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Child Poverty in the United States: A Tale of Devastation and the Promise of Hope

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Abstract

The child poverty rate in the United States is higher than in most similarly developed countries, making child poverty one of America's most pressing social problems. This article provides an introduction of child poverty in the US, beginning with a short description of how poverty is measured and how child poverty is patterned across social groups and geographic space. I then examine the consequences of child poverty with a focus educational outcomes and child health, and three pathways through which poverty exerts its influence: resources, culture, and stress. After a brief review of the anti-poverty policy and programmatic landscape, I argue that moving forward we must enrich the communities in which poor families live in addition to boosting incomes and directly supporting children's skill development. I conclude with emerging research questions.

SECTION I: Introduction

In 2014, 15.5 million children—or 21.1% of children under age 18—lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty line, making children the largest group of poor people in the United States (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor 2015). Rates are even higher for the youngest children: 25% of children under age 3 are poor (Jiang et al. 2015). These figures position the US second only to Romania in rankings of child poverty rates among 35 industrialized countries (Adamson 2012).

Poor children in the US face a widening economic chasm between themselves and their more affluent peers (Autor 2014). Income inequality has grown substantially in the last forty years; after decades of decline, income inequality now harkens back to levels similar to those during the Great Depression (Piketty & Saez 2014). What's more, children from impoverished backgrounds in the US have a tougher time getting out of poverty than children in other similarly developed countries. Rates of social mobility are lower in the United States than most continental European countries (Bjorklund & Jantti 2009; Duncan & Murnane 2011, pg. 5–6; Hertz et al. 2008) and have remained unchanged since 1979 (Lee & Solon 2009).

High rates of child poverty, income inequality, and social immobility motivate a sense of urgency and importance in research and policy focused on poor children and their families. In this article, I review the latest research on child poverty across multiple social and

behavioral science disciplines. Together, this work tells two stories: One narrative warns of the long-term negative impacts associated with child poverty, but the other offers hope of resilience through policies and programs designed to reduce child poverty and mitigate its damages.

In Section II, I begin by describing how researchers define and measure poverty. Section III offers a descriptive portrait of what child poverty looks like in America today. In Section IV, I review literature on the impact of child poverty educational outcomes and child health. I discuss new types of data and approaches to the study of child poverty that have uncovered nuance in the impact of child poverty. In Section V, I describe three pathways through which poverty exerts its effects on children: resources, culture, and stress. Section VI briefly reviews anti-poverty policies that aim to reduce the rate of child poverty and early childhood interventions that aim to limit its effects. In Section VII, I argue that providing economic benefits to poor families and investing early on in children's human capital may be more effective if paired with investments in the communities in which poor families live. Finally, in Section VII, I conclude with emerging research questions.

SECTION II: Definition of Poverty & Measurement

Approximately 46.7 million people in the United States live below the poverty line, a rate of 14.8 percent (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor 2015). Of these, 15.5 million—about a third—are children. Children account for about 23 percent of the overall US population, which means that children are overrepresented among the poor (US Census Bureau 2015). Figure 1 shows 2014 poverty rates for children across multiple age groups using data from the American Community Survey.¹ Overall, 21.7% of children are poor. Poverty rates are higher among younger children and lower among older children: approximately 24% of children ages 5 or younger are poor compared to about 18% of youth ages 16 or 17.

Accurately measuring child poverty and how it varies over time and place gives us insight into how rates of child poverty are shaped by economic, demographic, and public policy change (Cancian & Danziger 2009). On its face, measuring poverty should be quite simple. Yet, there is some debate about how best to categorize a family's poverty status (Haveman et al. 2015). Since the early 1960s, poverty status has been determined by comparing a household's pre-tax cash income (e.g., wages and salaries) to a threshold that accounts for inflation using the Consumer Price Index. The child poverty rate is the proportion of families with children who have incomes below the threshold. The threshold is anchored at three times the cost of a subsistence food budget.² The threshold is adjusted for family size, composition, and age of householder, but it is the same no matter where a person lives in the US.

¹These estimates are from American Community Survey data, whereas official estimates come from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement. The numbers are slightly different for overall poverty (21.7% vs 21.1%). These differences reflect the different samples included in the poverty universe: The ACS includes the civilian and military household population and excludes group quarters (e.g., nursing homes and college dormitories), whereas the CPS includes the civilian non-institutionalized population (US Census Bureau 2014).

²The logic behind defining the threshold this way reflects research in the 1950s that showed families spent a third of their annual budget on food (Haveman et al. 2015).

The official poverty measure is intended to reflect the proportion of the population for whom the resources they share with others in their household are not enough to meet their basic needs (Haveman et al. 2015). However, a number of criticisms of the measure have been raised, revealing the significant shortcomings of the way poverty is officially determined (Citro & Michael 1995). In response to these criticisms, the Census Bureau now reports a supplemental poverty measure (SPM) each year, which (1) takes into account necessary expenses (e.g., taxes and childcare) and cash and in-kind government benefits (e.g., cash welfare, housing subsidies, WIC and SNAP benefits); (2) broadens the definition of household to include foster children and unmarried partners; (3) updates the poverty threshold annually rather than “anchoring” it to a set poverty line; and (4) reflects housing costs reported in the American Community Survey, thus varies by place of residence (Haveman et al. 2015).

For most groups, the SPM rates are higher than official measures; however, for some groups—including children—the SPM rates are lower (Short 2015). The lower SPM child poverty rate largely reflects the impact of government anti-poverty policies, many of which explicitly target families with children such as the Child Tax Credit, school lunch subsidies, and WIC benefits (Fox et al. 2015). According to Short (2015), the official poverty rate for children under 18 in 2014 was 21.5 percent, which exceeds the 2014 SPM rate of 16.7 percent by about 4.8 percentage points.³

SECTION III: A PORTRAIT OF CHILD POVERTY IN AMERICA

The burden of child poverty is unequally distributed across population subgroups in the US. In this section, I describe patterns of child poverty in our society, drawing on research that explores the social and economic factors that generate and maintain poverty for some groups more than others, over time, and across geographic space.

The Color of Child Poverty

There are dramatic disparities in child poverty rates by race/ethnicity: in 2014, child poverty rates were highest for children who are non-Hispanic Black or African American (38%), American Indian (36%), or Hispanic or Latino (32%), while rates were lowest for children who are non-Hispanic White (13%) or Asian and Pacific Islander (13%) (Kids Count 2015).

Though *rates* help us understand the disproportionate burden of child poverty for some racial/ethnic minorities, it is also revealing to examine the *total population* of children in poverty by race/ethnicity (see Figure 2). First, poverty affects all children, regardless of racial/ethnic background. Second, contrary to racialized stereotypes about who is poor in America, there are more non-Hispanic white children in poverty (4.9 million) than non-Hispanic Black or African American children (3.9 million). Third, the majority of children in poverty are of Hispanic origin (5.7 million). Fourth, for each racial/ethnic group, most children in poverty are between 0 and 5 years of age.

³The official child poverty rate reported in Short (2015) is 21.5%, which differs from the official rate of 21.1% reported by DeNavas-Walt and Proctor (2015). This is because Short includes unrelated individuals under the age of 15 in her calculation of the official rate among families with children.

High levels of child poverty among Black, American Indian, and Hispanic children reflect changes over time in the economy, public policy, and institutional practices that disproportionately affect people of color, such as declining relative wages of less educated men, declining availability of full-time jobs, and rising incarceration rates (Wilson 1996). The disproportionality of poverty by race/ethnicity also reflects past and current discrimination in schooling, housing markets, and labor markets (Cancian & Danziger 2009; Desmond 2016; Stokes et al. 2001).

Immigration and Child Poverty in the US: A Growing Concern

Immigrant status is also closely associated with poverty. Children of recent immigrants are a rapidly growing share of the child population in the United States: from 2006 to 2011, the number of children with at least one immigrant parent grew by 1.5 million, from 15.7 to 17.2 million (Hanson & Simms 2014). Thus, children of immigrants account for nearly a fourth of all children in the United States. The majority of children of immigrants are Hispanic, and more than 40% have parents from Mexico.

Similar to many racial/ethnic minority groups, immigrant children are disproportionately likely to experience poverty relative to children whose parents were born in the US. In 2009, 18.2% of children with native-born parents were poor compared to 27.2% of children with “established immigrant” parents (i.e., those who have been in the US for more than ten years), and 38.5% of children with parents who recently immigrated to the US (Wight et al. 2011).

Since immigrants represent an increasing share of the US population and poverty rates among the foreign born tend to be high, immigration directly affects the overall child poverty rate (Raphael & Smolensky 2009). Theoretically, immigration could also affect child poverty rates by driving down the wages and employment of native-born workers, though there is little evidence to support this claim (Raphael & Smolensky 2009).

Declining Rates of Marriage and the Growing Burden of Child Poverty

Child poverty rates are substantially higher for children in single-mother families than for those in married-couple families, in part because single-mother families have fewer potential earners, and many have difficulty collecting child support payments from fathers (Mather 2010). In 2014, 30.6% of single mother families were poor, compared with only 6.2% of married families with children (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor 2015).

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a rapid increase in single-mother families in the US, and rates have remained high since the 1990s; nearly one-fourth of children under 18 live in single-mother families (Mather 2010).⁴ Cancian & Reed (2009) note that though women are now less likely to be married than previously, women also tend to have fewer children, are more educated, and are more likely to be working than in the past. The researchers argue that these trends have countervailing influences on the child poverty rate: increased maternal

⁴Though single father families and cohabiting partners have increased in recent years, the overwhelming majority of children in single-parent homes live with their mothers (Mather 2010).

employment has offset the poverty increasing effects of single motherhood. Still, recent changes in family structure have increased the child poverty rate, all else being equal.

Poverty of Place: How Child Poverty is Spatially Distributed in the US

In addition to their race/ethnic identification, immigrant status, and their parents' marital status, where children live can also put them at a greater risk of growing up poor. Though many conceive of poverty as an urban problem, 95 of the 100 counties in the US with the highest child poverty rates are located in rural areas, whereas most counties with the lowest child poverty rates tend to be in wealthy suburbs of large metropolitan areas (O'Hare & Mather 2008). Poverty disproportionately affects children living in rural areas as a result of recent economic changes in rural communities where key industries have disappeared (e.g., family farms) or moved overseas (e.g., textiles manufacturing) (O'Hare 2009; Vernon-Feagans et al. 2012). The service sector jobs that have replaced these industries contribute to higher rates of poverty because they are less stable and lower paying, and rural areas have not benefitted from the rise of technology-related companies in the same way as have urban and suburban areas (O'Hare 2009).

Child poverty is also a highly clustered regional phenomenon. The South has a regional poverty rate of over 16%, and there are hotspot clusters of high rates of child poverty in the Mississippi Delta region, the Black Belt, Appalachia, southwest Texas and New Mexico, southern South Dakota, and northern Nebraska (Voss et al. 2006). Regional variation in child poverty can in part be explained by their social and economic contexts. Structural factors such as racial/ethnic composition and industry combine to influence the social processes that generate levels of child poverty in different areas. For example, racial/ethnic composition is more strongly associated with child poverty in farming dependent areas, which in part explains the higher levels of child poverty that are observed in the South (Curtis et al. 2012).

The supplemental child poverty rate varies widely across states, which in large part reflects variation in state anti-poverty policies (The Anne E Casey Foundation 2015). In an analysis of the US Census Bureau Supplementary Poverty Measure Public Use Research files in 2012–2014, The Anne E Casey Foundation (2015) found that federal benefits, which generally do not adjust for differences in costs of living, have a smaller impact on reducing child poverty rates in states where cost of living is high. In addition, though most government benefits are funded at the federal level, states vary with respect to the ins-and-outs of policy implementation, particularly for welfare: income eligibility limits, benefit levels, financial incentives to work, time limits, eligibility requirements for two-parent families, and the stringency of rules that reduce or terminate benefits for families that are non-compliant (McKernan & Ratcliffe 2006; Soss et al. 2001). Many of these welfare policy variations are associated with variation in poverty levels by state, making the state that children are raised in particularly consequential for their economic well-being (McKernan & Ratcliffe 2006).

SECTION IV: Consequences of Poverty

The literature on the consequences of child poverty is enormous, and the latest scholarship is increasingly methodologically sophisticated (see recent review by Duncan et al., 2012).

Recent research has moved away from cross-sectional analyses, which capture a snapshot of children's lives at one point in time, toward longitudinal analyses, which allow the linking of trajectories of poverty exposures during infancy and early childhood to outcomes across the life course. As such, it is increasingly common for studies to address the dynamics of exposure to poverty, including intensity, timing, and duration (e.g., short term vs. long term poverty). Furthermore, studies are paying increasing attention to the context of children's lives beyond their families' own socioeconomic status by explicitly modeling the impact of economic resources of others around them, for example in their schools and neighborhoods.

These new ways of studying the effects of child poverty have revealed that: 1) most differences in outcomes between poor and non-poor children remain after adjusting for potentially confounding factors (i.e., factors other than income that are associated with both poverty and child outcomes); 2) poverty exposure may be especially harmful during early childhood, a period of rapid brain growth and development; 3) the longer a child is exposed to poverty, the greater the risk of negative outcomes; 4) the effects of poverty can accumulate over time or lie dormant for years, only to be revealed in adulthood; and 5) the socioeconomic context of neighborhoods and schools matter for children's outcomes net of their own family's resources (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Duncan & Magnuson 2011a; Duncan et al. 1998; Duncan et al. 2010; Elder 1985; Entwisle et al. 2005; Foster & Furstenberg 1999; Harding 2003; Hertzman 1999; Kuh & Shlomo 2004; McLeod & Shanahan 1996; Ratcliffe & McKernan 2010; Sastry & Pebley 2010; Turley 2003).

In the next few pages, I review literature on two domains of child well-being: academic achievement and child health. Due to lack of space, I do not focus on other outcomes, though they remain the focus of much of the current academic research on the consequences of child poverty across the life course, including learning and developmental delays, criminal activity, teenage childbearing, marriage, and adult health and socioeconomic outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1997b; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997; Duncan et al. 2010; Duncan et al. 2012).

A Growing Academic Achievement Gap Between Rich and Poor

One of the most widely studied outcomes of childhood poverty is success in school. The focus on schooling is rooted in the widespread belief that children who do well in school have a better chance of escaping poverty when they are adults. Indeed, education is increasingly necessary for economic wellbeing in the US, in part due to a growing earnings gap between those who are college-educated and those who are not (Goldin & Katz 2008). Success in school also strongly predicts a wide variety of other desired outcomes, such as civic participation, adult health, and life expectancy (Attewell & Levin 2007; Hout 2012; van Kippersluis et al. 2011). Yet, the challenge of succeeding academically for children living in poverty is a difficult one. Poverty has large and consistent associations with academic outcomes, including achievement on standardized tests, years of completed schooling, and degree attainment (Bailey & Dynarski 2011; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1997a; Duncan & Magnuson 2011b; Entwisle et al. 2005). Differences between poor and non-poor children are observable early on and persist across the school years: gaps in academic achievement are evident in kindergarten, and by age 14, students from the bottom income

quintile are a full academic year behind their peers in the top income quintile (Duncan & Magnuson 2011b; Duncan & Murnane 2011). What's more, income inequality in academic achievement is getting worse rather than improving over time: the achievement gap between the 90th and 10th percentiles of the income distribution among children born in 2001 is 30–40 percent larger than among children born twenty-five years earlier and is now larger than racial gaps (Reardon 2011). The growing income-achievement gap is driven by a strengthening of the association between family income and children's academic achievement for families above the median income level, which reflects increasing parental investment in children's cognitive development among the more economically advantaged (Reardon 2011).⁵

Impact of Poverty on the Physical and Mental Health of Children

Poverty is also key social determinant of infant and child health, which can have lasting effects on educational attainment, earnings, and adult health (Aber et al. 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997b; Wagmiller et al. 2006). The central role of poverty in shaping child health is increasingly clear. Recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a policy statement and technical report that recognizes this centrality, drawing on research demonstrating a causal relation between early childhood poverty and child health (Council on Community Pediatrics 2016).

For infants, poverty increases the risk of a number of birth outcomes including low birth weight, which is a general indicator of a baby's in utero environment and development and a precursor to subsequent physical health and cognitive and emotion problems (Bennett 1997; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1997b; Starfield et al. 1991). Poverty increases the risk of infant mortality, another widely accepted indicator of the health and well-being of children (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan 1997b; Corman & Grossman 1985). With an infant mortality rate of 6.1 in 2009, the US lags far behind European countries, ranking last in a comparison of 26 OECD countries (MacDorman et al. 2014). The excess infant mortality rate in the US is largely driven by post-neonatal deaths (those that occur between one month and a year after the birth) among low-income mothers (Chen et al. forthcoming).

For children, poverty is associated with a number of physical health insults: increased risk of injuries resulting from accidents or physical abuse/neglect; more frequent and severe chronic conditions (e.g., asthma, diabetes, and problems with hearing, vision, and speech); more frequent acute illnesses; poorer nutrition and growth; lower immunization rates or delayed immunization; and increased risk of obesity and its complications (Aber et al. 1997; Starfield 1991; Currie & Lin 2007; Case et al. 2002).

In addition to physical health problems, the disadvantages associated with poverty and economic insecurity can trigger significant mental health problems for children, including ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and mood and anxiety disorders (Costello et al. 2004; Cuellar 2015; Perou et al. 2013). Mental health problems are more

⁵During the 1970s, middle class families on average spent about \$3,700 per year on investments in their children, compared to today's average of \$9,300 per year. Poor parents have not been able to keep pace with these increases in investments, so that contemporary poor children lag further behind their affluent counterparts of fifty years prior. The current average annual spending of \$1,400 on investments in children among poor families is not even twice the 1970s average of \$880 per year (Duncan and Murnane 2011)

common than physical health problems, and their effects can be more pervasive (Currie & Stabile 2006; Currie 2009). Approximately one fourth of youth experience a mental disorder during the past year and about a third across their lifetimes (Merikangas et al. 2009). These problems, which are the dominant cause of childhood disability, can restrict children's social competence and opportunities to learn (Delaney & Smith 2012; Halfon et al. 2012).

Estimates across poverty status for mental disorders combined are not available. But, according to a recent summary of mental health surveillance among children in the US between 2005–2011 by the Center for Disease Control, prevalence rates are higher for children living in poverty compared with non-poor children for ADHD, behavior or conduct disorders, and mood/anxiety disorders (Perou et al. 2013). The only exception to the pattern is among children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders, who are more likely to come from more economically advantaged families.

Beyond The Individual: How Neighborhood Poverty Affects Children

A rising share of US children live in high-poverty neighborhoods, defined as a neighborhood with poverty rates of 30 percent or more: more than 10 percent of US children lived in a high poverty neighborhood in 2010, up from 8.7 percent in 2000, a 25% increase (Mather & Dupuis 2012). There are small but clear negative effects for children of growing up in a poor neighborhood that are beyond the effects of growing up in a poor family (see Sastry 2012 for a summary of this literature). Children growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods are at a higher risk of health problems, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993). What's more, the effects of neighborhoods may linger across generations. Many caregivers themselves grew up in the neighborhoods in which they are raising their children (Sharkey 2008), and neighborhood environments experienced over multiple generations of a family influence children's cognitive ability: exposure to neighborhood poverty over two consecutive generations can reduce a child's cognitive ability by more than half a standard deviation (Sharkey & Elwert 2011).

Section V: Mechanisms of Influence

There are several pathways through which poverty affects children's outcomes, which have been linked to three main theoretical frameworks: resources, culture, and family and environmental stress (Duncan et al. 2014). This section reviews these frameworks, emphasizing the particular mechanisms that link poverty to child outcomes that each bring to light.

Material and Social Resources

Parents who struggle to make ends meet do not have enough income to fulfill basic material needs for their children, such as food, clothing, adequate and stable housing, and quality educational environments (Becker 1991). Families who are poor also tend to be less socially connected to others, are less emotionally supported, and have more frequent negative social interactions (Lin 2000; Mickelson & Kubzansky 2003). Inequality in access to resourceful social networks contributes to—and even reproduces—social inequality (for a review and discussion, see Lin 2000; DiMaggio & Garip 2012). In some ways, material and social

resources work in tandem to disadvantage families in poverty. For example, high rates of mobility in areas of concentrated economic disadvantage erode the social fabric of neighborhoods, a process which has negative consequences for families who are able to stay put (Jacobs 1961). As Desmond (2016) emphasizes in his ethnography *Evicted*, housing instability and evictions operate as mechanisms that degrade the social connectivity upon which resourceful neighborhoods are built. Evictions are not rare—one in eight families face involuntary moves each year nationwide—and evictions disproportionately affect low-income families with children. Many poor families that are in need of stable social environments to raise their children struggle to maintain stable housing, and are forced to move from place to place when a combination of their good will and financial supports give way to a rental market that profits from tenants' financial instability (Desmond 2016). Facing eviction, these families are not motivated to invest in their neighborhoods, emotionally or otherwise, and the ties that are formed between those crippled by the weight of their housing situations are often “disposable,” made for the short-term benefits they provide but easily discarded (Desmond 2012). Disposable ties can add stress rather than reduce it, making them ill-suited to rebuff the negative consequences of poverty on child outcomes.

A Renewed Focus on the Culture of Poverty

After a considerable absence from the research agenda of social scientists, the study of culture within poverty scholarship has been reinvigorated. A culture perspective asks questions about how and why people cope with poverty and how they escape it, focusing on individuals' beliefs, preferences, orientations, and strategies in response to poverty as well as anti-poverty policies and programs (Small et al. 2010). Unlike much of what preceded it, current culture of poverty scholarship avoids blaming the victim for their problems, rather focusing on why poor people adopt certain frames, values, and repertoires, and how people make meaning of their social status in relation to others (Small et al. 2010).

Central to literature that addresses child poverty from a cultural perspective are studies of how parenting practices operate as a mechanism through which poverty affects children. For example, Lareau (2003) observes families from different class backgrounds with school-aged children in order to understand how social class differences in child-rearing strategies might contribute to stratification processes. She argues that social class position shapes parents' cultural logics of child-rearing. Middle and upper class families practice “concerted cultivation,” wherein parents actively foster and assess their child's talents, opinions, and skills. In contrast, working class and poor families are more likely to see the development of their children as an “accomplishment of natural growth,” allowing for unstructured free time socializing with family and community members and teaching children to be deferential and quiet. As a result of these different approaches, Lareau argues that middle-class children exhibit a sense of entitlement that puts them at a distinct advantage within schools and other institutions, while working-class children develop a sense of constraint in relation to schooling and the wider social world and are less adept at responding to school demands and practices. While Lareau's theory is intuitively appealing, the small scope of her study leaves many questions unanswered. Nonetheless, her study is a primary example of the culture of

poverty approach, which highlights parenting practices as key to understanding the mechanism through which poverty impacts children.

The Stress of Poverty

In contrast to the material, social, or cultural pathways that highlight social, cultural and economic factors and how they affect children, the stress pathway turns our focus inside the body. Living in poverty is a stressful, often chaotic experience (Thompson 2014; Vernon-Feagans et al. 2012; Evans and Wachs 2010). The term “toxic stress” is often used to describe the potential impact on body systems of living in the disorganized, unstable, and unpredictable environments of impoverished families (Garner & Shonkoff 2012). Toxic stress refers to strong, frequent, or prolonged activation of the body’s stress response system (Thompson 2014). In contrast to positive or tolerable stress responses, which refer to more mild and adaptive changes in the body’s stress response system or stronger changes over a short period of time, a toxic stress response can undermine the organization of the brain. In some cases, toxic stress can challenge the body’s ability to respond to subsequent stressors, even those of the positive or tolerable variety (Ladd et al. 2000). This lowered threshold makes some poor children less capable of coping effectively with stress as they age, influences genomic function and brain development, and increases the risk of stress-related physical and mental health problems later in life (Blair et al. 2011; Danese & McEwen 2012).

SECTION VI: Anti-Poverty Policy and Interventions

It is clear that the consequences of growing up poor are substantial, particularly when children are exposed to conditions associated with poverty early on and for long stretches of time (Duncan & Magnuson 2011a). Government policies and early childhood interventions represent society’s response to the burden of child poverty. A comprehensive review of anti-poverty policies is beyond the scope of this review (see Cancian & Danziger 2009 and Haveman et al. 2015 for excellent analyses of anti-poverty efforts over the past 60 years), but the consensus is that anti-poverty policies successfully lift many people out of poverty, especially people with children (Danziger and Wimer 2014; Haveman et al. 2015). In particular, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which is an income-based monthly benefit that can be used to purchase food at authorized stores, has become one of the most effective anti-poverty policies, particularly for households with children living in deep poverty (Bartfeld et al. 2015). Yet, economic benefits of current policies constitute proportionately less of their income for poor families now than in prior decades (Danziger & Danziger 2009). The public benefits that remain available to low-income families are mostly concentrated among families with earnings, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC), mostly come in the form of in-kind benefits—like SNAP—rather than cash assistance (Shaefer et al 2015), and often fall very short of full coverage for those in need. For example, Section 8 housing choice vouchers, which guarantee that a family will pay no more than 30 percent of its income for housing, are available only to a third of poor renting families (Desmond 2016).

In addition to anti-poverty policies that supplement income or increase employment for families with children, there are also programs and interventions that help redress the negative effects of poverty on children's life chances. Rigorous evaluations of a number of famous early childhood programs (e.g., the Perry Preschool program, The Incredible Years, and the Abecedarian project) are often cited as evidence that such programs can at least partially compensate for the disadvantages associated with growing up poor, promoting cognitive skills and non-cognitive traits such as motivation (Cuhna et al. 2006). The positive effects appear to be long-lasting, and early interventions produce larger effects than programs focused on older children. Ultimately, though expensive at the outset, the returns on early investments come in the form of a more productive workforce, a reduction in expensive treatment for mental and physical problems, reduced reliance on public assistance, and less involvement in the criminal justice system (Heckman et al. 2010).

In contrast to small-scale early childhood interventions, Head Start, which is administered by the Administration for Children and Families within the Department of Health and Human Services, serves over 1 million low-income children ages birth to 5 (Administration for Children and Families 2014). Head Start services generally focus on early learning, health and developmental screenings, and strengthening parent-child relationships. Though children who attend Head Start score below norms across developmental areas including language, literacy, and mathematics, at both Head Start entry and exit (Aikens et al. 2013), Head Start is associated with modest improvements in children's preschool experiences and school readiness in certain areas compared to similarly disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start (Puma et al. 2012). However, the benefits appear to wane over time.

Another large scale program designed to address the needs of low-income families with children is the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) (Michalopoulos et al. 2015). MEICHV began as a pilot initiative in the Bush administration and a full fledged program in 2010 as an expansion to the Affordable Care Act. Between 2010 and 2014, it provided \$1.5 billion to states for home visiting. For the most part, states used the MIECHV funds to expand the use of four evidence-based home visiting models: Early Head Start – Home Based Program Option; Healthy Families America; Nurse-Family Partnership; and Parents as Teachers. Home visiting programs vary quite a bit, but generally consist of visits from social workers, parent educators, and/or registered nurses to low-income pregnant women and new parents. Participants receive health check-ups and referrals, parenting advice, and guidance with navigating other programs. The duration and frequency of the visits vary depending on the program and age of the child. Some continue until the baby is two years old, others support families until children complete kindergarten. A recent review of 19 home visiting models suggests that home visiting programs have favorable impacts on a number of child outcomes including child health, child development, and school readiness (Avellar et al. 2015). Many of the programs have sustained impacts at least one year after program enrollment.

SECTION VII: A Community approach to combating child poverty

Anti-poverty policy and early childhood interventions are successful, but both typically focus on individual families and children. This focus draws away from the ecological

underpinnings of the poverty experience. Multiple ecologies of children's lives—the variety of institutions with which families interact, the relations among these institutions, and the social networks of families—contribute developmental and educational inequalities among children (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris 1997; Coleman 1988; Durlauf & Young 2001; Gamoran 1992; Turley 2003; Vandell & Pierce 2002). Given evidence of the increasing spatial concentration of poverty and the impact of living in areas of concentrated economic deprivation (Jargowsky 2013; Sastry 2012), I argue that child and/or family-centered approaches may be more effective and longer lasting if paired with approaches that directly and purposefully target the communities in which low-income families live, thus in the ecological contexts of poor children.

A community approach should involve both indirect investments through institutions such as stable and affordable housing, schools, and labor markets, and direct investments through programs explicitly designed to strengthen social connectivity among parents. Indeed, a crucial aspect of breaking the cycle of poverty must directly build resourceful social connections among the caregivers of poor children. Resourceful social connections are those that are rich in social resources, like social support (e.g., listening to problems or plans for the future), social control (e.g., maintaining consistent expectations among parents and others within the social network), advice and information (e.g., regarding program eligibility, effectiveness of teachers and other institutional agents), and commonplace reciprocal exchanges (e.g., car pooling, child care) (Domina 2005; Thoits 2011; Small 2009). As many low-income families know all too well, it takes a lot of effort, energy, and human capital to take advantage of the benefits the state provides (Edin & Lein 1997). Building resourceful social connections within high-poverty neighborhoods can make these tasks less daunting by spreading information about how to determine eligibility, sharing in child care responsibilities, and providing transportation to government agencies, doctors' offices, school, and other institutions designed to help poor families. Additionally, perhaps by investing in the social resources of communities devastated by high rates of poverty, we can empower residents to fight for policy changes they identify for themselves as immediately warranted.

Sociological research is not unequivocal about the benefits of tight social networks. Similar to the depiction of “disposable ties” describe above, Portes and Landolt (1996) argue that we are remiss when failing to consider the pitfalls of close relationships in areas of concentrated disadvantage. Thus, merely connecting parents to each other may not be enough to benefit children. The quality of those connections is tantamount as well. One example of a community-based program that targets parental social resources for low-income families is Families and Schools Together (FAST). FAST is a multi-family group intervention developed using family stress theory, family systems theory, social ecological theory, and community development strategies (McDonald and Frey 1999). Four randomized controlled trials of the program show that, compared to control groups, FAST participants exhibit reduced aggressive and withdrawal behaviors, increased academic competence, and more developed social skills (Abt Associates 2001; Kratochwill et al. 2004; McDonald et al. 2006; Gamoran et al. 2012). The effect of FAST on child outcomes is mediated in part through its effect on parent social networks (Turley et al. 2012). Parents who participate in FAST are more likely to know other parents in their child's school, to report that other parents share

their expectations for their children, and to participate in reciprocal exchanges with other parents (Turley et al. 2012).

The FAST program and others like it take direct aim at the quantity and quality of parents' social connections. Social resource interventions may break down insidious hurdles that may be difficult for children from low-income families to overcome than by intervening through income supplementation or skill acquisition alone. Of course, the success of these types of programs will be undercut by the high rates of residential mobility currently experienced in low-income neighborhoods. Thus, indirect investments in social resources, for example through expanding housing vouchers to enable more poor families to pay their rent and avoid eviction (Desmond 2016), should be considered a requisite for a truly enriched community approach to combating child poverty.

SECTION VIII: Emerging research questions

Poverty is a persistent problem for over 20% of the children in the United States (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor 2015). Child development is shaped by children's interactions within and across social contexts (Bronfenbrenner 2002). The social contexts in which children from impoverished backgrounds live can be devastatingly harmful: growing up in poverty exposes children to more stress or abuse in the home, neighborhood crime, and school violence (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997). Exposure to environmental conditions associated with poverty profoundly shapes their development, and the effects become more pronounced the longer the exposure to poverty (Duncan et al., 1998; Foster & Furstenberg 1999). Empirical studies from multiple social science disciplines including sociology, psychology, economics, have consistently documented crippling disadvantages across a number of developmental domains, showing that the disadvantages associated with poverty are entrenched, wide-reaching, and constitute an immediate and pressing policy challenge.

Moving the field forward are emerging questions about who sets the anti-poverty policy and programmatic agendas (e.g., Bradshaw 2007; O'Connor 2001), what cultural and behavioral assumptions are made by specific policy and program components (e.g., Edin & Kefalas 2005; Steensland 2006), and how policies and programs interact with the ways in which poor people engage various institutions, each other, and those who profit from their disadvantaged status (e.g., Desmond 2016). Furthermore, as argued here, an examination of the ways that neighborhood institutions support or erode the social connectivity of low-income neighborhoods is key. Researchers should continue to centrally locate the analysis of the impact of policy and programs not only on individual children but also on the social ecological environments in which they live and learn. Investing in the communities in which poor parents and caregivers live may enhance the positive effects of anti-poverty policy and early childhood interventions. Poverty scholars should examine how institutional features shape the social networks of families in financial trouble, and how children fare under different organizational arrangements. In *Unanticipated Gains*, his study of day care centers in New York City, Mario Small (2005) offers a theoretical framework to think about how organizational features of institutions can promote the kinds of stable ties that benefit families with young children. Small documents the social network benefits of certain centers that, by virtue of the particular institutional conditions in place, connect families to each

other and provide families, particularly single mothers with young children, relationships that support their health and well being. Rather than the “unanticipated gains” like those that were observed in Small’s study, we may find we can anticipate these gains as we invest in the social and economic opportunities for the poor.

These emerging research questions will bring us closer to an understanding what policies will work best for addressing the high rates of overall child poverty, the disproportionality of child poverty, and the most cost-effective mechanisms for buffering children from the negative effects of poverty and its associated conditions.

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Figure 1. Child Poverty Rates by Age Group

Source: Author's calculations using American Community Survey (ACS) data, 2014.

Accurately measuring child poverty and how it varies over time and place gives us...

Figure 2. Population Estimates of Children in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity and Age Group
 Source: Author's calculations using American Community Survey (ACS) data, 2014.
 High levels of child poverty among Black, American Indian, and Hispanic children...