



National Center for Children in Poverty  
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**For Immediate Release**

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***Report: DON'T EXCLUDE ADOLESCENTS***

*Better programs, policies needed in key transitional years*

**New York City, May 6, 2009** – Adolescence is a crucial time when children and youth must meet a range of developmental, emotional, and behavioral goals in order to grow into healthy adults. But many public policies and programs aimed at helping disadvantaged children exclude adolescents, or lack a sufficient level of focus to address their unique needs.

Researchers at Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) hope to change this, and are working to bring poor and low-income adolescents' needs into the spotlight with a new research emphasis and through the center's upcoming publications.

According to neuroscientists, brain development during adolescence creates a set of needs and vulnerabilities that are distinct from those of either young children or adults.

In particular, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, substance use, violence and risk-taking behaviors, and nutrition and obesity are all areas where adolescents may face special challenges or have unique needs. At the same time, adolescence represents a stage of development that presents opportunities for quality prevention and early intervention strategies to be effective.

In 2008, NCCP launched its Adolescent Health and Youth Development focus, which is designed to promote change in adolescent health care, support healthy development in adolescents and young adults, and highlight and address the unique needs of poor and low-income adolescents.

This month, NCCP demographics analysts also expanded the center's long-running Basic Facts series – a set of fact sheets that provide demographic profiles of children from birth to 18 years of age – to include a fact sheet *specific* to adolescents.

According to Ayana Douglas-Hall and Michelle Chau, coauthors of *Basic Facts About Low-income Adolescents: Age 12 to 18*, there are more than 10 million low-income adolescents in the nation, and nearly five million of these are considered poor by federal poverty standards. (Adolescents are characterized as low-income if their families have an income of twice the federal poverty level or less, which is the amount most researchers agree is needed for households to make ends meet.)

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“The evidence tells us that adolescents are highly resilient and receptive to interventions, and they generally want to be positively engaged, but at the policy level we’re not making the most of these opportunities,” comments NCCP Research Analyst Susan Wile Schwarz, project coordinator for the Improving the Odds for Adolescents project.

“There is enormous potential for effective programs to have positive impact, but the negative consequences of failing to appropriately support adolescents through policy and programs can also be magnified for this age group.”

The risk is even greater for poor or low-income adolescents, who are among the most marginalized in this already neglected age group.

Despite the challenges, Schwarz and the other researchers working within the adolescent focus are optimistic about the prospect of using research to inform positive change.

“We all want adolescents to become healthy, productive and contributing adults,” remarks Schwarz. “By providing key information on the extent of financial hardship among adolescents in the United States and its impact on healthy development, as well as describing the unique challenges all adolescents must overcome, we can spur interests in changing the policy framework in order to implement appropriate strategies.”

Improving the Odds for Adolescents was funded by a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies. To read more about the project, go to <http://www.nccp.org/projects/ITOAdolescents.html>. To download *Basic Facts About Low-income Adolescents: Age 12 to 18*, go to [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_872.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_872.html).

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*The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation’s leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. Part of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.*

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