

# Child Poverty Policy in Delaware: A Focus on Health and Education

May 2017



*This policy brief by the Institute for Public Administration was prepared for the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (the Commission) and begins with an overview of the changing conditions of child poverty that lead to disparities in academic performance and outcomes for students. The analysis then highlights recent state legislation to address the challenges disproportionately faced by low-income families in Delaware. Consistent with the Commission's mandates, the analysis considers the relationships of poverty, education, and state policy.*

*The conclusions are clear: The condition of child poverty in Delaware has become more acute; poverty remains a dominant force limiting educational achievement; no comprehensive and integrated plan has been developed to address the overall challenges of poverty for Delaware children and families; and the state provides no focused resources for low-income students, English language learners, and basic special education, K-3. As the Commission has recommended, Delaware needs to better align existing policies that address poverty, starting with coordination among state agencies that leverage existing resources and assets far more effectively than has been the case.*

## Introduction

Poverty is a dominant force limiting educational success for an increasing number of Delaware children. The Commission has recommended an action agenda that will improve educational outcomes despite a student's zip code or socioeconomic status. The Commission advocates greater alignment of policies, resources, and programs to better support the developmental needs of all students, from birth through entry to college and the workforce. Two important starting points for achieving such alignment are a recognition of the changing conditions of child poverty in Delaware and an understanding of the nature and limits of the state policies now in place to address child poverty.

This brief includes key findings of research conducted and sponsored by the Commission including a policy inventory carried out by KIDS COUNT in Delaware. KIDS COUNT in Delaware provides data on the conditions of poverty in Delaware, and the Poverty Policy in Delaware Inventory documents current state policies addressing poverty. The inventory's focus is on the period since 2009, when the Delaware Child Poverty Task Force issued a comprehensive report that reviewed state policy and recommended actions to reduce child poverty by 50% over ten years. That 2009 objective has not been achieved. Indeed, poverty in Delaware is increasing, particularly among children. This trend holds despite many state poverty policies enacted since 2009.<sup>1</sup>

## Changing Demographics

The demographic make-up of Delaware's children is changing dramatically. In 1980, 75% of Delaware children were white. By 2014, nearly half of Delaware children were non-White (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017). The changes in the demographic make-up are statewide.

The fastest growing segment is Hispanic children, particularly in Sussex County. The number of Delaware students who are English language learners increased fourfold since 2000, reaching nearly 9,000 in 2016 (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017).

## Child Poverty

Overall, Delaware's children have experienced a dramatic growth of poverty<sup>2</sup> between 2007 and

2015. Children under the age of 18 remain the poorest age cohort in Delaware. Using a three-year period, KIDS COUNT in Delaware estimates an average of 10.2% of adults and 18.5% of children in poverty during 2014–2016.

### *Delaware Child Poverty by County and Place, Five Year Average, 2011–2015*

<b>Kent County</b>	<b>19.7%</b>
<b>New Castle County</b>	<b>15.4%</b>
<b>Sussex County</b>	<b>21.6%</b>
<b>Dover</b>	<b>32.7%</b>
<b>Wilmington</b>	<b>34.7%</b>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011–2015 American Community Survey

The City of Wilmington has a higher percentage of children under age 18 in poverty with an estimated five-year average of 34.7%, as does the City of Dover with an estimated five-year average of 32.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011–2015 American Community Survey). This compares with five-year averages estimated at 21.6% in Sussex County, 19.7% in Kent County, and 15.4% in New Castle County (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011–2015 American Community Survey).

Some indicators of poverty have improved. The number and rate of children in foster care has decreased since 2000 (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017). Improvements also have been made in the accessibility of healthcare, although, as of 2016, approximately 5.6% of children remain uninsured (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017). Since 2007, the

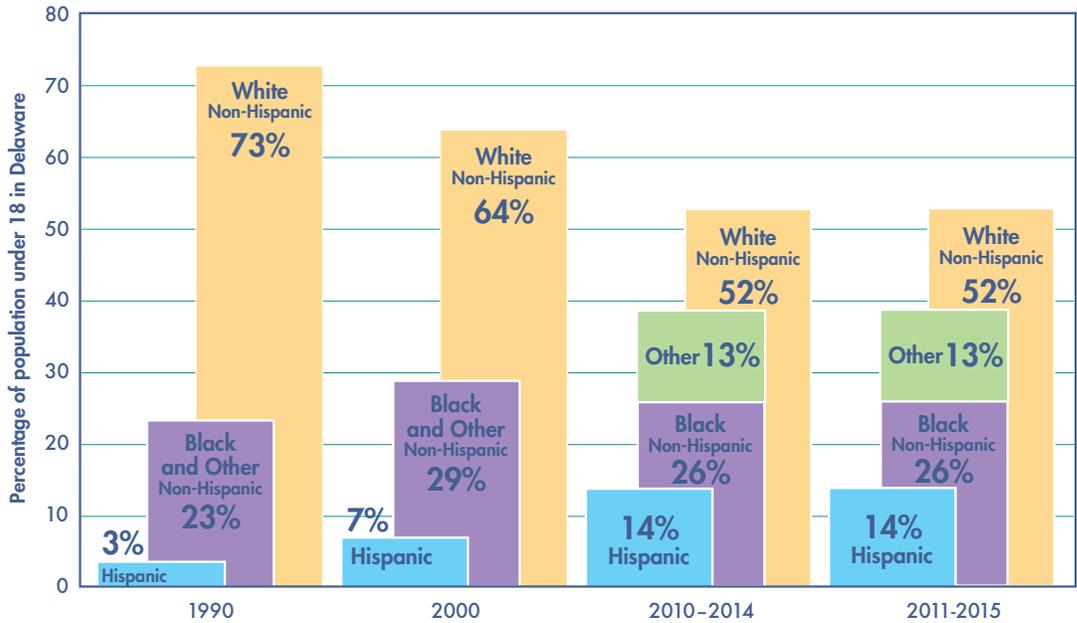
1 This brief addresses child poverty and policy and does not address programs and services that work to meet the challenges children and families in poverty face. We recognize that there are many programs and services that work to ameliorate the effects of poverty and address the needs of children and families in poverty statewide.

2 This section uses the federal measure of poverty. As noted by KIDS COUNT in Delaware, "the poverty measure was established in 1964 based on research indicating that families spent about one-third of their incomes on food. A family is officially classified as poor if

its cash income (wages, pensions, social security benefits, and all other forms of cash income) falls below the poverty threshold." KIDS COUNT in Delaware further notes, "while the thresholds are updated each year for inflation, the measure is widely acknowledged to be outdated because in today's society, food comprises a much lower percentage of an average family's expenses than it did in the sixties, while the costs of housing, child care, health care and transportation have increased substantially" (KIDS COUNT in Delaware).

## The Changing Face of Delaware's Children

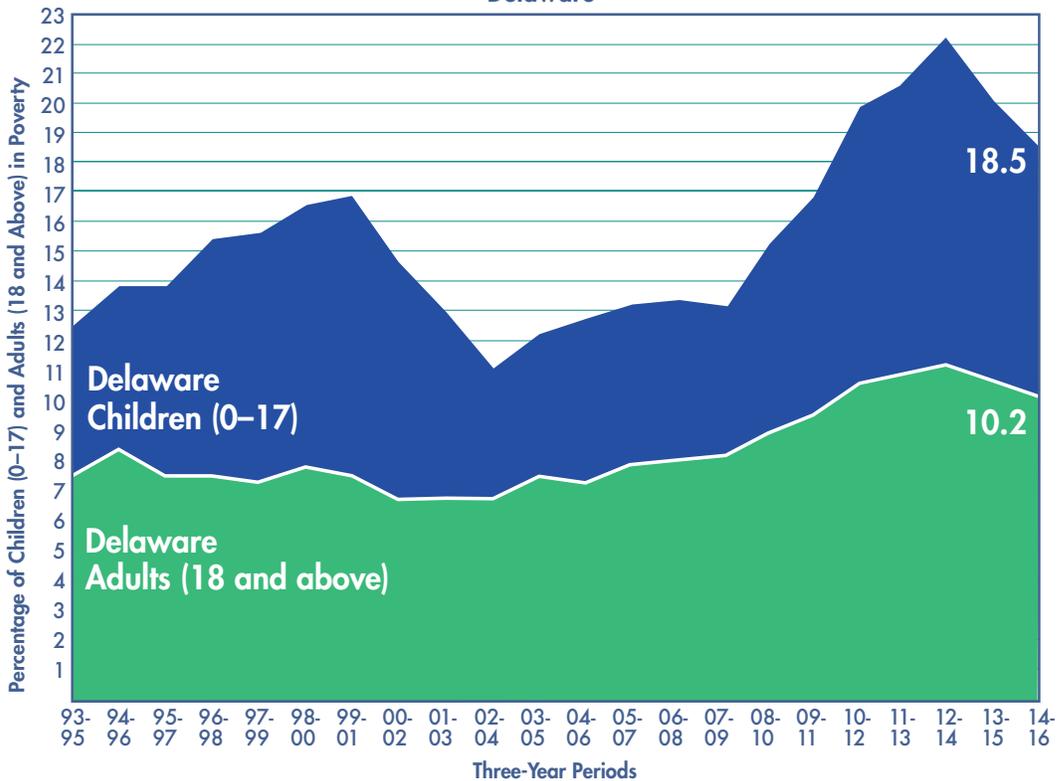
Children under 18 by Race/Hispanic Origin, Delaware



Note: Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

## Children and Adults in Poverty

Delaware

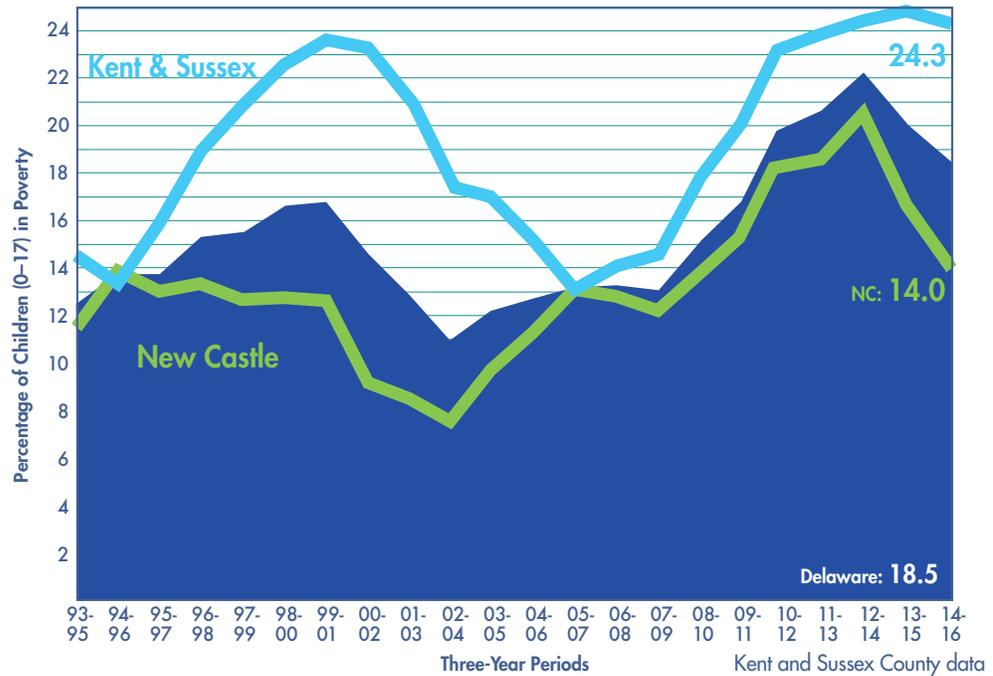


Source: Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research, University of Delaware

Source: KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017

## Children in Poverty

Delaware and Counties

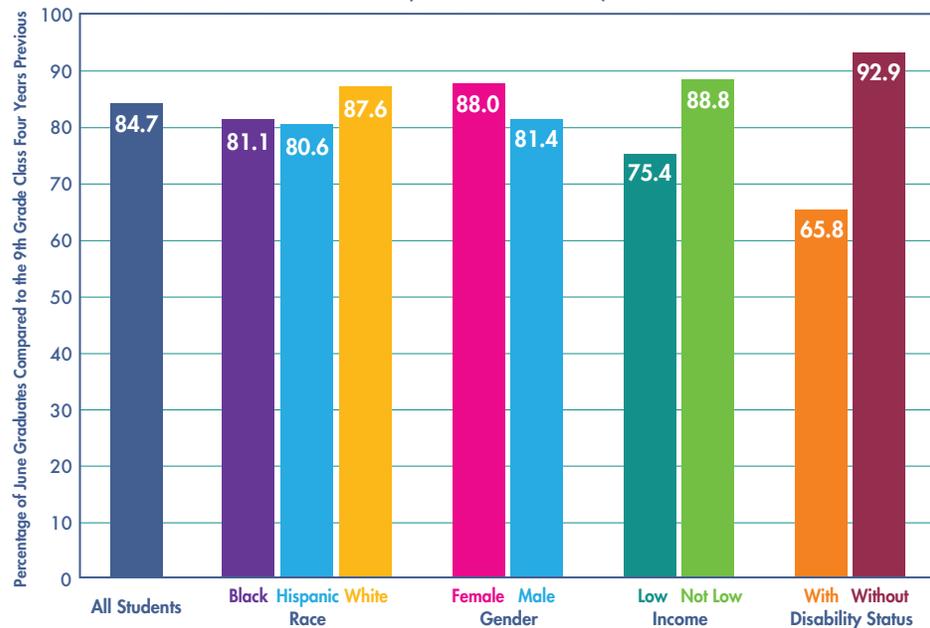


Source: Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research, University of Delaware

Kent and Sussex County data are not available separately.

## Graduation Rates

Delaware, School Year 2015/16



**Note: Graduation Rate** – The graduation rate is a cohort rate that reflects the percent of 9th grade students who graduated within four years from a Delaware public school. The rate takes into account dropouts. For example, the rate for 2015–2016 reflects the percent of incoming 9th graders in September of 2012 who graduated in June of 2016.

Source: Delaware Department of Education

Source: KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017

rate of all juvenile crime arrests has decreased (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017). There also has been a sharp increase in homeless students, reaching over 4,000 in 2016 (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017).

## Poverty and Education

The conditions of child poverty in Delaware are reflected in the disparities in academic performance and outcomes of students. Across Delaware, an achievement gap continues to exist between the academic proficiency of black, Hispanic, and low-income students as compared with white, higher-income students (KIDS COUNT in Delaware, 2017). Similarly, Hispanic, Black, and low-income students graduate at a lower rate than White and higher-income students.

The achievement gap is particularly acute for City of Wilmington students<sup>3</sup>, a population where approximately 83% of students are from low-income families<sup>4</sup> and 74% of students are black, as of school year 2014–15 (Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, 2016).<sup>5</sup> The achievement gap for low-income City of Wilmington students persists not only with higher-income students but also with non-Wilmington and low-income students. The Commission's Annual Report documents this trend as it applies to students in both

traditional and charter schools serving the City of Wilmington (Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, 2016). In 2015, nearly 75% of City of Wilmington students did not meet state standards in English Language Arts, and approximately 84% of City of Wilmington students did not meet state standards in Mathematics (Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, 2016). As of school year 2014–15, the City of Wilmington student graduation rate was 69% compared to 74% of low-income students statewide and 86% of non-Wilmington students. For that same school year, the high school dropout rates for City of Wilmington students is more than twice the rate for low-income students statewide (Wilmington Education Improvement Commission, 2016).



## Delaware Poverty Policies

Between 2009 and 2016, the State enacted over 200 pieces of legislation to address the challenges disproportionately facing low-income families and children. This does not include additional policies adopted through budget action or in the epilogue to state budgets. This legislative action spans many policy areas, such as housing, food security, transportation, economic opportunity, employability, adult and juvenile justice, and child welfare. The two areas with the largest number of legislation are

<sup>3</sup> The term, "City Wilmington students," is defined as P–12 students residing within the limits of the City of Wilmington, attending traditional, vo-tech, and charter schools across the state. The term, "Non-Wilmington students," is defined as, P–12 students not residing within the limits of the City of Wilmington but attending traditional, vo-tech, and charter schools across the state.

<sup>4</sup> This number uses the 2011–2013 Delaware Department of Education definition of low-income: students who received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or free or reduced lunch. The definition has since been updated to include students who only receive TANF and/or SNAP (direct certification).

<sup>5</sup> The data provides a snapshot of the state of education in Delaware, particularly as it pertains to children in the City of Wilmington. The findings are far from encouraging. In reporting them, the Commission in no way means to blame the city's students, nor the school districts or schools that serve them.

education, and health and healthcare. From the vantage point of the Commission's action agenda, the policies in these areas are critical. Some legislation, highlighted below, have been particularly important in meeting the developmental needs of children.

Since 2009, legislative task forces and commissions have addressed some of the most difficult poverty problems. However, the

legislative output from this work has been modest. The Wilmington Education Improvement Commission was established through legislation in 2015, but most of its recommendations have not yet been acted upon. The Commission has advocated additional focused resources to improve outcomes for low-income students and English language learners (HB 148 with HA 1 and SA 1). To date, no action has been taken.

## Highlighted Legislation to Support Education and Health and Healthcare, from 2009 to 2016

1. In 2012, Delaware passed House Bill (HB) 317 with House Amendment (HA) 1 that required a common statewide readiness tool to review developmental domains of incoming kindergarten students (Delaware General Assembly). In 2009, through HB 199 with HA 2, Delaware required private health insurers to cover developmental screenings of infants and toddlers in addition to screenings already covered for children under Medicaid (Delaware General Assembly). These policies have a positive impact on the success of Delaware's students, particularly those from low-income families. Access to developmental screenings is a key step to ensure the needs of all children are met at an early age.
2. HB 163 "requires the Department of Services for Children, Youth and Their Families to create and maintain a developmentally appropriate, comprehensive program that fully integrates independent living services from ages 14 to 21" (Delaware General Assembly, 2013). This 2013 law assists youth aging out of foster care with their transition into adulthood and reflects the proposal of Delaware's Youth Advisory Council as described in House Joint Resolution 18 from 2012 (Delaware General Assembly).
3. In 2011, HB 3 with HA 1 mandated healthier school lunches for all Delaware public schools by limiting the amount of artificial trans fatty acids in meals (Delaware General Assembly). Additionally, in 2016, HB 408 with HA 2 mandated traditional Delaware public schools with high need to offer breakfast at no cost to all students (Delaware General Assembly).
4. In 2009, HB 139 with HA 1 extended the state's Children's Health Insurance Program "to include reduced-cost health insurance coverage for children of families with personal incomes above 200% of the Federal Poverty Level" (Delaware General Assembly).
5. Beyond specific legislation, budget actions have impacted policy. Delaware adopted tiered reimbursement for Purchase of Care payments linked to the quality rating of early learning providers, based on the Delaware Stars Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). The number of children with high needs enrolled in highly-rated Stars programs increased from 5% in 2011 to 76% in 2016 (Delaware Office of Early Learning & Delaware Early Childhood Council, 2016).

Delaware remains one of about 15 states with no direct state education funding for low-income students, and one of only 4 states with no state funding for English Language learners. There also is a critical gap in funding for basic special education, K–3.

## Conclusions

Overall, four conclusions are inescapable.

1. Despite many new state policies since 2009, the **condition of child poverty in Delaware has become more acute**. Delaware’s children are our state’s poorest age cohort.
2. **Poverty remains a dominant force limiting the educational achievement** of Delaware students and sustaining an achievement gap in education outcomes. This condition applies statewide and is most acute in areas of concentrated poverty such as the City of Wilmington.
3. The enacted state policies since 2009 seldom if ever align and reflect **no comprehensive and integrated plan to address the overall challenges of poverty for Delaware children and families** in a sustained and cost-effective manner.
4. The state has not acted in critical areas required to mitigate the impact of poverty on educational opportunities and outcomes. Specifically, **the state provides no focused resources for low-income students, English language learners, and basic special education, K–3**.

## Recommendations

The action agenda for Delaware state government should be clear. Delaware needs to better align existing policies that address poverty, starting with coordination among

state agencies that leverage existing resources and assets far more effectively than has been the case. This alignment needs to be guided by a comprehensive and integrated approach to meeting the challenges of poverty, and specifically child poverty. Current policies and the resources that support them should be reviewed and revised within the framework of this comprehensive approach. The overarching guiding principle must be to meet the developmental needs of all Delaware children from birth through entry to college or the workforce.

Governor Carney has taken a key step with the creation of a cabinet-level Family Services Council. The Commission advocated for this council in its initial report. The new council should develop the comprehensive plan to address the needs of low-income children and families in an integrated and cost-effective manner. **The Commission has advocated that the plan should:**

- **Extend from early childhood to college and career readiness**
- **Align supports across sectors using all community-based assets**
- **Integrate services for families as well as children**
- **Support effective transitions for children at every stage of development**

The first step is to conduct a statewide evaluation of the needs of Delaware’s children, focusing specifically on health and education. The plan must be matched with resources. The critical step for immediate action is to provide schools with the focused resources needed to mitigate the ongoing impact of poverty on educational opportunities and outcomes.

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## Prepared for the Wilmington Education Improvement Commission

The Wilmington Education Improvement Commission is mandated by law to advise the Governor and General Assembly on how to improve the quality and availability of education for children P–12 within the City of Wilmington and recommend actions to address the needs of all schools statewide that have high concentrations of students in poverty, English language learners, and other students at risk.

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