2024 Child Poverty Rates in Historical Perspective

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Annual poverty rates are an important indicator of economic wellbeing. Placing current poverty rates in historical context is also crucial for understanding how populations are faring over time and how policy decisions have or have not improved economic wellbeing. Further, different choices related to measuring poverty can affect our understanding of poverty and can yield additional insights when interpreting long-term trends.

In recent work, we examined total population poverty trends from 1967 to 2024 in the United States under four different poverty measures, finding that while measurement choices alter the shape of long-term trends, government taxes and transfers have played a critical and growing role in reducing poverty.

This brief builds on the center's prior work examining long-term historical poverty trends under various measures[1] by focusing specifically on poverty among children. We examine poverty rates of children who are under the age of 18, both before and after counting resources from government policies and programs. We present poverty rates for children under the four different measures used in our prior work: (1) the historical Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), (2) the anchored 2012 SPM, (3) the anchored 2022 SPM, and (4) a fully relative poverty measure.

KEY FINDINGS

- Progress in child poverty reduction varies based on how changes in living standards are accounted for over time. When assessed against a *fixed* standard of living (as in the anchored SPM), children are significantly better off today than in the 1960s. On the other hand, when considering measures that adjust for changing living standards (as in the historical SPM and relative measure), the picture is more nuanced: while children are better off under the historical SPM, relative poverty rates have actually risen since the 1960s.

- Before accounting for government taxes and transfers, child poverty declined from 1967 to 2024 when assessed against a *fixed* standard of living (as in the anchored SPM). When considering measures that adjust for changing living standards, child poverty remains somewhat stagnant (as in the historical SPM) or has risen (as in the relative poverty rate) before accounting for taxes and transfers. Regardless of measure, government programs and policies have played an increasingly important role in reducing the child poverty rate over time.

- Regardless of measure, the role of government policies and programs in reducing the child poverty rate has grown substantially over time.

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[1] Fox et al., 2015, Waging war on poverty; Wimer et al., 2016, Progress on poverty? New estimates of historical trends using an anchored Supplemental Poverty Measure

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Understanding the Difference Between Poverty Measures[2]

The historical Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) compares incomes against a poverty line that changes over time with changes in expenditures.[3] The SPM poverty threshold varies by geography and is based on contemporary spending on necessities including food, clothing, shelter, and utilities. In the SPM, tax credits and noncash benefits are also counted as resources, and for families who incur them, medical, work, and child care costs, as well as tax liabilities, are subtracted from resources. If a family's resources fall below the SPM threshold, they are considered in poverty.

Anchored SPM measures hold the living standards from a given year constant and allow the poverty line to change only with changes in prices. For example, the anchored 2022 SPM is based on 2022 standards of living adjusted forward and backward in time for inflation.[4] As a result, the anchored 2022 SPM poverty rate in 1975 would reflect the percent of people with incomes and resources that fall below the 2022 SPM poverty threshold expressed in 1975 dollars.

Fully relative poverty measures are more commonly used in international contexts than variants of the SPM and compare resources to a percent of median household resources. Under this measure, a family is in poverty if their resources fall below 50% of median household resources. Because relative poverty measures focus more on the distribution of household resources, they express the proportion of people whose resources are well below a "typical" household's.

Accounting for the Role of Government Taxes and Transfers in Poverty Measurement

Because the SPM counts tax credits and noncash benefits as income when measuring poverty, we can directly quantify the role that government taxes and transfers play in reducing or increasing the poverty rate. We do this by subtracting taxes and transfers from a given family's resources and re-comparing their income to the poverty threshold. This allows us to answer the question: how many people would be counted in poverty without government taxes and transfers? Hence, for each measure, we compare the post-tax/transfer poverty rate with the pre-tax/transfer poverty rate to illustrate the role that government taxes and transfers play in either reducing or increasing the poverty rate.

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[2] For a more in-depth overview of these measures, see Wimer et al., 2025, 2024 poverty rates in historical perspective.

[3] The historical SPM construction attempts to mimic Census and BLS SPM measurement decisions with as much fidelity as possible going back in time and given available data constraints. Full descriptions of the methods used to create the series can be found in Fox et al., 2015, Waging war on poverty, and Nolan et al., 2016, A new method for measuring historical poverty trends; for data see Wimer et al., 2024, Historical Supplemental Poverty Measure Data.

[4] For adjusting threshold values for inflation, we use the Consumer Price Index retroactive series using current methods (R-CPI-U-RS). Due to gaps in coverage over the period from 1967 to 2024, we use the R-CPI-U-RS produced by the Census Bureau for inflation adjustments from 1967 to 1977 (also known as the CPI-U-X1) and the R-CPI-U-RS produced by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 1978 to the present.

RESULTS

Poverty trends among children aged 18 and under

Figure 1 presents poverty rates from 1967 to 2024 for children across our four different poverty measures. These results show that:
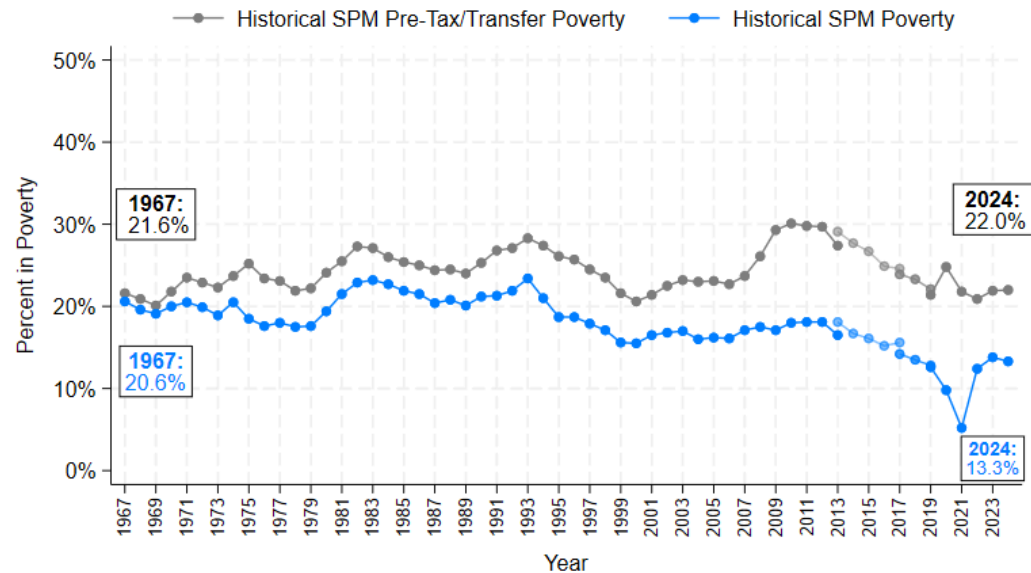
- Between 1967 and 2024, the **historical SPM poverty rate** among children declined by over 35% (from 20.6% to 13.3%)[5], while the **pre-tax/transfer historical SPM** rate remained virtually unchanged, rising slightly from 21.6% to 22.0%. The fact that **pre-tax/transfer historical SPM** rates have never fallen below 20% over this period demonstrates the critical role of government programs and policies in reducing child poverty over time.

- Over the same period, the **relative poverty rate** among children rose by about 27% (from 15.8% to 20.0%). The **pre-tax/transfer relative poverty rate** among this group increased by even more (nearly 44%, or from 18.2% to 26.1%). This suggests that while government policies and programs are increasingly playing a larger role in keeping children out of relative poverty, they are still not able to fully offset the increase in the relative poverty rate over this period.

- Both anchored measures show substantial declines in child poverty between 1967 and 2024. Under the **anchored 2012 SPM**, child poverty dropped by about 67% (from 29.8% to 9.8%), and under the **anchored 2022 SPM**, it dropped by approximately 65% (from 32.1% to 11.4%). These declines suggest that, when poverty is measured against a fixed standard of living, children are significantly less likely to be in poverty today than in the past.

Overall, understanding how children are doing today relative to the past depends on the measure chosen. When evaluated against a fixed standard of living, as with the anchored SPM, children are better off today than in the 1960s. The historical SPM also shows a meaningful decline in child poverty. However, the relative child poverty rate has increased over time, indicating while government programs have become more effective at boosting household resources, those gains have not kept pace with growth in median family income. Despite these differences, the importance of government policies and programs in reducing child poverty has increased over time across all measures.
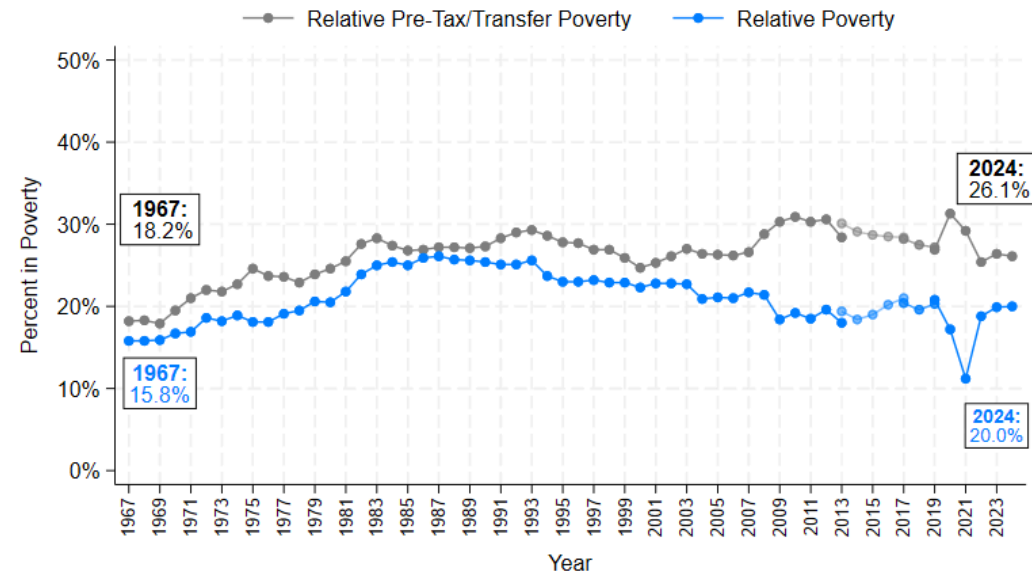
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[5] The estimates here use publicly released data. As a result, they do not exactly match the Census Bureau's estimates, which are based on internal CPS ASEC data.

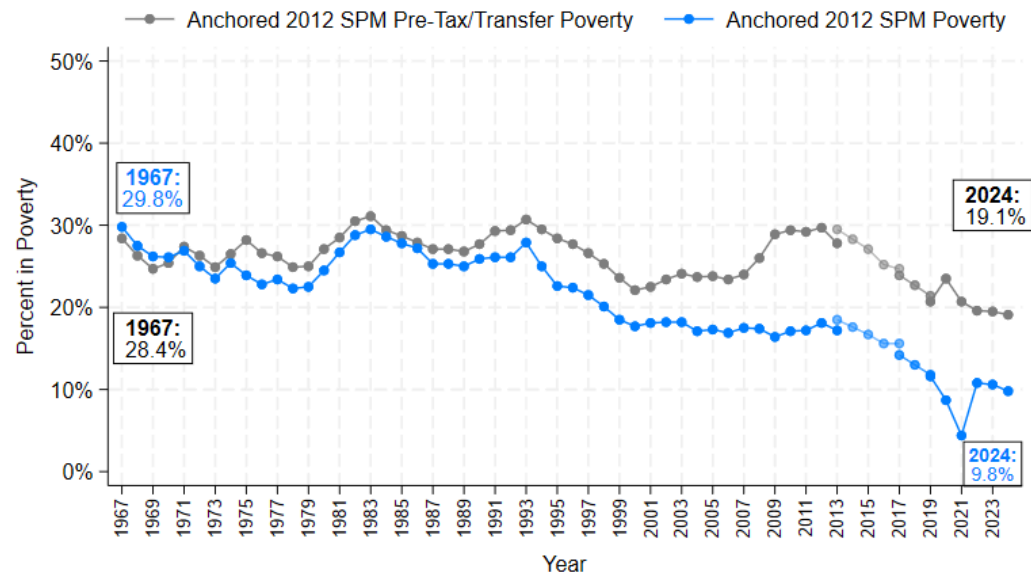## Figure 1. Poverty rates for U.S. children under four measures (1967–2024)

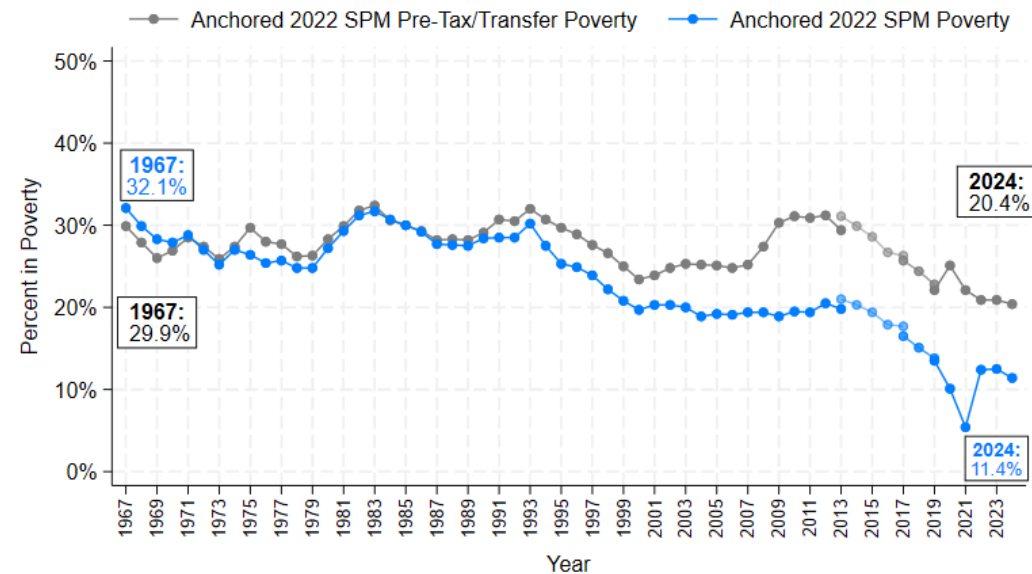### Panel A: Historical Supplemental Poverty Measure

Legend: — Historical SPM Pre-Tax/Transfer Poverty — Historical SPM Poverty

1967: 21.6%
1967: 20.6%
2024: 22.0%
2024: 13.3%

Panel B: Relative Poverty Measure

Legend: — Relative Pre-Tax/Transfer Poverty — Relative Poverty

1967: 18.2%
1967: 15.8%
2024: 26.1%
2024: 20.0%

Panel C: Anchored 2012 Supplemental Poverty Measure

Legend: — Anchored 2012 SPM Pre-Tax/Transfer Poverty — Anchored 2012 SPM Poverty

1967: 29.8%
1967: 28.4%
2024: 19.1%
2024: 9.8%

Panel D: Anchored 2022 Supplemental Poverty Measure

Legend: — Anchored 2022 SPM Pre-Tax/Transfer Poverty — Anchored 2022 SPM Poverty

1967: 32.1%
1967: 29.9%
2024: 20.4%
2024: 11.4%

Source: Center on Poverty and Social Policy analysis of the Current Population Survey's Annual Social and Economic Supplements from 1968 to 2024 and historical Supplemental Poverty Measure series (Wimer et al. (2024)). Estimates exclude observations housed in group quarters. The series breaks reflect changes from various updates to the SPM methodology: redesigned income questions in 2013, updates to the processing system in 2017, and threshold changes in 2019. For additional details, see the historical footnotes of Table B-2 in Shrider and Bijou (2025). For survey years 2019 to 2021, we use the entropy balance weights from Rothbaum and Bee (2021) to account for pandemic nonresponse.

CONCLUSION

Examining poverty trends across time and measurement choice allows us to better understand the Census Bureau's most recent poverty estimates in historical context.[6] This brief has considered the case of children in the United States.

How children are faring over time with respect to poverty depends on the measure chosen. When evaluated against a fixed standard of living, children appear to be much better off today, with substantial declines in poverty. The historical SPM also shows a notable decrease in child poverty. However, the relative poverty rate has increased, underscoring that while government programs play a large role in supporting families, those gains have not kept pace with rising median family income, leaving many children behind in relative terms. Across all measures however, it is clear that government policies and programs play an increasingly important role in moving children out of poverty.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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DATA SOURCE

Wimer, Christopher, Liana Fox, Sophie Collyer, Irwin Garfinkel, Neeraj Kaushal, Jennifer Laird, Jaehyun Nam, Laura Nolan, Jessica Pac, Ryan Vinh, and Jane Waldfogel. 2024. Historical Supplemental Poverty Measure data. New York: Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Columbia University.

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The Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University School of Social Work produces actionable research to advance our understanding of poverty and the role of social policy in reducing poverty and promoting economic security, opportunity, and well-being in New York City and the United States. For the center's latest work and policy briefs, visit povertycenter.columbia.edu. Email at cpsp@columbia.edu. Sign up for research updates. Follow on LinkedIn and Bluesky.

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[6] For the Census Bureau's most recent poverty estimates, see Shrider and Bijou, 2025, Poverty in the United States: 2024.

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