

## How Poverty Programs Aided Children From One Generation to the Next

For families in West Virginia, which has had especially sharp drops in child poverty over the past three decades, the shift has played out in ways not fully captured by statistics.

By Jason DeParle Photographs by Maddie McGarvey

For this article, the reporter worked closely for five months with researchers from a nonpartisan group to document the decline in child poverty and the forces pushing it lower.

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HUNTINGTON, W.Va. — When Cecelia Jackson was born nearly three decades ago, about a quarter of American children were poor, a head count of hardship that for most of her childhood included her.

Her father, a truck driver with a grade-school education, injured his arm when Ms. Jackson was young, then raised five children on a disability check. Food ran short, worries long, and she remembers exactly one vacation, an eight-hour drive to the beach.

“We lived on the struggle bus,” she said.

Ms. Jackson’s children struggle less. Like her father, Ms. Jackson earns a modest wage — as a counselor at a Head Start program — but she benefits from a safety net that does much more for low-income parents, especially those like her who work. The share of children the government considers poor has fallen by more than half, and Ms. Jackson’s children — Conner, Ezekiel and Lyric — are not among them.

While she and her husband, Jarren, a student and musician, earn less than \$21,000 after taxes and work expenses, they receive about as much in government aid, which doubles their net income. That degree of support, partly meant to compensate for the prevalence of low wages, has become common among low-income working families, and it lifts the Jacksons from thousands of dollars below the poverty line to thousands above it.



Cecelia Jackson faced food shortages when she was a child. With the help of government aid, she doesn't have the same worries for her children.



Jarren Jackson with his daughter, Lyric. Mr. Jackson is a student and musician.

“Absolutely it makes a difference,” Ms. Jackson said. “The kids get plenty to eat. If they’re sick, we can take them to the doctor. I’ve got dreams and goals not to need it one day, but for now I’m grateful it’s here.”

Child poverty has plunged over the last generation, and few places have experienced larger declines than West Virginia, a state that once epitomized childhood deprivation. Poverty among the state’s children fell nearly three-quarters from 1993 to 2019, according to a comprehensive analysis by Child Trends, a nonpartisan research group, conducted in partnership with The New York Times. That compares to a 59 percent drop nationwide.

If West Virginia’s child poverty rate was as high now as in 1993, nearly 80,000 additional children would be poor, a population larger than the state capital, Charleston.

The statistical progress is impressive, but children escape poverty one complicated family story at a time. A visit to Huntington, a rusting Appalachian river town where tales of hardscrabble childhoods abound, shows how an expanded safety net offers children protection their parents often lacked and profoundly affects families’ economic and emotional lives.

That safety net is less the product of a unified vision than a series of ad hoc programs that reflect both liberal and conservative ideas. Over the past quarter-century, tough welfare laws cut cash aid to nonworking families, but tax credits for low-wage workers expanded and overall spending grew.



Few states have experienced larger declines in child poverty than West Virginia, which has long epitomized childhood deprivation.



An expanded safety net offers children in Huntington protection their parents often lacked.

In a series of conversations, the Jacksons spoke in unusual detail about the impact of aid on their budgets, mental health and parenting style. So did other families at the Head Start center where Ms. Jackson works. Collectively their stories offer a vivid if unscientific sampling of life on the front lines of child-poverty reduction.

### How the Safety Net Lifts the Jacksons Out of Poverty

The couple has three children: Conner, 9; Ezekiel, 5; and Lyric, 2. Roughly half of the family's income consists of government aid. Without it, they would be considered poor. With it, they are not.

#### Without government benefits

**\$20,500** in total income

**66%** of poverty line

ESTIMATED 2022  
POVERTY LINE: \$31,200

#### With government benefits

**\$42,600** in total income

**137%** of poverty line

WIC \$400

Unemployment insurance \$1,500

School lunch program \$2,000

Child tax credit \$3,200

Earned-income tax credit \$6,900

SNAP (food stamps) \$8,100

Net earnings \$20,500  
\$24,400 in earnings, minus payroll taxes  
and work expenses

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Note: Estimates are based on family reports of earnings and on current tax and benefit policies, and they are rounded to the nearest hundred. They do not include temporary pandemic assistance. The Census Bureau assumes work expenses of \$2,060 per full-time worker. • By Alicia Parlapiano

Nutrition programs subsidize the lactose-free milk that Lyric, 2, requires. Medicaid financed an operation that helped Ezekiel, 5, overcome a speech delay. Tax credits helped the Jacksons buy a new car, which they drove to a family vacation of the sort Ms. Jackson never knew as a child.

The Jacksons respond to their financial pressures in contrasting ways. Mr. Jackson, 28, is an affable jazz musician seemingly immune to stress. Ms. Jackson, 27, worries and apologizes her way through the day. Both take pride in their devotion as parents — “we’re an incredibly close family,” Mr. Jackson said — and say the aid raises their children’s chances of long-term success.

“We’ve gone with it and gone without it,” Mr. Jackson said. “The difference is huge.”



Ms. Jackson dropped out of high school after she had her first child, and faced a strict welfare system. “It kicked my butt into gear — in a good way.”

## Cornbread, beans and potatoes.

When Ms. Jackson describes the challenges of growing up poor, she starts with location. “I grew up in a cemetery,” she said. Her father owned a trailer in rural Ohio with a graveyard on three sides. “I played beside the graves.”

Though money was short even when her father worked, his injury increased the hardship and left him angry and depressed. Her mother stretched food stamps with a bare-budget meal that remains in Ms. Jackson’s repertoire: cornbread, beans and potatoes.

The opioid epidemic that raced across the Ohio Valley wreaked havoc with some of her older siblings. As nieces and nephews took refuge in the trailer, Ms. Jackson spent much of her childhood helping to care for them.

By the time she reached high school, her family had moved across the Ohio River to Huntington, and Ms. Jackson was essentially raising a sister's toddler. She already felt hopelessly behind in school when she discovered she was pregnant. She gave birth her senior year and dropped out, with more worries than plans and little help from the baby's father.

As a poor single mother in 2012, Ms. Jackson turned to a welfare system that had undergone profound changes in her short lifetime. There was more help for parents who worked but less for those who did not, with time limits and work requirements on cash aid.



When Ms. Jackson was in high school, her family moved across the Ohio River to Huntington.



“He was just like a whole new world I didn’t think I was good enough to have,” Ms. Jackson said of her husband, Jarren.

In explaining the declines in child poverty, liberals emphasize benefit expansions in an age of wage stagnation. Conservatives argue that tough welfare laws pushed more people to work. Ms. Jackson says both developments affected her.

“It kicked my butt into gear — in a good way,” she said of the welfare time limit. Within a year, she had her equivalency degree and a full-time job as a caregiver for the elderly, which she loved.

That is when she met Mr. Jackson, a student at Marshall University who played seven instruments, talked about his jazz hero, Cannonball Adderley, and was kind to her son. “He was just like a whole new world I didn’t think I was good enough to have,” she said. The interracial relationship drew disapproval from both of their families — she is white, he is Black — but the resistance faded with time.

After the birth of Ezekiel, their first child together, they hit a period that they call “the rough time.” Ms. Jackson was immobilized with postpartum depression and lost her caretaking job. Mr. Jackson quit school to work at a call center but earned too little to keep up with the rent. They moved to avoid eviction.

The depression lasted more than a year, but with the help of medication Ms. Jackson got better. She got a job at a Head Start center that “makes my heart happy.” But after nearly five years, she earns only \$11.28 per hour for the 10-month school year, with summers unpaid. Working for a government program leaves her needing government aid. Without it she would be raising her children about \$11,000 below the poverty line (about \$31,200 in Huntington for a family of five).

“We work really hard, but we appreciate the help,” she said.



Josie Smith earns less than \$12 an hour, while \$15,000 in tax credits and nutritional aid lifts her children out of poverty.

### **‘A better fighting chance.’**

The Head Start center is filled with families in similar circumstances, earning tenuous livings at the low end of the service economy and escaping poverty with government help. With tight budgets, limited prospects and a poverty line set so low that many nonpoor families still experience hardship, the success they embody may seem modest. But compared to poverty, it is progress nonetheless.

It takes little to convince Josie Smith, a 32-year-old caregiver, that child poverty has fallen since her youth. She grew up in a trailer so ramshackle it drew repeated child welfare inspections. “We were way, way poorer than we are now,” she said. “That’s why I’ve been working this hard,” to offer her children more.

Still, after nearly six years at an agency that serves the mentally ill, Ms. Smith earns less than \$12 an hour, while nearly \$16,000 in tax credits and nutritional aid lifts her children, August, 8, and Belle, 5, out of poverty. Government assistance accounts for about 47 percent of her net income.

As a single mother with two children and a full-time job, Ms. Smith often wears the weary look of a woman with more tasks than time, but evidence of her conscientious parenting abounds. She coaches T-ball, dresses as the Easter bunny for an annual egg hunt and cares for two huskies and a bearded dragon named Norbert.





Government assistance accounts for about 45 percent of Ms. Smith's net income.



Ms. Smith with her daughter, Belle.

With Medicaid, she got August the ear tubes he needed to address a developmental delay. And government assistance helped make her a homeowner; after 250 hours of volunteer work to qualify for a Habitat for Humanity house, she used her tax credits for the down payment.

The tax money also permits an annual trip to Virginia Beach — an eight-hour drive from Huntington and a world away from its worries. “Making memories” is how she describes the allure, laughing at a cellphone video of Belle chasing sea gulls. When a school assignment required August to choose a word for each letter of his mother’s first name, the “O” was automatic.

“Ocean,” he wrote.

(Ms. Smith recently received an insurance settlement for a two-year-old car wreck, which she is using in part to take online college classes.)

While aid boosted Ms. Smith’s ascent, it cushioned a co-worker’s fall. Until two years ago, Patricia Shepperson and her husband, Al, had two incomes to draw on while raising their daughter, Rosalee. But health problems cost Mr. Shepperson his job, and their income has fallen in half. His weight has soared to 400 pounds, and he is fighting arthritis, diabetes, depression and self-recrimination.

“I should be working,” he said. “My family deserves better.”



Patricia Shepperson with her daughter, Rosalee, and husband, Al. The family faced financial troubles after Mr. Shepperson stopped working amid health problems, cutting the family's income by half.



Ms. Shepperson now receives tax credits, after years of having them garnished to repay student loans.

Though Ms. Shepperson works full time at a job she has held for 13 years, her hourly wage of about \$12.40 would leave the family poor without significant aid.

Part of the assistance comes from subsidized housing, which is so limited nationwide it reaches only about one in four eligible families. During their yearslong wait for help, the Sheppersons lived in a private apartment infested with rats and bats. The move to public housing cut their rent by about half and provided Rosalee a trim room with pink curtains. Mr. Shepperson recently added a handmade sign anointing her “Princess Rosalee.”

The Sheppersons get two types of nutritional aid —from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (also called food stamps), and school meals — and Ms. Shepperson now receives tax credits, after years of having them garnished to repay student loans. In a family down to one income, the annual cash bonus is prized. This year they used it to repair the car, pay an overdue utility bill and buy Rosalee a tablet computer.

Mr. Shepperson said the parallel decline of his health and income had “been absolute hell” on everyone, including Rosalee, but he credited the government support for helping to keep her housed and fed. “It gives her a better fighting chance,” he said.



Lyric slept at the Head Start center where Ms. Jackson works.

### **Getting ‘to experience life more than we did.’**

While critics of government aid often warn that it fosters a sense of entitlement, what is striking in the case of Ms. Jackson, the Head Start worker, is how little entitlement she seems to feel. She apologizes constantly about being in need and describes the help as something she appreciates more than deserves.

“I’m not entitled to it, the assistance,” she said. “I never wanted someone else to raise my kids. I need to take responsibility, and I try.”

With his wife’s encouragement, Mr. Jackson has returned to school full time at an online university that offers a music production degree. With a flexible schedule, he also has a few paying students and provides most of the child care. He hopes to open a studio someday but says he feels guilty about not earning more now.

Many supporters of aid applaud it for letting people like Mr. Jackson invest in their futures; some critics would say it lets him avoid present obligations, at taxpayers’ expense. Mr. Jackson himself is divided.

“There are moments when I’m like, ‘Man, I should just quit, get a 9-to-5,’” he said.

Ms. Jackson said a second income would help greatly but predicted the degree will pay off.

The average family that the safety net lifts from poverty gets half its income — nearly \$18,000 a year — from government benefits, the Child Trends analysis found. The analysis used the Supplemental Poverty Measure, the Census Bureau definition of poverty that best accounts for government aid and local living costs. That degree of support is the Jacksons’ circumstance.



Ms. Jackson, right, earns a modest wage as a counselor at a Head Start program.



Ms. Jackson apologizes constantly about being in need and describes aid programs as something she appreciates more than deserves. Maddie McGarvey for The New York Times

More than \$10,000 consists of nutritional benefits, mostly from SNAP but also from free school meals. Both programs have expanded eligibility in the past generation and more than doubled the share of children they remove from poverty.

The Jacksons also benefit from an expanded medical safety net, which since the early 1990s has cut the number of uninsured children by about two-thirds. All five receive Medicaid, and for Ezekiel it was transformational; an operation when he was 2 removed the tissue that restricted his tongue and kept him from talking. Medicaid also spared the family a potentially bankrupting bill last year when Mr. Jackson punctured his lung and broke his ribs in a car accident.

No policy has done more to reduce child poverty than the growth of refundable tax credits, which provide annual cash bonuses to low-wage workers. Between the earned-income tax credit and the child tax credit, the Jacksons receive about \$10,000 a year.

Much of this year's money went toward a down payment on a tiny new blue Ford EcoSport, which they named "The Blueberry." Two previous cars, both used, had failed, and after a winter of walking they wanted a reliable ride, though the car is so small they appear to be performing a magic trick when they pack inside.



Zeke looking out the window of the car the Jacksons were able to buy with the help of the earned-income tax credit and the child tax credit.





The Jacksons earn about \$20,000 after taxes and expenses, and they receive about as much in government aid.

In addition, they bought a used washing machine, took the children shopping for clothes and redecorated their rooms, with a plaque for Lyric that says “Sweet Baby, I love you more than all the stars in the sky.”

Tellingly, they also took the kind of trips that eluded Ms. Jackson during a childhood surrounded by tombstones. Destinations included two amusement parks and the Columbus, Ohio, zoo — two hours by Blueberry. An expert in child development might call the adventures “enrichment activities.” The Jacksons use a simpler term: fun.

“It may be a little luxurious,” Ms. Jackson said, apologizing again. “But we bond as a family.”

“If we have that little extra, we can go do things,” Mr. Jackson said. “Our kids get to experience life more than we did.”

This summer, the Jacksons took the children to Virginia Beach, a family reunion in Maryland and a gig that Mr. Jackson’s band, the Heavy Hitters, landed at the Nashville Margaritaville. They are not poor, statistically speaking, and did not feel that way.

“When I was a kid, my parents argued about money all the time. I felt that burden,” Ms. Jackson said. With an income comprised equally of wages and assistance, “I do think I give my kids more opportunity.”



The share of children the government considers poor has fallen by more than half, and Ms. Jackson's children are not among them.