6% were Asian, and 36.2% were American Indian.

The percentages of children under 18 years old living in extreme poverty were as follows: 5% were White, 15.3% were Black, 10.5% were Hispanic, 4.9% were Asian, and 16.4% were American Indian and Alaskan. For children under the age of five, the percentages were as follows: 5.4% were White, 18.8% were Black, 10.8% were Hispanic, 6.2% were Asian, and 21% were American Indian and Alaskan (Children Defense Fund, 2017; ChildTrends, 2018).

Public assistance can help decrease poverty and prevent people from falling into extreme

poverty. However, in 1970, the “safety net” was substantially reduced in size, and labor regulations became more complicated, which undermined job opportunities. Also, new public assistance and social services regulations emerged. These changes hindered people’s

opportunities to improve themselves through social programs and made them work full time with low wages. Naturally, these conditions made it difficult to avoid child poverty (Nadasen, 2017).

**Figure 1: The table below displays the distribution of child poverty in the United States.**

	12.8 million children	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	American Indian	Alaska
Children under 18 years old living in poverty	17.5%	10.9%	28.7%	25.0%	12.2%	31.1%	
Children under five years old living in poverty	1 in 5	17.7%	33.7%	26.2%	15.6%	36.2%	--
Children under 18 years old living in extreme poverty	1 in 12	5%	15.3%	10.5%	4.9%	16.4%	
Children under five years old living in extreme poverty		5.4%	18.8%	10.8%	6.2%	21%	

**A brief overview of poverty’s roots and attempts to address the issue**

A look back to 1870-1930 shows that child poverty is rooted in the United States’ economy and social culture. According to the social culture, impoverished children inherited poverty from their low-income parents. Therefore, children were exploited and forced to work under poor conditions in coal mines or producing cotton, wool, or silk in factories (Day, 2013). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the economy prospered and made rich people richer, leaving low-income individuals unable to keep up with the new high cost of living (Jansson, 2012). As a result, the poverty rate increased, further restricting low-income families’ opportunities to escape poverty. The Great Depression was the primary cause of the gap between a few extremely wealthy people and the majority of people with limited resources. The situation improved somewhat for low-income families during the middle of the 20th century through public assistance programs. However, in 1970, economic issues, such as the Great inflation, created complicated labor regulations, which undermined many people’s

job opportunities (Kramer, 2018; Brya, 2013). Social welfare reforms in 1996 further limited people’s eligibility for assistance to five years, after which time individuals must find work, regardless of how bad the conditions and pay are. The restrictive regulations of public assistance and social services prevent people from improving themselves and make them work full time for low wages (Nadasen, 2017).

In 1980, children were recognized as the “juvenilization of poverty” (Segal, 2013, p 180). Despite some improvements made by the government, a significant percentage of America’s children are poor today. People from low-income families tend to be undereducated, unhealthy, unemployed, more likely than others to commit crimes, and generally make society unstable (Segal, 2013). Also, poverty has a severe impact on childhood development, especially when children face poverty from an early age. Such children often suffer from poor nutrition and chronic illnesses, which makes them weak and adversely affects their physical and mental development. As a result, their parents continually feel psychologically and materially concerned about their children’s fate.

It does not help that the government's assistance programs and policies are constantly subjected to changes based on social expenditures and the government's budget (AAP, 2016).

According to Haskins (2012), child poverty still exists for many reasons that are rooted in American history. For example, unemployment, low-wages, family structure, education, and immigration have been directly connected to poverty. According to Segal (2013), societal values and beliefs play an essential role in increasing poverty, including beliefs related to "human capital, macroeconomics, racism, discrimination, dependency [and a] lack of political power" (p. 183).

Although many attempts have been made to reduce poverty, child poverty is still a significant problem in the United States. Despite previous achievements in reducing poverty in the United States, such progress is unstable. Two decades ago, the rate of child poverty fluctuated between 10% and 20% of the population. This rate decreased in the late 1990s due to benefits derived from social welfare. However, child poverty still existed, mainly because of three conditions. First, social welfare reforms reduced the safety net available for low-income families. Second, inaccurate measures were used to calculate severe poverty rates—based on the federal poverty measure, many families' incomes were below half of the official poverty measure. Third, many children remained below the poverty threshold (ABA, 2012).

As mentioned above, scaling down the safety net increased child poverty. For example, in 1996, for every 100 low-income families with dependent children, 68 families received cash assistance; in 2015, only 23 of every 100 such low-income families received cash assistance (Edelman, 2015). Also, many workers lost their jobs when economic hardships caused companies to lay off employees. Unemployment increased sharply as a result, and many families struggled to meet their basic needs, as they could not afford housing, education, healthcare

expenses, and so on. All of these effects have negatively impacted children's lives (Anderson, n.d).

Changes in family structure have also led to poverty. From 1950 to 2009, the number of single-mother-headed families increased by 6.3%, and the rate of childhood poverty increased by 44.3%. In comparison, in families headed by a married couple, the rate of child poverty is only 11.0% (Haskins, 2012).

The United States government's budget supports children living in low-income families by providing social programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. This program allocates money for childcare, development funds, child nutrition programs, and refundable child tax credits (Smeeding & Thévenot, 2016). Such programs include minimum wage and increased benefits for families with dependent children (AFDC). Aid is also provided by the Housing Act, increased job opportunities, and Medicaid for families with dependent children (Day, 2012).

However, those programs have undergone many reforms due to changes in the economy. Significantly reducing poverty remains a challenge in the United States, especially in light of recent proposals put forth by the Trump administration regarding changes in the tax system and changes to the Affordable Healthcare Act (Obamacare) (Ben-Meir, 217).

In 2015, the Child Defense Fund (CDF) proposed nine policies intended to reduce childhood poverty. The proposal included increasing low-income families' earnings by increasing minimum wage from \$7 to \$10 per hour, providing jobs for unemployed low-income individuals with children, and giving temporary assistance to needy families. Other proposals included \$100 child support, a supplemental nutrition assistance program, expanding voucher housing assistance for low-income families with children, increased SNAP benefits for low-income families with children, increased earned tax income benefits, full refunds of child tax deduction, increased Child and Dependent

Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), and increased child care aid for children under 13 years old from low-income families (Giannarelli, Lippold, Minton, & Wheaton, 2015). Government officials should consider these proposals to reduce child poverty and rescue many children from illness, disability, and death because of poverty.

### **Conflict theory's perspective on child poverty**

There are many sociological explanations for child poverty. For instance, the functional perspective attributes poverty to poor individuals. This perspective explains poverty as a natural consequence of population growth and states that poor individuals have personal problems that lead them to live in poverty (Barkan, 2012). Meanwhile, the conflict perspective attributes poverty to the structure of American society. According to this perspective, unemployment, low wages, low levels of education, and immigration are connected to child poverty in the United States.

Conflict theory explains child poverty based on three assumptions. The first assumption is that those who have economic resources and those who do not are in direct conflict. The second is that economic resources are limited. The third is that the dominant class influences social constructions and political decisions and, therefore, controls the social classes or groups who live on limited resources (Barkan, 2012; CHEMYCLASS, 2018).

### **Unemployment, low wages, and job insecurity limit access to adequate income.**

According to Hoynes, Page, and Stevens (2005), there is a positive relationship between unemployment and poverty. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2016, the overall unemployment rate in the United States was 4.9%, with an especially high rate among African Americans (8.9%). The unemployment rates for other ethnic groups were 3.6% (Asian), 4.3% (White), and 5.8% (Latino) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Researchers at the Brookings Institution found that the number of children

living in poverty increased due to unemployment. They estimated that in 2009, 8.1 million children under 18 were from families with unemployed parents, and 2.3 million lived in families with unemployed family members (Isaacs & Lovell, 2010).

Conflict theory assumes there is conflict in the labor market between people of different social classes and individual interests. Some individuals are employed and have positions in the labor market and have the privilege and power to take advantage of social services. Those in the privileged class use employed but who have fewer advantages and less power than those in the privileged class to obtain services, such as access to resources, information, and benefits from the written policies that protect them as a privileged class. Individuals who are unemployed or who work for low wages are considered as being in the weakest social class. It is almost impossible for these individuals to improve their social standing (Paperap, 2018). Individuals who work for low wages do not benefit from certain welfare services, such as unemployment compensation, and they must live for a long time on limited resources. As a result, they and their children live in poverty, which leads to other social issues that burden the state (Corcoran & Hill, 1980).

Conversely, according to conflict theory, employed people take advantage of social welfare and live luxurious lives. They do not worry if they lose their jobs in the labor market because they can rely on social welfare programs until they find new jobs. This makes them more powerful than those who accept work for low wages with limited resources to avoid unemployment. Members of this latter group worry about losing their jobs, and they benefit relatively little from social welfare.

Low levels of education directly impact child poverty. Today, working in the United States requires a high education level because the labor market depends significantly on technology and relatively little on unskilled labor. According to U.S. Census Bureau data from

2009 on the relationship between education and child poverty, families headed by well-educated parents make more money than families headed by parents with a high school education level or lower (Haskins, 2012). Families headed by undereducated adults tend to suffer from poverty. In turn, children of impoverished parents cannot afford to obtain education beyond the high-school level to achieve financial security as adults. So, these children accept limited education as members of the poor class living in poor areas, and they tend to blame society for not providing them with sufficient education. Despite the support of No Child Left Behind for children's education, college education are still unattainable for poor children, as are effective employment and social services programs (Klein, 2015).

According to conflict theory, public schools do not minimize social inequality. In fact, public education exacerbates social inequalities arising from differences in social class statuses. Public schools provide some activities and competitions between students that portray knowledge as being correlated with the upper-class culture. They also provide some activities that cost money that low-income families often cannot afford. Also, public education provides students with different opportunities based on their social status and where they live. Some provide well for students, while those in poor areas cannot always adequately attend to all students' abilities and needs, and they often provide limited school supplies (Lumen, n.d.). These factors worsen child poverty and may lead children to isolate themselves from pursuing job opportunities because they feel like strangers in their society.

### **Immigration is often connected with poverty.**

Many children have come to the United States from other countries with poor and unskilled parents who wished to seek asylum, escape violence, and flee from gangs. Women and children who were poor in their home countries came to the United States looking for a secure environment and an opportunity to improve their

economic conditions, eventually achieving financial independence. However, official data shows that those immigrants have shaped the high rate of child poverty in the United States, as about 40% of children living in poverty in the United States are from immigrant families (most of which are Latino Hispanics) (McCarty, 2017; Meyer & Pachico, 2018). In 1999, these immigrants encountered an anti-immigrant policy that excluded them from public cash assistance and long-term care at the government's expense. More recently, the Trump administration announced its refusal to provide government assistance to illegal immigrants (Meyer & Pachico, 2018). As a result, unskilled immigrants with low levels of education could not achieve financial independence. Therefore, they and their children were left to live in poverty.

According to Rector (2006), an expert on poverty, welfare programs, and immigration in America, stated that 38% of immigrant children live in families headed by unskilled householders with a low education level, and 26% of first-generation dependent children are poor. Even if the United States government were to provide some assistance for most noncitizen children (e.g., 49% Medicaid, 2.8% SSI, 34.3% SNAP, and 3.9% cash assistance), the rate of poverty among immigrants would remain higher than that of the native population. This is because immigrants are more willing than natives to accept low-income jobs (e.g., as a farm laborer, janitor, or construction worker) (Rector, 2006; Nowrasteh & Orr, 2018; Porter, 2017).

Conflict theory suggests that members of middle- and upper-class society believe they have a right to exploit members of lower social classes and immigrants based on the belief that members of lower classes are weak. Members of the privileged classes hire members of lower classes to perform services that conflict with their interests (Essays, 2013). From 2009-2013, the restrictive immigration policy affected 4.1 million Mexicans living in unemployed families

by allowing members of the privileged economic class to exploit illegal immigrants. Landmark's study found that 37% of illegal immigrants were exposed to exploitation, and 89% of those working full time were paid for fewer hours than they worked. They could not complain about their rights because they were afraid of being deported (Costa, 2015; Menjivar & Cervantes, 2016).

## Conclusion

This article explored different definitions of child poverty and described the United States' official poverty measure (OPM), which the country uses to categorize children as living in poverty. In addition, this article addressed the main reasons behind child poverty by examining the problem's origins. It expressed the value of social studies in reducing child poverty, encouraging federal policies to consider their suggestions, and reinforcing efforts to reduce child poverty. This article also identified the factors most strongly connected to child poverty, which include unemployment, low wages, undereducation, and immigration. Finally, child poverty was analyzed from a sociological perspective and based on conflict theory, through which the connections between child poverty in the United States and its underlying factors were explained.

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