If Dick and Jane drop out of school in 1997, the odds are good that they and their families will become poverty statistics in the rows of numbers analyzed by economist Joyce Allen-Smith.

If Jane becomes a single mother, her chances of hitting the statistics lists on Allen-Smith's desk and staying on it increase. The contemporary teenage Jane will likely be faced with adult stresses of family responsibilities and economic challenges, as well as demands of high school, job training, and college. While she is still growing up, she will have to learn how to help her child grow up and how to be a good parent.

The College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) provides single parents like Jane education on nutrition and diet and teaches them how to nurture their families.

Poverty rates among Illinois counties vary from 32 percent to 3 percent of the population, according to Allen-Smith, an agricultural economist with the ACES’s Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics. Allen-Smith is assessing national and state data to identify factors that explain the variation. Two population variables, level of education and the household makeup, top her list.

"As the percent of households headed by women without spouses and by people without high-school educations increases in a county, so does the percent of households in poverty," Allen-Smith says. "These two factors appear to have the largest impact on poverty rates."

That finding is no surprise to Geraldine Peeples, coordinator of the Parent Readiness Education Program (PREP), run by the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Delivered in partnership with the Illinois State Board of Education, PREP programs teach low-income single parents and homemakers basic "life skills" necessary to achieve educational and employment goals.

A key goal of PREP is for parents to graduate from high school, earn high-school equivalency degrees, or complete job-training courses. Supportive PREP paraprofessionals help parents learn how to assess options and make decisions. They often advise parents of career opportunities and community support services, such as child care, that could help them stay in school or keep jobs.
“Young, single parents face many decisions they are not prepared to make, and society has a stake in helping this group learn the life skills to be successful,” says Peeples.

Last year, PREP paraprofessionals worked with more than 600 teen parents. Some participants improved parenting skills, earned scholarships, returned to school, found jobs, developed budgets, and took action to change their lives. All PREP seniors graduated from high school.

“The PREP program helps to enhance employability of these teens and to create a stable, strong family. In the longer societal view, this program helps break the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency.”

Two other Extension programs for low-income families are the Family Nutrition Program (FNP), targeted to food-stamp recipients, and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). These research-based programs promote healthful eating and living and teach people to manage on a tight budget.

Research can reveal unexpected truths related to cultural values and differences in the way people learn, says Karen Chapman-Novakofski, assistant professor and nutrition specialist with the ACEs’s Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition. She once found a group using the USDA Food Guide Pyramid to gain weight instead of what it was intended to do, help control weight through eating more complex grains and low-fat foods. They wanted the soft, more rounded bodies desired in their culture.

“It isn’t enough to simply teach people the Food Guide or hand them a brochure,” Chapman-Novakofski says. “They also have to learn how to put knowledge into practice. The challenge for us is to design programs that bring about positive changes in behavior.”

The payoff for society’s investment in nutrition research and education programs is healthier people. Healthy people use less health care, healthy children perform better in school, and healthy adults are more employable and productive.

Last year, EFNEP provided nutrition education to more than 9,000 families and 13,700 youth in Illinois. The program uses paraprofessional staff, often from the community, to teach people how to plan nutritious meals, shop efficiently, and handle, prepare, and store foods at home.

More than 95 percent of participants in EFNEP programs reduced their monthly food bill. The FNP program delivered lessons and educational materials to some 280,000 food-stamp recipients. Among the success stories is a mother of six who improved her family’s diet and lost 70 pounds. A program addressed a woman’s interest in vegetable gardening, helping her feed her family and inspiring her return to college.

“There are endless opportunities to find ways to make things better in many communities,” says Robin Orr, Extension coordinator for the EFNEP and FNP nutrition education programs. “These programs are designed not only to teach nutrition and resource management, but also to increase confidence and self-esteem. It’s classic Extension, meeting people where they are and taking them someplace else through research-based educational programs.”

“Take charge” was the name of the Extension program that Felicia Houston joined in her youth. Its goal was to ensure teens are well-prepared to become parents.

At 14, Felicia Houston was pregnant and moving between her mother’s and grandmother’s homes.

“If I hadn’t found PREP [Extension’s Parent Readiness Education Program], I probably would have dropped out of school,” she says. “They helped me understand that if I didn’t want welfare, I’d better stay in school.”

Today, Houston, a single mother, supports her two children, Marcus, 6, and Kiana, 1, by working at a Chicago nursing home.

She credits PREP and program assistant Ruby Fenton with helping her through some tough times.

Through PREP, Houston received Chicago Transit Authority tokens so she could travel to the babysitter and to school. PREP helped Houston apply for the Certified Nursing Assistant program at Kennedy-King College and paid her tuition.

And, all through high school, Houston knew she could always turn to Fenton.

“It really helped to have somebody who would listen and encourage me,” recalls Houston, now 21. She is proud of the life she has made for herself and her children.

“I feel good about myself. I had a child at an early age, but I’ve achieved something. I’m living on my own, I’m working, and I’m supporting my children.”