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Child Poverty Spiked After Pandemic Aid Ended Last Year, Census Shows

BY MICHAEL FITZGERALD



After hitting a historic low, child poverty levels have risen again since pandemic-era aid ended, the U.S. Census Bureau reports. Photo by Napatcha, Adobe Stock.

After a dramatic dip when the federal government stepped up cash assistance for needy families during the pandemic, the nation's child poverty rate more than doubled last year, according to U.S. Census Bureau data released Tuesday. The economic supplements to the Current Population Survey are a key indicator of households' financial health, and this year's [reports](#) captured the end of pandemic-era government aid programs.

Child poverty hit a historic low in 2021, with [early research](#) showing a dramatic improvement in living standards for the nation's lowest-income families, including those at risk of foster care intervention or family court-ordered supervision.

But the new Census data appear to upend the [gains](#) from temporary assistance such as the expanded [Child Tax Credit](#). The 2022 data released this week shows the overall poverty rate increased for all children rose from just over 5% in 2021 to roughly 12% in 2022, marking the steepest rise on record.

"This represents a return to child poverty levels prior to the pandemic," Liana Fox, an assistant division chief at the Census Bureau, said at a Tuesday press conference. "We did see the Child Tax Credit had a substantial decrease in child poverty."



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The highest poverty rates were for children identified as Hispanic, at 19.5%. Close to 18% of Black children lived in poverty last year, roughly matching 2019 levels.

Those results confirmed expectations among child welfare advocates, experts and professionals who have been outspoken supporters of government anti-poverty programs such as the expanded Child Tax Credit, launched in 2021 to combat COVID-19's temporary impact on parents' ability to work. The credit automatically delivered \$250 or \$300 per child each month into [more than](#) 36 million households, reaching more than 60 million children. But as the pandemic wound down, Congress allowed the program to expire in late 2021.

The president of Washington, D.C.-based First Focus on Children responded with alarm to this week's new poverty data, imploring Congress to restore income support measures like the tax credit, and to set a specific child poverty reduction target.

"The expiration of those policies has sent us back to unacceptable — and utterly preventable — levels of child poverty that threaten the health of our children and the nation as a whole," Bruce Lesley said in a statement posted on the First Focus website. "We as a nation have proven that child poverty is a choice. Our baseline for child poverty should not be what is, but what is possible."

Scores of studies have found that families at greatest risk of CPS involvement are disproportionately living in low-income communities and experience instability in housing or food access. They are also more likely to be single-parent households or to have Black or Native American children.

THE POVERTY RATE INCREASE FOR CHILDREN ROSE FROM JUST OVER 5% IN 2021 TO ROUGHLY 12% IN 2022, MARKING THE STEEPEST RISE ON RECORD.

Recent research has also begun to establish a causal link between income and CPS involvement, with interventions like a boosted Expanded Income Tax Credit (EITC) for low-wage workers [showing](#) reductions in child welfare investigations.

Reached via email, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign social work scholar William Schneider noted there hasn't been much research yet into the expanded Child Tax Credit's effects on child abuse and neglect cases. Maltreatment reporting, investigations, and services changed dramatically during the pandemic, making it hard to identify specific effects from the tax credit reserved for families with children regardless of employment status.

"Given the existing, prior research about the effects of the EITC I think it's likely that more child poverty will be linked to more child maltreatment, and neglect in particular," said Schneider.

Schneider, who has [studied](#) the effects of the minimum wage and housing assistance on child welfare cases, added that in the absence of the Child Tax Credit (CTC), state agencies should look for other ways to help families meet basic needs.

“This seems like a key moment for child welfare systems to fill the gap left by the expiration of the expanded CTC, particularly given the vulnerability of the families they serve,” he said.

Researchers suspect other recent proposals to reduce child poverty in the U.S. could help families avoid getting swept up into lengthy court battles or disruptive foster care placements. A study published in March in the academic journal *Social Service Review* [projected](#) CPS investigations could decline as much as 20% if the government launched anti-child poverty plans [proposed](#) by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The reductions for Black and Hispanic children in those proposals were roughly double white children’s.

“All else equal, increased household income should directly reduce risk of CPS involvement,” said the co-authors from schools of social work at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Columbia University, and the Seattle-based philanthropic nonprofit Casey Family Programs.

The number of children in foster care has [plummeted](#) since the onset of the pandemic. But the annual federal foster care count is not yet available for the period after the government’s broad-based economic rescue efforts during the pandemic.

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The Census Bureau’s findings on income, poverty and health insurance this week, meanwhile, described uneven financial conditions in American households overall, with a strong labor market offsetting scorching inflation and the end of pandemic-era aid that reached even many middle class families.

While inflation helped drive real median household income down by more than 2%, there were bright spots: The number of people with full-time employment grew; the share of women working full-time, year-round reached a historic high, and the broader poverty rate for Black people hit a historic low.

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