



How Cultural Factors Shape Children's Economic Outcomes

Melissa S. Kearney and Ron Haskins

Cultural factors affect children's economic outcomes and contribute to socioeconomic gaps in those outcomes. In this brief, we focus on three of these factors—parenting practices, family structure, and the influence of role models and the media—and examine how policy could influence them to increase economic mobility for children from lower-income families.

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The United States today is characterized by high levels of income inequality and social fragmentation. The past four decades have seen large increases in family income for people at the top of the income distribution, but only modest increases for those in the bottom half. Most people without a college degree have experienced stagnant or declining wages and greater economic insecurity. Furthermore, as a result of both lower aggregate economic growth and a decline in shared prosperity across the income distribution, it's now less common for children to have higher incomes as adults than their parents did. These trends have rightly led to widespread concern that the promises of ample opportunity and a path to upward mobility are eroding in this country. The fabled American Dream is under threat.

A common policy reaction to these trends is to focus on ways to increase educational and economic opportunities for all, and to strengthen safety net programs and progressive taxation in order to redistribute economic resources to individuals and families who need assistance. These are productive approaches. But cultural factors such as parenting practices, family structure, and social influences also affect children's economic outcomes and contribute to socioeconomic gaps in outcomes. As the editors of the current issue of the *Future of Children*, we invited

scholars to present the evidence about how various features of social institutions, norms, and behaviors shape children's outcomes. By taking a quantitative, empirically rigorous approach to defining and studying cultural constructs, the articles in this issue advance the policy conversation about how culture shapes children's outcomes. Both individually and collectively, they offer useful, evidence-based observations for policy makers, practitioners, and advocates for children.

In this policy brief, we highlight three specific cultural factors considered in the issue: parenting practices; family structure; and the social influences of role models, mentors, and media. Space constraints prevent us from delving more deeply into five other factors covered in the issue—perceptions about social mobility; religion and religious institutions; peer and family effects; social capital networks; and discrimination—so we describe them only briefly here. Those interested should read the journal itself for a thorough treatment of all of these complex factors.

Parenting Practices and Family Structure

There are large and growing gaps in the amount of time that higher- and lower-income parents devote to their children and in the ways they engage with their children. Children born to lower-income, less-educated parents generally have less quality time with their parents; they're also less likely to receive positive emotional support from their parents. This divide in parenting time and practices is related to, albeit distinct from, differences in family structure. Low-income parents are far more likely to be single parents, which means that on average, they have fewer total resources to offer their children in terms of income, time, and emotional stability. Research has shown that this family disadvantage often means worse outcomes for children, especially for boys.

In the *Future of Children*, Ariel Kalil of the University of Chicago and Rebecca Ryan of Georgetown University, both developmental psychologists, review recent evidence on socioeconomic gaps in parenting practices. Dozens of studies have demonstrated these differences: higher-income mothers and fathers spend more time in educational activities with their children, create home learning environments that are more cognitively stimulating, and are more likely to read to their children and do math-related activities with them. Parents also differ systematically when it comes to discipline: those with less income and less education are more likely to use harsh, physical discipline with children than are their higher-income

and more educated counterparts. Not only do lower- and higher-income parents differ in the way they raise their children, but they also differ in precisely the parenting behaviors that predict children's cognitive and socioemotional skills. Given these documented linkages, socioeconomic differences in parenting behaviors likely contribute to the intergenerational transmission of economic status.

Survey data reveal that economically disadvantaged parents *want* to do many of the same things that higher-income parents do, such as reading to their children and engaging them in educational experiences like trips to parks and museums. But they're less likely to do them in practice. According to Kalil and Ryan, most recent evidence suggests that parents in the United States across the economic distribution share similar beliefs about the importance of developing skills in children that will prepare them for success in school and life, and about the values they as parents wish to instill in their children. So it doesn't appear that the gaps we see reflect differences in information, values, or preferences. Nor do the gaps seem to reflect total time available. More-educated mothers actually work more hours outside the home than less-educated mothers do, on average, but they still spend more time with their children. Rather, the leading explanation seems to be that financial strain and family stress make it hard for lower-income parents to realize their parenting intentions. Financial strain and stress can impede parents' emotional and cognitive functioning and make it harder for them to interact with young children in intellectually stimulating and emotionally nurturing ways.

Studies show that well-designed interventions can improve the quality of parenting in low-income families by reducing parents' emotional and interpersonal stress and improving their mental health. Kalil and Ryan emphasize that among programs with documented success at improving early childhood parenting, a key feature is that the program focuses specifically on improving parents' mental health using clear clinical approaches. The authors highlight two programs in particular. One is Mothers and Babies, a six-week cognitive-behavioral intervention that's been demonstrated to reduce depressive symptoms and prevent depressive episodes among perinatal women, thereby elevating the mothers' sensitivity with their infants. The other program is Family Foundations, which aims to improve mental health by minimizing the strains of the transition to parenthood, increasing co-parental support, and decreasing co-parental undermining. Another promising (and typically inexpensive) approach to helping low-income parents achieve their parenting goals consists of

behaviorally informed, light-touch interventions that aim to overcome the challenges that some intensive programs face with regard to participant recruitment and retention. One recent example is the Parents and Children Together program, which was implemented as a field experiment to test whether text reminders and social rewards could increase the time that low-income parents spend reading to their children. The results are encouraging.¹

Policy makers and children's advocates should keep developing evidence-based programs that aim to improve parenting techniques among financially and emotionally stretched parents—especially when so many less-educated and lower-income mothers are raising children as single parents, without the additional resources of a spouse or partner. Less than 60 percent of the children of mothers with a high school degree or less are being raised in married-parent homes, compared to 85 percent of the children of mothers with four years of college.²

In another *Future of Children* article, Melanie Wasserman, an economist at the University of California, Los Angeles, reviews the latest evidence on the causal link between family structure and children's economic and social outcomes. Wasserman moves beyond *whether* family structure affects child outcomes—a topic that has been considered at length elsewhere, including in previous issues of *Future of Children*—to examine how family structure affects children differently. Several recent studies indicate that growing up outside of a family with two biological married parents has especially negative consequences for boys as compared to girls, including worse educational outcomes and higher rates of criminal involvement.³

Wasserman considers a number of mechanisms by which family structure could affect children's outcomes—and affect boys and girls differently. These include same-gender role models, parental resources, parenting time and practices, and differences in how boys and girls respond to parental inputs. The emerging consensus, she reports, is that the absence of a biological father in the home has especially negative consequences for boys. These consequences manifest as disruptive and delinquent behavior, and they persist into adult educational attainment and employment.

When researchers statistically account for maternal characteristics that might differ between family types, such as a mother's education and age, they still find that growing up outside of a two-parent married household has especially negative effects for boys. The

differential effect for boys doesn't appear to reflect gender gaps in parental investments: existing evidence doesn't indicate that gender gaps in resources within the family vary meaningfully across family structures. Another possibility is that the differential effects of family structure on boys and girls can be explained by correlated factors external to the family, such as the types of schools the children attend or the neighborhoods in which they live. A study using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey found no evidence that schooling environments affect boys and girls differently, which implies that schools alone can't explain the disproportionately negative effects of single parenthood on boys' externalizing behavior and suspensions. But a study using administrative school records in Florida shows that attending higher-quality schools benefits boys more than girls. This study concludes that gender differences in response to correlated environmental attributes such as schools and neighborhoods can explain perhaps a quarter of the differential effects of family structure on boys.

Because the proportion of children growing up in single-mother households is rising, and because boys appear to be especially disadvantaged by this family structure, trends in family structure might be part of the reason that boys have fallen behind girls in rates of high school and college completion. What could policy makers do? Wasserman cautions that the benefits of being raised by continuously married parents don't stem from marital status alone. In particular, when biological fathers have limited financial, emotional, and educational resources, children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes are no better when they're raised by married parents.

Perhaps for this reason, policies meant to encourage marriage or marriage stability with fathers who have limited resources are unlikely to generate lasting benefits for children. Rigorous evaluations of federally sponsored policies designed to promote marriage among low-income families show that these programs have produced little improvement in couples' relationship stability or children's outcomes. Rather, policy makers and children's advocates must explore efforts to supplement the parental, educational, and community resources available to children who are most at risk for the negative effects of nontraditional family structures.

Social Influences: Role Models, Mentors, and Media

Children encounter many important social influences beyond their parents and families. They learn from the adults and peers with whom they interact in their

schools, neighborhoods, and communities, both in the real world and through the media. As with the other factors considered in the *Future of Children*, the social influences experienced by children vary by socioeconomic status. Children in lower-income families grow up in neighborhoods that offer less exposure to adult role models who have higher levels of education or who work full time. These children are also likely to spend more time watching television or engaged with media. In their *Future of Children* article, economists Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland (also an editor of the issue) and Phillip Levine of Wellesley College observe that the social learning that occurs through role models, mentors, and media influences might contribute to the widely diverging outcomes of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. But their review of the relevant research leads them to the optimistic conclusion that these same social forces can be deliberately, effectively, and in many cases inexpensively deployed to improve the social and economic outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Kearney and Levine describe evidence that role models and media affect children's outcomes. Research shows that role models with whom young people identify—often adults of their own gender or race—can positively influence their lives. A number of studies show that having a teacher of the same gender or race can boost a student's educational persistence and performance. Another type of role model effect that has been documented is the aspirational effect for girls of seeing women in positions of leadership.

Evidence also shows that formal mentoring programs can meaningfully improve outcomes for some disadvantaged youth. For example, mentoring relationships arranged through programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters have been shown to produce better school performance and lower rates of involvement with the criminal justice system. Kearney and Levine note that we need more research to understand when and why some mentoring programs work better than others or better for some groups than for others.

Kearney and Levine also review evidence that exposure to certain media content can have sizable positive effects on social and educational attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes. Rigorous empirical studies of many contexts and outcomes have led to this encouraging finding. Granted, sustained exposure to pernicious images on television might

well be harmful, but a number of notable research papers show that TV can have beneficial effects, both intentional and unintentional. Many entertainment programs have been created with the explicit goal of promoting education. An obvious example is educational children's programming, now widely available on television, as well as through recorded content and online. A comprehensive study of US Census data confirms that the introduction of the most viewed children's educational show of all time, *Sesame Street*, led to better elementary school performance for the cohorts of children who had broadcast access to the show during their preschool years.⁴

Beyond explicit educational content, media content can change individual attitudes and preferences through what economists call *persuasion effects*. These effects can come about in several ways: through glamorizing an activity, vilifying or mocking it, or associating it with an admired or maligned media character. Scholars in the field of communication have speculated that "entertainment-education" might offer a more effective way to influence attitudes and behavior than traditional persuasive messages, because it may elicit less resistance to a narrative's persuasive messages. Researchers have found that the introduction of *novelas*, or TV soap operas, in Brazil led to a reduction in fertility, with the largest effects among poorer and less-educated women. The authors hypothesize that the small families portrayed on these programs served as role models, resulting in a reduced demand for children among young female viewers.⁵

Kearney and Levine's research uncovered a perhaps surprising example of how even media content developed purely for entertainment purposes can have positive social effects. The authors found that the compelling, cautionary tales about the struggles of teen moms revealed on MTV's reality show *16 and Pregnant* led to a sizable decrease in US teen childbearing rates.⁶ The show's impact didn't stem from a role model effect, but more likely from relaying useful information to teens about how pregnancy and parenthood would affect their everyday lives.

The research described by Kearney and Levine suggests that entertainment programs that are explicitly designed to inform or inspire, or that include embedded narratives with the power to inform or inspire, can have a sizable influence on the attitudes and behaviors of impressionable children and teens.

Other Cultural Factors

Below we briefly describe five other cultural factors covered in the latest issue of *Future of Children*.

Perceptions of Social Mobility

A critical reason that social influences such as role models, mentors, and media are so important in the lives of children is that these factors shape children's perceptions of themselves and the world around them. Social context extends beyond personal networks and relationships to beliefs about society and the discrimination and biases that people encounter in their lives. Mesmin Destin, a psychologist at Northwestern University, examines how beliefs about opportunity and economic mobility affect people's behaviors. Destin writes that several disciplinary perspectives have conceptualized and empirically documented important links between societal-level economic inequality, individual-level beliefs about the attainability of socioeconomic mobility, and behaviors related to socioeconomic success among youth and young adults from low-income backgrounds. The dominant framework comes from robust research in social psychology that directly links people's expectations of future success to their level of motivation to persist on tasks and in areas of life that could contribute to success. For example, students who see a connection between academics and the kinds of jobs they hope to have in the future are more motivated to work hard in school, and they ultimately have better academic outcomes than those who don't see this connection. The more that contexts convey to young people that opportunities are available to them, the more likely they are to pursue their aspirations. This has been demonstrated by evidence from a number of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and economics.

Religion and Religious Institutions

Religion is a key feature of any society, and many scholars have investigated the relationship between it and economic outcomes. Daniel Hungerman, an economist at Notre Dame University, reviews the roles religious institutions play in people's lives and looks at how engagement with these institutions shapes economic wellbeing. Many of the United States' 380,000-plus religious congregations provide help to people in their communities, not just members, most often in the form of food, housing, and clothing. Besides these social services, religious congregations play a large role in education and

community organizing. Hungerman also discusses the consequences of religious participation, describing rigorous evidence about whether religion's effect on people's outcomes is causal. He concludes that religiosity does indeed have a positive causal effect on wellbeing. Religious participation discourages unhealthy behaviors like heavy drinking and gambling, and generally promotes educational attainment. It can also increase a person's tolerance of others and, in some contexts, advance the societal status of girls and women.

Peer and Family Effects

Gordon Dahl, an economist at the University of California, San Diego, takes on the topic of how peers and families shape social group norms. He describes how researchers have overcome the challenge of separating peer and family effects from shared peer and family preferences, so that they can generate credible estimates of how the behaviors of peers and family members affect people's own choices about work and participation in government assistance programs. The evidence suggests that when a policy changes a person's employment or program participation, it also has large spillover effects on that person's family members and peers. Dahl points out the policy relevance of large social multiplier effects. For instance, to the extent that increased take-up of a government assistance program implies greater participation among the children and relatives of current beneficiaries, we should expect higher program caseloads and costs in the long term.

Social Capital and Networks

Scholars and policy makers alike are increasingly interested in how social capital shapes people's economic lives. But the idea of social capital is an amorphous one. Economists Judy Hellerstein of the University of Maryland and David Neumark of the University of California, Irvine, define *social capital* as networks of relationships among people who are connected by where they live or work. The authors draw on survey evidence, case studies, and administrative data to document the important role such networks play in improving wellbeing, especially in terms of better labor market outcomes. The evidence suggests that when it comes to getting a job, personal networks are especially important to immigrants. Hellerstein and Neumark also discuss some limited evidence showing how neighborhood networks may shape children's health and educational outcomes.

Economists Kevin Lang of Boston University and Ariella Kahn-Lang Spitzer of the policy research firm Mathematica explore how discrimination and bias shape outcomes. Lang and Kahn-Lang Spitzer focus primarily on discrimination by race, while acknowledging that discrimination exists on many other dimensions as well, including gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. They describe evidence of substantial racial disparities in outcomes related to the labor market, education, criminal justice, health, and housing, and they show that the disparities in each of these domains at least partially reflect discrimination. They note that disparities are both the cause and the result of discrimination, reinforcing each other. For instance, harsher treatment from the criminal justice system makes it more difficult for black people to get good jobs, which makes it more likely that they'll live in poor neighborhoods and that their children will attend inferior schools. Lang and Kahn-Lang Spitzer argue that simply prohibiting discrimination is less effective for addressing disparities than are policies that reduce the residential and social distance between people of difference races.

Conclusion

The economic and social outcomes of children, both while they're young and later, in their adult lives, largely depend on the circumstances into which they're born and raised. Such circumstances are the product of their families, their schools, their neighborhoods, the peers and adults with whom they interact, the media images that shape their perceptions of themselves and their place in the world, and other factors both internal and external to the individual child. Many would say "culture" plays a large role in shaping a child's life experiences and outcomes. But culture is hard to define and quantify—and controversial to talk about, especially as an ill-defined concept. Furthermore, the question of what policy makers and practitioners can do about culture—if anything—is hard to grapple with, unlike more readily measurable concepts like income and educational attainment. In the current issue of *Future of Children*, we aim to break through some of the impasses and draw on the lessons of scholarly research to highlight evidence and insights that could be used to improve children's lives.

Endnotes

1. Susan E. Mayer et al., "Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Parental Engagement: The Parents and Children Together Intervention," *Journal of Human Resources* 54 (2019): 900–25, <https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.4.0617.8835R>.
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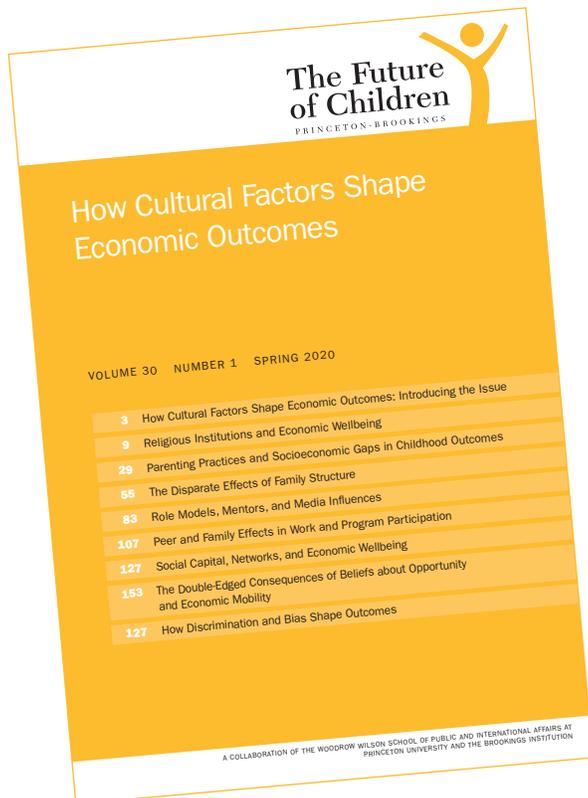


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