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## “DEEP POVERTY”: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS TO SCHOOLS



A family of four living on \$27,000 per year is, according to the federal government, not living in poverty. In fact, a family of four is defined by the government as living in poverty only when they earn at most \$26,500.

Now, picture that same family living on no more than half that amount. That’s a maximum of \$9 per person, per day—for housing, food, clothing and all other expenses.

Social scientists call this “deep poverty.” More than five million children in our country live in deep poverty, including 11% of children under the age of nine.

Those numbers have almost certainly increased as a result of COVID-19 and the associated economic downturn, which has disproportionately impacted low-income families and people of color.

Deep poverty can have profound implications for parents and their children, who commonly face such hardships as living without electricity or running water because they cannot afford to pay a utility bill, inhabiting dangerously substandard housing, or eating inexpensive, unhealthy processed foods associated with obesity. Compared to all children who live below the poverty line, **children in deep poverty** are three times more likely to have elevated blood lead levels, which are associated with problems with academic achievement and behavior.

“If we are to educate the whole child, regardless of their family’s income, it is essential to provide an array of academic and social services that ensures that equity of opportunity

reaches those students living in deep poverty,” writes NEPC Fellow Peter W. Cookson, Jr. of the Learning Policy Institute.

Unfortunately, one of the most commonly used measures of child socioeconomic status (“SES”) does not distinguish among different levels of poverty. This metric, free or reduced-price lunch qualification (“FRL”), includes children from families with incomes up to 185 percent above the federal poverty threshold.

And this is not the only problem with FRL. “Researchers generally agree that FRL is a poor SES measure, since it fails to validly reflect access to financial resources, shows reduced levels of participation as students age, and misclassifies, on average, approximately 20% of students,” Professor Michael Harwell of the University of Minnesota writes in a 2018 NEPC [policy brief](#).

Harwell suggests that a better approach would be to develop new measures of SES. In the meantime, he proposes creating a composite index that draws upon multiple sources of information such as parental education levels and people’s subjective perceptions of their own socioeconomic status.

Cookson recommends that the nation assess deep poverty by supplementing more general measures of SES with surveys of material hardships that ask such questions as: “In the past 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn’t eat because you couldn’t afford enough food?” or “In the past 12 months, did you move in with other people even for a little while because of financial problems?”

Schools could then use this information to ensure that families in deep poverty receive such services as high-quality early childhood education.

“Of course, schools alone cannot reverse the impact of deep poverty on children, families, and communities,” he writes. “But without well-financed schools with the targeted resources needed to enable students’ learning, the negative effects of deep poverty on children will remain, now and in the future.”

## NEPC Resources on Poverty

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