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CHILDREN IN POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Child poverty was greater in 1983 than it has been since the war on poverty began in 1965, according to Congressional record. One child out of every five, or almost 14 million American children were poor in 1983. Since 1968, the number of poor children grew by three million although the total number of children fell by nine million.

Not only were there more children in 1983 but their poverty was worse. In 1968, people in the lowest income fifth of the population received 91% of the pre-tax cash income necessary to reach the government poverty line, while in 1983, the lowest fifth of the population received only 60% of the poverty level of income.

Hunger Increasing in the U.S.--The worsening poverty is causing a growing problem of hunger in the United States. Serious hunger was virtually eliminated in the U.S. in the 1970s but has grown more common in the 1980s, according to a physician's task force at the Harvard School of Public Health. Cases of severe protein and calorie deficiency diseases (kwashiorkor and marasmus), which are usually only found in children from Third World nations, were found recently in Illinois, Texas, and New Mexico. The physicians' study also found that at least 20 million Americans involuntarily go without any food at least two days a month.

Reagan Budget Cuts and Child Poverty--Most of the growth in the number of poor children occurred after 1979, when Reagan's budget cuts began to reduce spending programs for the poor. Between 1979 and 1983, the spending per poor child fell 22 percent, while the number of poor children rose by 35 percent. Programs cut include Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), school lunch programs, food stamps, and the Women-Infants-Children program (WIC). Food programs have traditionally prevented serious health problems for many children, and therefore reduced government spending on health care. A dollar spent by programs supplementing the diet of pregnant women reduces the cost of health care of the children in the first year by \$3, since these children might otherwise have been born premature or with low birth weights.

Child Poverty Differs by Race and Household Type--The deprivations faced by poor black children is tremendous. A study by the Children's Defense Fund found that black children were three times as likely as white children to live in female headed families, to have their mothers die in child birth, or to die of child abuse. Black children were twice as likely as white children to die in their first year, to have mothers who received late or no prenatal care, to see a parent die, to live in substandard housing, to be unemployed as teens, to have no parents employed, or to live in an institution. The growing poverty of black children has also reduced their educational opportunities. In 1977, one half of both black and white high school graduates went on to college. In 1982, the percentage of black high school graduates going on to college fell to only 36% while the rate for white high school graduates remained at half.

Child Poverty by Race and by Group

	Black	White	Total
% of children in poverty	46.7%	16.9%	22.2%
% children in poverty in female headed households	63.7	39.3	55.8
% children in poverty if one parent full time employed			16.0
% children born poor	45.0	15.0	
% of all poor who are children			39.0
% of all poor children who live in female headed household			51.0
avg. no. months child spends in poverty	60 mo.	10 mo.	

Politics to Reduce Child Poverty--The persistently high rate of unemployment condemns a large number of children to poverty. Unemployment has not fallen below seven percent in the 1980s and is not predicted to fall below seven percent until at least 1987. In order to reduce poverty, we need economic policies to reduce the level of unemployment. The government should also promote affirmative action and comparable worth since most poor children are from families with minority and/or female heads. Legislation which increases government support of day care such as proposed by Representative George Miller of California will make it possible for more single women to hold jobs, bringing themselves and their children out of poverty. This legislation is endorsed by the AFL-CIO. Finally, programs to restructure the labor market must be supplemented by adequate funding for poverty programs.

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