

Social Inequality and the Impacts of Austerity Budgets: Nearly Half of US Public School Children are Poor

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Nearly half of public school children in the United States were poor in the school year that ended in 2011, according to a new study by the Southern Education Foundation (SEF), the oldest US educational charity. In 17 states in the South and four in the West, children from low-income families comprised a majority in public schools.

The SEF study, based on data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), further found that the percentage of low-income students in public schools rose dramatically from 2001 to 2011, far outpacing public school funding. The study also found a direct correlation between levels of poverty and academic performance.

The findings are the latest exposure of the growth of poverty in the US alongside burgeoning social inequality.

The SEF study defines poor students as those qualifying for either free or reduced-price lunches in preschool through 12th grade (P-12). According to Department of Agriculture Guidelines, a student from a household with an income below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG)—about \$29,000 for a family of four—qualified for free lunches. Children from four-person households with incomes below 185 percent FPG (about \$41,000) qualified for reduced-price lunches.

Levels of poverty among schoolchildren were the highest in the South and West, including in all but two of the 15 Southern states. The five most impoverished school populations also came from states in these regions: Mississippi (71 percent), New Mexico (68 percent), Louisiana (66 percent), Oklahoma (61 percent), and Arkansas (60 percent).

The SEF study's most staggering finding is that 48 percent of all US public school children come from poor households. While figures for poor school children were highest in the South and West, 53 percent and 50 percent respectively, poverty levels were also extremely high in the Midwest, 44 percent, and the Northeast, 40 percent.

The study notes that reduced family incomes in the US since the 2008 recession have directly contributed to the growth in the number of poor students in public schools, especially in states hard hit by the housing market crisis. However, data from the US Department of Agriculture show a consistent growth in rates of poor students in most US states since at least as far back as 1989, long before the recession hit.

According to NCEES data, the growth of child poverty between 2001 and 2011 was particularly sharp, rising by 32 percent—an increase of more than 5.7 million children. In 2007, a year before the recession hit, the South became the first region of the country in modern times to have a majority of poor students in its public schools. Three years later, poor children also became the majority in schools in the West.

More than two-thirds of African American and Hispanic public school students attend schools where poor students are the majority. A high number of students from Pacific Islander (53 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (65 percent) households also attend schools where more than half of students are poor. About a third of white and Asian students attend schools where the majority is poor.

A comparison between living areas across the country—city, suburb, town, rural—finds the highest concentration of majority poor students in cities (60 percent), followed by towns (52 percent), rural areas (44 percent), and suburbs (40 percent). While the Northeast had the lowest percentage of poor students in public schools, 40 percent, it had the highest rate of majority poor students in cities—71 percent.

However, several Northeastern states have extremely high levels of poor students in their cities. The figure for New Jersey is 78 percent, for Pennsylvania it is 75 percent, and for New York it is 74 percent. In these same three states, 30 percent or less of students in suburban schools are poor, an indication of striking social inequality in these urban centers.

While the proportion of students from poor families has continued to increase, the growth of public school funding has not kept pace in all but the Northeast region. The Midwest, which has been devastated by the collapse of manufacturing, saw a 40 percent increase in poor students between 2001 and 2011, but per pupil expenditures increased by only 12 percent. Nationwide during this decade, school funding has increased a paltry 14 percent.

The study also found that the regions with the largest proportion of poor students spend the least on educating them. For example, the South (53 percent poor students) spent \$9,226 per pupil in 2011, compared to the Northeast (40 percent poor students), which spent \$16,045 per pupil. This disparity in funding can only serve to perpetuate social inequality and the decay of education in poorer schools.

Data cited by the SEF study show that poor students are more likely than students from more well-off families to have lower test scores, fall behind in school, drop out, and fail to acquire a college degree. Problems faced by children coming from households where poverty, hunger and the accompanying stress are a daily fact of life are exacerbated by conditions in schools that are starved for funding.

Test scores for the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) strongly suggest that from 2003 to 2011, despite a slight upward trend in scores overall for 4th graders, the gap between the scores of low-income and higher income students has remained relatively constant. Both in 2003 and 2011, higher income students scored an average of 28 points higher on a 240-point test.

Austerity budgets at the federal, state and local level threaten to further starve the poorest school districts of cash, while growing income inequality will increase the percentage of low-income students attending these struggling public schools.

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