

Child **TRENDS** RESEARCH BRIEF

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THE STRENGTHS OF POOR FAMILIES

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OVERVIEW

In the minds of many people, poor families equal problem families. Indeed, that perception is not surprising, giving compelling evidence of the harsh effects that poverty can have on family life and child well-being. However, far less attention has been paid to the strengths that many poor families have and the characteristics that they may share with more affluent families. This Research Brief examines these issues.

To explore the similarities and contrasts between poor and non-poor families, Child Trends analyzed data for more than 100,000 families from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH). Our results suggest that, although poor families experience socioeconomic disadvantages, these families may be enriched by the strengths found in their family routines and relationships. Specifically, we found that poor families are at a disadvantage when it comes to receiving services and benefits and are more likely to express concerns about their neighborhoods. On the other hand, we found that poor families do not differ from more affluent families in many ways, such as in the closeness of their relationships and the frequency of outings together or attending religious services. Also, while parents in poor households express concerns about neighborhood safety in general, they are just as likely to report feeling that their child is safe at home or at school as are parents who are better off. Moreover, we found that families in poverty are somewhat more likely to eat meals together.

BACKGROUND

For years, researchers have reported on the detrimental effects of poverty for a child's development.¹ Several studies have found that children living in poverty are at a greater risk for a range of negative outcomes, in areas such as health, social and emotional development, and in economic outcomes as adults.² Children in persistently poor families have been found to have lower levels of performance on tests of language and school readiness, and they are rated by mothers and teachers as having more externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.³ Because of such negative reporting, often overlooked are the family strengths—the set of relationships and processes that support and protect families and their members⁴—that allow many children to flourish even in poverty. Results of Child Trends' analyses of the 2003 NSCH data, which has a very large, nationally representative sample, confirm previous findings about the socioeconomic disadvantages faced by poor families. However, we also found several surprising ways in which poor families are doing just as well as higher-income families, and, in one instance, even better.

SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGES

As found in other research, Child Trends' analyses of the NSCH data revealed differences between families in poverty and those above poverty that might have negative implications for the lives of

ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE USED FOR THIS BRIEF

The first National Survey of Children's Health is a national telephone survey involving 102,353 interviews that were completed between January 2003 and July 2004. One child under the age of 18 was randomly selected in each household as the subject of the survey. The parent or guardian of the child served as the respondent. Data were collected by the Maternal Child and Health Bureau in collaboration with the National Center for Health Statistics.

children. (Families with incomes below the official poverty line are referred to as *poor* families; those with incomes 100-300 percent above the poverty line are referred to here as *moderate-income* families; and those with incomes 300 percent or more above the poverty line are referred to as *higher-income* families.)

Health care is one area in which these differences are noteworthy.

- Only 85 percent of children in poverty were reported to have any kind of health insurance, compared with 89 percent of children in moderate-income families, and 96 percent of children in higher-income families.
- Children in poor families were also less likely to have any dental insurance—only 72 percent of children in poverty did, compared with 76 percent of children in moderate-income families, and 81 percent of children in higher-income families.

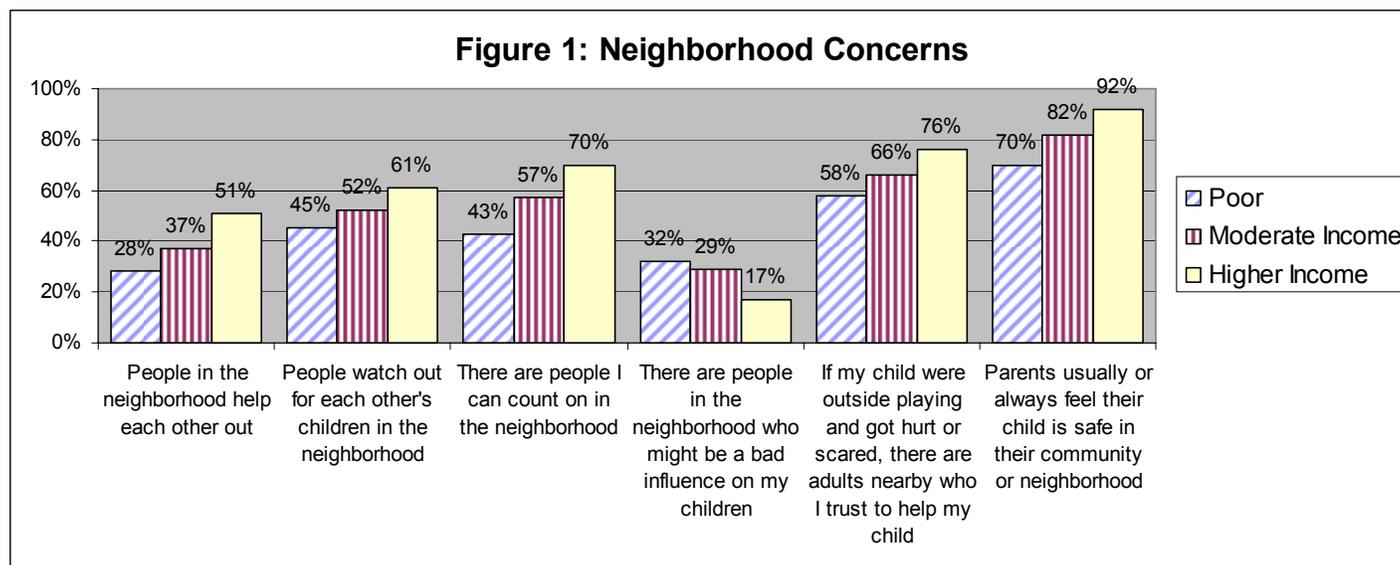
Reading is another. Reading to young children is associated with greater school readiness.^{5,6} In our analysis of the NSCH data, we found disadvantages for children in poor families when it came to the number of stories read to three- to five-year-olds. When asked how many times in the past week a family member had read stories to the child in the last week, 61 percent of parents in higher-income families reported that they had done so six or seven times, but only 41 percent of families in poverty reported the same pattern—a significant difference. This difference might be explained by varied disadvantages that are associated with lower income levels, such as a lower adult-literacy rate or single-parent families and their attendant pressures, which make it difficult for parents in these families to participate in reading activities with their preschool children.

NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERNS

Parents in poor families are also significantly less likely to be able to draw upon social networks within their neighborhoods. Compared with parents in moderate- and higher-income families, parents in poor families were less likely to agree that:

- People in their neighborhood help each other out (28 percent, versus 37 percent of parents in moderate-income families, and 51 percent in higher-income families).
- People watch out for each other's children in their neighborhood (45 percent, versus 52 percent of parents in moderate-income families, and 61 percent in higher-income families).
- There are people they can count on in their neighborhood (43 percent, versus 57 percent of parents in moderate-income families, and 70 percent in higher-income families).
- If their child were playing outside and got hurt or scared, there are adults nearby whom they trust to help their child (58 percent, versus 66 percent of parents in moderate-income families, and 76 percent in higher-income families).
- Also, parents in poor families are more likely to definitely agree that there are people in their neighborhood who might be a bad influence on their children (32 percent, versus 29 percent of parents in moderate-income families, and 17 percent in higher-income families).
- Similarly, while 92 percent of parents in higher income families feel that their child is

usually or always safe in their community, about 82 percent of moderate income families, and only 70 percent of poor families felt the same way.



OUTINGS

The NSCH also asked parents how often in the last week their preschool child was taken on outings (such as to the park, zoo, shopping, church, restaurants, or family gatherings). While 34 percent of parents in higher-income families reported that they had been on these outings six or more times in the past week, only 24 percent of parents in poor families did. However, we found that this difference was not significant once confounding variables were considered, such as race/ethnicity, age, gender, parental education, and family structure.

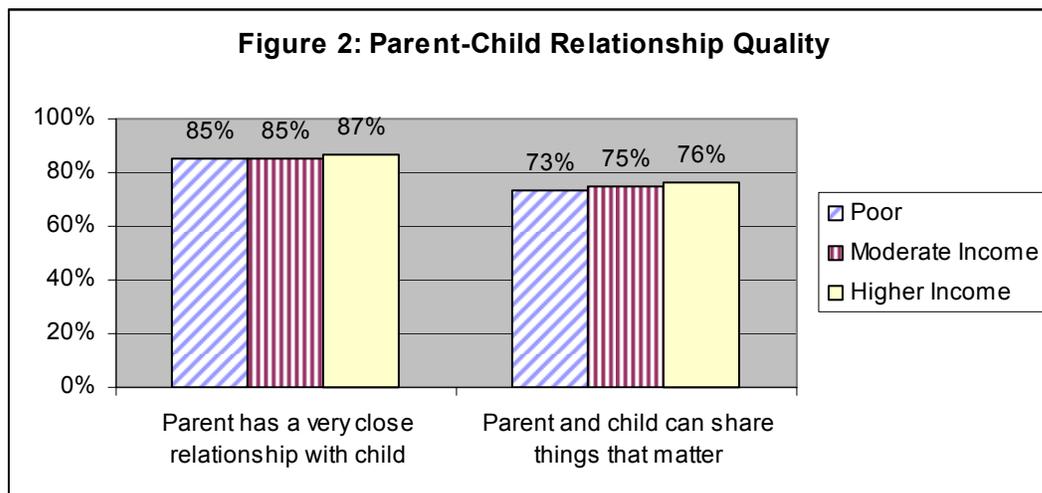
STRENGTHS IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

The statistics illustrating how poor families are functioning are not always troubling. In our analyses of the NSCH data, we found that there were no (or only tiny) differences in several areas of family life between families in poverty and those outside of it. These areas include parent-child relationships, religious attendance, and feeling safe at home and in school. In one case—eating meals together—families in poverty appeared to be doing better than other families.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

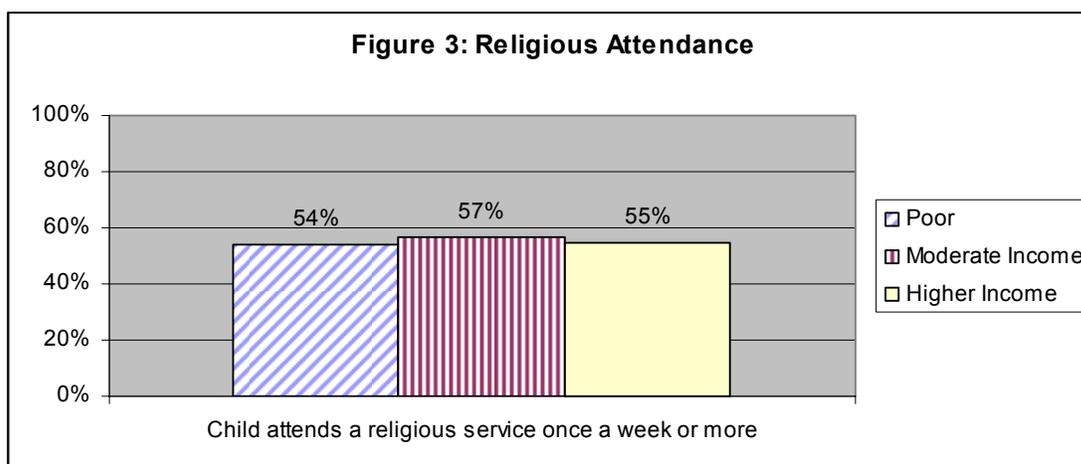
One area of similarity between families above and below the federal poverty level is parents' reported closeness of their relationship with their child. Eighty-five percent of parents in poor families rated their relationship with their child to be very close, the same proportion as in moderate-income families. The proportion for higher-income families was just about the same: 87 percent.⁷

Parents' abilities to share ideas and talk about things that matter with their child also seem to differ little by family income. When asked about this, 73 percent of parents in poor families reported that they can share ideas and talk very well with their child—very similar to the 75 percent of parents in moderate-income families and the 76 percent of parents in higher-income families who answered in the same way.



RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE

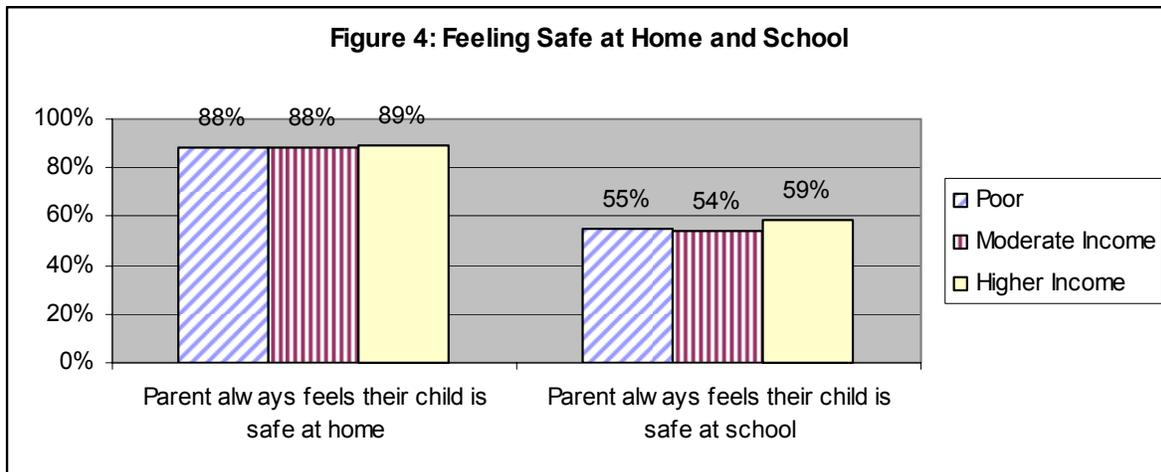
The NSCH also asked families about their religious attendance and, once again, the responses were quite similar for all families—regardless of poverty level.⁸ When asked how often their child attends a religious service, 54 percent of parents in poor families, 57 percent of parents in moderate-income families, and 55 percent of parents in higher-income families all responded that their child attended once a week or more.



FEELING SAFE AT HOME AND SCHOOL

Although families in poverty more often live in unsafe neighborhoods, we found that these families do not feel any less safe *in their homes* than do families in more affluent neighborhoods. The NSCH asked parents how often they feel that their child is safe at home. Most parents, regardless of socioeconomic levels, reported that they always felt that their child was safe at home—with 88 percent of parents in poor and moderate-income families and 89 percent of parents in higher-income families responding in this manner.

Similarly, our analyses found no significant differences in the number of parents who always feel that their child is safe *at school*: 55 percent of parents in poor families, 54 percent in moderate-income families, and 59 percent in higher-income families reported feeling this way. We don't know whether the same reasons for these feelings apply to children in poor families as they do to those in more affluent families, underscoring the need for further examination of this issue.

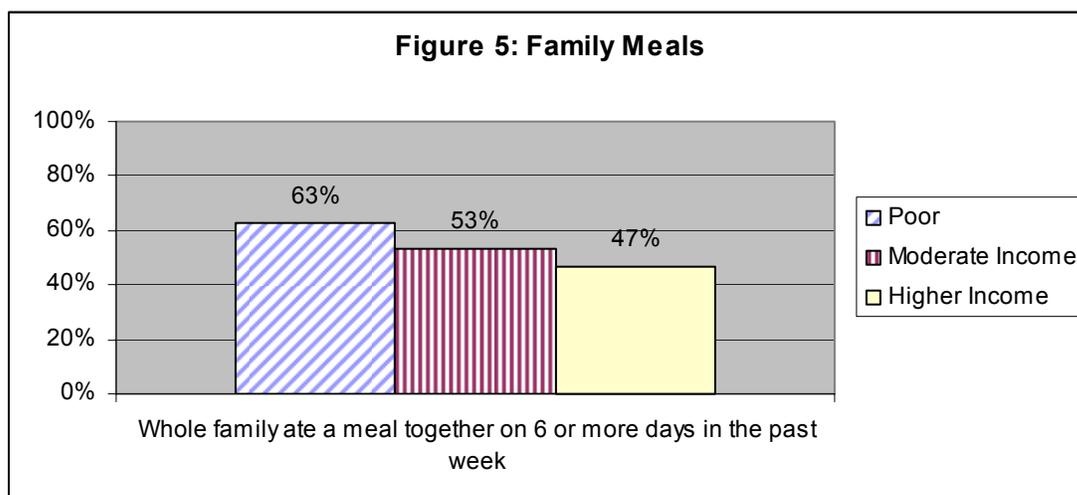


POSITIVE DIFFERENCES IN POOR FAMILIES

Not only did we find that many poor families do not differ from more affluent families when it comes to key variables of family functioning, but we also found that in one instance, poor families are better off than families with incomes above the federal poverty line.

MEALS

Eating meals as part of other family routines is an important contributor to the well-being of children. Research finds that adolescents from families that eat meals together are less likely to be involved in delinquent behaviors; to use alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco; to be suspended from school; or to have a high level of problem behaviors.⁹ In our analysis, we found significant differences between families in and out of poverty in the number of meals the whole family eats together. When asked how often they eat together as a family, 63 percent of parents in poor families said they did so six days or more days in the past week—significantly more than the 53 percent of parents in moderate-income families and the 47 percent in higher-income families who also reported that they did.¹⁰



CONCLUSION

Overall, as past research has shown, poor families are at a disadvantage in many areas of life. We found that families in poverty are less likely to have health and dental coverage and that parents in these families are also more likely to have concerns about their neighborhoods and the safety of their communities. When it comes to sharing in reading activities with their young children, parents in poor families are less likely to read stories to their preschoolers. But despite these negative findings, we found that most parents across income groups see their relationship with their child as very close, and feel that they can share important matters very well. We also found that rates of consistent attendance at a religious service do not vary between children in poor families and those in families with higher-income levels. While feeling their neighborhood is less safe, parents in poor families reported feeling that their child is safe at home and at school just as often as parents in moderate- and higher-income families. Parents in poor households report significantly higher rates of eating meals together as a family than do parents in higher-income households. It is important to note that these findings are based only on parent-reported data. However, the findings point to the value of examining family strengths—not just family problems—even in low-income families.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Table: Family Characteristics as Reported by Parents (from NSCH 2003)

	Families below poverty level	Families 100-300% of poverty level	Families 300+% of poverty level	Significance*
<u>PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP</u>				
Parent has very close relationship with child	85%	85%	87%	AC
Parent and child can share ideas or talk about things that matter very well	73%	75%	76%	
<u>FAMILY</u>				
During the past week, the whole family ate a meal together on 6 or more days	63%	53%	47%	AB, AC
During the past week, child was taken on outings (e.g. to the park, library, zoo, shopping, church, restaurants, or family gatherings) 6 or more times	24%	26%	34%	
Child attends a religious service once a week or more	54%	57%	55%	AB
During the past week, a family member read stories to the child on 6 or 7 days (children 3-5 only)	41%	50%	61%	AC
Parents always feel their child is safe at school	55%	54%	59%	
Parents always feel their child is safe at home	88%	88%	89%	
<u>NEIGHBORHOOD CONCERNS</u>				
Parents reported they definitely agree with the following statements:				
People in this neighborhood help each other out	28%	37%	51%	AC
We watch out for each other's children in this neighborhood	45%	52%	61%	AC
There are people I can count on in this neighborhood	43%	57%	70%	AB, AC
There are people in this neighborhood who might be a bad influence on my children	32%	29%	17%	AC
If my child were outside playing and got hurt or scared, there are adults nearby who I trust to help my child	58%	66%	76%	AC
Parents usually or always feel their child is safe in their community or neighborhood	70%	82%	92%	AB, AC
<u>SERVICES</u>				
Child has any kind of health care coverage, including health insurance, prepaid plans such as HMOs, or government plans such as Medicaid	85%	89%	96%	AC
Child has insurance that helps pay for any routine dental care including cleanings, x-rays and examinations	72%	76%	81%	AC

*In the table, A refers to respondents below poverty level, B refers to respondents 100-300% above poverty level, and C refers to respondents 300+% above poverty level. The pairing of the letters indicates a significant difference between these groups. For example, AC means that there is a significant difference between group A (those below poverty level), and group C (those 300+% above poverty level).

Unless otherwise stated, all estimates are based on weighted data from the National Survey of Children's Health, 2003. Available at www.nschdata.org. Source: Child Trends' analyses of NSCH, 2003

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- ⁶ Kuo, A.A., Franke, T.M., Regalado, M., and Halfon, N. (2004). "Parent Report of Reading to Young Children." *Pediatrics*, 113(6), pp. 1944-1951.
- ⁷ Although significant, perhaps due to the large sample size of the NSCH, the differences were very tiny.
- ⁸ Although analyses suggest there are significant differences, these are very small.
- ⁹ Moore, K.A., Chalk, R., Scarpa, J. & Vandivere, S. (2002).
- ¹⁰ We also examined whether this pattern holds if a different cut-point is used, specifically, eating together five or more days a week. Analyses indicate that the same pattern is found.

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