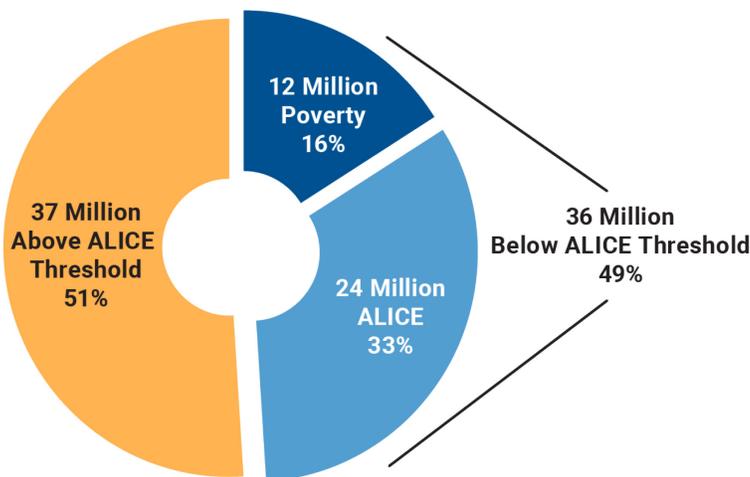


CHILDREN IN FINANCIAL HARDSHIP: UNITED STATES

The number of children growing up in financial hardship in the United States has been systematically undercounted. For decades, policymakers and community stakeholders have relied on the outdated Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to understand the extent of financial hardship in their communities. According to the FPL, 16% of children in the U.S. (12 million) lived in poverty in 2019. Yet United For ALICE data shows that another 33% (24 million) – twice as many – were also growing up in hardship, in households that earned above the FPL but not enough to afford the basics in the communities where they lived.

The reality is that 36 million children in the U.S. – 49% of all children – lived in a household with income below the [ALICE Threshold of Financial Survival](#) in 2019. These households included families in poverty as well as those who were **ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed**. ALICE households don't earn enough to afford the essentials of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, a smartphone plan, and taxes – the basics needed to live and work in the modern economy. There are children below the ALICE Threshold [in all states](#), at rates ranging from 33% in North Dakota to 57% in Georgia and Louisiana.

Children by Household, United States, 2019 Number of Children in U.S. = 72 million



Note: This research uses the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) and focuses on children, whose ALICE status is determined by their household's income compared to local cost of living. The data does not include children who are unhoused or living in group quarters. In this brief, percentages are rounded to whole numbers for ease of reading, which may result in percentages totaling 99% or 101%. All numbers are presented in the [ALICE Children Data Dashboard](#).

Sources: ALICE Threshold, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, PUMS, 2019



KEY FINDINGS

- Nearly half (49%) of children in the U.S. lived in households experiencing financial hardship in 2019. While 16% were below the FPL, an additional 33% – twice as many – were ALICE.
- While there are children below the ALICE Threshold across all demographic groups, 70% of Black children and 68% of Hispanic children lived in households with income below the ALICE Threshold in 2019, compared to 36% of White children.
- Having working parents or guardians does not guarantee financial stability: 28% of children in households with two adults in the labor force were still below the ALICE Threshold in 2019.
- Children below the ALICE Threshold often lack access to resources ranging from stable housing and public assistance to education and broadband services. More than 23 million children below the ALICE Threshold did not participate in SNAP and 11 million had no high-speed internet access at home in 2019.

WHO ARE ALICE CHILDREN?

Children below the ALICE Threshold are those under age 18 living in households with income below the basic cost of living for their communities. In 2019, 17% of children below the ALICE Threshold in the U.S. were infants (0–2 years), 12% were preschool-age (3–4 years), and 70% were school-age (5–17 years). Children in struggling households are from all demographic groups; they include children born in the U.S. and abroad, of all abilities and races/ethnicities, living with parents or guardians who are married or single, working or not working. Children below the ALICE Threshold live in rural, urban, and suburban areas.

Race/Ethnicity and Nativity

In 2019, the largest number of children below the ALICE Threshold in the U.S. were found in the largest racial/ethnic populations: Children below the Threshold were predominantly White (13 million), Hispanic (12.6 million), and Black (7 million). Yet Black and Hispanic children are disproportionately ALICE — a result of [persistent discrimination and systemic barriers](#) that limit their families' access to resources and opportunities for financial stability. In 2019, 70% of Black, 68% of Hispanic, and 62% of American Indian/Alaska Native children lived in households below the ALICE Threshold, compared to 39% of Asian and 36% of White children.

Nativity and English-speaking ability also have an impact. Of the 2.5 million children in the U.S. who were born outside the country (3% of all children), 65% lived below the ALICE Threshold in 2019, compared to 49% for those born in the U.S. Rates were even higher for children living in a family with limited English-speaking ability, with 84% below the Threshold.

Disability Status

There were over 3 million children with a disability living in the U.S. — 4% of all children — in 2019. However, this is likely a significant underestimate as the number of [children being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) in the U.S. is substantially higher. Children with a disability were more likely to live in households below the ALICE Threshold (61%) than those without a disability (49%). The most common disability, impacting 2.3 million children age 5 and older, was a cognitive difficulty due to a physical, mental, or emotional issue — having trouble remembering, concentrating, or making decisions.

Having a household member with a disability affects everyone in the family. In 2019 there were 14.7 million children living in a household where someone had a disability, and 62% were below the ALICE Threshold. When a parent or guardian had a disability, 65% of children were below the Threshold.

Key Terms

- **ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed** — households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but cannot afford the basic cost of living in their county. While the FPL for a family of four in 2019 was \$25,750, the average bare-minimum cost of living for a family according to the ALICE Household Survival Budget was just over \$67,000 in Cook County, IL and nearly \$77,000 in Miami-Dade County, FL.
- **ALICE Threshold:** Derived from the Household Survival Budget, the average income that a household needs to afford housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and a smartphone plan, plus taxes. Calculated for various household types for every U.S. state and county.
- **Below ALICE Threshold:** Includes children in both poverty-level and ALICE households combined.

ALICE Children Data Dashboard

Visit the ALICE Children Data Dashboard, to explore data on children living in hardship by:

- State, regional, and local geographies
- Demographic categories including children's age, race/ethnicity, disability, and nativity
- Household characteristics like work status and living arrangements
- Children's access to key resources

Visit UnitedForALICE.org/Focus-Children

Living Arrangements

ALICE children live in all kinds of households – with married or unmarried parents, single parents, grandparents, or guardians. Children are more likely to be below the ALICE Threshold when their families have fewer adults and/or adults with lower earning potential due to systemic [racism](#) and [gender](#) and [age discrimination](#).

Most children in the U.S. (95%) lived with at least one of their parents (biological or adoptive) in 2019: 62% lived in a household with both parents and 33% in a household with one parent. The largest number of children below the ALICE Threshold were in married-couple households (18.5 million), followed by single-female-headed households (13.8 million). Other arrangements, representing smaller groups, were disproportionately struggling: 63% of children in unmarried-couple households were below the Threshold, as were 58% of children in single-male-headed households.

The share of households below the ALICE Threshold was similar in different-sex and same-sex married-couple households, at 38% and 39%, respectively. For unmarried couples, children in different-sex-couple households had a higher rate below the Threshold (63%) than children in same-sex-couple households (48%).

In 2019, 13% of children (9.7 million) lived in a home with a grandparent. Children living with grandparents had the same rate of poverty as all children (16%). Yet they were more likely to be ALICE (44% vs. 33%), which is generally the case for senior households.

In addition, there were 3.7 million children in the U.S. living in households without their parents in 2019. Just 7% were children in [foster care](#) (279,222). But many more children lived without their parents in [arrangements outside of the formal system](#), including households headed by a grandparent (1.1 million), other relatives (1.4 million), or nonrelatives (917,719). Children living without their parents were more likely to be in households below the ALICE Threshold (62%).

The largest number of children below the Threshold living without their parents were White. But Hispanic and Black children living without their parents were disproportionately represented in households below the Threshold (71% and 74%, respectively) compared to those who were White (52%).

Household Work Status

The largest driver of a child's financial stability is the employment status of household members. In 2019, most children in the U.S. lived in a household with at least one worker (94%). But having working parents or guardians does not guarantee financial stability.

Children living with two adults were more likely to be financially stable than children living with a single parent or guardian. Yet even in households with two working adults, 28% of children were below the ALICE Threshold. When only one of two adults worked, the rate increased to 61%. Children living in a household with a single working parent or guardian were even more likely to be below the Threshold (73%).

79%

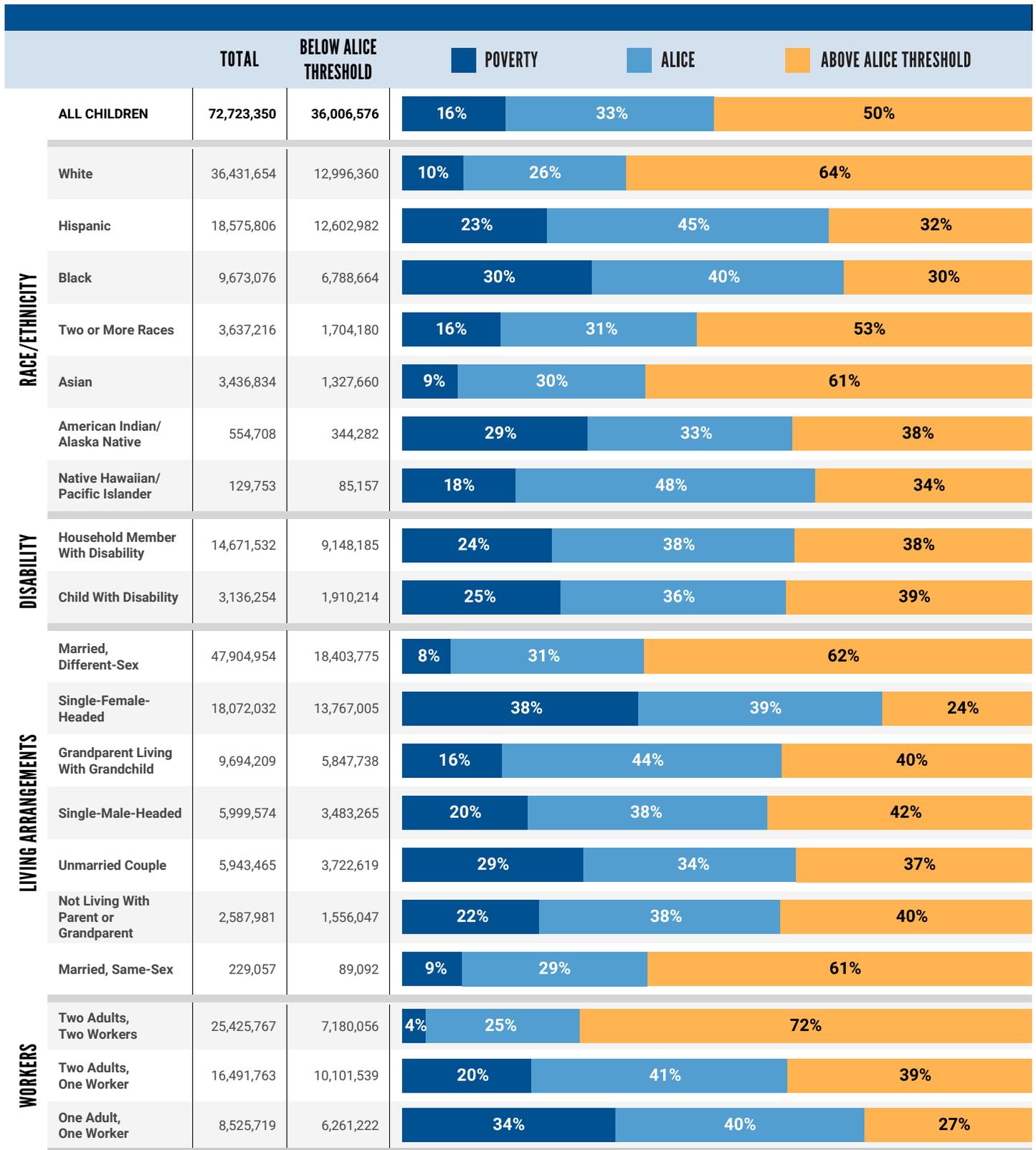
of children with an adult working as a cashier – one of the most common jobs in the U.S. – were below the ALICE Threshold

While parents and guardians work in every industry and sector in the U.S., children below the ALICE Threshold are concentrated in families where adults work in occupations with low median hourly wages. For example, in 2019, 79% of children with an adult working as a cashier, earning a median wage of \$11.37 per hour, were below the ALICE Threshold. Similarly, 55% of children with adults working as delivery/sales drivers (median wage of \$12.43 per hour) and 53% of children with adults working as retail salespersons (median wage of \$12.14 per hour) were below the Threshold.

Even children with an adult working in a higher-wage job, such as a registered nurse (median wage of \$35.24 per hour) or an elementary school teacher (median wage of \$28.69 per hour), were below the ALICE Threshold (19% and 22%, respectively), as household expenses vary by household size, composition, and location.

In addition, 22% of 16- and 17-year-olds were in the labor force in 2019 (1.7 million). Of teens living in households with income below the ALICE Threshold, 16% were in the labor force, compared to 25% living in households above the Threshold. While these findings may seem counterintuitive, they are in line with existing [research](#) that shows youth in low-income households have fewer opportunities and resources needed to work than teens from families with higher incomes.

Children by Household Financial Status and Key Demographics, United States, 2019



Note: Percentages are rounded to whole numbers for ease of reading, which may result in percentages totaling 99% or 101%. The groups shown in this figure overlap across categories (Race/Ethnicity, Disability Status, Living Arrangements, and Workers). All racial categories except Two or More Races are for one race alone. The Hispanic group may include children of any race. "Grandparent Living With Grandchild" includes any arrangement where grandparents live with their grandchild, including where parents or other adults are present. For the Workers category, the number of workers is defined as "workers in the family over the last 12 months" from when the survey was conducted. View more on the [ALICE Children Data Dashboard](#).

Sources: ALICE Threshold, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, PUMS, 2019

WHAT RESOURCES DO ALICE CHILDREN LACK?

Many ALICE families earn too much to be eligible for public assistance but still struggle to meet basic needs for their children. ALICE households are much more likely to lack stable housing, quality child care/early education, private health insurance, and home internet access, yet they still don't qualify for many public assistance programs. When these necessities are at risk, there are both [short- and long-term consequences](#) for children below the ALICE Threshold.

Stable Housing

Housing instability has a profound impact on a family and child's overall well-being. Children in families without stable housing face greater risks for [poor physical health](#), [increased family stress](#), [social isolation](#), and [lower academic performance](#). Children living in rented housing units and cost burdened households are more likely to go through the stress of moving – and ALICE children and children in poverty are more likely to live in both of these types of housing.

Among children below the ALICE Threshold in 2019, more than half (57%) were in families who rented. Conversely, children above the ALICE Threshold were more likely to live in families who owned their home (81%). There were also gaps by race and ethnicity both above and below the Threshold:

- Below the ALICE Threshold, homeownership rates ranged from 25% for families of both Black and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children and 36% for families of Hispanic children to 57% for families of both Asian and White children.
- Above the ALICE Threshold, rates were significantly higher across all racial/ethnic groups: 56% for families of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children, 65% for families of Black children, 71% for families of Hispanic children, 80% for families of Asian children, and 87% for families of White children.

53%

*of children in renter households
below the ALICE Threshold in the U.S.
were rent burdened*

Because housing is one of the most expensive items in the Household Survival Budget, it is not surprising that more than half (53%) of children in renter households below the ALICE Threshold in the U.S. paid more than 35% of household income on rent (compared to 3% of children in renter households above the Threshold). Across the country, the highest rates – above 60% – were in Florida, Hawai'i, and Connecticut.

For all children – regardless of whether their family rented or owned – the longer they lived at their place of residence, the more likely they were to have higher income. Both above and below the ALICE Threshold, children in renter households were more likely to have moved in the past year compared to those in owner households (25% vs. 8%).



Education

Quality early-childhood programs have proven to be critical to [healthy child development](#), and to acquiring foundational skills required for a [successful transition to school](#) and [future academic achievement](#). Of all preschool-age children in the U.S., 49% were enrolled in preschool in 2019, but there was wide variation across the country, from less than 35% in Idaho, North Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming to more than 60% in Connecticut, D.C., Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont. Preschool enrollment rates also differed by household financial status: 43% of preschool-age children below the ALICE Threshold were enrolled in preschool in 2019, compared to 57% of their peers above the Threshold. Kindergarten enrollment had a smaller difference by income, with 90% of kindergarten-age children below the Threshold enrolled compared to 93% above.

[Being a high school graduate prepares teens for future academic and career success](#). Yet in 2019, almost 300,000 children aged 15–17 were not in school. More than half of these teens (58%) lived in households with income below the ALICE Threshold.

Health Insurance

Access to health insurance is critical to both [wellness](#) and [financial stability](#) for families below the ALICE Threshold and [especially children](#). While almost all children in the U.S. had health insurance in 2019 (95%), 7% of children in families with income below the ALICE Threshold did not have coverage. The biggest difference was in the type of insurance; children in families with income below the Threshold were more likely to have public insurance (59%), while those above the Threshold were more likely to have private insurance (85%).

Children: United States	Below ALICE Threshold	Above ALICE Threshold
No Insurance	7% (2.6 million)	4% (1.3 million)
Public Insurance	59% (21 million)	11% (4 million)
Private Insurance	34% (12 million)	85% (31 million)

Home Internet

The availability of internet access and devices for education has become increasingly essential for young people, yet the [digital divide](#) by income and race/ethnicity persists. In the U.S., 95% of children overall had home internet access in 2019; even 91% of children below the ALICE Threshold had home internet access. However, with the increase in online work and education, a high-speed internet connection has become more important; yet children below the Threshold were considerably less likely to have high-speed internet than those above the Threshold (69% vs. 87%).

More than

11 million

children below the ALICE Threshold in the U.S. did not have access to high-speed internet at home

There were also differences in access by race/ethnicity, especially for high-speed internet: 34% of Hispanic and 35% of Black children in households below the ALICE Threshold did not have high-speed internet access, compared to 28% of White children in households below the Threshold.

By location, access varied. High-speed internet access for children below the ALICE Threshold was lowest in Mississippi (51%) and highest in New Hampshire and Hawai'i (above 80%).

Public Assistance

For a [variety of reasons](#), public assistance does not reach all children in households that are struggling. While most children in poverty are eligible, ALICE children live in households that often earn too much to qualify for assistance. For example, the income eligibility threshold for one of the most far-reaching public assistance programs in the U.S., the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP, formerly food stamps), is generally [130%](#) of the FPL. Even though all children in poverty should be covered by SNAP, nationwide the program was utilized by only 60% of children in poverty (7 million) and a mere 23% of children in ALICE households (5.6 million) in 2019. This left a gap of over 23 million children whose families were struggling to make ends meet but not participating in SNAP.

More than

23 million

children below the ALICE Threshold in the U.S. were struggling but did not participate in SNAP

SNAP coverage of children below the ALICE Threshold varied greatly across the country, from less than 20% in Utah and Wyoming to 53% in West Virginia.

Differences by race and ethnicity were also striking. In 2019, 51% of Black children and 35% of Hispanic children below the ALICE Threshold received SNAP benefits, compared to 29% of White children below the Threshold.

HOW HAVE ALICE CHILDREN FARED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

How a child starts in life impacts their long-term health, wellness, education, and career. Family financial stability is one of the strongest [predictors of current and future well-being](#). Financial instability not only contributes to current experiences of [trauma and hardship](#), but it impedes a child's opportunity for [future success](#), including higher education, a higher income, and long-term asset building.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, children below the ALICE Threshold experienced the ripple effect of challenges related to their parents' work status, lack of income/savings, and family responsibilities. As shown in our recent report, *The Pandemic Divide*, households below the Threshold suffered disproportionately during the pandemic, with vulnerabilities caused by longstanding racial inequities ensuring that Black and Hispanic households experienced the greatest hardship.

Expanding on *The Pandemic Divide*, our analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent [Household Pulse Surveys](#) (July–October 2021) reveals that **children and households below the ALICE Threshold bear the brunt of the pandemic's physical and emotional toll:**

- **Financial uncertainties:** Because households below the ALICE Threshold with children continue to suffer from loss of employment income and are unable to save, they remain far less confident in their ability to make their next rent or mortgage payment on time. In the U.S., more than one-third (37%) of families below the ALICE Threshold with children were slightly confident, not at all confident, or had deferred their housing payment, compared to 8% of those above the Threshold.
- **Food insufficiency:** Throughout the pandemic, families below the ALICE Threshold with children struggled to afford food. As of the fall of 2021, 40% of families below the Threshold with children reported that sometimes or often “children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food.” While this was less common in higher-income households, a substantial 21% of respondents above the Threshold also struggled to afford food for their children. (These levels are almost as high as in January/February of 2021, when they were 41% for families below the Threshold and 17% for those above.) Public assistance has filled in only part of the gap. In the fall of 2021, half (51%) of students below the ALICE Threshold picked up or ate a free meal at school, received an EBT card to help buy groceries, or had free meals delivered, which means that half (49%) did not.
- **Interrupted learning:** The pandemic has disrupted student learning for two years, and children in households below the ALICE Threshold have been disproportionately affected across the country. The most immediate way to compensate for disrupted K–12 schooling is to attend summer academic programs. In the summer of 2021, children below the ALICE Threshold were more likely to have attended such programs (21% vs. 15% above the Threshold), reinforcing the research that shows [children from low-income households are more likely to have experienced a loss of learning](#). Higher education was also impacted as many students [changed their plans to attend college](#), and those below the Threshold were more likely to cancel plans to take classes than those above the Threshold (20% vs. 12%).
- **Delayed or missed health care:** Children below the ALICE Threshold were less likely to have had preventive health care; in the fall of 2021, 43% of households below the Threshold with children had to miss, delay, or skip their child's preventive check-up in the last 12 months, compared to 27% of those above the Threshold. Forgoing or postponing care caused some children to go without routine vaccinations, screenings, and ongoing care for chronic health conditions.
- **The Child Tax Credit:** Forty-one percent of households below the ALICE Threshold with children had still not received the advance Child Tax Credit in the fall of 2021, which could be [for numerous reasons](#) such as a parent not having filed a recent tax return or a child not having a Social Security number. The immediate need for the additional income is evident from the ways U.S. families who did receive the advance Child Tax Credit used it: Those below the ALICE Threshold were more likely to use it to pay off debt than those above the Threshold (49% vs. 29%), and were less likely to save it (18% vs. 40%).

41%

of U.S. households below the ALICE Threshold with children still had not received the advance Child Tax Credit in the fall of 2021

ALICE IN FOCUS: CHILDREN – KEY INDICATORS BY STATE, 2019

State	Total	Household Income Status			Rent Burden	Preschool	Internet	SNAP
	Number of Children	% Poverty	% ALICE	% Below ALICE Threshold	% Below ALICE Threshold Paying 35% or More on Rent	% Preschool-Age Enrolled in School	% Below ALICE Threshold with High-Speed Internet Access	% Below ALICE Threshold Participating in SNAP
United States	72,723,350	16%	33%	49%	53%	49%	69%	36%
Alabama	1,084,431	21%	32%	53%	41%	45%	56%	40%
Alaska	177,930	12%	33%	45%	50%	47%	59%	32%
Arizona	1,635,592	18%	33%	51%	46%	42%	64%	36%
Arkansas	696,534	23%	32%	55%	39%	48%	57%	31%
California	8,857,941	15%	41%	56%	59%	51%	73%	29%
Colorado	1,250,988	10%	40%	50%	51%	52%	78%	22%
Connecticut	725,789	13%	29%	42%	65%	67%	77%	37%
Delaware	203,357	15%	33%	48%	56%	54%	72%	34%
D.C.	127,468	20%	34%	54%	54%	84%	75%	49%
Florida	4,219,941	17%	39%	56%	61%	53%	71%	38%
Georgia	2,498,618	19%	38%	57%	50%	51%	69%	35%
Hawaii	299,765	12%	35%	47%	64%	53%	80%	32%
Idaho	448,452	12%	33%	45%	47%	33%	68%	28%
Illinois	2,809,314	15%	26%	41%	56%	56%	69%	42%
Indiana	1,566,776	16%	28%	44%	48%	41%	63%	31%
Iowa	719,042	14%	25%	39%	45%	47%	62%	39%
Kansas	698,097	15%	30%	45%	48%	50%	71%	26%
Kentucky	996,896	21%	28%	49%	44%	36%	66%	38%
Louisiana	1,084,053	26%	31%	57%	53%	51%	60%	45%
Maine	245,182	12%	36%	48%	37%	51%	76%	40%
Maryland	1,328,582	12%	35%	47%	57%	50%	76%	32%
Massachusetts	1,345,145	11%	34%	45%	55%	59%	78%	35%
Michigan	2,134,523	17%	27%	44%	52%	47%	68%	41%
Minnesota	1,299,381	10%	26%	36%	52%	48%	74%	29%
Mississippi	696,324	27%	27%	54%	45%	60%	51%	42%
Missouri	1,363,714	16%	32%	48%	43%	46%	64%	36%
Montana	225,787	17%	27%	44%	45%	38%	67%	37%
Nebraska	472,477	11%	29%	40%	37%	47%	77%	31%
Nevada	689,628	18%	34%	52%	59%	37%	72%	30%
New Hampshire	256,279	7%	32%	39%	45%	58%	82%	27%
New Jersey	1,926,659	12%	29%	41%	59%	70%	75%	31%
New Mexico	472,259	24%	32%	56%	47%	48%	56%	48%
New York	3,995,206	17%	35%	52%	58%	60%	69%	36%
North Carolina	2,288,488	19%	32%	51%	47%	46%	67%	39%
North Dakota	176,687	9%	24%	33%	27%	32%	62%	30%
Ohio	2,566,933	18%	28%	46%	46%	47%	71%	42%
Oklahoma	948,484	20%	30%	50%	47%	45%	57%	39%
Oregon	859,939	13%	35%	48%	49%	43%	74%	38%
Pennsylvania	2,615,510	17%	27%	44%	54%	43%	73%	47%
Rhode Island	202,058	12%	31%	43%	52%	49%	77%	44%
South Carolina	1,107,123	19%	36%	55%	45%	43%	62%	37%
South Dakota	213,617	13%	29%	42%	33%	42%	74%	38%
Tennessee	1,507,924	20%	35%	55%	46%	41%	67%	36%
Texas	7,380,301	19%	34%	53%	52%	44%	63%	37%
Utah	926,458	10%	31%	41%	53%	45%	76%	19%
Vermont	112,768	9%	33%	42%	45%	69%	78%	39%
Virginia	1,852,456	12%	35%	47%	54%	50%	72%	29%
Washington	1,660,090	11%	32%	43%	51%	50%	78%	34%
West Virginia	357,343	19%	29%	48%	38%	32%	71%	53%
Wisconsin	1,260,851	12%	26%	38%	48%	45%	72%	37%
Wyoming	134,190	10%	25%	35%	40%	32%	68%	20%

NEXT STEPS

There's a lot more to be done to change the trajectory for ALICE children. Visit UnitedForALICE.org to learn more, then share this data with stakeholders in your community.

Learn more with:

- The [ALICE Children Data Dashboard](#), to dig deeper into related topics, demographics, and sub-state geographies
- [Resources related to children and financial hardship](#), including the references linked in this Research Brief, as well as additional resources that offer important context and even deeper analysis
- [The Pandemic Divide: An ALICE Analysis of National COVID Surveys](#) (2021) and other resources on the ALICE and COVID-19 webpage, to see the impacts of the pandemic on ALICE
- [On Uneven Ground: ALICE and Financial Hardship in the U.S.](#) (2020), to learn about the trends that contributed to a growing number of ALICE households even before the pandemic
- The [ALICE Wage Tool](#), to explore wage levels by geography and occupation

Connect with stakeholders:

- [Contact your local United Way](#) for support and volunteer opportunities
- [See members of the committees that support this work](#), including the ALICE in Focus National Research Advisory Committee for Children, and the ALICE in Focus National Leadership Committee for Children
- Find your state and federal representatives and see ALICE household data by legislative district with our [ALICE Legislative District Tool](#)
- Advocate for more accurate data collection by the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) for children who have been [historically undercounted](#), including (but not limited to) young children, children of color, children with disabilities, and children in low-income households

United For ALICE is a driver of innovative research and action around financial hardship. The data and analysis are shared with United Ways, corporations, foundations, government, and nonprofits, to inform policy and promote positive change.

The **ALICE in Focus Series** utilizes ALICE measures – the Household Survival Budget and the ALICE Threshold – to analyze the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS). Each "Focus" in the series highlights a different demographic group. For more details about the methodology for the ALICE in Focus Series, go to UnitedForALICE.org/Methodology.

