NEPC Review: Measuring Student Poverty: Developing Accurate Counts for School Funding, Accountability, and Research (Urban Institute, December 2019)

Reviewed by:

Michael Harwell
University of Minnesota

March 2020

National Education Policy Center

School of Education
University of Colorado Boulder
nepc.colorado.edu

Acknowledgements

NEPC Staff

Kevin Welner
NEPC Director

William Mathis
Managing Director

Alex Molnar
Publications Director

Suggested Citation: Harwell, M.R. (2020). *NEPC Review: "Measuring Student Poverty: Developing Accurate Counts for School Funding, Accountability, and Research."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/student-poverty.

Funding: This review was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice.

NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

NEPC Review: Measuring Student Poverty: Developing Accurate Counts for School Funding, Accountability, and Research (Urban Institute, December 2019)

Reviewed by:

Michael Harwell
University of Minnesota

March 2020

Executive Summary

A recent Urban Institute report highlights how legislative changes have led to the steady decline of the use of participation in the free- and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program as a measure of student poverty. The Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act mandates that schools enrolled in CEP have at least 40% of their students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch in the year before enrolling. CEP schools provide free breakfasts and lunches to all students regardless of any given student's household income or enrollment in safety net programs. Thus FRPL participation is 100% in a school and can no longer be sensibly used as a poverty measure. In looking at how states now make poverty-related determinations for school funding and accountability purposes, the report provides an important snapshot of the crazy quilt pattern of enrollment in safety net programs. However, the report does not take a clear position on a question that should significantly influence its methods, conclusions, and impact: Is it sufficient to rely on enrollment in safety net programs to define and measure student poverty, or is a change needed in its definition and measurement? The report seems to lean towards the latter but no definition (new or otherwise) of student poverty is provided, and alternative measures of poverty are presented without critique. The report is also silent on whether a poverty measure should be related to important student outcomes such as achievement. As such, the report is very useful in describing the current dilemma, but it offers little specific guidance on how to move forward.

NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

NEPC Review: Measuring Student Poverty: Developing Accurate Counts for School Funding, Accountability, and Research (Urban Institute, December 2019)

Reviewed by:

Michael Harwell
University of Minnesota

March 2020

I. Introduction

Measuring Student Poverty: Developing Accurate Counts for School Funding, Accountability, and Research is authored by Erica Greenberg, Kristin Blagg, and Macy Rainer and published by the Urban Institute.[1] The report begins by highlighting the rise of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010[2] and the associated decline of FRPL participation as a measure of student poverty. The report points out that FRPL eligibility is tied to federal poverty levels or household enrollment in safety net programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program. The well-documented deficiencies of FRPL participation as a measure of poverty[3] are acknowledged, but a critical advantage of this measure is rightly highlighted: FRPL participation rates (numbers of students in poverty defined by eligibility for a free- or reduced-price lunch) represent a standardized measure of student poverty in the sense that eligibility criteria are constant across states and schools.

The report targets (i) State and school administrators who collect, report, and synthesize student poverty data on K-12 students in public schools, typically aggregating these data and reporting up to federal data collections such as the Department of Education's Common Core of Data, and (ii) Users of student poverty data for school funding, accountability, and research purposes. An important distinction is drawn between identifying individual students in poverty for accountability purposes and aggregating the number of students in poverty in a school district for funding purposes.

Schools must have at least 40% of their students eligible for a free- or reduced-price lunch in the prior school year to enroll in CEP, but once enrolled, all students receive a free breakfast

and lunch regardless of any given student's household income or enrollment in a safety net program. Thus FRPL participation is 100% in schools enrolled in CEP (approximately 65% of eligible schools have enrolled) and FRPL can no longer serve as a measure of poverty. The report describes the current reliance of states on household enrollment in safety net programs such as SNAP or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to identify students in poverty. Alternative poverty measures are mentioned, along with methods used to statistically adjust student poverty counts.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The findings are summarized in three figures used to document the crazy quilt pattern of current measures (enrollment in safety net programs) employed by states to replace or supplement FRPL participation. The conclusions of the report are that (i) States currently rely on household participation in safety net programs to count students in poverty, with some states exploring other measures (e.g., census estimates of poverty), (ii) The variety of safety net programs and their enrollment requirements produces state-by-state differences in accountability and funding patterns that may exacerbate over- or under-counting the number of students in poverty, and (iii) Administrators and poverty data users (including researchers) need to work collaboratively to identify and implement alternative measures that accurately count students in poverty.

The report's findings provide ample evidence of (i) and (ii). For example, 45 states include participation in TANF when determining poverty status for accountability purposes, 15 states include participation in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), 15 include students experiencing homelessness, 26 include students living in foster care, and 14 include those with migrant status. Similar variation in poverty measures exists for allocating school funding. The implication of state-by-state variation in how poverty status is determined is that different measures used by different states to identify students in poverty can produce different accountability and funding patterns even if the same pool of students were measured. For example, the report argues that Hispanic and Latinx students and English Language Learners typically use safety net programs less than their counterparts, making it more likely these students will be undercounted in some states, which means less funding for schools.

Conclusion (iii) follows from (i) and (ii), and several examples of alternative measures are mentioned:

- Parent education[4]
- Household income reported in tax filings to the Internal Revenue[5] or surveys by researchers or public agencies
- Community socioeconomic characteristics available in census-type sources linked to geocoded student address or school location data[6]
- Receipt of additional safety net programs (e.g., Medicaid in most states, state benefit programs)
- Student mobility or other indicators of instability[7]

- Early exposure to poverty captured in longitudinal income data or through enrollment in the Women, Infants, and Children program[8]
- Overexposure or cumulative measures of poverty similar to Michelmore and Dynarski, 2017[9]

Conclusion (iii) also seems to be the basis of questions posed at the end of the report that are intended to guide future collaborations:

- What do we mean by low income, economically disadvantaged, and at-risk?
- How do we match measures of student poverty with goals for policy, practice, and research?
- To what extent can (and should) we aim for comparability across state and district lines?
- How do we ensure students do not go uncounted?
- What guidance and supporting resources are needed and from what levels of government?
- How do we overcome communications barriers and navigate toward the next generation of measures?

Providing examples of successful collaborations between state and school administrators and poverty data users would have been helpful because these collaborations seem likely to be challenging.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The use of national databases to assess student poverty status provides a clear rationale for highlighting state-by-state variation in the findings and conclusion describing how poverty status is determined, and also supports the potential role of alternative measures to count students in poverty.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The use of national aggregated databases to describe what states are doing to replace or supplement FRPL participation to identify students in poverty understandably did not involve much research literature. The review of alternative measures of poverty was reasonable but incomplete. Including recommendations from the U. S. Department of Education 2012[10] report, *Improving the measurement of socioeconomic status for the National Assessment of Educational Progress: A theoretical foundation*, and the U. S. Department of Education 2015[11] report, *Forum guide to alternative measures of socioeconomic status in education data systems*, would have bolstered the framing of key issues surrounding alternative measures.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The data for the report come from trustworthy sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data and the American Community Survey as compiled by the Urban Institute. The methodology applied to these state-level data (simple plots and frequencies in three figures) credibly documents variation among states in how students in poverty are currently identified.

However, the report does not take a clear position on an important question that should significantly influence its methods, conclusions, and impact: Is it sufficient to rely on enrollment in safety net programs to define and measure student poverty, or is a change needed? Put another way, does the use of enrollment in safety net programs to define and measure student poverty simply need tweaking or is a more dramatic change in its definition and measurement appropriate? The report seems to lean towards the latter, with the Executive Summary stating, "This framing paper identifies key issues surrounding the use of alternative measures of student poverty." However, there is relatively little attention given to alternative measures and no clear statement concerning the adequacy of current measures. Perhaps this is because the two groups of stakeholders targeted by the report (state and school administrators, poverty data users including researchers) have different tasks, responsibilities, and investments in the current system for counting the number of students in poverty. Whatever the reason(s), not taking a clear position on this question weakens the report as a platform for change.

The report could also have benefited from additional clarity in five complementary ways. First, titles are important, and the report's title is misleading because methods for accurately counting students in poverty are not developed. A better title would be *Measuring Student Poverty: A Review of Current and Proposed Methods for Counting Students in Poverty for School Funding, Accountability, and Research Purposes*.

Second, the report uses the descriptors *poverty*, *economic disadvantage*, *low income*, *at-risk*, and *low socioeconomic status (SES)* interchangeably. This practice may be appropriate for administrative purposes, but this is often not the case for research purposes. This distinction is important because the conclusion that moving forward, state and school administrators and poverty data users (including researchers) need to collaborate suggests a single descriptor is needed (e.g., *poverty* or *economic disadvantage*) to help ensure clear communication among stakeholders. Relatedly, the descriptor (e.g., *poverty*) should be clearly defined and the importance of identifying students in poverty beyond legislative or policy mandates clarified. The research literature has thoroughly documented the negative impact of poverty on multiple outcomes for children, including educational,[12,13] which suggests a measure of poverty should be related to important student outcomes. The report links the number of students in poverty to school funding intended to ameliorate its effects, but different definitions of poverty may produce different impacts on important student outcomes. For example, if a student's poverty status is defined by enrollment in a safety net program, but there is little evidence of the impact of enrollment on achievement, this definition provides a less useful measure of poverty for school funding, accountability, and research purposes.

Third, the importance of reporting errors in safety net programs is acknowledged but no empirical evidence of their magnitude or direction is provided. The report points out that audits of the FRPL program have produced misclassification rates of about 20[14], but does not provide similar evidence regarding enrollment in safety net programs. For example, what percentage of students eligible for different safety net programs are denied enrollment and what percentage not eligible are enrolled?

Fourth, the report presents hypothetical data to illustrate a point that could be made in a few sentences: Changing the definition of poverty can change the composition of the group of students in poverty, and hence change the group's average score on outcomes such as achievement, although the underlying scores do not change. Thus administrators presenting achievement data should do so carefully; for example, present data for CEP and non-CEP schools separately.

Fifth, the questions posed at the end of the report (What do we mean by *low income*, *economically disadvantaged*, and *at-risk*? . . . How do we overcome communications barriers and navigate toward the next generation of measures?) should have appeared at the beginning and guided the report's organization and arguments, because these are the important questions.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's use of aggregated national data effectively illustrates the different measures currently used by states to identify students in poverty. The conclusion that administrators and other users of poverty data need to collaborate to evaluate existing measures and develop and study new measures is important, but no specific guidance is offered. For example, summarizing (or calling for) research that provides evidence of the accuracy of a student's poverty status based on enrollment in safety net programs would help to clarify the adequacy of this measure. Alternative measures to determine poverty status are briefly described but no comparative evaluation of these measures is provided, perhaps because none exists. The report properly states that additional research of these and other alternative measures is needed, which presumably would include the use of large empirical datasets to allow the determination of student poverty status to be compared across measures.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

State and school administrators and users of student poverty data will find the report's summary of current state practices for identifying students in poverty useful. The description of alternative poverty measures provides a handy snapshot of measures under consideration to complement or replace FRPL participation. On the other hand, the absence of a clear position on the adequacy of the current definition and measurement of student poverty as

enrollment in a safety net program, whether changes in its definition and measurement are needed, and the report's brief description of alternative measures provided without critique, unnecessarily limits its impact. The call for collaboration between state and school administrators and poverty data users moving forward is important, but the absence of successful examples of doing so also limits the report's potential impact. Finally, the report missed an opportunity to take a position on the need for a national (standardized) measure of student poverty to replace FRPL participation, which might be based on alternative measures or come from a sustained effort to develop new measures to accurately count students in poverty.

Notes and References

1 Greenberg, E., Blagg, K., & Rainer, M. (2019, December). *Measuring student poverty: Developing accurate counts for school funding, accountability, and research*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved December 22, 2019, from https://www.urban.org/research/publication/measuring-student-poverty/view/full%20report

2 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-296, 124 Stat. 3183 (2010). Washington, DC. Retrieved January 31, 2020, from https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/PL_111-296.pdf

3 Harwell, M.R., & LeBeau, B. (2010). Student eligibility for a free lunch as an SES measure in educational research. *Educational Researcher*, *39*, 120-131.

4 Owens, A., Reardon, S.F., & Jencks, C. (2016). Income segregation between school and school districts. *American Educational Research Journal 53*(4), 1159–1197.

5 Domina, T., Pharris-Ciurej, N., Penner, A.M., Penner, E.K., Brummet, Q., Porter, S.R., & Sanabria, T. (2018). Is free and reduced-price lunch a valid measure of educational disadvantage? *Educational Researcher 47*(9), 539–555.

6 Geverdt, D., & Nixon, L. (2018). *Sidestepping the box: Designing a supplemental poverty indicator for school neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved January 31, 2020, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/docs/2017039.pdf

7 Sandstrom, H., & Huerta, S. (2013). *The negative effects of instability on child development: A research synthesis*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. Retrieved January 31, 2020, from https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/32706/412899-The-Negative-Effects-of-Instability-on-Child-Development-A-Research-Synthesis.PDF

8 Duncan, G.J., & Magnuson, K. (2013). The long reach of early childhood poverty. In W.J.J. Yeung and M.T. Yap (Eds.), *Economic stress, human capital, and families in Asia: Research and policy changes*. New York, NY: Springer.

9 Michelmore, K., & Dynarski, S. (2017). The gap within the gap: Using longitudinal data to understand income differences in educational outcomes. *AERA Open 3*(1), 1–18.

10 U.S. Department of Education. (2012). *Improving the measurement of socioeconomic status for the National Assessment of Educational Progress: A theoretical foundation (NCES 2013-009)*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved January 30, 2020, from https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/researchcenter/Socioeconomic_Factors.pdf

11 U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Forum guide to alternative measures of socioeconomic status in education data systems* (NCES 2015–158). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved January 30, 2020, from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015158.pdf

12 Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *Future of Children, 7,* 55–71.

13 Duncan, G., Magnuson, K., & Votruba-Drzal, E. Children and socioeconomic status. In M.H. Bornstein and T. Leventhal (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology and developmental science (Vol 4*): *Ecological settings and processes in developmental systems*. New York, NY: Wiley.

14 U.S. Department of Agriculture (2015). *Error in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program: Findings from the second access, participation, eligibility and certification study (APEC II, Vol 1.)* Retrieved January 30, 2020, from https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/APECII-Summary.pdf