

# CHILD POVERTY IN NORTHEAST ARKANSAS: A SNAPSHOT OF THE LANDSCAPE



May 2017



## 5 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CHILD POVERTY IN NORTHEAST ARKANSAS

1. Nearly one in three children in Northeast Arkansas lives in poverty. Almost 60 percent of all children in the region live in low-income households where their parents make less than 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (less than \$40,840 for a family of three).
2. Poverty is much higher for young children in Northeast Arkansas than it is for adults, with nearly 40 percent of children under age 5 living in poverty, compared to 10 percent of seniors 65 and older.
3. People with more education are less likely to live in poverty.
4. Children of color in the region are more than twice as likely to live in poverty as their white peers.
5. Child poverty negatively impacts the development of children and follows them well into adulthood.



## HOW PREVALENT IS CHILD POVERTY IN NORTHEAST ARKANSAS?

While Jonesboro is typically thought of as the economic hub of Northeast Arkansas, the labor market area for the region is made up of 11 counties: Clay, Craighead, Crittenden, Cross, Greene, Jackson, Lawrence, Mississippi, Poinsett, Randolph, and Sharp. Nearly one in three children in the region, or 28,623 children, live in poverty. But there are big differences in child poverty among the counties, with child poverty rates ranging from a low of 23 percent in Greene County to 45 percent in Jackson County. More than one in seven children in the region live in extreme or deep poverty, defined as a family income of less than 50 percent of the poverty line, or less than \$10,210 for a family of three. There are also huge differences by race, with children of color being more than twice as likely to live in poverty.

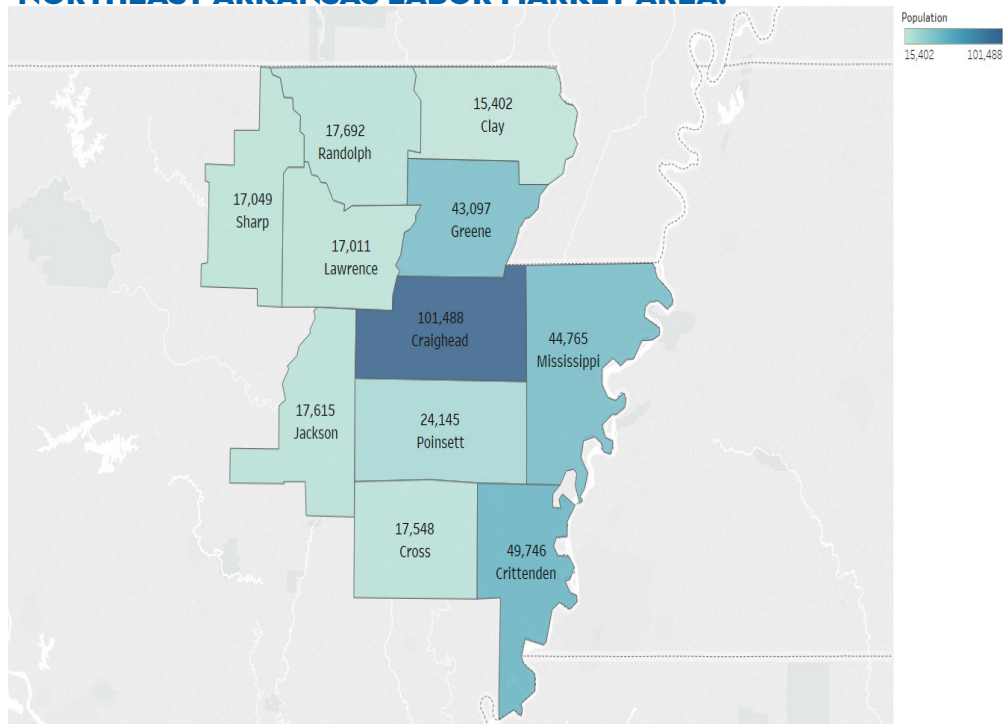
The official definition of poverty, however, tells only part of the story. Many experts think it takes an income twice the poverty line (nearly \$41,000 for a family of three) to make ends meet. Under this definition, three in five children in the region live in low-income families who are struggling to make ends meet.

## WHAT DO PEOPLE IN POVERTY HAVE IN COMMON?

At its most basic level, poverty is the result of failing to earn enough money to meet all of a family’s essential needs. Larger families also must earn more income to meet the family’s basic needs. Poverty rates are always higher for young children than older adults because young parents tend to be at the beginning stages of their prime earning years. Beyond those basic observations, the causes of poverty are much more complicated and multi-dimensional. Some common factors are:

- Education and Skill Levels – All other factors being equal, workers with higher levels of education and skills have the ability to compete for higher-paying jobs. Low education and skill levels are the result of many factors, including systems that fail to promote the healthy development of young children; policies that fail to adequately close educational gaps for low-income and minority students; inadequate support for a strong two- and four-year university system; and workforce policies that fail to address job mismatches between the skills possessed by potential workers and those needed by local businesses.

### NORTHEAST ARKANSAS LABOR MARKET AREA:



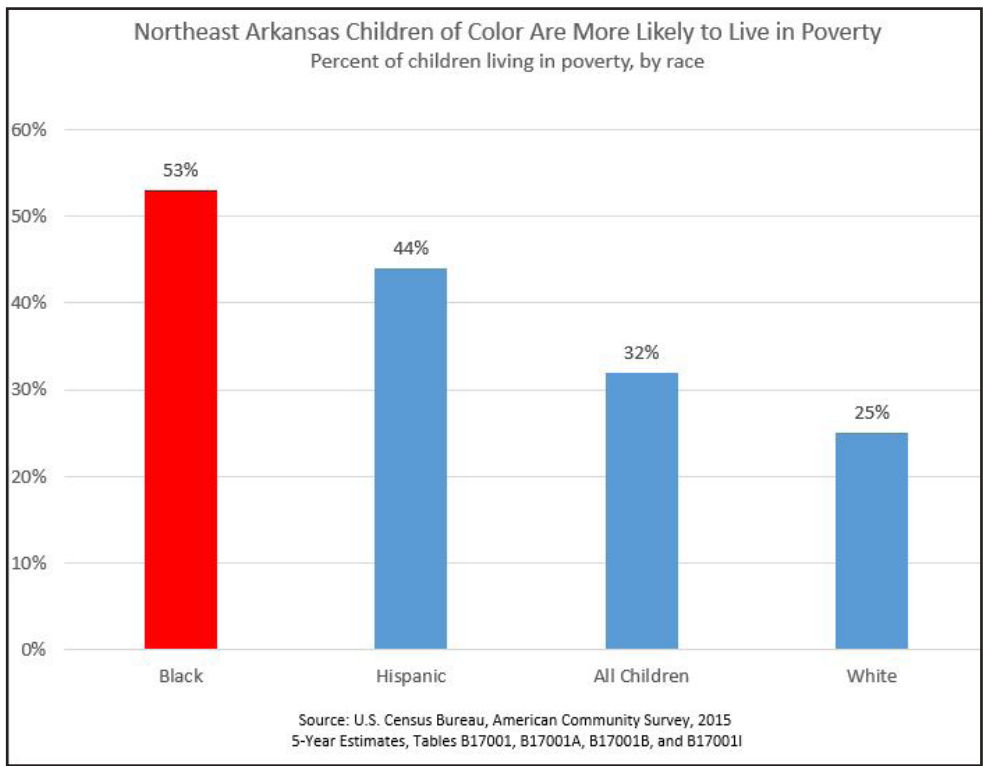
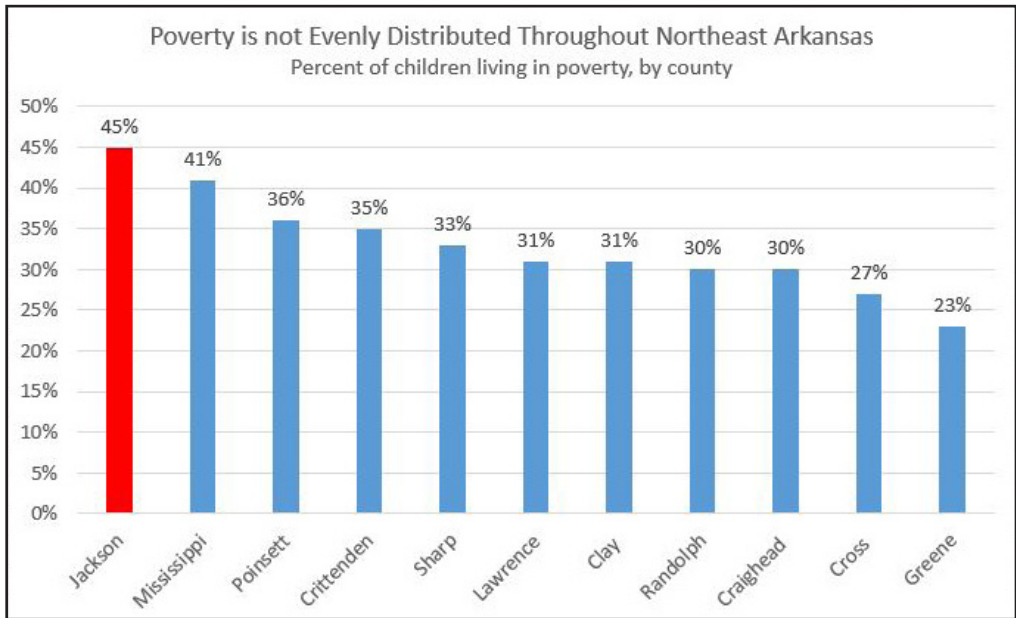
## 2017 Poverty Guidelines for the 48 Contiguous States & the District of Columbia

Persons in the family/household	Poverty guideline
1	\$12,060
2	\$16,240
3	\$20,420
4	\$24,600
5	\$28,780
6	\$32,960
7	\$37,140
8	\$41,320

- **Geographic Location** – Location matters when it comes to poverty. Southern states have higher rates of poverty than other parts of the country, in part because of centuries of policy-driven inequality, such as structural racism and slavery. Within Arkansas, poverty tends to be higher in rural areas, especially along the Eastern border of the state and the Mississippi Delta. A variety of factors attract business and industry to one area over another: the quality of the workforce, quality of life, quality of public services, access to markets, availability of capital, state tax policies that support the infrastructure and service needs of businesses, strong local leadership, accountable economic development policies, level of civic engagement, and much more.
- **Community Support** – Lack of adequate support for working families or the lack of policies that promote social and economic mobility can lead to poverty. Things like lack of affordable child care, transportation, health insurance, and policies that allow families to accumulate assets while they are moving up the economic ladder are critical to fighting poverty. Immigrants and families of color often face extra challenges in trying to access community supports, such as structural racism, cultural differences, language barriers, and stigma attached to using services.

- **Family Structure** – All other factors being equal, children in single-parent families are more likely to live in poverty because their families typically have only one income and fewer financial resources.
- **Incarceration** – Families in high poverty regions—especially in urban areas—are likely to be victims of crime or have a family member who is incarcerated. This often contributes to having fewer wage earners in the household. Additionally, people often face more difficult employment prospects once they leave incarceration. The U.S. currently leads the world in incarceration rates, and Arkansas leads the U.S. in incarceration growth.
- **Economic Inequality** – Some economists argue that growing wage inequality and the wealth gap between the rich and the poor—fueled by tax policies, anti-labor policies, and financial policies that favor the wealthy and corporate interests over workers—have made it harder for workers to move up the economic ladder and have led to a disappearing middle class.





## WHY DOES CHILD POVERTY MATTER?

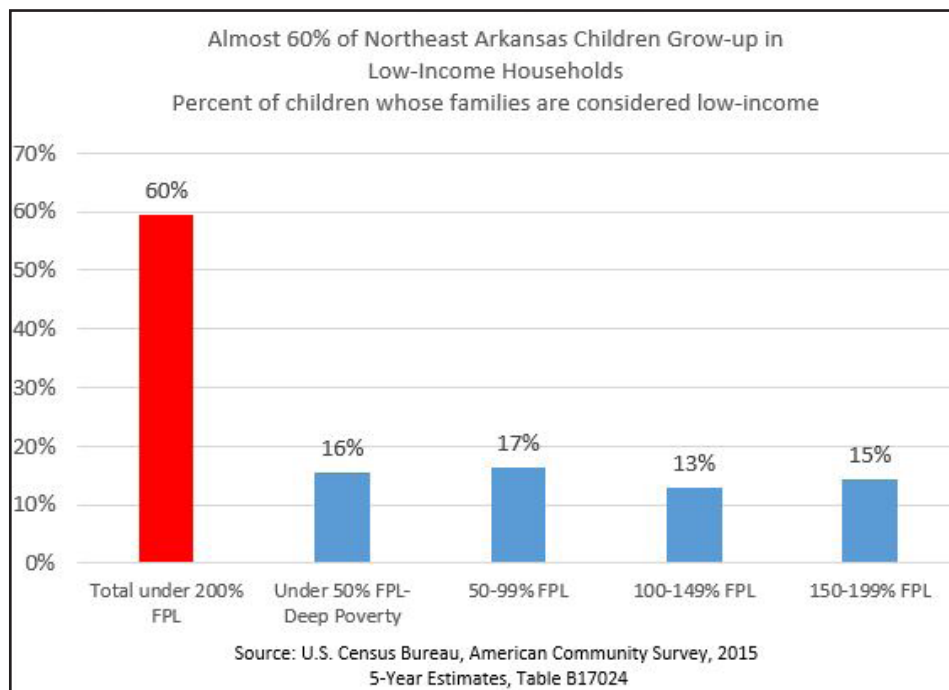
Most families earning up to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (\$40,840 for a family of three) are struggling to pay for important life necessities. This can have a huge impact on kids, carrying on well into their adulthood. Some of the impacts include:

- Education and Cognitive Consequences – Studies have repeatedly shown that children living in poverty experience several negative educational outcomes, like poor academic performance, low vocabularies, lower reading and achievement scores, higher drop-out rates and lower college graduation rates.
- Negative Health Outcomes – Children in low-income families are more likely to have health problems. When living in poverty, children are sick for longer periods of time, less likely to receive quality care or preventive care, and less likely to access healthy food.

- Stunted Social and Emotional Development – Families living in poverty tend to have unstable home environments that can lead to behavioral problems. Children in these situations are more likely to act out and experience disobedience or aggression. Poverty is also associated with higher rates of teen pregnancy, low self-esteem, anxiety, and unhappiness.
- Adult Poverty – Poverty rarely has a short-term impact on a child. Children who grow up experiencing persistent poverty are more likely to become poor adults.

## HOW CAN WE FIGHT CHILD POVERTY?

There are many different views on the best ways to reduce poverty, but a complete discussion of strategies is beyond the scope of this brief. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF), however, believes that any effort to reduce poverty must be part of a two-generation approach



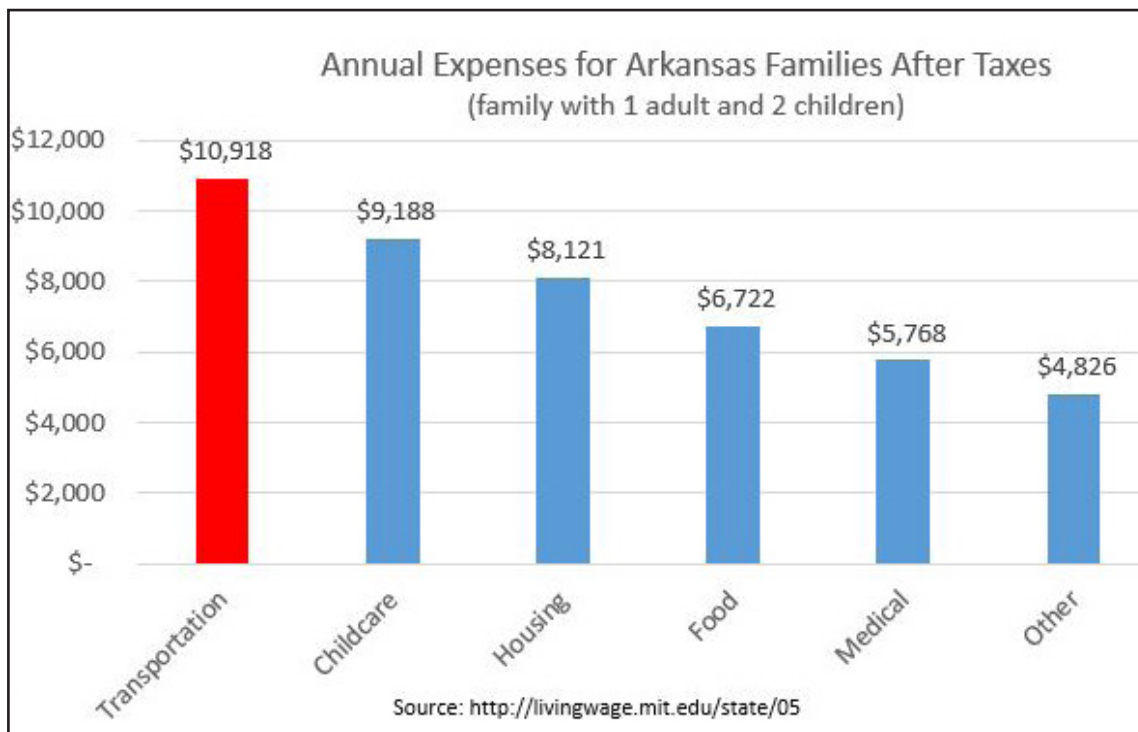


that acknowledges that the future success of children also depends on the short-term success of their parents. This approach combines child- and parent-focused strategies to create an all-inclusive family model. Two-generation success requires coordinating existing public programs and creating new partnerships so that there are early childhood supports like home-visiting and educational opportunities for children at the same time as economic and workforce training/supports for parents so they can earn higher incomes to meet basic family economic needs. The following recommendations are among those that can be part of a “two-generation” approach:

- Early childhood policies, such as access to high-quality home-visiting and pre-K programs (such as the

Arkansas Better Chance program). These promote the healthy development of young children so they can start school prepared to succeed and improve the odds they will graduate from high school, receive advanced training, and obtain better-paying jobs.

- K-12 policies that help close the achievement gap for low-income students, such as access to high-quality after-school and summer programs that close the gap while supporting parents while they are at work.
- Reduce the school-to-prison pipeline through more effective discipline programs that keep kids in school and juvenile justice practices that reduce incarceration. Those practices rely on more effective community-based programs that are more likely to



help young people become productive adults.

- Since poverty will not go away overnight, adequately fund and improve the foster care system to help our most vulnerable children who are victims of abuse or neglect and to keep families together.
- Support innovative community college and workforce training programs like “career pathways” that help low-income working parents receive the education and skills they need to obtain better-paying jobs.
- Economic policies that help parents meet the basic needs of their families, such as increasing the minimum wage and creating a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Patterned after the highly successful federal EITC, a state tax credit would help working families catch up on bills, further their education, or meet basic needs.
- Establish paid family and maternity leave policies that support the healthy development of our youngest children, economically support parents, and ensure that working families don’t have to choose between their jobs and their families’ health.

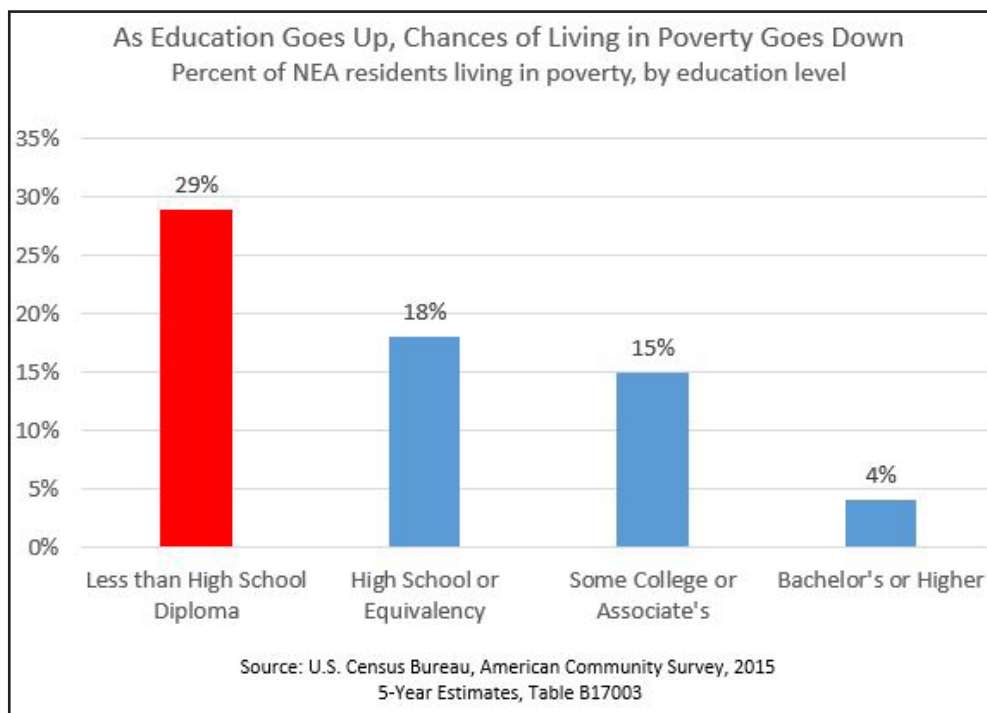
## BY THE NUMBERS

**\$20,420: POVERTY-LEVEL INCOME FOR FAMILY OF THREE**

**28,623: NUMBER OF NORTHEAST AR CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY**

**7,255: NUMBER OF CRAIGHEAD COUNTY CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY**

**60: PERCENT OF NORTHEAST AR CHILDREN GROWING UP IN LOW-INCOME HOMES UP TO 200% OF THE FEDERAL POVERTY LEVEL**





Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families  
1400 West Markham, Suite 306  
Little Rock, AR 72201  
(501) 371-9678

Northwest Arkansas Office  
614 East Emma Avenue, Suite 235  
Springdale, AR 72764  
(479) 927-9800

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- AACF would like to thank Kim Reeve-DeLong for her work on an earlier draft of this brief.
- Parts of this brief use material previously seen in two earlier AACF reports on child poverty “Child Poverty in Northwest Arkansas,” published in January 2015 and written by Laura Kellams; and “Child Poverty in Arkansas: Policy Solutions to Change Lives, Build Stronger Communities,” published in December 2016 and written by Eleanor Wheeler.

