Families and Children in Poverty (2012)

The federal government develops two different poverty measures each year. First, the U.S. Census Bureau calculates poverty thresholds to count how many people lived in poverty during the previous year.

Second, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services calculates poverty guidelines to determine who is eligible this year for many federal programs, such as Food Stamps and other food and nutrition programs, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance, Head Start and parts of Medicaid.

Neither federal poverty measure is intended as a comprehensive measure of financial hardship. The designers of the poverty measures were well aware that more families experience significant financial hardship than those who fall below the federal poverty lines. Here we report Census poverty numbers since the Census measure is intended for statistical use to compare one year with another. Many more families experience serious hardship than those counted here.

Young children living in poverty are eligible to receive free early education through the federal Head Start program and Illinois’ Preschool for All. These public preschool programs give children formal classroom experience where they can develop skills needed for kindergarten. The programs are typically part-day and therefore may be inaccessible to children with parents working full-time. However, a growing number of programs offer full-day sessions or collaborate with child care programs in order to provide an educational experience as part of full-day child care.

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1 “In Poverty” meaning below 100 percent of the federal poverty threshold calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau. The poverty threshold, which varies according to family size, was $18,123 for a family of one adult and two children in 2011. Population and poverty data are from the American Community Survey, 2011, 1-year estimates.

2 The number of children birth through 2 and 3 through 5 are estimates based on the ACS.