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Introduction

What Does It Take to Achieve Equality of Opportunity for Children?

Laura Tach, Rachel Dunifon, and Douglas L. Miller

Inequality is one of the defining social problems of the 21st century. As economic inequality has grown, so too has inequality in the social contexts central to healthy child development, including families, neighborhoods, education systems, and social programs. Parents' resources and investments in children are increasingly polarized along economic lines (Kalil, Ziol-Guest, Ryan, & Markowitz, 2016; Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013; Ramey & Ramey, 2010; Schneider, Hastings, & LaBriola, 2018). Neighborhoods have become more economically segregated, particularly for children, generating greater inequity in children's exposure to educational and community resources (Owens, 2016; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). These trends have had deleterious consequences for children's health and well-being in the short run, and they have undermined opportunities for upward social mobility in the long run. In fact, the fraction of children who can expect to attain at least the same standard of living as their parents—a hallmark of the American Dream—has fallen markedly, from 90% of children born in the 1940s to just 50% of children born in the 1980s who are entering adulthood in the 21st century (Chetty et al., 2017).

Although inequality can seem intractable, a long tradition of research examines policies and practices that aim to disrupt the intergenerational persistence of inequality and to promote equality of opportunity for children. Much of this work has occurred within the traditional silos of standard academic disciplines, such as economics, psychology, or sociology, but great innovations have also come at the interface of different disciplines, when researchers

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use perspectives and methods from one field to inform, critique, or advance another. The late psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, to whom this series is dedicated, was an early pioneer on this front. In his foundational work on ecological systems theory, he argued that research endeavors that do not explicitly consider multiple disciplinary perspectives and levels of analyses are doomed to fail or, at the very least, stagnate (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Bronfenbrenner was also a leader in what we might now call applied social science research, which informs, and is informed by, real-world settings beyond the academic ivory tower. Bronfenbrenner (1977) rejected the simplistic distinction between basic and applied research, however, claiming that the best way to understand a social issue is to try to change it. His work certainly lived up to this maxim, as he not only developed foundational theoretical models of human–environment interaction but also used them to inform the development of many influential social programs, most notably Head Start.

This volume was preceded by a conference at Cornell University in the fall of 2018. This gathering celebrated Bronfenbrenner’s legacy and brought together cutting-edge research from psychology, economics, and sociology to illuminate what we know, and what we still need to know, about how to improve equality of opportunity for children. We asked leading scholars in these disciplines to assess the state of research about effective policies and practices for reducing inequality across a range of childhood developmental settings. We deliberately brought together different disciplinary and methodological traditions to forge new, and richer, insights about these issues. Finally, we asked the authors to consider promising new approaches and perspectives that can help chart a course for future research, policies, and interventions that support healthy development and upward social mobility among children and their families. The resulting papers generated a dialogue, captured in this volume, that provides tangible evidence of the benefits of working across disciplines and contexts.

In the chapters that follow, we consider several domains central to human development and equality of opportunity—health, family, and community—from multidisciplinary perspectives. Part I of the volume considers the state of knowledge about access to health-promoting environments and resources. In Chapter 1, developmental psychologists Emma Adam, Sarah Collier Villaume, and Emily Hittner present a “stress disparities” framework, arguing that stress exposure and its biological consequences are a key pathway by which adverse circumstances “get under the skin and into the mind” to affect health and developmental outcomes. They present evidence about promising interventions that have effectively reduced stress disparities, and they argue that interventions that reduce stress disparities may in turn reduce inequities in children’s long-run opportunities and well-being. Chapter 2 reviews the state of knowledge about the largest U.S. safety net program targeting the nutrition and health of low-income mothers and young children—the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Economists Janet Currie and Maya Rossin-Slater argue that there is overwhelming evidence that “WIC works” to promote infant health at birth and to reduce

early-life health inequalities. However, the mechanisms for understanding why such benefits accrue, and why barriers to program take-up and retention persist, remain elusive and should be the focus of future research in order to understand which aspects of the intervention increase health equality among children. Chapter 3 zooms out even further, taking a multigenerational perspective on health-related policy interventions. Economists Chloe N. East and Marianne E. Page argue that early-life health experiences affect not only later-life outcomes, but also the well-being of the next generation; as a result, health inequalities in one generation persist into the next. The silver lining of this story, however, is that policies, programs, and societal changes that improve early-life health and reduce disparities—such as access to means-tested programs like Medicaid or Head Start—have even more positive benefit–cost ratios when we take multigenerational beneficial impacts into account.

In Part II, we turn our attention to the family system, which provides resources, interactions, and experiences that shape children’s development. Although economic inequality in children’s access to these parental resources has been growing, the contributors in this section provide novel approaches to redressing these inequities. In Chapter 4, the interdisciplinary team of Susan E. Mayer, Ariel Kalil, and Nadav Klein use insights from behavioral science to understand the origins of inequality in parental decision-making and to develop “behavioral nudge” interventions that can enhance parents’ decisions in ways that have a payoff for their children’s future well-being; they present early evidence of the effectiveness of such an approach. Next, in Chapter 5, sociologists Timothy Nelson and Kathryn Edin critique the child support system because, rather than promoting involvement with their children, it drives low-income, nonresident fathers away from their family responsibilities. Drawing on qualitative interviews with low-income men, Nelson and Edin propose an alternative to the current child support enforcement system—one that allows for in-kind forms of child support that are more aligned with the ways in which fathers want to invest in their children. This may ultimately promote father–child bonds outside of nuclear family arrangements in ways that have lasting benefits for children and the family system more broadly.

Part III investigates broader social settings consequential for healthy child development, with a focus on educational institutions and residential environments. In Chapter 6, psychologists Tyler W. Watts and C. Cybele Raver argue that poverty reduces children’s chances of receiving high-quality, enriching care outside the home. Although classic randomized controlled trials of early childhood interventions showed substantial short- and long-run gains, many other early childhood programs, such as Head Start, demonstrate short-run gains that fade out over time. The authors draw from their own experiences implementing and evaluating a large-scale early childhood intervention to grapple with this “fade out” puzzle. They urge early childhood education interventions to be bolder in transforming the learning environments that children experience in order to improve children’s life chances. Chapter 7 turns to the educational environments of school-age children and tackles the classic question of whether school spending matters, based on a large body of research that has

arguably produced a mixed set of findings. Economist C. Kirabo Jackson argues that both classic and contemporary scholarship on this issue is clear, once units of analysis and methodological approaches are taken into account. He argues unequivocally that more school spending does indeed improve student achievement on average, laying the groundwork for a renewed focus on school spending as a key mechanism to promote opportunities for children. He also argues that we need more research to understand precisely which forms of school spending are the most effective. The final chapter in Part III, Chapter 8, puts a new spin on an age-old question—Do neighborhoods matter?—through the lens of housing mobility programs that relocate disadvantaged families to higher-opportunity neighborhoods. Sociologists Stefanie DeLuca, Anna Rhodes, and Allison Young argue that person–environment interactions are key when understanding whether and how neighborhoods matter for youth. Parent engagement with schools, parent–child interactions, youth developmental stage, and youth friendship networks are key proximal processes that help to explain why some youth benefit from neighborhood mobility and others do not. They conclude with a call for a more nuanced consideration of social ties as enabling features of so-called “moves to opportunity.”

In Part IV of this volume, we provide commentary from leading disciplinary scholars: psychologists Rochelle Cassells and Gary Evans (Chapter 9), economist Jens Ludwig (Chapter 10), and sociologist Sean F. Reardon (Chapter 11). We asked each commentator to discuss key themes and insights from a multidisciplinary set of chapters in this volume and to chart a course for future research and practice, given their insights. We close this volume with the Conclusion, in which we describe a set of crosscutting themes drawing both from the individual contributions and from the insights gained by putting the chapters in dialog with one another. We see great value in the diversity of epistemological approaches and methodological tools brought to bear on a topic that is both timeless and timely. Collectively, the contributions to this volume show us that we know a lot about what works, but there is also room for improvement and still a lot left for us to learn. We conclude by charting a path forward for scholarship, focusing on opportunities for multidisciplinary insights and work that blurs the traditional divides between basic and applied social science.

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