k(n)o(w) poverty?

COMMITMENT | SERVICE | LEARNING

AUBURN UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE INAUGURAL WEEK OF SERVICE
AUGUST 10-15, 2014

Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve & Nature Center, School of Forestry & Wildlife Sciences
Alabama Rural Ministry
Food Bank of East Alabama

Auburn University College of Liberal Arts
Alabama Possible
Alabama ARISE
Auburn University ROTC

Auburn University Center for Community Service, Office of Student Involvement

Auburn University
Honors College
A Message from the Honors College Staff

According to The Alabama Poverty Project, Alabama has the sixth highest poverty rate and is the fourth least food secure state, which means that 19 percent of our neighbors struggle with poverty and hunger. Twenty of Alabama’s 67 counties have poverty rates above 25 percent while only Shelby county has a poverty rate below 10 percent (Lee county: 21.4; Macon county: 30.9; Russell county: 20.1; Tallapoosa county: 18.8; Chambers county: 23.7). It should be noted that nearly 27 percent of Alabama children are food insecure and do not get the healthy food they need each day and every day to thrive. It is no surprise that poverty is more prevalent in rural areas, where 27 percent of residents live in poverty, as opposed to metropolitan areas where 20 percent live in poverty. Did you know poverty persisted like this throughout the state of Alabama? We were a little taken aback by these staggering statistics that were sent to us by Ms. Kristina Scott, Executive Director of Alabama Possible. Since we believe that a major part of an Honors College education is to produce students that are more aware of real issues, we decided to provide platforms to raise awareness of the issues surrounding poverty through a lecture series in Spring 2014 and this Week of Service in Summer 2014. In our view these programming items will at least give our Honors students a different vantage point on poverty. For those students particularly interested in community service, a new student organization – Honors Serves – was created in The Honors College to support hands-on alleviation of poverty in our area by fellow Honors students. It is our hope that through the end of this Week of Service that you will become more aware of poverty and its impacts in Alabama as well as more ways that you can become involved on Auburn’s campus as you chart your academic future.

In this packet you will find some readings on the issue of poverty that are divided among five sections – Children & Vulnerable Populations, Rural Poverty, Education, Food Insecurity, and Community & Civic Engagement. Here you will also find more information about the Community Partners that we will be working with to undertake community service during this week along with biographical information for speakers. Contact information for all participants is listed on the last few pages.

During this week it is our hope to raise your awareness of poverty and its associated issues through hands-on community service, lectures, films and discussions, and through select readings. The general overview of the week is provided here:
Sunday 10 August, 2014
6pm Dinner, Registration & Icebreaking Activities
Front Porch of Cater Hall, The Honors College
Dinner Provided

Monday 11 August, 2014
8:30-9:30am Breakfast
College of Liberal Arts Dean’s Conference Room, 310 Tichenor Hall
Breakfast Provided

9:30am -12 noon Welcome & Lectures
Dr. Melissa Baumann, Director of The Honors College – Welcome
Dr. Mark Wilson, Director of Community Initiatives – “Beyond Service: How Students and Communities are Changing the Places Where They Live”
Dr. Carole Zugazaga, Associate Professor of Social Work – “The Purpose of Non-profit Agencies in Poverty Alleviation”
Lunch on Your Own

1:30-4:30pm Poverty Simulation, Student Center Ballroom (led by Ms. Kristina Scott & Mr. T.C. McLemore of Alabama Possible)
Snacks Provided

6:30pm Short Film & Discussion
2182 Haley Center
Snacks Provided

Tuesday 12 August, 2014
7:45am-3:00pm Day of Service at the Food Bank of East Alabama and the Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve (Transportation provided)
Lunch & Snacks Provided (on site)

6:30pm Film & Discussion
2182 Haley Center
Snacks Provided

Wednesday 13 August, 2014
7:45am-3:00pm Day of Service with Alabama Rural Ministry in Tuskegee, AL (Transportation provided)
Lunch & Snacks Provided (on site)

6:30pm Film & Discussion
2182 Haley Center
Snacks Provided
Thursday 14 August, 2014
7:45am-3:00pm Second Day of Service with Alabama Rural Ministry in
Tuskegee, AL (Transportation provided)
   Lunch & Snacks Provided (on site)
   6:00pm Dinner & Film
Front Porch of Cater Hall, The Honors College
   Dinner & Snacks Provided

Friday 15 August, 2014
8:30-9:30am Breakfast
   2182 Haley Center
   Breakfast Provided

9:30am -12 noon Lectures & Farewell
Mr. Tim King, Coordinator of Center for Community Service – “Opportunities
for Service through the Center for Community Service”
Ms. Lisa Pierce, Founder & Director of Alabama Rural Ministry – “Selfless
Service”
Mr. Azeem Ahmed, Honors College Student – “Service through the Eyes of an
Honors Student”
Dr. Melissa Baumann, Director of The Honors College – Farewell

   Lunch on Your Own

On each day of the week, a detailed schedule will be provided and discussed
at the nightly films for the following day. We are all looking forward to
learning, alongside you, at this Week of Service.

War Eagle!

Staff of The Honors College
Foreword

The great civil rights champion Martin Luther King, Jr. once said “Intelligence plus character - that is the goal of true education.” I have not found anything to be more true during my time at Auburn. You will discover during your time here that this campus is filled to the brim with knowledge; I encourage you to soak it all up and take advantage of every opportunity presented you. However, I also encourage you to remember that the purest value of knowledge is the ability to utilize it to make the world around you a better place.

During your time in the Honors College you will be exposed to many people with viewpoints different than your own. I encourage you to embrace this and use this friction as an impetus to grow. Issues in the real world are rarely black and white, and as such neither are their solutions. To make real, lasting change, it is of the utmost importance that we are able to comprehend the causes and effects of the problems presented to us.

I hope that as you explore this packet you are able to begin to understand more clearly the complex nature of the issue that is poverty and begin to understand more clearly your role in addressing it. Above all, I hope that you realize that poverty is an issue that affects us all, as communities, as nations, and as the human race. As John Green says, “There is no ‘them’, there are only facets of ‘us’.” My greatest realization during my time at this university and one that I hope you arrive at as well is the reality that poverty is not, and has never been, a “them” problem.

To address the problem of poverty, many different roles are needed. Please don’t read this packet and think that only “professional volunteerism” careers can be effective. Read it and think about the ways, in your unique education and career goals, that you can use your talents to seek solutions. The world doesn’t need a million copies of the same person; rather, it needs all of us using our individual skills, perspectives, and circumstances to contribute to the cause. Pay attention and seek opportunities for engagement, and your time at Auburn University will be invaluable in helping you discover who you are and what you have to offer. Always remember that volunteering isn’t something you do on Saturdays but rather, a way of life. Use this week and your time at Auburn to discover how you can best serve, and your life and the lives of those around you will be better for it.

Mary Beth Snow
Auburn University
College of Liberal Arts
& The Honors College
Major: Spanish
Minor: Community & Civic Engagement
Community Partners

Alabama Rural Ministry
The vision of Alabama Rural Ministry (ARM) is to end substandard housing in Rural Alabama through home repair and children's ministry. ARM serves Lee, Macon, and Sumter Counties and strives to build relationships with the homeowners there in addition to meeting their physical needs through home repair. Before ARM began, there was no home repair assistance available to families living in rural areas of Sumter, Macon, and Lee Counties. Elderly and disabled families were isolated and "making do". Additionally, many children did not have a safe place to learn, grow, and play during the summer time. Childcare facilities are a rarity. Therefore, a need for summer enrichment and after school ministry was recognized.

Food Bank of East Alabama
The Food Bank of East Alabama is a centralized warehouse that stores and distributes donated and purchased perishable and nonperishable food items. We distribute food to low-income people through member agencies that serve the ill, needy and infants.

The Food Bank works to reduce food waste, feed hungry people and raise public awareness of issues related to food and hunger. The mission of the Food Bank of East Alabama is to alleviate hunger; to provide an efficient, coordinated system for collecting and distributing food; to reduce food waste; and to increase public awareness regarding hunger and food security issues in East Central Alabama.

Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve & Nature Center
In 1993, Dr. Louise Kreher Turner and her husband, Frank Allan Turner, donated 120 acres of forest land to Auburn University School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences. As Auburn and surrounding areas continued to grow, the Turners wanted to see the preserve intact and become an educational facility where “students” could study, learn, appreciate, and enjoy the natural world.

The mission of the Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve is to provide programs, experiences, nature trails and natural habitats for education, study and relaxation for students and citizens of all ages while creating an atmosphere of discovery and stewardship toward our natural world. Since its endowment to the Auburn University School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, the Forest Ecology Preserve has continued to evolve into a first-class discovery and nature center with exciting programs offered throughout the year. In keeping with its mission, the Preserve fosters a
greater sense of appreciation and understanding of our environment with many nature-based programs such as:

- Discovery hikes and nature walks
- School programs and youth camps
- Adult workshops and classes
- Educational exhibits, tours and wildlife study

Today the Preserve acts as an outreach program of the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, serving as a local resource for outdoor recreation and environmental education for thousands of visitors and students each year.
Dr. Mark Wilson

Director of Civic Learning Initiatives, College of Liberal Arts, Auburn University

Beyond Service: How Students and Communities are Changing the Places Where They Live.

Dr. Mark Wilson is Director of Civic Learning Initiatives in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. Originally from Saraland, Alabama, he holds degrees from the University of Mobile (B.A.), McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University (M.Div.) and Auburn University (Ph.D.). He currently teaches the Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement Course and a practicum that includes a living-learning experience in an Appalachian community. He is an Appalachian Teaching Fellow with the Appalachian Regional Commission. He coordinates research and action projects with partners (Kettering Foundation, David Mathews Center for Civic Life, Appalachian Teaching Project) and communities around the state. He is the author of several articles and the book William Owen Carver’s Controversies in the Baptist South, published by Mercer University Press. Wilson serves as the secretary of the Alabama Historical Association and lives in Auburn with his wife and two children.
Dr. Carole Zugazaga

Associate Professor and Director of the Social Work Program, Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Social Work, Auburn University
Board Member of Alabama ARISE and Alabama Possible

The Purpose of Non-profit Agencies in Poverty Alleviation

Dr. Carole Zugazaga is Associate Professor and Director of the Social Work Program in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Social Work at Auburn University. Dr. Zugazaga received both her MSW and Ph.D. in Public Affairs from the University of Central Florida. She received her BSW from Florida State University. She has 13 years of professional social work practice experience, primarily in the medical field. She was an Emergency Department Social Worker for a Level 1 Trauma Center in Central Florida for 5 years. Dr. Zugazaga’s research interests include homelessness, poverty, and healthcare. She was named a Fahs-Beck Fellow in 2007 and was the recipient of a research grant from the Fahs-Beck Fund for Research and Experimentation to support her study of the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless: women with children. She was also the recipient of a grant from the Alabama Women’s Commission and was the Principal Investigator (PI) of a study designed to better understand barriers and issues that affect women in Alabama with children age one and below. She was the co-PI for a study on postpartum depression in Alabama, also with support of the Alabama Women’s Commission, which led to a state-wide public awareness campaign of the disorder and the establishment of a support hotline. Dr. Zugazaga was also the recipient of the College of Liberal Arts Engaged Scholar designation for 2008-2010. She currently teaches Introduction to Social Work, Social Welfare Policy, Social Work in Healthcare, and Methods of Social Research. Her research has been published in numerous journals including the American Journal of Community Psychology, Families in Society, Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work, Social Work Education, Research on Social Work Practice, and the Journal of Primary Prevention.
Kristina Scott is the executive director of Alabama Possible, which works to reduce poverty through education, collaboration and advocacy.

A seasoned coalition builder and attorney, Kristina brings a unique mix of communications and analytical skills to the job. Before joining AP in August 2008, Kristina served as the Managing Attorney for External Affairs at the Los Angeles City Attorney’s Office.

In addition to her work in the legal field, Kristina has designed communications and voter contact strategies for candidates and ballot initiative campaigns across the country. During the 2000 election cycle, Kristina ran statewide communications operations as the Communications Director for the California Democratic Party’s Coordinated Campaign. She was also a senior strategist for The Strategy Group and served as a top staffer on Los Angeles City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo’s campaign. In 2001, Delgadillo became the first Latino elected to citywide office in Los Angeles in 125 years in an upset, come-from-behind victory made possible by a unique coalition of Latino, African American and conservative voters.

Kristina earned her bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Florida, where she was a member of Florida Blue Key, and her juris doctor with distinction from Emory University. She is a member of the California, Georgia and New York Bars.

Kristina also serves as an adjunct faculty member at UAB and Birmingham-Southern College. She is a member of Leadership Alabama Class XXI and currently serves as the board secretary of the Sidewalk Film Festival/Alabama Moving Image Association.
T.C. McLemore is the Communications & Development Coordinator for Alabama Possible. He received his bachelor’s degree in political science with honors in global and community leadership from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. After serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA with Alabama Possible, he earned his master’s degree in history from UAB. His scholarly focus has been on food security and food access in Alabama and Birmingham. He is originally from Fort Payne and currently resides in Birmingham.
Mr. Tim King

Coordinator for the Center for Community Service, Auburn University

Opportunities for Service through the Center for Community Service

Tim King attended Jacksonville State University and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Art with a minor in English in 2005. In 2007, he completed his graduate program, receiving a Master of Science Degree in Education with a concentration in Community Agency Counseling. He currently serves as the Coordinator for the Center for Community Service, where he works with Alternative Student Breaks (ASB), Auburn University Dance Marathon (AUDM), Beat Bama Food Drive (BBFD), and IMPACT. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration at Auburn. In his spare time he enjoys photography, singing, music, working out, and spending time with family and friends. Tim is a native of Jacksonville, Alabama and joined the Office of Student Involvement staff in December of 2007.
Ms. Lisa Pierce

Founder and Director, Alabama Rural Ministry

*Selfless Service*

Ms. Pierce is originally from Daytona Beach, Florida and attended Auburn University for college and graduated with a B.S. in Animal Science in 1995. She took a position with the University of West Alabama Wesley Foundation in 1996 and in 1998 started Alabama Rural Ministry (ARM). She moved back to the Auburn/Opelika area in 2001 to base ARM from Lee County. Ms. Pierce also has been in the Alabama National Guard for 24 years and maintains the position as a Lieutenant Colonial serving as a Battalion Commander in Huntsville, Alabama. She obtained a Masters of Counseling and Psychology at UWA and is currently pursuing a Masters of Arts in Christian Leadership through Asbury Seminary in Orlando.
Azeem Ahmed is an Honors College student majoring in Finance and pre-medicine.

A 2013 Truman Scholar, Azeem is a four-year member, and immediate past-president of the University’s most engaged organization, The Committee of 19 (an organization affiliated with the Universities Fighting World Hunger and the United Nations World Food Programme). He is co-founder and current president of Campus Kitchens Project (an on-campus organization which packages food for hungry citizens of Lee County). In the spring of 2010, Azeem was named a Community and Civic Engagement Undergraduate Fellow and he is a lifetime member of the American Red Cross and past president of its Auburn University Chapter.

In 2011, on the heels of the Arab Spring, he traveled to Egypt as a World Food Programme health and nutrition summer intern and helped develop a national food program. He conducted more than 40 field visits and certified enough mills to produce 250,000 tons of vitamin-enriched rice. In 2012 he traveled to Bangladesh to work with the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research. He helped create protocol for pediatric sepsis management, shadowed physicians and assisted with emergency triage of cholera victims.

As a result of Azeem’s tireless efforts on behalf of the world’s poorest and most needy, he was awarded the President William Jefferson Clinton Global Hunger Leadership Award in the spring of 2014. Created to honor former President Clinton for his commitment to humanitarian causes, especially his commitment to eradicating hunger, the award criteria include demonstrated leadership in the fight against hunger and a commitment to a life of service in the areas of hunger and poverty reduction. In addition, Azeem was named a President Harry S. Truman Scholar last spring – one of the nation’s top academic awards for college juniors and the only recipient from the state of Alabama.
Azeem was also selected to receive the Algernon Sydney Sullivan in the spring of 2014. The Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award is one of the highest honors bestowed on an Auburn University study and “recognizes the efforts of individuals who represent our institution through their unsurpassed humanitarian leadership and contributions to the community.” Finally, Azeem was awarded the Honors College highest honor being named the 2014 Edgar C. Gentle, III Award recipient.
Readings

Section 1

Children & Vulnerable Populations
Effect of Child and Family Poverty on Child Health in the United States

David Wood, MD, MPH, FAAP

ABSTRACT. The Issue. Poverty has been described as an economic state that does not allow for the provision of basic family and child needs, such as adequate food, clothing, and housing. However, the debate about the effects of poverty on the growth, development, and health of children is as much involved with the culture or general context of poverty as it is with the economics of poverty. This culture of poverty is in part mediated through environmental deprivations, such as failing schools, gangs, drugs, violence, and struggling families. Heclo1 described this sociocultural and environmental dimension of poverty as “a condition of misery, hopelessness, and dependency.” The subject of this article is to review the literature on the effects of poverty on US children as mediated through economic, ecologic, and family influences. Pediatrics 2003;112:707–711; poverty, child health, community-based advocacy, CATCH.

ABBREVIATIONS. TANF, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families; AFDC, Aid to Families With Dependent Children; CATCH, Community Access to Child Health.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF FAMILY AND CHILD POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

The “child poverty rate” is the proportion of families with children who have incomes below the nationally established poverty line. In 2000, the poverty level for a family of 3 was an annual income of $13,874; for a family of 4 (2 children), the level was $17,603.2 Using a comparable metric of 50% of the country’s median income for defining the poverty level, 22% of children in the United States are poor, the highest child poverty rate among all developed countries. The countries with the next highest child poverty rates are Canada and Australia at 14%. In the United Kingdom and Israel, 10% of children are considered poor, whereas in Italy and Germany, only 7% of children live in poverty. Norway and Belgium have very low rates of child poverty at only 4% to 5%.3

With the use of the US census data and definition of poverty, 16.2% of people who were younger than 18 years in the United States in 2000 were considered poor, down from a high of 20.8% in 1995. Children 0 to 5 years of age have higher rates of poverty; in 1995, approximately 22% were poor. In other words, >1 in 5 children in the United States grow up poor and are frequently deprived of a supportive environment to grow and develop. Approximately 10% of children who are poor are extremely poor (<50% of poverty level), and approximately 6 million children who are extremely poor are younger than 6. Among children who are poor and younger than 6 years, the largest racial group is white children (1.9 million) followed by 1.4 million non-Hispanic blacks and 1.6 million Hispanics. Poverty is strongly correlated with the educational level of parent(s), which further contributes to the culture of deprivation that children who are poor experience.

The proportion of families that live in poverty varies greatly across the United States, from 30% in Louisiana to 7% in New Hampshire. States with high family poverty rates include some of the largest states in the country, such as California and New York, with 23% and 24%, respectively, of families living in poverty. The poverty rate for families that are headed by parents with less than a high school education is more than 1.5 times higher (62%) than for families that are headed by parents with “some college” (15.2%). The rate is only 2.8% if a parent has a college degree. Parental education is the single best predictor of family income. Significant changes have occurred in the rates of child poverty over the past 25 years in the United States, with child poverty ranging from a low of 14.4% in 1973 to a high of 20.8% in 1995. However, during this same period, the proportion of elderly who are poor has steadily decreased from 25% in the mid-1960s to 10% in 2000. Approximately 15% of children who are poor are chronically poor—that is, consistently poor over the previous 5 years. Chronic poverty is highly correlated with a confluence of the above factors, with the strongest factor being race: 6% of white children who are poor were poor for 5 years compared with 29% of black children who were poor for 10 years or more.4

In 1965, the poverty line was set at 3 times the cost of the basic food basket for a family by size or number of children. At that time, this amount was adequate for a family to afford food, housing, clothes, and other necessities. However, since the 1960s, the cost of housing, transportation, and other nonfood essential items have increased much faster than the cost of food. Other items not initially considered essential, such as child care, have become necessities and represent a significant portion of families’ expenses, families who are poor in particular. As a result, 77% of households in the United States spend >50% of income on rent and 24% are overcrowded. There is a >200 000-unit shortage of affordable rental apartments, and only 1 in 9 Temporary Assistance...
for Needy Families (TANF)/Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) families receives public housing assistance. A family that lives at today’s poverty level has only approximately 60% of the buying power of a family that lived at the poverty level in the 1960s. A family that is poor today is nearly twice as poor as in 1965.

Over the past several decades, the number, severity, and chronicity of poverty among families with children who are poor has increased, despite numerous public income-transfer programs, such as TANF/AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. During this same period, public income-transfer programs for the elderly, primarily Social Security and Medicare, have successfully reduced the proportion of elderly who are poor by 60%—from 25% in the mid-1960s to 10% in 2000. These programs did this by providing enough support to raise an elderly person out of poverty and by adjusting the annual amount of aid to keep pace with inflation and increases in the cost of living.

**WHY ARE SO MANY US CHILDREN POOR?**

Child poverty increased in the past 35 years primarily because of the following national trends:

- Decreased real value of wages earned by lower educated workers
- Income-transfer programs (welfare/TANF) support has decreased in real value
- Increased numbers of single-parent, female-headed families

Those with 12 or fewer years of schooling have experienced the greatest decrease in the value of their earning power. Even workers with postsecondary schooling have had problems earning more than a poverty-level income in recent years. The technology and information economy expansion has excluded people with low educational backgrounds. In addition, there has been an increasing downward pressure on manual labor wages from international competition as a result of the low wages paid in other countries and free trade zones (eg, North American Free Trade Agreement). This results in a decrease in the real value of the minimum wage. The number of “working poor”—those who are under the poverty line despite working full time—has increased by 35% from 1990 to 1998.

Of money allocated to government income support programs (TANF/AFDC, Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security), 20% goes to families that are poor and 80% goes to the elderly. The TANF/AFDC benefits vary widely across the United States. A family of 3 in 1996 would have received $120 in Mississippi in monthly support and $923 in Alaska. The median real value (adjusted for inflation) of the TANF/AFDC benefit fell 51% between 1970 and 1995. Thus, families that are dependent on TANF/AFDC are twice as poor as they were in 1970. When you combine the median state TANF/AFDC support level with that of food stamps, families reach an income of approximately 65% of the poverty level as it was initially established.

Trends in family structure and other social, environmental, and emotional issues that affect families also are contributing factors to family poverty. It is estimated that almost one third of children who are poor are poor because they live in a family headed by a single mother. Sixty-five percent of children who are poor versus 25% of children who are not poor live in households that do not include their biological father. Fifty-five percent of children who live in single-parent, mother-only families are poor compared with only 10% of children in 2-parent families. The loss of the wage-earning power of the absent parent, usually the father, compounded by the frequent failure of fathers to comply with child support judgments drive the majority of single-parent, female-headed families into poverty, regardless of whether the mother works.

Problems such as substance abuse or mental illness also work to drive families into poverty and worsen the deprivation experienced by children. According to a recent survey, 20% of female heads of households on TANF/AFDC (welfare) were abused in the previous year compared with only 1.5% of a comparable group of women who were not poor and not on welfare. Twenty-eight percent of female parents who have low income are to some degree mentally impaired, primarily because of clinical depression rates 2 to 4 times that found in the general female population. Poverty results from a complex interaction between the downward pressure on lower income wages, economic pressures, and social and emotional problems of families.

**IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILD HEALTH**

**Confluence of Risks**

Millions of children who are poor are particularly vulnerable to the effects of poverty because of the environment in which they live. Approximately half of families that are poor live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, such as neighborhoods in core inner cities. “Many of our poorest families are struggling to survive in communities that often exacerbate rather than mitigate the disadvantages of poverty—communities where a lack of public resources, economic investment, and political power sometimes serve to separate and isolate families from mainstream society.” Inner-city communities more often lack opportunities for parents to build social networks, leading to increased stress and increased child abuse. Families are isolated further by the violence and crime that are concentrated in neighborhoods of families with low income. The lack of safe places for children to congregate and play is a reality faced by many families that are poor throughout the United States. Kids who live in neighborhoods that are poor are less likely to participate in sports or after-school activities. Economic, social, health, and other factors converge in these settings to produce more severe, persistent poverty and deprivation that has a detrimental impact on the intellectual, emotional, and physical development of children (Fig 1).
Cognitive and Educational Effect of Poverty on Children

Many studies have compared children who are poor with children who are not poor on a number of aspects of development, intellect, and educational attainment. In Table 1, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan summarize the literature on the effects of poverty on children’s development and educational performance. The National Longitudinal Study on Youth and the Infant Health and Development Project have followed children who are poor and children who are not poor over years and provide a rich data source to examine the impact of poverty on cognitive ability and educational attainment while controlling for a number of confounding factors such as family characteristics. Scores on IQ tests seem to vary with the level of poverty, whereas educational attainment seems to be related to poverty early in a child’s life and duration of family poverty. Poverty during a child’s early years has a more powerful influence on grade completed than poverty during school years. The high school dropout rate for central cities is 14% compared with 7% for adolescents in the suburbs. In areas with high poverty, graduation rates approach only 50% of those who started high school. It is estimated that an increase in mean family income of $10,000 during the child’s first 5 years of life results in almost 1 full year more of schooling.

IQ scores among children who live in poor families are 6 to 13 points lower Controlled for maternal age, marital status, education, and ethnicity, there is a “dose effect” as families move from very poor to poor to not poor. Various studies show similar effects on IQ across age groups of children, although in adolescence, the effect is dampened.

Impact of Poverty on Physical Health of Children

Numerous studies have demonstrated that poverty is associated with higher rates of poor health and chronic health conditions in children (Table 2). National surveys find that compared with parents who are not poor, parents who are poor more often rate their children’s health as “fair” or “poor” and are less likely to rate their children’s health as “excellent.” Children who are poor have higher rates of hospital admissions, disability days, and death rates. They have inadequate access to preventive, curative, and emergency care and are affected more frequently by poor nutrition, single-parent families, dysfunctional families, and poor housing.

Exposure to lead hazards is an example of how poverty directly impacts child health. Four to 5 million children, the vast majority of whom are poor, reside in older homes with lead levels exceeding the accepted threshold for safety. More than 1.5 million of these children (younger than 6 years) have elevated blood lead levels.

Pregnancy Outcomes Associated With Poverty

Pregnancy outcomes are an important predictor of ultimate child and adult health outcomes, and poverty is strongly associated with low birth weight and other poor pregnancy outcomes (Table 3). Black women are twice as likely to have low birth weight

### TABLE 1. Cognitive and Educational Effects of Poverty on Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Children Who Are Poor</th>
<th>Children Who Are Not Poor</th>
<th>Ratio Poor/Nonpoor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning disability</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade retention</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever expelled or suspended</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school dropout rate in 1994</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed or in school at age 24</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
newborns as white women, regardless of socioeconomic status. Although rates are much higher among the poor, after adjusting for other confounding factors, white women who are poor have an 80% greater chance of having a low birth weight newborn than white women who are not poor. White women who are poor for 5 to 10 years are 3 times more likely to deliver a low birth weight newborn than white women who are not poor. Adolescents who are poor are 3 times as likely to have a newborn out of wedlock than adolescents who are not poor. These births are associated with increased rates of low birth weight and perinatal and postnatal complications.

**HOW CAN PEDIATRICIANS ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE POOR?**

Pediatricians can advocate for children and families who are poor at multiple levels (Fig 2). Advocacy can occur within office practices, 1 family at a time, or outside offices through involvement in community issues or at higher levels of government. Among the most effective approaches to advocacy for the poor, in which all pediatricians can participate, is to receive and welcome families that are poor, both those on Medicaid and those without insurance, into their practices. Pediatricians that do not practice in areas that are poor (and relatively few do) can reach out to families that are poor by accepting Medicaid and participating in the Vaccine for Children program, which supplies free vaccines to physicians for children who are poor. They can offer formal sliding-scale payment programs for families that lack insurance or whose insurance does not cover preventive or other needed care.

Pediatricians also can support families that are poor in their practices by connecting them with the services for which they qualify or need in the community. Pediatricians can use materials supplied by community programs to screen their patients and families for social and economic risk factors, adding this screening approach to their regular child development and family social screening. In this way, the pediatrician can assess whether the child or family qualifies or could benefit from the social and income support programs available to poor families. Pediatricians should be knowledgeable about Head Start; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; food stamps; housing support services; and other income and social support programs in their communities and know how to refer families to them. Links to local health departments also can provide access to resources that are

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**TABLE 2. Impact of Poverty on the Physical Health of Children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Children Who Are Poor</th>
<th>Children Who Are Not Poor</th>
<th>Ratio Poor/Nonpoor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In fair or poor health</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In excellent health</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days spent in bed in past year</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of short-stay hospital episodes/</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>year/1000 children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths during 0 to 14 years of age</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with blood lead levels ≥10 μ/dL†</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Adapted from Dawson.†

† Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III), 1988–1991

**TABLE 3. Pregnancy and Birth Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Children Who Are Poor</th>
<th>Children Who Are Not Poor</th>
<th>Ratio Poor/Nonpoor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low birth weight rate (&lt;2500 g)</td>
<td>10/1000 births</td>
<td>6/1000 births</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality</td>
<td>14/1000 births</td>
<td>8/1000 births</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female adolescent has newborn out of wedlock</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Fig 2. The advocacy pyramid.

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relevant to the care of families with multiple needs. Community support services should be viewed by pediatricians as important interventions for families that can have a positive effect on child health and development. Just as with any “specialty” referral, pediatricians should request feedback on the progress of their patients from the agencies to which they are referred. Pediatricians also should follow-up with families to assess the impact of the intervention and the need for additional services.

Community-Based Advocacy

Pediatricians also can advocate for children who are poor outside their offices. Many pediatricians have started their community advocacy careers by applying for American Academy of Pediatrics Community Access to Child Health (CATCH) Planning Funds grants. The planning process and funds that the CATCH Program provides can enable pediatricians to identify and address important issues for children’s communities that are poor and underserved. CATCH grants can be used to plan new clinics in communities that are poor, where access to high-quality pediatric care often is lacking. CATCH Program resources also can be used to perform community assets and needs assessments and to identify important political and social issues that affect children.

The use of CATCH funds by pediatricians to advocate and plan for lead abatement in housing in communities with low income is a good example of the capacity of the CATCH Program to effect social and environmental changes. Improved intellectual development among children who are exposed to lead supports this expensive intervention. In almost all US communities, public health departments have local lead poisoning prevention programs, and pediatricians can be very effective advocates in how these programs use their funds to intervene for children.

Another example is the role that pediatricians can play in mitigating the effects of poverty on the cognitive and intellectual development of children. An impoverished home environment with a paucity of stimulating challenges to help children learn and grow may have a significant effect on early brain development and later educational success. Pediatricians can become involved in advocacy in this area, both inside and outside their offices. First, pediatricians can assess their patients’ families for high-risk home environments using standardized tools. They can become knowledgeable of and refer children to community-based early childhood development services and implement Reach Out and Read programs in their offices (www.reachoutandread.org). At the community level, pediatricians can advocate for sufficient early childhood developmental support programs. Is the local Early Intervention program adequate to meet the community’s needs? If not, then pediatricians could help to organize the community to create additional programs.

Finally, pediatricians can be very effective advocates for children at the local, state, and national levels of government. The American Academy of Pediatrics has materials that describe key policy issues that face children who are poor today, such as lack of health insurance. Pediatricians can lobby at the local, state, and national levels for important child health issues that affect all children but may disproportionately affect children who are poor. Pediatricians across the country have been successful at promoting legislation that supports the health and development of children, especially at the local and state levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Poverty is prevalent in the United States and disproportionately affects children. Economic and demographic trends indicate that rates of child poverty and deprivation are not declining but actually are worsening in many parts of the country. Poverty and the culture surrounding it have a significant and pervasive impact on the health and development of children. Multiple risk factors converge in families that are extremely poor, greatly increasing children’s risk for chronic health problems, school failure, births out of wedlock to adolescents, and other poor outcomes. Without economic and other supportive interventions, many of these children will be caught in a cycle of poverty and despair, perpetuating and perhaps growing the size of an underclass in the richest nation on earth.

REFERENCES

17. AAP Federal Affairs Update web site: http://www.aap.org/advocacy/washing/ch97.htm
The Long Reach of Early childhood poverty
Using a poverty line of about $22,000 for a family of four, the Census Bureau counted more than 15 million U.S. children living in poor families in 2009. Poor children begin school well behind their more affluent age mates and, if anything, lose ground during the school years. On average, poor kindergarten children have lower levels of reading and math skills and are rated by their teachers as less well behaved than their more affluent peers (see Figure 1). Children from poor families also go on to complete less schooling, work less, and earn less than others.

Social scientists have been investigating links between family poverty and subsequent child outcomes for decades. Yet, careful thought about the timing of economic hardship across childhood and adolescence is almost universally neglected. Emerging research in neuroscience and developmental psychology suggests that poverty early in a child’s life may be particularly harmful because the astonishingly rapid development of young children’s brains leaves them sensitive (and vulnerable) to environmental conditions.
After a brief review of possible mechanisms and the highest quality evidence linking poverty to negative childhood outcomes, we highlight emerging research linking poverty occurring as early as the prenatal year to adult outcomes as far as the fourth decade of life. Based on this evidence, we discuss how policy might better focus on deep and persistent poverty occurring very early in the childhoods of the poor.

**American Poverty and Its Consequences for Children**

If we were to draw the poverty line at 50 percent of median disposable income (about $29,000 for a family of three in today’s dollars), as is common in much cross-national research on poverty, nearly one-quarter of U.S. children would be classified as poor (Figure 2). Comparing across countries, the U.S. fares badly, though not too much worse than countries like the UK, Canada, and Poland. More striking are the cross-country differences when the poverty threshold is set at a more spartan 40 percent of median disposable income (about $23,000). In this instance, the 15 percent U.S. childhood poverty rate is more than half again as high as any country other than Poland. Clearly, deep poverty is considerably more pervasive for children in the U.S. than among children in most Western industrialized countries.

What are the consequences of growing up in a poor household? Economists, sociologists, developmental psychologists, and neuroscientists emphasize different pathways by which poverty may influence children’s development. Economic models of child development focus on what money can buy. They view families with greater economic resources as being better able to purchase or produce important “inputs” into their young children’s development (e.g., nutritious meals; enriched home learning environments and child care settings outside the home; and safe and stimulating neighborhood environments), and higher-quality schools and post-secondary education for older children. The cost of the inputs and family income constraints are therefore the key considerations for understanding poverty’s effects on children.

Psychologists and sociologists point to the quality of family relationships to explain poverty’s detrimental effects on children. These theoretical models point out that higher incomes may improve parents’ psychological well-being and their ability to engage in positive family processes, in particular high-quality parental interactions with children. A long line of research has found that low-income parents are more likely than others to use an authoritarian and punitive parenting style and less likely to provide their children with stimulating learning experiences in the home. Poverty and economic insecurity take a toll on a parents’ mental health, which may be an important cause of low-income parents’ non-supportive parenting. Depression and other forms of psychological distress can profoundly affect parents’ interactions with their children. But as we argue below, it is not just the fact that these relationships exist that matters, but when.
For some outcomes later in life, particularly those related to achievement skills and cognitive development, poverty early in a child’s life may be especially harmful.

Why Early Poverty May Matter Most
It is not solely poverty that matters for children’s outcomes, but also the timing of child poverty. For some outcomes later in life, particularly those related to achievement skills and cognitive development, poverty early in a child’s life may be especially harmful. Emerging evidence from both human and animal studies highlights the critical importance of early childhood in brain development and for establishing the neural functions and structures that shape future cognitive, social, emotional, and health outcomes. There is also clear evidence emerging from neuroscience that demonstrates strong correlations between socioeconomic status and various aspects of brain function in young children. For clear and compelling evidence on these points, look no further than the pieces in this very issue of Pathways.

Intensive programs aimed at providing early care and educational experiences for high-risk infants and toddlers also support the idea that children’s early years are a fruitful time for intervention. The best known of these are the Abecedarian program, which provided a full-day, center-based, educational program for children who were at high risk for school failure, starting in early infancy and continuing until school entry, and the Perry Preschool program, which provided one or two years of intensive center-based education for preschoolers. Both of these programs have been shown to generate impressive long-term improvements in subsequent education and employment. Perry also produced large reductions in adult crime.

A Causal Story?
Regardless of the timing of low income, isolating its causal impact on children’s well-being is difficult. Poverty is associated with other experiences of disadvantage (such as poor schools or being raised by a single parent), making it difficult to know for certain whether it is poverty per se that really matters or other related experiences. The best method for identifying the extent to which income really matters would be an experiment that compares families who receive some additional money to similar parents who do not receive such money. The only large-scale randomized interventions to alter family income directly were the Negative Income Tax Experiments, which were conducted between 1968 and 1982 with the primary goal of identifying the influence of a guaranteed income on parents’ labor force participation. Researchers found that elementary school children whose families enjoyed a 50 percent boost in family income from the program exhibited higher levels of early academic achievement and school attendance than children who did not. No test score differences were found for adolescents, although youth who received the income boost did have higher rates of high school completion and educational attainment. This suggests that higher income may indeed cause higher achievement, although even in this case it is impossible to distinguish the effects of income from the possible benefits to children from the reductions in parental work effort that accompanied the income increases.

According to newer experimental welfare reform evaluations in the 1990s, though, providing income support to working poor parents through wage supplements does improve children’s achievement. One study analyzed data from seven random-assignment welfare and antipoverty policies. All of these policies increased parental employment, while only some increased family income. These analyses indicated improved academic achievement for preschool and elementary school children by programs that boosted both income and parental employment, but not by programs that only increased employment.

These experimental findings suggest that income plays a causal role in boosting younger children’s achievement, although here it should be kept in mind that the beneficial welfare-to-work programs increased both income and parental employment. However, combining these results with those from the 1970s experiments, we note that both kinds of programs increased income but produced opposing impacts on work hours. This suggests that the income boost may have been the most active ingredient in promoting children’s achievement.

Non-experimental studies that take care to ensure they are comparing families who differ in terms of income, but who are otherwise similar, can also provide strong evidence. One such study took advantage of an increase in the maximum Earned Income Tax Credit for working poor families with more than two children by more than $2,000 between the years of 1993 and 1997. This generous increase in tax benefits enabled researchers to compare the school achievement of children in otherwise similar—and even the same—working families before and after the increase in the tax credit. And indeed, improvements in low-income children’s achievement in middle childhood coincided with the policy change. A second, Canadian study found similar results when researchers took advantage of variation across Canadian provinces in the generosity of Canada’s National Child Benefit program to estimate income impacts on child achieve-
ment. Thus, the weight of the evidence suggests that increases in income for poor families are causally related to improvements in children's outcomes.

**The Long Reach**

None of this past income literature has been able to examine family income early in a child’s life in relation to that child’s adult attainments. This limitation comes largely from the lack of data on both early childhood income and later adult outcomes. Recent research by Duncan and his colleagues, however, has now made this link using recently-released data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which has followed a nationally representative sample of U.S. families and their children since 1968. The study is based on children born between 1968 and 1975, for whom adult outcomes were collected between ages 30 and 37.

Measures of income were available in every year of a child's life from the prenatal period through age 15. This enabled Duncan and his colleagues to measure poverty across several distinct periods of childhood, distinguishing income early in life (prenatal through age 5) from income in middle childhood and adolescence. The simple associations between income early in life and adult outcomes are striking (Table 1). Compared with children whose families had incomes of at least twice the poverty line during their early childhood, poor children completed two fewer years of schooling, earned less than half as much money, worked 451 fewer hours per year, received $826 per year more in food stamps, and are nearly three times as likely to report poor overall health. Poor males are more than twice as likely to be arrested. For females, poverty is associated with a more than five fold increase in the likelihood of bearing a child out of wedlock prior to age 21.

None of these simple comparisons, however, considered the various factors that go along with growing up in poverty that also might explain poorer adult outcomes (e.g., single parenthood or lack of motivation). To account for this, we also adjusted for an extensive set of background control variables, all of which were measured either before or near the time of birth. This effort to separate income from other related disadvantages and characteristics of poor children produces smaller correlations than in the absence of these statistical controls. This suggests that a substantial portion of the simple correlation between childhood income and most adult outcomes can be accounted for by the disadvantageous conditions associated with birth into a low-income household.

But what about the timing of poverty? To better understand whether poverty in early childhood is particularly important, Duncan and colleagues replaced the average childhood income measure with three stage-specific measures of income. As before, adjustments are made for the effects of the extensive array of background conditions.

In the case of adult earnings and work hours, early childhood income appears to matter much more than later income. For some measures, like work hours, there appears to even be a negligible role for income beyond age 5. Early income also appears to matter for completed schooling, but in this case adolescent family income seems to matter even more. In contrast, the strong association between overall childhood income and health and non-marital birth seems to be largely attributable to income during adolescence, rather than earlier in childhood.

More detailed analyses show that for families with average early childhood incomes below $25,000, a $3,000 annual boost to family income is associated with a 17 percent increase in adult earnings (Figure 3). Results for work hours are broadly similar to those for earnings. In this case, a $3,000 annual increase in the prenatal to age-5 income of low-income families is associated with 135 additional work hours per year after age 25. In contrast, increments to early-childhood income for higher-income children were not significantly associated with higher adult earnings or work hours. The implication is clear: If we are hoping that giving parents extra income will bolster their children's chances for success, early childhood is the time to do it.

**Refashioning Income Supports**

Early childhood is a particularly sensitive period in which economic deprivation may compromise children's life achievement and employment opportunities. Research continues to confirm a remarkable sensitivity (and growing number) of developing brain structures and functions that are related to growing up in an impoverished home.
We also have convincing evidence linking early poverty with both child achievement and adult employment. The achievement studies employ unusually rigorous methods for estimating causal relationships between income early in life and achievement test scores as children age. The effect sizes estimated in these studies are broadly similar. An annual income increase of $3,000 sustained for several years appears to boost children’s achievement by roughly one-fifth of a standard deviation. In the early grades, children’s achievement increases by nearly one standard deviation per year, so 20 percent of a standard deviation amounts to about two months’ advantage in school.

Very recent research has linked poverty early in childhood to adult earnings and work hours. Although non-experimental, the study’s key finding—that income early in childhood appears to matter much more than income later in childhood for a range of employment outcomes—is strikingly consistent with the achievement studies.

Taken together, this research suggests that greater policy attention should be given to remediating situations involving deep and persistent poverty occurring early in childhood. In the case of welfare policies, we should take care to ensure that sanctions and other regulations do not deny benefits to families with very young children. Not only do young children appear to be most vulnerable to the consequences of deep poverty, but mothers with very young children are also least able to support themselves through employment in the labor market.

A more generous, and perhaps smarter, approach would be enacting income transfer policies that provide more income to families with young children. In the case of work support programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit, this might mean extending more generous credits to families with young children. In the case of child tax credits, this could mean making the credit refundable and also providing larger credits to families with young children.

Interestingly, several European countries gear time-limited benefits to the age of children. In Germany, a modest parental allowance is available to a mother working fewer than 20 hours per week until her child is 18 months old. France guarantees a modest minimum income to most of its citizens, including families with children of all ages. Supplementing this basic support is the Allocation de Parent Isolé (API) program for single parents with children under age 3. In effect, the API program acknowledges a special need for income support during this period, especially if a parent wishes to care for very young children and forgo income from employment. The state-funded child care system in France that begins at age 3 alleviates the problems associated with a parent’s transition into the labor force.

In emphasizing the potential importance of policies to boost income in early childhood, we do not mean to imply that focusing on this area is the only policy path worth pursuing. Obviously investments later in life, including those that provide direct services to children and families, may also be well-advised. Economic logic requires a comparison of the costs and benefits of the various programs that seek to promote the development of disadvantaged children throughout the life course. In this context, expenditures on income-transfer and service-delivery programs should be placed side by side and judged by their costs and benefits, with the utmost goal of making our social investments as profitable as possible.

Greg J. Duncan is Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of California at Irvine. Katherine Magnuson is Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.
OLDER AMERICANS IN POVERTY: A SNAPSHOT

What is Poverty?
Demographic Characteristics of Poor Older Adults
The Geographic Distribution of Poverty
Sources of Income and Assistance
Reliance on Social Security
Noncash Benefits
Enrollment in Assistance Programs
Affordability of Health Care
Health and Disability Status
The Burden of Health Care Costs
Older Americans in Poverty: A Snapshot

Ellen O'Brien, Ke Bin Wu and David Baer

AARP Public Policy Institute

This report was prepared under the direction of Janet McCubbin.

AARP’s Public Policy Institute informs and stimulates public debate on the issues we face as we age. Through research, analysis and dialogue with the nation’s leading experts, PPI promotes development of sound, creative policies to address our common need for economic security, health care, and quality of life.

The views expressed herein are for information, debate, and discussion, and do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

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AARP, 601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049
www.aarp.org/ssi
OVERVIEW

Poverty among the elderly remains a serious and persistent problem in the United States. Nearly one in ten adults age 65 and above live in a family with income below the official U.S. poverty line, or federal poverty level (FPL). In 2008, an adult age 65 and older living alone was counted as poor if his or her annual cash income before taxes was below $10,326. An elderly couple with income below $13,014 was counted as poor.1 Nearly one in six older adults was poor or near poor, with income below 125 percent of the FPL, and about a third had low income—below 200 percent of the FPL.

The fact that 3.7 million older adults do not have sufficient cash income to meet their basic expenses too often escapes attention. By most accounts, elderly poverty is a problem we have largely solved. Since 1968 the poverty rate among adults age 65 and older has declined by about a third, falling from 25 percent in 1968 to 9.7 percent in 2008. In contrast, poverty among younger adults, and especially among children, has risen in recent decades even as national prosperity, real gross domestic product per capita, has grown. But poverty—particularly poverty among the elderly—is mismeasured and poverty rates are still unacceptably high, especially for certain groups of older Americans.

Poverty hits some groups of older adults more than others. Twenty percent of older adults who are black or Hispanic are poor, and poverty hits older people with limited education and those who are not married especially hard. Most poor adults age 65 and older are not married—either widowed (43 percent), divorced or separated (19 percent), or never married (8 percent). Older women of color are especially likely to live in poverty. Nearly a quarter of older women who are black or Hispanic are poor, and more than a third are poor or near poor (with income below 125 percent of the FPL).
Poverty among older adults varies across the states, but because of Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI)—which provide uniform federal benefits—the percentage of older adults living in poverty varies far less across the country than does the percentage of children living in poverty. The percentage of older adults living in poverty in 2008 ranged from a high of 16.9 percent in Mississippi to a low of 3.7 percent in Alaska.

Most poor older adults receive income from Social Security. In fact, the majority (59 percent) of poor older adults depend on Social Security for all or nearly all (90 percent or more) of their family income. And although Social Security benefits are typically large enough to prevent older people from living in poverty, some people receive only modest benefits that leave them in poverty. Older poor families are substantially less likely than the nonpoor to have income from assets, earnings, and pensions. And, even when they do have income from these sources, poor families derive less from these sources of income than do nonpoor families. Only about 15 percent of poor older families received cash assistance from SSI or other cash welfare programs.

An array of state and federal assistance programs is available to assist poor and low-income older adults, but a substantial share of even very low-income adults do not benefit from programs that could supplement limited incomes and make food, shelter, utilities, health care, and other necessities more affordable. Many of the elderly poor receive assistance from other (noncash or near-cash) federal assistance programs, including Medicaid and the Medicare Savings Programs (MSP), the Medicare Part D Low Income Subsidy (LIS), and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps).

Many older adults who live in poor families face other challenges that make it especially difficult to get by on a limited income. Poor older adults tend to be in worse health than adults who are not poor: They tend to have more chronic and disabling health conditions. Poor health and disability, on top of very limited income and inadequate insurance protection, mean that health care costs are a burden for many poor older adults. In 2006, the typical poor
adult age 65 and older spent 19.6 percent of income on health care, compared
to 6.1 percent for older adults with incomes above 400 percent of poverty.
Health care costs are unaffordable (exceed 20 percent of family income) for
half of poor elderly adults.

**Housing takes an even bigger bite out of the incomes of poor older adults.**
The median poor older household spent 60 percent of annual household
income on housing in 2008. Put another way, housing costs are extremely
unaffordable (absorbing more than half of household income) for more than
half (56.9 percent) of older poor households. When a less restrictive standard
is used, more than three-fourths of poor older households faced a housing
affordability problem, spending more than 30 percent of household income
on housing in 2008.

Food is a far less costly item than housing in the budgets of the elderly poor,
but a growing share of poor and near-poor older households experienced
severe difficulties paying for food in 2008. In 2008, 22.1 percent of low-
income elderly households (with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty
line) were “food insecure” (they had limited or uncertain availability of
nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to
acquire acceptable foods). This is a substantial increase from 2006, when
17.6 percent of the very low-income elderly had low or very low food security.

Some of the elderly poor can draw on assets to ease their hardships. Some
poor older adults may have accumulated assets that can provide a cushion
during hard times and can be used to meet extraordinary needs. But most
have few assets, and most of what they do have is tied up in their home. Poor
older adults had median assets (excluding home equity) of just $5,310 in
2005. Even when home equity is included, the median total family assets of
elderly poor individuals were just $66,600 in 2005.

**The official U.S. poverty measure has been in use for more than four
decades, but increasingly, it fails to accurately describe who is and who is
not poor,** and it does an especially inadequate job of measuring the extent of
poverty among older adults. Nearly twice as many adults age 65 and above
are poor when newer measurement approaches are used.
Reducing poverty among older adults should be a policy priority for federal and state policymakers. Options for alleviating poverty among the elderly include improvements in Social Security and SSI, better protection from high out-of-pocket costs for health care and long-term care, and policies to ensure that housing is affordable for both renters and homeowners.

**WHAT IS POVERTY?**

The official poverty measure describes the number and percentage of people who have pre-tax cash family income inadequate to meet their most basic needs for shelter, food, and clothing. Constructed more than four decades ago—and adjusted only for price inflation since then—the poverty measure is widely regarded as out-of-date. Recent efforts to measure the income needed to pay for ordinary expenses find that the income needed for a decent standard of living is significantly higher than the federal poverty level (FPL). Further, since the official poverty measure fails to count noncash sources of assistance and post-tax transfers, it is not useful for assessing the effectiveness of government policies.

**Measuring Poverty**

The official poverty measure is a measure of income poverty. Various sources of cash income before taxes are counted to determine a family’s poverty status, including earnings, self-employment income, Social Security benefits, private and government pension income, interest, rent and dividends, unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation and veterans’ benefits, and SSI benefits and other forms of welfare payments or cash assistance, as well as other regular source of support, such as alimony payments.

The official poverty measure does not make allowance for noncash benefits received, such as food stamps, housing and energy subsidies, or Medicaid’s health care benefits; it does not deduct taxes paid (or include tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, as income), nor does it take into account any savings or financial assets that a family may be able to draw on to supplement income.
To determine the poverty rate for the population as a whole and for various subgroups, the Census Bureau uses annual thresholds based on family size and composition. There are 48 thresholds reflecting variation in the income families of different sizes and types need to meet basic expenses. Each year, the Census Bureau estimates the number of individuals who live in families with income below the threshold for families of their size and type.

These thresholds were first set in the mid-1960s, based on expenditure data from the mid-1950s. Since expenditures on food were estimated to represent about a third of family expenditures, the poverty threshold was defined as three times the cost of a minimally adequate diet (to allow for expenditures on all other goods and services). Consequently, today's thresholds, updated only for inflation, continue to reflect 55-year-old expenditure patterns for basic needs.

Not only do the thresholds vary by family size and presence of children, they also vary by age. The thresholds are based on an assumption that older adults need less cash income to meet basic needs than do younger adults. In 2008, for example, the official poverty threshold for an older adult was 92 percent of the threshold for a younger adult. (Figure 1.)

If the higher thresholds for younger adults had been used to estimate the number of older people living in poverty, an additional 704,000 older adults would have been counted as poor in 2008 (for a total of 4.36 million), and the poverty rate for adults age 65 and above would have been

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**FIGURE 1.**
Official Poverty Thresholds, 2008
Individuals and Couples, by Age

The official poverty threshold for an adult age 65+ is 92% of the threshold for an adult under age 65.

FIGURE 2.
Number of Adults Age 65 and Older Living in Poverty When Age-Related Thresholds Are Not Used, 2008 (in Thousands)

4,360 (11.5%)
704
3,656

Adults Age 65 and Older Living in Poverty

Additional Number Who Would Be Counted as Poor if Age 65+ Thresholds Not Used (1.8%)

Officially Poor (9.7%)


FIGURE 3.
Official Poverty Thresholds, 2008
Adults Age 65 and Older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age:</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Couple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$13,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,326</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The official poverty threshold for an older couple is 26% higher than the threshold for an individual.


nearly 2 percentage points higher (11.5 percent vs. 9.7 percent). (Figure 2.)

In 2008, the poverty threshold for an older couple was $13,014—just 26 percent higher than the threshold for an individual age 65 or older ($10,326). That is, according to official poverty calculations, an older couple needs 26 percent more income than an individual to meet basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. (Figure 3.)

Poverty Guidelines for Program Administration

The federal poverty measure is used in determining individuals’ eligibility for some low-income assistance programs and is used in some federal funding formulas. Each year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issues federal poverty guidelines (FPGs)—which are somewhat different from the Census Bureau’s poverty thresholds—that are used in a number of federal, state, and local public programs. The 2009
federal poverty guidelines are those used for program administration in 2009. They are based on the 2007 federal poverty thresholds (with adjustments for family size and for inflation through the end of 2008). There is a single poverty guideline for adults, rather than separate guidelines for older and younger adults. In 2009, the FPG for a single person was $10,830; for a family of two persons, it was $14,570.\(^6\) (Figure 4.)

For the first time since the establishment of the official poverty guidelines, the average annual CPI went down between 2008 and 2009 (by -0.4 percent). The Defense Appropriations Act of 2010 includes a provision that freezes the poverty guidelines at 2009 levels through March 1, 2010, in order to prevent a reduction in eligibility for certain means-tested programs, including Medicaid, SNAP, and child nutrition.\(^7\) Additional legislation may be needed to prevent any reduction of the guidelines in 2010. (The 2009 thresholds, which the Census Bureau will use to measure the poverty rate later in 2010, are lower than the 2008 thresholds.\(^8\))

### TRENDS IN POVERTY

Tremendous strides have been made in reducing the poverty rate of the elderly. Just in the first decade since the federal government adopted an official measure of poverty, the percentage of older adults in poverty fell dramatically, from 25 percent in 1968 to 14 percent in 1978. The steep decline in the 1960s and 1970s was almost entirely due to the significant expansion of Social Security benefits during that period. Since then, progress has been more gradual, with the official rate of poverty among older adults
remaining at about 10 percent over the past decade. (Figure 5.) However, while the percentage of persons aged 65 and older in poverty has fallen over the past 40 years, the number of poor elderly has remained relatively constant since the mid-1970s due to the growth in the total number of elderly people.

When the poverty rate for the elderly is compared to poverty rates for other age groups, the elderly appear to be significantly better off. In 2008, nearly 40 million people (13.2 percent of the noninstitutionalized population) lived below the official poverty line in the United States. The elderly poverty rate (9.7 percent) is significantly lower than the child poverty rate (19 percent) and lower than the poverty rate for adults aged 18 to 64 (11.7 percent). In addition, in contrast to the fairly steady decline in poverty among older adults, poverty among younger adults and especially, children, has risen in
recent decades, even as national prosperity (real gross domestic product per capita) has grown. (Figure 6.)

**FIGURE 6.**
Percentage of the Population below the Official Poverty Threshold, by Age, 1968–2008

In 2008, one year into the current economic recession, the number of people living in poverty rose by 2.5 million, from 37.3 million in 2007 to 39.8 million. The overall poverty rate increased sharply, rising from 12.5 percent in 2007 to 13.2 percent, with most of the increase occurring among children and adults under age 65. (Figure 7.) Of the 2.5 million people who fell into poverty, 1.7 million were adults age 18 to 64, 744,000 were children, and 100,000 were adults age 65 and older.

**WHO ARE POOR AND NEAR-POOR OLDER ADULTS?**

Today, nearly 3.7 million older adults (9.7 percent of adults age 65 and older) live in poverty. Another 2.4 million older adults live in families with incomes marginally above the poverty threshold (between 100 percent and 125
percent of the federal poverty line), and 2.6 million have incomes between 125 percent and 150 percent of the federal poverty line. Overall, 36.2 percent of older adults, or 13.7 million adults age 65 and older, have low income—defined as family income below 200 percent of the FPL. (Figure 8.)

Because people age 65 and older represent just 12.6 percent of the noninstitutionalized U.S. population, they
represent a relatively small share of the poor. Most people living in poverty are children and working-age adults. In 2008, 35.3 percent of people living in poverty were children. Adults age 18 to 64 accounted for 55.5 percent of the poor, and people age 65 and above accounted for 9.2 percent. (Figure 9.)

While adults age 65 and older are less likely than younger people to live in poor families, they are more likely to live in families with incomes between one and two times the poverty line. As a result, when we look at people with low income (defined as income below 200 percent of the FPL), the gap between the elderly and other age groups narrows. Although children are twice as likely as elderly adults to live in poverty, the elderly are more likely than children to have family income between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty (26.5 percent vs. 21.6 percent). The share of older adults with low income (36.2 percent) is only slightly lower than the share of children living in low-income families (40.6 percent). (Figure 10.)
**Demographic Characteristics of Poor Older Adults**

Economic hardship and poverty are pervasive for many subgroups of older adults, especially women; widows and people who are divorced, separated, or never married; racial and ethnic minorities; people living alone; and the oldest adults (people over age 85).

In 2008, about 12 percent of women age 65 and above lived in poverty, compared to about 7 percent of men. Poverty is more common among the oldest adults; 12.7 percent of adults age 85 and above were poor, compared to 8.4 percent of those aged 65 to 74. Poverty rates are especially high among racial and ethnic minorities. About 20 percent of black and Hispanic older adults were poor in 2008, compared to 7.6 percent of whites. Older adults with low levels of educational attainment are also far more likely than those with more education to live in poor families; 19.3 percent of elderly individuals who did not complete high school lived in poverty in 2008, compared to just 4.4 percent of four-year college graduates. (Figure 11.)
FIGURE 11.
Percentage of Adults Age 65 and Above with Income Below the Official Poverty Threshold, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-74</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75-84</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85+</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced or Separated</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-Year College Graduate</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate*</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a High School Graduate</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The category high school graduate may include people with additional schooling, including a two-year college degree, but who did not graduate from a four-year university.
In part because women live longer than men, the number of poor older women (2.564 million) in 2008 was more than twice the number of poor older men (1.092 million). In 2008, 70 percent of older adults in poverty were women, and 30 percent were men. (Figure 12.)

Poor older adults are also more ethnically diverse than the overall elderly population. In 2008, racial and ethnic minorities accounted for 19 percent of the elderly, but 36 percent of the elderly poor. Reflecting poverty rates that are twice those for older whites, blacks account for 8 percent of all older adults, but 17 percent of poor older adults. Hispanics are also disproportionately represented among the older adults in poverty. (Figure 13.)

The elderly poor are also disproportionately on their own, either widowed or unmarried. Most adults age 65 and above (56 percent) are married, but only 30 percent of the elderly poor
are married. People who are widowed account for 29 percent of older adults, but 43 percent of the elderly poor. In 2008, 8 percent of the elderly poor had never married.
(Figure 14.)

A third of all adults age 65 and older live alone, compared to 58 percent of poor older adults. (Figure 15.) The poverty rate for older adults who live alone was nearly three times that for older adults who lived with others (17.2 percent vs. 6.0 percent).

**FIGURE 14.**
All Elderly and Elderly Poor, by Marital Status, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>All Older Adults 37.78 million</th>
<th>Poor Older Adults 3.656 million</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never Married</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced/Separated</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>56.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**FIGURE 15.**
Poverty Rate of Adults Age 65 and Older and Distribution of the Elderly Poor, by Living Arrangement, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living Arrangement</th>
<th>Percentage of Adults Age 65+ with Income Below Poverty</th>
<th>Population Distributions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living Alone</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>Living with Others 67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with Others</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>Living Alone 58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Poverty rates are also higher among older adults who are immigrants (15.2 percent), compared to people who were born in the United States (8.9 percent). Naturalized citizens have lower poverty rates than older noncitizens (13.0 percent vs. 20.8 percent). Despite higher poverty rates, immigrants account for just 11.6 percent of the older population and thus account for a relatively small share of poor older adults nationwide (18.4 percent in 2008). (Figure 16.)

FIGURE 16.
Older Adults Who Are Not Citizens Have High Poverty Rates, but Account for a Small Proportion of Poor Older Adults

A closer look at these populations reveals in even starker terms the level of economic insecurity a large share of older adults face. The likelihood that an older woman will live in poverty rises substantially with age; 10.6 percent of women age 65 to 74 were poor in 2008, compared to 15.1 percent for women age 85 and older. Poverty rates for older men are lower than those for women at all ages. In 2008, 8.0 percent of men age 85 and above lived in poverty, compared to 15.1 percent of women. (Figure 17.)
Nearly a quarter of black and Hispanic women age 65 and above lived in poverty in 2008. (Figure 18.)
Roughly 20 percent of black and Hispanic adults age 65 and above lived in poverty in 2008, compared to just 7.6 percent of whites. (Figure 19.)

**FIGURE 19.**
Poverty Rates, Adults Age 65 and Older, by Age and by Race/Ethnicity, 2008

Note: “Hispanic” includes people of all races. “White” includes people who are not Hispanic who report only one race or who report more than one race (e.g., white and black, white and Asian); “Black” includes people who are not Hispanic who report only one race or who report black and any other race except white.

When those with incomes just above the poverty line are counted, the numbers rise sharply. More than a third of black and Hispanic women over age 65 have incomes below 125 percent of poverty (34.4 percent of black elderly women and 34.7 percent of Hispanic elderly women) in 2008. (Figure 20.)
Across racial and ethnic groups, more than a quarter of unmarried older women have incomes below the poverty level or only modestly above it (27.6 percent of widows, 30.1 percent of divorced or separated women, and 28.5 percent of never-married women). (Figure 21.)
The large majority of poor women age 65 and above (80 percent) are not married. More than half (54 percent) of those women are widows, and more than a quarter (26 percent) are divorced or separated (20 percent) or never married (6 percent). Only 20 percent of older poor women in poverty are married. In contrast, more than half of all older men in poverty are married. (Figure 22.)

**FIGURE 22.**
Distribution of Poor Women and Men, Age 65 and Older, by Marital Status, 2008

Most poor older women are not very old: Nearly half (roughly 1.2 million) are 65 to 74 years old, and most of these women are not widowed. About 40 percent of poor women between the ages of 65 and 74 are widowed, 25 percent are married, 28.4 percent are divorced or separated, and 7 percent were never married (7 percent). Among the poor women age 85 and older, more than 80 percent are widows. (Figure 23.)
The Geographic Distribution of Poverty among the Elderly

Poverty among older adults varies across the states, but because of Social Security and SSI—which provide uniform federal benefits—the percentage of older adults living in poverty varies less across the country than does the percentage of children living in poverty. According to data from the 2008 American Community Survey, the percentage of older adults living in poverty ranged from 16.9 percent in Mississippi to 3.7 percent in Alaska. (See appendix table 1). In general, however, the official rate of elderly poverty varies relatively little across the states. Most states (34) had an elderly poverty rate between 8 percent and 11.9 percent in 2008, with the highest rates of elderly poverty occurring in the South. (Figure 24.)
FIGURE 24.  
Elderly Poverty Rates, by State, 2008

Percentage of Adults Age 65 and Older Living in Poverty

12% or more (8 states + DC)  
10% to 11.9% (10 states)  
8% to 9.9% (24 states)  
Less than 8% (8 states)

U.S. elderly poverty rate = 9.9%

In every state, children are more likely (though not always much more likely) than older adults to live in poor families (see appendix table 1). (Figure 25.) In part, this is because benefit levels for assistance programs for poor and low-income families with children are determined by states. In addition, the largest federal income support program for families with children—the Earned Income Tax Credit—is not included as income in the official poverty measure.

**FIGURE 25.**
**Elderly and Child Poverty Rates, by State, 2008**

Source: AARP Public Policy Institute estimates based on the 2008 American Community Survey.
There is some troubling evidence that homelessness is beginning to increase among elderly adults. In addition, there are demographic factors—such as the anticipated growth of the elderly population as baby boomers turn 65 years of age and recent reports of increases in the number of homeless adults ages 50 to 64—that suggest a dramatic increase in the elderly homeless population between 2010 and 2020. While the country’s changing demographics may make this finding unsurprising, it has serious implications for providers of homeless services and should be deeply troubling to the policymakers that aim to prevent poverty and homelessness among the elderly through local and federal social welfare programs.

This paper provides an assessment of the recent and projected changes in homelessness among the elderly and assesses the ability of public affordable housing programs to handle the projected growth in elderly persons at-risk of housing instability and homelessness.

Homelessness Among the Elderly

While there is a fair amount known about elders experiencing poverty and about the general homeless population, there is relatively little known about the elderly homeless population. This section details what we know from existing research about incidence and growth of homelessness among the elderly.

Incidence
The elderly population has historically been underrepresented among the homeless population. The limited national homelessness data that have been collected over the past two decades are consistent in revealing that homelessness is much more prevalent among younger adults than among older adults and the elderly. A 1996 national study by the Urban Institute found that, while those over age 55 represented 28 percent of the general adult population, they made up only 8 percent of the homeless population. This underrepresentation is also reflected in HUD’s 2008 annual homelessness data, which reveal that the incidence of sheltered homelessness among adults over 18 years of age is 55 per 10,000, while the annual incidence among those ages 62 and older is 9 per 10,000. While these findings speak to the relative infrequency of homelessness among the elderly, any level of homelessness among the elderly is concerning.

Changes
There is very limited national data on the changing demographics of the homeless population, but the data that do exist show that homelessness among the elderly and older adults is modestly increasing. HUD’s first Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR), which covered a three-month period ending in April 2005, estimated that 2.4 percent of sheltered homeless adults were older than 62 years of age. HUD’s fourth AHAR, which covered the twelve-month period ending September 2008, showed that 2.8 percent of sheltered homeless adults were older than 62 years of age. To the extent that the two data points are comparable, they suggest very modestly increasing representation of the elderly among the homeless.

While the national data show only modest increases in the representation of the elderly among the homeless population, there is some city-specific research that shows more rapid increases in homelessness among adults ages 50 and older, but not necessarily among the elderly.
Increases Expected Among At-risk and Homeless Elderly Populations

Who is considered elderly? This paper focuses on homelessness and economic vulnerability among elderly and, to a lesser extent, older adults. The Census Bureau defines the elderly as those ages 65 and older. As much of the analysis in this paper is based upon Census data, we define the term “elderly” as those over 65 years of age unless otherwise specified. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports on homelessness include an ages 62 and older age category, which is also considered “elderly” for the purposes of this report. "Older adults" are those between ages 50 and 64 unless otherwise specified.

City-specific research shows more rapid increases in homelessness among adults aged 50 and older.

- Researchers studying the street homeless population in San Francisco found that from the period 1990–1994 to 2000–2002, the representation of those ages 50 and over went progressively from 11.2 percent to 32.3 percent.5
- Data from New York City indicates that the median age of the homeless population in New York City went from 28 to 42 years of age from 1987 to 2005.6
- A study of the homeless population in Massachusetts found homelessness among those ages 55 and older increased from 8 percent of the homeless population in 1999 to 14 percent in 2003.7
- A study by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness and Loyola University found that homelessness is increasing among adults between the ages of 50 and 64, but not among those over the age of 64.8

The limited existing research tells a story of increasing homelessness among adults ages 50 and older and more modest increases among the elderly population. The trend is suggestive of an increase in the elderly homeless population over the next few decades as the current older adult population reaches and exceeds age 65.

Demographic Changes Among the Elderly

This paper predicts that homelessness among elderly persons will increase substantially over the next decade. There are two primary demographic factors that contribute to the projected increase in homelessness among the elderly. One is the overall growth in the elderly population, which is expected to more than double in size between now and 2050. The other factor is the relative stability in the proportion of the elderly population facing economic vulnerability. Together, these factors signal an increase in elder economic vulnerability and homelessness.

The Growing Elderly Population

There are more Americans over the age of 65 today than ever before and the number is rapidly increasing. During the past century, the number of elderly people has grown from 3.1 million in 1900 to 37 million in 2008—an increase of over 1,100 percent. The proportion of elderly Americans has also increased since 1900, when adults ages 65 and older made up only 4.1 percent of the population.9 Today, at 37 million, elderly Americans make up 12.6 percent of the population.10 This demographic shift means that we have become an older nation, with the median age at almost 37 years old—the country's
highest median age on record. Further, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2050 there will be approximately 89 million people over the age of 65, which more than doubles our current elderly population.\textsuperscript{11} This projected increase in elderly Americans, illustrated in Figure 1, merits significant attention at the federal policy level. An increased number of elderly persons will mean an increased need for federal programs aimed at preventing economic vulnerability among older persons.

**Economic Vulnerability among the Elderly**

The most common measure of economic instability among the elderly is poverty. Poverty among elderly Americans has been relatively low since the 1960s. In 1959, the poverty rate for elder Americans was 35 percent. This fell to approximately 15 percent by 1975, due in large part to increases in government programs such as Social Security.\textsuperscript{12} Since that time, poverty rates among the elderly have steadily declined, remaining between 9 and 11 percent for the past decade. According to the 2008 American Community Survey, 9.9 percent of people over 65 years of age had annual incomes below the poverty threshold of $10,326 for a single person and $13,030 for a couple.\textsuperscript{13}

A measure of even greater economic vulnerability is the proportion of elderly persons in deep poverty—earning only half of the poverty threshold. In 2008, there were over 969,925 elderly persons, or 2.6 percent of the elderly population, in deep poverty.\textsuperscript{14} Figure 2 shows the trends in rates of poverty and deep poverty for both the general population and the elderly population since 1975 and reveals that the deep poverty rate among elderly persons has remained around 2 percent since 1975. Federal programs such as Social Security, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program), and housing programs directed to the elderly have helped decrease the number of persons over 65 years of age living in precarious housing situations due to insufficient income. Despite the overall effectiveness of these programs, some elderly people are not prevented from experiencing economic hardship and homelessness.

**Projected Increase in Homelessness among Elderly**

In the most recent AHAR, HUD estimates that there were 43,450 sheltered homeless people over the age of 62 in 2008.\textsuperscript{15} Because of anticipated increases in the elderly homeless population as the general population ages, a projection of the elderly homeless population is made in this paper. It is based on the following assumptions:

- The elderly population will increase as projected by the U.S. Census Bureau through 2050.
- The rate of deep poverty in the elderly population will remain constant at 2 percent through 2050, as it has remained since 1975.
- The 2008 ratio of 1 sheltered elderly homeless person to every 22 elderly persons in deep poverty remains constant through 2050.

The resulting projection of the elderly homeless population is illustrated in Figure 3. It shows that homelessness is projected to increase by 33 percent from 44,172 in 2010 to 58,772 in 2020 and will more than double between 2010 and 2050, when over 95,000 elderly persons are projected to be homeless.\textsuperscript{16}

This projected increase in homelessness among elderly persons is alarming. The remainder of this paper is focused on pathways into elder homeless-
Increases Expected Among At-risk and Homeless Elderly Populations

The proportion of elderly Americans has increased since 1900, when adults aged 65 and older made up only 4.1 percent of the population. In 2008, elderly Americans make up 12.6 percent of the population.

Pathways Into Elder Homelessness

To the extent that both political will and resources have been committed to preventing elder homelessness and destitution, the natural next question is: How does homelessness among the elderly and older adults occur?

The two basic pathways are the aging of the chronically homeless population and new homelessness among elderly adults who did not experience homelessness prior to turning 65 years of age. Research into this question is rare, but two regional studies provide evidence supporting each of the two pathways.

The Shelter Partnership conducted an extensive study of the older and elderly homeless adults that presented at the Los Angeles area’s largest homeless shelter. This study examined the differences between those ages 50 to 61 and those ages 62 and older. The study revealed that 28 percent of homeless persons over 62 years of age came to the shelter directly from the streets, 25 percent came from another shelter, and 15 percent were living with family or friends prior to homelessness. For those between ages 50 and 61, 37 percent arrived from the streets, 19 percent arrived from another shelter, and 10 percent were living with family or friends. The high percentage of older and elderly homeless adults coming to the shelter from the streets and other shelters highlights the first pathway—the aging of the chronically homeless.

An international, three-city study points more toward the second pathway—new homelessness among formerly stably-housed elders. Boston was one of the three cities (and only U.S. city). The data from Boston revealed that most elderly homelessness people were newly homeless with a history of stable adult employment. Most were last housed in a private rental unit and a plurality had lived alone. The common causes of their homelessness were, in decreasing order of frequency: financial problems, mental health problems, relationship breakdown, physical health problems, and issues related to work. A Chicago study also looked at homeless adults over 50 years of age and found the following reasons as common causes of their homelessness: recent job loss, drinking problems, discontinued/inadequate public assistance, inadequate income, disagreement with family or friends, and injury or illness on the job.

Understanding the pathways into homelessness for the elderly is important when determining the right policy response. Those older Americans who become homeless as senior citizens require more preventive action. Federal housing programs are fundamental in reducing the economic hardship experienced by the elderly whose only income is often Social Security and/or Supplemental Security Income. Alternatively, those older adults—ages 50 to 64—who are chronically homeless and remain homeless as they age have intensive housing and service needs that must be addressed to end their homelessness. Both pathways are addressed in the following sections.

Precariously Housed Elderly Households

At its root, homelessness is the result of an inability to afford housing. With rising housing costs, elderly
Chronically Homeless Older and Elderly Households

Chronically homeless older adults who age into elderly homelessness often have critical health and service needs in addition to their obvious housing needs. Homeless seniors are more likely to experience multiple medical issues at a time and often have chronic illnesses that go untreated. Exposure to harsh weather and the often unhealthy environment of shelters can affect the susceptible health and well-being of the elderly population. Substance use disorders, particularly alcoholism, are not uncommon among the elderly homeless population and are often presented alongside mental health disorders, especially among the chronically homeless population. The mental health issues of the elderly are also particularly important when examining the reasons that older people become or remain homeless. Mental illnesses associated with memory loss, for example, can affect the ability to secure housing as acquiring housing often involved multiple appointments and self-initiated persistence.22

Elderly chronically homeless people often require intensive service coordination. This helps them transition into permanent housing smoothly and ensures they remain there. Case management is often critical in coordinating care—primary health care, housing assistance, food, and other services can get lost without some assistance and supervision. Elderly homeless people often face barriers to accessing resources and benefits such as Social Security, Medicare, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). They may not know that they are eligible for such benefits, they may not know where to start, and/or they may have a hard time following up with service providers, meeting appointments, or completing the necessary paperwork due to health limitations (mental or physical).23 A coordination of services, coupled with housing assistance, can help homeless or formerly homeless seniors age in their own housing with dignity.

Federal Housing Assistance for the Elderly

There are a few federal programs that provide housing assistance to seniors. These programs provide the housing safety net for the most vulnerable low-income people. According to the 2007 American Housing Survey, 6 percent of elderly households either lived in housing owned by a public housing authority or identified themselves as recipients of some form of housing subsidy.24 While this is likely an underestimate, it still represents over 1.3 million households. This section outlines the primary federal rental housing assistance programs that support seniors. Because there are many state and local programs that support seniors, this is not a comprehensive account of all housing services for the elderly.

Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly Program. Created in 1959, Section 202 is a project-based housing program that provides housing and supportive services to very low-income elderly households. Eligible persons must be over 62 and have incomes at or below 50 percent of the area median income (AMI).25 This program is the only government-subsidized program dedicated exclusively to senior housing. There are currently over 300,000 units of Section 202 housing and for each unit that becomes available there are an estimated ten seniors waiting.

Public Housing. Public housing is a federally subsidized housing program providing units to persons at or below 80 percent of AMI. While open to all persons below this income threshold, most
Public Housing Authorities (PHA) target funds to those at very low or extremely low-income levels. Some PHAs give preference to elderly applicants. Currently, 31 percent—or over 350,000 public housing units—have a senior householder.27

**Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8).** The Housing Choice Voucher Program provides tenant-based and project-based housing assistance to persons with incomes at or below 50 percent of AMI. Approximately 17 percent of the 1.9 million vouchers currently in use are being utilized by senior citizens.28 The demand for vouchers far exceeds the supply of vouchers, with average waiting lists ranging from 5 to 10 years in some cities.

**Project-Based Section 8.** Project-based Section 8 is a public-private partnership in which the owner (private or non-profit) signs a contract with HUD to provide affordable rental units to low-income tenants. There are currently 1.27 million units of Project-based Section 8, and approximately 50 percent are occupied by elderly householders. With the exception of a small number of units for homeless people, there have been no units added under this program since the mid 1980s. Further, the total number of these units has been declining by over 10,000 a year as owners choose not to renew their expiring contracts.29

**Section 515 Rural Rental Housing Program.** Section 515 is a federally subsidized program providing rental assistance to rural areas. This program serves very low and extremely low income persons, with about half of the units being allocated to seniors. Since the program’s creation in 1962, over 523,000 units have been built. At its peak in 1979, 38,650 units were created; this figure dropped to 1,621 in 1994 and to only 486 units in 2006. In recent years, funding has been limited, with approximately 1,000 units funded each year. In new construction projects, 95 percent of the eligible participants must have incomes at or below 50 percent of the AMI, compared with 75 percent at existing projects. Elderly households occupy 58 percent of the units.30, 31

Table 1 reveals that together, these programs provide approximately 1.9 million units to low-income elderly households. However, these programs have long waiting lists spanning several years, an indication that the number of units both affordable and available to elderly households is insufficient. While federal programs targeted to the elderly have helped lessen the number of precariously housed elderly households who fall into homelessness, the number of units is not keeping pace with the increasing demand. If the deep poverty projections hold true, the government will have to fund between 700,000 and 822,000 additional units through these programs by 2020 simply to maintain the current deficit.32

**A Call to Action and Inquiry**

In the coming years, the United States will experience a monumental societal shift as baby boomers become senior citizens. Meeting the needs of this population, particularly the economically vulnerable portion of the population, will be one of the greatest domestic policy challenges in our lifetime. Social Security, Medicare, and housing programs targeting the elderly will be critical for meeting the challenge and reducing risk of homelessness. Below is a list of recommendations to reduce and eventually eliminate homelessness among elderly persons in the United States.

1. **Increase the supply of subsidized affordable housing on which economically vulnerable elderly persons rely.** In addition to the Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly Program, elderly persons also make up

### Table 1. Housing Units Serving Elderly Households by Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Number of Units with Elderly Households</th>
<th>Percent of Program Serving Elderly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 202</td>
<td>300,000 units</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Housing*</td>
<td>359,882 units</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8)</td>
<td>323,000 subsidies</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project-Based Section 8</td>
<td>624,750 units</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 515 (Section 521)</td>
<td>303,340 units</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

either the majority or a large fraction of the beneficiaries of the other federal affordable rental housing programs—public housing, Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8), Project-Based Section 8, and the Section 515 Rural Rental Housing Program. These programs must be preserved and expanded to keep pace with expected increases in demand and to provide a way of providing housing stability for the tens of thousands of elderly persons who experience homelessness every year. Capitalization of the National Housing Trust Fund, which will be used to build, rehabilitate and preserve housing for the lowest-income households, will be a critical element of ensuring that the programs upon which elderly persons depend are adequately sized.

2. Create sufficient permanent supportive housing to finish the job of ending chronic homelessness. The aging of the chronically homeless population from the older adult to the elderly age group is one of the ways that homelessness among elderly persons is expected to grow in the coming years. This pathway can be largely averted if the job of ending chronic homelessness is successfully completed in the next 10 years. This requires the creation of sufficient supportive housing units to house the approximately 120,000 persons who are chronically homeless today. Because of the progressive health care and support needs of this population, it is critical that this population receives housing combined with flexible and adaptive support services.

3. Research to better understand the needs of the homeless elderly population. One of the recurrent themes of this paper is the paucity of information available about the elderly homeless population. Research is needed to better understand the characteristics of the population. Specifically, research is needed into the patterns of homeless and mainstream service utilization, the frequency and duration of homeless episodes, and health status and functionality of elderly homeless people. This information is necessary to form a typology of the elderly homeless population that can be used to better plan and target effective interventions, including supportive housing and homelessness prevention strategies.

The existence of homelessness among the elderly indicates that our safety nets are failing our most vulnerable citizens. However, with thoughtful and strategic planning, we can greatly reduce elderly homelessness and prevent the population at-risk from experiencing homelessness. Addressing the unmet housing and service needs of our at-risk and homeless elderly, as well as understanding the characteristics and needs of the elderly population at-risk of homelessness can help us end elder homelessness. As a nation, we are judged by how we care for our most vulnerable citizens. It is a failing of public policy that any of our elderly are homeless. To fail to act would be, in short, irresponsible.

Endnotes

10. Authors’ calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008 data.
16. The methodology used for this projection was adapted from National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Homelessness Looms as Potential Outcome of Recession”, 2009.
Increases Expected Among At-risk and Homeless Elderly Populations


20. Author's calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, American Housing Survey, 2007 data.

21. Author’s calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, American Housing Survey, 2007 data.


32. 700,000 units from CBPP estimate of units to get to 1999 deficiency and 822,000 units based on the number of current units in the programs outlined as percent of elderly households. Those households served in these programs represent 5 percent of all elderly households. If you assume 5 percent onto the 2020 projection, you get 2.72 million units, 822,000 over the current number.

THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS is a non-partisan, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The Alliance is a leading voice on the issue of homelessness. The Alliance analyzes policy and develops pragmatic, cost-effective policy solutions. The Alliance works collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help communities achieve their goal of ending homelessness. We provide data and research to policymakers and elected officials in order to inform policy debates and educate the public and opinion leaders nationwide.

THE HOMELESSNESS RESEARCH INSTITUTE, the research and education arm of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, works to end homelessness by building and disseminating knowledge that drives policy change. The goals of the Institute are to build the intellectual capital around solutions to homelessness; to advance data and research to ensure that policymakers, practitioners, and the caring public have the best information about trends in homelessness and emerging solutions; and to engage the media to ensure intelligent reporting on the issue of homelessness.
INJUSTICE
ON OUR PLATES
Immigrant Women in the U.S. Food Industry
Executive Summary

They’re the backbone of our food supply.
Their hands sliced the chicken breast we had for lunch. Their sweat brought the fresh
tomato to our plates. Their backs bent to pick the lettuce in our salads.

They are America’s undocumented workers. Every single day, virtually all of us rely on
their labor. At least six in 10 of our country’s farmworkers are undocumented immigrants—
probably many more. On farms across America, they help produce billions of dollars worth
of grapes, tomatoes, strawberries, melons, beans and other grocery store staples.

Despite their contribution to our economy, these immigrants live at the margins of U.S.
society — subsisting on poverty wages, enduring humiliation and exploitation in the work-
place, and living in constant fear that their families will be shattered if they are detected.

Because of their status, they remain in the shadows, their voices silent. They are unable to speak out about the indignities they suffer
and the crimes committed against them. As one 59-year-old Mexican
woman says: “No one sees the people in the field. We’re ignored.”

This report is based on extensive interviews conducted with 150
immigrant women from Mexico, Guatemala and other Latin-American
countries. They live and work in Florida, California, North Carolina,
New York, Iowa, Arkansas and other states. All have worked in the
fields or in the factories that produce our food. They are among the 4
million undocumented women living in the U.S.

They are the linchpin of the immigrant family. And they are surely
the most vulnerable of all workers in America — seen by their employ-
ers as easily exploitable and, at the end of the day, disposable.

Their stories are remarkably similar. Virtually all say they came to
the United States to escape devastating poverty and to try, like waves of
immigrants before them, to lay a foundation for their children’s future.
They tell harrowing stories of survival in the desert they crossed to get
here. They tell of being cheated out of hard-earned wages by unscrupulous employers. They
tell of working in dangerous conditions without adequate safety precautions. And they tell of
enduring near-constant sexual harassment in the fields and factories.

The laws that protect these workers are grossly inadequate. More importantly, the work-
ners’ ability to enforce what protections they do have is generally nonexistent.

When the debate over immigration policy once again reaches Congress — the only venue
where it can be resolved — it’s important to understand the motivation that drives these
women across our borders, their role in our economy and our communities, and the exploi-
tation they face.

They are economic refugees — pushed from their home countries by abject poverty, hun-
ger and desperation. They’re pulled north by the alluring images in their heads of a bounti-
ful country overflowing with opportunity — a meritocracy where one need only work hard
to have enough food to eat and to provide decent clothes and shelter. They don’t come here
“The migrants have no lobby. Only an enlightened, aroused and perhaps angered public opinion can do anything about the migrants. They have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation.”

— EDWARD R. MURROW

expecting a handout.

Some find their American dream is little more than a mirage. Others, finding a modicum of success, are able to put their children on an upward path and help sustain their relatives back home. Many come to the U.S. for what they believe will be a temporary stay but find their plans to return home complicated by community ties, their desire to give their children the opportunity the U.S. offers and tighter border controls.

These women live at the bottom of a world where titans of finance send capital across borders at the speed of light and transnational corporations move factories — and jobs — around the globe like a chess match to take advantage of the lowest labor costs. It’s a world where trade and foreign policies established in Washington and other faraway places can mean a job or no job to people who have no say in the matter. Though the world’s economy has never before been so interwoven, it’s still a world where people, the workers who run the factories and whose labor helps enrich those at the top, are supposed to stay within the lines.

America is now at war with the immigrant hands that feed us. Communities and states across the country are enacting a patchwork of highly restrictive laws that will only drive undocumented immigrants further underground and make them even more exploitable by the businesses that employ them and the criminals who prey on them. Immigrant women face the additional danger of sexual assault and rape, crimes they often are afraid to report to police because it could lead to deportation.

Not only is this war costing taxpayers many billions, it is eroding wage and workplace protections for U.S. workers as well, especially for low-skilled workers, as businesses find they can exploit immigrant labor with virtual impunity.

U.S. immigration policy has not kept pace with these challenges. Border security has been greatly enhanced. But the reality is that about 11 million people are now living and working in the U.S. without documentation. Millions of them are raising U.S.-born children. Deporting all of these immigrants, according to one recent study, would leave a $2.6 trillion hole in the U.S. economy over the next decade. That does not include the billions of dollars that would be required to enforce such a policy. And it does not take into account the massive human rights violations that would inevitably occur.

Fifty years ago this Thanksgiving, CBS broadcast “Harvest of Shame,” an Edward R. Murrow documentary that chronicled the plight of migrant farmworkers. Murrow closed the program with this commentary: “The migrants have no lobby. Only an enlightened, aroused and perhaps angered public opinion can do anything about the migrants. The people you have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation.”

Not much has changed.

Congress must address this crisis in a comprehensive way — a way that recognizes the contributions of these immigrants to our country and our fundamental values of fairness and dignity. Our recommendations for doing so appear at the conclusion of this report.
“I imagined something very pretty. That’s what people told us. And that you earned a lot of money and could get ahead. But when I arrived here, I thought, well, if this is the United States, I should have stayed where I was. My goal was to be here for five years, and in five years, I would be able to build my little house and leave. I couldn’t do it.”

— MARTINA

SECTION ONE

In Search of a Better Life and the Crucible of the Crossing

In Mexico, Alma often couldn’t afford milk for her children’s bottles, so she filled them with coffee. Today, the 39-year-old farmworker lives near Immokalee, Florida, the tomato capital of the United States. Like many of the other women interviewed for this report, she simply wants to spare her children the grinding poverty she experienced in Mexico. “I’d like to live (in the U.S.) for my kids — for them to study and not live the life I lived in Mexico, because it was very hard,” she says.

Like Alma, Maria Concepcion, 27, crossed the border illegally. Four years ago, she swam across the Rio Grande, badly injuring her leg during the journey. After the crossing, her husband left her. Now, she is a single mother living in Florida, with a son in Mexico. Her parents and her child rely on her to send money.

Back home, the pay was too paltry.

“For me, this place was a dream, a hope for me and my family,” she says. Here, with her meager wages picking oranges and working as a cook, she has basic conveniences she could never have had in Mexico: an air conditioner, a stove, a refrigerator, carpet on the floor.

“In Mexico, my house was open,” Maria says. “The cardboard walls would break and bend. My dream was to arrive here for my family, to work. Just that.”

Alma and Maria are among the estimated 6.7 million Mexicans living in the U.S. without legal status. Mexicans make up 62 percent of the country’s 10.8 million undocumented immigrants, according to the Department of Homeland Security’s most recent figures. Four million of these immigrants are women.

Women like Alma and Maria help form the backbone of American agriculture. Their hands harvest the bounty that replenishes our tables. Their hard labor enriches the farmers and business owners who employ them at wages that are simply not enough for American workers.

A glance at basic economic statistics shows why millions of women like them are willing to risk detention, sexual assault, separation from their children and even death just for the opportunity to earn subsistence wages and live at the bottom of U.S. society. In the top four countries that provide the most undocumented immigrants to the United States — Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — the per capita gross national income (GNI) ranges from about $1,700 to $9,990 a year.

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2 Ibid.
In comparison, the U.S. per capita GNI hovers near $50,000 a year.\(^4\)
By migrating to the United States, Mexican immigrants like Alma and Maria are able to increase their annual incomes by 2.5 times, on average, even after accounting for the difference in the cost of living.\(^5\)
When such disparities exist between neighboring countries, is it any wonder that the poor will ignore the lines in the desert sand?

**Looking for a decent wage**
Time and again, these Latina immigrants say they don’t want anything given to them. They just want to work hard and earn a decent wage so that their children can get an education and climb the economic ladder, a path that immigrants throughout U.S. history have taken.

Gloria, a 37-year-old Mexican woman who works from July to December packing tomatoes, avocados, mangoes and papayas in south Florida, says she “risked everything” for the opportunity to work in the U.S. “That is the only objective that most immigrants have,” she says. “We don’t come to damage the country but to get ahead and progress.”

The fact is, they’re not eligible for most government benefits. Undocumented immigrants are prohibited from participating in most federal programs that benefit the poor and unemployed, including welfare, food stamps, housing assistance, disability and unemployment benefits, Medicaid and Social Security.\(^6\) Fear of detection keeps many from using the benefits to which they are entitled, such as emergency medical services.

But while they don’t receive federal benefits, most economists agree that their cheap labor results in a net benefit to the U.S. economy. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan told the U.S. Senate in 2009 that undocumented immigrants have “made a significant contribution to the growth of our economy.”\(^7\)

In addition to their labor, each year undocumented immigrants contribute as much as $1.5 billion to the Medicare system and $7 billion to the Social Security system, even though they will never be able to collect benefits upon retirement.\(^8\)

Deporting these immigrants en masse would shrink the American economy by as much as $2.6 trillion over 10 years, according to one recent study.\(^9\)

**The decision to stay or go**
The decision to leave their country and culture is not something taken lightly, the women

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4. Ibid.
The Blocked Path

When discussing undocumented immigrants, the question often arises, "Why don't they just get in line and enter the U.S. legally?"

The answer is that for most of the women interviewed for this report — and for the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. — there simply is no gateway to obtain legal status.

Immigration law is enormously complex, with dozens of potential statuses. There are four major ways under our current system that people can obtain a green card for lawful permanent residency:

- A specified family relationship with a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident.
- An employer petition for lawful permanent residency.
- Adjustment from refugee or asylee status.
- Obtaining a diversity visa, a process commonly known as "the lottery."

For a number of reasons, none of these mechanisms for legalizing status are available to most undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Family Relationships and the "Anchor Baby" Myth

The "anchor baby" myth is just that — a myth. Children born in the U.S. to undocumented parents cannot petition for the permanent residency of their parents until age 21. The notion that families might have babies to facilitate their lawful migration 21 years later is not supported by any data. In fact, absent changes to U.S. law, the parents would likely be ineligible to migrate to the U.S.

The other family relationships specified as a path to lawful permanent residency include spouses, parents and siblings. The process of gaining residency status through a family relationship can take longer than 20 years. Some of these family relationship categories are so backlogged with immigrants seeking legal permanent resident status that federal officials have declared those categories unavailable.

Immigrants who don't have these relationships will find that this path to citizenship is simply unavailable. Even immigrants with these relationships often discover the path is practically unavailable.

Employer Petition

Employment-based visas are not available to most low-income workers, even for the most exemplary employees. Of the more than 1 million legal permanent resident visas given out each year, only 10,000 are allocated for workers who are not highly educated or trained. There are so many individuals waiting for these visas, the category has been designated as unavailable by immigration officials.

Refugee/Asylee Status

Refugee or asylee status is a rare commodity for Mexican or Central American residents. Few people from these areas have been granted either status in recent years. In order to qualify, individuals must face a "well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." Asylum is not an option for those seeking to escape crushing poverty.

"The Lottery"

The odds are long in the diversity visa "lottery." In this lottery, about 50,000 visas are awarded each year to eligible individuals. Last year, more than 6 million people from around the world applied. Individuals from Mexico and most Central American countries are flatly ineligible for these visas because they are reserved for countries with small numbers of immigrants to the United States.

A Painful Choice

Even for people otherwise eligible to become permanent residents — such as those married to a U.S. citizen — immigration law makes it impossible for many of them to adjust their status.

From 1994 until 2001, Section 245(i) of the Immigration and Nationality Act allowed certain individuals who were otherwise eligible for immigrant visas but entered the United States without inspection or fell out of lawful status, to become lawful permanent residents without traveling to a U.S. consulate outside the country to obtain this status.

Section 245(i) grew in significance after 1996, when Congress enacted a law with a provision known as the "3 and 10 year bars." Under this provision, an immigrant who is unlawfully in the United States for more than 180 days and then leaves the country is barred from re-entry for three or 10 years. The length of the re-entry ban depends on the length of the illegal stay.

Because of more recent changes to immigration law, however, countless people who are otherwise eligible to adjust their status — including thousands of people married to U.S. citizens — are subject to that ban.

Many people now face the painful choice of either leaving the country and their family for 10 years for the chance to become a legal permanent resident or remaining in the United States with their family and giving up the hope of ever achieving legal status.
“Now, more than ever, I feel like my hands are tied. I asked myself what I’m doing here. I can’t see my children. I can just call them. They have to eat every day, and they ask me if I can send them a little something. And my mom says that if I can’t, that they’ll come here, because they’re suffering a lot because of our separation.”

— WOMAN FROM EL SALVADOR

say. Often, family members — children, husbands, fathers, mothers — are left behind. The dangers and cost involved in the journey do not allow for whimsy, and the pain of leaving loved ones is wrenching, often unbearable.

Gullermina, a 30-year-old farmworker in Florida, still cries when she remembers the painful decision she made with her brother to leave their mother behind in Mexico. “My mom became a widow when we were little. She always worked, and there wasn’t enough money. So we had to leave Mexico. Yes, it was difficult,” Gullermina says, her voice trailing off before she bursts into tears. “I don’t think I can go on,” she says, excusing herself from the interview.

One woman from El Salvador left behind three children and a 21-year-old son. Her wages there, $6 a day, were simply not enough to pay for food. She hasn’t seen her children in two years. “Now, more than ever, I feel like my hands are tied,” she says. “I asked myself what I’m doing here. I can’t see them. I can just call them. They have to eat every day, and they ask me if I can send them a little something. And my mom says that if I can’t, that they’ll come here, because they’re suffering a lot because of our separation.”

For many women, the decision to stay in the U.S. or go home is complicated by their children. There are currently 5.5 million children living in households with at least one undocumented parent; 4 million of them were born in the U.S. and are, thus, U.S. citizens.¹⁰

Edilia, 26, has been in the U.S. almost a decade. She always dreamed of saving enough money to build a home in Mexico “and not be here suffering any longer in the fields.” But she doesn’t earn much picking tomatoes in Florida — clearing about $30 a day after paying $10 for a babysitter.

Now, her mother is sick, and she would like to go see her in Mexico but cannot. “I haven’t gone back, because my daughter was born here,” she says. “She has papers and I don’t. How would I come back with her?”

Likewise, Lucila*, 34, had planned to work in the U.S. for only a year and then return to Mexico. She’s now been here for 15 years. “I worked in everything from factories to restaurants,” she says. “I had kids and I couldn’t go back. It’s not easy to go back with three kids.”

Contrary to the “anchor baby” myth, women like Edilia and Lucila are not eligible for citizenship simply because they gave birth here to children, who are automatically U.S. citizens.


* Not her real name.
The fact is that children born in the U.S. to undocumented parents cannot petition for the permanent residency of their parents until age 21. Even if a 21-year-old child does file such a petition to legalize the parent, the parent will likely be subject to a 10-year bar — a requirement that she leave the country for 10 years before she receives legal status. Under this scenario, the parent would finally receive legal status when her child was in her 30s.

Crossing: The fallen have no names

Araceli knew if she stopped walking she would die.

The 26-year-old from Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico, had been trudging through the sands of the Sonoran Desert for five days after leaving the border town of Altar, just a one-hour drive south of the Arizona-Mexico border.

Altar was once a small farming community. Now, by some accounts, its entire economy is based on the smuggling of people across the border.\(^\text{11}\) For many undocumented immigrants, the town is the final way station before embarking on one of the most dangerous migratory treks on the planet. Popular routes are controlled by unscrupulous human smugglers and terrorized by predatory gangs. The desert, which covers much of the northern Mexico state of Sonora and stretches well into Arizona and California, ranks in some spots as one of the hottest places on the planet during the summer. “The desert deceives you,” Araceli says. “You don’t know where you’re going. You’re easily disoriented.”

This is where the nightmare often begins for women and girls. They are, by far, the most vulnerable during the crossing — and their experience can have an enormous impact on their lives in the U.S. Some academics and humanitarian organizations estimate that as many as six out of 10 women and girls experience some sort of sexual violence during the journey through Mexico into the United States.\(^\text{12}\) Definitive numbers are not available because the plight of women attempting to cross is severely underreported and understudied.

The accurate collection of data depicting migrants’ deaths is also challenging because of the number of agencies involved and the differing reporting standards. The U.S. Border Patrol does not include data from the Mexican side of the border, which almost certainly


"They grabbed me five times, and on the sixth time I finally got across. It was a hard trip. The last time when we crossed, we walked six days and nights. My mind was set that I was going to cross and come here to work."

Carina

ensures that deaths are underreported.13

As illegal immigration began to increase dramatically in the 1990s, the U.S. began a massive buildup of forces along the border. In 1992, there were 3,555 Border Patrol agents assigned to the U.S.-Mexico border. That number increased to 8,580 by 2000. By the end of 2009, it had reached more than 17,000. Meanwhile, the Border Patrol's budget has more than tripled in the last decade, rising from $1.06 billion in 2000 to $3.58 billion in 2010.14

But this manpower hasn't stopped the migration of people like Araceli. The population of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has roughly tripled over the past two decades. University of California, San Diego, researchers have found that the vast majority of migrants — as many as 92 to 98 percent — keep trying to cross the border until they make it.15

Many of the women interviewed for this report said they were not successful on the first attempt, but kept trying.

"They grabbed me five times, and on the sixth time I finally got across," says Carina, a 24-year-old woman from Mexico. "It was a hard trip. The last time when we crossed, we walked six days and nights. My mind was set that I was going to cross and come here to work."

The Obama administration has continued the buildup of border forces, announcing in May 2010 that up to 1,200 National Guard troops were to be deployed to the border.16 The White House followed that move with a request to Congress for 1,000 more Border Patrol agents.17

This enhanced border enforcement may be resulting in more, not fewer, undocumented immigrants staying in the U.S. That's because, with tighter border control, especially after the terrorist attacks in 2001, the "circular migration" of some migrants was interrupted. They could no longer work in the U.S. and then easily return home. According to one estimate, there were 3.9 million undocumented women in the United States in March 2005; by March 2008 that number had increased to 4.1 million.18

In recent years, the crossing has become more expensive and

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14 Ibid.
GRAPES

Declining Pay, Dying Workers

No single crop symbolizes the saga of immigrant labor better than California grapes.

Nearly half a century after Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta led the historic grape strike and boycott of the early 1960s, Latino workers continue to struggle for decent wages and workplace protections as they produce America’s table grapes, raisins and wine.

Pay is declining, workers are dying, and fear and discrimination are on the rise, largely because the grape industry has turned to undocumented workers who are easily exploited.

One of civilization’s most delicate and delicious fruits, cultivated since the Bronze Age, grapes have been part of the California “dream” since the 18th century, when Catholic missions transplanted vines from Mexico. Today, the U.S. grape industry generates $3 billion in sales each year.

Virtually all of the country’s table grapes, and 90 percent of its wine, comes from California, which boasts 1 million acres of vineyards. Forty-eight percent of this acreage is used for wine, 40 percent for raisins and 12 percent for table grapes.

Grape vines require delicate husbandry. Several times a year, they are tied, trained and trimmed to expose grapes to both breezes and sun.

The August-September harvest is a stressful, back-breaking race against rot and rain as table grapes, handled like china, are rushed to market and raisin grapes are dried on paper on the ground. The single most labor-intensive activity in U.S. agriculture is the harvesting of 250,000 acres of raisin grapes near Fresno, a job involving some 30,000 workers.

After harvest, workers prune 80 percent of the vine back, leaving just enough shoots and buds to optimize grape production year after year.

The Braceros

Latino labor has dominated California’s grape industry since 1942, when the U.S. government created the Bracero program (from the Spanish word brazo, meaning arm). The program, the forerunner of today’s guest-worker program, allowed Mexican Braceros to enter the country legally for farm work. The year after it was abolished in 1964, Chavez and Huerta’s United Farm Workers won a 40 percent wage increase for grape workers and, eventually, a law to allow farmworker unions. At one time, union contracts covered more than 50,000 grape workers.

But beginning in the 1980s, the industry began to chip away at these gains, using labor contractors to hire undocumented workers. Today, raisin workers are increasingly “non-Spanish speaking indigenous people from southern Mexico and Guatemala,” according to migrant labor expert Philip Martin of the University of California, Davis.

Because undocumented workers fear being deported, they accept what they can get for their labor. When pruning, they are paid by the “piece” — 13 cents per pruned point. “To earn $80 or $90 a day, you have to do 500,” said Isabel, 39, a Mexican worker.

Harvesters earn 1 to 5 cents per pound for grape clusters that sell in grocery stores for $1.40.

The result is that, in the California vineyards made famous by the grape strike, pay has dropped to about $5 an hour, far below California’s minimum wage of $8.

The workers must also contend with horrendous cold or heat, accidents, a lack of water and shade, and exposure to pesticides. In 2008, a pregnant teenager and a 37-year-old man died of heat stroke while working in vineyards in California’s San Joaquin Valley.

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3 Ibid.
more dangerous. The U.S. government’s “prevention through deterrence” strategy, according to a November 2008 report by the Congressional Research Service, has “pushed unauthorized migration away from population centers and funneled it into more remote and hazardous border regions. This policy has had the unintended consequence of increasing the number of fatalities along the border, as unauthorized migrants attempt to cross over the inhospitable Arizona desert without adequate supplies of water.”

The number of deaths of female migrants along this border has been trending upward since 2000, according to data provided by the Border Patrol. In the five-year period from FY2000 to FY2004, border officers recovered the remains of an average of 61 migrant women a year along the 1,952-mile Southwestern border. In the latest five-year period — from FY2005 to FY2009 — that number jumped to 77.

There are surely many more who are uncounted. Often these migrants go unidentified, their fate forever a mystery to their families.

**The Anonymous Dead**

Araceli did not want to become another of the desert’s anonymous dead. “What went through my mind is that this is where [the dead] stay, and the family doesn’t have any recourse,” she says. “There’s no way to claim those bodies. My children are waiting for me, and I don’t want to be like those people.”

Another of her fears had nothing to do with the elements. She was the lone woman in a group of 31 men. The trip was supposed to be completed in three days, but after five days the group from Mexico and Guatemala was still dodging authorities in the desert with very little food or water.

Araceli was falling behind. The smugglers — *los coyotes* — assured her they would not abandon her. But the mummifying bodies along the route, two young women and a man, told a different story. “I couldn’t stand to see those corpses.”

She questioned the smuggler. Though she never got a straight answer, Araceli suspected the bodies were once his clients and were left for dead when they could no longer keep up. She begged her companions to, if she could no longer walk, drag her to a spot where authorities could find her. The smuggler’s policy on saving stragglers frightened her. “He says, ‘I don’t know, but for one person we can’t risk the whole group, because it’s a lot of money.’”

Typically, undocumented immigrants will pay smugglers anywhere from $1,500 to more than $10,000 to guide them and their families across the border. Often, amounts are far beyond

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20 Correspondence with U.S. Border Patrol.
Thousands of undocumented women work in California’s multi-billion-dollar grape industry.

She fainted. When she woke up, Araceli was alone. “They didn’t come back for me. I had to stay there for two days, conserving the little bit of water I had.”

She gave up hope. She thought of her four sons back in Chiapas. “I have a dream of being able to provide for my children,” she says.

Given the anonymity of the fallen migrant in the desert, there was a good chance Araceli’s death would not be recorded or noticed by authorities, let alone reported to her family. She waited for the end.

Luckily for her, a passing group of migrants stumbled across her. At great risk to themselves, they helped her out of the desert.

Today, Araceli is happy to be alive. But the experience has left her scarred. “It was a horrible nightmare that I would never want to repeat.” She eventually arrived in Georgia and took a job in a restaurant where her sister worked. Cutbacks left her without employment, however, and she migrated to Florida, where she found work at a nursery tending plants.

She lost the position, however, when a co-worker’s husband made an unwanted sexual advance. Though she says the man was clearly at fault, Araceli’s boss found it simpler to get rid of the undocumented worker. After losing her job in November 2009, she found temporary, part-time work picking fruit but was driven from that job, again, by sexually explicit overtures, this time from her supervisor. She lasted less than a few weeks at each job and has not worked since. “I’m leaving it in the hands of God to see what happens,” she says.

She is deeply concerned that she will not be able to repay the money she owes the coyotes who brought her over the border. “I owe $2,500, and I don’t know where to find the money to liquidate that debt. And so many problems on top of it.”

Araceli says she arrived in the U.S. with the sole desire of finding work and providing for her family but now feels lost. “I’d like to be in a job that’s well-paid, good treatment, to better myself and others,” she says. “But I’m seeing that everything is very bad.”

**Dangerous Road**

Stories of violent abuse during their migration were common among the women interviewed. Many talked about the prevalence of rape — something so common that some
Despite their contributions, undocumented immigrants exist in a shadow economy — subject to the whims of unscrupulous employers, unable to assert their rights and, for all practical purposes, beyond the protection of labor laws that protect the rest of us from abuse, discrimination and wage cheating in the workplace.

SECTION TWO

Workplace Exploitation: Immigrant Women Powerless in the Face of Abuses

Soon after crossing into the U.S. in 1998, Maria found herself planting tomatoes in Florida, the country’s leading producer of fresh tomatoes. The 30-year-old Guatemalan with four children once did the difficult work of cleaning hotels in Mexico, but she never worked as hard as she did in the tomato fields.

“I had some friends who said that in the North you earn good money,” she says. “But I’m seeing that’s not the case.”

On her first 12-hour work day, “I cried because I didn’t think I’d make it. Your head hurts because of the [pesticide] spray, your back hurts.”

When working by the hour, Maria says she typically earns $5.75. When working by contract — during harvest, for example — she earns 45 cents for every 32-pound bucket she fills with tomatoes. Racing to make as much money as possible, like many of the more than 33,000 farmworkers toiling in Florida’s tomato fields, Maria runs back and forth, filling her bucket and dumping the load onto a nearby truck.

“You have to run to do 150 [buckets] to make your money for the day.”

That is, when the bosses actually pay.

When not battling the heat, the physical demands and the persistent sexual harassment in the fields, Maria has had to worry if, at the end of a work week, she has given away her labor for nothing.

Of one boss, she says, “He doesn’t let you go to the bathroom, and if you do, he yells at you.”

After putting in two weeks of work, the boss told the workers there was no money to pay them.

Somewhere in America, someone probably paid the full price for the tomatoes Maria picked. But she received nothing. And there was nothing she could do.

A vast army of low-wage workers

Because food production is so labor-intensive, the U.S. food industry requires a vast army of low-wage workers. These jobs — planting, harvesting, processing, packaging and serving our food — have been handed down from earlier generations of immigrants to an increasingly Latino workforce.

Maria is among 4 million undocumented women living and working in the U.S. Because of their status, they fill the lowest-paying jobs in the country. They typically earn minimum wage or less, get no sick or vacation days, and receive no health insurance.

Yet, these immigrants play a vital role in our economy, greasing the gears of the great U.S. food machine, which brings a cornucopia of fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, nuts and processed food to our markets and restaurants like clockwork. Like it or not, we eat the fruits of their labor every day.
Farmers depend on them: The government estimates that 60 percent of our country’s agricultural workers are undocumented immigrants.\textsuperscript{24} The reality is likely much higher.

Food-processing companies depend on them: Almost a quarter of the workers who butcher and process meat, poultry and fish are undocumented.\textsuperscript{25}

Restaurant owners depend on them: About one out of five cooks are undocumented, and more than a quarter of the dishwashers are undocumented.\textsuperscript{26}

Their economic value is difficult to quantify, but one recent study calculated that legalizing undocumented workers would raise the U.S. gross domestic product by $1.5 trillion over a decade. On the other hand, if the government were to deport all 10.8 million undocumented immigrants living on U.S. soil, our economy would decline by $2.6 trillion over a decade, not including the massive cost of such an endeavor.\textsuperscript{27} On top of that, it is assured that farmers and food companies would be scrambling to find the workers necessary to maintain the massive enterprise that brings food to our tables.

Despite their contributions, undocumented immigrants exist in a shadow economy — subject to the whims of unscrupulous employers, unable to assert their rights and, for all practical purposes, beyond the protection of labor laws that protect the rest of us from abuse, discrimination and wage cheating in the workplace.

\textbf{Disposable workers}

The women interviewed for this report all have worked in the U.S. food industry, in places as disparate as New York, North Carolina, Iowa, Arkansas, Florida and California. They have picked tomatoes, lettuce, green beans, apples, almonds, watermelons, strawberries, grapes, oranges, asparagus, plums, blueberries and peaches. They have cut up chickens and packed turkey wings. A few worked as waitresses. Others boxed desserts. Most accepted backbreaking, physical labor with unflinching determination.

Most of the women have little or no formal education. Some are married, many are mothers and most support family members back in their home countries. They are as young as
“It’s because of fear [that] we have to tolerate more. Sometimes they take advantage because we don’t have papers. They mistreat us, and what can we do? Where would we go?”
— YAZMIN

their teens and as old as their 60s.

Regardless of what sector of the food industry these women worked in, they all reported feeling like they were seen by their employers as disposable workers with no lasting value, to be squeezed of every last drop of sweat and labor before being cast aside.

The vast majority of the women, who were interviewed by the Southern Poverty Law Center over a period of two months in early 2010, said they worked for poverty wages and have been cheated, at one time or another, out of wages they earned. Many reported injuries from the repetitive and strenuous movement required to keep up with the voracious production demands.

Many of those employed in farm work said they have been sickened by pesticides and toxic chemicals. Those working in meat and poultry processing said they labored long hours in bone-chilling temperatures with inadequate safety equipment. Many of the women reported being denied access to bathrooms or barred from taking time off to tend to emergencies like sick children — even when they worked for huge corporate employers required by law to provide those benefits. Some faced illegal discrimination because of pregnancy.

Sophia*, a 37-year-old farmworker in California, came to the United States in 1990 like generations of immigrants before her, full of hope. Those dreams have been dashed. “It is different when you live here; (in Mexico) I saw it in a different way,” she says. “But now that I am here, I see it the way it is. It is very difficult to live here.”

All of these women share an understanding that, because of their vulnerable status, complaining is futile and their livelihoods depend on their tacit acceptance of the status quo.

“It’s because of fear [that] we have to tolerate more,” says Yazmin, a 26-year-old farmworker in Florida. “Sometimes they take advantage because we don’t have papers. They mistreat us, and what can we do? Where would we go?”

A ‘Vicious Cycle’

These women are part of the wave of undocumented immigrants who began arriving during the economic boom of the 1990s and created a large pool of easily exploitable workers. The women are even more vulnerable in the workplace than their male counterparts. They are often the primary caregivers for children, making them less likely to assert their rights for fear of being fired or, worse, being deported and separated from their families. And because of their fear of being reported to immigration authorities, they are reluctant to report wage violations, sexual violence or gender discrimination, or to take legal action to stop it. In some localities, particularly where police have entered into so-called 287(g) agreements with the federal government to enforce immigration law, they are fearful of reporting violent crimes.

* Not her real name.
“I’d rather not cause trouble. It would be worse to lose everything.”
— ALICIA

committed against them, because even crime victims can be deported.

Research has shown that intensified enforcement of immigration law by the U.S. government has pushed these immigrants further underground — having the effect of lowering their pay as they become even more susceptible to workplace exploitation. 28 Companies that hire them benefit from lower labor costs, increasing the likelihood that their competitors will follow suit, creating a “vicious cycle” of depressed wages for both immigrants and low-skill, native-born workers alike. 29 And when employers can exploit undocumented immigrants, they have little incentive to make their workplaces safe and fair for all workers.

“They know you’re illegal, and they pay you less than the others,” says Sasha*, who worked at a chicken-processing plant in North Carolina.

While undocumented workers often earn less than U.S. citizens in the same jobs, the women typically earn even less than their male counterparts. 30 That may be why, five years after Congress granted legal status to 1.7 million immigrants in 1986, wages for the previously undocumented women had risen by an average of 20.5 percent, compared to 13.2 percent for the men. 31

Undocumented workers are largely protected by U.S. labor laws — on paper, at least. Courts have found that all workers, including undocumented immigrants, are entitled to the protection of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which establishes the federal minimum wage and sets rules for overtime pay. Most courts have also held that they are entitled to the protections of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the major civil rights law prohibiting workplace discrimination.

In reality, however, most undocumented workers have no practical way to enforce their rights. And employers know that.

Wage theft prevalent

Wage theft was the most common complaint among the women interviewed. Virtually all said they had been victimized while working in the U.S.

Sometimes, as in the case of Maria in Florida’s tomato fields, they are not paid at all for

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29 Ibid.

* Not her real name.
“They mistreat you. When you’re working, you know how many trays you filled, but then the full amount of trays isn’t on your check.”

— MARGOT

their work. Typically, there is the implicit, or sometimes explicit, threat that complaints will be met with either firing or a strategic phone call to the police or immigration authorities.

Many women said their pay stubs routinely show far fewer hours than they actually worked. If they question their paychecks or ask for a raise, they are ignored or fired, to be replaced by other desperate workers waiting in line. Although these practices are brazenly illegal, employers know that most of these women will not come forward to complain about violations of the law. They make a completely rational choice to stay quiet, given a legal system that too often fails to protect workers. In the SPLC’s experience, law enforcement is far more likely to support an employer in getting rid of a “difficult” worker than to inquire more deeply and discover the underlying exploitation that led to the disagreement. Indeed, the SPLC has represented several groups of workers who were arrested and/or forced into removal proceedings after they asked to be paid. In one instance, the workers were arrested for “trespassing,” even though they were lawfully on the job during their work hours. These charges were dropped by the prosecutor within 24 hours, but by then the workers were already in immigration proceedings.

“I’d rather not cause trouble,” says Alicia, a 39-year-old Mexican. “It would be worse to lose everything.”

Minimum Wage Rules Routinely Violated
Farmworkers, among the poorest laborers in the U.S., are especially vulnerable to wage theft. Many growers and labor contractors pay “piece rates” rather than hourly wages. This is often a ruse to avoid paying the minimum wage while putting pressure on laborers to work as fast as possible. Under federal law, a farmworker’s weekly pay must equal at least what she would earn under the federal minimum wage for the hours worked. In practice, this requirement is routinely violated, and paychecks regularly misstate the hours worked.

Margot is a 19-year-old farmworker from Mexico who came to the U.S. at 14. She and her husband work seven months in Florida, then migrate to North Carolina and New Jersey as the crops there ripen. “If we stayed here [in Florida], we wouldn’t make enough money because there’s not enough work,” she says.

Each morning, she leaves her two children — a 3-year-old girl and an infant boy — with daycare before starting her long days in the sweltering Florida tomato fields. She says she makes $2.50 for every tray of grape tomatoes she picks. During a typical 12-hour workday, if she manages to work at full speed under optimal conditions, she can gather as many as a dozen trays, about 300 pounds. That’s $30 a day — far less than she would earn if paid the minimum wage of $7.25 an hour. Her one-day tomato harvest retails for as much as $1,000.

Conditions, of course, are never optimal. Employers “do what they want with you,” Margot says. “They mistreat you. When you’re working, you know how many trays you filled, but then the full amount of trays

Fair Labor Standards Act
Courts have found that workers lacking legal status are protected under the FLSA, which establishes the federal minimum wage and sets rules for overtime pay. But undocumented workers have little or no way to enforce their rights.
isn’t on your check.”

Carina, a 24-year-old Mexican woman who began working the Florida fields a decade ago as a 14-year-old girl, says she was told by a crew leader that she would earn $6 for every box of green beans she picked. She worked seven days a week and kept track of the boxes she turned in. “At $6, it comes out to be $380 or $400,” she says. “When you get your check, it’s for $250. And we go and tell the crew leader. He says, ‘I don’t know.’”

FLORIDA TOMATOES

A Penny on the Dollar

Arriving on supermarket shelves during the coldest days of the year — loaded with vitamins and antioxidants and the taste of summer — year-round tomatoes are an affordable luxury that Americans take for granted. Each year, we eat 20 pounds per person.

In Florida, the country’s largest producer of fresh-market tomatoes, each tomato is hand-made, tended by farmworkers like Delfina, Maria, Teresa and Josefina. Each one takes three months of sweaty, exhausting work in fields covered with poisons. From planting to harvest, day after sunny day, these women toil under dark shadows of exploitation and fear.

More than 33,000 farmworkers, almost all of them undocumented Latinos, produce Florida’s annual crop of 1 billion pounds of fresh-market tomatoes, a crop whose wholesale value exceeds $619 million.

The itinerant farmworker makes this all possible. But for every dollar we spend on a supermarket tomato, the field worker who picks it gets just 1 cent.

Tomatoes are grown on 31,000 acres in south Florida. As seeds are sprouted in greenhouses, workers on foot and tractor plow narrow, raised beds saturated with fumigants that kill everything in the sandy soil. The beds are covered with plastic sheets, and holes are punched 18 to 30 inches apart. Workers then walk the rows, planting 4,000 seedlings per acre. Four-foot stakes are driven between the plants.

A month later, workers prune and tie every plant to twine that is stretched between the stakes. As the plant grows, the twine is adjusted to keep the plant upright and the new tomatoes off the ground.

Over three months, Florida tomato plants and soil are sprayed or dusted with as many as 72 different pesticides. At 217 pounds per acre, this is the greatest use of pesticides in U.S. farming. Applied by tractor and hand-held sprayers, the poisons keep the tomatoes free of bugs, diseases and blemishes.

Warnings, protective clothing, washing water and

2 “Tomato 101” Ibid; Interview with Greg Schell, Florida Legal Services Migrant Farmworker Justice Project.
3 Based on $1.50 per pound retail.

26 INJUSTICE ON OUR PLATES
“Yesterday, I picked two [900-pound] tubs [of oranges] at $10, because the trees are so bad there’s no fruit, so I earned $20. I’m better off keeping quiet, even if they pay me $20 or $30. What can I do? They give me work. That’s what I want. I don’t want anything more.”
— CATALINA

She hears the same words told to others in her situation: “There are many people who need work, and if you want to work, fine. And if not, fine.”

Catalina, a 33-year-old Guatemalan who left three children behind in her homeland to work in Florida four years ago, says she doesn’t complain when she gets shortchanged “because I need to work and I don’t have papers.”

Women like Margot, Carina and Catalina make up about 22 percent of agricultural field-workers in the United States. They often find themselves subject to discrimination by employers who prefer male workers. It is not uncommon for them to experience pregnancy

bilingual safety instructions are required, but the rules are often ignored and workers are often exposed while in the fields. They work despite headaches, rashes and vomiting — afraid of losing their meager pay.

The harvest is a frenetic race to hand-pick the tomatoes and get them to the markets. Farmworkers fill a large plastic bucket with 32 pounds of tomatoes and run with it to a truck, where it is dumped into large boxes. For each 32-pound bucket, the worker gets 45 to 50 cents, a wage unchanged in the last 30 years. A worker typically fills 100 to 150 buckets a day, earning a “piece-rate” wage of $45 to $75 per day.

Once the tomatoes are picked, the plants are killed with herbicides, the stakes are removed and disinfected, and the plastic sheets and twine are burned.

Under federal law, a farmworker’s weekly pay must equal at least what they would earn under the federal minimum wage for the number of hours worked. But workers often report their paychecks fall short. A day’s work can range from three to 12 hours. Workers are not paid for hours spent waiting for plants to dry in the morning before picking.

A seven-year campaign by the Florida-based Coalition of Immokalee Workers to raise tomato workers’ wages by one penny per pound — a 60 percent raise, to 77 cents per bucket — has won support from McDonald’s, Taco Bell, Subway and Burger King. But these corporations buy less than 5 percent of Florida’s tomatoes, relying instead on imports. Still, these courageous actions by workers — organizing to improve their working conditions in the face of overwhelming adversity — have produced only small increases in pay in the industry overall. Supporters hope that a recent agreement between CIW and the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange may bring about greater change, but many obstacles remain.

America’s largest supermarkets continue to resist paying one additional penny per pound for tomatoes, even though the cost would be passed directly to consumers who wouldn’t notice a penny in a product that ranges from $1.30 to $3 per pound.

For all their labors, Florida tomato workers live in poverty. They have no job protections. They get no vacation or sick days. Few have health insurance. They reside in temporary, crowded, migrant camps of rundown trailers, shacks and tenement apartments. If they have legal immigration status, they are eligible for food stamps, Medicaid and other programs for the poor — but the vast majority are not.

This winter, they will be back in Florida’s fields, growing tomatoes for America.

When you buy one, remember them.
“Sometimes I don’t feel my hands. I feel like an animal bit me. I have a pulsing in my arms, and I feel the pain when I sleep. It’s like biting me. It’s intolerable the pain, from using the scissors so much.”

— ISABEL

discrimination and to receive less favorable opportunities or work assignments than their male counterparts. They are often given fewer opportunities for advancement. They are assigned to the lowest-paying jobs. And they are typically the first to be laid off. Employers are keenly aware of the women’s desperation to get and keep their jobs, which makes them easy prey.

Like many others, Catalina doesn’t always understand how her pay is calculated. But she knows not to question her bosses.

“Yesterday, I did two [900-pound] tubs [of oranges] at $10, because the trees are so bad there’s no fruit,” Catalina says. “So I earned $20. But when you get the pay stub, it says eight hours. But they didn’t pay us for eight hours. I’m better off keeping quiet, even if they pay me $20 or $30. What can I do? They give me work. That’s what I want. I don’t want anything more. If someone wants to rob me, let them rob me. Only God knows, and God will help me. That’s all I can say.”

Isabel

Like other migrant farmworkers, Isabel’s workday is decided by the season. The 39-year-old farmworker in upstate New York has picked strawberries, grapes and apples. Regardless of the crop, her days usually begin at 4:30 a.m. She and her husband wake up, make a few tacos for lunch and brew up coffee before making their way to the fields and orchards.

“There are a lot of people who can’t take this work,” she says. “I’ve seen that people who just arrived and try this work, they quit. They don’t like it. It’s hard.”

But Isabel and her husband take pride in their work.

“We’ve done it for a long time and we know how to do it.”

During her time in the fields, Isabel has learned that a grape vine can live for many years, but it takes a practiced and skilled hand to prune it correctly.

Strawberries also are tricky, she says. “You have to pick them well, and they don’t want them full of snails. They don’t want them to be too ripe or too green. They have to be the right size.”

Working in these fields takes a physical toll. At times, Isabel must spend whole days hunched over. In addition, we “have a lot of hand movement and use big scissors to cut the little branches and cutters for the big branches.”

At the end of the day, the pain can be numbing, Isabel says. “Sometimes I don’t feel my hands. I feel like an animal bit me. I have a pulsing in my arms, and I feel the pain when I sleep. It’s like biting me. It’s intolerable the pain, from using the scissors so much.”

She also suffers from headaches from the pesticides. “It’s such a strong smell,” she says.

“When I start to breathe that in, my head starts to hurt, and I feel nauseated.”
"My husband and I were paid together since we picked together. So the check was in my husband’s name. It was his Social Security number. If you got hurt, whether your Social Security number is fake or not, there’s no proof. It’s like you’re invisible.”

— MARIA ERICA

She earns roughly $40 a day, but she does not collect a paycheck. Her husband gets a single check for both of them.

It’s not uncommon for immigrant women working on farms and in the food industry to be paid on their husband’s paycheck, an accounting shell game that avoids Social Security, unemployment compensation and disability expenses. Women become, essentially, invisible. The practice is illegal. It has the immediate impact of depriving women of the minimum wages to which they are entitled and the longer-term impact of denying them any chance of qualifying for Social Security or other benefits. It also subjects these women to control by their husbands, partners or male family members, because they do not have the same financial freedom they would have if they were afforded their own pay check. And, if immigration reform is enacted, it will make proving their eligibility for legalization more difficult.

Maria Erica, a 39-year-old woman from Mexico, also experienced such an arrangement harvesting Florida grapefruit. “My husband and I were paid together since we picked together,” she says. “So the check was in my husband’s name. It was his Social Security number. If you got hurt, whether your Social Security number is fake or not, there’s no proof. It’s like you’re invisible.”

When women do receive their own paycheck, it is not uncommon for them to get paid less than male workers receive for the same jobs.32

Least protected workers in America
Farmworkers are the least protected workers in America. They were specifically excluded from nearly all major federal labor laws passed during the New Deal era. These exemptions were enacted as part of a compromise between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Southern lawmakers who wanted to preserve the social and racial order on which the South’s plantation system depended.33 Some laws have been amended since then, but many exemptions remain. The dire situation faced by farmworkers stems from their lack of economic and political power. Because they have no measurable political influence, there has been little organized opposition to the efforts of wealthy agribusiness interests to deny farmworkers most of the legal protections other American workers take for granted.34

Farmworkers, for example, are not covered by workers’ compensation laws in many states. They are not entitled to overtime pay under federal law. On smaller farms and in short

Child Labor Laws
Children may perform farm work as young as 10. In some states, farmworker children are exempt from compulsory education laws.

34 Farmworkers’ lack of political clout predates the relatively recent transformation of the farm labor workforce to one dominated by undocumented workers. Even during the decades when most farmworkers were U.S. citizens, their itinerant employment schedules, coupled with local residency requirements, prevented the vast majority of them from registering as voters.
"We were all wet, but kept tying. I thought it was a fog. [Then] I saw a truck that was spraying. All that white stuff came over to where we were. After, my head hurt. I felt like it got inside. I felt dry ... like when you have a cold or flu or congested."

— GENOVEVA VASQUEZ

harvest seasons, they are not entitled to the federal minimum wage.\textsuperscript{35} They are excluded from many state health and safety laws.\textsuperscript{36} Farmworkers also are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act and thus have no protection against unfair labor practices when they seek to collectively act for better wages or working conditions, except in the handful of states that have passed statutes extending NLRAl-type protections to agricultural workers.

In addition, child labor laws are riddled with exemptions for farmworkers. Children may legally perform farm work as young as 10 years of age. By contrast, 16 is the minimum age for most non-agricultural jobs. In some states, farmworker children are exempt from compulsory education laws.\textsuperscript{37} Undocumented immigrant women already face enormous obstacles. The fact that the law offers little protection against many of the abuses they experience adds further insult.

\textbf{Pesticides and other workplace hazards}

Because of their vulnerability, undocumented immigrants are in no position to protect themselves against exposure to toxic chemicals in the fields or other workplace hazards.

Many of the women spoke about being sickened by pesticides, but they knew virtually nothing about the nature of the chemicals (they commonly characterized them as “white” or “green”) and understood little about safety precautions or their rights.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, farmworkers suffer from higher rates of toxic chemical injuries and skin disorders than any other workers in the country.\textsuperscript{38} The children of migrant farmworkers, also, have higher rates of pesticide exposure than the general public.\textsuperscript{39} If these women do get sick, there is usually no health insurance to help pay for medical treatment. Fewer than 10 percent of farmworkers report having employer-provided health insurance.\textsuperscript{40}

Several of the women interviewed for this report worked in the Immokalee area of south Florida, where, in late 2004, three children with severe birth defects were born within seven weeks of each other to women who worked in the tomato fields of the Plant City-based grower Ag-Mart.\textsuperscript{41}

One child, Carlitos Candelario, was born without arms and legs. Another was so deformed that it was impossible to determine gender without an autopsy after the child died. Carlitos' parents filed a lawsuit against Ag-Mart, claiming that pesticides caused the birth defects.

\textsuperscript{35} In many states, either there is no state minimum wage or farmworkers are expressly excluded from coverage.


\textsuperscript{37} Under Alabama Code § 16-28-6(b), children who are legally employed under the state child labor code are not obligated to attend school. Because Alabama’s child labor law (Ala. Code § 25-8-33) exempts agriculture, children employed in agriculture are not required to attend school in the state.


\textsuperscript{39} Maternal & Child Health Fact Sheet, National Center for Farm Worker Health Inc., 2009, www.nchf.org/docs/ls-MATERNAL%20FACT%20SHEET.pdf.

\textsuperscript{40} "Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Demographics, National Center for Farmworker Health, Inc., 2009, http://www.nchf.org/docs/ls-Migrant%20Demographics.pdf.

\textsuperscript{41} Christine Stapleton, "Ag-Mart to Pay for Limbless Child’s Needs," The Palm Beach Post, April 17, 2008.
According to The Palm Beach Post, Ag-Mart settled the lawsuit in 2008 for an undisclosed amount after an expert said in a deposition that Carlitos' mother was “heavily” exposed to a “witch’s brew” of pesticides. The newspaper’s investigation also discovered lax enforcement of pesticide regulations.

Lucia, an Immokalee farmworker, said she tries to avoid thinking about her exposure to chemicals, even after a doctor warned of the adverse effects they were having on her. She can’t, after all, leave her job. “At first with the chemicals, I had a lot of headaches and I went to the doctor about that,” she says. “Sometimes I think the more a person worries, the faster they do themselves in.”

Genoveva Vasquez, a 27-year-old Mexican woman, tells of tying grape vines in California vineyards when it began “raining mist.” “We were all wet, but kept tying,” she says. “I thought it was a fog. [Then] I saw a truck that was spraying. All that white stuff came over to where we were. After, my head hurt. I felt like it got inside. I felt dry ... like when you have a cold or flu or congested.”

Every year, roughly 2 billion pounds of licensed pesticides are used in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The amount is approximately one-fifth of total global use. A wide variety of chemical pesticides — insecticides, herbicides, fungicides and others — are used on U.S. crops. Florida’s tomato industry is particularly reliant on these chemicals, using more than 70 different pesticides that are sprayed and dusted at the rate of 217 pounds per acre.

**Thousands Sickened by Pesticides**

A 2003 study found that in California the most common illnesses reported by farmworkers to the state health department stemmed from exposure to pesticides in the class of chemicals called organophosphates. The main route of entry was through the

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42 Ibid.

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Carlitos Candelario, born without arms or legs in 2004, was one of three babies with severe birth defects whose mothers were exposed to pesticides in South Florida’s tomato fields.
"Anyone who was at all aware of meatpacking trends in America realizes that what happened in Postville was a time bomb ready to go off."

— STEVEN BLOOM, Professor of Journalism, University of Iowa

Organophosphates became widely used in agriculture after World War II, when Nazi Germany used these compounds as potent nerve agents in chemical weapons.

Each year, there are an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 cases of physician-diagnosed pesticide poisoning among U.S. farmworkers, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Given barriers to health care for undocumented workers, these estimates almost certainly underestimate the problem. The CDC warns that short-term exposure to high levels of pesticides may cause respiratory, gastrointestinal, allergic or neurologic symptoms. Chronic exposure has been linked to a wide range of serious health problems, including cancer, birth defects and other reproductive problems, and neurological disorders.

Many of the women interviewed by the SPLC told stories of headaches, stomach aches and flu-like symptoms after being exposed to chemicals.

"There are times when they're still fumigating when people go in to work," says Emilia Guzman, a 38-year-old Mexican woman who describes her work in California vineyards. "My throat started to hurt, I started sneezing, my head started hurting. Many people were sick. I've seen where the cherry pickers go in, and I don't know how they do it, because cherries are covered in liquid. The smell is strong. It's white and yellow. Then you start sneezing, then your throat and head hurt."

Gloria, 37, of Mexico, who has worked for years packing Florida lemons, mangoes and other fruits and vegetables, tells of having to wash a white powder off the fruit that is harvested. "When the fruit arrives, it has the white powder on it from the chemicals, and we have to clean it off. And in one way or another, we're breathing it in. You feel that your throat and chest is filling up. We don't have anything to cover our mouth and nose with. We're in constant contact with those chemicals."

Nothing is accomplished by complaining, says Teresa Hilario, a 20-year-old Mexican woman. Complaints to supervisors are answered with this matter-of-fact response: "If we want to work, fine, and if not, we can go home."

Elodia, who picks oranges, is resigned to the presence of chemicals in the fields. Like many others, the 50-year-old farmworker from Mexico says the wind sometimes carries a pesticide mist to orchards where workers are present.

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“At that time, there was [a supervisor] who would give people work if they bought a car from him. Then he'd deduct the car payments from your check.”
— MARTA

It causes “a little vomit or something, but it goes away,” she says.

‘Disassembling’ poultry
Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* remains an influential and powerful illustration of the enduring intersection of labor, immigration and food production in the U.S. When the novel was first published in 1906, the country was shocked at the treatment of workers and the methods used to prepare food.

If Sinclair were writing today, he would not head to Chicago or New York, the meatpacking centers of a century ago. Instead, he might go to Postville, Iowa.

Marta and her husband arrived in Postville in 2005. Even as far away as their native Guatemala, they learned that the meat-processing plant in the small town — called Agriprocessors Inc. — offered jobs to immigrants while ignoring their legal status.

They submitted applications but, to their surprise, were rejected. Workers at the plant soon informed Marta and her husband that they were missing a necessary element in their applications. “At that time, there was [a supervisor] who would give people work if they bought a car from him,” she recalls. “Then he'd deduct the car payments from your check.”

Marta and her husband bought a car and were soon initiated into a workplace so abusive that it would become a symbol of the very worst that present immigration policies could produce.

In one of the largest immigration raids in history, federal officials swept through Agriprocessors in May 2008 and arrested 389 workers — nearly half of the workforce. As the case made its way through court, what emerged in statements from workers were horrific tales of sexual harassment, degrading and dangerous labor practices, and rampant intimidation of a largely undocumented and frightened labor force.

The raid sent a charge through the national immigration debate and made headlines nationwide. Some commentators claimed that Agriprocessors was an aberration.

A ‘time bomb’
But many experts, including Steven Bloom, a professor of journalism at the University of Iowa, say the horrors uncovered at the company were the result of trends that plague the whole industry. “Anyone who was at all aware of meatpacking trends in America realizes
that what happened in Postville was a time bomb ready to go off," he said.\textsuperscript{49}

On May 12, 2008, nearly 1,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents raided Agriprocessors, the country’s largest kosher slaughterhouse and meatpacking plant. Many of the more than two dozen former Postville workers interviewed by the SPLC were present for the raid and said the experience was among the darkest days of their lives.

Ana, an 18-year-old from Guatemala, said the workday had barely begun when a worker ran by her station yelling "Immigration! Immigration!" Chaos broke out as panicked workers fled from armed officers. Ana started running and quickly found her husband. "I started crying and told him, 'What are we going to do with our baby?'"

Soon after the raid, stories of the poor working conditions and outrageous mistreatment of workers began to surface. In papers filed to obtain a search warrant, officials mentioned an incident in which a supervisor covered the eyes of a worker with duct tape and then struck the worker with a meat hook. The undocumented worker did not report the incident because "it would not do any good and could jeopardize his job."\textsuperscript{50}

Bloom said it was no accident that meatpacking plants like Agriprocessors began leaving major urban centers and relocating in small rural towns like Postville, which has a population of little more than 2,000 residents.

"It was economics 101," Bloom said. "There’s very little union (presence) in middle America, minimum wage is an acceptable wage, and there’s very little government oversight."

Constant humiliation

Luz\textsuperscript{*} said supervisors would humiliate workers if they could not keep up with overwhelming production quotas. At one of her various jobs at the plant, she sliced the fat from chicken breasts. As she scraped and cut as fast as she could, a supervisor would often stand next to her with a stopwatch.

"We had to do 16 breasts per minute," she says. Many of her co-workers would suffer disfiguring injuries to their hands and wrists from repetitive and strenuous motion on the production line.

Dull instruments made the work harder and the pain greater. If workers wanted better equipment or safety gear, it would be deducted from their wages. "If I told them that my knife wasn’t sharp, they charge $10," she says. "So, for them not to deduct from my check, I put up with the dull knife. So when I wanted to cut the breast, I had to apply a lot of pressure with my hand because I had to cut bone. I couldn’t take the pain in my arm."

Luz recalls one supervisor who would curse and berate workers, once saying that "since we didn’t have papers, we had to put up with everything he said to us. And, yes, I believed that since we were illegal, we had to take everything he yelled at us and told us."

\textsuperscript{49} Interview with Steven Bloom.

\textsuperscript{50} Application and Affidavit for Search Warrant filed with the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Iowa, May 9, 2008.

\textsuperscript{*} Not her real name.
"We were at the table, and the water from the chicken falls and spills on your apron and on my shoes. At the end of the day, I couldn't feel my feet because they were very wet and cold. I worked for a whole week like that. I could barely walk after work."

— MARTINA

She would eventually suffer a miscarriage after being told to lift 70-pound containers. Workers were often denied permission to go to the bathroom. Lunch breaks were timed to the second and allowed little time for eating.

Alma, a 39-year-old woman from Guatemala, said that on one occasion she was repeatedly told by a supervisor that she would risk her job by taking a bathroom break. She did the only thing she could. "I urinated on myself," she says. The supervisor laughed at her. "I came home and didn't tell my husband anything."

CHICKEN

900 Breasts Per Hour

There's a reason that chicken is cheap. Her name is Rosa.

Five years ago, with her daughter wrapped in a shawl on her back, Rosa walked, rode and swam from Guatemala to the U.S. to escape war and poverty. She found work in an Iowa chicken factory that welcomed undocumented immigrants into its workforce.

In a loud room chilled to 47 degrees, she stood for up to 14 hours, five nights a week, cutting skin and bone from chicken breasts with a pair of scissors. Her boss wanted 15 breasts cleaned every minute, 900 per hour. If she went to the bathroom, the breasts piled up and her boss yelled at her. So she held her urine as water from the carcasses splashed on her apron and shoes, soaking them and chilling her.

On the chicken line, Rosa earned $6.25 per hour. The breasts she cleaned were sold in grocery stores, three per package, for about $3 a pound. For each $6.25 she earned, she trimmed and deboned $900 worth of chicken breasts — hour after hour.

Rosa's labor, and that of 250,000 other workers who toil in 174 major chicken factories, have helped make chicken America's cheapest and most popular meat protein. At least half of these workers are Latino and more than half are women. Since 1950, chicken prices have risen only one third as much as the Consumer Price Index, and chicken now accounts for 40 percent of our meat consumption, up from 15 percent in 1950.

Agriculture experts say 1983 — the year McDonald's introduced the Chicken McNugget — proved a turning point in American chicken history. The race for cheap chicken parts has more than doubled the number of chickens butchered to 8 billion a year; Unionized meatpacking plants collapsed, and mega-factories arose in the rural South and Midwest. They were filled with minimum-wage workers from Latin America. For the first time, meatpacker pay fell below the average U.S. manufacturing wage. It is now 25 percent lower.

Nothing in her 33 years in rural Guatemala, where chicken was a rare Sunday treat, could have prepared Rosa for the work that she did in Iowa.

'Racing with the machines'
A "modern" poultry plant is a violent machine that kills, eviscerates and cuts apart millions of chickens a day. Rosa and the tens of thousands of Latino men and women who work on the "disassembly line" are disposable cogs in this apparatus.

Hung on hooks and stuck on conveyor cones, chicken carcasses stream by at a rate of hundreds per minute as workers — standing shoulder-to-shoulder, bundled in sweaters and aprons, and armed with scissors and knives — make repeated cuts, up to 30,000 repetitions per shift.6

"I was dizzy from so many chickens that I saw pass by," Rosa says. "No matter how fast you worked, that belt never slowed down. All day, it was full of chicken."

Supervisors with stopwatches keep a close eye on the workers to monitor their productivity.

"Cutting wings, they would even check how many chickens we cut per minute, measuring us like machines," said one Mexican woman who worked for Tyson Foods Inc. in Arkansas. "And you do it to not lose your job. You were racing with the machines."

Working in a chicken factory is one of the most dangerous occupations in America. In the decade ending in 2008, 100 poultry workers died in the U.S., and 300,0006 were injured, many suffering the loss of a limb or debilitating repetitive motion injuries.8

Marta, 45, recalls the day her nephew lost a hand in a machine that grinds chicken feet: "When he was taking out a piece to clean the machine, a crew leader pushed a green button and turned it on. And his hand got ground up. I heard him screaming."

Even in the absence of an obviously serious injury like the loss of a limb or a broken bone, the pain is constant. Many immigrants rely on over-the-counter pain relievers imported from Central America, which some call "vitamins."

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“So, for them not to deduct from my check, I put up with the dull knife. So when I wanted to cut the breast, I had to apply a lot of pressure with my hand because I had to cut bone. I couldn’t take the pain in my arm.”

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In addition to resulting in embarrassment and additional stress, refusing to allow women to use the bathroom can have health consequences, such as an increased number of bladder and urinary tract infections.

Irma, 30, who also came from Guatemala, said that runoff from the slaughterhouse would often back up into the workers’ cafeteria. “When the cow slaughter backed up, all the dirtiness formed a canal in the middle [of the cafeteria],” she says. “The tables were here, and the waste passed under the table, and that’s where we had to eat.”

Underage workers were common at the plant. Cindy, from Guatemala, was 15 when she started working in Agriprocessors. “I got some papers that said I was older than I really was,” she says.

Cindy lasted just eight months, in part because she couldn’t tolerate the smells. “It was from the chicken,” she says. “I think it went bad because they kept it so long.”

Most of the Postville workers said sexual harassment was widespread and constant. Rosa, a 38-year-old woman from Guatemala, says that her shift supervisor would sneak up behind women and grab their breasts and backsides. “I felt very ashamed.”

In June 2010, a federal judge in Iowa sentenced Agriprocessor’s manager to 27 years in prison on financial fraud charges. The manager, however, was found innocent of 67 charges of child labor law violations.

Most of the immigrants who were arrested by authorities served sentences of up to five months for identity theft and were deported.

Lost fingers, dull instruments
The horrible work conditions were not confined to Agriprocessors. Many of the women interviewed by the SPLC have worked in other poultry-processing plants. They spoke of their injuries, their chronic pain, the humiliating conditions and the numerous hazards in plants where chickens on hangers can whiz by at a rate of hundreds per minute. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the federal agency charged with protecting workers’ health, has not enacted any regulation to limit the speed at which poultry and meat processing lines operate — despite the appallingly high rates of injury directly attributable to the linespeed.

Sometimes, people lose fingers. Martina, 32, of Guatemala recalls witnessing one such incident at a chicken plant. “There was a boy working with a machine, and he cut off his

finger. The finger stayed in the machine."

After some searching, the finger was found. "Since the office didn't take him to the hospital quickly, the finger wasn't any good anymore. They threw it in the trash."

The work was, at times, extremely cold and wet for long hours at a time. "The first day, I'll never forget," Martina says. "We were at the table, and the water from the chicken falls and spills on your apron and on my shoes. At the end of the day, I couldn't feel my feet because they were very wet and cold. I worked for a whole week like that. I could barely walk after work."

Fabiola* worked at a chicken processing plant in North Carolina. She has performed several jobs in the industry, but cutting chickens into pieces with dull scissors ranks among the most difficult. "When you work with the scissors, sometimes we were in the department the whole night cutting, and it's an amazing amount of chicken that comes out. The band is spinning around, and on the other side all the chicken is dropping out."

"So you had to work fast to get the chicken off the band. And it just keeps dropping. There's no way to wait or delay it. We hurt our fingers, we got blisters, because sometimes the scissors weren't good. Or they weren't sharp. We had to wrap our fingers in Band-Aids because with so much force we hurt our hands."

Fabiola says the production demands were unreasonable. "I felt like I was going to faint," she says. "I think that was my biggest problem. The line was too fast. If the crew leader said we weren't going to get the order out in time, he'd speed it up."

Milagro, a 37-year-old former poultry worker from Guatemala, says she left her job at the North Carolina plant when she started developing a flesh-colored growth — soft to the touch and about the size of a baseball — on her wrist. She gritted her teeth and ignored the pain for as long as she could. "Little by little, it started swelling," she says. "It would go away, then come back. Now, it just stayed and hasn't disappeared."

She adds that she struggled with the cold temperature in the plant, set by the managers to keep the meat fresh. "You see your breath in the air. You can see it because of the cold, and your nose runs because it's too cold," she says. With the relentless speed of the line, workers often don't have time to even wipe away the mucus. "Sometimes you see some gross things there."

* Not her real name.
The Economic Costs of Poverty in the United States:

Subsequent Effects Of Children Growing Up Poor

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January 24, 2007
Executive Summary

Most arguments for reducing poverty in the U.S., especially among children, rest on a moral case for doing so—one that emphasizes the unfairness of child poverty, and how it runs counter to our national creed of equal opportunity for all.

But there is also an economic case for reducing child poverty. When children grow up in poverty, they are somewhat more likely than non-poor children to have low earnings as adults, which in turn reflects lower workforce productivity. They are also somewhat more likely to engage in crime (though that’s not the case for the vast majority) and to have poor health later in life. Their reduced productive activity generates a direct loss of goods and services to the U.S. economy.

What’s more, any crime in which they engage imposes large monetary and other personal costs on their victims, as well as the costs to the taxpayer of administering our huge criminal justice system. And their poor health generates illness and early mortality which not only require large healthcare expenditures, but also impede productivity and ultimately reduce their quality and quantity of life.

In this paper, we review a range of rigorous research studies that estimate the average statistical relationships between children growing up in poverty and their earnings, propensity to commit crime, and quality of health later in life. We also review estimates of the costs that crime and poor health per person impose on the economy. Then we aggregate all of these average costs per poor child across the total number of children growing up in poverty in the U.S. to estimate the aggregate costs of child poverty to the U.S. economy.

We had to make a number of critical assumptions about how to define and measure poverty, what level of income to use as a non-poverty benchmark, and which effects are really caused by growing up in poverty and not simply correlated with it. Wherever possible, we made conservative assumptions, in order to generate lower-bound estimates.

The upshot: Our results suggest that the costs to the U.S. associated with childhood poverty total about $500B per year, or the equivalent of nearly 4 percent of GDP.

More specifically, we estimate that childhood poverty each year:

- Reduces productivity and economic output by about 1.3 percent of GDP
- Raises the costs of crime by 1.3 percent of GDP
- Raises health expenditures and reduces the value of health by 1.2 percent of GDP.

If anything, these estimates almost certainly understate the true costs of poverty to the U.S. economy. For one thing, they omit the costs associated with poor adults who did not grow up poor as children. They ignore all other costs that poverty might impose on the nation besides those associated with low productivity, crime, and health—such as environmental costs and much of the suffering of the poor themselves.
What does all of this imply for public policy? The high cost of childhood poverty to the U.S. suggests that investing significant resources in poverty reduction might be more cost-effective over time than we previously thought. Of course, determining the effectiveness of various policies requires careful evaluation research in a variety of areas.

Our analysis did not venture into the effectiveness of specific anti-poverty policies, but our conclusions point unmistakably to several clear options, among them:

- Universal pre-kindergarten programs
- Various elementary and secondary school reforms
- Expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit and other income supports for the working poor
- Job training for poor adults
- Higher minimum wages and more collective bargaining
- Low-income neighborhood revitalization and housing mobility
- Marriage promotion and faith-based initiatives

Given the strong evidence of the effectiveness of some of these programs, such as high-quality pre-kindergarten and the Earned Income Tax Credit, investments through these mechanisms seem particularly warranted. At a minimum, the costs of poverty imply that we should work hard to identify cost-effective strategies of poverty remediation and that we should not hesitate to invest significant resources when these strategies are identified. In the meantime, we should also experiment with and evaluate a wide range of promising efforts.
Introduction

Why should the U.S. expend scarce public resources to reduce its poverty rate? The most common response to this question focuses on the moral case that reducing poverty is fair and just. This argument usually stresses the high costs imposed on individuals and families—and especially children in poor families—when they are poor. In a nation where equal opportunity—regardless of race, ethnicity, or family background—is a widely accepted goal for public policy, inequities associated with children growing up in poverty are troubling.

Others argue for poverty reduction on economic grounds. In this view, poverty burdens the rest of U.S. society and robs it of some of its productive potential. The economic costs of poverty to society include certain public expenditures on poor families, especially for conditions and behaviors—such as poor health and crime—associated with the poor. Costs borne by victims of crime are examples of private expenditures and losses for the nonpoor that should count as burdens as well. Moreover, the income that the poor might have earned represents a loss of productive capacity and output that ultimately reduces the aggregate value of our economy. By this argument, it is not only fair and just to reduce poverty in the U.S., but may be in the nation's material self-interest as well.

When viewed in this economic way, expenditures on poverty reduction can be viewed as public or social investments, which generate returns to society over time in the form of higher real gross domestic product (GDP), reduced expenditures on crime or health care problems, reduced costs borne by crime victims or those in poor health, and improvements in everyone's quality of life in a wide variety of other ways as well. To make the case for these investments, we need to estimate the social costs associated with poverty, as well as some sense of the returns on any investments in poverty alleviation.

This paper focuses on the economic and social costs of poverty. We attempt to quantify the overall costs to U.S. society of having children grow up in poverty—both in the form of lost economic productivity and earnings as adults, and also as additional costs associated with higher crime and poorer health later in life. Before presenting our estimates, we review our conceptual framework and its limitations (Section II). We present our estimates in Sections III and IV, and conclude in Section V with some thoughts and implications.

All told, we estimate that the costs to America associated with childhood poverty total $500 billion per year—the equivalent of nearly 4 percent of GDP. In other words, we could raise our overall consumption of goods and services and our quality of life by about a half trillion dollars a year if childhood poverty were eliminated. If anything, this calculation likely understates the true annual losses associated with U.S. poverty.
Our Approach

What is the right way to think about the costs that poverty imposes on the U.S., and how might this thinking be captured in a convincing empirical framework?

We begin with what we do not include in estimating poverty costs. We omit from our cost estimates the poverty “gap” of poor households themselves, defined as the difference between household income and its poverty threshold. To do so would be tautological: the costs of poverty would be defined as poverty itself. Nor do we estimate the effects of adult poverty on earnings capacity, crime, or health, since it is very difficult to determine whether adult poverty is a cause or an effect of crime and bad health.

Instead, we seek to estimate links between poverty among children and the elements of their behavior or circumstances as adults that generate economic costs for U.S. society. But why do we believe that children who grow up in poverty might have lower incomes, as well as worse health and higher crime rates as adults? A very long literature (e.g., Duncan, 2006) documents strong statistical relationships between the incomes of families in which children grow up, various cognitive and behavioral measures we observe for these children, and important outcomes they experience as adults. These statistical correlations also seem to reflect the very different home, school, and neighborhood environments in which more affluent and poorer children grow up.

As Ludwig and Sawhill (2006) summarize: “…compared to kindergarteners from families in the bottom fifth of the socioeconomic distribution, children from the most advantaged fifth of all families are four times more likely to have a computer in the home, have three times as many books, are read to more often, watch far less television, and are more likely to visit museums or libraries…These differences in early environments contribute to large gaps in test scores, which show up even at a very early age…The early years also appear to be a sensitive period for the development of non-cognitive skills…large differences in non-cognitive outcomes such as physical aggression between children in families above versus below the poverty line have been documented….These early gaps in cognitive and non-cognitive skills tend to persist through the school years and into later life. Those who score poorly before entering kindergarten are likely to do less well in school, to become teen parents, to engage in crime, and to be unemployed as adults….”

Family economic conditions seem to impact children because they affect the material and social resources available to children and family psychological processes, such as parental emotional well-being and parenting styles. And differences in the quality of schools attended and neighborhoods resided in by children of different family backgrounds up through the teen years likely reinforce and widen the many gaps that emerge early on in the home.

So we focus in this paper on measuring how childhood poverty in the U.S. affects outcomes for adults later in life, and what these effects imply for the broader U.S. economy and society. We estimate the reductions in the annual aggregate U.S. production of goods and services (as measured by earnings) associated with childhood poverty, as well as the extra expenditures (both public and
private) and reduced safety and well-being due to crime and poor health associated with adults who grow up poor as children. One can think of this exercise as estimating the total economic value of increased production and higher quality of life that would accrue to the U.S. if childhood poverty were eliminated. We express the costs of poverty as a share of GDP. But these estimates also include some of the intangible social costs, such as the value of improved health, that are not directly counted as part of the formal government GDP calculations but nonetheless have obvious value in Americans’ quality of life.

As for our actual methodology, we measure the effects of poverty on these outcomes using estimates of the statistical association between childhood poverty (or low family income) and such outcomes as adult earnings, participation in crime, or poor health.\(^1\) These impacts do not hold for every single individual growing up in poverty, as some children who grow up poor do not become poor as adults and some who are non-poor as children become poor as adults.\(^2\) But the estimates we use represent the average likelihood of lower earnings, participation in crime or poor health among adults who grew up in poverty.

In the jargon of economists, lost earnings are an opportunity cost—a cost that is incurred because the opportunity to be productive and generate earnings is lost. And since all earnings ultimately derive from economic output, it is reasonable to consider any foregone earnings associated with poverty as reflecting lost output for the U.S. economy.\(^3\) This estimate will also reflect the average impact of poverty on the level of GDP in any year, which abstracts from any effects poverty might have on the rate of growth in GDP over time.

In addition to lost earnings, we focus on childhood poverty’s impacts on adult crime and poor health. These are certainly not the only possible costs of poverty, but they are likely to be the largest and most easily quantifiable costs. The value of other costs potentially associated with poverty, such as low cognitive skills (as measured by test scores) and low levels of education, should be largely captured by lost earnings.\(^4\) In contrast, poor health and crime impose large costs, above and beyond the lost earnings of those who are sick or jailed, and these costs have been quantified by some researchers. Furthermore, these costs are often borne both by the poor themselves and by crime victims or taxpayers who pay for the public expenditures to deal with these problems.

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1 These estimates come from regressions that take the following form: \(Y = a + b \text{POVERTY}_i + u_i\), where \(Y\) represents one of the outcomes affected for person \(i\) – either adult earnings, participation in crime, or poor health – and \(\text{POVERTY}\) is a dichotomous (or dummy) variable for whether or not he/she spent at least a certain number of years as a child in a poor household. The coefficient \(b\) then represents the average (presumably negative) effect of childhood poverty on his/her earnings, or its (positive) effect on their likelihood of engaging in crime or having poor health. In some cases below, we may use a measure of average parental income rather than a poverty indicator as the independent variable, and simply predict the impact of having poverty-level income (relative to some benchmark level) on the outcome in question. Of course, using family income rather than poverty as the independent variable leads to expectations of a positive sign on the estimated coefficient \(b\) when the dependent variable is earnings or income, and a negative coefficient when it is crime or poor health. In this case, calculating \(b'(POVINC-INC)\), where \(POVINC\) and \(INC\) represent the poverty and benchmark levels of income respectively, generates a predicted impact of poverty with the same sign as the coefficient estimated from a poverty variable. The magnitudes of the estimated impacts on outcomes should also be comparable, as long as the effects of income on any outcomes are linear. Which approach we use in any particular case depends on what we find in the relevant literature.

2 According to Corcoran (2001), the poverty rates at ages 25-27 for those who grew up in poor v. non-poor households are about 24 percent and 4 percent respectively.

3 One previous attempt to calculate the economic costs of poverty in a similar manner can be found in a report by the Children’s Defense Fund (1994).

4 This is not strictly true, as there are likely benefits to education that go beyond the higher wages and salaries that they generate for individuals, but these are not easy to quantify.
The annual costs of crime and poor health associated with poverty are then the magnitudes of each that appear to be “caused” by (or at least statistically associated with) childhood poverty, multiplied by our estimates of the annual cost per “unit” of crime or poor health to the U.S. economy. Since lost earnings already represent a direct dollar cost to the economy, we need only calculate the direct loss of such earnings associated with childhood poverty. In all cases, these social costs per individual who was poor as a child need to be aggregated across the number (or percent) of all children who grow up in poverty, and then calculated as portions of GDP.\(^5\)

An important issue with our approach is whether the estimated effects of poverty for children are caused by low family income per se, or a broader range of family and community forces that afflict the poor. Susan Mayer’s book (1997) argues that the costs of poverty have less to do with income, and more with the quality of family life, schools, and neighborhoods that poor children experience. In turn, these nonpecuniary factors might be reflected in a range of attitudes, behaviors, and values that poor children develop and carry into adulthood, which might have been caused by their parents’ and/or peers’ attitudes, behaviors, and values in addition to (or even instead of) their low childhood income.

Of course, the latter interpretation does not imply that poverty is any less costly to the children who experience it. Rather, it implies that the mechanisms through which poverty hurts children may not be exclusively (or even primarily) financial. If not, then boosting the incomes of parents might not be the appropriate policy remedy. In our view, elaborated below, statistical efforts to disentangle the effects of income per se from other characteristics of poor parents, schools, and neighborhoods are far from definitive.

As a result, we interpret the causal effects of childhood poverty quite broadly. They include not only the effects of low parental incomes, but also of the entire range of environmental factors associated with poverty in the U.S., and all of the personal characteristics imparted by parents, schools, and neighborhoods to children who grow up with or in them. We define “poverty” broadly in this way in part because researchers have been unable to clearly separate low income from other factors that affect the life chances of the poor, and also because the set of potential policy levers that might reduce the disadvantages experienced by poor children go beyond just increasing family incomes. Of course, in defining poverty this way, we also assume that the entire range of negative influences associated with low family incomes would ultimately be eliminated if all poor children were instead raised in non-poor households.

This broad interpretation of poverty effects enables us to use fairly simple estimates of the statistical relationships between childhood poverty and adult outcomes, rather than estimates from studies that adjust for factors correlated with poverty such as parental education, race, etc. Controls for these explanatory variables are sometimes used to isolate the effects of low childhood incomes, although we view most of these efforts as unsuccessful, since the list of variables for which we can control are almost always incomplete. Our broader interpretation of the effects of poverty enables us to avoid this issue entirely and measure the impact of poverty along with its related characteristics such as neighborhood and parental characteristics.

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\(^{5}\) In mathematical terms, foregone adult earnings per poor child are simply $\frac{\Delta\text{LOSEARN}}{\Delta\text{POVERTY}}$, whereas the loss associated with crime would be $\frac{\Delta\text{CRIME}}{\Delta\text{POVERTY}} \times \frac{\Delta\text{COST}}{\Delta\text{CRIME}}$; and the losses associated with poor health would be comparable to those of crime. Multiplying these fractions by $\text{POVERTY}$, that is the percentage of children who grow up poor, generates aggregate losses and costs that can be compared to annual GDP.
But at least part of the lower earnings, poorer health, and greater tendency to commit crime among poor adults might not be caused by childhood poverty, even broadly defined. We know that hereditary characteristics can play an important role in determining such personal attributes as height, weight, physical and mental health, temperament, and cognitive ability. The degree to which the observed association between growing up in a disadvantaged family and later life outcomes is caused by inherited rather than environmental causes remains controversial, and we do not take a strong stand on this question ourselves. We also understand that, at least historically, genetic research has sometimes been misused and misinterpreted (by racists or others advocating harsh treatment of the poor) in ways that we oppose.

Still, in acknowledging that there may be a hereditary component of poverty, and in order to generate a conservative estimate for the social costs of having children grow up in poverty, we err on the side of adjusting for the possible genetic contributions to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. To isolate the impact of poverty *per se* on outcomes, we deduct some portion of the costs when research suggests that some of the costs could be hereditary in origin. The best available studies on this topic rely heavily on comparisons of identical twins to fraternal twins, on siblings raised separately after birth from those raised together (where the former have only shared genes and very little shared environment), or on twins/siblings adopted by families of different socioeconomic status from one another. Since such studies often generate a range of estimates (and are often based on richer data from other countries, particularly Sweden), we will use estimates of hereditary effects that have been judged by respected scholars as the most plausible and convincing in each case. Our adjustments might well overstate the hereditary component of poverty (for reasons discussed in Footnote 19 below), but we make them anyway to be conservative.

All in all, we believe that our estimates almost certainly underestimate the true costs of poverty. For one thing, many children who do not grow up poor become poor as adults, and their poverty likely imposes costs on themselves and the nation. As noted above, it is very difficult to separate causes from effects of poverty in these cases, so we do not attempt to measure these costs. But they are likely to be substantial. Furthermore, we cannot capture all of the many costs associated with child poverty such as the nonmonetary costs on the poor themselves, or the costs of living in poor areas that are not captured by crime or health measures.

A few other analytical and interpretative issues must be mentioned here as well. The costs associated with poverty for children will almost certainly depend on the number of years that they spend in poverty, and may also depend on the timing of poverty—in early childhood, primary school, or adolescence. Poverty is dynamic, with some families experiencing temporary spells of poverty and others experiencing longer spells (e.g., Blank, 1997). Longer (or more permanent) spells of poverty will likely be costlier to children than shorter (or more temporary) ones. Consequently, the number of years spent in poverty, or a family’s average income over the years of childhood, will be used in most studies as the primary determinant of its effects. On the other hand, recent research also suggests that the timing of such poverty matters as well. Given that poverty early in life may be most damaging (Duncan *et al.*, 1998), it might well be true that even short spells of poverty during those years can impose large and permanent costs on children. Many fewer studies measure the timing of poverty for children, though its importance must certainly be acknowledged in any such efforts.
And, in defining and measuring poverty during the childhood years, we will rely on many studies that use the official “poverty line,” despite its well-known limitations and arbitrariness (National Research Council, 1995). But since most of these studies use family incomes averaged over several years, those years in which family incomes were above but near the official poverty line will still contribute to poverty-level average incomes in many cases. Also, the choice of a reference group for the poor becomes critical in these calculations. We will generally use those with family incomes at twice the poverty line as our reference group for the poor, as this is considered by many researchers to be an upper bound of where a true “poverty line” might be drawn. This level of income can also be considered a realistic goal for antipoverty policy efforts.

Finally, we note that these definitions of poverty use an absolute rather than relative income measure. There remains some debate over whether absolute income levels or inequality have larger effects on outcomes, both in the U.S. and abroad, though the evidence suggests stronger effects of the former than the latter (Deaton, 2003). This choice also suggests a more supply-based interpretation of how poverty hurts children—i.e., one that emphasizes the effects of growing up poor on individual skills, productivity, and behavior. Clearly, other economic factors also influence the outcomes these children face in life—such as the structure of wages and the quality of jobs generated on the demand side of the labor market. Even where the latter are important, the benefits of higher productivity, lower crime, and improved health associated with eliminating child poverty could be used to improve the quality of life for a broad range of Americans.

**Empirical Estimates of the Impacts of Childhood Poverty: Foregone Productivity and Earnings**

As we noted above, the most straightforward way to estimate the effects of childhood poverty on adult earnings would be from simple regressions in which adult earnings, averaged over several years, are regressed on the prevalence of poverty when the child was growing up. Alternatively, some studies generate broader estimates of intergenerational mobility, where sons’ (or daughters’) earnings are related to those of their fathers (or mothers), or where the family incomes of the former are related to those of the latter. The two sets of studies differ from one another in the type of outcome they use (i.e., earnings, income, or some mix of the two), and in that the designation of an explicit poverty cutoff can allow for the effects of parental income to differ at various points in the income distribution (i.e., the estimated effects of income can be nonlinear).

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6 Many studies we reference below use the average ratio of family income to needs (with the latter based on family size) when children were growing up as the primary variable reflecting child poverty; ratios below one represent families below the poverty line. Some studies use family income as a linear variable rather than its ratio to needs; average income for a family of four, conditional on being in poverty, can be used in these cases to calculate the effects of childhood poverty on later earnings.

7 For instance, if there are a limited number of high-wage jobs in the economy for less-educated workers (Anderson et al., 2005), then childhood poverty might restrict the ability of individuals to compete for those jobs—but ultimately the "causes" of their low earnings would include these demand-side economic variables as well as their own characteristics. Whether the labor market over the long run generates enough high-wage jobs to match rising worker skills remains a controversial issue in the economics literature. But, even if it doesn’t, the benefits of higher productivity could be distributed to these or other workers, in the form of publicly subsidized wages or benefits or other publicly provided goods and services. The benefits of lower crime and better health would still accrue more directly to the public.

8 Coefficients from simple regressions equal simple correlation coefficients when the dependent and independent variables have unit variances.

9 Nonlinear effects of income can also be tested even in studies that use a broader income measure, with various nonlinear (e.g., quadratic or logarithmic) functional forms.
We draw on this entire range of studies below. All of them require panel data on several years of earnings or income, both for parents and their children. The best source of such data in the U.S. to date has been the Panel Study on Income Dynamics (PSID), which most of these studies have used. Others, such as the 1979 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), are sometimes used as well.

What do these studies show? Of the most recent studies\(^\text{10}\) that explicitly link the earnings of children to their parents’ family income, Mayer (1997) and Corcoran and Adams (1997) show that doubling the incomes of families below or at the poverty line raises the earnings of their sons by 30-40 percent—with the larger estimates generated when longer periods of time are available for measuring sons’ adult earnings, and without controls for parental education and other personal characteristics.\(^\text{11}\) Allowing family incomes to rise to the national median, rather than just to 1.5 or twice the poverty line, generates effects that are roughly twice as large (as median household income is almost three times the poverty line for a family of four and more than three times the average income of a poor family).\(^\text{12}\)

Alternatively, much of the earnings and income mobility literature in the 1990’s (e.g., Solon, 1992, Zimmerman, 1992) generate intergenerational “elasticities,” in which percentage changes in parental earnings or income are related to percentage changes in those of offspring as adults. The best recent estimates suggest elasticities of at least 0.4, when many years of both parent and offspring earnings are used (in order to capture the permanent earnings or incomes of both); and near 0.5, when other statistical techniques are used to adjust for measurement error in the data.\(^\text{13}\) More recently, when Bhashkar Mazumder (2005) uses similar statistical techniques on longer panels of intergenerational data from Social Security earnings records, he generates estimates of intergenerational elasticities above 0.6. These estimates are much higher than those generated in the 1970s and 1980s (which were often 0.2 or less), since measurement of permanent income and overall accuracy are now much improved, and they suggest much less economic mobility over time than was earlier thought.

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\(^\text{10}\) Other studies besides those listed here include those of Hauser and Sweeney (1997) and Haveman and Wolfe (1995). We focus on the few studies below that were most recent and generated the empirical estimates that most closely resemble what we have described in Section II above.

\(^\text{11}\) Mayer finds that doubling average family income during the 13-17 age period from $15,000 to $30,000 in 1992 dollars (when the poverty line for a family of four was roughly $15,000) increases the earnings of sons by just under 25 percent; but her equations include controls for parental education and other personal characteristics. Corcoran and Adams show that these controls reduce the coefficients on family income by about 40 percent, implying an effect in Mayer’s estimates of about 0.4. In the Corcoran-Adams paper (Table 15.3), growing up in poverty reduces the adult family’s income-to-needs ratio by about 20 percent relative to families with average income-to-needs ratios of 100-200 percent of the poverty line in an equation controlling for other factors, or about 35 percent without controls. In both papers, the ages of the adult offspring are only in their twenties or early thirties, which likely biases their estimates downward.

\(^\text{12}\) In Corcoran and Adams, those growing up in poverty (i.e. with average family incomes/needs below one) had incomes as adults about 35 percent below those who grew up in families with income-to-needs ratios between 200-300 percent of the poverty line when other factors are included as control variables, implying about a 60 percent difference without controlling for other factors. When they compare those who spent more than half of their childhood in families with below-poverty incomes to those who either spent less than half of their childhood in poverty, or those who were not in poverty at all, the estimates are almost identical. Mayer’s estimates also imply similar magnitudes when comparing those at the poverty line to the median income level. In Corcoran (2001), the earnings of those who grew up poor on average are only about 40 percent lower than those who were not poor on average, though her sample of adult men is very young and based only on 3 years of data.

\(^\text{13}\) Earnings and incomes in these studies are always measured in natural logs, which allow the estimated coefficients to be described as “elasticities.” Both Solon and Zimmerman use instrumental variables (IV) methods to reduce measurement error in parental income, which is likely to generate downward biases in estimates; in fact, their IV estimates are generally larger than those based on more traditional regression methods (i.e., ordinary least squares). These studies generally find that the estimated elasticities rise with the number of years of data included for both parents and offspring, and with the age of the offspring. A good review of the 1990’s literature can be found in Solon (1999).
Few of these studies show strong nonlinear effects that vary across the income distribution.\(^{14}\) Differences across studies that use sons as opposed to daughters, or parental income as opposed to earnings, also appear to be quite modest (Solon, 1999). Overall, these estimates imply effects of rising incomes for the poor that are quite comparable to those found by Mayer, Corcoran, and others who focused on poor v. nonpoor families.\(^{15}\)

To calculate the aggregate effects of childhood poverty on the earnings of adults, we use an average intergenerational elasticity estimate of 0.5; and a difference in family income of 0.98 log points, which represents the difference between the average incomes for poor families (about $14,500) and twice the poverty line for a family of four (about $38,800) in 2005. This implies a reduction of 0.49 log points in earnings for those who grew up in poverty relative to the median household. Since median adult earnings was about $30,500 in 2005, a reduction of 0.49 log points associated with poverty reduces average adult earnings to about $18,770, or by 39 percent relative to median earnings.\(^{16}\) According to Blank (1997), 9.6 percent of all children grew up in families whose incomes were below the poverty line for over half of all recorded years in the PSID in the period 1979-94. Adjusting for the fact that median earnings in the U.S. is about 60 percent of mean earnings,\(^{17}\) and that earnings represent about 65 percent of GDP, our calculations suggest that having this percentage of children growing up in poverty implies an annual reduction of GDP of 1.5 percent.\(^{18}\) A comparable calculation for the roughly 8 percent of children who spend at least a fourth of their time growing up in poor families (Blank, op. cit.), with half as large an effect on their earnings (Corcoran and Adams, op. cit.), is associated with an additional loss of 0.6 percent of GDP, for a total of roughly 2.1 percent.

How much of this reduction might be hereditary as opposed to environmental? Jencks and Tach (2006) carefully review the various studies of siblings, twins, and adoptions, using mostly Swedish data but also some based on Americans. Abstracting from possible complicating interactions between genetic and environmental components, their best guess regarding the hereditary portion of intergenerational transmission of inequality is about 40 percent, implying that the other 60 percent represents the entire range of environmental factors.\(^{19}\) Overall, then, our calculations imply that once the hereditary component is factored out, the experience of growing up in poverty or near poverty for about 17 percent of our nation’s children reduces the nation’s aggregate output by about 1.3 percent, or about $170B per year.\(^{20}\)

\(^{14}\) On the one hand, Corcoran and Adams find larger effects on income elasticities at the very bottom of the income ladder, compared to the median. But Solon (1992) argues that the sons of the poor seem a bit more likely to rise out of poverty than the sons of the wealthy are to fall; his estimates, using earnings rather than income, are based on a quadratic functional form that doesn’t necessarily allow estimated effects at the bottom to be larger than those at the middle of the income distribution. Hertz (2005) estimates income elasticities separately for blacks and whites over the entire income range; his estimates show little nonlinearity between the bottom and the middle of the income distribution.

\(^{15}\) For instance, a doubling of parental earnings or income from the poverty line to twice the poverty line, which implies an increase of 0.7 log points, would generate a rise of earnings or income of about 0.35 log points, or about 40 percent, using an estimated intergenerational elasticity of 0.5.


\(^{17}\) A variety of estimates suggest that mean annual earnings are now about $50,000. More details are available from the authors.

\(^{18}\) In other words, 0.096*0.39*0.60*0.65=0.015.

\(^{19}\) Bowles et al. (2005) argue that the most credible estimate of the hereditary effect is closer to 1/3, though there are other papers in this literature that suggest estimates over one-half. Also, Turkheimer et al. (2003) suggest that genetic inheritance and socioeconomic status of children interact, with very low hereditary effects for low-SES children and very high ones for high-SES children (since the environments of the latter allow them to reach their full innate potentials while those of the former do not). These interactions suggest that the 40 percent figure might well overstate the role of inherited traits for those from low-income families.

\(^{20}\) GDP is currently measured at roughly $13.2 trillion dollars per year by the U.S. Department of Commerce.
Of course, there is a range of estimates for several of the key parameters used in these calculations, and the real number could therefore be higher or lower than our estimate. Changes over time in the child poverty rate and the demographic makeup of the poor might invalidate these estimates, though we believe that the net effect of such changes should not greatly change our predictions. And it is important to note that these calculations are all based on studies which include only those individuals who report positive earnings in any given year. Those with zero earnings—either due to incarceration, disability, death, or any other reason for permanent labor force withdrawal—are not captured in these data, and, at least among minority men, the incidence of those with zero earnings has grown (Holzer et al., 2005). Their growing absence from the data likely implies downward biases in the true estimates today, although the growth of earnings among low-income women in the 1990s (Blank, 2002) might offset this somewhat.

It is also important to note that these estimates often represent the effects of parental income averaged over many years, often including the teen years of the children. But Duncan (2005) argues, based on a range of studies from the developmental psychology literature that the negative effects of low parental income are likely to be more severe when children are very young than in their later childhood, adolescent, or teen years—which implies more negative effects of certain periods of transitory low income, even relative to permanent income. Transitory events in the lives of parents, such as a particular episode of job loss, also can translate into relatively permanent reductions in income affecting children in their households.

The studies that generate our estimates capture permanent but not transitory effects of parental income on the later earnings of children. Various attempts in the economics literature in the late 1990s to separate the effects on children of permanent versus transitory income changes were inconclusive. Some greater progress has been made in just the last few years to sort out the effects of the timing of income changes on children, and also the effects of income per se from the broader environmental effects of poverty. These recent studies use “natural experiments” in the policy world, as well as data from actual experimental evaluations to do so.

For instance, Dahl and Lochner (2006) use the timing and location of extensions of Earned Income Tax Credits to estimate the effects of higher income on children’s achievement in poor families, while Morris et al. (2006) use data from various welfare-to-work experiments, including those where earnings supplements were provided to the mothers of small children. The data in the latter study uses the micro-data from evaluations using “random assignment” of welfare mothers into treatment and control groups that did or did not receive the earnings supplementation when they worked. Both of these studies find significant positive effects of earnings supplementation on child achievement. The experimental evidence also suggests that earnings supplements boost achievement of younger children the most.

21 The child poverty rate rose between the 1980's and mid-1990s, declined substantially in the late 1990’s, and then has risen modestly since the year 2000. The largest change in the demographics of the poor is the growth in the representation of Hispanics among them, mostly owing to immigration. Blacks have much lower mobility out of poverty than whites (Corcoran and Adams, op. cit.; Hertz, 2005), though we have few estimates for Hispanics alone. While the children of less-educated immigrants traditionally have high intergenerational mobility, this has been much less true of Hispanic and especially Mexican-American immigrants in the past few decades (Borjas and Katz, 2005).

22 Oreopoulos et al. (2005) using Canadian data find that children whose fathers lost their jobs due to a plant closing had annual earnings that were about 9 percent lower than children from similar family backgrounds where the adult earner did not suffer a similar job loss. The decline in family income that results from job loss is certainly one plausible explanation for this pattern.

23 See, for example, Duncan et al. (1998) and Blau (1999) for estimates using a variety of “fixed effects” models to sort out permanent and transitory effects.
Achievement increases for children, if sustained, are likely to translate into increases in educational attainment and earnings later in life. But it is hard to know the extent to which the results of these studies can be generalized to broader populations and other kinds of income increases. Recent evidence from Jacob and Ludwig (2006), using households who were randomly assigned (by lottery) to receive housing assistance in Chicago, found little gain in test scores but some modest gains in educational attainment of youth. Thus, the extent to which the estimated effects of parental income on the later earnings of children can be attributed to income poverty, as opposed to broader environmental factors, remains unclear at this time—which reinforces our decision to interpret the environmental effects of poverty broadly.

Finally, none of these studies clearly establish whether it is changes in absolute or relative income of parents that generate the impacts we observe on their children. Evidence that parental poverty negatively affects children’s educational attainment or achievement suggests that the underlying mechanism might be that poverty reduces the productive capacities of children when they reach adulthood, which is consistent with the effects being driven by absolute income changes. But we cannot be certain that reduced skill and productive capacity really drive the negative effects of parental income on their children independently of the characteristics of the demand side of the labor market. Thus it remains unclear whether increases in the incomes of these parents would directly translate into earnings increases for their children of the implied magnitude in the aggregate, though other policies (like taxes and public subsidies) could be used to ensure that any productivity increases from reducing poverty are widely shared by Americans.

Overall, then, we conclude that children who grow up in persistently poor households have reduced earnings as adults, by enough to reduce aggregate GDP in the U.S. by about 1.3 percent. On the basis of the most recent evidence, it seems likely that some part of this represents the effects of income per se, as opposed to other factors related to growing up in poor environments, though it is still unclear how much of the reduction is related to the former vs. the latter. Other transitory effects of low income during early childhood, and differences in relative as opposed to absolute income across parents may also be important, though these are not well captured by the studies used for our estimates.

**Empirical Estimates of the Costs of Childhood Poverty: Crime and Poor Health**

The costs of crime and health associated with poverty depend on two factors: 1) the impacts of childhood poverty on crime and health among adults; and 2) the costs associated with each of these to the overall economy. Below we consider what the research literature suggests about the magnitudes of each of these factors for crime and then for health.
Crime

Using data from the NLSY79, Bjerk (2004) estimates that youth growing up in the bottom quintile of the income distribution are about 1.3 times as likely to be involved in serious crime compared with youth from the second income quintile.24 When Elliott and Ageton (1980) use data from the 1977 National Youth Survey and pay particular attention to distinguishing between violent and other serious crimes, and also pay closer attention to measuring the frequency of offending rather than just involvement with offending at all, they find that “lower class” youth report committing nearly four times as many violent crimes as “middle class” youth. The estimated differences across income or class categories in both studies for property, drug, or other less serious crimes are smaller; but Cohen (2005) shows that violent crime accounts for the vast majority (as much as 84 percent) of the costs to victims of crime. Given this range of estimates, we conservatively infer that low childhood income doubles the likelihood that individuals commit and report costly crimes, relative to children growing up in families with incomes around twice the poverty line. We use this data to infer that the annual incidence of crime attributable to poverty is then 0.2*(100 percent), or 20 percent.25

If anything, this number almost certainly understates the true magnitude of the poverty effect on crime by a considerable amount, since it is well-known that self-reported crime rates in national surveys underestimate the true rates, especially among minorities. Indeed, self-reported crime and arrest rates among young black men in the 1997 cohort of the NLSY are not dramatically different from those of young white and Hispanic men (Abe, 2001; Hill and Holzer, 2006), even though arrest rates among young black men are several times higher than those of their counterparts in reality (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). One of the best known studies on the magnitude of this problem (Hindelang et al., 1981) states that the ratio of actual criminal participation to self-reported participation for blacks is in the range of two to four; and some researchers (e.g., Viscusi, 1986) have used this finding to adjust upwards the self-reported criminal income of blacks by a factor of three.

We assume that the underreporting for blacks relative to whites is mostly driven by the differences across groups in average socio-economic status (SES) rather than the effects of race per se on survey reporting patterns. Under this assumption we expect underreporting among low-income whites and Latinos.26 To be conservative, we use the lower end of the range identified by Hindelang and his coauthors, and adjust our estimates by a factor of two. Hence, the incidence of annual crime and its costs attributable to poverty after we adjust for survey reporting problems is on the order of 40 percent (i.e., 2*20 percent).

24 Bjerk (2004) Table 1 shows that the estimated relationship between family income and involvement in serious crimes in the NLSY97 (after trying to adjust for measurement error with the family income variable) is equal to -.043. The mean rate of involvement with serious crime for youth in the bottom income quartile in his data is .189 (personal correspondence between Jens Ludwig and David Bjerk, 8/11/06), which implies that the mean offending rate for the second quartile is .146 and so (.043 / .146) = 29 percent.

25 The 0.2 reflects the fact that 20 percent of children fall into the bottom quintile of the household income distribution. Also, the vast majority of serious crime in any year is committed by young men, so we can apply this estimate to the overall rate of serious crime commission per year. To the extent that some crime is committed by those beyond the age category of "youth" (say, above the age of 24), we can simply assume that the estimated relationships between growing up in poverty and the incidence of crime in any year hold for this group as well.

26 For example, Kling, Ludwig and Katz (2005) use data from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment, which has a program population that is around two-thirds African-American and one-third Latino, and compare self-reported rates of arrest against arrest rates measured from administrative data, and find substantial under-reporting. We might expect under-reporting to be even more pronounced for actual criminal behavior rather than arrests, since the latter is at least in principle verifiable.
What are the costs that the additional crime associated with poverty imposes on the U.S.? In recent testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Ludwig (2006) updates the well-known cost-of-crime estimates from Anderson (1999) and Cohen (2005) and argues that the total costs of crime in the U.S. may be as large as $2 trillion per year, of which around $1.3 billion stems from “street crime” and the remainder comes from economic crimes such as fraud and white collar offenses. We conservatively assume that “poverty” only matters for “street crime” (though this is surely not the case in practice); that any changes in the crime rate only affect those part of the costs of crime associated with victimization; and that protective measures against crime (such as spending on police, prisons, or private security) are essentially unchanged as a result of marginal changes in crime. The victimization costs of street crime are estimated to be on the order of $700 billion per year given the best available data for crime rates in the U.S. for recent years (Ludwig, 2006).

As with foregone earnings, it is also important to net out the part of criminal activity that is likely attributable to hereditary rather than environmental factors. Here, again, the available estimates are not very precise or consistent. Raines (1993) reports that various studies of twins suggest that 50-70 percent of crime has a hereditary source, while the best adoption studies suggest much lower estimates in the ballpark of 25 percent. Given the considerable uncertainty associated with such a wide range, we continue to use the 40 percent figure suggested by Jencks and Tach (op. cit.) for our estimate of the hereditary component, or 60 percent for the environmental piece.

Overall, these figures suggest that poverty raises the costs of crime by at least 0.6*0.4*$700 billion, or about $170 billion annually. This figure represents about 1.3 percent of GDP today, and is still likely a lower bound to the true effect of poverty and crime on the economy.

Health

As in the case of crime, we need to compute the likely impacts of child poverty on the incidence of poor health, and the costs associated with poor health in economic terms. In terms of the latter, there are two dimensions of costs that we can capture: 1) Additional expenditures on health care; and 2) The value of lost quantity and quality of life associated with early mortality and morbidity. In each case, our estimates are somewhat incomplete, and based only on estimates in the research literature that we are able to find.

To obtain the impact of child poverty on later health outcomes, we use estimates from Case et al. (2002, 2005) in which the impacts of income on self-reported categories of health (poor, fair, good, very good, excellent) are reported.27 We use these estimates to predict the effects of family income rising from the

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27 These papers report coefficients from ordered probit estimates of self-reported health on log(parental income) for different age groups, using American and British data respectively. The 2002 paper presents estimates of the impact of poverty with no further controls, and also the impact of poverty when other characteristics such as parental education are accounted for, and in general the former coefficients are 1.5 times the latter. The 2005 paper only presents estimates controlling for other characteristics, so we inflate the reported coefficients by 1.5. We transformed the probit coefficients into partial derivatives for different categories of health. Studies using British data rely on a 4-point self-reported health status measure instead of the 5-point scale used in the United States. To make those comparable, we collapsed the top 2 categories in the U.S. data (“excellent” and “very good”) to one single top category (“excellent.”) The work of Case and her coauthors also helps to establish the direction of causality as running from socioeconomic status in childhood to health of adults, since data on incomes and health of adults are plagued by causality running in both directions (Smith, 1999).
average of those currently in poverty to twice the poverty line (in log points), as we did earlier. We then use data on health expenditures by age group and health status (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2006) to predict how child poverty affects health expenditures per age group.\(^{28}\)

Finally, we convert these age-specific estimates over the life-cycle to an aggregated set of annual health costs by computing the present discounted value of additional health expenses for all children born in poverty in a year, assuming four million births per year and a 15 percent child poverty rate.\(^{29}\) Based on these assumptions, we find that poverty raises direct expenditures on health care by about $22B per year. In addition, data on some other categories of direct expenditures, such as special education, along with estimates of the impact of poverty on assignments to special education generated additional direct expenditures of $4B.\(^{30}\) Together, these expenditures account for about 0.20 percent of GDP, though this no doubt understates the true effects of poverty (as expenditures on Social Security, Disability Insurance, and other categories are omitted here due to lack of estimates of these poverty effects).

Of course, the higher rates of morbidity and especially mortality among the poor have costs in terms of lost quantity and quality of life, above and beyond their effects on medical or education expenditures.\(^{31}\) We use estimates provided by David Cutler and Elizabeth Richardson (1998), who estimate the value of “health capital” at birth—in other words, the total value of lifetime health—for individuals born into poor v. non-poor families; and we once again convert these estimates into annual costs of mortality and morbidity for all poor children born in any given year.

The estimates of “health capital” are the present discounted values of the expected numbers of “quality-adjusted life years” (QALY's) for different groups. The QALY's are essentially life expectancies, adjusted for the effects of various illnesses on self-reported quality of health; they thus capture the effects of both differential mortality and morbidity on one measure. Each year is then valued using an average annual “value of statistical life,” which is routinely used to measure the cost-effectiveness of medical procedures and the value of various health and environmental risks. Some estimates of this value (e.g., Aldy and Viscusi, 2006) allow it to vary over the life-cycle before computing an average annual value over the life cycle. But these calculations are generally not based on earnings, and therefore do not overlap with the estimates of lost productivity and earnings that we calculated in Section III above.\(^{32}\)

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28 We obtain the distribution of self-reported health status and average medical spending across various age groups (0-4, 5-17, 18-24, 25-44, 45-64, and 65-90) in 2003 tabulated from the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey using the MEPSnet interface on the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website. We then estimate the percentage change in self-reported health status across age groups implied by the Case et al. ordered probit models for an income increase of 1.3 log points, and multiply the changes by the average costs by age and health status group to obtain average cost savings by age group.

29 We compute the present discounted value of health costs over the life cycle because these costs vary so much with age, and given changes over time in the sizes of birth cohorts and life expectancy, we never really reach a “steady state” that would enable us to aggregate across the current age structure of the population. We assume a 3 percent discount rate and a 3 percent rate of inflation in real medical costs (compared to about a 2 percent annual increase over the past decade, but about 3.6 percent over the previous two decades.)

30 According to the Office of Special Education's 2003 annual report, elementary and middle-school students are 4 percentage points more likely to be in special education if they live in poverty compared to those in a middle-income group. High school students in poverty are 5 points more likely to be in special education. These increased rates are multiplied by the additional $12,600 spent on special education students, on average, per year (United States Department of Education, 2005). See also Chambers et al. (2004).

31 For example, Smith (1999) cites studies showing that poverty reduces the life expectancy of white and black men by an average of 7 years.

32 These various estimates use different statistical methodologies but are usually based on actual expenditures or surveys of willingness to pay for additional years of life for different demographic groups.
Cutler and Richardson, using a value of life of $100,000 per year (in 1997 dollars), estimate that poverty reduces the present discounted value of health capital over the lifetime of a child by about $124,000.\textsuperscript{33} But the annual value of life on which this computation is based, or its equivalent in 2006 dollars ($127,000), is definitely at the low end of credible estimates. Alternatively, Aldy, and Viscusi estimate the average annual value of life to be over $300,000 in 2000 dollars, or about $350,000 in today's dollars. In another influential article, Miller et al. (2004) used a value of $160,000 per year, based on a survey of this literature published in the year 2000.

We conservatively use a value of $200,000 as an estimate of the annual value of life, which is much closer to the estimate of Cutler and Richardson (in current dollars) than to that of Aldy and Viscusi. As this estimate doubles the annual value of life used in Cutler and Richardson, we accordingly double their estimate of lost health capital per poor child to a value of $248,000 (in today's dollars). Again assuming that 15 percent of four million children annually are born into poverty, we generate an estimate of lost “health capital” of about $149B per year in the aggregate, or about 1.1 percent of GDP. This figure captures the economic value of lost quantity and quality of life, though not lost earnings (which we have measured separately).

Combining our estimates of additional expenditures and lost “health capital” due to poverty thus generates an estimate of 1.3 percent of GDP. Once again, it is likely that some component of this effect is hereditary. Somewhat surprisingly, research has recently found that these components of the estimated socioeconomic impacts on health are relatively small. Using an estimate of seven percent, our estimate of the impact of poverty on health costs is reduced to 1.2 percent of GDP per year.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} They also use a 3 percent discount rate, as we did above in our calculations of the discounted value of future medical expenditures.

\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, Case and her colleagues estimate that it might be as little as seven percent in their data, since controlling for parental health status only reduces the relationship between child poverty and health by that amount.
Conclusion

Summing the costs of foregone earnings and productivity, high crime rates and poor health associated with adults who grew up in poor households, we estimate the economic costs of U.S. poverty to be:

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<td>Foregone earnings</td>
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<td>Health</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Thus, our best estimates suggest that childhood poverty imposes costs on American society equal to nearly **four percent of GDP**, or about **$500B per year**. In other words, the total value of our production of goods and services and our quality of life in America might rise by about a half trillion dollars annually if all of our poor children were instead growing up in non-poor households.

Of course, any such estimates are highly uncertain. In many cases—especially our attempts to attribute these costs to their hereditary and environmental components—the range of estimates we found in the relevant literatures was often very high. In these cases, we rely on our best judgments (or those of scholars whom we respect) to generate the most plausible point estimates. Of course, the true estimates in these cases might be higher or lower than the numbers we use. We cannot be certain that the effects we observe are driven by absolute or relative differences in parental income (or the rationing of a limited number of “good jobs” on the demand side of the economy irrespective of the supply of skills), though these issues might affect the policy implications derived from this work.

On the other hand, we have good reason to believe that, if anything, our estimates understate the true costs of poverty to the U.S., and therefore should be considered lower bounds to the true effects. For one thing, we focus only on the effects of childhood poverty on subsequent outcomes for youth and adults, rather than poverty among adults who were not poor as children. We focus only on three components of costs (foregone output, crime, and health), and ignore others that are harder to quantify. For instance, the others might include environmental costs—such as the blight of poor urban neighborhoods, and the costs of “sprawl” generated by those who flee this blight when moving to the suburbs and exurbs in our metropolitan areas. Our calculations also omit (except in the area of health) a whole range of important nonpecuniary costs—mostly borne by the poor themselves—that reflect the “psychic” costs and scars of unfulfilled potential, pain, and grief in their lives.

Even regarding the issues of foregone earnings, crime, and poor health, our estimates likely understate the true costs of poverty. Our adjustments for underreporting of crime in survey data and for the value of life when computing lost “health capital” use calculations that are at the lower ends of the ranges of credible estimates in the literature. Since our estimates of foregone earnings are based almost exclusively on those who participate at least marginally in the labor force each year, the experiences of those who do not—because of disability, early mortality, or other factors—are not
captured in those estimates; nor are certain categories of additional public expenditures, such as on disability and Social Security payments. And our estimates of the impacts of low family income mostly capture permanent income effects, rather than those transitory effects during early childhood years that could have important negative long-term effects on them as well.

What does all of this imply for public policy? The high costs of poverty to the U.S. clearly imply that the potential returns to effective anti-poverty strategies might be high as well. Of course, because we defined the environmental components of poverty so broadly, and we did not try to sort out the specific mechanisms through which poverty operates on children, the range of antipoverty policies that could be effective at reducing these costs is very wide. The creation of higher-wage jobs (through higher minimum wage, more collective bargaining, etc.), income supplementation (especially for working parents, along the lines of the EITC or earnings disregards for welfare recipients), education and training policies (including early education, class-size reduction, teacher training, or other reforms), neighborhood revitalization and housing mobility, marriage promotion, and faith-based initiatives might all potentially be useful in reducing those costs. In each case, rigorous statistical evidence will continue to be needed to determine exactly what works or does not work.

But the high costs of poverty to the U.S. also suggest that the investment of some significant resources in poverty reduction might be more socially cost-effective over time than we previously thought. This view is consistent with some recent calculations by Dickens and Sawhill (2006) suggesting that, if we made high-quality pre-kindergarten programs universally available to children, the expected returns over time might easily dwarf the costs. Indeed, their preferred calculations suggest, in steady state, such a program would increase GDP by 3.7 percent annually.\(^\text{35}\) Interestingly, this magnitude suggests that very high-quality early childhood efforts could overcome a very large part, though perhaps not all, of the costs of poverty to the U.S. that we estimate. And other investments, such as those which make the EITC more generous to working poor families, might have important positive effects as well (according to Dahl and Lochner, and Morris et al., op cit.)

At a minimum, the high costs that childhood poverty imposes on the U.S. imply that we should work hard to identify cost-effective strategies that reduce such poverty, and we should not hesitate to invest significant resources in such efforts when they are identified. In the meantime, a great deal of experimentation and evaluation in poverty-reduction is clearly warranted.

\(^{35}\) Their estimates assume that early childhood interventions as successful as the Abecedarian or the Perry Preschool Program could be implemented nationally, with net new enrollment rates of 70 percent. Given that both of these efforts were very small and intensive, our ability to generate these benefits on a large national scale remains very uncertain. Other small experiments in education that have generated large returns, and that might be brought to scale, include the class-size reductions of the Star program in Tennessee (Krueger and Whitmore, 2001). 2001 article is cited in references.
Endnotes:


Acknowledgements

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS

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CINCINNATI — It’s 4 a.m. when the overnight bus from Pittsburgh rolls into Cincinnati station. With hours to go until daylight and more than a little fatigued, I join the small crowd of passengers sprawled out on the floor in one corner of the station. A pair of infomercials is playing on endless loop on the TVs overhead and I can only dream of falling asleep. An hour later, I stop trying and make my usual cup of gruel before setting off on foot through the drizzle into town—the wrong part of town, as it happens.

Heading out past the casino and north on Gilbert Avenue, I see office parks and museums give way to blocks of rundown rowhouses with broken windows and ground floors boarded up. There are seedy strip malls, vacant overgrown lots, and once-proud red-brick factories with faded marble molding and "For Sale" signs on the door. Trash has gone uncollected for some time, judging by the overflowing bins.

Few storefronts remain in business—a convenience store here, check casher there, and beauty supplier and furniture store further down. The Speedy Refund tax service silently awaits another tax season, when eager EITC filers will pack the place seeking "Cash Back Fast" (for a fee). Across the
street, the Life Skills center promises "Help with dreams—Enrolling Now!" in the form of a GED. A dilapidated stone church next door is fenced off with fluorescent "No Trespassing" signs posted all around. At another former church nearby, all that remains is a crumbling steeple proclaiming the Father's glory. Strangest of all, on this average weekday morning there is hardly another soul in sight.

Continuing out along Route 3, I notice the scene begin to change. No longer are the streets and sidewalks busted up, the homes unoccupied or in disrepair. As I turn into a leafy lane, I come across a battery of dump trucks and heavy machinery laying down a new layer of fresh tar. Judging by the amount of men and machines assigned, it looks as if the job will be complete in time for lunch, leaving ample time to dry before the residents return from work. Sprawling, manicured lawns and curvaceous drives lead up to lavish homes with porticos and chimneys all around. One is a castle made of stone with turrets and lattice windows.

Back in town at midday, I wander into the Lord’s Pantry soup kitchen and am offered the daily fare of "sandwiches, drinks, and prayer" along with a few dozen of the city's down-and-out. I gratefully accept all three in exchange for a small donation. Returning to the streets after lunch, I decide to pay a visit to the nearby Contact Center, a community nonprofit. Although I don't know a thing about the place, a flyer in the window headlined "Janitors for Justice" catches my eye by announcing that 48 percent of Cincinnati children are living in poverty—hardly the thing I was expecting to find in this venerable old city of Proctor & Gamble fame. A subsequent check with the Census Bureau confirms the unhappy fact.

Inside the dimply-lit office, I am greeted by Cassandra, a middle-aged black woman with braids and a melancholy aspect, who manages the Contact Center's outreach to families in need. She agrees to my impromptu request for an interview and shows me to a table piled high with handmade Christmas ornaments—to help pay the bills. "I'll Be There" by the Jackson 5 is playing softly in the background.

As we take our seats, Cassandra shares her primary credential for the job: She was once on welfare—a picture-perfect "welfare mom" according to the stereotype, single with seven children. But the welfare
she knew did not meet the hype, she says: There was no Cadillac, no name-brand clothes, no fancy meals or other special things. There was the bus to get to work and school; thrift-store clothing for the kids twice a year; food to eat and a roof over their heads, most of the time. "I didn't want to be there, because the money that you get is not enough to take care of you, pay rent, gas and electric, telephone," she explains. "At the end of the month the money's gone, you've got to rely on soup kitchens and stuff like that. You can only stretch the dollar so far."

When welfare reform was passed in 1996, she says she started attending public meetings where men and women in suits would talk about how "those people are lazy, those people won't work." That's when she realized they were talking about her. She says she wondered if they had any idea that she had enrolled in job programs one after another; had seen her kids through public schools and into gainful employment; had applied for more jobs than she can remember and been turned away. "I even tried to work in a sandwich factory," she says. "I make sandwiches all the time at home, but I couldn't get the job!"

It didn't take long for her to realize that the politicians knew very little about how she and her neighbors lived, about the level of opportunity they did and did not enjoy. Making matters worse, she says, most of them didn't seem to care. "Folks that are on welfare, the [politicians] look down on us," she says.

True to President Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it," welfare rolls were slashed in Cincinnati and across the United States—down from 12.3 million in 1996 to around 4 million today, or 1.3 percent of the population. The amount of cash assistance available to needy families also shrank to a maximum benefit of $428 per month for a family of three in the median state, less than half the poverty line. In a handful of southern states, just one in 10 poor families with children currently receives welfare and the level of assistance is less than 15 percent of the poverty line.

Cassandra grants that getting more folks off welfare and into work was a good idea—if only jobs could be found. After showing steady gains during the economic boom years of the late 1990s, the share of single mothers in the workforce started to decline again to 54 percent, for a net gain of just five percent between 1995 and 2009. Meanwhile, around half of those who have found jobs since leaving welfare still cannot escape the poverty trap, and one in three continues to live in deep poverty with earnings below $11,500 a year for a family of four. The rise in deep poverty, especially among children, to 20.5 million people in 2012—the highest rate and number since record-keeping began in 1975—is considered a consequence by scholars.

Cassandra says the combination of welfare cuts, insufficient jobs, and a lack of other in-kind supports for single parents to find and keep what low-wage jobs there are has left a lot of people, like herself, in the lurch. At the beginning of welfare reform, she says, advocates in Cincinnati tried to convey to state officials what it would take to move people off the rolls and into gainful employment for the long-term. "We pointed out what needed to happen: childcare, transportation, education ... Without those things how are we gonna get a decent job to make a decent living?" But, she says, many of the promised investments still have not come through—leaving food stamps as the only reliable source of government support for millions of people in need. Citing the latest round of budget cuts in Washington, she worries that even food stamps will decline. "They're taking that safety net away from
us."

When I ask Cassandra why she sees problems like these persisting over time, she turns immediately to politics and the democratic process. Money and social status is how you make yourself heard, she says, but people below or near the poverty line have neither. "We're not equal citizens."

Unlike the legal disenfranchisement of immigrants and former felons and residents of Washington, D.C. and the territories, the concerns Cassandra has in mind do not involve formal restrictions at all. Most of the impoverished people she knows possess the right to vote. Instead, when Cassandra talks of "unequal citizenship" for people like her, she is referring to the inability of low-income people generally to put the rights they have to good effect. If nothing else, she says, her years of community organizing at the Contact Center have opened her eyes to the many practical hurdles that keep poor people from having their voices heard in politics.

For starters, low-income citizens are far less likely to vote. According to the U.S. Census, 47 percent of eligible adults with family incomes of less than $20,000 a year voted in 2012 and just one in four voted in the midterm election of 2010. By contrast, those with annual earnings of $100,000 or more turned out at rates of around 80 percent and 60 percent, respectively. Similar disparities are seen in voter registration. When non-citizens and incarcerated persons are included in the count, the gap in voting and registration across income groups is wider still.

**U.S. Citizenship, Registration, and Voter Turnout by Family Income, 2008-2012**

![Graph showing voter turnout by income level.](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/print/2014/01/why-are-the-poor-and-minorities-less-likely-to-vote/282896/)


A close examination of the reasons non-voters give for staying home—especially those lower down the socioeconomic ladder—suggests that a slew of practical barriers continue to stand in the way of full and equal exercise of the franchise. According to a Caltech/MIT survey of both registered and unregistered eligible voters who did not cast a ballot in 2008, disapproval of candidate choices, busyness, illness, transportation, and registration/administrative problems were the leading causes of non-participation, with considerable variation across groups.

While income and education levels were not recorded in the survey, race and age were major factors influencing who made it to the polls on Election Day and what kind of barriers they faced. Black and Hispanic citizens, for whom the poverty rate is close to three times that of whites, were three times as
likely as whites to not have the requisite I.D. and to have difficulty finding the correct polling place. They were more than three times as likely as whites to not receive a requested absentee ballots, and roughly twice as likely to be out of town on Election Day or to have to wait in long lines. They were also substantially more likely than whites to report transportation problems and bad time and location as reasons for not getting to the polls, while white voters were the most likely to cite disapproval of candidate choices. Taken together, the surveys suggest that white citizens who abstain from voting do so primarily by choice, while the majority of minority non-voters face problems along the way.

**Reasons for Not Voting by Eligible Citizens, 2008**

![Chart](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/print/2014/01/why-are-the-poor-and-minorities-less-likely-to-vote/282896/)

Analysis of Caltech/MIT "2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections." Chart includes all reasons surveyed except those for which all group responses were less than 25 percent (bad weather, forgot); substantially similar reasons are collapsed into a single category and averaged.

How do these data translate into actual votes? The Caltech/MIT survey estimates that between **910,000 and 3 million votes were lost** due to registration problems in 2008, a modest improvement over the year 2000, when between 1.5 million and 3 million votes were lost for the same reason. Another 1.8 million voters experienced equipment problems at the polls, making the total number of registered voters who were prevented from voting in 2008 greater than the margin of victory in the national popular vote in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. What's more, an estimated 1.5 million voters found their polling place poorly run and 1 million reported feeling intimidated at the polls—small but not insignificant percentages. African-American and Hispanic voters were considerably more likely than white voters to be asked to show photo identification at the polls, at rates of 70 percent, 65 percent, and 51 percent, respectively.

Then there are the lines. **Nearly 40 percent of voters** reported waiting in line on Election Day 2012 and 17 percent reported waits of 30 minutes or more—primarily people of color in urban areas and the state of Florida. Black and Hispanic voters waited an average of more than 20 minutes to vote, almost twice as long as whites. In larger, urban counties with populations exceeding 150,000 voters, the average wait was **almost 20 minutes**, more than double the time in counties with 50,000 voters or less. Young voters also experienced significantly longer wait times, and other Election Day hurdles, than their older counterparts. Finally, in Florida, voters waited an average of 45 minutes. An estimated 200,000 Florida voters "gave up in frustration" before they could cast a ballot in 2012. Overall, **nearly one in 10 Americans** reported that they or someone they knew tried to vote but was
not able to in 2012, and close to half of eligible Americans who did not cast a ballot cited external administrative barriers as the major cause.

Election hurdles aside, Cassandra is quick to point out that voting is not the only form of participation practiced in American politics, and it is arguably not the most impactful either. Volunteering for political causes and campaigns, contributing money to candidates, and lobbying the government all have an effect. And here, a mounting body of social science research examined for this study supports Cassandra's hypothesis that "low-income people lack funding to effectively advocate" for their needs and are under-represented as a result.

**Political Participation Rates by Socioeconomic Status, 2008**

![Graph showing participation rates by socioeconomic status](image)


For example, just two percent of Americans at the bottom of the income and education ladder attend campaign meetings and rallies or conduct campaign work, compared to 14 percent of people at the top—a factor of seven to one. When it comes to selecting candidates and funding their campaigns, two percent of all Americans give money in presidential elections and less than half of one percent provide the lion's share. In fact, the largest single donor in 2012 personally accounted for more money than the bottom 98 percent of citizens combined. As Cassandra puts it, "Whoever can buy the most TV time, whoever talks at them the right way" usually gets the votes—and the money to fund campaigns isn't coming from people like her. Finally, of the more than 12,000 interests groups actively lobbying Washington, only a few dozen—less than 1 percent—advocate directly on behalf of low-income people. With annual expenditures of around $1 million, they are outspent by business by a factor of 3,000 to one.

**Concentration of Individual Contributors to Federal Elections, 2012**

![Graph showing concentration of individual contributors](image)
Analysis of 2012 data from the Center for Responsive Politics (www.opensecrets.org)

As the authors of a recent 700-page study conclude, "Year after year, decade after decade, and from one generation to the next, the affluent and well educated have participatory megaphones that amplify their voices in American politics ... [and] shape what politicians hear about political needs, concerns, and preferences." The result, according to another academic, is that poor and near-poor citizens exert "no discernible impact on the behavior of their elected representatives."

Cassandra has no intention of going unheard. Spending an afternoon with her, it's hard to imagine anything getting between her and the ballot box. In fact, she even brings a group of low-income citizens to the state capitol in Columbus once or twice a year so legislators can "hear what people have to say." But speaking isn't the same thing as being heard, she concedes. For one thing, many of the people whom she is trying to empower "feel intimidated by the way the legislators talk to them [or] get scared off." For another, lobbying government costs money she doesn't have. "Our biggest problem is getting money to be able to continue doing the work that we do," she says.

Ultimately, Cassandra says, "Our communities and families are losing because of [what's happening] in Washington, D.C."

* * *

This is the conclusion of a week-long series exploring the intersection of poverty and democracy in America. Read the rest of the series:

**Poverty vs. Democracy in America**: 50 years after Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty, tens of millions of second-class Americans are still legally or effectively disenfranchised.

**Should Felons Lose the Right to Vote?** The poor and minorities are disproportionately locked up—and as a result, disproportionately banned from the polls.

**Immigrant Voting: Not a Crazy Idea**: Until the 1920s, many states and territories allowed non-citizens to cast ballots. Given their role in American society, it's worth reconsidering the practice.

Why Are the Poor and Minorities Less Likely to Vote? Even when America's underclass isn't formally stripped of its ballot, a slew of barriers come between them and full representation and participation.

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Section 2

Rural Poverty
Have you ever noticed that when we in health and human services talk about prevention of chronic disease and health disparities, we talk about cycles of violence, but we rarely talk about the most pernicious root cause—poverty?

Let's have that conversation now. Eighty-five percent of our nation's high-poverty counties are not metropolitan. Read that sentence again. Now consider that 18 percent of rural and frontier America is multicultural and multiracial, but disproportionately poor and unhealthy. Let me be more specific. The poverty rates for rural African Americans and American Indians are three times higher than for whites. Poverty rates for rural African Americans and American Indians are 10 percentage points higher than their urban counterparts.

OK, one more sobering thought before delving into solutions: If you take a U.S. map with points for counties that are “persistently high poverty,” defined as three decades or more with at least 20 percent of the population living in poverty, and superimpose it with counties of children living in poverty, you may take a break from reading this magazine and cry. That's what I did when I saw the maps and explanations in reports on the U.S. Dept of Agriculture's Economic Research Service web site. Think about it. Many of the rural children living in poverty today have parents and grandparents who grew up in poverty. The first thing I learned in business school is that "wealth begets wealth," but now I understand that the reverse is also true: "poverty begets poverty."

If you work in a rural or frontier area, or you support populations living in these areas, you intuitively knew this without getting mired in statistics. And that's part of the problem. Rural folks have been poor for so long that we don't really think about it anymore, and, more important, we
don't think about reducing poverty to reduce illness. Let's consider it now. We all understand that an indirect benefit of employment is improved self-esteem and reduced dependence on the health and social service safety net. We all know the power of psychosomatic disease and it is covered well in the research literature; what we think makes us sick or makes us well. Our ability to project hope and opportunity — whether talking about the stock market or our children's future — has an immediate impact on our physical and emotional health today. Think about the impact of helplessness, or hopelessness, on our psyches.

Essentially, health and human service organizations carry the burden of poverty, but have historically only had the tools to address some of the symptoms. This must change, and now is the time. As leaders in rural health, as leaders in our rural communities, we have an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen our local economies, and break down the walls of the antiquated urban-rural divide of resources. Opportunities abound if we look for them; as the U.S. government prints more money, and funds domestic programs at a record level for this decade, we need to leverage the resources and the new administration's message of hope into communities that are healthier on every level.

The rest of this article is intended to provide ideas, resources and perspective to support you in leveraging your existing resources and capacity to build more economically viable communities and healthier populations.

First, some perspective: do you remember Thomas Friedman's 2005 book, *The World is Flat?* Rural areas are no longer hampered by geography, race or class — they can compete and collaborate in the global marketplace. From the BlackBerry to outsourcing, to downloading our own boarding passes — technology has revolutionized the way we work, the way we think and our expectations.

Think about it. The cyber industry, the knowledge industry, is no longer out of reach. Rural areas have historically been characterized by two types of industries, maybe. One is called "local," such as health care, retail, other producers/sellers of things for the local market. The second industry is called "resource dependent." You all know what that means, and the global price for those commodities is entirely out of our control. If you are lucky, a third market is the "trades" industry, things that can be manufactured or assembled. This one is sought in rural areas, and it brings good wages to the local economy. But those jobs continue to move to other countries. And we all know these industries are not enough.

In contrast to our industries, the urban folk get the desk jobs — because that's where the academic ivory towers and infrastructure are located. All of this should change, and it can change. Education has flattened too. Our metropolitan towns have vibrant community colleges, and distance education ensures you can learn just about anything from your home computer.

Second, rural economic development must include all four key areas listed below to meaningfully address historical, political and social realities and, at the same time, improve the economic viability of the entire rural community. Think about where you live and work; do you have sufficient capacity in these areas? What can your agency do to strengthen them?

1. **Education**: Design and provide programs that meet the needs of adult learners and children of all ages from pre-school through college, including community education and USDA extension services.

2. **Public Infrastructure**: Ensure the availability of and access to basic utilities (e.g., water, electricity and gas), affordable and accessible transportation, and the ability to access modern technology (e.g., the Internet via high-speed connections).

3. **Social Infrastructure**: Provide resources and develop programs such as child care and adult day care, outpatient and inpatient mental health services, and other programs and resources that help rural residents—especially working families and single parents—achieve the degree of independence to hold a job and be able to lead a fulfilling productive life.

4. **Entrepreneurship**: Promote and support innovations in health and social services through collaborations with businesses, faith-based and spiritual entities, and for-profit enterprises.

Third, rethink your community partners and engage them in a new way, with a focus on strengthening these
pillars. The diagram on this page is intended to illustrate the partners.

Let’s take entrepreneurialism as an example. Every farmer is an entrepreneur; we just need to think about innovation in new ways. Talk to your community college. Apply for seed funds to support courses in entrepreneurialism and brainstorm how to infuse the concept in some of their classes. With your K-12 partners, I assume you are already getting professionals into the classrooms to talk about that career path, just like your area health education center tells you to. How about your CFO or other members of administration to talk about your industry as a business? With your financial institution, encourage them to talk to the entrepreneurial student clubs and in the classrooms about how to start a business and compose a business plan. With the other health and social service agencies in town, brainstorm some opportunities for social entrepreneurialism: new or expanded child care or assisted living. If you looked at it five years ago and it didn’t pencil out, or you didn’t have anyone to champion it, bring it up with the entrepreneurial club. Some communities have created local business plan competitions. Think about how to inspire innovation at home.

Fourth, let me share a few examples. One comes from Friedman’s aforementioned book. In it, he explained that the then-CEO of eBay, Meg Whitman, attended an “eBay Live” event, sort of a revival meeting for eBay sellers. There, she met a mom and dad and 17-year-old boy in a wheelchair—very disabled with cerebral palsy. The parents explained that their son was very disabled and could not go to school, but he built an eBay business. The year prior, the parents quit their jobs to help him—and they made more money on eBay than they ever did on their jobs. They also said “on eBay, Kyle is not disabled.”

Another example comes from the Wisconsin Office of Rural Health, which provides funding and staff to the Strong Rural Communities Initiative. This is a multisectoral collaborative; Tim Size of the Rural Wisconsin Health Collaborative, and a former NRHA president, is actively involved. A year ago, they produced a discussion paper and recommendations to enhance statewide support for the business sector to expand wellness initiatives. They also created “The Rural Health and Economic Development Forum,” whose mission is to “optimize the health of rural citizens and the economic well-being of rural communities by identifying, enabling and advocating actions which add value to both.” With start-up grant funding, four Wisconsin hospitals now have a business model for selling wellness services to area employers. Talk to John Eich or Tim Size for more information.

Another example is Charlie Alfero, longtime friend of the NRHA and CEO of Hidalgo Medical Services in Frontier, New Mexico. He created a “health commons” that means one-stop shopping for medical, dental and mental health care, family support and economic development. He has used health as a catalyst for social and economic development in the region.

The National Rural Health Association is developing an initiative on economic development and we are eager to engage new partners on a national level. Internally, the NRHA is developing policy briefs, sessions in all of its conferences, articles in each issue of its trade publication Rural Roads, formation of an Interdisciplinary Leadership Taskforce, and a lot more. The current momentum (originated in NRHA’s Multicultural and Multiracial Committee) has an economic development focus.

This is a great opportunity for collaboration and I hope that you will consider visiting our web site to learn more about our association. The NRHA can be an option for you to address legislative and regulatory barriers to rural economic development. Working together, we can improve rural America.
Economic Development

A Poverty Solution for the Rural South?

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From the founding of the nation, the South has been the least economically developed region of the United States. Many of the necessary preconditions for economic growth and diversification, such as the presence of essential physical resources, large quantities of capital, skilled labor, sufficient technology, and a class of innovators and entrepreneurs, have traditionally been lacking. The 1970 census showed the South to be both more rural and more impoverished than any other region of the country. The South accounted for 41.3 percent of the nation’s rural population but had only 31 percent of the nation’s population. Furthermore, the South contained 44 percent of the total poverty population of the nation. Over 46 percent of all poor Southerners resided in its rural sector.

Popular accounts in recent years have noted the tremendous growth and development of the “sunbelt” states. The rural South, in comparison, has not come of age economically and is not generating self-sustaining growth of new factories, service industries, financial capacity, and housing. It is an area where the potential for development and the hope for elimination of poverty are limited. Not only have financial and physical capital not been forthcoming, but there are also serious questions as to the quality of available human resources.

The Economic Development Process

Defining poverty as an inadequate relative income level suggests economic development as a means of eliminating it. Because economic development has been lacking in the rural South, the process of development should be examined as it applies to rural areas. One way to do this is to examine the relationship between the industrial structure and the economic well-being of regions and nations in terms of stages of development. This method, although often criticized, allows rough generalizations to be made concerning major changes that are occurring. The first stage of development is characterized by a heavy reliance on primary activities such as agriculture. As per capita income grows, there is a decline in the proportion of the working force engaged in agriculture and increased emphasis on manufacturing, a second stage of development. The “final” stage of development is characterized by the growth of service industries.

Another view of the process of economic development examines empirical data. A study by Haren—although not specific to the rural South—found that nonmetropolitan areas experienced significant industrialization during the 1960s. Half of the gains in manufacturing employment in smaller labor market areas were found to stem from new plant locations or expansions in entirely and partly rural communities. Beale, Berry, Till, Lewis, and Prescott as well as Haren have found that significant increases in employment have taken place in the nonmetropolitan or small labor markets. However, the extent to which most of the rural South has “escaped” the first stage of development and has entered successive stages should be analyzed to provide clues to guide policy decisions. For although the terms nonmetropolitan and rural are often used interchangeably, many nonmetropolitan areas cannot be considered rural by most comparative standards. Some nonmetropolitan areas are simply too small to qualify statistically as being metropolitan. Such areas are not “rural” to the degree that the term meaningfully applies to many counties in the rural South. Hence, even though the literature may show that nonmetropolitan counties in the recent past have been able to grow without external assistance, it has yet to be proved that rural counties can be expected to do likewise.

Unfortunately, the rural South and the South in general have historically added to their economic woes by fostering certain institutional practices which restrict development. A long tradition of segregation and discrimination and the evolvement of powerful and conservative elite groups have impaired industrialization and the growth of per capita income in the South. W. W. Rostow claims that the South differs from the rest of the nation in that it was not “born free”; rather, it is a place where changes in the structure, politics, and values of a traditional society are necessary before industrialization can take place.

Because of institutional problems, it is not surprising that local efforts to industrialize have been limited. Many rural counties have expended effort to entice enterprises to locate within them but have met with mixed success. Tax incentives, establishment of industrial parks, local bond issues, and active community

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leadership have attracted some labor intensive industries. However, most rural counties in the South have limited financial resources. For those counties which have gone so far as to establish local bodies to attract new industries, such organizations have usually tended to be both understaffed and underfunded.8

Industrial development is often hindered by hard-to-identify local power groups which are reluctant to upset present wage structures or to cause labor shortages for established industries. Many times when firms are sought for location within a community, the primary goal is to find a specific type of firm that can absorb existing labor surpluses. Firms that are competitive in the local market or that offer the prospect of being unionized are often not considered.9

The problem of limited local resources for development has not been eased much by the federal government. Beginning in 1937 with the establishment of the Farm Security Administration, program efforts in rural areas have been concerned with land use and farm problems—many of which were not extensive and had little effect on many residents of rural areas.

The Area Redevelopment Act (ARA) of 1961 was the first federal legislation to note the existence of problems in rural areas other than agricultural ones. The act provided low-interest loans for new firms and expansion of existing facilities, financial aid to improve public facilities, technical assistance, and modest training programs in economically distressed areas. The program was experimental, and relatively small amounts of funding were authorized.10

The ARA was replaced by the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965. Whereas the ARA assumed that rural areas possessed the basic infrastructure for development, the new legislation was designed primarily to provide such infrastructure. Emphasis was given to planning, intergovernmental cooperation, upgrading of planners' skills, and designation of certain areas as growth centers.11 Unfortunately, lack of local initiative, intercounty squabbling, interagency coordination problems, and poor planning produced mixed results. Further, little attention was given to investment in health, education, and training of the labor force in lagging areas which, according to one line of reasoning, might be more effective than investing in sewer and water lines.12

The Rural Development Act of 1972 was also an infrastructure-oriented piece of legislation designed to improve the economy and living conditions in rural America. The act is farm-oriented and is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Many of the provisions of the act were simply extensions of existing programs. The act does not contain an adequate conceptual framework for rural development policy, nor does it provide for the development of human resources as part of the development process.13

Dilemmas of Future Development Policy

Whether sustained economic development is the solution to poverty and to the problems of rural areas is questionable because of the economic status of many rural counties and their residents. Obviously, large financial disbursements by various regional government agencies (for example, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the current Tennessee-Tombigbee Project) have had an important regional impact on development. Growth also has occurred in some rural areas adjacent or close to metropolitan areas.

It is also evident that there are different possibilities for growth in many southern communities. It has been hypothesized that southern rural industrialization goes through two stages, in which low-wage, labor intensive firms of the first stage train a labor force which attracts higher-wage and more capital intensive firms.14 If this is so, various areas of the rural South seem to have experienced these two stages of industrialization at different times and with divergent results. Many counties have been unable to enter into the first stage of industrial development and continue to rely heavily on agriculture as a source of income and employment. It is often the case that significant private economic development in many rural communities is not practical, given the low potential for return on investment. Furthermore, there are not enough businesses and industries which would consider relocation to or expansion in a rural area for all counties in the rural South to benefit.

In addition, the available labor supply in the rural South presently lacks the education and training to meet the skill requirements of many average or above average wage industries. It is, of course, precisely these industries that are required if sustained economic development is to proceed. Low-wage industries need little additional encouragement to come to the rural South, although there is often sufficient active competition between communities to affect the location of a specific firm. Presently, low-wage industries provide employment opportunities and are a source of income, but communities are unlikely to become significantly better-off because of their presence.

The development process involves more than job creation. There are a limited number of persons whose skills could improve as a result of extensive training or retraining in rural areas. There are also those who are poor, undereducated, disabled, and sick who, even if jobs were available, probably would not be hired. Hence, a serious dilemma for economic development in the rural South is exposed. Should public policy attempt to attract industries whose occupational requirements ex-
ceed the skill levels of the local labor supply? The result would be that the new enterprises would import skilled workers and skim off the best of the local labor force for the remainder. Or, should public policy advocate training local people for jobs which are currently not available and which, in many instances, will not materialize in the near future for underdeveloped rural communities? More concisely, human resource policies will not help the rural South (as a region) if there are no jobs, and jobs will not help if there is no human resource development. Human resource policies have helped to increase the alternatives available to residents of the rural South (for example, they have facilitated out-migration), but they have had only limited success in establishing linkages to local economic development efforts. Hence, those persons remaining behind in the rural South have received limited benefits from such policies.

In the past, skill training has primarily afforded persons an escape route by making out-migration feasible. Most who have converted a training potential into a skill or vocation can be counted upon to leave. As a result, the rural area they leave is convicted of being a provider of a second-rate existence. For those remaining, government transfer payments have often become a major source of income. The alternative of leaving should continue to be provided; however, it should be noted that continued out-migration inhibits the emergence of a skilled labor force as a possible attracting force for industry. With the best-trained people gone, those who remain are seldom an attraction to above average wage industries.

Given limited public resources, the strategy of focusing developmental activities into designated growth centers has been posited as one way of solving the problem. That is to say, funds for both economic and human resource development would be concentrated on designated intermediate-sized cities to the exclusion of all other rural communities. The lack of good job opportunities in many rural communities would induce people to migrate to those “growth centers” where jobs and training would be available. Relocation allowances would be available to cushion the financial costs of moving and to assist in the settlement of a designated area.

From a regional view, the growth center strategy may have appeal because satellite areas often benefit from growth in larger towns. But such a strategy has little to offer for some rural areas except the prospect of population decline and community atrophy. There is little likelihood, for instance, that the most rural counties in the South would benefit from or be designated as growth centers if objective economic criteria were used and political manipulation were not involved in the decision-making process. Moreover, because of political considerations, it is unlikely that a growth center strategy will become the accepted development policy of this nation. The absence of relocation allowances from the array of publicly supported labor market policies adopted to date in this nation is no accident. Politicians are loathe to support policy proposals that encourage the exodus of local populations from their established political districts. It is hardly conceivable that legislative bodies at any governmental level will ever embrace a policy that simply writes off the future of the rural population, no matter how logical may be the objective case for doing so.

As recent problems of urban areas have revealed, there is little to be gained by a strategy of encouraging large numbers of poorly trained and inadequately educated rural persons to gravitate to growth centers. Moving to urban areas may improve their opportunities for education and training—as well as their access to health care—but it does not guarantee that such services will be received. The availability of housing and the quality of crime protection and urban services were all adversely affected in the 1950s and 1960s. The continued financial plight of urban areas throughout the 1970s as well as higher unemployment rates raise serious questions as to the advisability of a policy of encouraging migration to urban areas. Moreover, as Heady has written, the continuation of out-migration is not without its costs to the typical rural community. It exacerbates the decline in income, employment, capital values, and the provision of community services.

Aside from political questions, there is doubt as to the viability of the entire growth center strategy insofar as the smaller metropolitan areas are concerned. For example, linkages with the growth center hinterlands have been found to be weak for smaller areas. Furthermore, given the poor preparation of many rural workers, it is doubtful that urban growth centers in the South would welcome the poorly prepared rural relo- catees. Most growth center policy to date has dealt with physical infrastructure projects and the creation of jobs. Little attention has been paid to housing, transportation, and educational problems that will occur in the receiving communities by the gravitation of people from rural areas.

As an effort to cope with reality and at the same time to search for an acceptable policy alternative, growth center strategy appears questionable. For many rural communities, significant economic development simply will not occur. Some low-wage industries seeking to escape the high costs of production in urban areas may settle, at least temporarily, in some southern rural communities, but they are not likely to offer broader job opportunities or higher incomes than those already available in the area.
This is not to suggest that the federal government should refrain from any role in stimulating development. Where exceptional cases arise in which either state or local efforts are successful in enticing above average wage paying enterprises to locate in the rural South, federal funds should be available to cover the full costs of adapting the local labor to the needed skill requirements. And, should a local enterprise consider expansion, federal funds to cover the costs of institutional and on-the-job training of local workers should be available (especially if such training involves the upgrading of skills). An expanded federal role for support to small business enterprises—especially minority small businesses in the rural South—is essential. On-the-job training programs for small businesses—both existing and newly created—should be consistently available. The Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce should serve as a supportive agency in rural areas to provide housing assistance, transportation development, and aid for the development of public services.

It should be clear that the only tenable role for the federal government is ex post in any economic development effort in any region of the country. To the degree that the federal government may seek to play an ex ante role of trying to make economic development occur, it is likely that an undesirable competitive war between national regions could be triggered. If one region is receiving federal support to attract existing businesses from other regions, it is unlikely that the regions that are losing firms would stand for such a program for long. It is also important to realize that much of the attractiveness of moving is often an attempt by a firm to escape existing labor standards and to flee from unionization. The federal government cannot be supportive of efforts to undermine prevailing work standards under the pretense of fostering economic development. There is nothing, however, to stop states and localities from doing so, and it can be expected that they will continue to make such efforts.

Unfortunately for the rural South, efforts to diversify local economies have fallen into the purview of local business leaders and local government officials (often one and the same) who often do not wish to see prevailing power relationships altered. Such individuals and interest groups often seek industries which will absorb some of the existing labor surplus but not enough to have any meaningful effect on the wage structure. One study found that industrial search activities in rural areas of the South often centered on acquiring minority female labor intensive industries. Agrarian resistance to high-wage industries (and the unions that may follow) is a persistent force in rural communities. It appears, therefore, to be illogical to vest total responsibility for change in those who may have an interest in opposing it.

One alternative is the establishment of community development corporations (CDCs). Experimentation with the concept is being carried out in a 15-county area of the Mississippi Delta. These corporations enable local people to achieve ownership and control over business enterprises that they create or can attract. This approach escapes the domination of the local power structure, which often favors only controlled industrialization. By transcending political boundaries in their membership and operations, the development corporations avoid the parochialism of a single municipality or county. In the rural South, CDCs also have the advantage of drawing upon the increasing feelings of racial pride among minorities.

On the other hand, the CDC approach has conceptual drawbacks which may limit its effectiveness. The most obvious problem is limited funds. It is unlikely that a poor population can raise sufficient funds to engage in activities representing a significant step toward economic development. Their ability to exist without subsidization and available outside technical assistance is questionable. It also is unrealistic to believe that established interests will ignore CDCs should they begin to compete actively for local labor or in other local markets. The strength of CDCs appears to be more one of community involvement than of community development, and their effectiveness may be limited as a general approach to economic development.

No Panacea

The rapidity with which economic development is possible in rural areas is subject to all sorts of institutional constraints and other limitations. Existing unemployment and underemployment will not be absorbed into the private sector in the short run. All of the available evidence indicates that industrialization should not be viewed as the only way to reduce poverty. Public employment and income maintenance programs, as well as continued out-migration, are escape valves in the short run.

Further, until economic development is well under way in the rural South, neither expanded private employment nor public employment will be able to provide job opportunities to prevent out-migration. The major need is not to thwart all migration from rural areas but to prevent that which does occur from having an adverse effect on urban areas. Information is poor concerning available employment opportunities in urban areas for potential migrants, as is attested by the current patterns of rural southern migration. Existing patterns cannot be altered without better information.

The economic development of the rural South may well have to wait until the United States government decides to adopt a comprehensive rural development...
policy. There may be limits to the extent of urbanization that is desirable for a nation. Eventually, attention must turn to the importance of striking a balance between urban and rural life. Until then, it is likely that the thrust of federal policy should be to assist in a purely supportive manner the local and state efforts to attract industries. In a larger context, it may be necessary to rely upon income maintenance and extensive public job creation measures to help "those left behind" until such time as a national rural development policy is enunciated.

FOOTNOTES

1. Financial support for the study from which this paper was drawn was provided by the Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor. The authors also wish to express their appreciation to Lewis H. Smith for his critical comments.


3. Ibid.


8. Some studies, however, have concluded that the major determinants of plant location or expansion are independent of public action or control. See, for example, Ronald J. Dorf and M. Jarvin Emerson, "Determinants of Manufacturing Plant Location for Non-Metropolitan Communities in the West North Central Region of the U.S.," Journal of Regional Science, vol. 18, no. 1 (April 1978), p. 119.


15. Rungeling et al., op. cit., chaps. 7 and 9.


17. It has been suggested [see K. R. Tefertiller, "Rural Development in an Urban Age," American Journal of Agricultural Economics, vol. 55, no. 5 (December 1973), p. 772] that some rural areas might be designated "artificial" growth centers in order to receive federal dollars. Criteria for establishing these centers would at best be controversial.


22. Heady, op. cit.

Learning About Politics in Low-Income Communities

Poverty and Political Knowledge

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Many take for granted that children living in impoverished communities are disadvantaged on several social outcomes, including civic knowledge, because of their poverty and the circumstances that go along with this condition. However, most analyses of poor communities are conducted only in urban neighborhoods. In this article, the author examines the paradox of small-town life: On one hand, many rural areas and small towns are just as or even more impoverished than many urban neighborhoods; on the other hand, these same communities are praised as the most civically minded and politically knowledgeable places within the United States. How can two similarly poor community types produce such different outcomes? The author shows that the best explanation for these differences is the social interaction that characterizes small towns and rural areas. Political discussion within smaller towns is beneficial for adolescents’ levels of political knowledge, whereas this discussion in urban areas is associated with lower levels of knowledge.

Keywords: political knowledge; political engagement; civic engagement; political socialization; neighborhood effects; contextual effects; poverty

Rural poverty has been and continues to be a way of life for many Americans. In 2000, the metropolitan poverty rate stood at 10.8%, whereas the rural poverty rate was 13.4%. In spite of the higher rate in small towns, most social science research focuses on impoverished urban areas. Growing up in poor, urban neighborhoods is detrimental for school achievement, health and

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well-being, socioemotional functioning, and civic engagement and political knowledge. In contrast, and in spite of their poverty, small towns and rural areas are often described as bastions of American civic life. Why would these two impoverished environments have such different patterns of civic engagement and different levels of political knowledge?

I argue that these divergent patterns are due at least in part to the influence of social networks and positive social interactions in smaller towns. Informal networks that facilitate social development are often lacking in modern urban neighborhoods (Sampson, 1992; Wilson, 1987, 1996), but these types of relationships are more common in smaller towns and rural areas. Individuals are more knowledgeable and participatory in communities where they know and trust one another (Putnam, 2000). Here, I explore the differences in political knowledge among adolescents in smaller compared with more urban communities.

**Impoverished Communities and Social Outcomes**

The scholarship on the negative effects of poverty on many social outcomes is almost entirely based on urban neighborhoods, stimulated in part by Wilson’s (1987, 1996) work on the “urban underclass.” The urban focus is also largely practical; indeed, one look at a sampling of indicators of social and economic status confirms that life in certain parts of cities is abysmal. Even so, children in urban America are not alone in their deprivation. The nonmetropolitan poverty rate has exceeded the metropolitan poverty rate since these rates were officially measured in the 1960s (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2004). In 2000, the average urban resident made over $12,000 more per year than the average rural resident. These differences are due in part to the wider income distributions in urban than rural areas. Poverty is more common and widespread in rural areas. And although the average cost of living is lower in rural than urban areas (Nord, 2000), rural residents often have higher costs for transportation and medical care (Rogers, 1988). Rural areas and smaller towns suffer from many of the same problems that poor, urban neighborhoods face: high levels of unemployment, low levels of educational attainment, geographic isolation, and the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Given these similarities between small towns and urban communities, one might expect similar social outcomes. In some cases, this would be right. Rural schoolchildren score much lower on standardized tests and are more likely to drop out of school than those in the suburbs or urban areas.
Single parenthood is on the rise in smaller communities (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992), especially among those in poverty. In fact, in 1995, the proportion of single-parent families below the poverty rate within rural America was essentially the same as that in urban areas (32.8% compared with 32.2%; see “Poverty and Well-Being,” 1999). Furthermore, with the losses in the agricultural and industrial sectors that once typified the rural labor force, jobs in the low-paying service sector have been unable to replace the wages and benefits to which many were accustomed. Even so, many scholars extol the virtues of small-town civic life, while they bemoan the lack of civic mindedness in poor urban neighborhoods. Why would similarly impoverished environments produce such different patterns of engagement?

Although many smaller towns and rural areas have the same problems that poor, urban neighborhoods face, one of the major differences is the types of interactions that take place and the relationships that form within these communities. Social interaction is the mechanism that translates community characteristics into particular behavioral outcomes (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Two theories describe, generally, how the level of poverty influences social interaction within a community.

Theories of collective socialization and contagion describe how the affluence of a community can affect a variety of social outcomes. Collective socialization theories suggest that because adults in more well-off communities are more highly educated, steadily employed, and more participatory in civic life than adults in poor communities, they bestow benefits on all young people within the communities (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Wilson, 1987). Contagion theories describe how behaviors, both good and bad, spread through peer interaction. They assume that if children grow up in communities where their peers drop out of school, for example, they will be more likely to drop out; and likewise, if all their peers go to college, they are more likely to go to college (Crane, 1991; Granovetter, 1978; Schelling, 1978).

Even though these theories were mostly developed with poor, urban communities in mind, they still indicate that the types of adult-child and child-child interactions within a community have important influences on the socialization of young people. This interaction is mediated in part by the level of affluence or poverty within the community. Individuals, including young people, are a part of particular local contexts; these contexts structure interaction patterns through which people receive information about a wide range of activities. This community context creates a particular culture, or bias, that is transmitted from generation to generation through interaction in the community.
Although the economic standing of a community is undoubtedly a component of this culture, we should not expect the experience of poverty or affluence to be uniform across different environments with varying biases and contexts. Impoverished urban communities are often characterized as environments of social disorganization (Sampson, 1992; Wilson, 1987) and places where the “community structure is unable to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls” (Sampson, 2001, p. 8). The characteristics of many poor, urban neighborhoods, and thus the social interactions within them, often do not facilitate the kind of environment in which individuals can come together to achieve common goals. The networks and interactions within smaller communities, however, are characterized quite differently.

Social Interaction in Rural America

Poverty within small towns is “geographically concentrated in the same way that urban poverty is confined by neighborhoods; and rural children in poverty face the same challenges as poor urban children—substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and educational failure” (Nadel & Sagawa, 2002, p. 12). It is often assumed that urban communities are the only places that suffer from a lack of adequate institutions, such as good schools, community centers, and health clinics. However, these facilities are often just as lacking in rural communities, which also lack the money to hire and maintain the best teachers, to pay for new textbooks and equipment for school activities, and to attract medical practitioners and community leaders.

In spite of their poverty and hardship, individuals in rural areas are more likely to vote and to engage in other civic activities than those in poor urban areas (Putnam, 2000, chaps. 7, 12; Oliver, 2001; Verba & Nie, 1972). Monroe (1977, p. 75) finds a negative association between urbanism and turnout that is stronger in magnitude than education, income, and race. Looking at particular counties in Illinois, he shows that turnout is highest in the most rural areas, declines a bit in small towns, even more in suburbs, and is lowest in urban areas. Much of decline in voter turnout in the past 30 years can be explained by looking at the declining levels within the nation’s largest 32 metropolitan areas (Nardulli, Dalager, & Greco, 1996). Outside of these cities, turnout has remained steady.

An illustrative example can be found in Perry, Alabama. This community is small (only 11,800 residents) and is one of the poorest places in America (with an average income of $20,000 in 2000). But in the 2000 election, nearly 70% of adults in Perry County voted, and in 1996, 67% turned out. Accord-
According to a Perry County commissioner, “Voting is part of our culture, and we continue to preach it” (Scripps Howard News Service, 2004).

The commissioner points to an underlying rationale for higher civic knowledge and involvement in rural areas: a network of strong, positive social bonds that create a particular “culture” or “context” that promotes the importance of and fosters participation in politics. In smaller communities, “human relationships are intimate, enduring and based on a clear understanding of where each person stands in society” (Bell & Newby, 1972, p. 23). Often, an individual’s identity is tied to the smaller community because families tend to “stay put” and are less mobile than those living in large, urban neighborhoods (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Martinez-Brawley, 1990). Older sociological scholarship contends that people feel alienated from one another because of the high population density and heterogeneity in large (urban) areas (Toennies, 1887; Wirth, 1938).

The portrayal of the close ties and participatory nature in small towns contrasts with Wilson’s (1987, 1996) descriptions of informal social networks that are lacking in urban America. The difference between these networks and those in small towns, and thus why outcomes are often more positive in small towns, can be accounted for by what Sampson (2001) refers to as “the believed capacity for collective action” (p. 13). People can come together for any number of reasons. If they do not believe that they can effect change, or somehow obtain some of what they need, however, the relationships are less likely to support the values and behaviors that would allow a community to overcome its impoverished status and participate in the political system. The theory does not assume that social bonds and networks are absent in urban areas but rather that they are often not of the type that facilitate political knowledge and participation. Neighbors in poor inner cities, as well as small towns, often rely on one another for child care, financial support, and emotional support (Danziger & Chih Lin, 2000), but these relationships in small towns also incorporate civic or community activities.

Because poverty is more evenly distributed in rural areas, poor residents are not isolated from the rest of the community. Rather, all residents, whether they are poor or middle class, attend the same schools and places of worship, and they live in close proximity to one another. In cities, however, poor residents are often isolated from mainstream society, which “deprives inner-city residents not only of conventional role models . . . but also of the social resources (including social contacts) provided by mainstream social networks” (Wilson, 1996, p. 66). Social networks provide young people with additional caregivers, who provide social control and cohesion (Aschbrenner, 1975; Jarrett, 1995). These networks also facilitate opportunities for young people to discuss current events and local affairs. It is the presence of
these networks in many small towns that helps foster civic engagement as well as political knowledge. On the basis of this scholarship, I posit then that social interaction is the key to understanding why two types of impoverished communities yield different outcomes related to political knowledge.

Data and Methods

The data for this research are from the Metro Civic Values Study, a study of students at 29 public high schools (Grades 9 to 12) across the state of Maryland and northern Virginia (Gimpel, 1999-2000). These data are unique because unlike national random samples in which 1 to 2 students per community are selected, these data were designed with the aim of analyzing the roles that communities play in political socialization, and as such, 70 to 150 students were surveyed at each location. The sample was selected using multi-stage cluster-sampling techniques. In the first stage, 14 clusters, in the form of school districts, were selected within the entire state of Maryland, along with 4 in Virginia. These clusters were designed to represent urban, suburban, and rural contexts of varying levels of homogeneity on relevant population characteristics, such as race, socioeconomic status, political partisanship, and participation.

At the next stage, researchers selected 29 schools out of the 14 clusters by random draw. Each district had a minimum of 1 school selected. They selected a few more schools in the districts with larger populations because of their greater heterogeneity across the relevant dimensions. The resulting sample is representative of the overall population of the area (Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003).'

The categorization of communities into rural, suburban, and urban is highly problematic. The typical methods used to place communities into these categories use either population or census codes for metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs). Yet almost all communities within the United States fall into an MSA, and thus there is little variation, resulting in inadequately differentiating between an “urban” community and a “suburban” one. Similarly, the use of population poses problems, because it cannot adequately differentiate between the middle categories of communities. Few would quarrel that a community of 3,000 would not be considered urban; likewise, one of 2 million is not a small town. Population certainly differentiates between the poles, but it does not sufficiently distinguish between the middle categories. For example, two towns with similar populations can have very different levels of density and are thus very different places in which to grow up. Such
places are not likely to impart the same sets of norms or have the same sets of interaction patterns.

Because almost any scheme to demarcate clear lines between these different types of communities would be somewhat arbitrary, I use a continuous measure, population density, to measure community type. This continuous measure provides greater variation than a categorical scheme. Thus, when I describe the results, I use terms such as more rural or more urban. Even so, it is worth noting that the small communities in these data are not among the most rural communities in the United States. This may actually make my case more difficult; if it is true that social interaction can mediate the negative effects of poverty in these slightly larger small towns, it is likely the effects will be even stronger in the most rural communities in the United States.

Finally, once the school sites were chosen, a representative sample of students was selected on the basis of grade level, achievement level, race and ethnicity, and parental socioeconomic status. At each school, students were surveyed in their social studies classes in the springs of 1999 and 2000, for a total sample size of 3,062. The resulting sample represents a broad cross-section of economic, political, and demographic contexts. The appendix compares the racial breakdown of the subsamples to the populations within each community and also shows the sample sizes within each school. Other data on the representativeness of the sample to its population can be found in Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht’s (2003) Cultivating Democracy.

The community-level variables were constructed using U.S. census data matched to the schools’ ZIP codes. Although admittedly, the use of ZIP codes as proxies for communities presents some problems, this is an acceptable approximation to obtain socioeconomic, racial, and political data on communities (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993). These respondents attend public schools, making it less likely than if they were enrolled in private schools that they would live in markedly different communities from the ones in which they attend school.

The dependent variable is political knowledge. Political knowledge is an essential feature for most other forms of civic engagement. It fosters citizens’ abilities to connect their personal interest with specific public policies (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996); those with higher levels of knowledge are more consistent in their views across issues and across time (Galston, 2001); knowledge is a key element in helping people understand political institutions and events (Popkin & Dimock, 1999); and, perhaps most important, political knowledge promotes democratic values, including tolerance and most forms of political participation. Young people with higher levels of knowledge are more active in their schools and communities (Niemi & Junn, 1998). By political knowledge, my concern is with the fundamental under-
standing of political structures, historically significant events, and the identities and roles of officeholders in the political system. The measure was created as an index of the number of correct answers out of the seven knowledge-related questions on the survey and then rescaled from 0 to 100 to make the interpretation of results easier (see Table 1 for the specific wordings of questions).

There are two sets of independent variables: individual traits from the survey and community characteristics based on census data (see Table 1). The individual variables are controls for several traditional civic education indicators that are known to influence political knowledge. First is the number of civics courses a student has taken; civics courses tend to have a positive influence on political knowledge (Niemi & Junn, 1998). Because the respondents

| Table 1  |
| Description of Variables Used in Hierarchical Linear Modeling Analysis |

**Student-Level Dependent Variable**

Political knowledge: number of questions out of seven answered correctly, then rescaled from 0 to 100
1. How many Senators does each state have in the U.S. Senate?
2. In the U.S. House of Representatives, the member who is elected to preside is called?
3. Where can you find the Bill of Rights?
4. Presidential elections are held every _____ years?
5. The system of government in which power is divided between two levels of government is?
6. Who is the current Vice President of the U.S.?
7. The current Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court is ________,

**Student-Level Independent Variables**

Civics courses taken: semesters of civics-related coursework taken (0 to 5)
Dislike civics courses: dummy variable (1 = dislikes civics, 0 = likes civics)
No college plans: dummy variable (1 = not planning to attend college, 0 = planning for college)
Female: dummy variable (1 = female, 0 = male)
Black: dummy variable (1 = African American, 0 = not African American)
Inverse income: inverse of parental income scale (0 to 41, where 41 = lowest income)
Political discussion: number of days a week students discuss politics with others (0 to 7)

**Community-Level Independent Variables**

Density: measures urbanization with community in persons per square mile (72 to 19,921)
Percentage less than $15,000: measures poverty within community (1.8% to 34.7%)
were predominantly from one state, civics requirements are fairly uniform across the population studied. A student’s affinity for civics courses is also important; students who like their civics courses are more knowledgeable than those who dislike them. I include a dummy variable on whether a student dislikes civics courses. I also use a dummy variable to measure respondents’ educational aspirations, because students who plan to go to college are more politically knowledgeable and engaged than those who plan to complete their education with high school. Finally, the other control is for gender effects, because girls still generally have lower levels of knowledge than boys.

In addition to these individual-level controls, the focus of this article is on the interactions of parental income with the size and economic composition of the communities. The estimations include the individual measure of parental income and cross-level interactions with three community-level variables. Population density measures the urbanization, or size, of the community and is calculated as the number of people per square mile. The proportion of the community’s residents who make less than $15,000 per year measures the degree of poverty within the community. Because some might argue that any differences in outcomes between rural and urban areas may be due to racial differences in poverty, I control for whether a respondent is Black and examine cross-level interactions with race, density, and the percentage of the community’s residents who make less than $15,000. Finally, a second model examines the influence of social interaction (students’ political discussions with family members and friends) on political knowledge and includes cross-level interactions with discussion, density, and community poverty.

To conduct these multivariate analyses, I use hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). It is possible to create a series of interaction terms in a regular ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to account for cross-level interactions, but OLS regression does not provide accurate estimates for data at multiple levels of analysis. HLM maintains the assumptions of linearity and normality that are in OLS regression but deals with the special statistical challenges of data analysis when individual observations are clustered within schools, geographic jurisdictions, or distinct temporal periods rather than independently distributed. HLM provides a means to estimate the variability of the regression coefficients (slopes and intercepts) across communities (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). The main difference between HLM and OLS is in the error terms; the HLM model provides a more conservative estimate of the standard errors of coefficients than OLS models.
Table 2
Estimation of Fixed Effects for Political Knowledge, Excluding Social Interaction

<table>
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<th>$\gamma$ Coefficient (SE)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>Inverse income (higher value = lower income)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>Density</td>
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<tr>
<td>% less than $15,000</td>
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<tr>
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<td>–9.333*** (2.210)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Density</td>
<td>–0.0004 (0.0002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>% less than $15,000</td>
<td>0.144* (0.083)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civics courses taken</td>
<td>1.199*** (0.234)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>–5.210** (1.379)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No plans to attend college</td>
<td>–7.745** (1.970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislikes civics courses</td>
<td>–6.111*** (1.231)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentage reduction in error from fully unconditional model: 9.95%. Regression coefficients were derived using hierarchical linear modeling. Italicized variables are individual variables. The Level 2 variables are indented and placed underneath the Level 1 variables for which they were controlled.

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .001.

Results

Table 2 shows the results from the hierarchical linear regression model for political knowledge, excluding social interaction effects. The direct effects, or individual-level effects, are not surprising. Individuals from low-income families score lower than those with higher incomes, African American students score significantly lower than other students (by 9 points), female students score lower than male students, college-bound adolescents are more knowledgeable, and those who dislike their civics courses are less knowledgeable than those who enjoy these classes. It is important to note that civics courses also improve knowledge; with each additional semester of civics, students score 1.2 points higher on the knowledge test.

The most interesting results are with the cross-level interactions. The results should be read as follows: lower income students score lower than higher income students; lower income students in more urban areas have lower scores than poor students in smaller towns; and poor students living in impoverished communities score slightly higher on the knowledge test, controlling for urbanization. The low-income students living in poor, smaller...
towns are more knowledgeable than similarly situated students in urban areas. Thus, growing up in a poor community does not necessarily consign one to low levels of political knowledge, provided the impoverished community is a smaller town.

These results hold even controlling for the respondent’s race. The benefits of growing up in a smaller town are not merely because the communities in population area are generally all White. The cross-level interactions for race underscore this fact. Although Black students in more urban areas have lower knowledge scores, political knowledge actually rises among Black students in poor communities, controlling for urbanization. Although there are few Black students in these smaller towns ($n = 20$), a difference-of-means test shows that they score 7 points higher than Blacks in the more urban areas (65% correct compared with 58%, respectively; $p < .10$).

Figure 1 shows graphical representations of the relationships between political knowledge, urbanization (density), and poverty (income less than $15,000$). The graphs are drawn from the HLM regression model, and thus each variable in the model has been controlled. The darker line represents students who are poor, and the lighter line represents more affluent students. The graphs illustrate the influence of communities. Regardless of family background, knowledge increases in poor communities and decreases in urban communities. Affluent students, in any community, score higher on knowledge tests than lower income students. One would probably assume that knowledge would be highest among affluent children in affluent towns, but knowledge is higher in poorer communities (controlling for urbanization) among both higher and lower income children. Smaller towns, despite their poverty, are better able to foster political knowledge than wealthy suburbs. Additionally, the knowledge gaps between the rich and the poor are less significant in smaller towns than the more urban areas (3.7 compared with 6.2, respectively) as well as in poorer communities compared with affluent ones (4.1 compared with 5.5, respectively). Thus, even though it is better to come from a family that is well off, these benefits are less of an advantage in poor, rural communities.

The final set of results examines the effects of social interaction, in the form of political discussions students have with family and friends (Table 3). Political discussions are just one type of social interaction that may affect political socialization but the only such concept available in this survey. Political discussions have a positive direct impact on political knowledge. For every additional day a week that a respondent discusses politics with others, his or her score increases by 1.2 points. Students learn not only by reading books and sitting in the classroom but by engaging one another on political issues.
Figure 1
(a) Interaction of Parental Income and Poverty on Political Knowledge; (b) Interaction of Parental Income and Urbanization on Political Knowledge
There are two important findings with regard to the interactions. First, discussions have a negative impact on knowledge in the neighborhoods with higher densities but have a positive influence in poor communities, controlling for urbanization. The discussions that take place in impoverished smaller towns promote political knowledge, whereas those in urban areas are negatively associated with political knowledge. These data do not speak to the content of the discussions, and thus I could only speculate about why political discussions in urban areas actually seem to undermine political knowledge.

The overall level of inequality within the community likely has significant effects on socialization, including political discussion. There is greater income equality in rural areas and small towns than in urban areas, and as such, adolescents coming of age in urban areas witness the extent of their poverty by comparing their status with that of extremely affluent neighbors.
just blocks away. This not only makes their poverty seem greater than it might in a rural community in which the distribution of income is much narrower, but it also erodes trust in both government and the members of the community to be able to change the situation (Uslaner, 2002). This relative deprivation creates the attitudes Sampson (2001) describes in which residents of impoverished urban areas lack the sense that their networks can positively effect change within the community. Thus, the content and tone of the political discussions that take place in these neighborhoods is likely to be very different from those in smaller communities. In ethnographic work, Cynthia Duncan (1999) points out that social capital is much higher in smaller towns that have low socioeconomic inequality than in those small towns with high inequality. Inequality impedes the emergence of strong social networks by stratifying society.

Finally, once I look at social interaction, the effects of the cross-level interactions for individual income and race are no longer significant. The direct effects of parental income and race are still important, but when social interaction is controlled, differences between rural and urban communities vanish, indicating that the primary difference between these communities is the interactions and networks within them.

Conclusions

The concept of the urban underclass has typically included one or more of the following characteristics: (a) the persistence and/or intergenerational transmission of poverty, (b) geographic concentration, (c) social isolation from mainstream society, (d) unemployment and underemployment, (e) low skills and education, and (f) membership in a (racial) minority group (Gephart & Brooks-Gunn, 1997, p. xiv).

Although most scholars interested in the effects of these characteristics on social outcomes are concerned with urban areas, the above list adequately describes much of rural America as well. The main differences between impoverished small towns and urban neighborhoods are their racial composition and the social interactions within the communities. The results of my analysis show that even among African Americans, poor small towns are the best environments for political learning. This is especially true for lower income students, because the gaps between the rich and the poor are narrower in smaller towns. The negative effects of living in poor urban neighborhoods must not be due solely to their concentrated poverty, high unemployment, and racial composition.
Instead, the main difference between these environments is in the social
interactions that take place there. The patterns of social interaction are differ-
ent in content and character in many poor, urban neighborhoods compared to
poor, smaller towns. Once again, I am not suggesting that networks and rela-
tionships are absent in urban areas but rather that they are less likely to be of
the type that foster or facilitate political knowledge. In smaller communities,
for a variety of reasons, adults may exercise greater social control and
accountability over young people, because most residents know one another,
and often, relationships have formed through kinship and friendship ties that
have developed over long periods of time.

The size of smaller towns and the fact that many families have resided in
these locales for many generations enable residents to engage those around
them. Children can discuss issues with their parents, as well as their grand-
parents and other adults whom they know very well. These relationships not
only afford young people opportunities for jobs, as Wilson (1996) suggests,
but also indirectly influence academic achievement through activities avail-
able within the community (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Social inter-
action within smaller towns, in the form of political discussions, is also an
important mechanism helping young people learn about politics and govern-
ment. Informal ties can flourish in small towns, where residents often meet
one another on regular bases through various local community gatherings. It
is worth noting that many parts of urban America were once described in this
same way. Throughout much of the early 20th century, immigrants found
their way to America’s cities and lived in neighborhood enclaves in which
social interaction patterns looked much like those we see in smaller towns
today. There is a history of these patterns in urban America, and the potential
for the future may lie in this past.

I do not mean to suggest that the focus on urban poverty is misguided. In
fact, from a policy perspective, this work rightly emphasizes the worst envi-
ronments for political socialization. However, by comparing impoverished
urban neighborhoods only with affluent communities, one may miss some of
the nuances of urban life. Negative social outcomes, whether they are teen-
age pregnancy, drug abuse, or low civic knowledge, cannot be explained only
by examining poverty, geographic isolation, or racial composition. This is
best illustrated only when poor smaller towns are included in the analysis.

Even though smaller towns seem to be good environments for socializing
young people, it is still very much the case that children from higher income
homes are better off than those with low-income parents. This is not surpris-
ing and indicates that there is more to learning about politics than inter-
actions within the community. From objective resources such as books and
computers to more subjective factors, such as parental education, the resources available to children in affluent homes are vast compared with those available to children of lesser means. Yet the advantages of affluence are less important in small towns than in wealthy suburbs or urban neighborhoods.

Knowledge is only one aspect of political socialization but is seen by many as a fundamental prerequisite to democratic citizenship. Without adequate levels of knowledge about politics and government, political participation is less likely. To the extent that participation depends on knowledge, the future in many American smaller towns looks bright, especially compared with impoverished urban America.
Appendix

Student and Sample Populations by Race and Ethnicity at Public High Schools Surveyed in the
Metro Civic Values Survey, 1999 to 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Other/Biracial</th>
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(continued)
### Appendix (continued)

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Note: Values represent the percentages of each category within the sample and population.

a. The “Other/Biracial” category for the sample population includes mainly those students who classified themselves as biracial. This category is listed as 0 for most school population statistics because these school districts do not classify their students as biracial or multiracial. The vast majority of biracial students were of African American–Caucasian ancestry, and school officials usually classify these students as “Black.”

b. Figures may not total 100% because of rounding. Names of schools have been replaced by arbitrary letters because three of the schools asked not to be identified by name. More information about the school sites can be obtained on request from the author.
Notes

1. To correct for the unequal sizes of sample subclasses, I use sample weights (see Kish, 1987). The weights are defined by the inverse probability of selection and corrected for the slight oversampling or undersampling of populations in some districts within the study area. The weights are defined by Weight \( i \) = \( 1 / \left[ N \text{ of Districts} \times [(\text{School}_n / \text{District}_N) \times (\text{School}_n / \text{School}_N)] \right] \), where Weight is the sample weight for individual \( i \), \( N \text{ of Districts} \) is equal to the number of school district clusters (14), \( \text{School}_n \) is equal to the number of students sampled at the particular school at which \( i \) is a student, \( \text{District}_N \) is equal to the number of students in the entire district in which \( i \) is a student, and \( \text{School}_N \) is equal to the total number of students in the school at which \( i \) is a student. The need to use these weights is debatable. Their use typically makes little difference to the magnitude of coefficients in the regression analyses, but the variances are typically increased by their use, and consequently the standard errors (and significance tests) are often changed.

2. A completely random sample design was not feasible because most principals and teachers will not allow researchers to randomly select and pull children out of classes for a survey because it is too disruptive to their classes. Researchers were instructed to incorporate a lesson plan along with the collection of surveys so that students could gain something from the experience. Because social studies is a sufficiently ubiquitous part of the high school curriculum, the resulting sample from each school closely mirrors the overall school population, as shown in Table 1.

3. The scale is \( \frac{\text{Number of Correct Answers}}{7} \times 100 \).

4. Parental income was obtained by asking students to name their parents’ occupations, and then researchers used the mean income of each occupational category listed.

5. I selected $15,000 because according to the Office of Management and Budget, the poverty line for a three-person family is $14,494.

6. Although there are three levels of analysis (the original 14 clusters, 29 schools, and the individual respondents), I use a two-level hierarchical linear modeling model because there are not enough Level 3 groups to justify a three-level model.

References


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Section 3

Education
As most educators know, children from low-income households often arrive at the kindergarten door substantially behind children from higher-income households. On average, children from poor families score far below their peers from higher-income families in early vocabulary and literacy development, in early math, and in the social skills they need to get along well in their classrooms (Halle et al., 2009; Lee & Burkham, 2002).

This gap in school readiness receives much less attention than the test score gaps that hound these children throughout their school careers or the vast gulfs in high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates that are the end results. But the early delay in pre-academic progress largely predicts those later, more visible shortfalls (Burchinal, et al., 2011; Duncan & Magnuson, 2005). Children who enter school lagging far behind don't usually catch up.

It's no mystery why children from low-income families often start kindergarten so far behind. These children are less likely to have the early educational support that is so crucial for the development of their
knowledge and skills. Their parents tend to be less well educated and more stressed, and to have fewer psychological and financial resources. These children are less likely to spend their days in playful conversational banter with an adult who has the time and patience to answer their innocent, incessant questions, helping them build their vocabularies and their general store of knowledge. They typically have fewer enticing educational toys that could kick-start their cognitive development—sets of blocks and fascinating puzzles; fantastic or mundane clothes for dramatic play; wildly colorful picture books telling amazing stories.

This is where preschool comes in. We know that preschool can provide the developmentally stimulating experiences that many children growing up in poverty lack. The evidence is incontrovertible.

But here’s a crucial point: To fight poverty, preschool must provide an enormous early boost that changes the academic trajectory of a child forever. Only a high-quality preschool program will do the job. Lower-quality programs do not have a significant impact on poverty because they do not make that life-changing difference. How do we know this? A mature body of research on preschool provides guidance.

**We’ve Got Studies**

We are lucky to have evidence from three rigorous longitudinal studies that report the effects of high-quality preschool programs on children followed well into adulthood—the Perry Preschool study, the Abecedarian study, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers study.

The Perry Preschool and Abecedarian studies have followed children who were randomly assigned into preschool experiment groups and non-preschool control groups over several decades. These programs were both of the highest quality, with the Abecedarian program being particularly intensive in dosage and duration. The Chicago study, a strong quasi-experimental study, followed many more children and is perhaps more generalizable, with children enrolled in more typical, public preschools of relatively high quality through the mid-1980s.

The Perry Preschool children are now entering their 50s, the Abecedarian children their 40s, and the Chicago children are currently in their mid-30s.

We are also fortunate to have several state-level studies of large, current preschool programs (Barnett, Jung, Frede, Hustedt, & Howes, 2011). These programs are not old enough to have followed cohorts of students for many years, but some have followed students into elementary school. These studies have been conducted in states (especially Arkansas, California, New Mexico, Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia) that have put substantial effort toward accomplishing a most difficult and worthy goal—a consistently high-quality preschool program of extensive reach.

Finally, we have the recently published update of the Head Start Impact Study, with new 3rd grade findings (Puma et al., 2012). This huge national study has been long awaited with trepidation, because results from earlier studies were disappointing.

**The Evidence Is Strong: Quality Matters**

The Perry, Abecedarian, and Chicago studies all report that the preschool children they served have had significantly more success in school and in life than the control children.
These studies have been extensively reported on, but here are some of the main findings.

The Perry Preschool children scored significantly higher on standardized tests; graduated high school on time at higher rates (65 percent versus 45 percent for the control group); were much less likely to have been convicted of a crime (28 percent versus 52 percent for the controls); and at age 40 had expected lifetime earnings that averaged about $150,000 higher than the control group’s (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

The Abecedarian children, too, scored significantly higher than control-group children on standardized tests throughout their schooling. The girls in the preschool group became teenage parents at almost half the rate of the girls in the control group (26 percent versus 45 percent), and the preschool children attended college at a much higher rate (36 percent versus 13 percent) (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002).

The Chicago study found effects that are similar to, but less stellar than, those found in the other two studies. The Chicago preschoolers scored significantly higher on standardized tests. But they graduated high school at a rate just 9 points higher than the control group (79 percent versus 70 percent). The Chicago preschoolers also got in trouble with the law less frequently as teenagers (17 percent for the preschool group versus 21 percent for the controls), but the advantage was much smaller than it was for the Perry program (Reynolds, Temple, & Ou, 2010).

Both the Abecedarian and the Chicago researchers found that the preschool children were retained in grade about 40 percent less, and all three of the studies reported special education placements for the preschool children at about half the rate of the control group.

Economic cost-benefit analyses that used the findings of each of these studies to calculate the social return on investment in these programs produced eye-opening results. Lifetime returns on the dollar for the initial program investments range from a healthy 3:1 for the expensive Abecedarian program to a huge 17:1 for the Perry program. The Chicago program produces a 10:1 return of benefits over costs. These returns arise not only from the adult earnings increases of the lucky individuals who attended these great preschool programs, but also from increased income tax and sales tax revenues paid to government from those earnings, from savings to criminal justice systems because of decreased crime, and from reduced use of social safety net programs. Analysts estimate that when high-quality programs reach most children in a school district, these programs will save about 3 percent of the overall school district budget each year through decreases in grade retention and special education services, along with increases in positive peer effects that lift overall school efficiency (Belfield, 2004).

Compare these findings to those of the state studies and Head Start. The less intensive state-level programs across the United States, striving for high quality but often hitting the mid- to high-quality range, seem to be producing early benefits of about the same strength as the Chicago programs—and smaller than the Perry and Abecedarian programs (Frede & Barnett, 2011). The quality of Head Start programs, which often struggle with partial funding while attempting to serve as many children in poverty as possible, is known to be inconsistent, with many sites of lower quality (Currie & Neidell, 2007). The Head Start Impact Study 3rd grade results confirm that although Head Start increases children’s academic readiness, the benefit is short-term and becomes imperceptible within two years (Puma et al., 2012).

It should be noted that one state program implemented with particular attention to high quality has been rigorously, longitudinally studied: New Jersey’s Abbott Preschool program (so named for the state Supreme Court case that mandated its existence). Results at the end of 2nd grade continue to show substantially higher test scores and decreased grade retention for the preschool group of children compared with the control group. (Special education placements have not yet been studied.) Grade retention is cut by one-third for children who started preschool at age 4 and cut in half for those who started preschool at age 3 (Frede, Jung, Barnett, & Figueras, 2009).

What do the high-quality programs have that the lower-quality programs don’t have? High-quality programs are staffed with well-educated, responsive teachers with strong backgrounds in child development and early learning pedagogy. Administrators tend to be knowledgeable about and supportive of best practices in early learning, providing meaningful professional development and strong classroom supports. Research-backed curriculums support high standards for teaching and learning through a good mix of teacher-directed and child-directed activities (many
play-based). Classrooms are chock full of attractive, tempting materials for a wide variety of fun, educational experiences. Family outreach is vibrant and tenacious.

**Changing Children, Families, and Schools**

What are the mechanisms by which great preschools produce these beneficial outcomes well into adulthood? Experts continue to discuss this question, forming hypotheses involving the relative effects of early cognition, social skills, aspirations for success, family support, and teacher expectations (Barnett, 2011; Heckman, Malofeeva, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2010). It seems reasonable to suggest that, in general, three main factors work together in some complex, messy mix of effects (Lamy, 2012). The most obvious is a direct effect on children, followed by a direct effect on parents. A third avenue is the influence of best-practice preschools on schools themselves.

**Benefits for Children**

A great preschool experience provides children with foundational academic skills on which they can continue to build, as well as social abilities for getting along in a classroom. But perhaps just as important, attending a great preschool teaches children that they like to learn and that they can be good at learning. Their more developed cognitive and social skills, along with this positive attitude toward learning, hard work, and school, point them in the direction of academic success, which opens the door for success in life. This more successful start lowers the probabilities of grade retention and special education placement. These avoided derailments translate into higher education attainment and earnings.

**Benefits for Families**

Great preschools also benefit families. Teachers and administrators in excellent preschools reach out warmly to parents, involving them in their children’s schooling and providing additional resources to families in need. They alert parents to the importance of their children’s school experiences and share techniques parents can use to support their children’s learning at home. In fact, better parenting is among the few Head Start effects that do not fade after three years.

Great preschool programs include transition activities that guide parents toward supportive relationships with their children’s kindergarten and elementary school teachers (Bohan-Baker & Little, 2002). And many great preschools operate full-day programs or provide high-quality before-school and after-school care, which allows parents to work more securely, in turn increasing the family’s financial resources to create an educationally supportive home environment.

**Benefits for the School System**

Great preschools benefit school systems by (1) delivering to kindergarten cohorts of students with improved academic and social skills, and (2) providing the opportunity for preschool professionals and elementary school educators to share best practices in early learning.

Schools reap benefits when students are less likely to repeat a grade, need special services, or require disciplinary interventions. These improvements free teachers to do their best teaching. They also save school systems money—funds that can be repurposed from remedial activities to more exciting educational opportunities that can confirm students’ love of school.

Moreover, great preschools offer new opportunities for school systems to integrate the best early childhood practices into the primary grades, where we know they belong. Some researchers have called for explicit preK–3 models to accomplish this (Reynolds, Magnuson & Ou, 2009; Sadowski, 2006). Research suggests that extending best early learning practices into elementary school yields rewards; for example, analyses of the Abecedarian and Chicago study preschool-plus groups find even stronger effects for children who received continued early learning support (Campbell & Ramey, 2010; Reynolds, Magnuson, & Ou, 2009).
Extend the Learning

Great preschools embrace a focus on the whole child, respect the unique characteristics of individual children and families, and are guided by the principles of child development and a scientific approach toward what works in the classroom. Put into practice, these premises are providing education leaders with the research-based evidence they need to push back against the constant pressure to teach young children in the early grades with methods better suited for older children.

Educators, be aware! Young students—from low-income families or not—who have had a great preschool experience are much more likely to enter kindergarten confidently and joyfully, ready to learn and expecting to play an active part in an engaging educational conversation. Teachers must be ready for these students—ready to provide the kinds of classroom experiences that will support and extend that joyful learning.

References

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Research Report Update

A NEW MAJORITY

Low Income Students in the South and Nation

October 2013

Percent of Low Income Students in All Public Schools 2011

Percent of Students

- 0.0 to 38.3
- 38.3 to 42.6
- 42.6 to 47.6
- 47.6 to 50.0
- 50.0 and Above

National Average: 48.0
A majority of public school children in 17 states, one-third of the 50 states across the nation, were low income students – eligible for free or reduced lunches – in the school year that ended in 2011. Thirteen of the 17 states were in the South, and the remaining four were in the West. Since 2005, half or more of the South’s children in public schools have been from low income households. During the last two school years, 2010 and 2011, for the first time in modern history, the West has had a majority of low income students attending P-12 public schools.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rate (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in past years, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Louisiana had the largest rates of low income students among the 50 states. Based on data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 71 percent of all students in Mississippi, 68 percent of New Mexico’s students, and 66 percent of all Louisiana children attending public schools were from low income households. Oklahoma and Arkansas were the two other states where at least 60 percent of public school children were low income during the 2011 school year, the latest date for comparable data for all public school districts across the nation. All but two of the 15 states in the South had a majority of low income students enrolled in their public schools in 2011. Only Maryland (40 percent) and Virginia (37 percent), the northern-most states in the South, had rates below 50 percent [see Appendix 1 for ranking of all 50 states].

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1. This update was developed and written by Steve Suitts, Vice President of the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) with the assistance of Nasheed Sabree, SEF Program Assistant, and Katherine Dunn, SEF Program Officer. It follows the SEF report, *A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South’s Public Schools* (2007). Students are eligible for free or reduced meals at public schools if they live in households where the income is 185 percent or less of than the poverty threshold. In 2011, for example, a student in a household with a single parent with an annual income of less than $26,956 was eligible for a free or reduced lunch (FRL) at a public school.
Four states in the West – New Mexico, California, Oregon, and Nevada – had a majority of low income children in public schools, and, combined with a growing number of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch in recent years across the region’s other nine states, the West had a majority of public school children in 2011.

**REGIONAL TRENDS ACROSS THE STATES: SOUTH LEADS THE NATION AND OTHER REGIONS**

The latest NCES data indicates that 48 percent of all public school children across the nation were eligible for free or reduced lunch in 2011. The rate of low income students in the South was 53 percent – the highest rate among the regions of the nation. For the first time in recent history, at least half of the public school students in the West were low income. In 2010 the rate was 51 percent. In 2011, it remained 50 percent of all public school children. The Midwest had the next highest rate, 44 percent, and the Northeast had a rate of 40 percent.

Across the entire southern sections of the United States – ranging from the west coast across the Southwest through the Deep South, only in Arizona (45 percent) were low income students less than half of all public school children. In 2011, more than two-thirds of African American and Hispanic students in the United States attended public schools where a majority of school children were low income (see Appendix 3), but white students also constitute a majority of low income public school children in a large number of schools and school districts, especially in the South. The common denominator of education in 2011 for the states mapped across the western and southern portion of the United States from Oregon to North Carolina, with an outcropping into Appalachia, was the presence of a majority of low income students in P-12 public schools.²

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² For an overview of factors creating the growth of low income students, see p. 10 of *A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South’s Public Schools*. A closely related trend is found in the fact that the South is today the only US region with a majority of students of color in the public schools. See *A New Diverse Majority: Students of Color in the South’s Public Schools*. 
The nation’s cities have the highest rates of low income students in public schools. Sixty percent of the public school children in America’s cities were in low income households in 2011. In 38 of the 50 states, no less than half of all children attending public schools in cities — any urban place with more than 100,000 population — were low income (Appendix 2). While known for its rural poverty, Mississippi had the nation’s highest rate for low income students in cities: 83 percent of all children in that state’s cities were low income. New Jersey (78 percent), Pennsylvania (75 percent), and New York (73 percent) had the next highest rates for cities. Georgia, Louisiana, Illinois, and Oklahoma also had rates of low income students at or above 70 percent in their cities.

Fifty-two percent of all students attending public schools in America’s towns (located outside urban and suburban areas) were eligible for free or reduced meals in 2011. Mississippi also had the nation’s highest state rate for students in towns: 78 percent. Louisiana (72 percent) and New Mexico (70 percent) ranked next in line. South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, California, Oklahoma, and Arkansas followed — each with rates above 60 percent for students in towns (Appendix 2).

America’s rural and suburban schools had lower rates of low income students. Forty-four percent of rural students and 40 percent of suburban students were eligible for free and reduced lunches in 2011. In New Mexico, 71 percent of the rural students lived in low income households. In seven other states — all Southern states — 55 percent or more of all rural students were low income.
New Mexico also had the highest rate for low income children in suburban public schools: 72 percent. In seven other states, at least half of all students in suburban schools were low income. Five are Southern states and two states are in the West. In 22 states (including Wyoming), two out of every five suburban students were in low income households. The lowest suburban rate for any state was in New Hampshire (17 percent), where only about 11,000 low income students attended public schools in suburban areas. Only four other states, Alaska, Iowa, Maine, and New York had a percentage of low income in suburban public schools below 25 percent.

### Table 2
**States Where Low Income Students Are 55 Percent or More Among Rural Public School Children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rural Low Income Students</th>
<th>Rate (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>70,524</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>168,992</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>129,674</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>142,195</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>123,727</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>167,327</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>192,883</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>176,442</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3
**Low Income Students as a Majority of Suburban Public School Children: 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Suburban Low Income Students</th>
<th>Rate (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>27,737</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>93,933</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>24,571</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>78,154</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>734,329</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>351,886</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>24,881</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>1,196,481</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Patterns within Regions: Rates Higher in the South Except in Northeast Cities**

In each of the nation’s four regions, a majority of students attending public schools in the cities were eligible for free or reduced lunch last year. The Northeast had the highest rates for low income school children in cities: 71 percent. The next highest rate, 62 percent, was found in Midwestern cities. The South had the third highest percentage of low income students in the cities – 59 percent.

No region of the country in 2011 had a majority of low income students in suburban schools, although the suburban rate in Wyoming, 75 percent, was actually higher; but with only 1,133 suburban children in the state, its rate was not included in this ranking.
suburban rate in the South (47 percent) was the highest rate among the four regions. The suburban rate of low income students in the West was almost as high – 45 percent. The Northeast suburbs had the smallest rate – 28 percent.

In towns outside urban and suburban area, the South (60 percent) and the West (55 percent) had a majority of low income children attending public schools. The South also was the only region in the country where most rural public school children were in low income households. In the West, 44 percent of rural school children were low income. In the Northeast, the rate was only 29 percent.

In suburbs, towns, and rural areas, the South had the highest rates of low income students enrolled in public schools among the nation’s four regions. A majority of all students in all areas of the South, except suburban schools, were from low income families in 2011.

The prevalence of school districts with a majority low income enrollment was especially acute in the South, where more than three-fourths (76 percent) of all local school districts had a student population in which low income students were the majority. In Mississippi and Louisiana, at least nine out of every ten school districts had a majority of low income students (see Appendix 4). In Oklahoma and Georgia, 87 percent and 84 percent of the states’ school districts had a majority of low income students.

In Western states, low income students were a majority of all students in more than half the region’s school districts. In New Mexico, virtually eight of ten school districts enrolled a majority of low income students. The districts in the Northeast had the smallest rate – only 26 percent.

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4 In addition, more than half of the South’s school districts had a majority of school children eligible for free lunches – in household with incomes below 130 percent of poverty. School districts failing to report students eligible for free or reduce lunch (FRL) in 2011 were excluded from the calculations.
By all accounts, the 2008 recession reduced family incomes in the United States and added to growth in the number of low income students in public schools, especially in states where both the housing market and the local economy collapsed. But, there has been a steady increase in the number and percentage of low income students attending America’s public schools for a much longer period of time.

Data from the US Department of Agriculture demonstrates consistent growth in the rates of low income students in most states and in each region of the country since at least 1989. During the last ten years, according to NCES data, this pattern has continued annually. From 2001 through 2011, the numbers of low income students in the nation’s public schools grew by 32 percent – an increase of more than 5.7 million children. As a result, low income students attending the nation’s public schools moved from 38 percent of all students in 2001 to 48 percent in 2011.

During the same period, public schools in the Midwest experienced a 40 percent rate of growth in low income students, and in the South from 2001 to 2011 the number of low income public school children enlarged by almost one-third. The schools in the Northeast had the smallest rate of growth – 21 percent.

As a result of these trends, the South became the first region of the country in modern times to have a majority of low income students in its public schools in 2007, a year before the recent recession. Three years later, low income students became a new majority of the public school children in the West, and in 2011 the nation stood within only two percentage points of enrolling a majority of low income students in public schools across 50 states.

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5 See pp. 6-9, A New Majority: Low Income Students in the South’s Public Schools.
During the last decade, as the number of low income students grew substantially in all regions, public school expenditures also increased, although at markedly slower rates. After adjustments for inflation, NCES data show that the nation’s average per pupil expenditure for public education rose by 14 percent from 2001 to 2011. There were, however, considerable differences between and within the regions in rates of increase. The Northeast enlarged per pupil expenditures by 28 percent, twice the national average. The per pupil expenditure in the both the South and the Midwest were much smaller - only 12 percent, and the West had the smaller gains, half the national rate from 2001 to 2011.

These regional rates do not always reflect patterns of the states in the region. For example, per pupil expenditures in Alaska increased by 43 percent - more than five times the rate for Western states as a group. Maryland’s growth in per pupil expenditures was approximately three times larger than the South’s rate of growth. Despite these outliers, regional rates generally reflected the trends of growth for most states of each region.

These growth rates in educational expenditures failed to match the region’s rates of growth for the number of low income students. From 2001 to 2011, the region with the lowest growth in the number of low income students, the Northeast, had by far the largest growth in per pupil expenditures. It was the only region where the growth rate of school spending exceeded the rate of growth in low income students. In the other three regions, the opposite occurred: the growth rates in the number of low income students vastly exceeded the growth in per pupil expenditures.

The number of low income students in the West, for example, grew from 2001 to 2011 by 31 percent but per pupil expenditure for students in the West grew by only seven percent. Public schools in the Midwest had a growth of 40 percent in the number of low income students and an increase of 12 percent in per student spending. In the South,
public schools had a one-third increase in the number of low income students during a time when they had little more than a one-eighth increase in per pupil spending.

These trends in public schools since 2001 have contributed to a pattern that remains today: schools that have the largest proportion of low income students spend the least in support of students. In 2011, a majority of school children in both the South and the West were from low income families, and the public school children in the both the South and the West received the least educational resources: both less than $9,300 per pupil. In contrast, public schools in the Northeast, where 40 percent of all students are low income, spend $16,045 per pupil.6

This mismatch is nothing new in public education and is found at the regional, state or local levels. As noted in prior SEF reports, low income students are much more likely to attend public schools that have significantly lower academic and student support and per pupil funding.7 In this case, the pattern of inequitable, mismatched funding for student learning appears to have persisted at least since 2001 even as public schools in the regions experienced significant growth in the number of low income students.

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6 Some analysts adjust per pupil expenditures among the states by regional differences in cost of living (COL). See www.edcounts.org. This adjustment tends to flatten somewhat regional differences by lowering spending amounts in more urban states and increasing rates in more rural states. But, even with COL adjustments, the basic regional trends and patterns remains the same.

7 See pp. 17-23 of No Time to Lose and pp. 16-20 in Worst of Times: Children in Extreme Poverty in the South and the Nation. Charts of regional NAEP data use Census South, which includes Delaware and the District of Columbia, not in SEFs 15-state South.
Low income students are more likely than students from wealthier families to have lower tests scores, fall behind in school, dropout, and fail to acquire a college degree. These gaps in learning and achievement have not improved in recent years, while the numbers of low income students have escalated in the South and nation. Test scores for the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) – the most reliable, comparative test of academic performance across the states – suggest strongly that there has been little or no change in the wide differences in learning between students according to income from 2003 to 2011.

There have been some real gains in tests scores by low income students in the South since 2003, but those improvements have been matched largely by gains among higher income students. In other words, as low income students in the Southern states gained seven points on NAEP test scores for fourth grade reading from 2003 to 2011, so did students from higher income households. As a result, the learning gap of 26 score points that existed in 2003 between students in the South according to household income remained the same in 2011 for fourth grade reading scores. A similar pattern is evident among the regions of the nation. From 2003 through 2011, the learning gap by income in fourth grade reading remained wide and constant in the South and the Midwest. It narrowed somewhat in the Northeast, the only region where the growth in the number of low income students was smaller than growth in per pupil spending from 2001 to 2011. In the West, the gap by income slightly enlarged during this period. These huge learning gaps by income in fourth grade reading reflect regional patterns in other NAEP tests: regardless of subject or grade, gains in the test scores of low income students from 2003 to 2011 have generally been matched by similar gains of higher income students. Therefore, while there has been an upward trend in test scores for low income students, the learning gap for low income students has remained very wide and unyielding.

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9 Generally, a similar gap persisted in reading and mathematics scores in NEAP tests administered for 4th and 8th grade students from 2003 to 2011.
TRENDS IN 2003-2011: PRIVATE SCHOOLS HAVE SIMILAR LEARNING GAPS BY INCOME

These trends reflect issues of educational achievement in the nation’s public schools, which is where the vast majority of low income students in the United States receive their P-12 education. But, the learning gap is a national challenge for both public and private schools. The gap for low income students in private schools from 2003 to 2011 appears nearly as large as or larger than the gaps in public schools.

In 4th grade reading scores, for example, NAEP tests show that public and private schools have had comparable differences in scores according to student income since 2003. The gap has been huge – over 20 score points – in all years for both types of schools. The difference in scores was somewhat larger in public schools in 2003, but the public school income gap slightly narrowed in more recent years, and private schools evidenced a widening gap between low income students and wealthier students since 2003. As a result, from 2007 to 2009 there was relatively little difference between public and private schools in the average scores for low income students in fourth grade reading. By 2011, the learning gap by income was larger in private schools than public schools nationwide.

The actual scores for low income students in public and private schools – not simply the gap – have also narrowed. In 2009, for instance, low income students in private schools scored at an average of 210. Low
The latest data shows that low income students comprise a near-majority of the nation’s public school children (48 percent) and are half or more of all students in the South and the West. Low income students are concentrated in the nation’s cities but are by no measure confined to only cities. Forty percent or more of all public school children in the nation’s suburbs, towns, and rural areas are low income students.

Long-term trends strongly suggest that the nation has not adjusted its support for public schools to reflect the educational challenges that these developments bring. Since 2001, the number of low income students in public schools has grown roughly by one-third (32 percent) across the states. These are the students who need the most assistance. They generally are more likely to score lowest on school tests, fall behind in school, fail to graduate, and never receive a college degree. During this same period (2001-2011), the nation’s per pupil expenditure (adjusted for inflation) in public schools increased by only 14 percent --- less than half the rate of growth in the numbers of low income students. The growth in the number of low income students far out-stripped the growth in per pupil spending in public schools during the last decade in every region of the country, except the Northeast.

During virtually the same period (2003-2011), the learning gap for low income students across the nation and in every region of the country, except the Northeast, remained stagnant. While there were real learning gains for both low income and higher income students during this time, the gap between the student groups in national test scores in 2011 was the same as in 2003, except in the Northeast where the learning gap closed by three points.

Given the current debate over school choice that has emerged during the last decade, it is also worthy of note that the learning gap for low income students has generally been as large or larger in private schools as in public schools across the nation.

These trends present a clear, concise picture of what has happened during the last decade and what will

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This pattern of comparable differences between low income and higher income students for both public and private schools generally holds for NAEP subjects in both the 4th and 8th grade. In 8th grade reading, private school scores appear erratic during this period.
continue to happen in the next decade unless the patterns of the past are broken. There was no progress in closing the learning gap for the nation’s low income students at a time when the growth in their numbers far outpaced the growth in per pupil spending in public schools. If these trends in student enrollment and school spending persist, there is no reason to expect that the learning gap will begin to close. And there is no reason to expect that moving low income children from public schools to private schools will make any difference in closing this gap.

The future consequences of these trends are likely to severely undercut the American promise of fairness and equity for children in low income households. That should be concern enough for policymakers in Washington and all fifty states. But, the consequences will go far beyond that. When the public school achievement of low income students constitutes the educational success or failure of a majority of all public school students, our entire nation’s future educational capacity is at stake.

No longer can we consider the problems and needs of low income students simply a matter of fairness. These students are in two regions half or more of all public school children. They were in 2011 a near majority of the nation’s public school children and are continuing to grow in numbers. Their success or failure in the public schools will determine the entire body of human capital and educational potential that the nation will possess in the future. Without improving the educational support that the nation provides its low income students — students with the largest needs and usually with the least support — the trends of the last decade will be prologue for a nation not at risk, but a nation in decline.

**Conclusion**

Within the next few years, it is likely that low income students will become a majority of all public school children in the United States. With huge, stubbornly unchanging gaps in learning, schools in the South and across the nation face the real danger of becoming entrenched, inadequately funded educational systems that enlarge the division in America between haves and have-nots and endanger the entire nation’s prospects.

There is no real evidence that any scheme or policy of transferring large numbers of low income students from public schools to private schools will have a positive impact on this problem. The trends of the last decade strongly suggest that little or nothing will change for the better if schools and communities continue to postpone addressing the primary question of education in America today: what does it take and what will be done to provide low income students with a good chance to succeed in public schools? It is a question of how, not where, to improve the education of a new majority of students.

Without fundamental improvements in how the South and the nation educate low income students, the trends that this report documents will ricochet across all aspects of American society for generations to come. As a wise American leader once reminded a troubled nation: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”
Appendix I

State Rankings by Percentage of Low Income Students in Public Schools (2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>71%</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
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<td>New Mexico</td>
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<td>Idaho</td>
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<td>Ohio</td>
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Regional Rankings
Percentage of Low Income Students in Public Schools (2011)

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Appendix 2
Percentage of Low Income Students by Areas Inside State (2011)

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<th>Suburban Percent</th>
<th>Town Percent</th>
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National maps of this data available on SEF website: www.southerneducation.org.
Definitions of geographic units at NCES First Look – Common Core Data, 2010-11, pp. B-2 & B-3 Revised data version. 2a.
## Appendix 3

### Percent of Students by Race/Ethnicity/Heritage Attending Public Schools Where Low Income Students Are Half or More of All Students 2011

#### All Public Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity/Heritage</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
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#### Suburban Public Schools

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity/Heritage</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
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</table>

#### City Public Schools

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>76%</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
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<td>Two or more races</td>
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Appendix 4
Percentage of Public School Districts with a Majority of Low Income Students
By Region and State: 2011

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<th>State/Region</th>
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<th>Free / Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>State/Region</th>
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<th>Free / Reduced Lunch</th>
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<td>82%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wyoming</td>
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</table>

“Free Lunch” Column is the percentage of schools districts in the state or region in which a majority of the districts’ students are eligible for a free lunch – children in households with an income below 130 percent of the poverty line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Region</th>
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<tr>
<td>50 States USA</td>
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<td>South</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-South</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Founded in 1867 as the George Peabody Education Fund, the Southern Education Foundation’s mission is to advance equity and excellence in education for low income students and students of color.

SEF uses research, advocacy, and collaboration to improve outcomes from early childhood to young adulthood.

Our core belief is that education is the vehicle by which all students get fair chances to develop their talents and contribute to the common good.

www.southerneducation.org
High School Dropouts

Alabama’s Number One Education & Economic Problem
The Southern Education Foundation

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF), www.southerneducation.org, is a nonprofit organization comprised of diverse women and men who work together to improve the quality of life for all of the South’s people through better and more accessible education. SEF advances creative solutions to ensure fairness and excellence in education for low income students from preschool through higher education.

SEF develops and implements programs of its own design, serves as an intermediary for donors who want a high-quality partner with whom to work on education issues in the South, and participates as a public charity in the world of philanthropy. SEF depends upon contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals to support its efforts.

**SEF’s Vision**

We seek a South and a nation with a skilled workforce that sustains an expanding economy, where civic life embodies diversity and democratic values and practice, and where an excellent education system provides all students with fair chances to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. We will be known for our commitment to combating poverty and inequality through education.

**SEF’s Timeless Mission**

SEF develops, promotes, and implements policies, practices, and creative solutions that ensure educational excellence, fairness, and high levels of achievement among African Americans and other groups and communities that have not yet reached the full measure of their potential. SEF began in 1867 as the Peabody Education Fund.

**Credits**

*High School Dropouts: Alabama’s Number One Education and Economic Problem*, as well as other SEF reports and publications can be found at www.southerneducation.org.

Steve Suitts, SEF Vice President, with Lauren Veasey, SEF Program Officer, developed and wrote this report. Mary Sommers of Typographic Solutions designed the report.
High School Dropouts

Alabama’s Number One Education & Economic Problem
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This report is primarily about dropouts from Alabama public elementary and secondary schools. It reveals that at least 40 percent of Alabama students currently fail to graduate from high school, and some even drop out before entry into high school. Too few of those who manage to graduate from high school, especially those who are low income, attend and graduate from college. Each time I read statistics such as these, my heart sinks. They are a warning sign of hard times for the people of Alabama now and in the future, as well as for our beloved nation.

At every level, the consequences of inadequate education are profound and injurious to all. Let me focus on dropouts. Here is what the Southern Education Foundation (SEF) knows from its study of the literature.

The young person who drops out loses the chance to gain skills needed to earn livable wages for a lifetime or to provide a family with a good standard of living. That person’s town or city faces an increased demand for public services but has fewer revenues with which to provide them. As the numbers of low income citizens proliferate, those with resources are more hard-pressed to ante up through taxes or philanthropy.

In addition, the young person without an adequate education is less likely than others to vote or participate in civic life. Without broad engagement by the governed, the quality of civic life and public accountability of government are diminished. The complexity of the modern world calls for a more highly educated public than ever before to understand problems, exercise voting rights on an informed basis, and hold public officials accountable. Public engagement is a pillar of a healthy democracy.

Finally, a young person who has dropped out of high school is more likely to wind up marginalized, forced to live as a vagrant or in communities of concentrated poverty with a high probability of criminal conduct and incarceration at ever greater public expense. High dropout rates create a downward spiral in health and well-being for all concerned. In a beautiful world full of possibilities, it is a tragedy for any young person to have few chances to enjoy a decent standard of living and the fulfillment of the American Dream.

For the Alabama business community, this SEF report brings bad news. Investment capital does not readily flow to areas of deep poverty, where inadequately prepared workers can’t operate in the modern, technology-driven workplace. The days of abundant low-skill jobs are gone for the most part in America, except in the service sector, and are declining in agriculture, as well. Places without accessible, high-quality public education are not primary destinations for job-creating industries, investors, or entrepreneurs. Thus, the business community has a vested, bottom-line interest in reducing the dropout rate and improving education more generally and at all levels. The economic progress made by the state in recent years will be threatened unless measures to effect change are undertaken now.

People with a good education and skills are also negatively affected by high dropout rates. Not only are they required to shoulder the escalating needs of government for sources of revenue, many are also compelled to migrate out of state in order to pursue promising careers. Few enjoy living on an island of affluence in a sea of poverty.

Those who are retired, elderly, or low income are likewise impacted by high dropout rates. The revenues necessary for Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other public benefits come from taxes. As the number of high-earning workers declines in many venues, the possibility of cuts in benefits looms large, jeopardizing advances in the quality of life for the elderly.

Last, but certainly not least, national security is affected by high dropout rates. Like industry, military and governmental agencies associated with security need sophisticated, well-educated people at all levels. Even “foot soldiers” require more training to operate complex machinery than ever before.
Alabama is not alone in having a tragic and serious dropout problem. Many other states have similar problems, creating a national dilemma. The United States will not remain on the leading edge of quality of life for its people or remain globally competitive unless each state begins to seriously and aggressively devise and implement effective dropout prevention and school re-entry strategies.

SEF is a public charity that for 141 years has worked across the South to enhance education achievement, attainment, quality, and access for all low income students and communities, from pre-school through higher education. This report is a call to action for all Alabamians who love their home state. It is up to citizens of Alabama to do what is necessary to increase retention of students in elementary and secondary schools, to ensure that students are learning what they need to know from pre-kindergarten on, and to provide support for expanded pathways to college.

By enumerating factors that contribute to Alabama’s dropout problem, SEF targets the problems that need to be solved. The solutions become evident in the discussion of dropout causation and pilot programs that have already achieved measurable success.

Addressing the problems one by one is the way forward. Important organizations in Alabama are doing good work by pressing for effective measures to reduce the number of dropouts. People of diverse stripes in Alabama have knowledge, information about what works, and a desire to change the dropout picture. SEF stands ready to work with them, to share its research and knowledge in dropout prevention and recovery, and to participate in educational outreach to build consensus for change.

Will Alabama businesses, civic and religious leaders, organizations, public officials, educators, and the people themselves, out of enlightened self-interest, awareness of interdependence, and a desire for a better life, devise urgent measures now to reduce the state’s alarmingly high dropout rate? Or will the problem be allowed to fester and hobble the state’s future?

The answer depends upon what Alabamians are prepared to do.

Lynn Huntley
President
The Southern Education Foundation
Education: Alabama’s Old Problem and New Imperative

In recent years Alabama has successfully attracted and expanded major industries such as automobiles, medicine, aeronautics, and other heavy metal operations to provide new jobs for the state’s workers. These economic development efforts have often involved substantial public subsidies and tax forgiveness programs, but they have produced thousands of new private jobs and the possibility of future jobs contingent on the expansion of new industries.

This economic development helps to account for the fact that Alabama has maintained a relatively low unemployment rate and has gradually increased the state’s per capita income during the last few years. Yet Alabama will jeopardize both its job gains and its long-term economic growth within the next 10 to 15 years if the state does not do whatever it takes to fix its number one economic problem: education.

The dilemmas of Alabama education have existed for over 140 years. Since the Civil War, the state has trailed the South and the nation in educational attainment. During the intervening decades, the state’s educational gap with the nation has narrowed, and a handful of Alabama communities have made significant advancements. Certainly Alabama’s educational problems do not persist from a lack of concern by Alabamians or from a failure of effort or endorsement on the part of many teachers, primary state officials, and important civic leaders.

The state’s fundamental oversight in recent years has been a full appreciation of the pivotal role that education plays in developing Alabama’s future in the new global economy. Alabama fails to recognize the urgent need for the implementation of policies, priorities, and programs that can effectively address the state’s number one obstacle to sustained economic growth, expansion, and well-being: Alabama’s exceptionally high dropout rate.

This report outlines the new, critical role of education in today’s global economy. It identifies and analyzes the state’s largest educational problem—that too many Alabama students are dropping out of education before acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to become successful adults. The report also demonstrates that dramatic changes in Alabama’s dropout rates will greatly advance the Alabama economy, personal income, and quality of life. It quantifies how even modest, yearly gains in educational attainment, if sustained consistently over time, can create dramatic changes and enormous gains. In short, this report puts into focus Alabama’s unique opportunity to adopt realistic measures in order to transform a long-standing problem into a new imperative for a better life for all Alabamians.
Education: Alabama’s Number One Economic Problem

Education has never been more important to Alabama. While the state’s adults have always valued education for their children, Alabama’s current quality of life and future prosperity are shaped more by education than ever before. The emergence of a global economy and technological advances, especially during the last three decades, has vastly expanded the role of education in determining the well-being of Alabama and its people.

Two generations ago, Alabamians who did not graduate from high school could find decent jobs and enjoy a good life. On average, they earned an annual income of more than $20,000—respectable money during the 1950s and early 1960s—representing approximately 50 cents for every dollar of income earned by the average college graduate. Those days are gone. The income of high school dropouts has fallen in recent decades, while the income of college-educated adults has risen. In 2002, workers who failed to graduate from high school earned only 29 cents for every dollar that the average college-educated worker received.

When adjusted for inflation, the average family income for high school dropouts declined by approximately 25 percent from 1973 to 2004 while the average income increased by 17 percent for families headed by an adult with a four-year college degree. Adults who earned an advanced degree increased their families’ average income by 34 percent over the same period.

Alabama children whose parents have no high school education today are virtually destined to grow up in low income families. In 2006, 93 percent of all Alabama children with a parent who has less than a high school degree were low income. Even for those Alabama children who have wage-earning parents with high school diplomas, almost two out of three, belonged to low income families.

These data illuminate an unmistakable, modern trend that differs radically from the past: students who fail to graduate from high school today will fail to earn a decent living tomorrow. In turn, improving and expanding educa-

---

High School Is No Longer Enough
Change in Average Family Income by Education Attainment, 1973–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Attainment</th>
<th>1973</th>
<th>1988</th>
<th>2002</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 Yrs Elem or Less</td>
<td>-18.7%</td>
<td>-25.3%</td>
<td>-7.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School</td>
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<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Yrs College</td>
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<td>17.0%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ Yrs College</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
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</table>

Source: Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2006

*"Low income" in this case is defined as a family earning 200 percent or less of poverty. This would amount to $26,400 or less for a single mother with a teenage child in Alabama in 2006.”
tion today is the surest way for Alabama to increase income, job security, and well-being for a lifetime.

This trend is particularly significant in a state that has lagged behind the nation in per capita income for over a hundred years. While Alabama made some progress in reducing this income gap during the last century, the gains slowed and began to flatten during the 1980s as the economy turned increasingly global. In the last few years, Alabama’s per capita income has inched upward, although Alabama continues to rank 42nd among the states in per capita income.

In 2006, the average Alabamian earned $5,788 less income than the average American, a difference that significantly affects the quality of life for all citizens. In other words, on average, every man, woman, and child in Alabama had nearly $6,000 less in income than the average American to spend on life’s necessities and pleasures. For low income Alabamians, the income gap was much greater. According to a SEF-commissioned econometric study, at least 59 percent of this difference in per capita income is due to the state’s lower levels of education.

Additional factors help to explain the state’s economic problems: a lower rate of available jobs per person and a higher rate of rural
population. Rural areas correlate with lower per capita incomes because they usually have underemployment on farms, a larger portion of the population that is too young or too old for the work force, and a lower cost-of-living. But by far the largest factor explaining the current gap between Alabama and the nation in per capita income remains the state’s lower level of education.

These data make clear that Alabama’s problems in education constitute its major economic threat today. More than ever before, education has become Alabama’s primary obstacle for advancing income and economic growth. At the same time, education can become the state’s most effective tool for furthering economic development. While Alabama has successfully used state subsidies and tax breaks to attract new jobs into the state, those gains will expand only if the state improves education. For the long term, improving education is Alabama’s most important income-creating investment and its surest means to enhance and sustain economic growth over time.

A few states in the South and nation have been fortunate enough to enlarge their human capital in recent decades by attracting an in-migration of college graduates who help supply an educated work force to meet growing

### Alabama Economic Gap

The Education Gap Explains Most of the Difference in Per Capita Income

![Pie chart showing the distribution of Alabama's economic gap contributors: Lower Education 59%, Higher Rural Population 21%, Lower Employment per Capita 20%.](Source: SEF Commissioned Econometric Study)

### Alabama Migration of Adults by Education Level

From 1990 to 2000

<table>
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<th>Education Level</th>
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<td>Less than High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>15,799</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>2,761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>-4,433</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduate/Professional</td>
<td>584</td>
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</table>

Source: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems; U.S. Census
economic needs and to spur economic growth. Regretably, Alabama is not among those states.

The persistent trend in Alabama has been a net loss of educated adults through out-migration and a net increase in the numbers of under-educated adults. From 1990 to 2000 (the latest data available), Alabama suffered a net loss of nearly 4,500 college-educated adults between the working ages of 22 and 64. Most who left were young workers. During the same period, the state saw a net increase of more than 15,000 adults of working age who had no high school diploma.2

In 2000, 25 percent—one in four—of all adults in Alabama had no high school diploma. Most Alabama counties actually had higher rates of adults without a high school diploma. No section of the state was exempt from having extraordinarily high rates of adults without a high school education.

Those Alabama adults in 2000 with only a high school diploma numbered 30 percent. Thus, according to the last federal census, 55 percent of all adults in Alabama had no high school diploma or only a high school diploma. These population groups, a majority of Alabama adults in 2000, have experienced large declines in both real and relative income during the last few decades.

In summary, increasing high school graduation and college attendance rates—enlarging the state’s educational attainment from the bottom up—is Alabama’s most important challenge for increasing income and building a better quality of life.

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2Alabama also had a net increase in the number of adults who had some college education but no degree. For additional details, visit SEF web site, www.southerneducation.org, in the program section relating to the Alabama report.
Alabama Education’s Number One Problem:
Too Many High School Students Drop Out of School

Despite the economic importance of increasing educational attainment, Alabama has a huge number of students failing to graduate from high school and college. Alabama has had and continues to have one of the nation’s worst high school dropout rates. National studies have used varying methods and numbers, but every independent analysis of high school graduation rates among the states in recent years has shown that Alabama remains near the bottom, ranking somewhere between 42nd and 47th in the nation. Pell Institute scholar Tom Mortenson measured state graduation rates and found no less than 43 percent of Alabama’s 9th grade students who were scheduled to receive a high school diploma in recent years failed to graduate.

This is not a recent problem. Alabama has failed to graduate around 40 percent or more of its public high school students throughout most of the last 25 years. In 1981, for example, Alabama’s high school dropout rate was 43 percent. In 1991, it was 44 percent, about the same rate reported after 2000. Despite the growing economic significance of improving educational attainment during the last few decades, Alabama’s high school dropout rate has remained unacceptably high.
In 2005-06, using U.S. Department of Education data, Mortenson calculated the Alabama dropout rate at 43 percent. Using the Alabama Department of Education’s own latest published data and graduation standards, SEF determined that Alabama’s public high schools had a dropout rate of 39 percent in 2006. This means that roughly 4 out of every 10 of Alabama’s 9th grade students who should have received regular high school diplomas in 2006 did not graduate.

Severe problems with high school graduation rates exist across Alabama. With the possible exception of the upper crest of the Tennessee Valley, school districts in every section of the state record exceptionally high dropout rates. In some counties, school districts struggle with a combined dropout rate that is twice the state average.

The highest dropout rates—where a majority of students in a district’s secondary schools quit before graduation—exist throughout the state in both rural and urban areas. (See Appendix 1 for the 2006 listing of Alabama public high school dropout rates by county.) In Calhoun County, the Anniston district had a high school dropout rate of 52 percent. Nearby, the Talladega city school district’s dropout rate was 53 percent, while Bessemer’s schools hit 56 percent. In Marshall County the dropout rate was 56 percent, and in Wilcox County schools, the high school dropout rate exceeded 80 percent.

3 The SEF methods of calculations are explained at its web site, www.southerneducation.org, in the section relating to the Alabama report.
Dropouts in Alabama’s Education Pipeline: From High School to Higher Education

The failure of Alabama schools to graduate a larger percentage of students from high school is Alabama’s number one education problem, but it represents only the largest part of the state’s overall dropout problem. Students need to pursue education beyond a high school diploma to acquire the requisite knowledge and skill sets to find good jobs and to help build an economy that continually expands the state’s income, productivity, and tax base. Alabama can no longer afford to have an educational system that ends before or even at high school for the majority of students.

The latest available data confirm that while high school dropouts constitute the largest drain of human capital in Alabama, problems in education follow even those who do graduate. Optimally, students who were in the 9th grade in Alabama in 1994 should have graduated from high school in the spring of 1998 and entered a two- or four-year college in the fall of the same year. These 9th graders should have become college sophomores in 1999 and graduated from a two- or four-year college by 2004. Regrettably, too few Alabama students do so well.

For every one hundred 9th grade students in Alabama public schools in 1994, 40 failed to graduate from high school in 1998. Of the 60 who did graduate in 1998, 24 failed to go on to college that year. Of the 36 students who entered college, 13 failed to continue for a second year of college in 1999. And five years later, only 14 of every one hundred 9th grade students of 1994 graduated 10 years later with a college degree.4

Alabama’s biggest educational problem, its high school dropout rate of 40 percent, is compounded by the 40 percent of high school graduates who do not enter college. The net effect is that roughly two-thirds of Alabama’s 9th grade students fall out of the education pipeline before college, where individuals and the state will realize the largest economic gains of education. Of those 9th graders in 1994 who did enter college in 1998, over 60 percent failed to graduate within 6 years.

In a state with a long history with low levels of educational attainment, this snapshot of Alabama’s graduation rates indicates profound educational and economic problems for the future. Without a meaningful increase in graduation rates and adequate development of human capital, the state will face extreme limits in how much and how far other strategies for economic development will succeed in the years ahead.

4This “education pipeline” analysis can understate the students who come in and out of school over time and who may eventually complete a GED or a college degree after several additional years. This analysis also only captures students who progress on time within a 10-year period.
Contributing Factors to Alabama’s Dropout Problems

As teachers and educators know, Alabama students drop out of school for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the problems stem from how the student is doing in school or how much support and encouragement they receive at school and at home. Financial reasons also often play a part. The factors contributing to the dropout rate in K-12 schools can differ from school to school within a district or county, as well as across the state.

In this regard, school dropouts represent not just one concern but a constellation of educational problems and issues. As a result, the dilemma of school dropouts requires more than one program or approach. At the same time, its multi-faceted nature reaffirms its importance as the single most important issue to address.

To resolve the problem of school dropouts, Alabama needs to tackle a set of issues that define the needs of the entire education system: academic preparation for achievement, positive school environments, targeting effective programs, successful recovery and prevention measures, and adequate financing. By addressing these shortcomings, Alabama can identify how to improve its entire education system for all students.

Each school and school district may have its own set of problems and opportunities, but the following are common factors throughout Alabama that explain a large part of the statewide dropout problem.

**LOW LEVELS OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT BY THE 8TH GRADE**

Both national and state test scores reveal that the average Alabama student is far behind the national average in academic achievement when they enter high school. Test scores from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), the “nation’s report card,” undertaken in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education, demonstrate that the average Alabama student is behind the average American student in a
mastery of skills and knowledge by about 10 percentage points in reading and other subjects. This difference represents roughly a disparity of one year of knowledge and learning. These national tests also indicate that 8th grade reading scores in Alabama have steadily declined since 2003 while national scores have risen since 2005, only widening Alabama’s learning gap with the nation. In 2007, Alabama ranked near the bottom in national test scores in reading and in most other basic subjects for 8th grade students.

There are also considerable differences in test scores along the lines of income, race, and ethnicity among Alabama’s 8th grade students. For example, in 2007 only 61 percent of low income students in the 8th grade met or exceeded state standards in reading compared to 84 percent of wealthier students. There are similarly large gaps in Alabama test scores between White students and Hispanic and African American students, who are more likely to be low income. Disparities in test scores also exist in other subjects and have persisted since Alabama began its current statewide testing program.

In short, too many Alabama students are already too far behind in knowledge, skills, and learning habits when they enter high school.
TOO FEW STUDENTS IN HIGH-QUALITY PRE-KINDERGARTEN

Too many students in Alabama also enter school inadequately prepared, never catch up, and fall further behind each year. Studies show that access to high-quality pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) prepares four-year-olds for school and, over time, has an important, beneficial effect on reducing high school dropout rates.

Unfortunately, while Alabama has a high-quality Pre-K program, it is a pilot program that reaches only a few thousand children. Increasing access to high quality Pre-K in Alabama can be an important long-term strategy for reducing high school dropout rates. It will help all students, especially low income and minority students, to perform at higher levels in earlier grades by assuring that they are school-ready from the start.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE THAT REMOVES STUDENTS FROM LEARNING

It appears that on average approximately one in ten Alabama students were suspended from school during the 2004-2005 year. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s surveys, the rate was considerably higher—17 percent—for African American students.

In Alabama high schools, the overall rate of out-of-school suspensions is close to 15 percent: one suspension from school for every 7 high school students. A significant number of high schools across Alabama reported very high rates of out-of-school suspensions. In some places, such as Jess Lanier High School in Bessemer and SS Murphy High School in Mobile, the schools suspended one out of every two or three students in 2004.

Alabama’s Early Grades Reading Initiative Shows the Way

Alabama’s special reading program for kindergarten through the 3rd grade has shown that schools can increase academic achievement and test scores with special, focused strategies and adequate resources. After Alabama’s 4th grade NAEP reading scores began to fall dramatically after 1998, the Alabama Department of Education began to develop a special early grades reading program to bring achievement and test scores up. After 2004, the reading program moved beyond the pilot stages, and by 2007 Alabama’s 4th grade NAEP scores evidence the results. Alabama had the nation’s largest gains in 4th grade reading and considerably narrowed its learning gap.

Alabama Education Performance Over Time

National Reading Results – Grade 4

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
These numbers may often include repeat suspensions of a smaller percentage of the schools’ students, but by any measure they indicate that a sizeable number of students are routinely removed from school. Since out-of-school suspensions usually involve students who are struggling academically, high suspension rates remove students from the tasks of learning and contribute to increased dropout rates.

Schools must be safe and orderly in order for learning to take place in the classrooms, but it is no less true that suspensions from school take students away from the learning environment they need and often increase estrangement and poor performance. Alabama schools need to find new ways to maintain discipline and to keep all students in a learning environment.

INADEQUATE K-12 FUNDING

Alabama fails to provide sufficient funds to educate all of its children. The vast majority of Alabama students attend public schools that spend less than the national average for their education. In 2002, the latest year for comparable data, only 11 percent of the students in Alabama’s K-12 public schools were in districts where per pupil expenditure was at or above the national average.
average. Eighty-nine percent of Alabama’s students received fewer school resources than the average American student. Alabama ranked 37th in the nation in per pupil expenditure.

Large disparities also exist in education funding between Alabama school districts. In 2005, the cities of Homewood and Florence invested an average of $4,000—69 percent—more per child than Autauga County and the city of Oneonta. A large number of counties in every part of Alabama have school districts that spend less on educating children than the state average.

**LACK OF INCENTIVES AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Alabama K-12 schools operate each day amid a patchwork of federal- and state-mandated tests, regulations, and standards that establish the state’s system of accountability. Above and beyond the usual array of homework, “pop quizzes,” course tests, and report cards, students and schools in Alabama are held accountable for academic performance based on student scores from a battery of annual tests, including 12th grade graduation exams and the calculated ratings of annual yearly progress (AYP) for meeting the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

In contrast, there are virtually no standards or incentives by which schools in Alabama are held accountable for student dropouts. NCLB has failed to address the problem and, despite the state’s compulsory attendance law, Alabama law and regulations likewise provide no incentives or practical accountability for keeping students in school. In a heavily regulated environment, Alabama’s number one educational and economic problem appears to be no one’s responsibility.
To make matters worse, the current system of K-12 accountability provides schools with incentives to permit or even encourage many students to drop out. Students who are struggling in high school present formidable challenges for classroom teachers, especially inexperienced ones. As every good student and teacher knows, classrooms usually function most effectively without estranged or struggling students. Moreover, if such students remain in school, they inevitably make it more difficult, if not impossible, for schools and school districts to meet state and federal standards for mandated tests. If an average Alabama high school with the state’s 2006 dropout rate of 39 percent retained most of its student dropouts, the school’s tests scores would plummet, probably endangering the school’s compliance with both state standards and federal AYP.

The Alabama Department of Education’s annual school dropout report, which vastly understates the extent of the problem, does nothing to encourage schools to address the state’s low graduation rates. By calculating retention rates by grade by year rather than over the span of a child’s secondary school education, the Department arrived at a dropout rate of less than 12 percent in its 2006-2007 “Alabama Education Facts.”

In summary, Alabama has no current incentives or system of accountability to address the state’s number one educational problem, while its current reports strikingly understate the problem.

LACK OF FINANCIAL AID FOR LOW INCOME HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

The second largest drain on the state’s human capital is among high school graduates. Forty percent of Alabama’s students who successfully complete high school do not go on to college in the fall. In effect, these students are dropouts of another sort, in that they fail to continue their education or to acquire the skills and knowledge that will allow them to become productive adults. In this

---

**Inadequate Support for College-Eligible Students with Very Low Income**

Alabama Four-Year Public College Costs
After Federal & State Financial Aid, as a Percentage of Family Income Under $10,000, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Other Family Costs</th>
<th>College Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Family Income**

19% of Black Families in Alabama earn less than $10,000 a year.

Source: Census Bureau; The College Board; ACHE; SEF Calculations

---

**Inadequate Support for Low Income College-Eligible Students**

Alabama Students Eligible for Federal Aid Who Received State Financial Aid, 2005–06

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Federal Aid Eligible</th>
<th>Received State Aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100,873</td>
<td></td>
<td>3,742</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 3.7% of Alabama’s students meeting federal aid eligibility received state aid.

sense, these students are only somewhat more successful than those who complete the 11th grade but fail to enter the 12th grade or to graduate.

The primary obstacle to higher education for many high school graduates is a lack of financial resources. In Alabama and elsewhere in the United States, K-12 education is free, while college is relatively expensive. The average cost of a college education in Alabama is very competitive with costs in several other states, but it remains beyond the reach of many low income high school graduates. In order to attend a four-year college in Alabama, even after receiving all available financial aid from state and federal sources, a high school graduate from a family with less than $10,000 in annual income would have to spend 79 percent of the family’s entire income for college costs. Almost one in five African American families in Alabama had incomes below $10,000.

In fact, most low income students in Alabama receive no financial aid from the state to attend college. Of over 100,000 Alabama students who qualified for federal financial aid on the basis of income in 2005-06, fewer than 4,000 received any amount of state assistance. This means that Alabama helped less than 4 percent of students with a demonstrated financial need to attend college.

Alabama’s most recently reported state appropriation for need-based financial aid for higher education was barely more than $2 million. It is a grossly inadequate amount in the face of current demand and the urgent need to increase the number of Alabama’s college-educated adults. This under-funding reflects a system of neglected or misplaced priorities within the state’s higher education system. In comparison, the head football coaches at two Alabama universities make a combined annual salary more than triple the total amount that the State of Alabama appropriates to assist over 100,000 high school graduates who have a proven need for college assistance each year.

Visit SEF’s website, www.southerneducation.org, for additional charts and data on Alabama dropouts and Alabama education.
Costs and Benefits of Reducing the Dropout Rate

Alabama needs a candid re-examination of its priorities in addition to targeting new resources for education in order to successfully tackle its number one educational and economic problem: excessively high dropout rates. While positive changes can be made without additional funding, many effective strategies and policies to reduce the student dropout rate will cost money. Increasing need-based financial aid, replicating innovative learning strategies (such as the state’s early grades reading program), expanding high-quality Pre-K, developing effective dropout recovery and retention programs—these and other necessary initiatives and interventions will require Alabama to make possibly tough budget choices and to develop new funding for education.

In assessing various options, Alabama and its public leaders should consider the current costs of school dropouts—the real, ongoing costs of doing nothing—as well as the economic and social benefits for the state of achieving realistic, long-term improvements in the dropout rate.

Based on recent cost-benefit studies, it is now possible to estimate the cost of high school dropouts to Alabama’s state and local governments (primarily public expenses in the fields of health, crime, and welfare) and to calculate the additional government revenues that would flow from increased earnings of high school graduates. In these analyses, the benefits compare very favorably to the added costs of measures to decrease high school dropout rates and to return dropout students to the educational system.
If Alabama were to decrease its statewide dropout rate annually by two percent and to sustain that modest, achievable rate of improvement over two decades, the state would realize a net increase of more than $190 million in government savings and revenues. If the state also increased by only two percent annually the number of high school dropouts who return to get a diploma, the net gains in government revenues over time would approach $400 million. Clearly, the public benefits for Alabama of preventing and recovering high school dropouts far exceed the government costs.

At times the problems of Alabama education may appear overwhelming, but even achievable steady gains in educational attainment over time throughout the state can have remarkable results. If Alabama were to adopt and achieve a “two percent” strategy in education that graduated more high school students and more college students annually, the results would prove phenomenal within only one or two generations.

Alabama has the capacity to transform its economy by implementing an education plan over 20 years that achieves an average annual gain of only two percent in each of the following four areas of education: 1) increasing the number of high school graduates; 2) increasing the number of student dropouts who return to school and graduate; 3) increasing the number of high school graduates who go on to college each year; and 4) increasing the number of college students who graduate within 6 years. If the state met and sustained these modest annual goals, SEF’s econometric projections show that Alabama’s economy would increase its current size and rate of growth almost by 50 percent by the year 2030 and almost double its economic growth by 2045. Additional progress would advance the state even more. These gains in Alabama’s gross domestic product (GDP) per person
would provide similar
increases in Alabamians’
per capita income, as well
as added tax revenues
or lower taxes.

The state would also realize
non-economic benefits by
successfully tackling its
dropout problems. Based
on the same econometric
model, Alabama’s steady
educational gains would
translate into an average gain
of almost 2 years in the life
expectancy of Alabamians,
as well as a significant
decline in the state’s infant
mortality rates by 2030.
In addition, Alabama would
enjoy a decline in crime
rates and increased political
participation and community
and civic involvement.

Sooner rather than later,
Alabama needs to make
dramatic improvements
in school dropout rates.
Whenever it does so,
the benefits for the entire
state will be enormous
if it sustains those
improvements over time.

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**Education Improves Quality of Life –
Long-Term Social Payoffs for Alabama**

*Increasing Life Expectancy by Reducing Dropout Rates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Current Dropout Rates</th>
<th>Reduced Dropout Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>75.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>75.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>77.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2025</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2030</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>78.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2035</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2040</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>79.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2045</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SEF Commissioned Projections

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**Long-Term Health Gains**

*Reducing Alabama’s Infant Mortality Rate by Reducing Dropout Rates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Current Dropout Rates</th>
<th>Reduced Dropout Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>9.80</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>9.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>9.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>9.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2025</td>
<td>9.72</td>
<td>9.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2030</td>
<td>9.70</td>
<td>9.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>2035</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>9.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2040</td>
<td>9.66</td>
<td>9.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2045</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>9.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SEF Commissioned Projections
In the last few years, Alabama has begun to try to adapt to the new global economy. It has attracted a range of new plants and industries from the Gulf Coast to the Tennessee River that have spurred some recent growth in the state’s per capita income. But these gains for Alabama will be short-lived if the state does not improve education and consistently increase educational attainment throughout the state.

Alabama can attract and grow new industries with good paying jobs in the decades ahead only if it systematically keeps more students in school, provides them with affordable higher education, and helps them graduate from high school and college on time. Gone are the days when Alabama could realize progress without steadily broadening and increasing educational attainment.

The public benefits of improving education in Alabama will be far greater than the costs. Alabama can advance its economy and income even if it only makes yearly, incremental improvements in reducing the school dropout rate. The benefits of consistent, steady improvements will not occur overnight, but they are achievable for the state as a whole in the course of a generation or two. By sustaining improvements in educational attainment, starting with the high school dropout problem, Alabama can significantly improve the quality of life for its citizens.

It is time for Alabama to develop a new consensus and a new mandate for improving education that continues for decades—beyond one election, one governor, or one legislature. It is time to make the hard choices and the necessary investments that can successfully improve Alabama’s school dropout rate year after year. It is time to provide a new generation of Alabamians with the education and the opportunities that will permit them to build for themselves and their children a new, more prosperous Alabama. Now is the time to begin this change for good.
## APPENDIX

### Alabama Public High School Graduation and Dropout Rates

*Estimated County and School District Averages, 2007*

Averages for county graduation and dropout rates shown in bold. Where multiple school districts exist within a county the individual district graduation and dropout rates are also listed. SEF methods of calculation were revised from the 2006 rate to more closely reflect NCLB standards for calculating high school graduation rates and are explained in the “What’s New” section of www.southerneducation.org.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL SYSTEM</th>
<th>2007 GRADUATION RATE</th>
<th>2007 DROPOUT RATE</th>
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</thead>
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<td>STATE RATE</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Calhoun</td>
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<tr>
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<td>CHAMBERS</td>
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<td>Choctaw</td>
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<td>CLEburne</td>
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<td>Tuscalb City</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>48.3%</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Averages for County Graduation and Dropout Rates

Averages for county graduation and dropout rates shown in bold.
AlabAmA HigH ScHool DropouTS

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Section 4

Food Insecurity
A Rights-Based Approach to Food Insecurity in the United States

Mariana Chilton, PhD, MPH, and Donald Rose, PhD, MPH

Food insecurity is a serious public health problem associated with poor cognitive and emotional development in children and with depression and poor health in adults. Despite sizable continued investments in federal food assistance, food insecurity still affects 11.1% of US households—almost the same rate as in 1995, when annual measurement began. As a fresh approach to solving the problem of food insecurity, we suggest adoption of a human rights framework. This approach could actively engage those affected and would ensure that food security monitoring would be compared to benchmarks in national action plans. We describe key elements of a right-to-food approach, review challenges to implementing it, and suggest actions to foster its adoption. (Am J Public Health. 2009;99:1203–1211. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2007.130229)

Ask most Americans to name a food problem in this country and obesity is likely to be the first response. However, food insecurity—the lack of access to enough quality food for an active and healthy life—is also an urgent public health problem in the United States, affecting 11.1% of the population in 2007. The problem is of special concern for women and children. Female-headed households had a food insecurity prevalence rate of 30.2% or almost 3 times the national average, and more than 12.4 million children experienced food insecurity in 2007.1,2 After controls for low income and educational status, food insecurity has been associated with poor health status in children and adults,3–6 depression and anxiety among adolescents and adults,7–10 and adolescent suicidal ideation.11 Even the mildest form of food insecurity is associated with risk of poor cognitive, social, and emotional development of children younger than 3 years.12

Currently, the United States spends more than $50 billion per year on nutrition assistance programs for the US population. These include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program); the National School Lunch Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; and others. Despite this comprehensive network of assistance, the United States has made no advancement toward the Healthy People 2010 goal of reducing food insecurity by half—to 6%. In fact, there has been little change in overall rates since annual measurement of household food insecurity began in 1995.

The persistence of food insecurity rates is more than just a health problem. With more than 12 million children living in households that are food insecure, sizable segments of the population are at risk for poor development and impaired performance in school, an outcome that can diminish national productivity. Food insecurity costs about $90 billion per year in increased medical care costs, lost educational attainment and worker productivity, and investment burden into the emergency food system.13 However, for many observers issues of economic competitiveness may be secondary. The existence of widespread food insecurity in a country with the world’s largest economy—one that produces a cornucopia of food even to the point of grand-scale exports of surplus commodities—is morally reprehensible.

We suggest that the United States adopt a new approach to address food insecurity that openly and explicitly engages a human rights framework. A human rights framework repositions our understanding of food insecurity to acknowledge and actively address its social and economic determinants. It provides a venue for public participation in the food and nutrition discourse from people most affected by food insecurity. Perhaps most importantly, it provides a mechanism through which the general public can hold the US government accountable for making progress in ending food insecurity.

The human rights framework itself, of course, is not new. More than 3 generations ago, President Roosevelt emphasized the need to protect basic human freedoms—including "freedom from want."14 It was his administration that launched development of the Charter of the United Nations, and, ultimately, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.15 More than 60 years later, however, the United States is the only nation besides Australia that refuses to embrace the right to food, perhaps the most basic form of freedom from want.16 Other investigators have asked why this is so from an historical perspective, suggesting that United Nations representatives from the US government assume such a right contradicts constitutional law. Other interpretations are that poor understanding of concepts regarding rights prohibit the general acceptance of social and cultural rights, and that Congress lacks the political will to integrate the human right to food in its national agenda.17,18

The United States already has a strong record of documenting food insecurity. Adopting key elements of the human rights framework is the obvious next step in improving human nutrition and well-being. The common definitions of food security and the right to food lend themselves to common strategies for implementation. We describe a rights-based approach to food and its key elements, consider barriers to adopting this approach, and suggest strategies to foster the adoption of a human rights framework to address food insecurity in the United States.

What Is a Human Rights Framework?

A human rights framework is a system of ideas based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and its associated treaties and legal covenants. Although the human rights framework is not new to the United States, much of the language that surrounds the framework—including discourse regarding the need to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights—may be unfamiliar to many Americans. To respect the right to food is to not interfere with one's ability to acquire food. To protect the right to food is to...
make sure that others do not interfere with access to food. To fulfill the right to food has 2 components: to facilitate or create social and economic environments that foster human development, and to provide food to people in an emergency or in circumstances when self-provisioning is beyond their control. The right to food and the right to be free from hunger stem from Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which lays out the right to a minimum standard of living. Expanded upon in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the right to food is clearly integral to the overall right to a minimum standard of living that includes right to housing, clothing, health care, and social services. The right to food is comprehensively defined in General Comment 12 written by the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, and endorsed by the Committee of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which oversees accountability and utilization of the Covenant. In addition there have been several international summits regarding the right to food. At the Rome Declaration on World Food Security in 1996, all countries except the United States and Australia agreed to adopt the notion that food is a basic human right and pledged to make efforts to cut world hunger in half by 2015.

THE LINK BETWEEN THE RIGHT TO FOOD AND FOOD SECURITY

The right to food is:

The right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.

The definition of food security parallels the definition of the right to food. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization defines food security as:

A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.

The absence of food security implies a state of food insecurity. Food insecurity can strike at multiple levels—individual, household, community, and nationwide—and has multiple impacts ranging from a protein or micronutrient deficiency that has severe health consequences to milder forms that affect attention and cognitive ability. Food insecurity is considered an outcome of social and economic processes that lead to lack of access to food. These are: lack of adequate education and living wages, lack of access to health care and health information, and exposure to unsafe living conditions such as unsafe water, poor housing, and dangerous neighborhood environments. Each of these is recognized to be integrally associated with poverty.

Definitions of food insecurity and hunger have been debated for several decades. The work of Jean Drèze and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen is widely cited in the international community. They assert that hunger is not simply a manifestation of an involuntary lack of food, but rather, that hunger is a result of "entitlement failure." In other words, access to adequate nutrition depends upon political and legal systems that allow one to meet basic needs. Moreover, entitlement includes access to social support systems to assist individuals—such as small children, the elderly, and the infirm—who cannot meet their own needs.

The US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) definition of food security is similar to the United Nations'. In the United States, food security is "access by all people to enough food for an active and healthy life." In 1990, when the USDA formally established and endorsed this definition, it included 2 domains: (1) ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) an ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Evidence of the closeness of the United States' understanding of food security and the United Nations' concept of the right to food lies in their respective definitions (Table 1). Although one is a right that implies government obligation to uphold a state of being among individuals and the other defines a condition with no implicit governmental obligation, they include parallel domains that address the importance of health, accessibility, and quality of food, and social acceptability of available foods. In addition, both have been shown to influence other states of well-being such as physical and mental health, safe housing, and educational attainment.

Both the right to food and food security have received official government recognition and widespread translation into practice. The similarity in the US definition of food security and the international definition of the right to food suggests that by promoting the right to food, the United States can make better progress in resolving domestic food insecurity.

KEY ELEMENTS OF A RIGHT-TO-FOOD APPROACH

Adopting the human rights framework for addressing food insecurity seems a natural extension of the progress already made in the health and human rights movement—for example, in the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS and other diseases worldwide. Those advancing a human rights framework in public health have had success in promoting health, well-being, and dignity through attention to several key elements, including (1) government accountability, (2) public participation, (3) an analytic framework that accounts for vulnerability and discrimination, and (4) stronger connections between policies and health outcomes.

Promote Government Accountability

The human rights framework is premised on the concept of accountability. Every year, the US government collects data on food insecurity in the US population and publishes a report on the findings. Since 1995, rates of food insecurity have changed very little. There is no apparent linkage of the report's findings to any action plan to reduce rates. Measurement is a key component of tracking the magnitude of food insecurity, but accountability implies clear targets for reducing food insecurity. This includes ensuring that there are governmental actors charged with establishing these reference goals with clear timeframes for implementation of action plans to achieve them.

In 1990, the Interagency Board for National Nutrition Monitoring and Related Research was instituted under a 10-year legislative mandate. This board was responsible for ensuring that the public had timely access to upto-date information collected by 22 different government agencies involved in nutrition monitoring. This mandate was not renewed in 2000, leaving no similar mandate for leadership in the...
TABLE 1—Similarities Between the International Right to Food and US Definition of Food Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarity</th>
<th>Right to Food–International</th>
<th>Food Security–US Domestic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domains</td>
<td>&quot;The right to have regular access, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food, corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent access</td>
<td></td>
<td>Access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life, and includes, at a minimum: (1) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and (2) an ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality and quantity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignity and acceptability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How utilized:</td>
<td>Related to all other humaas rights, especially right to health, water, social services, education.</td>
<td>Provides reliable, validated population measures; it has been associated with overall health, child development, academic performance, mental health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrelated with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and well-being</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official endorsement</td>
<td>International legal apparatus and accepted international norms.</td>
<td>Endorsed and utilized by US governmental agencies (US Department of Agriculture, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increase Public Participation by Clarifying Terminology

A human rights approach is predicated on the idea that people have the right and the duty to participate in civic life, including the development, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programs. To facilitate and ensure participation, there must be administrative commitment to establish and maintain open avenues to legitimate forms of participation by people with all types of backgrounds. This is an area in which those advocating a human rights approach to health problems have yet to succeed. Sharing information and encouraging education through direct, easy-to-understand language, clear venues for feedback and public participation, and reference to clear benchmarks and targets for food security would facilitate participation.

Transparency is vital to increasing participation of the public. One clear improvement could come in the very definition of food insecurity. The US Household Food Security Survey Module, first fielded in 1995, is an 18-item survey that has been used to monitor food insecurity at national, regional, and state levels through an annual implementation in the Current Population Survey. Although the terminology used in this report should be easily understood by all concerned, the report is often misunderstood and by the media. Of greater concern are changes to the definition of food insecurity (e.g., eliminating the word hunger from the most severe form of food insecurity) made by the US Government in 2006 without public participation. Lack of broadly accepted definitions makes it difficult for the public to demand accountability and complicates the flow of information and education about the importance of hunger and food insecurity to national well-being. This limits the public participation and transparency that are essential to the human rights framework.

Address Vulnerability and Discrimination

Certain groups, by nature of socioeconomic conditions or previous discrimination, are more vulnerable to food insecurity than others. A human rights approach entails focusing on those who are most vulnerable, understanding what causes this vulnerability or susceptibility to adverse outcomes, and changing conditions national infrastructure for food security or nutrition oversight in place. The task of producing monitoring reports on food insecurity, dietary intake, and nutrition-related health outcomes is spread throughout different governmental agencies with no monitoring board to pull these results together. With the human rights approach, such an interagency effort could be revitalized to monitor, set reference goals, to inform and educate the public, and to inform nutrition-related and poverty-related legislation.

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, known as the Farm Bill, reauthorizes national nutrition monitoring activities for the first time in more than 15 years. This is an important step. But accountability implies that monitoring must be tied to action. There needs to be a board or agency that takes the lead in reducing food insecurity, not just measuring it. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service is a likely choice at the agency level, because they administer most of the federal food and nutrition assistance programs. Indeed, their mission is "to provide children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet." But food insecurity is integrally connected to many other social problems, such as poverty, ill health, and lack of schooling. Thus, as with monitoring, it makes sense to have an interagency body that can coordinate government efforts across a number of types of interventions.

Accountability also implies that, in cases where government does not follow through on appropriate reference goals, there is legal recourse for those affected. Lawsuits against the government over food assistance are not typical. However, such lawsuits could play an important role in ensuring food security. For example, initial resistance by the Department of Agriculture during the Nixon administration to begin the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children demonstration program was countered successfully by a lawsuit.
to improve their situation. For example, female-headed households have a high prevalence of household food insecurity—30.2% compared with 11.1% in the general population. A low-income female head of household may be vulnerable to food insecurity because she may have lower income and less childcare support compared with women who are married. Her low income may be related to having less education, fewer skills, less access to higher paying jobs, and, thus, more stress and anxiety about affording food. These processes may lead her to be more vulnerable to food insecurity and poor health.

The more food-insecure a woman is, the more risks she may take to get food on the table, such as taking low-wage jobs requiring long hours or may jeopardize her health by paying less for childcare and, thus, putting her children in higher-risk environments; or, at an extreme, trading sexual intercourse for money and thereby increasing her exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and violence. Among homeless or poorly housed women in Massachusetts, posttraumatic stress disorder because of adverse childhood experiences was associated with a 2-fold increase in the odds of household food insecurity. These examples show how vulnerability can lead to food insecurity. However, food insecurity itself can exacerbate already-existing vulnerability. Food-insecure women have described experiences of alienation and anxiety coupled with worries about family strife or losing their children. In a nationally representative sample in Canada, individuals from food-insecure households reported higher odds of depression and stress. Among African American women who chronically utilize food pantries, anxiety, violence, and stress were strongly associated with the experience of hunger. Food-insecure households have documented lower nutrient intakes, poor child development, poor health, and forced trade-offs between paying for basic needs such as housing, heating, and medical care. Each trade-off situation increases vulnerability.

The vulnerability of women to hunger and food insecurity has long been recognized in the human rights documents of the United Nations. One of the greatest concerns is the intergenerational transmission of malnutrition—that is, pregnant women that are malnourished are more likely to have low-birthweight babies. As a result, their children are more susceptible to undernutrition and poor cognitive development, which in turn affects the children's ability to earn enough money to support themselves and their families when they become adults. Because women and children are especially vulnerable to food insecurity and to socioeconomic processes that cause it, ensuring women's rights is an important correlate of the right to food.

A rights-based approach would investigate how US policies and programs might create or maintain vulnerability for some groups and not others, and, thus, have inequitable and negative effects on health and well-being. Such an investigation would require that data be disaggregated whenever possible. Highlighting the trends in racial/ethnic and gender disparities in national datasets helps monitor changes in disparities over time. Since 1998, disparities in food insecurity rates have not changed, and African American and Latino households continue to have 2 to 3 times the prevalence of household food insecurity compared with White households. It has been well documented that geographic disparities also exist in access to healthy foods. A human rights approach focuses attention on who and what might be accountable for these continuing disparities.

Link Policies to Outcomes

A human rights framework applied to the right to food can interpret how food-related policies affect one's ability to purchase food and how such policies affect health and well-being. For instance, research demonstrates that changes in food stamp laws are associated with altered health and well-being of families and children. Other research shows that the odds of food insecurity for those cut off from food stamp benefits were 2 times higher than for families who had no change in food stamps. The study showed that the loss of food stamps was also associated with a 40% increase in the odds of fair or poor health. A rights analysis would include an assessment of the ill health and greater vulnerability that sanction policies—i.e., those that disallow families to participate in federal programs such as food stamps, TANF, and Medicaid—might create.

Recently, USDA's Food and Nutrition Service has developed historic changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children's food packages. These changes, the first comprehensive ones since 1980, were developed in part to make the food packages more consistent with current nutritional guidelines and in part to address the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity among low-income children and adults. This is a positive example of government action and "fulfills" the right to food by facilitating an environment that fosters human development.

CHALLENGES TO ADOPTING A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Why is the United States one of the only countries that has not endorsed the right to food? There are 2 general misperceptions regarding human rights and the right to food. Finding ways to address them can create new opportunities for the adoption of a rights-based approach to food insecurity.

A Misperception of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the United States has had a formidable record of formally seeking to protect civil and political rights. The United States has ratified the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Based on Race and Ethnicity. On the other hand, the United States is slow to accept social, economic, and cultural rights generally referred to as "positive rights" or "basic rights." These social and economic rights include the right to a minimum standard of living, to health and well-being, to education, to housing, and to food. Such rights are integrated into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights without distinction, but they are largely covered in the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which the United States has signed (meaning they agree with the tenets but has not ratified (meaning they are not willing to hold themselves legally accountable for implementation).

The lack of acceptance of social and economic rights is related to a common misperception that they indicate direct provision of services and food for everyone. But this is not the primary intention of these rights. Economic, social, and cultural rights are rights that Henry Shue defines as "subsistence rights." They are predicated on the idea that social,
economic, and political structures should tangibly support populations and individuals in providing for themselves. In more precise terms, the right to food means the right to expect reasonable opportunities to provide food and good nutrition for oneself. The government’s role is to facilitate these opportunities. In the event that someone is incapable of providing for himself or herself, then the government should make provisions to provide food directly.

A second misperception is that acceptance of these positive rights implies that the government must instantly solve all social ills related to poverty and deprivation. This is not the case. The rights approach helps to identify ways of codifying a national will to end poverty and hunger, to provide a framework for continued progress in this area, and to provide a means for monitoring this progress.

To overcome these misperceptions, understanding is needed of the importance of basic rights (i.e., food, shelter, and water) to the health and well-being of the population, to the capacity of the population to participate in the workforce, and for the fulfillment of other freedoms, such as participating in civic life and cultural institutions. But this understanding involves a cultural shift and likely requires media attention, widespread education, and community participation activities. More federal legislation is needed that protects safety net programs as entitlement programs, as is the case for the Food Stamp Program. More investments are needed in social programs that have been proven to reduce poverty rates. In the same way that civil rights legislation, over time, changed culturally dominant views on race and racism, legislative and administrative action that incorporates rights language related to health promotion and income support policies may have a tangible effect on food insecurity.

Public health research can also play a role in changing attitudes about rights. Good health is valued in society, both for its own sake and for its potential to reduce skyrocketing medical costs. Social epidemiology and other public health research provides empirical evidence that social, economic, and cultural dimensions of life determine health status. This research can provide a basis for rights promotion by demonstrating that social, political, and economic interventions have a positive impact on health. The research in social epidemiology and the research on health and human rights have begun to merge in promoting the concepts of social and economic interventions and in framing these interventions in a rights-based context.

A Misperception That Solving Food Insecurity Requires Charity

A common misperception about hunger in the United States is that involuntary lack of access to food ought to be solved with charity. The emphasis on charity for solving food insecurity and hunger is a “needs-based” approach to food. The needs-based approach assumes that people who lack access to food are passive recipients in need of direct assistance. Programs and policy efforts that use this approach tend to provide assistance without expectation of action from the recipient, without obligation and without legal protections.

A needs-based approach does not require informed legislation, political will, and coordinated action. But a rights-based approach creates enabling environments that support people in nourishing themselves while providing a structure for legal recourse. A rights-based approach focuses on ways in which conditions and environments can be altered so that people take an active role in procuring food. It incorporates the idea that good nutrition is not something based solely on benevolence or charity but is, rather, the duty and obligation of a country to its people.

Further action on the part of local communities as well as academic and health professionals is required to shift the emphasis from a needs-based to a rights-based approach. Food security and good nutrition must be established as central aspects of the fundamental entitlement to a minimum standard of living. These groups can encourage the United States to take legislative, administrative, and regulatory action to ensure that all households have enough food for an active and healthy life. This can be done not only by providing food assistance, but also through ensuring that people have skills, education, health care, income, and other supports to procure healthy foods for themselves.

ADOPTING A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

The US government could revisit the opportunity to ratify the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. This will require strong support in the Congress and a clear presidential mandate. In the meantime, there are other ways to begin to implement the rights-based approach.

National Plan to End Hunger

Following the recommendations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (General Comment 12), there should be a national strategy to implement the right to food. To implement the right to food means to put the structural processes in place whereby agencies, organizations, and citizens are working toward the common goal of actively respecting, protecting, and promoting the right to food.

The first step in any strategy should be to map the prevalence of food insecurity for different groups and regions within the country, taking into account the differences that exist on the basis of gender and race/ethnicity and between rural and urban areas. Such mapping is necessary to identify those most at risk for food insecurity and to develop appropriate, targeted responses to food insecurity.

According to the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, a national strategy should establish the appropriate mechanisms that (1) utilize monitoring systems to identify emerging threats to the right to adequate food, (2) improve coordination between relevant agencies at the national, state, and local level, (3) improve accountability, with a clear allocation of responsibilities and timeframes for progressive implementation of the right to food, and (4) ensure the adequate public participation that includes the most food-insecure segments of the population.

In addition to a national plan, there should be a clear delineation of US obligations in each domain of the rights framework: respect, protect, facilitate, and provide. In Table 2 we provide examples for each domain of US obligations (respect, protect, and fulfill), some of which the United States is already doing; others, the United States might do if it adopted a rights-based approach to food insecurity.

Other Related Strategies

Aside from establishing a national plan to end hunger, other, more immediate steps can be taken. First, we recommend that there be open debate on the current food insecurity and hunger measures to ensure broad-based agreement...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain of Responsibility</th>
<th>Respect</th>
<th>Protect</th>
<th>Facilitate</th>
<th>Provide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Noninterference</td>
<td>Protect people from others doing harm</td>
<td>Develop policy environment that enables economic and food security</td>
<td>When fulfillment of other obligations have failed, or in circumstances beyond people’s control—from, e.g., emergency situations, vulnerable children, the destitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual protect against individual vulnerability</td>
<td>Do not deny qualifying citizens and legal immigrants access to nutrition assistance</td>
<td>Ensure all public assistance staff are properly trained about all programs</td>
<td>Increase minimum wage.</td>
<td>Promote access of all children to quality education, health care, and housing. Consider “comprehensive eligibility.” For instance, if a mother is eligible for WIC, then she could be entitled to other assistance programs without having to apply for each program separately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households: ensure supportive environment for families, especially women and children</td>
<td>Do not enforce a “family cap” limit on number of children when calculating food stamp allotment amounts.</td>
<td>Protect against predatory lenders.</td>
<td>Consider comprehensive eligibility (i.e., if a child qualifies for health insurance through Medicaid, the family should automatically qualify for food stamps).</td>
<td>Provide nutritious food or adequate food stamps on a temporary basis to families who experience personal emergency, i.e., household fire or broad-scale natural disaster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community: protect against community insecurity definitions without public debate and participation.</td>
<td>Investigate or revise zoning laws that ensure nutritious food retail options.</td>
<td>Provide tax breaks for supermarkets and food retailers to locate in low-income neighborhoods.</td>
<td>Directly provide opportunities to purchase nutritious foods in communities that otherwise have limited access to nutritious foods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reassess measures of poverty to account for housing and child care costs. Establish national monitoring or leadership role on nutrition. Hold agencies accountable for actively addressing disparities in food insecurity.</td>
<td>Provide meaningful venues for participation in dialogue, policies, and programs regarding food security and right to food.</td>
<td>Have rapid, organized, and sustained response in disaster situations.</td>
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Notes: WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. Not a comprehensive list. For related strategies, see US Action Plan on Food Security: Solutions to Hunger.\textsuperscript{65} The US Government is already engaged in these approaches.\textsuperscript{65} Some states do not enforce the family cap.
on a consensus definition. This endeavor should involve scientific experts, legislators, advocates, members of the media, and representatives of the poor who have experienced food insecurity first-hand. A national conference with representatives from these stakeholder groups, along with international experts, would help to establish a definition and measurement approach that could last for decades. With agreed-upon terminology, benchmarks, and targets, cross- agency accountability for reaching those targets can be more clearly articulated.

Second, position statements on food as a fundamental human right from the American Public Health Association, the American Society for Nutrition, the American Dietetic Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and others would help to inform scientists, advocates, and legislators about the negative health and developmental effects of food insecurity.

Third, these statements can also call on the USDA and other governmental agencies to integrate an accountability component into their food security reporting. Current food insecurity rates could be released with reference to progress toward national goals.

Finally, these activities should have a venue for encouraging participation of key community leaders who have experienced food insecurity first-hand. Examples of such participation would be invitations for commentary on results of food insecurity reports, collaboration with local people regarding intervention programs to prevent food insecurity, and establishment of local forums where national nutrition experts meet with and learn from local people who are food insecure about their needs and perceived effectiveness of programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the recent change in administration and a reevaluation of our domestic agenda, food insecurity and hunger ought to be one of the first health issues on our nation’s address. We have attempted to demonstrate how a human rights framework can be used to address food insecurity in the United States. From the examples presented here, it is clear that such a framework is not foreign to the cultural and political climate of the United States and that many advances have been made in the nutrition landscape. However, since the USDA started measuring food insecurity, there has been either increase or stagnation in these food insecurity rates. The rights framework is a fresh approach with a concrete methodology to advance the US government’s leadership in improving the well-being of its vulnerable populations.

Dominant US cultural beliefs express strong values for ways that the US system unleashes the spirit, energies, and ingenuity of the individual. This resonates with the rights-based approach that seeks to create enabling environments for people to procure their own food. By convincing others that the right to food is about creating enabling environments and conditions for people to feed themselves; by insisting that nutritious food is not simply a basic need, but a fundamental human right; and by having a clear and convincing definition of food insecurity and hunger, it will be possible to advance a human rights approach. We have presented concrete examples of activities and policies so that no matter what our expertise—research, policy analysis, advocacy, or education—we can all follow through on our obligation to promote well-being and enhance basic human dignity.

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References


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The Challenge of High and Rising Food Prices

Homi Kharas
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The Brookings Institution

Global food prices stand at levels not seen for almost 35 years. Do these prices foretell a world food crisis? When prices first peaked in mid-2008 there was a surge of news articles asking this question. Food riots erupted in every developing region of the world, including in Haiti, Cameroon, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The World Bank warned that 100 million people were at risk of being thrust back into poverty.1 UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon set up a High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis to provide a comprehensive long-term push to empower communities to become food secure. The leaders of the most important economies in the world put the issue on their agenda in G-8 (and later G-20) summit meetings.

Despite food prices near 2008 levels and in some cases exceeding them, the big issue in 2011 is food price volatility. After collapsing during the global financial crisis, maize, wheat, and sugar prices have doubled or tripled over the last year, continuing a roller coaster of fluctuation that has unnerved farmers, consumers, and governments all over the world. To take one example, maize prices started rising rapidly from late 2006 through the beginning of 2008, collapsed by half or more between July and December 2008, and stayed flat through the recovery of 2009 and early 2010, before recording another spike in the spring of 2011. The price of maize has since fallen by about 10 percent.2

It seems clear that the debate has shifted away from the effects of high prices on hunger and food access toward problems associated with commodity price volatility and market imperfections. According to Google Trends, there has

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been no noticeable uptick in news stories about a food crisis in 2010 or 2011, unlike in 2008. True, there have been some claims that the Arab Spring uprisings were partly instigated by unhappiness over food prices, but the banners in Tahrir Square demanded dignity, fairness, and social justice—not cheap food. It is telling that the report prepared by the major international food agencies on behalf of the G-20 in mid-2011 focused on price volatility and not price levels.3

The level of food prices and the degree of price volatility are both important issues that should receive attention from policy makers, but they are quite distinct. Food prices are different from other prices because food is a basic necessity of life. For poor households, food represents a sizeable fraction of their total consumption, often two-thirds or more, so high prices are felt acutely. High food prices can increase poverty for groups that are net food consumers, but they have broader effects as well. When people spend more on food, they have less discretionary income to spend on other items, leading to contractionary demand pressure elsewhere in the economy. If governments use subsidies to try to mitigate the impact of high food prices, the fiscal costs can become exorbitant.

The big difference between 2008 and 2011, however, is that developing countries are richer and better able to afford high food prices. The same economic forces that have boosted demand for food appear to have also improved incomes in poor countries. Strong growth in China, India, and other developing countries has contributed to a rise in the prices of many commodities, not just food. This has shifted global economic conditions in their favor, as most developing countries are net exporters of commodities, including food, and net importers of manufactures. Coupled with better domestic economic policies and leadership, the impact has been a large surge in incomes across the developing world.

This line of thinking is supported by data compiled by the International Food Policy Research Institute. In their recent report, “The Global Hunger Index of 2011,” they show a strong negative correlation between the degree of hunger and a developing country’s level of per capita income. Most developing countries have seen a surge in income growth over the last ten years despite the global recession. In 2011, the average purchasing power of an African is one-third higher than it was in 2005, when food prices started to rise. Even more rapid growth was observed in South Asia, the other region of the world where hunger is particularly prevalent. Of course, there are major exceptions: the

**If governments use subsidies to try to mitigate the impact of high food prices, the fiscal costs can be exorbitant.**
tragedy unfolding in the Horn of Africa is a clear reminder of the continuing severity of hunger and the risk of famine in several countries, but the consensus is that the causes of this catastrophe can be traced as much to conflict as to high global food prices. Among the countries that are at most risk of food shortages today are Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and North Korea—countries mired in conflict-induced poverty.

Other indicators also suggest that access to food is actually improving, not worsening. The United States Department of Agriculture analyzed food availability in 70 developing countries and estimated that 882 million people should be classified as food insecure in 2010. This number, defined as those unable to afford roughly 2,100 calories per day, decreased by 7.5 percent compared to 2009. Largely, this is because grain production in 2010 in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to be over 15 percent higher than in 2005. Notwithstanding these improvements, fully half of the region’s population still does not have access to enough food.

These trends suggest that the calamitous impact of high food price levels on poverty that many had feared simply did not come to pass, except in specific locations. There remains a large agenda to encourage producers and consumers to adapt to high prices, but the parameters of that agenda are reasonably well known. What is left is to implement the agenda on a large-enough scale to substantially decrease the prevalence of hunger.

Even more puzzling and of equal concern to policy makers is why food prices have become so volatile. Even short-term food price spikes and slumps can have severe long-term consequences. For example, food price spikes can compromise the nutritional status of poor people, making them vulnerable to disease. This is especially problematic for pregnant women and very young children. Early childhood malnutrition reduces the returns of schooling because severe undernourishment hinders motor, sensory, and cognitive development, leading to lower educational attainment and lifetime earnings.

Conversely, the possibility of food price slumps is reducing investment in agriculture and making smallholder farmers reluctant to apply fertilizer, irrigate, or otherwise improve their land to raise yields. In extreme cases, as in India, farmers have been driven to commit suicide when low prices for their crops have left them indebted and unable to support their families.

Although price volatility is an inherent characteristic of the market for food, it seems to have become worse in recent years. Neither food demand nor supply responds much to changes in prices, so large price changes are needed to restore equilibrium in food markets after a shock to either supply or demand.
Recently, extreme weather conditions in major food-producing countries, including droughts in Russia and China, and floods in Australia and South Africa, have affected global food supply. In addition, the increase in input costs—of, for example, fertilizers and pesticides—linked to higher oil prices also leads to supply shocks. On the demand side, policy decisions such as regulations to increase the biofuel content in gasoline have suddenly increased the demand for maize, sugar, and vegetable oils in unexpected ways.

Government policy has also played a role in exacerbating price volatility. Some food-importing countries panicked when prices started to rise in 2008 and increased their purchases to build domestic stocks and guard against even higher future prices. Other food-surplus countries tried to protect domestic markets by banning food exports. These actions simply exaggerated the global price cycles in the short term.

Food price volatility in the short term can also be explained by factors other than real supply and demand. The depreciation of the U.S. dollar and speculative investment in commodity index funds are financial mechanisms that can affect food spot and futures prices. Careful empirical analysis suggests that the most important determinants of volatility have been financial speculation and ethanol conversion.7

POLICY ISSUES AND RESPONSES

Governments are faced with three important policy issues concerning food. First, they need to make food markets work better so that production can continue to grow to meet the demands of world population growth and high-protein diets. Second, they should try to limit the damage being done to food markets by domestic politics. Third, they should promote mechanisms to strengthen social stability by giving households and farmers more ways to insure themselves against future price shocks.

MARKETS

Food markets stand as an exception in a world that is rapidly globalizing. They are still compartmentalized and segmented into national and local markets. This is partly because of high storage costs and the considerable waste incurred when food markets become global. To some extent, it is also because local foods are fresher and more nutritious. But largely it is because of policy-induced barriers to trade. Average tariffs on agricultural trade are over 20 percent. Non-tariff barriers
like safety standards, government procurement policies, subsidy policies, and export restrictions further segment food markets and limit their integration.

The evidence suggests that globalized markets actually have less volatility than local markets. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization looked at food prices in 20 African countries and found that price volatility was lowest for the major internationally traded grains (rice and wheat) compared to domestic, traditional staples like cassava, sorghum, and millet. One reason is that there is little correlation between international food prices and domestic prices. The World Bank estimates that although international food prices rose by 40 percent between June 2010 and January 2011, food prices in developing countries rose by only 7.9 percent and that in most cases the pass-through from international to domestic food prices in Africa (the degree to which domestic traders mark-up their prices when international prices rise) is less than 20 percent. In Kenya and Nigeria, for example, local food prices fell from the start of 2009 to the end of 2010 even while global food prices rose. At other times, local food prices in these countries have risen and fallen while international prices have stagnated.

Markets work best when there is good information about the underlying fundamentals of supply and demand. But in many developing countries, and indeed globally, this information is poor. There are no protocols for reporting on stock levels; many countries do not even collect this information in a rigorous way as most stocks are in the hands of private traders. Nor is there a global early warning system to estimate the risk of large price swings. Although the G-20 countries have agreed to an agricultural market information system to improve the flow of information, it does not seem likely that this will be sufficiently comprehensive and credible to make a large difference in volatility.

Many countries have instead resorted to trade policies to try to stabilize domestic food prices. Typically, this would be an appropriate response: importing more when international prices fall below domestic prices and exporting more when international prices rise above domestic prices. Unfortunately, the actual practice is often the reverse. When international prices rose in 2008, food-surplus countries like Argentina, Russia, and India (in the case of rice) used quantitative trade restrictions to ban exports in order to divert supplies to domestic markets, driving domestic prices further below international prices. Conversely, many food-importing countries chose to lower import tariffs when international prices rose, aggravating the pressure on global supplies. Although there have been many proposals for more coordinated

A “beggar-thy-neighbor attitude still prevails when it comes to food.
trade policy responses to improve the functioning of global food markets, it is unclear if countries would abide by international agreements if their citizenries objected to local price swings. A “beggar-thy-neighbor” attitude still prevails when it comes to food.

**Politics**

Most efforts to develop more coordinated international approaches to global food issues have foundered because of a lack of political will. The Doha Development Round of trade liberalization is perhaps the most obvious example. Although billed as a global effort to make international trade rules more favorable for developing countries, the negotiations have broken down with agricultural issues as a major sticking point.

Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath is famously said to have remarked “I can negotiate commerce but not farmers’ livelihood” in explaining his insistence on protecting a large group of special agricultural products and keeping a low threshold trigger, which could be activated to protect Indian farmers from import surges. His concern was that without such protections, global food prices could fall too low to allow for the development of rural India.8

The same concern over low prices affected the U.S. negotiating position, which sought to preserve a high level of domestic subsidies for food crops despite their trade-distorting effects. It seems ironic at a time of global concern over high food prices that it should be worries about prices falling too low that have derailed international trade negotiations. Perhaps the real explanation is that negotiators were not so concerned with technical arguments, but were reacting to the political strength of the rural vote—a constituency that prioritizes policies that sustain high domestic food prices.

These same political pressures can be seen in the emerging programs for biofuel that have been identified as major contributors to higher food prices. Biofuels now account for around 6.5 percent of the world’s grain output and 8 percent of its vegetable oil. These subsidies may be domestically justified on the grounds of reducing energy dependence on imported oil, but the impact is similar to that of other agricultural programs that strive to reward farmers without increasing output, thereby ensuring high crop prices.

In almost every country, rural incomes are considerably lower than urban incomes, and governments look for ways to address this inequality. Supporting farm-gate crop prices is one of the easiest programs to narrow the rural–urban gap. In developing countries, such measures are politically appealing because
The Challenge of High and Rising Food Prices

they affect the large numbers of voters that continue to live in rural areas. In advanced countries, the appeal comes from the fact that the benefits to farmers are considerable while the costs to urban consumers are small, as food is a small share of household budgets. It is no wonder that the G-20 agriculture ministers could not reach agreement on any politically important topics when discussing what to do about the global food crisis. No action on biofuels, on trade, or on resources for increasing agricultural productivity was agreed upon.

SOCIAL STABILITY

Governments are now recognizing that the best way to address food security and hunger is not just through interventions in food markets, but also through long-term development. Hunger has more to do with conflict, lack of income, intrahousehold inequality, and lack of nutritional education than with food availability.

As countries develop, food security improves. That much is clear from self-reported data on food security collected by the Gallup World Poll. Gallup asked representative samples of over 1,000 people in each of 70 developing countries whether they have been unable to afford enough food or gone hungry in the past 12 months. It finds a large decrease in the number of people reporting themselves to be food insecure between 2005 and 2008, mostly in large countries like China and India. The reason seems to be that average income levels have risen substantially in these countries.9

In countries where growth has stagnated, governments have turned to other interventions. Cheap food has long been a central policy in Arab economies where subsidies have been institutionalized, but the cost of these has become unsustainable. Arab countries import over half their caloric intake, partly because of the waste induced by generalized food subsidies. In Egypt, it is estimated that 28 percent of food subsidies never reach their intended beneficiaries; the food is either resold on the black market or used as animal or fish feed. Untargeted subsidies like this benefit the rich far more than the poor.

Some developing countries have targeted safety nets that can be expanded when food prices rise. The most efficient way is to use cash transfers to affected households. But there are few such programs in the lowest-income countries or in rural areas. To be useful, the programs must be administered well enough to handle an increased scale, often with adjustments to the target population. They also should have good-enough financial accounts to manage cash transfers without corruption. And of course, households must be able to purchase food with
the money they get; sometimes there is simply no food for sale in the market.

Where these conditions are not met, free food distribution along with other social services may make for a better safety net. The Vulnerable Group Development Program in Bangladesh is one such example, operating on a large scale where impoverished women can receive an allocation of wheat as long as they participate in training courses to improve their literacy, mathematical, and financial skills. Food-for-work and food-for-education (school meals) programs are other options that can be scaled easily. Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net workfare program reaches over 8 million rural residents and has been credited with avoiding the famine and deaths seen in neighboring Somalia as a result of drought.10

The issue with safety nets always comes down to money and organization, which many developing countries lack. Effectively targeting beneficiaries demands a good understanding of who is poor. Corruption can only be avoided with functioning payment systems. Administrative delays are inevitable without clear leadership and lines of accountability. Short-term safety nets can be provided to compensate for food price spikes, but in practice they are hard to put in place in many low-income countries.

International financial institutions can help, but there is only so much they can do. The Global Food Crisis Response Program was established in May 2008 with $1.2 billion from the World Bank Group, but those funds are now exhausted. Half the projects were small, totaling $10 million or less.11

A FORWARD-LOOKING ACTION AGENDA

What more can be done? Global cooperation on food is likely to remain limited and modest in scope for the near future, partly because food policy tends to be determined by domestic rather than international interests in rich and poor countries alike. Equally, safety nets can and should be expanded in developing countries, but the challenges of implementation are daunting. That leaves improving the market as the most promising path to pursue.

First and foremost, investments are needed to increase agricultural productivity, especially for smallholder farmers who serve local markets. Eighty-six percent of rural people worldwide depend on agriculture as a source of livelihood.12 Estimates from the Food and Agriculture Organization reveal that in the developing world, agricultural production needs to grow by 100 percent to feed the growing population. Around $83 billion is needed in developing countries to increase agricultural production, not including investments in roads.
The Challenge of High and Rising Food Prices

or electrification needed to increase production and get food to markets.\textsuperscript{13}

Recognizing the importance of increasing productivity, a U.S.-led international fund, the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program, was launched in April 2010 to promote investments in agriculture. Unfortunately, few donor countries have lived up to their commitments. The fund is now struggling to find a few hundred million dollars after starting with a goal of mobilizing $20 billion.\textsuperscript{14} It should be fully funded.

In too many developing countries, investment in agriculture is inadequate, market infrastructure is deteriorating, and little or no money is allocated for research and development. African agricultural productivity is only half that of India, a quarter that of China, and a fifth that of the United States. Ninety percent of African agricultural land is rain-fed rather than irrigated, so optimizing water intake cannot raise crop yields. Investments in mechanized power to till the soil would do wonders to raise yields, as would the application of fertilizer and better seed. Malawi is an example of a country that has achieved dramatic results by adopting such policies.\textsuperscript{15}

Second, the link between food prices and oil prices needs to be broken. While oil prices were low and stable, food production became concentrated in a few major locations with yields boosted by petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides. Crops could be easily transported to meet demand anywhere in the world. But with oil prices as high as they are now, transport, spoilage, and waste have become far more costly at the same time as production costs have risen. The food system needs to adapt to the new economics of energy by becoming more diversified and more localized. This would be efficient and potentially have significant nutritional benefits as well. Surprisingly, the organic, slow-food, go-local cooperative movement may find that market forces are its new best friend.

Third, international financial institutions must think about interventions that can be scaled up. There are still 3.1 billion people living in rural areas in developing countries—these are the most food insecure people. They are vulnerable to shocks from climate change, degraded natural resources, depleting common resources, land grabbing, and ill health. Their strategies revolve around diversifying what they grow and where family members work, and, to the extent possible, saving for a proverbial rainy day. Project-sized interventions cannot be expected to reach them all; systemic change is necessary.

To achieve this, smallholder farmers should be treated and supported like small businesses. They need to be integrated into producer supply chains...
Homi Kharas

to take full advantage of market opportunities and get the highest price for their products. They need new risk products such as weather index insurance and up-to-date information on local market prices transmitted through local and regional commodity exchanges. Farmer organizations can participate in research, innovate, understand modern scientific advances, educate members on best-practice growing techniques, and push for formal land rights and better local infrastructure.

The common thread through all these interventions is that, while food price volatility may be inevitable, food insecurity is not. There is a clear action plan to integrate more farmers into food markets and equip them with the resources and capacity to respond to price signals. It now needs to be implemented at a much larger scale. If markets instead of governments are allowed to smooth shocks across countries and over time, food price volatility does not have to be a concern for most people. The danger is that populist governments will take the opposite approach and try to regulate and restrict food markets. We would then continue to suffer both food price volatility and food insecurity, as we do today.

Notes

About 1 in 4 Americans participates in at least 1 of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs at some point during the year. These programs account for over 70 percent of USDA’s annual budget.
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The Food Assistance Landscape
FY 2013 Annual Report

Victor Oliveira

Overview

About 1 in 4 Americans participates in at least 1 of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs at some point during the year. Together these programs, which vary by size, type of benefits provided, and target population, form a nutritional safety net for millions of children and low-income adults. These programs account for over 70 percent of USDA’s annual budget. USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) conducts studies and evaluations of these programs.

This report uses preliminary administrative data from USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the agency responsible for managing the programs, to examine trends in the food and nutrition assistance programs through fiscal 2013 (October 1, 2012 to September 30, 2013). The report uses ERS data to examine trends in the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity in the United States through 2012 and summarizes two recent ERS reports that examine the food security of two subpopulations of particular concern: (1) adults with disabilities and (2) households with children. The report also looks at trends in some of the indicators of economic and social conditions that affect participation in and spending on food and nutrition assistance programs.

Figure 1
USDA outlays, FY 2013
Food and nutrition assistance accounts for almost three-quarters of USDA outlays

Note: Total USDA outlays for FY 2013 were estimated at $155 billion.
Source: USDA, Office of Budget and Program Analysis, FY 2013 Budget Summary and Annual Performance Plan.
Food Assistance Expenditures Increased Slightly

Federal expenditures for USDA's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs totaled $108.9 billion in fiscal 2013 or 2 percent more than the previous fiscal year. This increase—the smallest in percentage terms since 2000—marked the 13th consecutive year in which food and nutrition assistance expenditures exceeded the previous historical record. (Note: all references to expenditures refer to nominal expenditures—i.e., not adjusted for inflation—except where specifically noted.)

The five largest programs in fiscal 2013—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the National School Lunch Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the School Breakfast Program; and the Child and Adult Care Food Program—accounted for 96 percent of USDA's expenditures for food and nutrition assistance. In fiscal 2013, participation increased in some of these programs but decreased in others.

Rate of Growth in SNAP Participation Slowed

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—formerly the Food Stamp Program—is the cornerstone of USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs, accounting for almost three-quarters (73 percent) of all Federal food and nutrition assistance spending in fiscal 2013. The program provides monthly benefits for eligible participants to purchase food items at authorized food stores. Unlike other food and nutrition assistance programs that target specific groups, SNAP is available to most needy households with limited income and assets (subject to certain work and immigration status requirements). During fiscal 2013:
Table 1
USDA nutrition assistance at a glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>FY 2012</th>
<th>FY 2013</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SNAP</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average monthly participation (millions)</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average benefit per person (dollars/month)</td>
<td>133.41</td>
<td>133.08</td>
<td>-0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total annual expenditures ($ billions)</td>
<td>78.4</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WIC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average monthly participation (millions)</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>-2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Women</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Infants</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Children</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>-3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food cost per person (dollars/month)</td>
<td>44.98</td>
<td>43.45</td>
<td>-3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditures ($ billions)</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>-5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National School Lunch Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average daily participation (millions)</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>-3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Free</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduced price</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>-6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Full price</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>-10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditures ($ billions)</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School Breakfast Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average daily participation (millions)</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Free</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduced price</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Full price</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>-1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditures ($ billions)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child and Adult Care Food Program</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals served in:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• childcare centers (millions)</td>
<td>1,305.8</td>
<td>1,336.7</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• family daycare homes (millions)</td>
<td>568.8</td>
<td>551.8</td>
<td>-3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• adult daycare centers (millions)</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>-0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditures ($ billions)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All programs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditures ($ billions)</td>
<td>106.7</td>
<td>108.9</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Note: Figures are based on preliminary data provided by the Food and Nutrition Service as of December 2013 and are subject to change. Total program expenditures include figures from other programs not shown in the table.
• An average 47.6 million persons per month participated in the program, the largest number to ever participate in the program and over 2.5 times the number participating in FY 2000.

• The number of participants increased by 2 percent over the previous year’s participation numbers. This was the smallest percentage increase since fiscal 2007.

• About 15 percent of the Nation’s population participated in the program each month.

• Benefits per person averaged $133.08 per month, about the same as the previous year.

• Federal spending for the program totaled $79.8 billion or 2 percent more than the previous record high of $78.4 billion set the previous year.

**SNAP benefits to fall in fiscal 2014**

To help people affected by the Great Recession between December 2007 and June 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), also known as the Stimulus Act, temporarily increased benefit levels in SNAP beginning in April 2009 (maximum SNAP benefits increased by 13.6 percent). Benefits were to remain at the new higher level until SNAP’s regular adjustments for inflation to the maximum benefits caught up to the maximum benefits set by ARRA. However, subsequent legislation pushed up the sunset of the ARRA benefit to November 1, 2013 (i.e., the beginning of fiscal 2014). At that time, SNAP benefits decreased by 5.4 percent for a family of four receiving a maximum allotment.

*Figure 3*

**Average monthly SNAP participation, FY 2000-13**

*Participation slows after increasing sharply around the time of the Great Recession*

Note: The Great Recession occurred from December 2007 to June 2009.

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.
WIC Participation Shrunk

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) helps safeguard the health of low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women as well as infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk, by providing a package of supplemental foods, nutrition education, and health care referrals at no cost. To be eligible on the basis of income, applicants’ income must be at or below 185 percent of poverty (a person who participates or who has certain family members who participate in other benefits programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) automatically meet the income eligibility requirement). During fiscal 2013:

- An average 8.7 million people per month participated in the program, or 3 percent less than the previous year—the largest 1-year decrease since the program began in 1974.

- Over half (53 percent) of all participants were children, 24 percent were women, and 23 percent were infants.

- Reflecting the continued decrease in U.S. births that began in 2008, the number of infants and women in the program each fell by 2 percent, and the number of children fell by 4 percent. This marked the third consecutive year—and only the third time in the program’s 40-year history—that participation for all three groups fell.

- Food costs per person totaled $43.45 per month, or about 3 percent less than in the previous fiscal year.

- Spending on the program totaled $6.4 billion, a 6-percent decrease from the previous fiscal year.

Figure 4
Average monthly WIC participation, FY 1974-2013
The number of women, infants, and children participating in WIC each fell for the third consecutive year in FY 2013

WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.
Average monthly real SNAP and WIC per-person food costs have diverged over time

When WIC was initiated in 1974, the average monthly WIC food cost per person was similar to the average monthly SNAP benefit per person. However, real (i.e., after adjusting for inflation) food costs per person for SNAP and WIC have diverged significantly since then. In general, real per-person benefits for SNAP have trended upward while real per-person food costs for WIC have trended downward. WIC State agencies have reduced food costs through a variety of cost-containment measures, the most effective of which has been the use of infant formula rebates. Starting in the late 1980s, WIC State agencies have obtained significant discounts in the form of rebates from infant formula manufacturers for formula purchased through the program. In exchange for the rebates, a manufacturer is given the exclusive right to provide its product to WIC participants in that State. Rebates totaled $1.7 billion in fiscal 2012.

Since the mid-1990s, real monthly food costs for WIC have remained relatively stable at about $43-$48 per person (2013 dollars). However, real per-person food benefits for SNAP continues to fluctuate, due in large part to legislative changes that either increased or decreased benefit levels. For example, the ARRA temporarily raised SNAP benefits starting in April 2009. In recent years real food costs for SNAP have decreased as inflation eroded the temporary increase from ARRA.

Average real monthly food costs per person
Differences in per-person food costs for WIC and SNAP have widened over time

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Participation in National School Lunch Program Fell While Expenditures Increased

The National School Lunch Program provides nutritious lunches at low or no cost to students during lunch periods at school and snacks to children participating in after-school care programs. Schools that participate in the program receive cash and some commodities from USDA to offset the cost of providing food. In return, the schools must serve lunches that meet Federal nutrition requirements and offer free or reduced-price lunches to needy children. Any child at a participating school may enroll in the program. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty guidelines are eligible for free meals, and those from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty guidelines are eligible for reduced-price meals. Children from families with incomes over 185 percent of the poverty guidelines pay full price, although their meals are still subsidized to a small extent. During fiscal 2013:

- An average 30.6 million children participated in the program each school day or 3 percent fewer than in the previous fiscal year. This marked the second consecutive annual decrease in average participation and the largest 1-year decrease since fiscal 1982.

- The percentage of participants that received free meals increased from 59 percent in fiscal 2012 to 62 percent in fiscal 2013. The percentage of participants that received reduced-price meals decreased from 9 to 8 percent, and the percentage of participants that paid full price fell from 32 percent to 30 percent.

- Despite the decrease in the number of participating children, spending for the program totaled $12.2 billion or 5 percent more than in the previous fiscal year. This increase in expenditures reflected, at least in part, the percentage increase in free meals (which are more heavily subsidized)

Figure 5
Share of school lunches served by type of reimbursement, FY 2013

- Full price, 30%
- Free, 62%
- Reduced price, 8%

Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.
served in the program as well as the implementation of the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 whereby, starting in October 1, 2012, schools serving meals that met updated nutrition requirements received an additional reimbursement of 6 cents per lunch. This was the first noninflationary increase in reimbursement rates in over 30 years.

**Participation in School Breakfast Program Increased Slightly**

The School Breakfast Program provides low-cost breakfasts to schoolchildren, and students from low-income families receive free or reduced-price meals (eligibility requirements are the same as those for the National School Lunch Program). Schools that participate in the program receive cash from USDA to offset the cost of providing food. Participating schools receive higher “severe need” reimbursements when 40 percent or more of their lunches were served free or at a reduced price during the second preceding school year. During fiscal 2013:

- An average of 13.1 million children participated in the program each school day, or 2 percent more than the previous fiscal year. This was the smallest percentage increase since 2000.

- The percentage of participants that received free meals increased from 76 percent in fiscal 2012 to 77 percent in fiscal 2013, while the percentage of participants that paid full price decreased from 16 percent in fiscal 2012 to 15 percent in fiscal 2013. The percentage of participants that received reduced-price meals remained at 8 percent in fiscal 2013.

- Spending totaled $3.5 billion or 7 percent more than in the previous year, making the School Breakfast Program the fastest growing of all the major food assistance programs in terms of expenditures.

---

**Figure 6**

*Share of school breakfasts served by type of reimbursement, FY 2013*

- **Free,** 77%
- **Full price,** 15%
- **Reduced price,** 8%

Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.
Availability gap in the school meals programs narrows

The National School Lunch Program was established in 1946 and has been widely available in nearly all public schools and many private schools since the 1970s. The School Breakfast Program is a much newer program—it wasn’t granted permanent authorization until 1975—and it was at first targeted to schools in low-income areas that had a greater need for subsidized breakfasts. Throughout its history, the number of children participating in the School Breakfast Program has been much smaller than the number of children participating in the National School Lunch Program. For example, in fiscal 2013, the average daily number of children participating in the School Breakfast Program was only 43 percent of the number of children participating in the National School Lunch Program. The number of participants in the two programs is determined by the availability of the program—that is, the number of students enrolled in schools that offer the school meals—and by the percentage of students in those schools who choose to participate. The School Breakfast Program started out with much lower numbers of participants than the National School Lunch Program had. As the breakfast program funding increased—and grants to schools to help start up the program became more available—the number of schools participating in the breakfast program steadily grew and the number of students with access to the program began approaching that of the National School Lunch Program. By FY 2013, the School Breakfast Program was available to about 94 percent of the students who had access to the National School Lunch Program.

Although program availability rates have converged, student participation rates—the percentage of students in schools that offer the National School Lunch Program or the School Breakfast Program who receive school meals—remain far apart. For example, in FY 2013, about 59 percent of all children enrolled in schools offering the National School Lunch Program participated in the program while only 27 percent of all children enrolled in schools offering the School Breakfast Program participated in that program. That is, the participation rate among students in the School Breakfast Program is less than half that of students in the National School Lunch Program.

Availability of the School Meals Programs, FY 1969-2013

*The gap in the availability of the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program is narrowing*

![Graph showing availability gap in the School Meals Programs, FY 1969-2013](source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.)
The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) subsidizes healthy meals and snacks in participating childcare centers, daycare homes, and adult daycare facilities. Care providers are reimbursed for each type of qualifying meal (breakfast, lunch/supper, or snack) they serve. In addition to cash reimbursement, USDA makes donated agricultural foods or cash (in lieu of donated foods) available to institutions participating in CACFP. During fiscal 2013:

- A total of almost 2 billion meals were served, or 1 percent more than in the previous year.
- The number of meals served increased by 2 percent in childcare centers while the number of meals served in family daycare homes decreased by 3 percent and the number of meals served in adult daycare centers fell by 1 percent. The decline in the number of meals served in family daycare homes continues a trend that began in FY 1997. The decrease in the number of meals served in adult daycare centers was the first since the program started to include adult daycare centers in fiscal 1988.
- Program expenditures totaled $3 billion or 4 percent more than in the previous year. This marked the 15th consecutive year that program expenditures increased.

Figure 7
Meals served in the CACFP by type of provider, FY 1980-2013

Number of meals served in family daycare centers and adult daycare centers decreased in FY 2013

CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program.
Source: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service.
Prevalence of Food Insecurity Unchanged

Food security—access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life—is one of several conditions necessary for a population to be healthy and well nourished. Food-insecure households are those that at times lack adequate food for one or more household members because they have insufficient money or other resources for food. In the more severe range of food insecurity, described as very low food security, the food intake of one or more household members was reduced and their eating patterns were disrupted at times during the year because the household lacked money and other resources for food.

USDA monitors household food security in the United States through an annual survey sponsored by ERS. Household food security status is based on responses to a questionnaire about food-insecure conditions experienced by household members in the last 12 months. The most recent available data are from the December 2012 survey. During 2012:

- An estimated 14.5 percent of U.S. households (or 17.6 million households) were food-insecure at least some time during the year, essentially unchanged from the previous year.

---

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food security status</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All households</td>
<td>119,484</td>
<td>121,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Food-secure households</td>
<td>101,631</td>
<td>103,914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Food-insecure households</td>
<td>17,853</td>
<td>17,632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— With low food security</td>
<td>11,014</td>
<td>10,679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— With very low food security</td>
<td>6,839</td>
<td>6,953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All households with children</td>
<td>38,803</td>
<td>39,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Households with food-insecure children</td>
<td>3,862</td>
<td>3,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Households with very low food security</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All households</td>
<td>119,484</td>
<td>121,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Food-secure households</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Food-insecure households</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— With low food security</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— With very low food security</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All households with children</td>
<td>38,803</td>
<td>39,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Households with food-insecure children</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Households with very low food security</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• A total of 5.7 percent of all households (7.0 million households) had very low food security—the most severe food-insecure condition monitored by USDA. Typically, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 months of the year, for a few days in each of those months.

• Children were food-insecure at times during the year in 10 percent (3.9 million households) of all households with children. In about 1.2 percent of households with children (463,000 households), one or more children experienced very low food security. In households with very low food security among children, caregivers reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.

• The typical food-secure household spent 26 percent more for food than the typical food-insecure household of the same size and composition.

• Fifty-nine percent of food-insecure households in the month prior to the survey participated in one or more of the three largest food and nutrition assistance programs (i.e., SNAP, National School Lunch Program, or WIC).

Figure 8
**U.S. households by food security status, 2012**

*An estimated 14.5 percent of Americans were food-insecure at least some time during the year in 2012*

Economic and Social Indicators Related to Participation in Food Assistance Programs

Economic and social conditions affect participation in and spending on food assistance programs by influencing (1) the size of the eligible population, (2) the rate of participation among eligible people, and (3) benefit levels. The extent to which the programs respond to changing economic and social conditions affects the lives of millions of Americans and has Federal budgetary implications.

As means-tested programs, the number of persons eligible for USDA’s food and nutrition assistance programs is inherently linked to the economy. In particular, there is a strong association between economic conditions and SNAP caseloads. SNAP is one of the Nation’s primary countercyclical programs, expanding during economic downturns and contracting during periods of economic growth. In general, the percentage of the population in SNAP closely tracks the poverty rate. This important relationship emerges because to be eligible for the program, monthly gross income (i.e., a household’s total income before deductions) generally must be at or below 130 percent of poverty, and monthly net income (after allowable deductions) must be at or below 100 percent of poverty. The percentage of the population in SNAP also generally tracks the unemployment rate.

The percentage of the population in SNAP increased in both fiscal 2012 and 2013, even as the unemployment rate fell for the third consecutive calendar year—a result inconsistent with the historic relationship between the two variables. The improvement of economic conditions during the early stage of recovery, when the unemployment rate starts to fall, takes longer to be felt by lower educated, low-wage workers who are receiving SNAP benefits. For example, the poverty rate in 2012 (the latest year

Figure 9

Percentage of population in SNAP and selected economic indicators, 1980-2013
Several economic indicators track the percentage of population in SNAP

## Table 3
### Selected economic and social indicators, 2010-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population in July (millions)</td>
<td>309.3</td>
<td>311.6</td>
<td>313.9</td>
<td>316.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Births (thousands)</td>
<td>3,999</td>
<td>3,954</td>
<td>3,958 (PR)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School enrollment (thousands)</td>
<td>54,876</td>
<td>54,956 (PJ)</td>
<td>55,091 (PJ)</td>
<td>55,288 (PJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prekindergarten-grade 8 (thousands)</td>
<td>38,716</td>
<td>38,909 (PJ)</td>
<td>39,115 (PJ)</td>
<td>39,334 (PJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 9-12 (thousands)</td>
<td>16,160</td>
<td>16,047 (PJ)</td>
<td>15,976 (PJ)</td>
<td>15,954 (PJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed persons (thousands)</td>
<td>14,825</td>
<td>13,747</td>
<td>12,506</td>
<td>11,460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate (percent)</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons in poverty (millions)</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate (percent)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in poverty (millions)</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate for children (under 18)</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People without health insurance (percent)</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income (2012 dollars)</td>
<td>51,892</td>
<td>51,100</td>
<td>51,017</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI for all items (percent change)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI for food (percent change)</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI for food at home</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI for food away from home</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real GDP (percent change)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TANF recipients in June (thousands)</td>
<td>4,346</td>
<td>4,389</td>
<td>4,002</td>
<td>3,684</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CPI = Consumer Price Index; GDP = Gross Domestic Product; TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.  
NA = Data not available; (PJ) = Projected; (PR) = Provisional.  
U.S. Census Bureau: Population, poverty, household income, and health insurance data.  
National Center for Education Statistics: School enrollment data.  
National Center for Health Statistics: Birth data.  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: TANF data.
available) was about the same as during the 2 previous years, suggesting that while unemployment was falling, many low-income households did not share in the economic growth. During previous economic recessions, the unemployment rate fell before SNAP participation decreased (a lagged response). It is possible that as the economy continues to recover, SNAP participation will follow but with a longer lag than following previous recessions.

Changing demographics, like changing economic conditions, can affect participation in USDA's food assistance programs. While the U.S. population continues to increase, the number of births has fallen each year since 2007. Participation in WIC is heavily influenced by the number of births. The participation of pregnant women (up to 9 months before birth), infants and breastfeeding women (up to 1 year following birth) and nonbreastfeeding postpartum women (6 months following birth) in WIC all occur within a short window surrounding a birth event. In total, these groups comprised almost half of all WIC participants in fiscal 2013. As children age, the group of potential WIC participants is less dependent on the number of recent births, and more influenced by births in earlier periods. Participation in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs is influenced by school enrollment, which, in turn, is impacted by the number of births in the more distant past.

ERS Research Update

ERS is one of the premier sources of economic research on food and nutrition assistance programs in the United States. This research is conducted internally by ERS staff as well as through a portfolio of ERS-funded extramural research projects and partnerships. ERS has compiled an electronic database of over 900 peer-reviewed reports, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-and-nutrition-assistance-research-database/research-reports-articles-database.aspx

Each year, ERS releases summary national statistics on household food security, food spending, and use of Federal food and nutrition assistance programs by food-insecure households. In 2013, two ERS reports provided additional detailed information on the food security of adults with disabilities and households with children.

*Food Insecurity Among Households With Working-Age Adults With Disabilities, ERR-144, January 2013.* This study used 2009 and 2010 data to examine the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity by the presence of adults age 18-64 with disabilities. The study focused on two groups of households that include adults with disabilities: (1) households with a working-age adult with a disability that prevented work (referred to as *not in labor force-disabled*); and (2) those with a working-age adult with a specified disability (hearing, vision, mental, physical, self-care, or going-outside-home disability) that are not necessarily work-limiting (referred to as *other reported disabilities*). Persons with disabilities who are unable to work due to their disability may be more severely disabled or have poorer health than persons with disabilities who are not reported to be unable to work due to disability.

Food insecurity was most prevalent among households with an adult who was *not in labor force-disabled* (34 percent), followed by those with a working-age adult with *other reported disabilities* (25 percent). Households with no working-age adult with a disability had a much lower prevalence of food insecurity (12 percent).

Very low food security, the more severe range of food insecurity characterized by disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake, was also more common among households with adults with disabilities than among other households: 17 percent of households with a member who was *not in labor force-disabled* had very low food security, compared to 10 percent of households with no working-age adult with a disability.

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Very low food security, the more severe range of food insecurity characterized by disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake, was also more common among households with adults with disabilities than among other households: 17 percent of households with a member who was *not in labor force-disabled* had very low food security, compared to 10 percent of households with no working-age adult with a disability.
force-disabled had very low food security and 12 percent of households with a working-age adult with other reported disabilities had very low food security. Among households with no working-age adults with disabilities, 5 percent had very low food security.

Households that include working-age adults with disabilities comprise a large share of food-insecure households. While about 16 percent of all U.S. households with working-age adults included a working-age adult with a disability, an estimated 32 percent of households with food insecurity included a working-age adult with a disability and nearly 38 percent of households with very low food security included a working-age adult with a disability.

Whether disabilities prevented employment was an important factor related to food insecurity among households that included adults with disabilities. Vision, mental, and physical disabilities were related to higher odds of food insecurity than were hearing, self-care, and going-outside-home disabilities.

The influence of disability on earnings and income appears to have especially detrimental effects on food security. Lower capacity for employment and lower income are large parts of the reason that households with adults who have disabilities are more likely to experience food insecurity. Disabilities

Figure 10
Prevalence of food insecurity by disability status
Food insecurity most prevalent among households with an adult with disability that prevented work

Notes: Working-age adults with other reported disabilities are those reported to have one or more of the following disabilities: hearing, vision, mental, physical, self-care, or going-outside-home disability, but no indication that their disability prevented them from working.
Food insecurity includes households with low and very low food security.
affect the earning potential of persons with disabilities and also affect the employment of other household adults who may need to provide care for the member with a disability.

However, even with annual income accounted for, disability was associated with a substantially higher likelihood of food insecurity. The findings suggest that costs associated with disability are an important factor affecting food insecurity. The prevalence of food insecurity among households with a member not in the labor force-disabled, and income more than three times the poverty line was equivalent to the prevalence of food insecurity in households with no adults with disabilities and with incomes twice the poverty line. These statistics suggest that households with adults who have disabilities face high expenses that reduce resources available for the household food budget. Thus, even households with moderate incomes face a high likelihood of food insecurity due to costs associated with disability.

**Food Insecurity in Households With Children: Prevalence, Severity, and Household Characteristics, 2010-11, EIB-113, May 2013.** This report averaged 2 years of data (2010-11) to examine the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in households with children age 0-17 by selected household characteristics. Food security is especially important for children because their nutrition affects not only their current health, but also their physical, mental, and social development—and thus their future health and well-being.

Results from the study suggest that employment is a key determinant of food insecurity in households with children. The prevalence of food insecurity among children in households headed by an unemployed adult (26 percent) was 3 ½ times as high as in households headed by one or more adult employed full time (7 percent). However, three-quarters of households with food-insecure children had one or more adult in the labor force, either full time (60 percent) or part time (15 percent).

Educational attainment is also strongly associated with food insecurity in households with children. For households headed by an adult with less than a high school diploma, the prevalence of food insecurity among children (24 percent) was over six times as high as for households headed by an adult with at least a 4-year college degree (4 percent).

Disabilities are also an important risk factor for food insecurity in households with children. Food insecurity among children was more than twice as prevalent in households with an adult who was unable to work due to disability (21 percent) and in households with a working-age adult with other reported disabilities (18 percent) as in households with no working-age adult with a disability (9 percent).

Food insecurity among children was three times as prevalent in households headed by single women (19 percent) as in households headed by married couples (6 percent). Food insecurity among children was more than 2.5 times as prevalent for households headed by non-Hispanic Blacks (16 percent) and Hispanics (17 percent) as for those headed by non-Hispanic Whites (6 percent).

Federal food and nutrition assistance programs provided benefits to 84 percent of low-income households with food-insecure children (low-income households are those with incomes below 185 percent of the Federal poverty line). Children in about 70 percent of low-income households with food-insecure children received free or reduced-price school meals in 2010-11, about 42 percent of low-income households with food-insecure children received SNAP benefits, and about 25 percent received WIC benefits. Many households received assistance from multiple programs, although about 31 percent reported receiving only free or reduced-price school meals.
Low-income households not receiving assistance from any of the programs were less likely to be food insecure (12 percent) than those that did receive assistance (approximately 23-30 percent, depending on the mix of programs). This difference suggests that low-income households with greater food security are less likely to choose to participate in food assistance programs.

Figure 11
Prevalence of food insecurity among children, by educational attainment of most educated adult in the household, 2010-11 average
Educational attainment of adults is strongly associated with food insecurity among children

Information on food assistance research can be found on the ERS website at www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodnutritionassistance and on the FNS Office of Research and Analysis website at www.fns.usda.gov/ora/. Information on USDA’s food assistance programs can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/fns/. For more information on this report, contact Victor Oliveira at victoro@ers.usda.gov.
Section 5

Community & Civic Engagement
The Myth of the Culture of Poverty

Paul Gorski

As the students file out of Janet's classroom, I sit in the back corner, scribbling a few final notes. Defeat in her eyes, Janet drops into a seat next to me with a sigh.

"I love these kids," she declares, as if trying to convince me. "I adore them. But my hope is fading."

"Why's that?" I ask, stuffing my notes into a folder.

"They're smart. I know they're smart, but . . ."

And then the deficit floodgates open: "They don't care about school. They're unmotivated. And their parents—I'm lucky if two or three of them show up for conferences. No wonder the kids are unprepared to learn."

At Janet's invitation, I spent dozens of hours in her classroom, meeting her students, observing her teaching, helping her navigate the complexities of an urban midwestern elementary classroom with a growing percentage of students in poverty. I observed powerful moments of teaching and learning, caring and support. And I witnessed moments of internal conflict in Janet, when what she wanted to believe about her students collided with her prejudices.

Like most educators, Janet is determined to create an environment in which each student reaches his or her full potential. And like many of us, despite overflowing with good intentions, Janet has bought into the most common and dangerous myths about poverty.

Chief among these is the "culture of poverty" myth—the idea that poor people share more or less monolithic and predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors. For educators like Janet to be the best teachers they can be for all students, they need to challenge this myth and reach a deeper understanding of class and poverty.

Roots of the Culture of Poverty Concept

Oscar Lewis coined the term culture of poverty in his 1961 book The Children of Sanchez. Lewis based his thesis on his ethnographic studies of small Mexican communities. His studies uncovered approximately 50 attributes shared within these communities: frequent violence, a lack of a sense of history, a neglect of planning for the future, and so on. Despite studying very small communities, Lewis extrapolated his findings to suggest a universal culture of poverty. More than 45 years later, the premise of the culture of poverty paradigm remains the same: that people in poverty share a consistent and observable "culture."

Lewis ignited a debate about the nature of poverty that continues today. But just as important—especially in the age of data-driven decision making—he inspired a flood of research. Researchers around the world tested the culture of
poverty concept empirically (see Billings, 1974; Carmon, 1985; Jones & Luo, 1999). Others analyzed the overall body of evidence regarding the culture of poverty paradigm (see Abell & Lyon, 1979; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rodman, 1977). These studies raise a variety of questions and come to a variety of conclusions about poverty. But on this they all agree: There is no such thing as a culture of poverty. Differences in values and behaviors among poor people are just as great as those between poor and wealthy people.

In actuality, the culture of poverty concept is constructed from a collection of smaller stereotypes which, however false, seem to have crept into mainstream thinking as unquestioned fact. Let's look at some examples.

**MYTH:** Poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics.

**The Reality:** Poor people do not have weaker work ethics or lower levels of motivation than wealthier people (Iversen & Farber, 1996; Wilson, 1997). Although poor people are often stereotyped as lazy, 83 percent of children from low-income families have at least one employed parent; close to 60 percent have at least one parent who works full-time and year-round (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004). In fact, the severe shortage of living-wage jobs means that many poor adults must work two, three, or four jobs. According to the Economic Policy Institute (2002), poor working adults spend more hours working each week than their wealthier counterparts.

**MYTH:** Poor parents are uninvolved in their children's learning, largely because they do not value education.

**The Reality:** Low-income parents hold the same attitudes about education that wealthy parents do (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Leichter, 1978). Low-income parents are less likely to attend school functions or volunteer in their children's classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005)—not because they care less about education, but because they have less access to school involvement than their wealthier peers. They are more likely to work multiple jobs, to work evenings, to have jobs without paid leave, and to be unable to afford child care and public transportation. It might be said more accurately that schools that fail to take these considerations into account do not value the involvement of poor families as much as they value the involvement of other families.

**MYTH:** Poor people are linguistically deficient.

**The Reality:** All people, regardless of the languages and language varieties they speak, use a full continuum of language registers (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008). What's more, linguists have known for decades that all language varieties are highly structured with complex grammatical rules (Gee, 2004; Hess, 1974; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). What often are assumed to be deficient varieties of English—Appalachian varieties, perhaps, or what some refer to as Black English Vernacular—are no less sophisticated than so-called "standard English."

**MYTH:** Poor people tend to abuse drugs and alcohol.

**The Reality:** Poor people are no more likely than their wealthier counterparts to abuse alcohol or drugs. Although drug sales are more visible in poor neighborhoods, drug use is equally distributed across poor, middle class, and wealthy communities (Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001). Chen, Sheth, Kreji, and Wallace (2003) found that alcohol consumption is significantly higher among upper middle class white high school students than among poor black high school students. Their finding supports a history of research showing that alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than among poor people (Diala, Muntaner, & Walrath, 2004; Galea, Ahern, Tracy, & Vlahov, 2007). In other words, considering alcohol and illicit drugs together, wealthy people are more likely than poor people to be substance abusers.

**The Culture of Classism**

The myth of a "culture of poverty" distracts us from a dangerous culture that does exist—the culture of classism. This culture continues to harden in our schools today. It leads the most well intentioned of us, like my friend Janet, into low expectations for low-income students. It makes teachers fear their most powerless pupils. And, worst of all, it diverts attention from what people in poverty do have in common: inequitable access to basic human rights.

The most destructive tool of the culture of classism is deficit theory. In education, we often talk about the deficit perspective—defining students by their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Deficit theory takes this attitude a step further, suggesting that poor people are poor because of their own moral and intellectual deficiencies (Collins, 1988). Deficit theorists use two strategies for propagating this world view: (1) drawing on well-established stereotypes, and (2) ignoring systemic conditions, such as inequitable access to high-quality schooling, that support the cycle of poverty.

The implications of deficit theory reach far beyond individual bias. If we convince ourselves that poverty results not from gross inequities (in which we might be complicit) but from poor people's own deficiencies, we are much less likely to support authentic antipoverty policy and programs. Further, if we believe, however wrongly, that poor people don't value education, then we dodge any responsibility to redress the gross education inequities with which they contend. This application of deficit theory establishes the idea of what Gans (1995) calls the undeserving poor—a segment of our society that simply does not deserve a fair shake.

If the goal of deficit theory is to justify a system that privileges economically advantaged students at the expense of working-class and poor students, then it appears to be working marvelously. In our determination to "fix" the mythical culture of poor students, we ignore the ways in which our society cheats them out of opportunities that their wealthier
peers take for granted. We ignore the fact that poor people suffer disproportionately the effects of nearly every major social ill. They lack access to health care, living-wage jobs, safe and affordable housing, clean air and water, and so on (Books, 2004)—conditions that limit their abilities to achieve to their full potential.

Perhaps most of us, as educators, feel powerless to address these bigger issues. But the question is this: Are we willing, at the very least, to tackle the classism in our own schools and classrooms?

This classism is plentiful and well documented (Kozol, 1992). For example, compared with their wealthier peers, poor students are more likely to attend schools that have less funding (Carey, 2005); lower teacher salaries (Karoly, 2001); more limited computer and Internet access (Gorski, 2003); larger class sizes; higher student-to-teacher ratios; a less-rigorous curriculum; and fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2004). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2004) also found that low-income schools were more likely to suffer from cockroach or rat infestation, dirty or inoperative student bathrooms, large numbers of teacher vacancies and substitute teachers, more teachers who are not licensed in their subject areas, insufficient or outdated classroom materials, and inadequate or nonexistent learning facilities, such as science labs.

Here in Minnesota, several school districts offer universal half-day kindergarten but allow those families that can afford to do so to pay for full-day services. Our poor students scarcely make it out of early childhood without paying the price for our culture of classism. Deficit theory requires us to ignore these inequities—or worse, to see them as normal and justified.

What does this mean? Regardless of how much students in poverty value education, they must overcome tremendous inequities to learn. Perhaps the greatest myth of all is the one that dubs education the "great equalizer." Without considerable change, it cannot be anything of the sort.

What Can We Do?

The socioeconomic opportunity gap can be eliminated only when we stop trying to "fix" poor students and start addressing the ways in which our schools perpetuate classism. This includes destroying the inequities listed above as well as abolishing such practices as tracking and ability grouping, segregational redistricting, and the privatization of public schools. We must demand the best possible education for all students—higher-order pedagogies, innovative learning materials, and holistic teaching and learning. But first, we must demand basic human rights for all people: adequate housing and health care, living-wage jobs, and so on.

Of course, we ought not tell students who suffer today that, if they can wait for this education revolution, everything will fall into place. So as we prepare ourselves for bigger changes, we must

- Educate ourselves about class and poverty.
- Reject deficit theory and help students and colleagues unlearn misperceptions about poverty.
- Make school involvement accessible to all families.
- Follow Janet's lead, inviting colleagues to observe our teaching for signs of class bias.
- Continue reaching out to low-income families even when they appear unresponsive (and without assuming, if they are unresponsive, that we know why).
- Respond when colleagues stereotype poor students or parents.
- Never assume that all students have equitable access to such learning resources as computers and the Internet, and never assign work requiring this access without providing in-school time to complete it.
- Ensure that learning materials do not stereotype poor people.
- Fight to keep low-income students from being assigned unjustly to special education or low academic tracks.
- Make curriculum relevant to poor students, drawing on and validating their experiences and intelligences.
- Teach about issues related to class and poverty—including consumer culture, the dissolution of labor unions, and environmental injustice—and about movements for class equity.
- Teach about the antipoverty work of Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller, the Black Panthers, César Chávez, and other U.S. icons—and about why this dimension of their legacies has been erased from our national consciousness.
- Fight to ensure that school meal programs offer healthy options.
- Examine proposed corporate-school partnerships, rejecting those that require the adoption of specific curriculums or pedagogies.

Most important, we must consider how our own class biases affect our interactions with and expectations of our students. And then we must ask ourselves, Where, in reality, does the deficit lie? Does it lie in poor people, the most disenfranchised people among us? Does it lie in the education system itself—in, as Jonathan Kozol says, the savage inequalities of our schools? Or does it lie in us—educators with unquestionably good intentions who too often fall to the temptation of the quick fix, the easily digestible framework that never requires us to consider how we comply with the culture of classism.

References


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**KEYWORDS**

Click on keywords to see similar products: poverty, educational equity, achievement gap

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How do you break the cycle of poverty and create economic opportunities for people, particularly young people, to overcome obstacles to achieving a better standard of living? This question has been at the forefront of American policymaking for years.

It has never been easy for people living in abject poverty to escape, regardless of how motivated they might be. In recent years stagnant wages; the decline of unionization of the private work force; insufficient subsidies for child care, housing, transportation, and food; skyrocketing college tuition; changing family composition; and a lack of employment opportunities have made it increasingly more difficult to find upward mobility and escape from poverty.

The federal government—along with its state counterparts—spends billions of dollars every year trying to assist people in poverty to meet their day-to-day needs. Virtually all of that money is focused on addressing the consequences of poverty, not avoiding poverty in the first place, or finding a viable path to gainful, sustainable employment, a key pathway out of poverty. Policymakers trying to develop programs to “end poverty” cannot possibly be successful without first having an understanding of the causes of poverty. The underlying causes of poverty and the consequences of poverty are often difficult to distinguish.

Government programs designed to address some of the underlying symptoms of poverty (drug abuse, violence, lack of employment opportunities, poorly performing educational institutions, homelessness, and hunger, to name only a few) have been enacted for years and yet the rate of those living in poverty continues to grow. During the 2007 to 2011 period, 42.7 million people or 14.3 percent of the U.S. population had incomes below the poverty level. In 2011, more than 100 million people lived in households that received some kind of low-income government assistance; spending on these programs at the federal, state, and local levels combined now exceeds $1 trillion annually.

Exactly what role government should play in assisting people in need is an issue for which very different views of government collide. Many believe that one of the most fundamental responsibilities of government is to provide assistance to those in need while others take the viewpoint that such assistance discourages personal effort and responsibility.

However, there does seem to be one issue that most policymakers agree upon. While education is not a panacea to eliminating poverty, it is a critical factor in helping people obtain gainful employment and earn a living wage. The history of our national policies seems to indicate that policymakers feel that having access to education is a sufficient governmental response. Yet experience should tell us that having access to education, absent other life supports, is not enough. Children who go to school hungry, live in substandard housing, lack proper medical care, and are abused or neglected, particularly in their first two years of life, are not capable of reaping the full benefits of an education. Dropout rates of 16- to 24-year-old students who come from low-income families
are seven times more likely to drop out than those from families with higher incomes. However, the problem starts earlier than that. Forty percent of children living in poverty are not prepared for primary schooling.  

Investment in early childhood can have immense benefits. During this year’s State of the Union address, President Obama said:

"Study after study shows that the earlier a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road. But here’s the thing: We are not doing enough to give all of our kids that chance. Most middle-class parents can’t afford a few hundred bucks a week for private preschool. And for the poor children who need it the most, the lack of access to a great preschool education can have an impact on their entire lives. And we all pay a price for that. This is not speculation.

Study after study shows the achievement gap starts off very young. Kids who, when they go into kindergarten, their first day, if they already have a lot fewer vocabulary words, they don’t know their numbers and their shapes and have the capacity for focus, they’re going to be behind that first day. And it’s very hard for them to catch up over time.

Logic would argue that if education is the key to avoiding poverty, and that early pre-school learning is a major factor in determining how well students do in school years later, dedicating more resources to early education should be highly desirable. As a society, however, we have been reluctant to invest in early education even knowing that there is clear evidence it plays a major role in helping individuals escape poverty as adults. There are a number of reasons for this. Americans like to think that this country is the land of opportunity and that any individual who really wants to escape poverty can do so if they “just try hard enough” (pull themselves up by their bootstraps, as it were).

It is my experience that when people absolutely believe that something core to their beliefs is true, the more evidence there is that it is not true. We want to believe that people living in the worst communities of our inner cities can get the education and/or training necessary to make a living wage—if they would only dedicate themselves and show some personal responsibility. We want to believe that the American Dream is alive and well and that anyone can succeed regardless of the fact that the vast majority of children born in poverty will never experience anything else. We believe that America is the land of plenty while one in six people suffers from hunger.  

A classic example of the belief that poverty is caused by an individual’s behavior is Charles Murray’s book, Losing Ground. Murray sees success as something everyone has an opportunity to achieve. He reviews 30 years of federal antipoverty programs and notes that they’ve generally failed. He concludes from this that since government programs haven’t worked, poverty must not be caused by social factors. Instead, Murray argues, poverty is caused by failures of individual initiative and effort. What Murray fails to understand is that a set of policies designed to mitigate the effects of poverty cannot prevent poverty. Consequently, just because we have not eliminated poverty does not mean that these programs have failed or that they are not worth funding.

In March 1964, President Lyndon Johnson famously declared war on poverty. That war resulted in the creation of numerous programs that still exist today in the form of food stamps or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Head Start; Medicaid; the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; school breakfast programs; federal aid for poor schools and students; housing assistance; and the former Aid to Families with Dependent Children, now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). These programs have been highly successful in helping people cope with their poverty, but they are not designed to prevent people from going into poverty, or to even to help them find a way out.

Successfully addressing the issue of poverty involves more than addressing the accumulation of individuals’ needs. Any strategy designed to help people out of poverty must include a broader scope of solutions that take into account how economic factors and other social systems really work. Just like Murray’s viewpoint that the lack of individual responsibility is a core cause of poverty is overly simplistic; so, too, is the viewpoint that if we invest more resources in current human services we could make enormous strides in reducing poverty. Simplistic answers to complex questions are generally wrong.

What policymakers from President Johnson to those in power today seem never to realize is that a series of individual programs, regardless of how well-intended, cannot provide a solution. We have tried that approach and it did not work.

A holistic approach that addresses a much broader range of issues is required. We need a strategy that recognizes and embraces the fact that poverty exists because entire communities lack the economic infrastructure to provide adequate employment opportunities, access to public transportation, safe housing, crime protection, access to good food supplies, and available medical facilities. A holistic approach also recognizes that social infrastructures contribute to poverty. Young children need to be able to attend early learning centers to prepare them for elementary school. They need adequate nutrition. Their schools need the equipment and materials to support a modern curriculum. They need to be able to get to school safely and have after-school programs where they can be safe until there is a responsible adult at home to take care of them. Our justice system that places a higher priority on punishment over rehabilitation needs to be reformed. People with drug addictions need psychological and medical assistance to get sober.

The relationship between family composition and poverty cannot be ignored. A holistic anti-poverty strategy needs to address the issue of children being raised in families that lack at least one parent, if not two. Children need to have role models to guide them toward a better life and to instill in them the self-confidence.

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to expect success. Families with female heads of household are four or five times more likely to live in poverty than conventional households with both parents living at home.\(^6\)

According to The Economic Policy Institute, half of the jobs in the United States pay less than $34,000. Poverty among families with children headed by single mothers exceeds 40 percent.\(^7\)

Families that have two parents working have a much better chance of living above the poverty line.

Conventional efforts to fight poverty in America are not working and have not worked. Despite billions of dollars invested in human service programs, poverty remains intractable. The Pathways strategy adopted by APHSA calls for designing new, prevention-focused systems that address not just the immediate problems facing individuals, but the long-term, core contributing factors of poverty. The aim of Pathways is to convince policymakers to design sustainable, new approaches that not only address individual needs, but solutions that involve a broader range of community-based institutions.

Poverty has always been a difficult issue for policymakers. The challenges that poverty presents are well understood. Being able to reverse the trend of people living in poverty is going to take more than the President’s universal pre-K initiative, more than extending the current TANF and SNAP programs, more than simply reauthorizing the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and more than extending the Workforce Investment Act, all initiatives currently before Congress. Reversing the trend of people living in poverty is going to require new policies that are integrated and outcome based, that focus on prevention, and that encompass the totality of forces working to keep people impoverished.

At a recent hearing on welfare reform, David Reichert (R-WA), chair of the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Human Resources, said, “The status quo is simply not good enough. Spending more money on current programs is not good enough. Reforming programs so they spend smarter to achieve better outcomes is what we should always seek.” Amen to that. \(^8\)

Reference Notes
3. Ibid.

Adrian Bordone is the co-founder of Social Solutions Global.
Making Higher Education Civic Engagement Matter in the Community

Randy Stoecker and Mary Beckman

2009

While those who engage in service-learning and its associated forms of higher education civic engagement are surely concerned that their students make needed contributions to the communities in which they are involved, the primary interest of higher education has been, not surprisingly, on what students learn and not on what communities gain. Lately, concern has been increasing both inside and outside of the academy that our efforts at civic engagement should do a better job of serving our communities (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tryon 2009). Those who stress mutuality with community partners, and who want to place more emphasis on what students accomplish with them, struggle to figure out just how to make such aims reality. Herein we make suggestions for moving in this direction.

What is needed, first, is a fundamental shift in how community is viewed.

The term “community” is invoked by nearly everyone involved with civic engagement. However, the trend of pointing service-learning projects at individuals rather than communities often lessens impacts on the larger societal structures. The history of most higher education civic engagement, particularly service-learning, has been largely a history of individual students providing individual services to individual clients of service organizations. The bread and butter of service-learning—tutoring programs, after-school programs, literacy programs, and the like—all tend to favor individuals and rarely turn their focus on the community as a whole.

To participate in improving our communities, this individualistic understanding of “community engagement” must be transformed. Community needs to be viewed as the collective and complex set of systems that it is. However, this is just the beginning if we want our higher education civic engagement to result in deeper improvements in our communities. There are practical changes that also must take place in what we do. These have to do with design and participation.

The Community Impact Pyramid

Pyramids are structures that have been associated with the beginning of recorded history. Their endurance over time rests on the stability of their design. The peak of the pyramid—the ultimate achievement, is only possible because of the strength of the base. And the “taller” the achievement we want, the broader and more stable the base must be. This is a fitting structure from which to reconsider higher education civic engagement.
From a broad and strong base of community development principles and practices, to the participatory relationships that must be in place to implement those principles, grow strategic designs that achieve crucial changes in communities. This may be an unusual way to think about our civic engagement practices, so it deserves some explanation.

Community Development as Base

What is community development and why does it provide the base of the pyramid? Community development is a set of principles and practices for changing communities. Any issue you can imagine in a typical community—safety, education, poverty, justice, and many others—provides the basis for the community development approach. Community development workers help people solve collective problems, from getting clean water to building new housing to starting new businesses.

What is most important about the work of community development, however, is that it treats the community as a social system. Community development workers do not build houses for people. They do not dole out individual services to individuals. They instead engage the members of the community in determining what issues they want to take on, collectively developing plans and strategies for tackling those issues, and then even doing the actual work (Rubin & Rubin, 2007). We want to make clear that we are emphasizing a form of community development that builds the leadership and power of those who have been most excluded and are the most vulnerable, not the form led by government and corporate officials. This is most similar to various community organizing approaches that grow from the work of Saul Alinsky (1969; 1971).

Within such a framework, two challenges face higher education service-learning models that emphasize individuals serving individuals. The first is that giving services to individuals risks breaking their existing network bonds by changing the power and skill levels of community members randomly. As some members of the community receive services, and maybe then better jobs, they may leave the community. While the individual got help, the community as a whole was harmed. The second challenge is that simply providing services to individuals risks disempowering them. Effective civic engagement will support community members in harnessing their collective capacity to solve their own problems with minimal outsider assistance.

A community development approach to service-learning starts with a collective focus on an issue or problem, and an assumption that inequalities of power, not just deployment of assets, is at the root of the problem. Thus, any intervention must take those realities into account, moving us beyond an individual client service orientation of civic engagement.

Working in the community, then, means working with the community as a system. And that means understanding the community. We begin by asking who is in the community—is it an urban neighborhood, a rural area, an identity group, people who share a problem? Who has more power and less power in that community? What are the factions in the community? What is the community culture? We could send students out to test the water in the creek, but if they find it’s full of pollutants, will the homeowners who live along the creek be thankful to learn they are being poisoned or will they be worried that our civic engagement will wreck their property values? Will the residents who fish the
creek, partly because they are too poor to pay for food, be able to find another option for sustenance? We could send students into another community of Hmong and Mexican immigrants to do ESL training, but only work with the Mexican residents because the course sponsoring those students is from the Spanish department. What happens to the power structure in the community as one group of residents develop English-speaking skills while another group is excluded from such services? Does the chance for inter-ethnic conflict in the community increase?

Whether we might be an educational specialist, a biologist, a political scientist, or a recreation studies professor, we must attend to these community development issues. When we send our students “into the community” what they do will reverberate through that community system, and we are responsible for those consequences. So we must understand the community and its power dynamics before we act.

It is important to understand that, except in rare cases, the teachers who want the kids to read better, or the social workers who want the poor people to eat better, or the city official who wants people to shoot at each other less, are not the community in the sense that they are usually not directly experiencing the issue. The kids, the undernourished, and the people shooting and being shot at, are the communities in these cases. The social workers might be a community if they are trying to solve their own problems, but not when they are trying to solve someone else’s problem. The community consists of the people whose lives are directly affected by the issues at hand, and the community organizations that they control. Interacting with these people are outsider organizations—educational organizations, service organizations, funders, and others controlled by those outside of that very specific community. Some of those outsider organizations may have bridge people—those who come from the community and work for that outsider organization but do not control the organization (Stoecker, 2005). All of these outsiders are certainly worth engaging, along with all the other people from the outside who want to help, but the perspective of community development requires that the people who are actually experiencing the problem play a leadership role in resolving the problem. This goes against our cultural resistance to recognizing power divisions in society, and small rural communities are especially reluctant to see such divisions, so such an approach must be built carefully and sensitively.

All good civic engagement, then, starts with the principles of good community development, such as those espoused by the Community Development Society (2009):
Promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.

Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.

Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community.

Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.

Be open to using the full range of action strategies from education to political mobilization to work toward the long-term sustainability and well-being of the community.

As we can see, this approach completely shifts the locus of higher education civic engagement. Now, instead of asking what volunteer experience I can find for the students in my Introduction to Sociology course to help them better learn the course content, I start by asking what issues exist in this community that my students and I can contribute our efforts to tackling.

But that question cannot be answered for a specific class, and often not even for a specific professor. When we start from a community development perspective, before we send our students out to do things, we first have to build the community relationships on which we can design a community-based strategy to fit those students.

**Participatory Relationships**

Community development, as with most things, is fundamentally about relationships. Once we understand that, the rest falls into place. If we start with treating the community as a community—and remember that can be a small group of people with a shared issue, but is not a group of people doing something for someone else—our very first task is building relationships. It might be useful to start developing these relationships with a few trial projects, keeping in mind that these should be developed with community members so that the focus on community goals is not lost.

A little bit of homework will help us find groups—ideally community-controlled groups—with which we think we may have some compatibility. For those who are trained in community development, or the more specific skill of community organizing,
it may be possible to identify a group of people who are not yet a community, but have a common issue, and work with them to build their own relationships as well.

Those academics who really like a challenge begin from scratch—looking for issues in communities that have been neglected or ignored. Often, in such a case, the process of participatory relationship building begins with an interview—finding out what an organized group in a community is trying to accomplish. Some community organizers call this a one-to-one or a relational meeting (Chambers and Cowan, 2004). A one-to-one conversation is about getting to know people in the community context—what do they like about their community, what do they dislike about it, what do they do in the community, what would they like to change about their community. For those of us in higher education, as we engage in the conversation, we start listening for places where our skills may be of value. If I’m an education profession and someone says “we really need better schools here” my ears start to perk up. If I’m a political scientist and someone says “if we only had a better council member...” my wheels start turning. And I start focusing my questions—finding out more about that issue.

One such interview usually isn’t enough. While one person may really care about the schools, maybe no one else does. Finding a good issue to work on can be a long and arduous process.

The easier path is to look for groups already working on an issue. But this has its own challenges associated with it. Regrettably, social service agencies are often no better than academic institutions at engaging with communities in ways that empower community members as a collective. Coalitions often hold the greatest promise, because they frequently include at least one group actually controlled by the constituency being targeted. Here the one-to-one interview can be with an entire group.

Beware, however, that most of these groups are not looking for the academics’ advice. Too many academics enter such meetings thinking they are going to tell people what they should eat, or who they should vote for, or otherwise unload their book expertise on them. Such an approach is a non-starter. What people want is our walk, not our talk. They want to know how good our listening skills are, and whether we can deliver on what they say they want, rather than on what we say they should want. The kinds of questions that best elicit such things are questions asking people about what they are doing, what is working for them, what is not working for them, where they think they are heading, what capacity gaps they are experiencing. Questions are always better than answers at relationship-building.

Those participatory relationships then form the basis for trial projects. These will be small and focused actions. They will not be about sending students out to fill volunteer hours, but will focus on accomplishing an actual goal that the community has defined. Such projects, do-able in a single term, allow everyone to test the developing relationship without risking too many of their own resources. This model is now being called project-based service-learning (Chamberlain, 2003; Coyle et al., 2005; Draper 2004)
It is worth pointing out here that we are not talking about the students maintaining these relationships. **This is about the relationship work that the faculty need to do.** Among the complaints that our community partners are most vocal about is the absence of relationships with faculty (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tryon 2009). If the most we can muster is to send some anonymous students out to ask for volunteer work without ever showing up ourselves, many community groups might prefer that we keep our students in the classroom.

The intractible challenges facing the communities that we should be working with will not be solved in a single term. A single term project can be a value to the community, but the true potential of an effective project can only be realized when it is **part of a longer term strategy.** It is one thing to pull away if the initial project fails. But if it succeeds, then the principles of community development say that you **should be prepared to commit for the long haul.** A long-term commitment is not always required, especially if the community development project is being fully managed and led by others and they just need some short-term research or technical assistance support. But if the academic starts off being central to the project, then they will probably remain so and need to follow-through on that commitment. This is where it is important to understand and engage in strategic design.

**Strategic Design**

The concept of strategic planning has started creeping into higher education in recent years, but too many of those planning processes have been controlled by administrators rather than by the people who would have to actually implement the resulting plans. In the case of communities trying to overcome the external causes and internal effects of oppression and exploitation, and in a community development context, the ideal process takes on an entirely different and much more participatory character.

You may have heard of things like logic models (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004), too. While we agree with some of the logic of logic models, their imposition on communities has usually resulted in community members seeing them as a bunch of boxes to be filled in, rather than **a plan to be developed.** Not to mention the fact that those complex logic models get ignored as soon as the first unpredicted program even occurs. A good strategic design process is much simpler, much more flexible, and much more alive (University of Wisconsin Extension 2008).

Here again it is important to point out how different this is from the frequently occurring process of higher education civic engagement where a faceless faculty member sends out anonymous students to descend on unsuspecting community organizations that haven’t been consulted before the students shows up.

In the strategic design process, the professor’s course takes a back seat for the moment and the focus is on the community issue. What does the community want to change? What do they need to accomplish the change? What help is needed from outsiders? What help can the higher education institution provide? What help can other outsiders provide?
To some extent it is in the strategic design process where academics can help the most. Most communities, even when they have the skills, lack the capacity to do all the research necessary to make effective strategic design decisions. Skilled researchers, in contrast, make up a good number of higher education faculty and staff. And there are at least three crucial places where research is needed in a community design process (Stoecker, 2005). The first place is in diagnosing a community issue. The community says it has a youth crime problem. How much crime is there? Of what kinds? Who is being affected? At what times? With what consequences? Answering such questions—providing an effective diagnosis—is crucial for the next research step. That next step is coming up with a prescription. If the crime is after school, then that involves a different potential set of interventions than if it is late at night. In either case, the community needs to gather information on possible strategies for addressing the situation, and have criteria for choosing a strategy to try.

Once the group has designed its prescription, it needs to find the resources to put it into play. Ideally, the design of the prescription should take into account the resource environment, but even when it does, those resources still have to be mobilized. It is in this part of the strategic design process where the difference between an academic-driven process and a community-driven process is most apparent. An academic-driven process asks only what I can do with my course. A community-driven process asks what parts of institutions are needed to accomplish the community goals. It is likely that the community will need multiple parts of the institution through the life-cycle of the project. Some groups of students can help with the diagnostic research, others with the prescription research. Other students may contribute their labor to the actual intervention. And yet others can assist with the third crucial research need—the evaluation.

The most important part of strategic design is building in a feedback process to know quickly and frequently whether the project is moving toward or from its goals. To learn whether the project is moving toward or away from its goals, evaluation is essential. Note, though, that while evaluation is important in this sense, it is not important as an end in itself. If the goal is community change, then the evaluation should help achieve the change, not just find out whether any has occurred. This means that the evaluation starts when the action starts, to help it adjust along the way.

Community Impacts
The top of the pyramid is community impact—**stronger, safer, more powerful, happier collectivities of people**, not simply having 500 students put in 20 hours each of required volunteer time without being directed towards a larger goal. For those who have done their reading on evaluation methodology (Patton, 1997), sending students to do volunteer work is an output—not an impact; it is a strategy that can be directed toward an impact. As such, the strategy is most meaningful if those students are being deployed consistent with a strategic design that knows what they are supposed to be accomplishing. Those accomplishments we call outcomes—specific documentable changes in the community. **Impacts are the accumulated consequences of the outcomes.** Getting 20 students to coordinate a restorative justice program is an output. Getting those students to successfully carry out a strategic design of organizing youth into community development teams that reduces their own crime rate is an outcome. Reducing the overall crime rate as a result of various crime-diminishing strategies and activities, and ending up with stronger relationships and a happier community, are impacts.

Achieving such impacts is an **ongoing, coordinated, year-round, long-term team effort.** It can’t be done by one class over one term except in rare cases. It may seem entirely impractical to ask higher education faculty to become part of such a process. And yet, many of us have done exactly that—worked with a community year-round, plugging students into specific parts of the project through courses, independent studies, and even the occasional paid position.

All this may sound daunting, and it is clearly a challenging process. But the point is not about doing it perfectly. It is about thinking differently, thinking about a community-driven, system-oriented approach versus a campus-driven individual oriented one; thinking of larger, longer term action, done in a highly participatory manner that involves ongoing evaluation and redirection. So next we provide a couple examples of how we can move toward putting this model into practice. Neither example attempts to show a perfect implementation of the model, and thus each illustrates both potential strategies and challenges to implementing this new approach.

**Case Studies**

1. Developing an information service program for Madison

Randy Stoecker, Katherine Loving, Nicole Gilbertson, and Molly Reddy

This project began with a University of Wisconsin-Madison academic staff member—Katherine Loving—and a professor—Randy Stoecker, partnering with Eric Howland of the nonprofit information technology support provider DANEnet. DANEnet did not have the capacity to meet all the needs for computer support for the many nonprofits in Madison. Our partnership hoped to create a sustainable system for engaging skilled students in the process of meeting some of those needs.

We began in the fall of 2007 with a small group of about a half dozen organizations, identified through our professional networks, interested in nonprofits and computer technology. They helped us design a study of nonprofit information technology needs, beginning with a survey of 500 nonprofit organizations asking them about their information technology needs and their interest in a student-based program.
trying to help meet those needs. Sixty-five organizations responded. Randy, Katherine, and Eric, supported by a small sub-grant, then co-taught a student seminar that did more in-depth research with the 65 groups and options for meeting their information technology needs. Fifteen students—a mix of graduate and undergraduate students, enrolled in the course. Most students then conducted in-depth interviews with the 65 organizations, completing interviews with 30 of the groups. A smaller group studied a student-based computer support program serving students, faculty, and staff at the university, along with DANEnet itself. At the end of the semester we had a written report and organized a community event to which we recruited the organizations that had been involved in the study. Students presented their findings, and then we engaged the organizations in a planning process to design the actual program. Essentially, then, we completed both the diagnostic research—understanding the organizations’ needs—and the prescriptive research—analyzing two methods for meeting those needs—in the same semester.

The organizations were interested in obtaining personal face-to-face service and having the same person working with them long-term. So we decided to create a system of pairing students and organizations. The organizations also accepted the reality that we could not guarantee a student for longer than a single semester. We focused on accomplishing specific technology projects rather than providing on-call trouble-shooting, and emphasized capacity building of the organization staff rather than simply supplying them with finished products. An organization that wanted to update its website, for example, would get a student to help with the updating in a way that also involved educating one or more staff on the process of maintaining the site after the student left.

We began implementing and evaluating the program in the fall of 2008, surveying area nonprofits to learn of specific possible information technology projects. We settled on website development as a prime need. We also attempted to recruit students skilled in website design, offering them each 1 credit for an approximately 40-hour commitment that included 10 hours of training and 20 hours of actual project work. In the end we had four students each partnering with one organization. We required students to blog regularly on their progress and meet with student program coordinators in order to catch challenges as quickly as possible. We had a fifth organization and student, but realized that neither the student nor the organization was prepared for the commitment required to complete the project.

Even though Randy, Katherine, Eric, and three part-time student coordinators spent more than 800 hours attempting to coordinate four 20-hour projects, we had only one project that was a clear success by the end of the semester. To date, two of the projects have not succeeded because of technical issues. Clearly, we had chosen projects that were too complex. Based on these evaluation results, the next semester we focused on Web 2.0 projects—helping organizations develop a Facebook presence, or a YouTube video, or a blog, that did not require original coding and intense design work. We were able to increase our capacity to 11 organizations and 11 students, but still put in over 800 hours of program management time. We also intensified our evaluation efforts—tracking students’ progress even more carefully and frequently than before—to greater success.

Our community development goal in this project was to increase the capacity of Madison area nonprofits to more effectively use information technology. We believed that, in doing so, we would
increase their capacity to do their work and thus improve the community in general. In this case, our target community was the nonprofits themselves, since they were the ones experiencing the technology problems. Our diagnostic research focused on the technology challenges they faced and our prescriptive research focused on strategies for engaging students in meeting those challenges. Neither of these research processes prevented us from making mistakes, but our evaluation research prevented us from repeating mistakes.

2. Addressing Obesity in South Bend

Mary Beckman & Bethany Cockburn

In 2004, two individuals from the local American Heart Association board, a staff member of the University of Notre Dame’s Office of Human Resources, and a member of the University’s Center for Social Concerns who is also a faculty member in Notre Dame’s Economics and Policy Studies department called together local organizations that had an interest in addressing the growing incidence of obesity locally, particularly in low-income areas of the city. The initial gathering resulted in what has come to be known as the Reducing Obesity Coalition, or ROC. ROC grew to 30 local organizations, including universities, businesses, and health and other nonprofits. Its original mission was to “promote healthy lifestyles...through the prevention and reduction of overweight and obesity....”.

In what can be identified as the group’s effort to diagnose the problem, ROC applied for and obtained a community-based research grant from Notre Dame’s Center for Social Concerns soon after it formed. The research focused on the level of access to healthy food options that low-income families residing on the predominantly low-income and minority west side of South Bend experienced. The study also aimed to assess the willingness of these consumers to purchase healthier food if they had better choices. The grant required a team approach to the research that drew expertise from the academy and from community partners, and involved undergraduates and graduate students.

The results of the study led to new activities toward meeting ROC’s goals. Several different groups, including local health coalitions, requested to learn more about the study. As a result, the primary academic investigator and undergraduates working with the project gave presentations to local health experts and community members. The presentations inspired a new west side farmer’s market, several healthy cooking demonstrations by a culinary group and the Health Department at a local health fair and at other venues, and community gardens. Furthermore, data from the study have been requested and used by a number of organizations, and continue to be requested to assist related projects. For example, both the YMCA and the Health Department sought and made use of the results of ROC’s study, and ROC data has been requested for inclusion in program evaluations of a health project at a local homeless shelter and a summer youth sports program.

In the fall of 2008, ROC revised its mission statement, created goals and objectives, and wrote operating principles. ROC created an advisory board, and crafted its membership to better reflect ethnic, gender, and occupational diversity.

The work of ROC provides an important comparison to the community impact pyramid. ROC attempted
to see the bigger community development picture from the start, though it did not define its work as community development per se. Though there was not a single over-riding strategic plan that brought together disparate activities, considered how they might fit together, and evaluated them as a single strategy from a community development standpoint, ROC did take opportunities to evaluate its efforts and rethink its direction, as exemplified in the revision of its mission statement. It also attempted to develop a diverse membership, even though those who were likely to be most impacted by obesity were not specifically sought out for participation.

More to do….

As university and college educators, we engage in service in our local communities. We do research that assists area non-profits. We ask our students to contribute to community organizations in ways that are respectful of off-campus partners and make positive contributions.

Generally, our efforts are individually meaningful. They enable children to read better, those with physical disabilities to reach health clinics, and individuals in jail to get their GEDs.

Yet our efforts along these lines are disparate. They do not necessarily lead to changes that get at root causes, such as the problems with the school system or the lack of decent jobs for parents that results in children needing extra help with school work.

What we are attempting to describe here is an evolving framework for getting at those deeper causes. Doing so does not mean that our students won’t tutor children in reading or prisoners in high school math. But if they do, it will be as part of an integrated broader strategy to address the deeper issues in our schools and communities. Teachers and students alike would be able to have confidence that the service they are doing is not only helping one individual but is assisting a larger enterprise that is aimed to improve the situation for all those affected by the issue. And that may mean doing tutoring in a very different way.

We believe this work can be successful, however slow it is and however foggy the path toward it may be—because many voices will be in the process—determining the goals, evaluating, redirecting, and addressing the large and small pieces along the way. The many voices support a solidarity among those at all levels of privilege, and provide the variety of skills and sensibilities needed to sustain the vision.

The examples provided above shift the orientation of higher education civic engagement from one that is driven by the campus, its needs and its self-understanding, toward one that sees university participation as one element in a broad-based effort for the benefit of the entire community. The involvement of faculty and students follows a community-led direction, of which the university community is only one participant. Student and faculty involvement occur in response to the large agenda identified by a diverse coalition, rather than by a faculty member’s class or scholarship interests.

We believe others are engaged in similar efforts and experiments. We look forward to joining with them in helping this framework evolve.
References


Fighting Poverty and Building Community: Learning From Programs That Work

Lisbeth B. Schorr

A focus on poverty today is not altogether fashionable. In current policy debates, we hear about welfare reform and about people leaving the welfare rolls for work, but we hear little about whether these people and their children are actually leaving poverty behind. Their children are likely to be in the kind of child care that does nothing to prepare them for school success; their children, by and large, are still going to schools where teachers don’t expect them to learn and don’t expect to teach them at the high levels required by tomorrow’s economy. And welfare reform has done nothing about the plight of inner-city men and fathers.

The gap between the rich and poor continues to grow. While, according to 23 key indicators of health, education, and income, the well-being of all U.S. children is improving, “children living below the poverty level do not share in the improvements.”

Despite all that, we hear very little from public platforms today that are shaped by poll results; we hear very little about the problems of the ghetto, about whole neighborhoods where high rates of unemployment, school failure, crime, violence, and fractured families are the norm.

We also hear too little about what can be done, about how much we have learned about the attributes of successful programs, and about how we can overcome the obstacles to spreading and sustaining what works. I would like to touch here very briefly on three lessons that come out of my efforts to identify the elements of success at the program level, and success in establishing a climate in which effective interventions can thrive without being undermined or diluted. These three lessons are about the importance of crossing traditional professional boundaries, the signs of the evolution of a new practitioner, and the importance of neighborhoods and community.

ELEMENTS OF PROGRAM SUCCESS

Crossing Boundaries

First, I would underscore the importance of enabling people at the front lines to cross the boundaries that separate professionals and funding in one domain from professionals and funding in another—boundaries that keep us from working together to solve problems and from solving problems that can’t be solved within a single professional discipline or system.

We have come, at last, to recognize that the police, in isolation, cannot produce public safety; that schools, in isolation, cannot produce educated children; that child protection agencies, in isolation, cannot protect children; and that even the best health care and social services can’t service people out of poverty.

The changes needed to promote the kind of boundary-crossing that is now needed are the ones we can get at by venturing out of our own silos, and by getting policy makers to move out of theirs.

We know that we want the mental health professional who is considering a diagnosis of depression in a particular child to have the knowledge and skills to be able to understand the clues that might shed light on that diagnosis, even

Based on the 8th Marion F. Langer Award Lecture, presented to the annual meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, April 1999, in Arlington, Va. The author is Director of the Harvard University Project on Effective Interventions, and author of Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America (Doubleday, 1997) and Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage (Doubleday, 1988).
when they are provided by a parent from an unfamiliar culture.

We know that we want the algebra teacher to have the knowledge and skills to recognize that the student who consistently cries or falls asleep in class needs help; we want the teacher to be able to mobilize that help and to be able to play a part in the efforts led by social workers or mental health professionals to support that child and family through a rough time.

At the same time, we must resist, in our efforts to remove the constricting blinders from professional eyes, detracting in any way from a clear, laser-like focus, in both pre-professional training and continuing professional education, on honing professional skills for diagnosing and treating illness and for teaching algebra—skills that we cannot afford to compromise.

We also know that much of successful interprofessional collaboration comes down to the ability to respect professionals from other disciplines. When the city of Boston undertook an initiative to curb gun-related youth homicide, its dramatic victory showed how important it was that everyone involved—the ministers and teachers and police officers and probation officers and parents and geo-mappers and service providers—learned to respect each other’s very different skills and perspectives and contributions. In their work together to eliminate gun violence, their mutual respect turned out to be crucial.

Those professionals who are now parts of programs that are successful in changing outcomes have to get much better at documenting and trumpeting their successes. Much of the cynicism that keeps us from getting the support we need is based on the prevailing sense that nothing works. I agree with Washington Post columnist William Raspberry that you don’t have to be mean-spirited to turn your back on social problems—you just have to believe that nothing can be done to solve them. So we have to figure out what makes them work. And then we have to preach what we practice, so that others can learn from our successes.

The New Practitioner

A second lesson I want to call attention to is the evolution of a “new practitioner” who works more collaboratively and more respectfully with clients, patients, children, youth, and families; who pushes the boundaries of her job description; who is trained and supported in seeing children in the context of families and families in the context of communities. There is considerable evidence, from many disciplinary origins, of the emergence of this new practitioner, often in opposition to professional traditions.

Homebuilders, which shaped early family preservation initiatives, has been an important source for the new form of practice, for redefining the meaning of professionalism, and for encouraging staff to push the boundaries of their job description. At a Homebuilders staff meeting I attended, a therapist told of appearing at the front door of a family in crisis, to be greeted by a mother’s declaration that the one thing she didn’t need in her life was one more social worker telling her what to do. What she needed, she said, was to get her house cleaned up. The Homebuilders therapist, with her special training and mind-set, responded by asking the mother, “Do you want to start with the kitchen?” After working together for an hour, the two women were able to talk about the out-of-control teenager who had set off the family’s difficulty. It was an unorthodox way of forging what mental health professionals refer to as a therapeutic alliance. But it worked!

There are two lessons to be drawn from that story: first, this master’s-level psychologist was willing to expand the boundaries of her job description and her sense of professionalism to include an hour of work in the kitchen; second, the hour spent cleaning the kitchen would have been wasted had she not had the professional skills to take advantage of her relationship with this mother in order to help her address the family problems.

The new practitioner’s collaboration with families is authentic, reflecting the readiness of the professional to attribute expertise to the family—a major departure from some professional traditions. The new practitioners are driven by a commitment to making a difference in the lives of the families they serve, even when their professional training would dictate a more judgmental, more distanced posture.

It is striking how often effective practice is characterized precisely by how it departs from traditional norms about what is considered “professional.” Shawn Satterfield, 17, noted that what was special about Project Roadmap in Baltimore, why it worked for him when previous interventions had not, was that, in other programs “they never put their personal feelings in it; it was just like a nine-to-five type thing.”
At Project Roadmap, it seemed that everyone wanted to help. "These people...they care and they deliver...they are in it with their heart" (Schorr, 1997).

This is not to suggest that these new professionals operate under norms where anything goes if it feels right. Rather, their skills include a rigorous understanding of the theory that underlies practice. The new practitioners operate within the boundaries of well-developed theory about effective practice, while pushing the constraints imposed by job descriptions and bureaucracies.

**Neighborhood Partnerships**

The third lesson emerging from the successes of the last couple of decades has to do with the importance of partnerships between formal systems and neighborhoods, and of combining what works to target defined neighborhoods, using the synergy of cooperative, coherent interventions to build community.

Combining what works into a coherent whole goes far deeper than service integration. The new comprehensive community initiatives act in more than a single domain, be it through early education, school-based services, school reform, teen pregnancy prevention, family preservation, community policing, community drug courts, or expanding economic opportunity. These neighborhood transformation initiatives are comprehensive, which is not to say that they act in every domain at once, but that they use a comprehensive lens to look at the world, and to put together and connect enough of what works to restore hope in depleted inner-city neighborhoods.

The Los Angeles County welfare department, for example, has gone into partnership with 20 neighborhood networks to anchor help for troubled families right where families live, by involving local churches, Boys and Girls Clubs, and neighborhood family-support programs. These partnerships increase the chances that neighbors will help neighbors, be it with a casserole, a Port-a-Crib, or a babysitter. They help families feel less isolated in their child rearing, respond to a family’s self-defined need for help, and bridge the gulf of mistrust between public agencies and the community.

But no one has any illusions that community roots and community connections eliminate the need for professional expertise. The leader of one of the Los Angeles networks told me, “Just because I’m in the community and wish these families well and pray for them and want to be supportive, that’s not necessarily enough. I’ve worked with people where there’s a lot of pathology and who need a whole lot more help than that...so I am insisting that neighborhood networks have to have a set of standards that they are willing to be held to—standards of quality, of consultation and supervision, and of professionalism.”

Of course, the influence of neighborhoods on families and life outcomes has long been apparent to people living and working at the front lines, but the research has only recently caught up and begun to document the connections between community conditions and high rates of youth violence, school failure, and unmarried teenage childbearing.

The research makes clear that the capacity of families to do their child-rearing job is powerfully dependent on the health of their communities. A few children, blessed with extraordinary resiliency or unflagging adult support, will be able to beat the odds. But most children growing up in severely depleted neighborhoods face greatly diminished chances of escaping poor economic, educational, social, and health outcomes.

Memories of lost community confirm that something has been missing. In her wonderful book, The Measure of Our Success, my friend and colleague, Marian Wright Edelman (1993), founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund, reminisced about growing up in Bennettsville, South Carolina:

I went everywhere with my parents and was under the watchful eye of members of the congregation and community who were my extended family. They kept me when my parents went out of town, they reported on me and chided me when I strayed from the straight and narrow of community expectations, and they basked in and supported my achievements when I did well. Doing well, they made clear, meant high academic achievement, playing piano in Sunday school, participating in other church activities, being helpful, displaying good manners, and reading.

Gil Walker’s memories of his childhood in Gary, Indiana (Schorr, 1997), also feature networks of adults engaged with children, promoting community norms:

I can remember, when I was coming up, walking home from school with my report card in my hand. Before I got home, five or six people wanted to see it. If it was a good report card, I got hugs, I got kisses....If it was a bad report card, every one of those
individuals, said, “Gil Walker, you know you could do better...”

Gil Walker now runs a midnight basketball program for young people who live in Chicago public housing, as his way of trying to replace the lost networks he remembers. Marian Edelman and the CDF are trying to rebuild community by building a powerful constituency for policies that will assure that no child will be left behind.

THE HEROIC IDEA

Most recently we have learned from the MacArthur Foundation-funded research of Felton Earls and Robert Sampson that the largest predictor of violent crime rates in a particular neighborhood is “collective efficacy”—the degree to which there is or is not a pervasive sense of trust, common values, and cohesion (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Neighborhoods with lower rates of violence, it turns out, have a strong sense of community and shared values—values that are enforced and supported by adults who are likely to intervene when children are missing from school or found scrawling graffiti in public places; and by residents who have in common a sense of engagement and ownership of public spaces, and are therefore willing to supervise, step in, and monitor the neighborhood’s children.

Robert Kennedy was prescient when, not long before he was killed, he called attention to the destruction of “the thousand invisible strands of common experience and purpose, affection and respect, which tie men to their fellows.” He believed that the world beyond the neighborhood had become “impersonal and abstract...beyond the reach of individual control or even understanding.” In his 1968 presidential campaign, he called for the restoration of community as “a place where people can see and know each other, where children can play and adults work together and join in the pleasures and responsibilities of the place where they live” (Guthman & Allen, 1993).

It seems that we can no longer count on heroic figures to bring us together, but perhaps we can be mobilized on behalf of a shared heroic idea: the idea that we are all interconnected, that we’re all in this together; that we must share the burdens and pool some of our rich resources so that all our children will reach adulthood with a realistic stake in the American dream, so that we can achieve our best possibilities as a nation. Surely, we can tame our rampant individualism enough to agree that we cannot allow the world’s richest country to declare bankruptcy in its civic life.

REFERENCES


# k(no)w poverty? Week of Service Participants' Contact Information

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