

"Measuring" Early Childhood Poverty: A Literature Review of Tools and Definitions Shaped by Federal, State, and Local Programs and Policies

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INTRODUCTION

This matters because poverty measures influence:

- Who is identified as poor
- Which families qualify for services
- How resources are targeted
- How policy success is evaluated
- How child and family well-being is understood

Traditional measures are useful, but they may miss important family costs, including:

- Housing
- Child care
- Medical expenses
- Transportation
- Food insecurity
- Local cost-of-living differences

This review examines:

- How is poverty measured, and how measurement choices affect early childhood policy and practice
- How is poverty defined across different measures?
- What data sources and indicators are used?
- How do measurement choices affect child poverty estimates?
- Which measures are most useful for eligibility, targeting, evaluation, and reporting?

METHODS



Review of peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, and government publications.



Search terms included child poverty, poverty measurement, hardship, SPM, OPM, ACS, and multidimensional poverty.



Studies were grouped thematically and compared across use cases.

IDENTIFY

COMPARE

MAP

SYNTHESIZE



Final product: a practical crosswalk linking measures to eligibility screening, targeting evaluation, and reporting.

Poverty Measures Reviewed

Key poverty measurement approaches included:

- Official Poverty Measure, OPM
- Federal Poverty Level, FPL
- Supplemental Poverty Measure, SPM
- Anchored SPM
- Principal Poverty Measure, PPM
- Consumption-based poverty
- Material hardship measures
- Multidimensional Poverty Index, MPI
- Intrahousehold poverty measures
- American Community Survey poverty estimates
- Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, SAIPE
- Free or reduced-price lunch eligibility
- State and local poverty measures

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RESULTS

1. Measurement method changes who is counted

- Income-only measures may miss families with high costs
- Hardship measures may capture families above the poverty line
- Local measures may better reflect housing and regional costs
- Program eligibility measures may miss eligible but unenrolled families

2. Young children are often missed

Many common poverty indicators focus on school-age children. Early childhood systems need better measures for infants, toddlers, preschool-age children, and children under age 5 or under age 6.

3. Local detail and timeliness are a tradeoff

- ACS data are useful for counties and local planning
- SPM is stronger for policy evaluation
- SAIPE is useful for school district analysis
- Some measures are timely but not local
- Some local measures lag behind current policy changes

4. Hardship measures reveal lived experience

Income alone does not fully describe family need. Hardship indicators can show:

- Utility shut-offs
- Housing instability
- Child care burden
- Transportation barriers
- Food insecurity
- Unmet medical needs

MAIN LIMITATION		MEASURE TYPE		BEST USE
Misses benefits and costs	<	Income Threshold (E.g. OPM, FPL)	>	Historical trends, eligibility
Limited local detail	<	Policy-inclusive (E.g. SPM, local poverty measures)	>	Policy evaluation
More complex	<	Cost-adjusted (E.g. SPM, state/local measures)	>	Real family resources
Not always local	<	Hardship-based (E.g. food, housing, utilities)	>	Lived experience
Requires weighing	<	Multidimensional (E.g. MPI, deprivation indices)	>	Broader well-being
May lag policy changes	<	Geographic/local (E.g. ACS, SAIPE)	>	Planning and targeting
Eligibility is not poverty	<	Program-based (E.g. SNAP, WIC, Medicaid)	>	Service access
Data intensive	<	Intrahousehold (E.g. Individual-level poverty measures)	>	Hidden deprivation

MAIN GAPS

- Limited measures focus specifically on birth through age 5
- School-based measures miss infants and toddlers
- Local hardship data are limited
- Program eligibility does not always reflect actual need
- Families eligible for services may not be enrolled
- Housing and child care costs are not always captured
- Children's lived experiences are rarely included

POLICY AND PROGRAM USES

Different poverty measures are useful for different decisions: some track long-term trends, some evaluate policy effects, some guide local planning, some show family hardship, and some help determine eligibility for early childhood programs such as WIC, Medicaid, SNAP, Head Start, and child care subsidies.

EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS

Poverty measures should be examined by child age group, race and ethnicity, geography, family structure, housing status, disability, benefit access, and child care burden.

DISCUSSION

No single poverty measure is enough. Each measure answers a different question.

- OPM helps track long-term trends
- SPM shows how public policies affect poverty
- ACS supports local planning
- Hardship measures show lived deprivation
- Program data connect poverty to services
- Multidimensional measures show broader risks

A crosswalk approach helps match the measure to the decision.

CONCLUSION

Measuring early childhood poverty is not just a technical task. It shapes policy, funding, outreach, and service delivery. A strong poverty measurement strategy should combine traditional income measures, policy-inclusive measures, local geographic data, material hardship indicators, program eligibility data, and equity-focused disaggregation.