

# Effects of Family Structure on Poverty

More than 15.8 million American children live below the official poverty line.<sup>1)</sup> Poverty is principally a problem of non-intact families. In 2015, five times as many single, female-headed families were in poverty compared to married-couple families.<sup>2)</sup> Marriage is the most effective safeguard against child poverty.

## 1. Poverty in the Total Population

The fraction of high school graduates has the largest attenuating influence on the fraction of the total population living below the poverty line. This influence is precisely determinable<sup>3)</sup> under controls for demographics, education, and earnings.

The fraction of [intact families](#) in the geographic area has the next-largest attenuating influence; it, too, is precisely determinable even after controls for demographics, education, and earnings are applied.

The fraction of college graduates has a small attenuating influence on the fraction of the total population below the poverty line when controlling only for demographics and education, but the influence becomes large, enhancing, and precisely determinable when controls for earnings are added. Presumably, once the human and social capital effects of higher education are absorbed and accounted for by earned income itself, college degrees actually increase the potential for putting oneself in a poor area.

The black fraction of the population has a small precisely determinable enhancing influence on overall poverty levels when controlling for demographics, education, and earnings. The fraction of the population that is Hispanic has no determinable influence on an area's poverty.

Income earned in prime age has a precisely determinable influence on the proportion of the total population below the poverty line, as expected.

## 2. Women

The fraction of high school graduates in the geographic area has the largest attenuating influence on the fraction of 25- to 54-year-old [females living below the poverty line](#) in that geographic area. The attenuating influence is precisely determinable.

The fraction of intact families in the geographic area has the next-largest attenuating, precisely determinable influence.

The fraction of college graduates in the geographic area follows intact families in the strength of its attenuating influence. However, the influence of the fraction of college graduates again becomes enhancing after applying controls for earnings to the already-applied controls for demographics and education.

The fraction of blacks in a geographic area has a small, enhancing, slightly less precisely

determinable influence on the fraction of impoverished 25- to 54-year-old females. The fraction of the population that is Hispanic has no determinable influence on an area's female poverty.

Income earned by the overall prime-aged adult population has an attenuating and precisely determinable influence when it is added as an additional control, as expected.

### 3. Children

The fraction of adult high school graduates has the largest attenuating influence on the fraction of [minors living below the poverty line](#). The influence is precisely determinable.

The fraction of intact families in a geographic area has the next-largest attenuating influence on the fraction of minors below the poverty line. This influence is also precisely determinable.

The fraction of college graduates has a precisely determinable small attenuating influence on the fraction of minors below the poverty line when controlling for demographics and education, but the influence becomes enhancing, larger, and still precisely determinable when controls for earnings are added. In other words, the fraction of college graduates in a geographic area enhances the fraction of minors below the poverty line, when human and social capital effects are factored in separately through earnings.

The fraction of Hispanics in the population has an undetectable influence on the fraction of minors below the poverty line. The fraction of blacks in the population has a determinable, enhancing influence on the fraction of minors below the poverty line.

Increasing the ratio of elderly to prime-aged adults enhances the fraction of minors living below the poverty line.

Income earned in prime age (ages 25 to 54 years), when added as a control, has a precisely determinable attenuating influence on the fraction of minors below the poverty line, unsurprisingly.

<sup>1)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. The U.S. Census Bureau creates a set of poverty thresholds annually based on family composition and size, which must be worked with, despite its severe and justified critics. If a family's pre-tax income (without capital gains or welfare benefits) falls below this threshold, then the family is in poverty.

<sup>2)</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2015 and 2016 Annual Social and Economic Supplements, "Table 4: Families in Poverty by Type of Family: 2014 and 2015".

<sup>3)</sup> Precision has no formal meaning. It indicates how clearly determinable (distinguishable from zero) an influence on an outcome is. Precision is comparable to standard deviation. Low no precision indicates a high standard of deviation in which data points spread over a large range of value, signifying that the influence of one variable over another is relatively uncertain. High precision indicates a low standard of deviation in which data points hover around the mean, signifying that the influence of one variable over another is relatively certain. For further elaboration see "Marriage and Economic Well-Being: The Economy of the Family Rises or Falls with Marriage"

This entry draws heavily from [U.S. Social Policy Dependence on the Family](#).

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