

RESEARCH BRIEF

Poverty Brief



FEATURES

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Introduction to Poverty in the U.S.

This year marks an important anniversary for youth-serving organizations like Communities In Schools (CIS). Fifty years ago, President Johnson's administration implemented several programs aimed to eradicate poverty. The initiatives, which were known informally as the War on Poverty, included programs that many CIS students and families access today. For example, many children across our network take advantage of Head Start, a program designed to provide pre-kindergarten educational opportunities to low-income families. The War on Poverty also created Title I funding, which provides resources to schools serving families in poverty (Sparks, 50 Years Later, War on Poverty Yields Mixed Success, 2014).

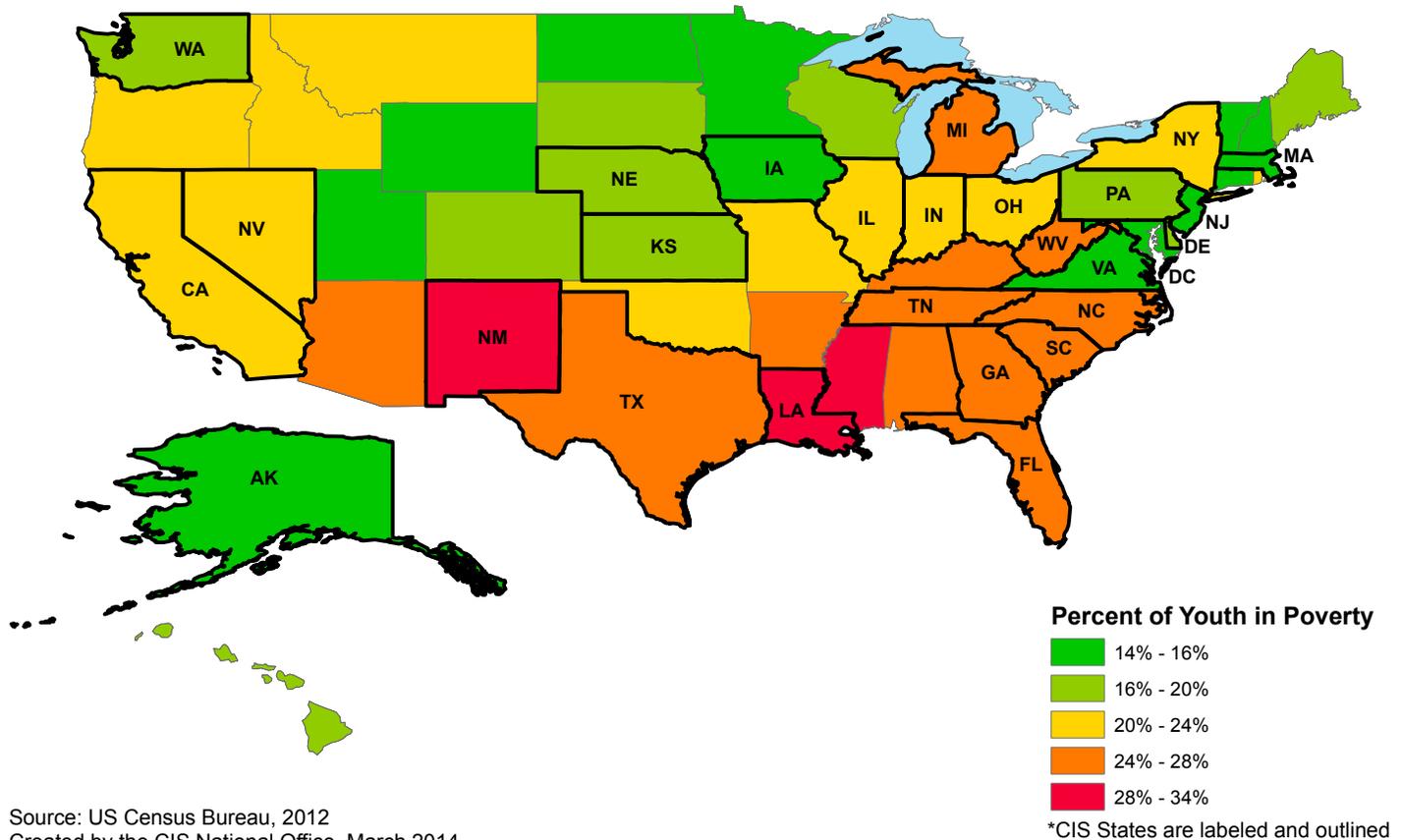
The 50-year anniversary offers members of our network the chance to reflect on our successes in serving students in poverty as well as the challenges we face in addressing the continuous - and in many ways, growing - needs. This brief takes a look at current trends in poverty; discusses why understanding poverty is important for CIS; and offers ideas on how CIS can help alleviate poverty in the United States.

Poverty in the United States has been increasing by multiple measures. The percentage of the American population living in poverty has increased from about 12% in 2000 to almost 16% in 2012. In raw numbers, this means that 5.5 million more people were living in poverty in 2012 than at the turn of the millennium (Bishaw, 2013). This increase in poverty is due, in part, to the 2008 recession. However, the number of people in poverty has been increasing since before the 2008 recession (Southern Education Foundation, 2013). Between 2000 and 2012, there was an increase in both the percentage and the number of people living in dire poverty (income to poverty ratio below 50%), as well as people who were just above their poverty threshold (income to poverty ratio below 125%) (Bishaw, 2013). The trend impacts children across the United States as well; in 2012, the poverty rate for people under the age of 18 was 21.8% (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013).

More recent years have seen a leveling off of the poverty rate. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "After four consecutive years of increases, the number and the percentage of people with income below the poverty level did not change between 2011 and 2012 (Bishaw, 2013)." However, poverty continues to be a pressing

Youth Poverty Rates and CIS States

Percentage of Youth Under 17 Living in Poverty



Source: US Census Bureau, 2012
Created by the CIS National Office, March 2014

problem for local CIS affiliates. In interviews conducted during site visits between 2011 and 2013, CIS affiliate stakeholders overwhelmingly cited poverty as the most significant problem for the communities they served.¹ Not surprisingly, national census data indicates that child poverty is a significant problem in several states that CIS currently serves. (This is shown in the map above, “Youth Poverty Rates and CIS States”.) The Southern Education Foundation estimates that in the next few years students in poverty will constitute a majority of public school students in the United States (Southern Education Foundation, 2013). The next section of this brief

¹In fact, families in our network may be worse off than statistics indicate, because the official poverty thresholds, which were developed four decades (two generations) ago are outdated and do not account for important cost-of-living calculations. (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013).

focuses on why understanding this all-pervasive issue has become crucial for practitioners in the CIS network.

Poverty’s Impact on the CIS Network

The number of low-income students in our public schools increased 32% between 2000 and 2011 (Southern Education Foundation, 2013). Many of these children are served by CIS affiliates. According to 2012-13 CIS End of School Year data, 92.3% of case-managed students are eligible for free or reduced price lunches; a proxy measure for poverty used by schools across the country. This suggests that the overwhelming majority of CIS case-managed students are living in poverty.

Poverty affects a student’s capacity to succeed in school and in life. It

Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price Lunches

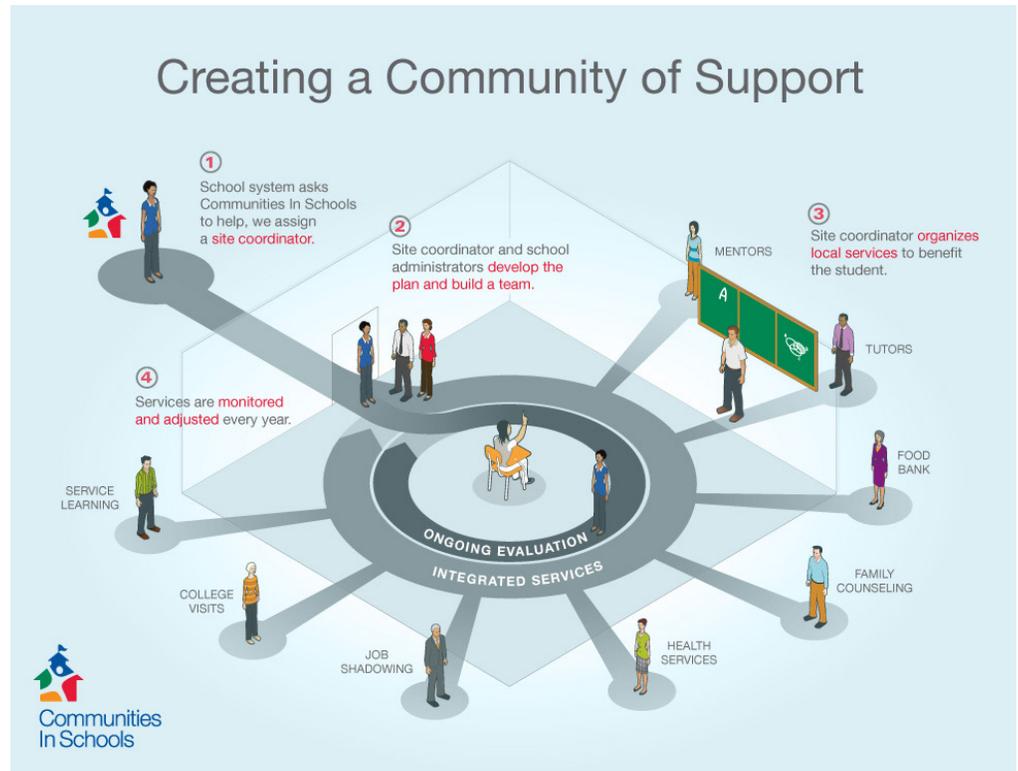
Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents.

affects students’ health; extreme poverty has an impact on a child’s physical development. In fact, poverty “can actually alter the fundamental architecture of the brain” (Murphey & Redd, 2014). One of the key areas of the brain – grey matter – affects a person’s ability to process information. When compared to

children of higher socioeconomic status, children living in poverty were found to have lower average gray matter volumes. As an extension, poverty also affects a child's ability to succeed in adulthood. Keys to success in life, such as working memory and executive function, are impaired in individuals who were exposed to poverty in childhood (Hanson, et al., 2013).

Given poverty's effects on the brain, it follows that poverty also has a negative impact on student achievement. Impoverished students start to fall behind their peers in school at a young age (Murphey & Redd, 2014). The school achievement gap by income has worsened over the past 30 years (National Public Radio, 2013). According to a report published by America's Promise, "[for] students from low-income families, graduation rates are at 66 percent or less in 18 states" (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Horning Fox, 2013). U.S. high schools with a significant percentage of students living in poverty sent slightly more than half of their students to college, whereas schools with higher-income families were able to send 70% of their students to college (Sparks & Adams, High School Poverty Levels Tied to College-Going, 2013). According to the results of an international assessment, U.S. schools with fewer students in poverty outrank other countries, but when the scores of students in poverty are taken into consideration, the U.S. falls to a more average ranking among industrialized nations (Rebell & Wolff, 2012).

Clearly, poverty creates serious barriers that prevent students from staying in school and achieving in life. The next section discusses how CIS practitioners across the U.S. can leverage the power of the CIS model in their community to address the problem of poverty.



Fighting Poverty by Leveraging the CIS Model

The CIS Model (see graphical representation above) offers enormous potential to address the issue of poverty. The driving force behind the CIS model, the site coordinator, starts by conducting school needs assessments and student intake assessments. These assessments indicate what challenges the school and students are facing, and allow the site coordinator to deliver or broker services aligned with the school and students' needs.

The CIS site coordinator is the primary link between the school, community services and young people in need. The CIS site coordinator uses the needs assessment to understand student and school needs and brokers or delivers services to match those needs.

If a site coordinator sees that poverty is impacting an individual or student body, he or she can provide or broker supplementary services that the school may not be able to offer, thus addressing the need that poverty has created.

As noted before, students whose lives are touched by poverty can suffer physical problems as well. The CIS site coordinator can broker relationships with local health organizations, can work with families to secure appropriate healthcare, and can leverage school resources to ensure that students are getting appropriate nutrition. The site coordinator plays a crucial role in combating poverty by providing the capacity and services that school systems often cannot provide.

The CIS model incorporates flexibility in service provision. The examples above are only the beginning of services that CIS site coordinators provide to combat poverty. Take, for example, the impact that poverty has on families' capacity to create learning environments for their children. Children from lower-income families

have less access to play areas, fewer age-appropriate toys and books, and are less likely to have access to a home computer or the internet (Hanson, et al., 2013). If a site coordinator conducts a needs assessment of the school and discovers that students living in poverty are not able to complete schoolwork at home because families do not have access to personal computers, the site coordinator can work with a local organization to start an after-school program with a focus on academic support. The site coordinator has a personal relationship with the school site team – often including the principal, counselor, and lead teachers – so students are likely to have access to the school computer lab during their after-school time to complete the homework that other students are able to complete on a home computer. The site coordinator is also connected with the local community, so he or she can work with volunteer organizations to bring qualified mentors into the school to assist students with homework. Similarly, if the site coordinator conducts a needs assessment and finds that children in the school do not have access to books, he or she can work with community organizations such as churches, nonprofits, and local businesses to seek donations to enrich students' learning environments. Site coordinators are able to support students, schools, and communities by proactively combating poverty through services that are aligned with identified needs.

Support for this kind of model is growing. A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicated that “[w]hile disadvantaged students may have fewer resources at home through which they can benefit from their motivation to learn, there are established strategies to aid disadvantaged students at school, including... building strong

partnerships among families, teachers and local communities to ensure that socio-economic disadvantage does not prevent these students from flourishing” (OECD, 2013). Educators and advocates from many organizations are calling for Integrated Student Supports – the kind of services that CIS site coordinators provide and broker – to combat the problems that poverty causes. Several recent articles in Education Week called for providing these types of supports. The authors of these articles assert that providing the kind of supports that site coordinators regularly provide and broker will help combat poverty and increase equity and success in school (Rebell & Wolff, 2012), (Sparks & Adams, High School Poverty Levels Tied to College-Going, 2013). Turnaround for Children, an organization that seeks to reduce the impacts of poverty on child development by working in schools, calls on schools to build school capacity to support teachers in serving students in poverty (Turnaround for Children, 2013a). In a report written by Turnaround for Children, Cami Anderson from the Newark Public School District says, “It is critical that schools utilize creative and effective ways to recruit adults outside of the school who can serve as essential supports for a student...this adult can play a key role in academic and social-emotional learning of a

According to Child Trends, Integrated Student Supports (ISS) “is a school- based approach to promoting students’ academic achievement and educational attainment by coordinating a seamless system of wraparound supports for the child, the family, and schools, to target student’s academic and non-academic barriers to learning.”

student” (Turnaround for Children, 2013a). Site coordinators, and the mentors that site coordinators often bring into the schools, provide that crucial relationship for many students in poverty across the CIS network. The CIS model addresses many of the barriers that students experience as a result of living in poverty; when school administrators invite CIS site coordinators onto their site, they ensure that students can focus on learning and teachers can focus on teaching.

Conclusion

Now is a crucial time for the CIS network. Fifty years after the War on Poverty, education professionals are reflecting on the role that poverty has played shaping our nation and the educational and personal achievement of the students we serve. CIS is uniquely positioned to address the issue of poverty in our communities and schools. With an evidence-based model, dedicated professionals, and a host of targeted services, CIS is helping communities across the country alleviate the effects of poverty by empowering students to stay in school and achieve in life.

Further Resources

[Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates:](#) This website has a wealth of information on poverty in the United States. Data is split up by school district and state and

What Do You Think?

Do you have quick comments or questions on this brief? [Click here](#) and let us know.

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