Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

# The Effect of Recession on Child Well-Being

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This report provides a synthesis of the evidence regarding the effect of recession on child well-being.

Since 2007, the United States has suffered its most serious economic contraction since the Great Depression. While experts debate whether it is a “depression” or a “recession” - and indeed whether it is even over - it is clear that we are experiencing the worst economic downturn in several generations. At 13.3 million in 2007, the number of children living in poverty was already high, but by 2009 the number rose dramatically to 15.5 million children (or one in five children in the United States).

This paper synthesizes evidence of the effects of recession on child well-being. It examines four domains – health, food security, housing stability, and maltreatment – and reviews the relationship of each to the well-being of children during recessions. While the paper presents research and trend data over time, it has – at its core – a more practical aspiration: to steer policymakers to lessons learned from prior recessions, as well those that emerge from the recent economic downturn, to foster more informed policymaking related to child well-being.

In reviewing evidence from prior recessions, two primary patterns emerge with respect to effects on child well-being. First, it takes several years post-recession for employment to rebound and families to return to pre-recession income levels, with low-income families generally taking longer to rebound than those with higher pre-recession incomes. Second, public benefits and government-sponsored programs that support children and families play a pivotal role in blunting the negative impacts of a recession.

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