

# Child Poverty Among Racial Minorities and Immigrants: Explaining Trends and Differentials\*

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*Objective.* This article examines the effects of changing family structure (including cohabitation) and maternal employment during the 1990s on child poverty rates across America's diverse racial and ethnic groups. Unlike most previous studies focused on broad pan-ethnic groups, our analyses examine children distinguished by race/ethnicity, immigrant generation, and national origin (e.g., Mexican, Japanese, Middle Eastern, among others). *Methods.* The analyses, using methods of demographic standardization, are based on data from the 1990 and 2000 Public Use Microdata Samples of the U.S. Decennial Censuses. *Results.* Child poverty rates declined broadly across population groups in the 1990s. Increasing maternal employment during the 1990s, rather than changing family structure, accounted for the largest share (nearly 40 percent) of the recent decline in child poverty rates. Changes in family structure played a minor role in reducing child poverty for most of the 25 groups considered in this article. Differences in family structure accounted for a large part of observed child poverty differences between minority groups. *Conclusions.* Rapid increases in maternal employment during the 1990s provided a hedge against rising child poverty and a route to economic self-sufficiency for growing shares of single mothers and their children.

Over the past quarter-century, the economic fortunes of America's children and youth have diverged significantly from the rest of America's population. For example, child poverty rates were only about 60 percent of elderly poverty rates in the 1960s, but they were over 80 percent *higher* in the early 1990s. After peaking during the 1993 recession, however, poverty rates among children declined by the end of the 1990s to their lowest levels in more than 20 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004a). The growth in

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maternal employment, especially among single mothers, helped lower the poverty rate among children (Iceland, 2003; Lu et al., 2004). Job growth was fueled by a robust economy, new welfare reform legislation that emphasized “work-first” programs, and expanded work supports (e.g., expansion of the earned income tax credit) (Moffitt, 2002; Sawhill and Haskins, 2002). At the same time, growth in the share of children living in poor single-parent families slowed (Iceland, 2003). Still, 17.1 percent or over 12 million American children were poor at the turn of the 21st century (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004a).

In this article, we update previous trend studies of child poverty; specifically, we document changes in poverty among America’s children using data from the 1990 and 2000 decennial Censuses. Like many demographic studies (Oropesa and Landale, 1997; Lerman, 1996), we emphasize the role of changing family structure and maternal employment in shaping children’s shifting economic fortunes. But unlike other studies, we highlight persistence and change in economic disparities across 25 different racial and ethnic groups, including immigrants. Minority and immigrant children typically have higher-than-average poverty rates (Van Hook, Brown, and Kwenda, 2004), but until now data limitations have prevented a fuller understanding of comparative changes in child poverty, especially for different Asian and Hispanic minorities (Jensen and Chitose, 1994; Lichter and Landale, 1995). The existing literature has focused instead on broad pan-ethnic groups. The demographic accounting framework presented in this article builds on previous studies of child poverty by giving special attention to racial and ethnic variation and to differences by country-of-origin of immigrants. Such analyses are now possible with the release of the 5 percent Public Use Microdata Sample from the 2000 Decennial Census, which, together with 1990 Census data, includes economic and demographic information on more than 6.8 million children and youth.

## **Child Poverty and Recent Changes in Family and Employment**

### ***National Trends***

Previous studies have documented declines in child poverty rates during the 1990s, especially after 1994 (Lu et al., 2004; Lichter and Crowley, 2004). Substantially less attention has been given to the changing economic circumstances of racially diverse subgroups of American children. In the past, explanations of trends and racial differentials typically centered on: (1) the “breakdown” of the family, including growing shares of children living in at-risk female-headed or cohabiting families (Iceland, 2000; Manning and Lichter, 1996), and (2) increases in maternal employment, especially among at-risk single women with children (Moffitt, 2002). The key public policy question is straightforward: To what extent have family structure and

maternal employment become increasingly important axes of economic differentiation and inequality among America's diverse population of children?

To be sure, any explanation of changing child poverty rates must acknowledge rapid shifts in the American family—increasing out-of-wedlock childbearing, declining marriage and remarriage rates, high divorce rates, and more cohabitation. In the 1960s, most poor children lived with married-couple families. By the end of the 1990s, 57 percent of poor children lived in female-headed families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004b). The economic implications for children are unmistakable. Eggebeen and Lichter (1991) showed that about one-half of the rise in child poverty during the 1980s was due to shifts of children from married-couple families to “high-risk” female-headed families. Lerman (1996) reported that virtually all the increase in child poverty between 1971 and 1989 was due to shifts away from marriage, a finding similar to that of Gottschalk and Danziger (1993). In fact, using data from the March Current Population Survey, Thomas and Sawhill (2002) found that the poverty rate of children would have been 4.4 percentage points lower than its actual level in 1998 if the proportion of children in female-headed families had remained constant since 1970 (also see Cancian and Reed, 2002). The positive news of the 1990s is that the rise in female-headed families slowed, while halting the upward rise in family and child poverty rates (Iceland, 2003; Lichter and Crowley, 2004). The strong statistical association between family structure and poverty has helped spawn new programmatic initiatives to promote marriage as part of the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform bill (Lichter, Graefe, and Brown, 2003).

Children and their families also have been affected in uncertain ways by changing economic conditions and decades-long increases in maternal employment (Elmelech and Lu, 2004). For the 1949–1969 period, Gottschalk and Danziger (1993) demonstrated that virtually all the decline in poverty (25.7 percentage points) was due to changes in the economy. The subsequent period, from 1973 to 1991, revealed little relationship between economic change and poverty. The implication is that “a rising tide lifts all boats” did not apply and that macroeconomic policies that stimulate economic growth do not necessarily provide a hedge against rising poverty rates. Eggebeen and Lichter (1991) showed that almost none of the rise in child poverty in either married-couple or female-headed families during the 1980s was associated, either positively or negatively, with changes in maternal employment patterns.

The situation was much different in the 1990s. The past decade ushered in unprecedented employment growth among single mothers, both as a response to work-based welfare reform (Moffitt, 2002) and to macroeconomic growth (Gunderson and Ziliak, 2004). Iceland (2003) showed that changing job growth was once again strongly linked to declines in poverty during the 1990s. Indeed, Lichter and Crowley (2004) found that roughly one-half of the decline in child poverty during the late 1990s in female-headed families was associated with increasing maternal work participation

rates. Economic and job growth has once again assumed its historic role in defining children's economic circumstances. It is less clear, however, whether changes in maternal employment have affected economic inequality similarly across diverse populations of children.

### ***Racial and Ethnic Diversity***

Racial and ethnic diversity in American society has accelerated, especially during the 1990s. As a result, national trends in poverty may increasingly mask racial variation and trends. Indeed, we have little basis for assuming a priori that recent declines in U.S. child poverty apply broadly across diverse racial and ethnic groups. With the exception of O'Hare's (1995) and Jensen and Chitose's (1994) analysis of 1990 Census data, little up-to-date empirical attention has been paid to proportionately small minority groups. Only a few studies have examined differences across first, second, and third generations of immigrant children (Oropesa and Landale, 1997).

Racial differences in child poverty are persistent and, like national trends, group differences in family structure and employment patterns undoubtedly play key roles. For example, inequality between blacks and whites, as measured by differences in child poverty, has been reinforced by large racial differences in family structure. Eggebeen and Lichter (1991) found that black-white differences in family structure were largely unrelated to racial differences in child poverty in 1960. By the end of the 1980s, however, nearly two-thirds of the black-white difference in child poverty was due to black-white differences in the percentage of children living in female-headed families. Among Hispanic children—especially Mexicans and Puerto Ricans—a large part of the difference from whites in child poverty is located in differences in maternal employment (i.e., Hispanic mothers have lower employment rates). Unlike the situation for blacks, differences in family structure accounted for only a small part of the large Hispanic-white difference in child poverty during the 1980s (Lichter and Landale, 1995), while poverty rates among Asian children would actually be larger than observed rates if they had the same living arrangements as white children (Hogan and Lichter, 1995). Clearly, the etiology of poverty varies widely among children with different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Indeed, the poverty rate in 2000 among the foreign born in the United States was 16.8 percent, versus 12.8 percent among the native population (Lollock, 2001). Moreover, variation by country of origin is substantial; immigrants from Asia had a poverty rate of 12.8 percent while 21.9 percent of Latin American immigrants were poor. Few recent studies, however, have centered on immigrant children or on the demographic and economic foundations of changing poverty rates or on immigrant-native differences. One exception is the work by Jensen and Chitose (1994). Using data from the 1990 Public Use Microdata Sample, they documented large disparities in poverty between native-born and foreign-born children (18.7 percent vs.

32.2 percent). Compared with the native born, the householders (usually parents) of foreign-born children were less likely to be employed (76.3 percent vs. 82.0 percent), and to be employed in professional occupations (18.4 percent vs. 26.0 percent). At the same time, immigrant families were more likely than native-born families to adopt a secondary worker strategy that lifted their families out of poverty (Jensen, 1991). This implies that changes in maternal employment may be more strongly associated with changes in child poverty among the foreign born than among natives.

Using more recent data, Van Hook, Brown, and Kwenda (2004) showed that poverty rates among the children of immigrant families doubled between 1969 and 1989 (from 11.6 percent to 22.2 percent) before declining slightly by 1999 (21.6 percent). Nearly one-half of immigrant children lived in families with income less than twice the poverty level, compared with 34 percent among children of native-born parents (Hernandez, 2004). Van Hook, Brown, and Kwenda (2004) also found that roughly one-half of the absolute increase in immigrant child poverty over 1969–1999 could be attributed to changing macroeconomic conditions. Among the children of immigrants, poverty rates in 1999 varied from a low of 9.5 percent among non-Hispanic whites to 32.9 percent among Mexicans. This study did not examine disparities by other countries of origin, but focused instead on trends among broad pan-ethnic groups (e.g., Asian natives and the foreign born). Although conventional, such analyses potentially mask wide and perhaps growing economic disparities within specific immigrant populations (Hernandez, 2004).

### ***Current Study***

National trends in child poverty reflect the balance of trends across a variety of population subgroups—not just those for blacks and Hispanics who make up the large share of America’s minority population. Here, we consider trends for over two dozen demographic groups distinguished by race and national origin. We also disaggregate non-Hispanic whites, blacks, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans by immigrant generation, highlighting poverty differentials across first, second, and third generations of children. Our fundamental goal is to evaluate the role of family structure and maternal employment in accounting for changes in child poverty during the 1990s and persistent economic inequality among children. More than ever, forecasting America’s future must acknowledge the diverse living and economic circumstances of children today.

### **Data and Sample**

Our analyses are based on nationally representative data from the 1990 and 2000 5 percent Integrated Public Use Microdata Samples (IPUMS).

Children are defined as age 17 or younger and related to the householder or the unmarried partner of the householder. Children who are, or are married to, the householder are excluded from analysis. Each child is linked to family and personal information of the householder and, in the case of married- or cohabitating-couple households, to their spouse or unmarried partner. The total sample includes 3,208,706 children in 1990 and 3,578,833 in 2000.

### *Measures*

Our measure of poverty is based on whether family income from all sources is below the official family income threshold for the appropriate family size and configuration set by the Office of Management and Budget. Family income includes all earnings and nonearned income (e.g., interest income) received during the previous year. This means that 1990 and 2000 poverty status is based on money income in 1989 and 1999, respectively.

The official poverty rate is not without flaws. This measure does not take into account income in-kind, such as Medicaid and food stamps. It does not adjust for geographical differences in the cost of living. The equivalence levels implied by the various poverty thresholds also are difficult to justify empirically. Poverty thresholds are adjusted annually for inflation, but they are based on assumptions about family consumption patterns that are questionable, and they may not reflect the true cost of basic items like food, clothing, and shelter.

Poverty is a family-based rather than household measure, which also means that this measure may not accurately reflect income pooling or shared spending patterns among unrelated adults. This is true, for example, of nonfamily households such as cohabiting couples. Cohabiting couples account for about 40 percent of all nonmarital births, and 43 percent of all cohabiting couples co-reside with minors (Lichter and Qian, 2004). Moreover, roughly one in seven children who live with a single mother also co-reside with her cohabiting partner, who may or may not be the biological father of the child (Manning and Lichter, 1996; Carlson and Danziger, 1999). Nearly 25 percent of all children will spend time in a cohabiting-couple household before age 15 (Graefe and Lichter, 1999). Although income pooling is likely if cohabiting couples bear children together, poverty guidelines do not consider the incomes of both partners when estimating poverty. For our purposes, we compare poverty rates of children living in cohabiting-couple households with an alternative measure that pools the income of both co-residential partners. We treat cohabiting partners, family members of the householder, and co-resident children of the unmarried partner as part of the family unit. For cohabiting partners, their combined incomes are compared to their appropriately adjusted poverty income threshold.

We identify 25 subgroups of children with sufficient number of cases for detailed analyses. We first distinguish between non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks.<sup>1</sup> Data permitting, we also disaggregate our analyses by first, second, and third generations. First-generation immigrants include immigrant children born to parents in which both are immigrants or one of the parents is an immigrant. Second-generation children are native-born children of immigrant parents (one or both are immigrants). Third-generation children are native born to native-born parents. Children born abroad of U.S. citizens (e.g., diplomats, soldiers, etc.) are considered third generation.

Asians are subcategorized as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Asian Indian, and Southeast Asian. Hispanics include Mexicans, Cubans, Central Americans, South Americans, Dominicans, and other Latin Americans. This category also includes island-born and mainland-born Puerto Ricans. Native Americans and Middle-Easterners are classified separately.<sup>2</sup>

Children's living arrangements are based on the householder's marital status and current living arrangements. Households headed by married persons are designated as married-couple families. Cohabiting-couple households include unmarried householders and their unmarried partners. We distinguish between families headed by single women who are either ever married or never married. Children living with never-married mothers typically have higher rates of poverty (Lichter and Crowley, 2004). We also identify children living with single fathers (without a wife or unmarried partner present).

Each child also is classified on the basis of his or her mother's employment or, in the case of cohabiting-couple families, the father's cohabiting partner's employment during the previous year. Those usually working 35 or more hours per week are considered full-time workers; women working fewer than 35 hours are considered part-time workers. We also identify children whose mothers are unemployed or not in the labor force.

<sup>1</sup>In the 2000 Census, for the first time, individuals could define themselves as two or more races. For researchers, this makes the analyses of racial change between 1990 and 2000 difficult. Our analysis of racial differences in poverty used children who are identified as belonging to only a single race. If black-white mixed race children have lower rates of poverty than blacks, our approach will introduce a small conservative bias in the analyses of racial change in minority poverty. That is, we will underestimate the magnitude of the 1990–2000 poverty decline. Indeed, in some additional analysis, we found that the poverty rate was 32.1 percent rather than 32.7 percent in 2000 if all black-white mixed race children were treated as black.

<sup>2</sup>Puerto Ricans are American citizens. For ease of presentation, however, we sometimes label island-born Puerto Ricans as immigrants. Persons who remained unclassified, or who were classified as white, were identified as Middle Eastern if the primary ancestry variable revealed North Africa and Southwest Asian descent. Parental nativity was based on whether either biological parent (or the householder in the case that the child lived with relatives other than the parent) immigrated. Native-born children with one or more immigrant parents are considered second-generation immigrants. Descriptions and codes are available at (<http://beta.ipums.org>).

### *Methods of Standardization*

Our analysis employs methods of direct standardization. Child poverty rates are calculated as the number of poor children divided by the total number of children, multiplied by 100. This crude poverty rate also is equal to race-specific poverty rates, weighted by race groups' representation in the overall population and summed. It is thus possible to determine what the poverty rate would be given a differently distributed population. We can calculate, for example, what the 2000 poverty rate would be if family structure remained unchanged since 1990 by applying 1990 population compositional "weights" to 2000 group-specific poverty rates (Eliason 2005).

By showing hypothetical poverty rates in the absence of changes in composition and comparing them to observed changes, we demonstrate the degree to which compositional shifts (in family structure and maternal work) affect poverty trends. The difference between the crude rate and composition-standardized rate reveals the effect of shifts in population composition. By dividing this difference by the change in crude rates, we show the proportion of crude rate change due to changing population composition. Standardization is a heuristic method that reveals the implications of changing population composition. It is less useful for drawing causal inferences. The effects of changes in population composition, such as family change, may be overstated if other factors, such as education, are also associated with both population composition and poverty.

## **Findings**

### *1990–2000 Changes in Child Poverty Rates*

We begin by providing child poverty rates in Table 1 for each of 25 different population subgroups. First, the share of all children born of native-born, non-Hispanic white parents declined from 65.6 to 57.7 percent between 1990 and 2000. Hispanic children increased the fastest on a percentage point basis over this period (from 11.9 to 16.8 percent). Growth was especially rapid among Mexican-origin children (7.9 to 10.6 percent). Percentage point changes in population shares were small for the other groups of children.

Columns 3 and 4 of Table 1 provide the poverty rates for each population group. Over 1990–2000, child poverty rates declined only modestly, from 17.8 to 16.3 percent. Yet, declines were not uniform across the racial and ethnic groups. In fact, seven groups did not experience declines in poverty over the 1990s. Indeed, increases in poverty were at or exceeded one percentage point for both foreign-born blacks and Koreans. The largest absolute declines were observed among children with historically high poverty rates. Poverty among third-generation black children of native-born parents



TABLE 1  
Child Poverty Rates by Race, 1990 and 2000

	Percent of Population		Poverty	
	1990	2000	1990	2000
Non-Hispanic White	(69.2)	(61.3)	(10.8)	(9.3)
Third generation	65.6	57.7	10.9	9.3
Second generation	3.2	3.0	8.1	8.7
First generation	0.4	0.6	21.6	19.3
Non-Hispanic Black	(14.5)	(14.4)	(39.2)	(32.7)
Third generation	13.6	13.0	40.5	34.0
Second generation	0.7	1.1	18.1	17.2
First generation	0.2	0.3	23.7	26.2
Native Americans	1.0	0.9	38.0	30.7
Asian	(2.8)	(3.2)	(15.8)	(14.2)
Chinese	0.6	0.7	13.4	12.3
Japanese	0.2	0.1	4.6	5.1
Filipino	0.5	0.6	4.9	5.3
Korean	0.4	0.4	10.7	11.7
Asian Indian	0.4	0.6	8.8	9.4
Southeast Asian	0.7	0.8	37.4	26.8
Hispanic	(11.9)	(16.8)	(31.3)	(27.2)
Mexican	(7.9)	(10.6)	(31.5)	(27.7)
Third generation	3.6	3.5	28.1	22.8
Second generation	3.3	5.5	31.7	28.5
First generation	1.0	1.6	43.6	36.1
Puerto Rican	(1.5)	(1.6)	(41.0)	(32.7)
Mainland born	0.5	0.8	39.8	30.4
Island-born parents	0.7	0.6	38.9	32.4
Island born	0.2	0.2	49.5	42.3
Cuban	0.3	0.3	17.0	15.4
Central American	0.6	0.6	26.8	23.8
South American	0.4	0.4	16.6	16.7
Dominican	0.3	0.3	42.6	35.0
Other Latin American	1.0	3.0	25.8	25.1
Middle Eastern	0.2	0.1	7.8	6.0
Other	0.5	3.4	20.5	18.2
Total	100.0	100.0	17.8	16.3
N	3,208,706	3,578,833		

declined by 16 percent between 1990 and 2000, from 40.5 to 34.0 percent. Native-American children (38.0 to 30.7 percent), Southeast-Asian children (37.4 to 26.8 percent), and Puerto Rican (41.0 to 32.7) and Dominican children (42.6 to 35.0) also experienced unusually rapid declines in poverty during the 1990s. Despite the optimism implied by substantial reductions in poverty over the past decade, these historically disadvantaged groups of children still had the highest poverty rates in 2000. Japanese, Filipino, and

Middle-Eastern children, on the other hand, had the lowest rates of poverty (5 to 6 percent) in 2000.

### *Family Structure and Child Poverty*

*National Trends.* Do changes in family structure account for changes in child poverty over the 1990s or for differences in poverty among the groups of children considered here? In 2000, 73.5 percent of U.S. children lived in married-couple families, down from 76.9 percent in 1990 (Columns 1 and 2, Table 2). Declines in the share of children in married-couple families is countered by increases in share of children who lived with never-married single mothers (4.4 to 5.8 percent over the 1990s) and cohabiting couples (3.5 to 5.5 percent). When considered as a whole, the decade of the 1990s was marked by a continuation of shifts from married-couple families to less traditional family arrangements for children.

The potential economic implications for children are obvious. The poverty rate for children in married-couple families in 2000 was 8.9 or roughly one-half the overall rate (16.3 percent). In contrast, child poverty rates were high for children living in female-headed families and cohabiting-couple families. In each instance, one-third to one-half of children were poor. The good news of the 1990s was that poverty rates for these “at-risk” children declined substantially. At the extreme, the poverty rate among children living with never-married single mothers declined from 69.4 percent in 1990 to 54.0 percent in 2000. Clearly, overall declines in child poverty cannot be explained by changes in family composition alone; child poverty rates declined in the 1990s for each family type.

TABLE 2  
Family Structure and Child Poverty, 1990 and 2000

	Percent of Population		Percent Poor	
	1990	2000	1990	2000
Married couple	76.9	73.5	9.7	8.9
Male head	2.2	2.9	19.4	17.0
Female ever-married head	13.0	12.3	41.8	32.4
Female never-married head	4.4	5.8	69.4	54.0
Cohabiting couple (official)	3.5	5.5	43.3	39.7
Total	100.0	100.0	17.8	16.3
Standardized by 1990 family structure				15.2
Cohabiting couple (adjusted)	3.5	5.5	25.1	20.1
Total (adjusted)	100.0	100.0	17.2	15.3
Standardized by 1990 family structure				14.5

Official poverty rates for children in cohabiting families do not include the income of the cohabiting partners. To the extent that income is pooled in cohabiting-couple families, child poverty rates are overestimated. To address this issue, the bottom panel of Table 2 provides adjusted child poverty rates taking into account the income of both partners and adjusting the poverty income thresholds accordingly. The adjusted child poverty rate among children in cohabiting-couple families was 25.1 percent in 1990 and 20.1 percent 2000. For 2000, this adjusted child poverty rate is roughly one-half of the official poverty rate for children in cohabiting-couple families. The crude and adjusted rates represent extremes; one suggests no income pooling while the other suggests total income pooling. The “true” poverty rate for these children undoubtedly falls somewhere between these extremes.

The 1990s decline in child poverty occurred despite shifts of children into high-risk family types. Indeed, child poverty rates would have been even lower in 2000 if children were distributed among various types of families in the same proportions as in 1990. This is confirmed in Table 2, which reports the standardized child poverty rates in 2000 using the 1990 family structure as the standard. In the absence of changes in family structure during the 1990s, child poverty would have declined from 17.8 to 15.2 (rather than to the observed 2000 rate of 16.3). The percentage point decline in child poverty would have been twice as large as the actual decline during the 1990s.

*Trends by Race, Generation, and Nationality.* We next turn to the question of whether this general conclusion applies to the children distinguished by race, nationality, and generation. In Table 3, we provide official poverty rates, group-specific standardized rates (using 1990 within-group family structure as the standard), and national standardized rates (using 2000 national family structure as the standard). The within-group standardized rates allow us to evaluate the effects of changes in family structure on group trends in child poverty. Standardization by national family structure patterns allows us to make between-group comparisons. That is, to what extent do differences in family structure account for differences between groups in child poverty?

Our analyses suggest that declines in child poverty for most groups would have been slightly greater had family structure remained constant during the 1990s. For example, for third-generation whites, child poverty rates would have declined from 10.9 in 1990 to 8.4 in 2000, rather than to the observed decline to 9.3. In other words, child poverty for this group would have declined in the 1990s by 23 percent rather than 15 percent. These data nevertheless have a clear message: changes in family structure cannot explain the observed changes in child poverty over the 1990s for most groups. Indeed, for most of the groups considered here (except Japanese, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and foreign-born Mexicans), declines in child poverty

TABLE 3  
Child Poverty Rates by Race: Crude and Standardized by Family Structure

	Poverty				Adjusted Poverty			
	1990	2000	1990 Standard <sup>1</sup>	Total	1990	2000	1990 Standard <sup>1</sup>	Total
				Population Standard <sup>2</sup>				Population Standard <sup>2</sup>
Non-Hispanic White	10.8	9.3	8.5	11.6	10.3	8.3	7.9	10.4
Third generation	10.9	9.3	8.4	11.5	10.3	8.2	7.8	10.2
Second generation	8.1	8.7	8.3	12.3	8.0	8.4	8.2	11.6
First generation	21.6	19.3	19.5	22.2	21.4	19.1	19.3	21.2
Non-Hispanic Black	39.2	32.7	31.2	21.8	38.3	31.4	30.3	20.8
Third generation	40.5	34.0	32.2	22.2	39.6	32.7	31.3	21.2
Second generation	18.1	17.2	16.0	15.6	17.5	16.5	15.5	14.9
First generation	23.7	26.2	26.7	25.2	23.3	25.7	26.2	24.5
Native Americans	38.0	30.7	29.4	26.9	36.7	28.6	27.8	25.9
Asian	15.8	14.2	14.0	17.1	15.7	13.8	13.8	16.4
Chinese	13.4	12.3	12.0	14.7	13.4	12.1	12.0	14.1
Japanese	4.6	5.1	5.2	7.4	4.4	4.9	5.0	6.6
Filipino	4.9	5.3	4.8	6.8	4.7	4.7	4.5	5.7
Korean	10.7	11.7	11.6	14.9	10.6	11.5	11.5	13.8
Asian Indian	8.8	9.4	9.3	13.0	8.8	9.3	9.3	12.4
Southeast Asian	37.4	26.8	26.8	28.9	37.2	26.3	26.6	28.3
Hispanic	31.3	27.2	27.1	26.8	30.5	26.1	26.3	26.0
Mexican	31.5	27.7	27.6	28.4	30.8	26.8	27.0	27.7
Third generation	28.1	22.8	21.1	19.7	27.1	21.1	20.1	18.7
Second generation	31.7	28.5	28.1	30.7	31.2	27.9	27.7	30.3
First generation	43.6	36.1	36.4	38.3	43.0	35.6	36.0	37.8
Puerto Rican	41.0	32.7	32.6	24.6	39.5	30.6	31.1	23.5
Mainland born	39.8	30.4	30.5	19.8	37.6	27.7	28.5	18.7
Island-born parents	38.9	32.4	33.1	26.4	37.8	31.0	31.9	25.4
Island born	49.5	42.3	44.3	36.0	48.2	40.6	42.9	34.9
Cuban	17.0	15.4	14.5	16.1	16.5	14.5	14.0	15.3
Central American	26.8	23.8	23.7	23.5	25.9	22.7	22.8	22.8
South American	16.6	16.7	16.4	17.5	16.3	16.0	15.9	16.9
Dominican	42.6	35.0	35.4	29.6	41.8	33.7	34.7	28.7
Other Latin American	25.8	25.1	24.3	24.0	25.0	23.9	23.5	23.1
Middle Eastern	7.8	6.0	5.7	8.2	7.5	5.4	5.4	7.1

<sup>1</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 1990 within-group family structure.

<sup>2</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 2000 total population family structure.

(within family types) more than offset the deleterious effects associated with shifts to single-parent families.

Table 3 (Column 4) provides standardized poverty rates using the 2000 family structure of children as the standard population. Would inequality exist if all groups of children, regardless of race, nationality, or generation, were distributed across family types in the same proportions? The short

answer is yes. Large differences in poverty between some groups of children remain. The standardized rate of third-generation white children was 11.5 in 2000. This compares favorably with standardized poverty rates of 22.2 for third-generation black children, 26.9 percent for Native Americans, 29.6 percent among Dominican children, and 19.8, 26.4, and 36.0 percent among mainland-born Puerto Ricans of mainland-born parents and island-born parents, and island-born Puerto Ricans, respectively. Clearly, group differences in family structure cannot account completely for poverty differences with white children. We need to look for other explanations.

At the same time, differences in family structure clearly exacerbate group inequality. This can be gleaned from differences between the 2000 crude (Column 2) and standardized rates (Column 4). For example, for third-generation black children, poverty rates would be 35 percent lower if black children were distributed across family types in the same proportions as all children. Similarly, large effects of family structure were observed for Puerto Rican children.

For other groups, the role of family structure in explaining poverty is small. Our results nevertheless provide another important lesson. It is sometimes assumed that low poverty rates among Asian children reflect high percentages that live in married-couple families. But even if Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, and Asian-Indian children had the same family structure as all children, their poverty rates would remain below the 2000 child poverty rate of 16.3 percent. Simply put, this means that poverty rates within specific family types (e.g., female-headed families) for Asians are lower than national averages.

Finally, Columns 5–8 of Table 3 provide a parallel analysis and conclusions using poverty rates adjusted for cohabitation. For most groups of children, differences between the official poverty rates and the cohabitation-adjusted poverty rates are low. The difference is largest for all three groups of Puerto Rican children—respective poverty would decline from the official rates of 30.4, 32.4, and 42.3 percent in 2000 to 27.7, 31.0, and 40.6 percent if the income of cohabiting couples were treated, for the purposes of calculating poverty, like the income of married couples. The positive difference reflects high rates of cohabitation in the Puerto Rican population.

### ***Maternal Employment and Child Poverty***

*National Trends.* We next consider the role of changing maternal employment in the economic lives of America's children. Table 4 provides the percentages of children whose mothers were not in the labor force, unemployed, worked part time, and worked full time. For 2000, these data show that roughly two-thirds of American children lived with mothers who were in the labor force. The share of full-time workers represents a slight upward shift from 1990 (i.e., 38.9 to 41.8 percent). Changes in these percentages are

TABLE 4  
Maternal Employment and Child Poverty, 1990 and 2000

	Percent of Population		Poverty		Adjusted Poverty	
	1990	2000	1990	2000	1990	2000
Not in labor force	35.2	33.4	28.9	24.6	28.2	23.8
Unemployed	4.4	3.6	42.2	41.6	40.7	39.3
Part time	19.1	17.6	13.7	15.1	13.1	14.0
Full time	38.9	41.8	7.0	8.0	6.4	6.7
Missing or n/a	2.4	3.6	20.0	17.9	19.9	17.2
Total	100.0	100.0	17.8	16.3	17.2	15.3
N	3,208,706	3,578,834				

modest, but they hide the substantial increases in employment among women heading families alone. Over the 1990s, the percentage of children in female-headed families in which the mother was employed either full or part time increased substantially, from 61.6 to 67.3 among ever-married noncohabiting single mothers and from 40.3 to 58.2 among never-married single mothers (data not shown). As we demonstrate below, these increases are a large part of the story of declining child poverty.

Data in Table 4 also indicate that maternal work is strongly linked to child poverty (Columns 3–4). For children whose mothers were employed full time, poverty rates were 7.0 percent in 1990 and 8.0 percent in 2000. In contrast, child poverty rates were 28.9 and 24.6 percent in 1990 and 2000, respectively, if the mother was not in the labor force. Child poverty rates were even higher (41.6 percent in 2000) if mothers were unemployed. These patterns are observed even if we adjust child poverty rates to take into account the cohabiting parent's partner (Table 4, Columns 5–6).

Maternal employment is an important hedge against child poverty, which gives empirical support to claims that promoting work is the best way to promote economic sufficiency and reduce welfare dependency. But, as we show in Table 5, the economic benefits to children from increases in maternal employment clearly vary by family structure. Specifically, we evaluate the poverty-ameliorating effects of maternal employment for each family type (i.e., married couple, single ever married, single never married, and cohabiting, both official and adjusted). For example, in the first row, which provides data on children in married-couple families, we show that the child poverty rate in 2000 would have been 9.1 percent if maternal employment rates had remained unchanged from 1990. This contrasts with the observed 2000 rate of 8.9 percent. The clear implication is that increases in maternal employment during the 1990s placed downward pressure on child poverty rates in married-couple families—increases in maternal employment

TABLE 5

Child Poverty Rates by Family Type: Crude and Standardized by Female Work Patterns

	1990	2000	1990 Standard <sup>1</sup>	2000 All Families Standard <sup>2</sup>
Married couple	9.6	8.9	9.1	8.8
Single ever-married head	41.8	32.4	34.6	36.2
Single never-married head	69.4	54.0	60.9	54.3
Cohabiting couple (official)	43.1	38.7	39.7	39.3
Cohabiting couple (adjusted)	25.1	20.3	21.6	21.0
All family types (official)	17.8	16.3	16.9	
All family types (adjusted)	17.2	15.3	15.8	

<sup>1</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 1990 within-group female work patterns.

<sup>2</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 2000 total population female work patterns.

accounted for 26.0 percent of the decline in child poverty during the past decade.

Similar patterns are observed for children in each of the other family types. The largest effect of changes in maternal employment on child poverty occurred among children living with single never-married mothers. The rise in maternal employment accounted for 44.8 percent of the 15.4 percentage point decline in child poverty in these families ( $[(60.9-54.0) * 100 / (69.4-54.0)]$ ). Thus, maternal work helped the poorest children the most during the 1990s. Overall, changes in maternal employment accounted for 38.9 percent of the decline in official child poverty during the 1990s. Child poverty rates would have declined from 17.8 to 16.9 percent (rather than 16.3 percent) if maternal employment patterns had remained at their 1990 levels.<sup>3</sup>

We next ask the following question: How much of the difference in child poverty across different family types is due to differences in maternal employment? In other words, what would be the 2000 child poverty rate for each family type if maternal employment patterns for each family type were set at national maternal employment rates in 2000 (Table 5, Column 4)? For children in married-couple families, child poverty rates in 2000 would be lower than observed rates, reflecting lower maternal employment rates in married-couple families than in other family types. On the other hand, for each of the other family types, observed child poverty rates in 2000 are lower than the expected poverty rates that would result from mothers having

<sup>3</sup>Maternal employment categories include full time, part time, unemployed, and not in the labor force. Standardizations for all family types include an additional category for no female present. Further dividing part-time employment into 15–34 hours and fewer than 15 hours does not have a discernible effect on standardized poverty rates.

employment patterns similar to those of all women. Clearly, single mothers work more than their married counterparts and often bear child-rearing responsibilities alone, yet their children face much higher rates of poverty.

*Trends by Race, Generation, and Nationality.* Table 6 provides analyses of the effects of changes in maternal employment on changes in poverty among

TABLE 6

Child Poverty Rates: Crude and Standardized by Female Work Patterns, Married Couples

	1990	2000	1990 Standard <sup>1</sup>	2000 All Races Standard <sup>2</sup>	2000 All Races, All Family Types Standard <sup>3</sup>
Non-Hispanic White	6.5	5.1	5.4	5.3	5.2
Third generation	6.5	4.8	5.1	5.1	5.0
Second generation	6.5	6.9	7.0	6.2	6.1
First generation	20.2	17.9	18.5	15.4	15.1
Non-Hispanic Black	17.1	14.1	14.4	16.3	15.9
Third generation	17.6	14.4	14.8	16.6	16.3
Second generation	11.1	10.2	9.9	11.9	11.7
First generation	17.2	21.9	20.6	23.4	23.0
Native Americans	26.4	19.9	21.2	19.5	19.2
Asian	13.3	12.0	11.6	11.9	11.6
Chinese	12.1	11.0	10.9	11.5	11.2
Japanese	3.4	4.1	3.9	3.5	3.4
Filipino	3.7	3.6	2.9	4.6	4.5
Korean	9.7	10.6	9.7	9.7	9.4
Asian Indian	7.4	8.5	7.8	7.6	7.5
Southeast Asian	33.2	23.4	25.8	22.6	22.0
Hispanic	22.4	20.3	19.8	17.8	17.5
Mexican	24.7	22.4	21.7	19.2	18.9
Third generation	16.6	12.0	12.7	12.0	11.9
Second generation	27.4	24.1	23.5	20.3	19.9
First generation	40.9	34.0	32.8	28.6	28.1
Puerto Rican	19.0	16.1	17.2	15.3	15.1
Mainland born	13.8	11.8	12.6	12.0	11.8
Island-born parents	18.8	17.0	17.5	15.7	15.4
Island born	28.6	27.0	28.1	24.3	23.9
Cuban	9.3	9.7	9.4	9.2	9.3
Central American	20.6	17.5	16.5	15.9	15.6
South American	11.5	12.7	12.4	11.8	11.6
Dominican	26.7	22.2	22.9	21.1	20.7
Other Latin American	16.0	17.0	15.9	15.2	14.9
Middle Eastern	5.1	4.0	4.5	4.1	4.2

<sup>1</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 1990 female work patterns within race and family type.

<sup>2</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 2000 female work patterns within family type, all races.

<sup>3</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 2000 female work patterns, all family types, all races.



children in married-couple families. Unlike the overall trends reported in Table 5, these data indicate that changes in maternal employment among married mothers accounted for very little of the decline in child poverty, regardless of race, national origin, or immigrant status. Only in the case of Puerto Ricans did employment increases account for a significant share (40.0, 27.8, 68.8 for mainland-born Puerto Ricans of mainland-born and island-born parents, and island-born Puerto Ricans, respectively) of recent declines in child poverty (e.g.,  $40.0 = [12.6-11.8] * 100 / [13.8-11.8]$ ). If their mothers had not increased their work effort during the 1990s, the 2000 child poverty rates would have been 12.6, 17.5, and 28.1 percent (rather than the observed 11.8, 17.0, and 27.0 percent).

We also calculated standardized poverty rates in 2000 for each subgroup, but used the 2000 maternal employment distribution for children of all married couples as the standard population. Our comparisons between crude and standardized rates suggest a singular conclusion: differences in maternal work patterns among these various population subgroups accounted for little of the inequality in children's poverty rates. As an illustration, if the employment patterns of third-generation white and Mexican children's married mothers were the same, child poverty would still be substantially higher among Mexican children (12.0 percent vs. 5.1 percent). The standardized poverty rates were also very high for third-generation black children (16.6 percent), foreign-born blacks (23.4 percent), Native Americans (19.5 percent), Southeast Asians (22.6 percent), and most Hispanic children. Clearly, differences in maternal work effort are not responsible for the large group to group differences in child poverty. The problem is low pay.

This general conclusion also applies to children living with previously-married single mothers, never-married single mothers, and cohabiting mothers (results for cohabiting mothers not shown, but are available on request). There are some exceptions worth mentioning, as shown in Table 7, especially for children living with never-married single mothers. For example, among Chinese, Japanese, and Asian-Indian children born to never-married women, the 2000 standardized rates are substantially higher than the observed rates. In the case of Japanese children, the observed poverty rate in 2000 was 21.3 percent, which is high in an absolute sense but low in comparison to most other children living with single mothers. The standardized poverty rate, however, was much higher—45.8 percent. The clear implication is that Japanese single mothers have a high level of employment; indeed, 84.3 percent of the children of Japanese never-married mothers worked part time or full time in 2000 (compared with 71.1 percent of all never-married white mothers). The pattern is the same when the national standard is applied (not shown). Greater maternal work participation is one reason Japanese children have disproportionately low poverty rates.

The results for the children of single mothers—both ever married or never married—also reveal the large role that increasing employment has played in spurring reductions in poverty for many of the racial and ethnic groups

TABLE 7

Child Poverty Rates: Crude and Standardized by Female Work Patterns for Noncohabiting Single Women

	Previously-Married Noncohabiting Women			Never-Married Noncohabiting Women		
	1990	2000	1990 Standard <sup>1</sup>	1990	2000	1990 Standard <sup>1</sup>
Non-Hispanic White	33.0	24.9	27.0	59.5	42.5	51.6
Third generation	33.2	24.9	27.1	59.8	42.6	51.9
Second generation	26.3	24.8	24.9	50.7	39.5	40.4
First generation	36.1	35.2	35.6	40.0	39.6	42.7
Non-Hispanic Black	51.5	39.3	41.5	72.0	56.9	63.1
Third generation	52.1	39.9	42.1	72.6	57.4	63.8
Second generation	34.2	28.4	29.2	46.3	41.0	42.4
First generation	32.6	36.8	37.6	42.8	41.0	36.7
Native Americans	55.6	43.9	46.5	72.5	55.9	62.6
Asian	38.3	29.9	31.8	53.1	40.2	45.6
Chinese	30.0	22.5	23.3	41.2	25.9	35.2
Japanese	13.3	16.3	14.9	35.0	21.3	45.8
Filipino	15.3	12.1	12.4	20.7	14.1	13.3
Korean	25.2	24.1	23.3	26.1	39.7	28.2
Asian Indian	39.2	23.5	24.5	33.6	30.9	38.5
Southeast Asian	63.0	47.7	54.2	73.0	55.8	62.9
Hispanic	54.8	44.0	46.8	71.0	58.4	64.3
Mexican	54.6	44.9	47.4	67.9	56.9	61.4
Third generation	53.0	39.3	43.7	69.4	54.5	63.8
Second generation	56.2	50.9	52.0	66.4	60.3	61.0
First generation	62.6	54.5	54.3	63.1	57.9	52.8
Puerto Rican	62.2	46.0	52.8	79.5	64.2	72.9
Mainland born	54.7	37.4	44.0	76.9	61.0	71.2
Island-born parents	64.1	51.9	56.7	79.9	66.7	72.4
Island born	72.1	60.5	64.6	86.0	76.3	80.8
Cuban	41.6	27.7	27.9	68.1	53.7	59.5
Central American	40.0	38.6	38.0	52.7	51.9	51.6
South American	38.0	31.0	31.0	48.6	44.9	44.1
Dominican	66.4	52.1	57.8	71.6	63.6	69.6
Other Latin American	49.8	43.0	43.7	70.1	56.2	62.2
Middle Eastern	22.1	11.8	13.2	48.9	33.3	38.8

<sup>1</sup>2000 poverty rates standardized by 1990 female work patterns within race and family type.

considered here. The evidence is contained in comparisons between the observed 2000 poverty rates and the 2000 standardized rates using 1990 employment patterns (for each group) as the standard. For example, the poverty rate among third-generation white children in previously-married single-mother families declined from 33.2 to 24.9 percent between 1990 and 2000. In the absence of increases in maternal employment over the decade, the

2000 rate would have only declined to 27.1 percent. In other words, changes in maternal employment accounted for 26.5 percent of the 1990s decline in child poverty (i.e.,  $[(27.1-24.9)](100)/(33.2-24.9) = 26.5$  percent).

If we consider only populations of children that experienced comparatively large declines in child poverty during the 1990s, it is clear that increasing maternal employment played a prominent role in the decline. For third-generation black children living with a previously-married single mother, increasing maternal employment accounted for 18 percent of the poverty decline (i.e.,  $[42.1-39.9]*[100]/[52.1-39.9] = 18$  percent). For Native Americans, increases in maternal employment accounted for 22.2 percent of the decline in child poverty, and for Southeast-Asian children, the increase in maternal employment accounted for 42.5 percent of the decline. Increases in maternal employment also accounted for substantial shares of the striking declines in poverty among Mexican third- and second-generation children (32.1 and 20.8 percent, respectively), three groups of Puerto Rican children (38.2, 39.3, and 35.3 percent, respectively), and Dominican children (39.9 percent). Clearly, increases in maternal employment over the 1990s helped lower poverty rates among children living with previously-married single mothers.

This conclusion applies especially for children living with never-married single mothers (which are formed as a result of nonmarital fertility rather than divorce). For most groups, 1990s declines in children poverty were large and unprecedented. Significantly, the shares of these declines that can be attributed to increasing maternal employment also were very large. This was the case for non-Hispanic white children, blacks (except foreign born), Native Americans, most groups of Asians (except Koreans and Filipinos), and all Hispanics, except for Central and South Americans and foreign-born Mexicans. In the case of third-generation Mexican children, for example, poverty rates declined from 69.4 to 54.5 percent between 1990 and 2000. In the absence of increases in maternal employment in the 1990s, the poverty rate in 2000 would have been 63.8 percent. Thus, over 60 percent of the decline in child poverty for this group can be attributed to rising maternal employment. Clearly, poverty among children living with never-married mothers remained high in 2000. Poverty rates would have been higher in the absence of increases in labor-force participation among mothers. Poverty reductions achieved at the cost of time spent with children should perhaps be viewed as a qualified success until the full implications for children's development are known.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our objective has been to track recent trends in poverty rates among diverse minority groups of American children over the 1990s, a period of substantial change in U.S. labor market conditions, welfare and poverty

policy, and children's living arrangements. Achieving our objective is now possible with the recent release of the 2000 5 percent Public Use Microdata Sample, which provides sufficiently sized samples of children with different racial and ethnic backgrounds or national origins. We have updated several previous empirical studies that have partitioned changes in child poverty into different demographic (e.g., changing family structure) or economic components. Our statistical update is propitious in light of current policy debates over the question of how best to help poor children and their parents. Should employment among mothers, including single mothers, be encouraged or supported (e.g., through additional work supports or requirements and tax incentives) or should public policy (e.g., welfare reform legislation) place new emphasis on promoting two-parent married-couple families as a context for child bearing and child rearing?

Our demographic accounting framework has identified the comparative effects of changing maternal employment and family structure on child poverty. Nationally, maternal employment growth during the 1990s rather than changing family structure accounted for the largest share of the recent decline in child poverty.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the pre-1990 period, when children's living arrangements shifted substantially away from married-couple families to "at-risk" single-parent families, the 1990s revealed comparatively little change in children's living arrangements. Family change is no longer giving demographic impetus to increasing child poverty. Maternal employment among single mothers, however, has been enormously important in placing downward pressure on child poverty for the diverse populations of children, including the historically disadvantaged.

Our study began with the premise that national declines in child poverty may conceal substantial diversity of the economic and family lives of children. Recent trends may also hide different economic trajectories that portend different social and economic outcomes in adulthood. Indeed, differences in maternal employment and family structure (especially differences in female headship) may fuel racial and ethnic inequality both among today's children and tomorrow's adults. Our results do not lend themselves to simple conclusions. On the one hand, changes in family structure have not played a large role in reducing child poverty in the 1990s for any of the 25 groups considered in this article. On the other hand, differences in family structure continue to account for a large part of observed differences in child poverty among minority groups. For example, poverty rates among third-generation black and white children were 34.0 and 9.3 percent, respectively, in 2000. Black children's poverty rates were more than three times greater than white children's rates. If these black and white children had the same distributions across family types, black children's poverty rate would be less than twice as large of the poverty rate for whites, or 1.9 times greater.

<sup>4</sup>Child poverty inched up since 2000 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Mills, 2004). Although 17.6 percent of children are poor today, this figure is still lower than any time since 1980.

Clearly, racial inequality among children cannot be discussed in isolation of the currently large-group differences in family structure. Racial and ethnic differences in work patterns, however, accounted for very little of the racial and ethnic variation in child poverty rates.

Our analyses also suggest that cohabitation may benefit some children from a strictly economic standpoint, that is, poverty rates are lower if we optimistically assume that cohabiting partners share their incomes and other resources with co-residential children. When the cohabiting partners' incomes are pooled, poverty rates are cut by nearly one-half for children in these households. Of course, whether cohabitation truly improves children's economic circumstances depends on whether partners actually pool their incomes and share household expenses. Moreover, even if income is pooled, the long-term economic benefits of cohabitation for children are ambiguous; most cohabiting unions are short-lived and dissolution rates are usually high for cohabiting couples that later marry (Graefe and Lichter, 1999). Cohabitation, on balance, is no replacement for marriage in the lives of most children. We also have shown that overall and race-specific poverty rates and trends were not seriously misrepresented using the official poverty rate, which in most instances does not consider cohabiting couples as a family unit in calculating family income used to determine poverty. The reason is clear: children in cohabiting unions, although economically disadvantaged, account for only a small share of all children (i.e., under 5 percent).

In the final analysis, recent changes in maternal employment have provided a hedge against rising poverty and a route to economic self-sufficiency for growing shares of single mothers. At the same time, our article has been rather narrowly focused on children's changing poverty rates over the 1990s. Our results do not speak to other equally important questions, such as whether rising maternal employment and reductions in poverty among families have contributed positively to children's emotional and cognitive development (Duncan and Chase-Lansdale, 2002). In the end, this may be the question that ultimately matters most for America's future.

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