

# The Unacknowledged Disaster

Youth Poverty and Educational  
Failure in America

Bruce J. Biddle

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**Bruce J. Biddle**

*The University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri, USA*



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My concerns about youth poverty and its educational impact were then nurtured by a symposium entitled *Social Class, Poverty, and Education* that I led at the University of Missouri in 1998. Part of a group of symposia on social inequities and education sponsored by the University's *Center for Research in Social Behavior*—with supplemental funding and support from its Departments of *Psychology*, *Sociology*, and *Political Science*, as well as its *College of Arts and Science* (whose Dean was then *Larry Clark*), and *College of Education* (whose Dean was *Richard Andrews*)—the symposium featured leading scholars from various American universities, and I learned a great deal from listening to and interacting with these persons: *Peter Cookson*, *Greg Duncan*, *Annette Lareau*, *Ricardo Stanton-Salazar*, and *Michael Knapp*. Books reporting outflows from the symposium series were published with the kind assistance of *Marie Ellen Larcada*, then Senior Editor of *Garland Publishing* (now a part of Routledge-Falmer).

Shortly afterwards, and with collaborative help from *Kevin Payne*, then a talented graduate student at the University of Missouri, I began to explore data from various sources and published articles concerned with the impact of youth poverty in American education. In 2000 and 2001 this effort was greatly facilitated by two modest grants (Numbers 113561 and 2113601) from *The Rockefeller Foundation*, awarded to me and (again) *David Berliner*, that allowed



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us to prepare reviews of evidence concerning the poverty-related effects of small class sizes and inadequate funding for American public schools. Articles from these efforts were initially brought out by *WestEd* as part of their series on “Policy Perspectives,” and abridged versions of them were then published in *Educational Leadership*. As part of the Rockefeller-sponsored effort, I also reviewed works concerned with the astounding scope of youth poverty and its awful educational impact in America, but I soon discovered that the scope of this issue was far too massive for an article and then began serious work on the present book.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### AN ELEPHANT AND AN ENIGMA

Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.

—John Adams (1770)

In the early 1980s Americans learned about a powerful, new idea—that a persistently ignored problem could be thought of as an unacknowledged “Elephant in the Living Room.” This image was originally proposed by counseling psychologists who applied it to reactions often created by alcoholism in the family—a problem that can cause carnage but may be denied. They wrote:

Imagine an ordinary living room—chairs, couch, coffee table, a TV set, and, in the middle, a

LARGE, GREY ELEPHANT.

The ELEPHANT stands there, shifting from one foot to another and slowly swaying from side to side. Imagine also the people who live in this house: a child, along with a mother and/or father and maybe some sisters and brothers. All members of the family have to go through the living room many times each day and the child watches as they walk through the room very ... carefully ... around ... the ... ELEPHANT. Everyone avoids the swinging trunk and enormous feet ... [But] no one ever talks about the ELEPHANT, [and] the child knows that she’s not supposed to talk about it either. And she doesn’t. Not to anyone.

—Marion Typpo and Jill Hastings (1984, pp. i-ii)

This intriguing metaphor has since become popular and has been applied to a number of serious but unacknowledged issues. I apply it now to a major problem that plagues America’s youths and the country’s education system. This problem is known to ruin lives for millions of young people, to plague a host of educators and the schools in which they work, and to generate endless miseries for the country at large. And yet the problem is also unacknowledged by most of the country’s educators, opinion leaders, journalists, politicians, and good-hearted citizens. It surely qualifies as an *Elephant in the Living Room* of America.

#### *The Elephant*

The problem about which I write has two aspects. On the one hand, *America tolerates a huge, inexcusable amount of poverty among its young people*, while on the other, *youth poverty is the key factor leading to educational failure in the*



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*United States.* As we shall see, these closely linked phenomena have been studied extensively, and the basic facts unearthed by these studies are well known to researchers, scholars, and advocates for youths and education. And yet, these facts are often unknown or misunderstood in the United States, do not appear in most debates about serious problems now faced by the country, and are not reflected in federal, state, and local policies designed to improve lives and future prospects for youths and American education.

It is easy to justify these claims. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, each year during the past two or more decades, at least *20 million* American youngsters—*one fifth or more* of all persons 18 and younger—have experienced poverty. By comparison, youths are now the most impoverished age group in the United States—indeed poverty rates for youths are roughly *twice* those for adults and the elderly. In addition, youth poverty is now endemic within the country's major cities and appears frequently among Black and Hispanic youths, but youth poverty is also widespread in other venues and among Whites and other groups in the U.S. And although some American youths experience only short periods of poverty, many endure poverty and its ugly effects throughout their formative years, and the longer and deeper their poverty experiences, the more crucially their lives and prospects are blighted.

In addition, youth poverty is also far worse in the U.S. than in other advanced, industrialized nations. No other first-world country has a youth poverty rate that even comes close to that of America; indeed, some other advanced nations have youth poverty rates that are *one tenth* that of the United States. Small wonder then that America also “leads” the world in severe problems tied to youth poverty—deaths among infants; lead poisoning and other preventable diseases of childhood; as well as teenage violence, drug use, incarceration, and early, unplanned pregnancies among teenagers. In sharp contrast, other advanced nations have adopted a wide range of workable policies—largely ignored in the U.S.—that are now known to reduce the scope of youth poverty and its evil effects.

Youth poverty is also strongly associated with educational failure in America, and this effect has appeared in literally hundreds of studies concerned with factors associated with poor performance among students, classrooms, and schools. As well, extensive research confirms that youth poverty in the U.S. is a key *cause* for failure in education. Features commonly found in impoverished American *households*, *neighborhoods*, and *schools* create serious burdens for youngsters in the country, and these burdens lie behind and explain many of the apparent effects of other social factors—race, ethnicity, lack of parental education, marital instability, and the like—that are commonly thought to cause school failure. And although research also confirms that some of poverty's evil effects can be reduced modestly by innovative curricula, dedicated teaching, and inspired school leadership, such educative strategies *do not*, indeed *cannot*, overcome the majority of burdens imposed by poverty on American students and schools.

Taken together then, poverty places huge burdens on the backs of American youths anxious to succeed. Small wonder that those impoverished youngsters are *very* likely to fail in education (and life). The deck is stacked against them; for them the playing field is badly tilted, and even inspired efforts by dedicated educators cannot fully level that field.

The close tie between poverty and school failure poses a severe challenge to America's time-honored beliefs about the powers of public education. Americans have long thought that their country provides a unique environment in which "success" depends, not on inherited wealth or privileges, but rather on individual talent, effort, and assistance through education. Because of constraints endemic in other countries, only a few, privileged persons are allowed to "succeed" elsewhere, but the U.S. breaks the bonds of constraint by providing a *public* education system in which youths from all backgrounds are offered opportunities to learn the skills, self-confidence, habits of hard work, and knowledge needed for success. Thus, the ideal public school in America should provide a "level playing field" in which talented students from both privileged and nonprivileged backgrounds can learn to succeed, and the bulk of (well-managed) public schools are thought to achieve this goal.

Many other authors have also written about American beliefs about inequality and public education, and it is useful to reprint one version of their efforts here. Here is how Gerald Grant described them in his recent book, *Hope and Despair in the American City*.

The United States has been shaped by the twin values of liberty and equality. But for the most part liberty has trumped equality in "the land of the free and the home of the brave." In America, you can become as rich as you want, say what you want, and live as you please with fewer restrictions than in any other country on earth. The power of the private purse is very great, for those who have one. We have never sought equality of condition or enforced equality of outcomes. But we have believed in the principles of equal access and equal opportunity, especially educational opportunity. According to the American creed, wealth does not need to be forcibly equalized because over time, if all children are provided equal educational opportunities and a chance to compete for their share of the good life, wealth will redistribute itself in a meritocratic way. Equal opportunity keeps the gates of promise open and prevents America from establishing impassable walls of social class and privilege.

—Gerald Grant (2009, 2011, pp. 183-184)

Such beliefs generate consequences, of course. For one, many Americans like to believe that they live in a "classless" society, become uncomfortable when asked to talk about social class in the United States, or believe that they (and most Americans) are all members of "the middle class." To illustrate, here are the words a former president, George H. W. Bush, expressed in 1988: "[Class is] for European democracies or something else—it isn't for the United States of

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America. We are not going to be divided by class.”<sup>1</sup> Opinions such as these make it difficult for Americans to think clearly or talk about problems created by economic inequality in their country.

As well, American beliefs about the powers of education feed into current assumptions that incompetent teachers and/or school administrators are responsible when educational failures appear in public schools, and to educational “reform” policies based on these assumptions. Consider for example *No Child Left Behind*, the reform program signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. This legislation sought to improve American education by requiring public schools to make certain that *all* of their students (including those known to be “at risk” for educational failure) earn “acceptable” scores on standardized tests of basic skills and to punish teachers and schools that fail to meet this standard. Moreover, this goal was to be achieved, not through reducing youth poverty or instituting changes in school procedures so that they could deal more effectively with impoverished students, but rather by demanding additional, more focused efforts from teachers and administrators in those schools. (And unfortunately, a modified version of this questionable program has been pursued to this day by the administration of President Barack Obama under the title of *Race to the Top*.)

When reviewing this program in January, 2004, the younger President Bush delivered the following judgment:

Two years ago this month I signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act. In that landmark law, we made our expectations clear: every child in America will learn to read, write, add and subtract at grade level. Schools are now required to test children regularly to make sure students are learning and that schools are teaching well. Above all, the No Child Left Behind Act required a change in attitude from the educators and public officials responsible for our schools. We will no longer write off some children as hopeless. We will no longer accept or excuse schools that do not effectively teach the basics. We will insist on high standards and accountability because we believe that every school should teach and every child can learn.<sup>2</sup>

Such sentiments sound admirable in the current American context, but they are oblivious to the fact that poverty is *the* huge, intransigent generator of educational failure, and they place demands on educators that cannot be met, given rampant youth poverty in the land.

But ignorance or confused thinking about youth poverty and its educational impact have not been restricted to those who supported No Child Left Behind. Educators, researchers, and scholars who have criticized the program have largely focused their fire on such concerns as lack of funds for poorly resourced schools that the program promised but then did not deliver, problems generated by its mandated use of high-stakes tests to evaluate teacher and school performance, its requirements which attach the “failure” label to needy public schools (thus making them ineligible for subsequent federal support), and its provisions that

require “failing” schools to fund private tutoring for students, face replacement of their teachers and administrators, or be converted into charter schools. Such concerns are serious and legitimate, but while focusing on them, critics have failed to note the basic absurdity underlying No Child Left Behind which makes counterfactual assumptions about the ability of public schools to somehow “make up” for the educational handicaps now imposed by poverty on millions of American youngsters.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, this same complaint might have been leveled against *me* in earlier years. For too many years, *I* too was largely unaware of the huge problems created by youth poverty in my country and its strong tie to educational failure. I grew up in an American household led by politically active parents who were educators; I heard frequent discussions about American prejudice, discrimination, and education during my formative, undergraduate, and post-graduate years; I began studying and writing about teachers, teaching, and educative processes about 1960; and my research has often contrasted American educational practices with those found in other advanced countries. One might think of me, then, as an ideal person to have long known about American youth poverty and its educational impact, and yet I was largely oblivious of such issues prior to the 1990s, and I have been astounded by some of the evidence I’ve been forced to confront while writing this book.

Such ignorance (or confusion) is disastrous in the United States. Americans are not wrong about the importance of education. Advanced knowledge is required for success in most fields of endeavor, and when, through poverty, Americans ruin educational chances for a fifth or more of their young people, they are not only harming those youngsters but also preventing the nation from ever benefitting from the scientific discoveries, social awareness, artistic contributions, business enterprises, and political leadership they might have contributed.

But these tragic losses constitute only part of the story. Impoverished youngsters, their parents, and their teachers are also Americans, and they too believe that the nation can provide equal opportunities for acquiring education through its public schools. So when, through no fault of their own, those handicapped youngsters fail in education, they are led to believe either that they themselves are to blame or that the procedures and rules of American schools are hopelessly stacked against them. And because they hold such alienating beliefs, many of those youths come to lead disaffected lives that are reflected in the country’s high rates of homelessness, unemployment, gang warfare, early pregnancies, substance abuse, violent crime, imprisonment, and early death. These latter constitute some of the nation’s most severe social problems, and they create huge tax burdens, generate fear, and debase the environment shared by all in the U.S. So middle- and upper-income Americans also pay dearly because of their collective inability or unwillingness to discuss, debate, or think lucidly about youth poverty and its educational impact.

Clearly then, lack of knowledge about youth poverty and its impact in education constitute a huge *Elephant in the Living Room* of America, an Elephant

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masking serious problems for impoverished youths and the nation as a whole. What on earth can be done to dispel this Elephant? This book assumes that Unacknowledged Elephants are best confronted by *facts*, are best dispersed when thoughtful and concerned persons have a chance to learn about the *evidence* now available concerning them and their consequences. Thus, this book stands with John Adams who, in his famous 1770 defense of British soldiers, then on trial for murder when they had only defended themselves against an unruly mob, asserted that “facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence,”<sup>4</sup> and the bulk of this book begins the process of dispelling The Elephant by reviewing research bearing on it and summarizing knowledge created by that research.

Five of this book’s chapters take on this task. Chapter Two reviews what research tells us about youth poverty in America—its prevalence, distribution, duration, and major effects. Chapter Three reports how America fares when compared with other advanced nations in rates of youth poverty and social policies that ameliorate youth poverty and its effects. Chapter Four explores evidence concerning the close link between poverty in the *homes* of young Americans and educational failure. Chapter Five deals with knowledge about ties between poverty in *neighborhoods* and that failure. And Chapter Six investigates how three poverty-related conditions in America’s *schools*—severe concentrations of impoverished students in the student body, miserable levels of school funding, and prejudicial features typically found in American schools—that also lead to failure outcomes. As will be discovered, each of these five chapters tackles a different body of research, studies in these traditions are sophisticated, and controversies have arisen over how to interpret some of their findings. But each body of effort has generated clear facts and evidence about The Elephant, and summaries of that knowledge are provided in each chapter.

### *The Enigma*

In a sense, however, The Elephant I write about differs sharply from the one posed by alcoholism in the family. The carnage created by alcoholism is normally observed by both the alcoholic person and by others in the family, so when family members refuse to acknowledge its presence, they are engaging in *denial*. In contrast, many educators, opinion leaders, politicians, and good-hearted Americans have had little personal experience with youth poverty and its impact and thus may merely be *ignorant* or *confused* about such issues and research that bears on them.

But lack of personal experience with youth poverty and its effects in education are only part of the story. Other major but often unexperienced medical, environmental, and social problems are regularly discussed in America’s mass media—think about infectious diseases such as AIDS, global warming and climate change, discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities, and the escalating costs of health care and higher education. Extensive research has also

appeared about each of these issues, public reports of new evidence concerning them appear regularly, and debates rage about how best to confront them. Why have extensive research on youth poverty and its educational impact not generated similar responses in America? To understand The Elephant fully then, it is also necessary to unravel this Enigma.

*Youths and representative democracy.* One factor lying behind The Enigma reflects the way in which political decisions are made in the United States. In brief, America is a republic where elected politicians respond to the concerns of constituent groups of voters. Only a few such groups are mobilized at any given time, and those groups and their concerns change over the years. Nevertheless, when specific groups are well organized, mobilized, and affluent, their concerns are likely to appear in American debates about public policy—witness recent examples triggered by worries of the gun lobby, the oil and pharmaceutical industries, farmers, and senior citizens in America. But youths are neophytes who are not allowed to vote and generally possess less knowledge than adults, and it would be foolish to suggest that youth groups would ever have political clout equal to adult groups that are mobilized and organized. As a result, youths will always be dependent on others to make the case for their welfare.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, other advanced nations, also republics, seem much more able to create effective programs that provide benefits for impoverished young people and the schools they attend. Thus one should ask, why have *Americans*, in particular, been so unable to mobilize effort for, or indeed even to think clearly about, youth poverty and its educational impact?

*A singular history.* One answer to this question leads us to other factors helping to create The Enigma—those associated with America’s unique history and its singular collection of opportunities and problems that have not been experienced elsewhere. These have, in turn, created a huge nation that is partitioned into 50 states, each with its own concerns as well as ethnic groups that are only partially laced together by a federal government (with limited powers), a profit-driven mass media system, and a national culture of customs, values, and beliefs whose mixture is unique to the United States. That culture has many strengths—among them: “can do” values, optimism, and beliefs that the U.S. offers unique opportunities for success; willingness to work hard; commitment to representative democracy; tolerance for diversity and free speech; and respect for law and the value of education. But it also has less admirable features—including: persistent racism; historical tolerance for corporate capitalism and economic brigandry; strong beliefs in individual efficacy and competition; a “culture of violence,” gun ownership, and personal insecurity; beliefs that America can solve its long-persisting social problems through improving education alone; and strong, antigovernment sentiments. The latter features, unfortunately, are associated with distorted stereotypes about youth poverty and public education, have promoted Tales about America that interfere with clear thinking about such matters, and have created a climate in which far-right ideologies and institutions can thrive.

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One set of American stereotypes about poverty concerns its prevalence. Since most Americans believe that the bulk of persons want to succeed and that opportunities for succeeding are uniquely present in their country, it follows that most of its citizens are successful and that poverty is but a “minor” problem in the U.S. Needless to say, media portrayals of the suffering caused by America’s recent economic recession have posed a challenge for this stereotype, but most of those stories also presume that recession-caused poverty is transitory and will fade away when the economy recovers. Note also that nearly all media stories about poverty are focused on *adults* who are no longer working, and *youths* are nearly always ignored in such stories. Since youths are largely exempt from demands for employment, such stories leave most Americans clueless about the prevalence of youth poverty.

Another set of stereotypes concerns a presumed close tie between race and poverty in the United States. Americans have long assumed that, in their country, most Blacks are impoverished and most impoverished citizens are Black, and this means that they tend to confuse the topics of poverty and race in their thinking, a tendency that has often been noted by those who write about poverty and social welfare in America.<sup>6</sup>

Hurricane Katrina provided a stark illustration of this confusion. When the dreadful story of that storm’s huge impact on New Orleans began to unfold, it became clear that the horrors it created fell particularly on citizens who were *poor*. But the bulk of those poor persons were also *Black*, and, responding to this fact, major opinion leaders (including then President George W. Bush) struggled to discuss what these events implied about the country’s historic mistreatment of such doubly disadvantaged citizens. Sadly, most of these discussions were muddy and most drifted back and forth between poverty and racial discrimination as if these two problems were indivisible. Poverty and racial injustice are hugely important in the U.S., racial discrimination and prejudice have often helped to generate practices leading to American poverty, and poverty generates much of the country’s current racial misery. But these two problems reflect different forces, persist for different reasons, generate different sets of outcomes, and require differing strategies if they are to be overcome. To ignore such differences escalates confusion and leads to ineffective policies for dealing with these serious and persisting issues. Worse, poverty and racial injustice generate discrete (albeit overlapping) difficulties for youths, but these facts tend to be ignored when pundits are promoting policies that might improve lives for American youths.

The U.S. would clearly benefit if inaccurate stereotypes underlying The Enigma were dispelled, and Chapters Two and Three explore whether evidence supports key American stereotypes bearing on poverty among youths and others in the population. And as will be seen, Chapters Three through Six open by setting forth major Tales about America that bear on youth poverty and education, and evidence relating to these Tales are then examined in these chapters.

*The far right and the poor.* In addition, other forces associated with The Enigma have been created by well-financed and highly organized campaigns waged

against The Poor and public education by far-right American forces—super-rich bigots who finance think tanks and front organizations that pedal radically conservative ideas and generate a regular flow of pseudoscientific propaganda blasts; a collection of leading talk show hosts and columnists; ultraconservative organizations that represent large corporations with deep pockets; powerful and archly conservative politicians; ideologues who hate unions, public institutions, and government-in-general; and a few social theorists, academics, and polemicists who actively advocate reactionary views—and such organized campaigns are far less common in other advanced countries. A host of themes have appeared in these campaigns, and I turn first to those associated with *poverty*.

Some far-right poverty propaganda reflects simple, blatant hostility towards those who are poor. Consider the following from a major, far-right, talk show host:

The poor in this country are the biggest piglets of the mother pig and her nipples. The poor feed off the largesse of this government and give nothing back. We need to stop giving them coupons where they can go buy all kinds of junk. And I'm sick and tired of playing the one phony game I've had to play and that is this so-called compassion for the poor. I don't have compassion for the poor.

—Rush Limbaugh (1992, pp. 40-41)

Other examples make claims that problems associated with poverty are exaggerated—that only a few Americans are actually poor, that much of poverty is transitory, or that the experience and consequences of poverty are “not all that bad.” Claims such as these make assumptions that fly in the face of evidence. Consider, for example, the words of an archly conservative politician, Dick Armey, formerly Majority Leader for Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives:

You hear it said that middle-class people were making less during the Reagan years. That's simply not true. From 1979 to 1988, 85.8 percent of the folks in the lowest [income] quintile moved into a higher group. Meanwhile, 60 percent of those in the second quintile moved up. About 47 percent who began the eighties at the middle moved into a higher quintile. As for the fifth richest quintile, 35 percent moved *downward*. All told, a person in the poorest income group in 1979 was more likely to end the decade in the richest quintile than to remain at the bottom.

—Dick Armey (1995, p. 38)

Representative Armey cited *no* source for any of the questionable “statistics” offered in this example; and his final, mind-boggling claim is contradicted by *all* income-mobility evidence currently available.

Other statements by far-right sources assert that blame for poverty should be assigned, not to low wages, unfair taxes, soaring prices, or serious problems that



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afflict hardworking people, but rather to personal shortcomings of The Poor—and above all, to the parents (and particularly the mothers) of youths in America who are said to suffer from “various character flaws, such as an absence of strong morals, failure to exert responsibilities, laziness, an inability to save and plan for the future, a lack of intelligence, or addiction to alcohol and/or drugs.”<sup>7</sup> Arguments such as these not only blame victims of poverty for their plights,<sup>8</sup> but again make assumptions that fly in the face of evidence.

As a rule, far-right poverty propaganda is designed to reduce sympathy for The Poor and to promote reduction or elimination of tax-funded programs that would provide support for low-income persons. And—as the notorious 1995 agreement between congressional Republicans and President Bill Clinton to “end welfare as we know it” illustrate—they sometimes succeed in accomplishing these goals.

In addition, claims of these propagandists have had less obvious effects. One such effect is to focus attention on parents (who can be charged with “responsibility” for poverty) rather than on the youths in their families (for whom such charges would be absurd). Thus, by demanding that we contemplate the supposed shortcomings of those parents, we are led away from any concern for the well-being of their children, the innocent victims of poverty, who happen to live in the same households.<sup>9</sup>

And another effect is to cause us to think about poverty as something that happens only to *individuals* (or their *families* or *households*) and to ignore poverty events associated with *neighborhoods*, *schools*, and other larger social entities. To illustrate, some fortunate neighborhoods in the U.S. are well-endowed with social services, parks, recreational facilities, attractive homes, good transportation, and living environments that involve little crime and violence; but others—dirt-poor rural venues and poverty ghettos in major cities—have few or none of these amenities. The many problems that stress the latter neighborhoods lie *outside* the home, but they too greatly affect the lives of young Americans who grow up in them. Similarly, public schools in rich, American suburbs tend to be well supported and can afford small classes; marvelous instructional facilities; well-paid and qualified staff; a wide range of curricular offerings and extracurricular experiences; and attractive, safe, well-maintained quarters. But schools in impoverished communities often receive only miserable funding which means that they simply cannot afford such “luxuries.” Their deficits also lie *outside* the home and greatly affect the lives of youths who must cope with those schools, but again we are led to ignore such matters.

The latter, inadvertent effects are not of central concern to those who construct far-right poverty propaganda (of course); but they too have helped to foster ignorance and confusion about youth poverty in America, thus have played a role in creating The Enigma.

*The far right and public education.* As well, far-right forces are blatantly hostile to America’s *public schools*. Public education is the largest tax-supported institution in America, and it is associated with some of the country’s major

values, commitments, and hopes for the future. Given such facts, it is hardly surprising that public education has long attracted both praise and criticism, but during recent years, far-right voices have sharply escalated the latter. Much of this abuse began with the questionable claim, first announced by the federal government in 1983 during the administration of President Ronald Reagan, that America's public education system now suffers from a major *Crisis* and needs to be replaced or overhauled.<sup>10</sup> Depending on the source one reads, this thesis may be simply announced or it may be bolstered with concocted or misinterpreted "research evidence," and differing far-right sources may call for adopting various "reforms" for public education, may rail against strategies to improve education that might raise costs for The Rich, may argue for privatizing schooling, may insist that federal or state governments reduce support for education, or may urge that public education be abandoned altogether.

Far-right proposals for educational reform sometimes include demands from religious conservatives that public school students be given the right to pray in their classrooms; that "creationism" (or "intelligent design") be taught along with Darwinian evolution in biology classes; that "dirty," "antifamily," "pro-homosexual," sexually instructive, and "anti-American" reading materials be banned from schools; and that "cultural relativism" and "humanism" be excised from courses on civics, history, or values. As well, advocates for parochial schools often argue that it is unfair when parents of their students must "pay twice" for education—once when they support public schools through taxes and a second time when they pay tuition for the school their children actually attend. However, these arguments from religious conservatives do not represent the core interests of far-right funding sources.

Rather, educational efforts from those sources have focused on ideologically based calls from business leaders, free-market economists, and The Rich who argue that, since public schools are tax-supported entities, they are exempt from market-force pressures and have few reasons to strive for excellence. As well, those schools' supposedly feeble commitments to excellence are further throttled by shortsighted school boards, bureaucratic regulations, clueless administrators, hopeless teachers, and incessant demands from unions—all of which explains, they argue, why public schools fail. And to fix these associated "problems," the U.S. should not only privatize its education through parental vouchers, charter school opportunities, and profit-making services within public schools, but also force techniques of corporate control on public schools such as standardized curricula and procedures, the regular measurement of "output success"—using high-stake tests of student achievements in basic skill subjects (such as language, mathematics, and science)—and punishing or replacing teachers and school administrators whose students perform "poorly." Many claims have been made about the supposed advantages of such reforms, a lot of propaganda citing questionable research and shoddy evidence has been advanced to support those claims, and this propaganda has been repeated endlessly by compliant media sources. But alas, most of these nostrums don't work or make matters worse, nor

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would we expect anything else since they do not address the draconian problems actually faced by impoverished American youths and their schools.

Some far-right propaganda also reflects simple greed, and this would include proposals from rich suburban parents (or their representatives) who argue for school voucher programs that can be used to help defray costs when those parents send their kids to high-status, private academies, as well as those from entrepreneurs who stand to make a packet when they provide private services for public schools. But whether motivated by ideology or greed, far-right activists have little interest in poverty or other serious problems that actually afflict American youths and their education; indeed those activists also generate an endless stream of propaganda belittling such problems, again citing questionable research and shoddy evidence.

A good example showing how claims about weak or nonexistent evidence may be used to argue against help for impoverished students has concerned the issue of inadequate school funding. Contemplate the following quote from the Heritage Foundation, a leading far-right think tank, arguing against more funding for disadvantaged schools:

Virtually all studies of school performance, in fact, reveal that spending has little bearing on student achievement. Research demonstrates that [reforms focused on performance assessment] will be far more successful than [reforms] that concentrate on [teacher] salary levels and class size.

—Heritage Foundation (1989, pp. 1-2)

No studies were cited in this broadside to bolster its absurd claims, but in making them the Foundation presumably drew from a history of flawed research and research summaries on funding effects from other far-right sources (and Chapter Six reviews this sad history).

Other examples of far-right debunking efforts have focused on such issues as proposals for reducing class size in the early grades, enlarging the scope and range of tax-supported preschool programs, instituting summer enrichment programs and other strategies for extending teaching hours, and paying larger salaries to teachers with more experience or higher levels of qualification. All of these strategies have been studied extensively and each is known to improve results for impoverished youths and their schools (again, see Chapter Six), but all would also help derail their education agenda, hence are fit topics for far-right rubbishing.

Yet another theme in far-right propaganda concerns the supposed advantages obtained if a private corporation takes over a struggling public school. Those advocating this form of privatization usually suggest that private enterprises are “more efficient” than public entities and make promises that full privatization will “clean up the public school mess,” raise student achievement scores, raise morale among teachers and students, and reduce drop-out rates or generate other tangible tokens of success. To date, full privatization programs have more often appeared in desperate, underfunded, school districts where

impoverished students are clustered, problems are rampant in schools, and achievement records are *not* stellar; but since most privatization programs do not address the real problems of those students and their schools, those programs largely fail.

In addition, some far-right propagandists call for abandoning public schools and replacing them with home schooling or private academies. Those calling for such draconian steps include ideologues, libertarians (who promote sharp reductions in all forms of public enterprise), and far-right religious figures who are so alienated that they would abolish all public schools. To illustrate the latter, Americans are given the following advice:

I imagine every Christian would agree that we need to remove the humanism from the public schools. There is only one way to accomplish this: to abolish the public schools. We need to get the government out of the education business. According to the Bible, education is a parental responsibility. It is not the place of the government to be running a school system.

—Robert Thoburn (1986, pp. 152-153)

And some right-wing economists argue that since public education is inherently flawed, it should be totally replaced by a “free market” of competing private schools.<sup>11</sup>

Far-right educational rhetorics ignore at least three key goals of public education in America. For one, good public schools are designed to open intellectual doors for their students, to expose those students to a wider range of ideas and opportunities than are typically discussed in families, private schools, or narrow, faith-based, or racially segregated academies. For a second, the good public school introduces students to the common ideals of citizenship that are badly needed if persons are to live peacefully with one another in a democracy. And for a third, good public schools provide educational opportunities for impoverished youngsters that would not be available if those youths’ parents had to pay for them personally. Such goals are widely embraced in America. They are not always achieved in public education, of course, but the U.S. would place itself at great peril if it were to abandon them as ideals.

In addition, far-right propagandists create endless confusion when they issue broadsides making counterfactual claims about public education, or worse, support their claims with inappropriate, shoddy, or faked “research evidence.” And concern for the welfare of *impoverished* youths has not been prominent in far-right education propaganda. Most of that propaganda addresses problems that are supposedly experienced by “all” public schools and their students, and although a few far-right proposals have begun to address the educational concerns of African-American parents, those of impoverished parents are generally ignored.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, far-right, educational propaganda has played a key role in helping to create *The Enigma*; and as readers will also see shortly, specific, far-right, anti-public education claims are set forth and challenged by evidence in Chapters Four

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through Six. But these responses do not fully address The Enigma. Chapter Seven, the last in this book, discusses what useful steps might now be taken to reduce youth poverty and reform education so that it truly serves the needs of all students in America. But effective discussion of these topics requires that we revisit strengths and weaknesses of the American scene, so I also return to The Enigma in Chapter Seven.

### *The Task and the Context*

Early in a 1995 book written to confront far-right claims then being made about the supposed “failures” of American public education, David Berliner and I asked readers to suspend judgment about those claims pending our reviews of evidence about them in later chapters.<sup>13</sup> It would be tempting to make this same plea here, but the plea is no longer appropriate.

For one thing, the *tasks* of these two books are not the same. Our earlier work was written to challenge far-right claims that were already in America’s public domain. In contrast, the key task of this book is to awaken readers to matters that are *not* now widely known, to dispel ignorance (or confusion), awaken concern, and promote action so as to confront an Unacknowledged Disaster that now besets the United States. Although both books provide reviews of research evidence, much of the evidence we presented earlier concerned familiar issues, whereas most of the evidence summarized in this work concerns matters that are not yet broadly familiar in America.

For another, the intellectual *context* has now changed significantly in the United States, and this poses new challenges and opportunities for my task. During the past three decades, the country has been plagued by two controversial wars, a striking escalation of unaddressed social and ecological problems, a recent and severe recession, and a sharp increase in the scope of far-right activism—and the latter has generated alarmed responses from both within and outside of education.

Far-right rhetorics now dominate most debates about and programs for educational reform in the United States, but this has not bottled up the country’s astounding flow of fraudulent far-right education propaganda which appears incessantly. Educational scholars are no longer silent about this assault, however, and three examples will illustrate their attempts to counter its effects:

- An early scholar-activist expressing concern about faults in far-right educational claims, the late Gerald Bracey, brought out a string of articles on the topic in the 1990s, notably his annual “Bracey Reports on the Condition of American Education” published in *Phi Delta Kappan* (a leading education journal), and he followed these up with various, thoughtful books dealing with both the substantive errors and erroneous methods of far-right propagandists;<sup>14</sup>
- Alarmed by the huge stream of badly flawed but media-friendly, far-right, think tank advocacy works disguised as “educational research reports,” Kevin Welner, Alex Molnar, and other scholars from the University of

Colorado, Arizona State University, and other campuses have formed an extensive response group (of which I am a member), some of whose members also assemble each year for a meeting. This group also sponsors a flow of articles that rebut claims made in these flawed “reports” and it has now generated two books relevant to the topic, *Think Tank Research Quality: Lessons for Policy Makers, the Media, and the Public*; and *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance*.<sup>15</sup>

- As well, blogs have now begun to appear from concerned scholars who are outraged by the many ways in which far-right educational propaganda mangles research evidence—see especially those of Rob Bligh and the Anonymous Editor of “EdTweak.”<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, as yet these efforts seem to have had little impact outside of the education community. Although far-right propaganda claims about education appear regularly in the mass media and are often quoted in debates on education, corrective voices such as those listed above have so far gained less traction with the American press or general public. (And reasons for this imbalance are also explored in Chapter Seven.)

But far-right activism has also now spread into other institutions of America, and this has distorted those institutions, provoked outrage from thoughtful analysts, and created public confusion and cynicism about the reliability of “research evidence.” A good example of this process may be found in the scientific community which has become increasingly alarmed by far-right attempts to restrict stem cell research as well as its denials of evidence-based conclusions about global warming, human causes for climate change, evolution, contraception, control of venereal diseases, and other issues that offend far-right ideological tenets or threaten the profits of far-right billionaires. Such alarms have led to statements of concern from prominent scientists and leading science journals. To illustrate, in a recent article in *Scientific American*, Shawn Otto writes about the history of antiscience rhetorics and their current persistence in America’s two, major political parties. But:

Of the two [current] forms of science denialism, the Republican form is more dangerous because the party has taken to attacking the validity of science itself as a basis for public policy when science disagrees with its ideology. It gives me no pleasure to say this. My family founded the Minnesota Republican Party. But much of the Republican Party has adopted an authoritarian approach that demands ideological conformity, even when contradicted by scientific evidence, and ostracizes those who do not conform.

—Shawn Lawrence Otto (2012, p. 65)

Sentiments like these are now widespread in the science community, and this has led a number of prominent, formerly right-leaning scientists to declare that they are “no longer Republicans.” As well, expressions of confusion and cynicism

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concerning the legitimacy of scientific evidence are now appearing in public debates over “hot-button” social issues.

Far-right activists are also now swarming into America’s federal Congress and state governments and those who analyze politics have begun to raise alarms about the effects of their activities. In earlier years, arch-conservatives could be found in both major political parties in the U.S., but this is now less true. As the parties have drifted apart, far-right activists have crowded into the Republican Party, now dominate much of its rhetoric which embraces counterfactual assumptions, and demands immediate adoption of draconian policies. This has raised alarm bells in various quarters. Consider, for example, a discussion of the issue that appeared in a recent book by prominent congressional analysts, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than You Think*.<sup>17</sup> According to these authors, and unlike in parliamentary democracies, American political systems function best when representatives from contending political parties are willing to “reach across the aisle” and fashion compromises. But two factors make this nearly impossible in today’s federal Congress and state legislatures. First, America’s major political parties are now sharply divided, mistrustful of each other, and leery of compromise—and second, far-right forces within the Republican Party bear the major fault for this state of affairs. Thus, in their Introduction they write:

However awkward it may be for the traditional press and nonpartisan analysts to acknowledge, one of the two major parties, the Republican Party has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition. When one party moves this far from the center of American politics, it is extremely difficult to enact policies responsive to the country’s most pressing challenges.

—Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein (2012, Introduction)

To summarize then, during the past 15 years, far-right forces in the U.S. have continued their assaults on the poor and public education and have expanded their activities into other institutions, particularly into the scientific and political realms where their untenable claims and controversial demands have created confusion, consternation, and chilling agenda. But contending voices have also become more vigorous, and this has begun to raise public awareness about far-right willingness to play fast-and-loose with research evidence as well as resistance to far-right nostrums. So far, however, public outrage about the huge flow of fraudulent claims from far-right sources has yet to appear. And although some discussions of poverty issues have surfaced since the onslaught of America’s current, severe recession in 2008, these have largely avoided *youth* poverty, and concern for the impact of that poverty within public education has continued to be missing from the public domain.

This context poses both opportunities and challenges for my task. On the one hand, today's readers are less likely to be surprised when they learn of counterfactual claims from far-right sources, and this simplifies my exposition. On the other, current readers may be more confused about the differences between fraudulent and evidence-based claims, indeed about the nature of legitimate research and the evidence it creates, and this means that I must discuss these issues clearly in my presentations. Be that as it may, the fundamental task of this book remains that of leading readers on a journey in which they look carefully at evidence concerning the nature of American youth poverty and its impact in education, as well as what might be done to confront the problems this journey reveals—thus dispelling The Elephant with facts and evidence—and to this task I now turn.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This quote from President G. H. W. Bush appeared in a column by George Will in *The Washington Post*. Also consult Gregory Mantsios (1992) for an expanded discussion of social class perceptions in America.
- <sup>2</sup> George W. Bush, speaking in a weekly radio address, January (2004).
- <sup>3</sup> See Berliner (2004) and Bracey (2003) for critiques of No Child Left Behind.
- <sup>4</sup> David McCullough, in his excellent biography, *John Adams* (2001, pp. 67-68), provides a good description of events related to this famous quote.
- <sup>5</sup> Bobo (1991) argues that Americans who favor reducing economic inequality, e.g., those who are poor or who come from minority groups, are also less likely to be mobilized or even to vote, hence have less political influence.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Katz (1989), Quadagno (1994), Gilens (1999), and Neubeck and Cazenave (2001).
- <sup>7</sup> This quote is from Rank (2004, pp. 171-172). Other statements of this thesis may be found in far-right sources, among them Gilder (1981), Murray (1984), Mead (1992), Magnet (1993), and Olasky (2000).
- <sup>8</sup> See Ryan (1971).
- <sup>9</sup> This point is explored by Finkelstein, Reem, and Doner (1998).
- <sup>10</sup> See Berliner and Biddle (1995, Chapter Four).
- <sup>11</sup> John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990), for example, made this argument in their book, *Politics, Markets, and American Schools*.
- <sup>12</sup> This issue is again addressed in Chapter Six.
- <sup>13</sup> Berliner and Biddle (1995).
- <sup>14</sup> For books discussing typical errors in far-right propaganda, consult Bracey (2002 or 2003). Expositions and examples of erroneous far-right analysis techniques may be found in Bracey (2000, 2006).
- <sup>15</sup> To access copies of rejoinders from the group, contact: <http://necp.colorado.edu/think-tank-reviews>. Full references for the books cited appear at Welner, Hinchey, Molnar, and Weitzman (2010) and Carter and Welner (2013).
- <sup>16</sup> For the former, consult [robbligh@tconl.com](mailto:robbligh@tconl.com). For the latter, see [edtweak@gmail.com](mailto:edtweak@gmail.com) or <http://edtweak.com>.
- <sup>17</sup> These two authors, longtime analysts of politics in the U.S. Congress, hold positions, respectively, in The Brookings Institution and The American Heritage Institute, and the latter think tank has long been known for politically *conservative* views!



## CHAPTER TWO

### YOUTH POVERTY IN AMERICA

In 1993, 23 percent of our children were living below the official poverty line. Of such children, the bipartisan National Commission on Children has said, “The harshness of [their] lives and their tenuous hold on tomorrow cannot be countenanced by a wealthy nation, a caring people, or a prudent society. America’s future depends on these children too.” Up to now, however, policy-makers in the United States have never made a serious effort to ensure that all of our children get a minimally decent start in life through governmental action.

—Barbara R. Bergmann (1996, p. 3)

This chapter begins our voyage of discovery and explores what is known today about the extent of youth poverty in America. In it we examine the concept of poverty, how poverty is assessed, the scope of poverty among youths and other age groups in the United States, and evidence concerning the duration, distribution, and sources of youth poverty.

In addition, we explore a number of stereotypes about poverty, particularly poverty among America’s youngest citizens. Many Americans seem to believe that poverty among youths in their country is minuscule, has little impact, and can be safely ignored. As well, some Americans assume that the elderly most often experience poverty, while others believe that youth poverty and its problems are largely created by those who are Black and Hispanic or that impoverished youths are often mired in poverty and are likely to remain poor throughout their formative years (and beyond).

Well, are these stereotypes accurate? Is it true that youth poverty is a “small” problem in the United States? Is poverty actually greatest among the elderly; are youth poverty and its problems largely Black and Hispanic issues; do most impoverished youths remain mired in long-term impoverishment? Answers for such questions may be found in research on youth poverty in America, and to this research I now turn.

#### POVERTY AND ITS ASSESSMENT

From the beginning, the [official American] poverty measure had weaknesses, and they have become more apparent and consequential because of far-reaching changes in the U.S. society and economy and in government policies.

—From a Statement by the National Research Council (Constance F. Citro & Robert T. Michael, Eds., 1995, p. 2)

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To understand youth poverty we must have some idea about what we are talking about. What exactly is poverty? What is meant when we read that youths or others in a population are impoverished? And how does one decide when people are “poor”?

### *Defining Poverty*

In its extended sense, “poverty” refers to any form of scarcity, but in most writing on the topic the poverty concept is limited to specific forms of need. A few American authors have written that poverty should be thought of as lack of disposable income, and this is understandable in a country where people are expected to pay personally for most of the things they need in life. But even in the United States, some needs are provided through tax-supported social services—safe drinking water (for example), paved streets, sewage and garbage disposal, police and fire protection services—and this implies that even those in the U.S. who have very little disposable income may be less impoverished than persons in the worst of third-world countries where such services are not provided.

Reflecting such thoughts, most analysts now define poverty as *lack of the tangible (or material) resources needed for a “minimum ‘decent’ standard of living.”*<sup>1</sup> Some people may bear extra burdens because they are threatened by physical or social forces, have chronic diseases, are socially isolated, or are subject to discrimination because of racial, religious, or ethnic prejudice, but in current usage these conditions are not normally thought to indicate poverty. In contrast, citizens in advanced countries are assumed to be impoverished if they lack sufficient food, clothing, shelter, appropriate heat (or air conditioning), electricity and telephone services, indoor plumbing, transportation facilities, medical assistance, supplemental support when they are too young, too old, or too impaired to provide for their own needs, and access to facilities for education, recreation, and the like.<sup>2</sup>

This definition seems to be clear, but it actually dodges several issues. For one, most human beings do not live alone but rather in social groupings where tangible resources are shared. This means that “poverty” is normally a condition that is endured, in common, by all persons found in a social entity—a family or household perhaps, or a community, school district, state, or nation. This introduces confusion because we also talk about poverty as if it is experienced by individuals; for example, researchers often report poverty rates for classes of specific persons; e.g., youths, single mothers, or the elderly. Such usage is a shorthand way of referring to poverty within social entities that include those persons. Most studies of poverty in the United States focus on *families* or people who share a common *household*. Thus, when those studies report poverty rates for youths, single mothers, or the elderly, their data actually reflect the numbers of those persons who live in families (or households) where poverty is shared in common.

For another, we normally think about “poverty” as if it is limited to a category, or perhaps several categories, of easily identified persons who are stigmatized or socially isolated. Earlier American images of poverty focused on The Irish, The Italians, or immigrant groups from Eastern or Southern Europe crowded into major East-coast cities, desperate families fleeing the dust bowl during the Great Depression, or perhaps hardscrabble residents of the Appalachian highlands, whereas current images of poverty more often involve African-American urban ghettos, Native American reservations, or Hispanic immigrants. Such images are misleading. As we shall see shortly, youth poverty is actually widespread in America, and poverty is certainly not an either-or experience. In fact, many American families experience years of “near poverty” and are never able to secure the full panoply of tangible resources normally thought necessary for a decent life in America.

And for a third, judgments about “poverty” are clearly tied to specific contexts and to standards of living that are relevant to those judgments. During the 19th century, most Americans lived in homes without indoor plumbing, let alone electricity. One hundred fifty years ago these conditions did not suggest impoverishment in the United States, but they certainly do so today. Similarly, persons thought to be “very” poor in contemporary America actually have access to some types of resources that are rarely found in underdeveloped nations. Judgments about poverty are always made, then, within a specific time and place.

#### *Assessing Poverty*

Above all, the definition given above does not tell us how to detect or assess poverty. In theory it should be possible to survey the various types of tangible resources available in a social entity, thus to establish the subtle ways in which that entity is more “affluent” or “impoverished” than others, and this is actually done in some studies that compare poverty rates among regions or states in America. However, it would be very costly to secure such data for large numbers of small entities, such as the millions of households in America, and most studies of poverty base their judgments on but a single statistic, computed for each household, equal to the fiscal value of funds it has available for purchasing tangible resources. This statistic is then compared to a standard *poverty threshold* value, also expressed in fiscal terms and designed to represent minimally adequate resources, and when funds available to a household fall below the threshold value, that household is said to be “impoverished.”

At first blush, such a strategy seems reasonable in America where households usually buy most of their resources. But how does one obtain information about funds available to each household, and how does one deal with resources that the household does not buy? (What about food that farm families grow for their own consumption, housing that is provided by an employer, or social services obtained from charitable or governmental sources?) And what do we mean by “available” funds? (Should we include illegal income, for example, and if not, should we count pretax dollars or only those funds remaining after

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income and property taxes have been deducted?) And which types of tangible resources should we include when constructing our poverty measure, how should we determine the threshold value we will use when judging which households are poor, and how should we adjust that value for households with differing numbers of adults and children?

Many answers have been suggested for these questions, and they have generated various techniques for assessing poverty.<sup>3</sup> Much has been written about these alternatives, but I focus here on three measures that often appear in studies of youth poverty and its educational impact.

*The official method.* I begin with the *Official Method* used to create most reports about poverty rates in America. In the early 1960s President Lyndon Johnson announced a “War on Poverty,” and this suggested need for a technique to measure poverty rates so that Americans could learn whether they were or were not “Winning the War.” Enter Mollie Orshansky, then an employee of the Social Service Administration. At that time, little was known about the costs of tangible resources needed by American families, but in 1961 the U.S. Department of Agriculture had published information about an Economy Food Plan detailing the foodstuffs families would need for temporary or emergency use when funds were low. Data were also available suggesting that American families then spent about one third of their total incomes on food, so Orshansky suggested that the “official” poverty threshold should be set at *three* times the annual income a typical family would need to purchase the “basket” of food items set forth in the Economy Food Plan, and that differing thresholds should be adopted depending on the size and composition of the family (or household).<sup>4</sup> Households having annual incomes smaller than those specified by these thresholds would then be declared “impoverished,” and through use of this yardstick one could tap census data or conduct surveys to examine poverty rates for various types of Americans.

This suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm, the method proposed by Orshansky has proven to be durable, and it is used today not only for record keeping but also to establish eligibility for benefits provided by some government programs. Although minor adjustments have been adopted for it over time, and its thresholds are updated annually for inflation using the Consumer Price Index, even today it still depends on the work of government shoppers who purchase “baskets” of basic food items in supermarkets around the nation and analysts who then multiply the average costs of those “baskets” by three to set poverty thresholds.<sup>5</sup> And although other thresholds are used by a few federal aid programs, the Orshansky method is still used by most federal agencies (including, crucially, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget), and most media reports of poverty rates reflect its use.

For those interested, simplified versions of the Official (“Orshansky”) poverty thresholds, used in 2002, are given in the first column of Exhibit 2.1. As can be seen, these thresholds are *not* generous. To illustrate, a family composed of two adults and two children could then earn no more than \$18,100 per year in 2002 in pretax dollars if it were to qualify for key poverty benefits. Even a few cents

**Exhibit 2.1. Recent Poverty Thresholds for Annual Household Income**

Household Size (Number of Persons)	(A) Official ("Orshansky") Thresholds	(B) Thresholds Used for Free Meals in Schools	(C) Thresholds Used for Reduced Price Meals in Schools
1	\$ 8,860	\$11,518	\$16,391
2	11,940	15,522	22,089
3	15,020	19,526	27,787
4	18,100	23,530	33,485
5	21,180	27,534	39,183
6	24,260	31,538	44,881
7	27,340	35,542	50,579
8	30,420	39,546	56,277
For each additional person, add	3,080	4,004	5,698

Sources: All thresholds displayed were those for the 48 contiguous states and the District of Columbia. Official thresholds were those in place for 2002 and were obtained from the *Federal Register* (2002a).

Thresholds used for free and reduced price meals in schools were those in place during the 2002/03 school year and were obtained from the *Federal Register* (2002b).

of additional annual income would have meant that the family would no longer be qualified as "impoverished."<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning, however, it was clear that the Official Method was a flawed tool, over time those flaws have become more glaring, and many scholars (including Mollie Orshansky) have urged that it be revised or abandoned. Several issues have prompted these concerns. For one thing, the Official Method is based on reports of pretax income and ignores both the taxes that families pay and the value of tax-supported benefits that poor families may receive, such as food stamps, public housing, assistance from Medicaid and Medicare programs, welfare or temporary assistance benefits, and Earned Income Tax Credits. Ignoring such issues did not matter much in earlier years when low-income people paid few taxes and most of these benefits were not available, but such conditions no longer prevail. This has suggested to a few authors that the Official Thresholds are now too *high*, that they *overestimate* the number of poor persons

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in America today,<sup>7</sup> and that new methods for measuring poverty should be adopted which include the taxes families pay and the benefits they receive.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, many authors have argued that the Official Method was always based on the minimum basket of food needed to sustain life in an emergency, so from the outset it reflected an unrealistic, stingy standard. In addition, families today spend a lot more of their available incomes on nonfood needs. As more mothers have entered the workforce, for example, family needs for child care services, appropriate work clothes, and transportation have increased, and the costs of some nonfood resources (such as housing and health care) have escalated sharply—but these changes are not reflected in the Official Method. Living costs also differ sharply among American communities and are generally higher in urban centers where more and more Americans are now living, but the Official Method also does not reflect such matters. All of which implies, in turn, that Official Thresholds are now too *low*, that they *underestimate* the number of impoverished Americans,<sup>9</sup> and that new methods for assessing poverty should be adopted which reflect both the current nature of tangible needs and the actual costs of living experienced by American families.<sup>10</sup>

Well, which is correct; are the Official Thresholds “too low” or “too high”? Would you believe that answers proposed for this question have reflected political commitments? Propagandists from far-right sources which desire to restrain benefits for the poor have claimed that Official Thresholds are “too high.” In contrast, advocates for impoverished youths, and other persons committed to improving life for disadvantaged persons have argued that they are “too low,” and the latter have assembled impressive evidence supporting their argument. As we shall see shortly, surveys have now reported that families whose resources place them “modestly above” Official Poverty Thresholds are nevertheless unable to afford resources needed for “decent” living. In addition, dramatic case studies have been published that reflected the lives of struggling families whose low incomes exceeded Official Thresholds but were unable to pay for crucial tangible needs.<sup>11</sup> And responding to such evidence, a general consensus has now emerged stressing that America’s Official Poverty Thresholds are, indeed, *too low*, which means—in turn—that poverty rates in the country are *greater* than those appearing in today’s Official statistics.<sup>12</sup>

*The supplemental lunch method.* How might one correct for this bias? One simple way to do this would be to raise the Official Thresholds by some fixed percentage—thus allowing more families to fall into the “impoverished” category—and various schemes for doing this have been advanced. Depending on the analyst who writes on the subject, the new, “replacement” thresholds might be set at 125%, 150%, or perhaps 200% of those used in the Official Method, but most of these proposals have not caught on in studies of youth poverty.

One fixed-percentage scheme has proven very useful, however, for studies of poverty effects in education. In 1970 the American Congress set up a program to support school lunches with federal funds and decreed that primary and secondary students who came from households receiving less than 130% of the

Official Thresholds would receive “free” lunches, whereas students from households where incomes fell between 130% and 185% of the Official Thresholds would receive “reduced-price” lunches in their schools.<sup>13</sup> To make this system work, someone had to collect data about persons present and income available in each student’s household, and this task was assigned to public school districts which, in turn, were required to ask a responsible adult from each student’s household to provide such data early in each school year. These data are then processed by the district and form the basis for decisions about which students will receive “free” and “reduced-price” lunches (and sometime other meals, in some school districts). As a result, each district in the nation now has a file of information, updated each year, that lists students who are eligible for lunch (and possibly other meal) benefits, and this information is also used to indicate rates of poverty among students (and their families) in many studies. For those interested, the free-lunch and reduced-price-lunch thresholds—based on official data for 1991 and used during the 2002/2003 school year—also appeared in Exhibit 2.1.

Needless to say, this second strategy generates poverty thresholds that are more generous than those of the Official Method. To illustrate, during the 2002/2003 school year, a family composed of two adults and two children could earn up to \$23,530, and students from it would still be eligible for “free” lunches (or up to \$33,485 for “reduced-price” lunches). And this also means, of course, that larger rates for poverty among the families of young Americans are generated if one uses thresholds from this technique.

In practice, most researchers assessing poverty with this strategy have sought to bundle all impoverished students into one category, so have chosen the reduced-price-lunch threshold to represent “all students who receive free and reduced-price lunches (and possibly other meals).” And when this is done, I shall refer to the practice as the *Supplemental Lunch Method*.

*The comparative method.* So far so good, but how do poverty rates in America fare when compared with those in other countries? This question is crucial if we want to learn whether American youth poverty rates are “excessive” or “minuscule” when juxtaposed with those from other advanced nations. To answer it we must turn to studies reported by such organizations as the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) group, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).<sup>14</sup> How have these studies generated comparable rates for different nations?

In theory, it might be possible to collect information from each nation about needs for basic tangible resources among its families and the number of families living in it that cannot meet those needs, but again this would be very costly. Instead, most comparative studies have adopted a simpler strategy in which those rates are generated by counting the numbers of families (or households) whose net income falls below a threshold defined as a specific fraction of the average (median) *net* income for the country in which they live, with the understanding that the same fraction will be used in all countries compared. Net incomes are

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normally expressed in the currency of each country studied and are defined as the fiscal value of gross cash income in each family, minus the value of taxes the family pays, plus the value of most types of tax-supported social benefits provided to the family (or household) unit—and in the typical comparative study, poverty thresholds are set at *one half* of median net income.

Data for making poverty estimates using the Comparative Method are drawn from statistical records provided by each national government. In addition, calculations are first made for a standard type of “reference family”—again, usually two adults and two children—but adjusted figures are also computed for other family (or household) types through use of a formula, based on research, which assumes that it costs less per person in larger families and requires only about 70% as much to provide basic tangible resources for children than for adults.<sup>15</sup>

Most comparative studies set poverty thresholds at one half of median net income because surveys have confirmed that respondents (at least in the United States) tend to define “as ‘poor’ any family of four living on an income that corresponds to about half of median income for a family of [that] size.”<sup>16</sup> Note also that these procedures generate poverty thresholds that are unique to each country, thus judgments about which families are and are not “poor” are normally made within each national context and do not reflect a universal standard for judging poverty. This does not matter much when comparing poverty rates among advanced nations—where standards of living are roughly similar—but it means that questions should be raised if the Comparative Method is used to contrast poverty rates for advanced nations with nations from the third world.

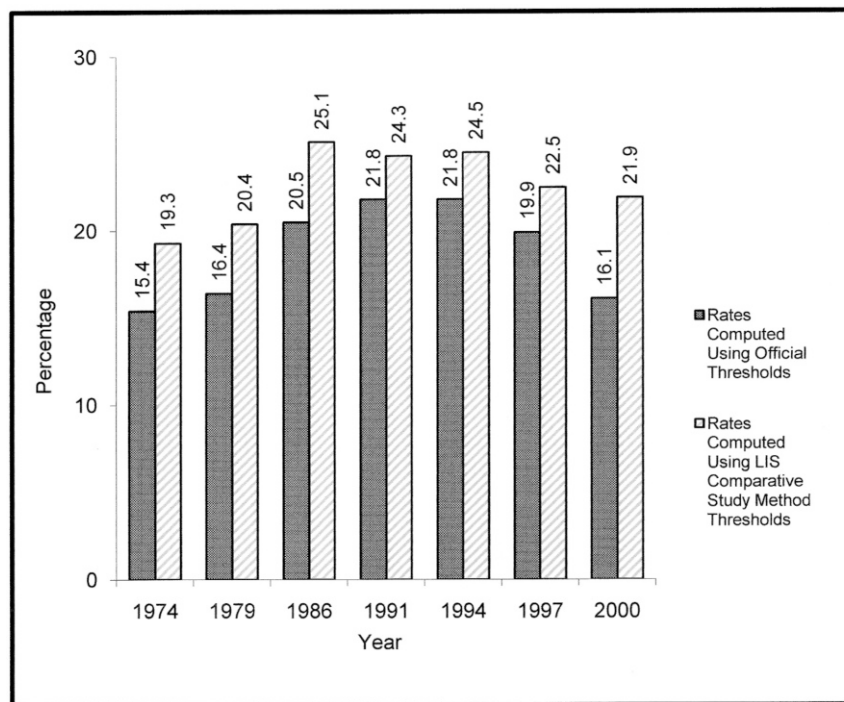
What then is the relation between poverty thresholds for America set by the Official Method and those generated by the Comparative Method? Interestingly, when Mollie Orshansky first proposed her solution, thresholds generated by the two methods were quite similar. Over time, however, the Official Method has become a more distorted measure, and the two sets of thresholds have drifted apart. Today the Comparative Method generates significantly higher thresholds for America, and this means that comparative studies report higher poverty rates for the United States than those from studies based on the Official Method. Exhibit 2.2 displays the size of such differences in youth poverty rates for various years between 1974 and 2000.

It is also useful to note that *medical* costs and benefits are not normally assessed when estimating poverty rates using the Comparative Method. The decision to exclude such data reflects the fact that medical benefit schemes are complex and vary from nation to nation, hence the values of such matters are difficult to assess. But other countries in the advanced world differ sharply from the United States in the way they finance health care costs. The former *all* have single-payer systems that provide tax-supported health benefits for each citizen and legal resident in their lands, whereas most Americans cover their escalating health care costs through insurance, membership in a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO), or cash outlays—all paid for with posttax dollars—and the bulk of low-income American families cannot afford to buy health insurance or join an HMO. By comparison with other advanced countries then, low-income families



in America spend more of their discretionary funds for health costs, have less adequate preventive health care, and are more vulnerable to financial ruin when catastrophic illness strikes. Which implies, in turn, that although Comparative Study estimates for American poverty rates may be generous, they are again *too low*.

**Exhibit 2.2. American Youth Poverty Rates Computed Using Two Different Methods**



Sources: Official poverty rates were obtained from *Poverty in the United States: 2001* (Proctor, B. D., & Dalaker, J., 2002, Table A-2).

Comparative study rates were obtained in January, 2004 from the Luxembourg Income Study website accessed at <http://www.lisproject.org/keyfigures.htm>.

To sum up then, various methods have been used for assessing poverty in America, and these have differing strengths and weaknesses. These methods generate somewhat different estimates for poverty rates, and this means that the “exact” numbers of Americans who suffer from poverty cannot be established. One can get a general feeling for poverty rates and numbers by pooling estimates from several methods, however, and each method can help us understand which groups in the population are more or less impoverished.

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In addition, it is clear that the Official Method now used in America is obsolete and generates poverty-rate estimates that are *too low*. This does not mean that continuing to collect data using the Official Method is an utter waste of time. On the contrary, since it has been in place for many years, annual publications of data generated by the Official Method provide at least some information about the ebb and flow of poverty rates over time. But other methods provide more realistic and charitable estimates of true poverty rates and numbers.

### THE SCOPE OF YOUTH POVERTY

The highest incidence of poverty in America has been forced upon our children who are the least able to overcome it, and this problem is getting worse, not better .... By consigning ... one-fifth to one-third of all of our nation's children to poverty, we are laying the seeds for a degree of social degeneration and deterioration perhaps never before experienced in a modern industrialized nation. By condoning a situation where millions of our children live in intolerable conditions of poverty and low income, with all that implies about poor diet, poor health care, inadequate housing, exposure to being criminally victimized, and an education that leaves them illiterate and uneducated, we have come to virtually institutionalize a form of what can only be viewed as societal child abuse.

—Andrew J. Winnick (1989, pp. 206-207)

Given several methods for assessing poverty, what is known today about youth poverty rates in America? How many young Americans live in poverty, how do rates of poverty compare for youths, adults, and the elderly, and what problems appear when youths in the United States must endure poverty?

#### *Poverty Rates and Numbers*

How many young Americans live in poverty? Answers for this question differ, of course, depending on the year we are talking about and the method used for assessing poverty. If we take 1994 as our reference year, the Official poverty rate for Americans under the age of 18 was 21.8%, whereas the rate estimated by the Comparative Study Method was 26.6% and those generated by other methods were as high as 30%. Since the total population of American youths that year was roughly 70 million, this means that at least *15.3 million*, more realistically *18.6 million*, or perhaps as many as *21+ million* American youngsters were then living in poverty. Although these estimates differ, they tell a common story. That year, *vast* numbers of young Americans—more than one out of every five infants, children, and adolescents in the country—experienced poverty in their homes. And this condition was tolerated in the “Richest, Most Powerful, Most Humane Nation on Earth” during a period of sharp economic growth.

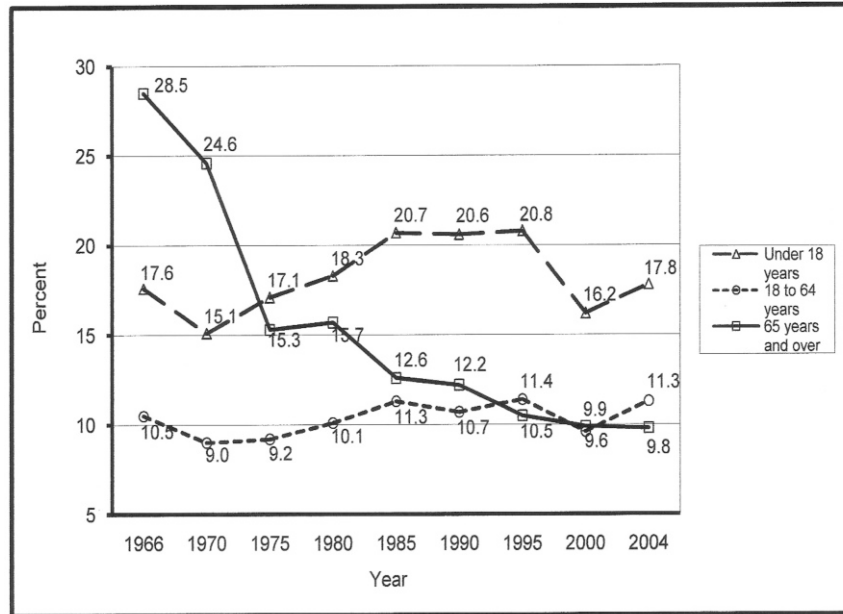
These numbers are truly astounding. They mean, among other things, that in 1994 more youths in the United States suffered from poverty than from *all* known infectious and inherited diseases combined, and that more American youngsters appeared on poverty rolls than on tallies of youngsters from families who were Black, Hispanic, did not speak English, or endured other conditions making success in education (and life) problematic. If we judge by numbers alone then, in 1994 poverty was the *leading* challenge faced by infants, children, and adolescents in America. Nor was 1994 an atypical year. If we look again at Exhibit 2.2 we see that rates for American youth poverty have been strikingly high in recent years. Minor fluctuations have appeared from year to year, and youth poverty rates have soared during the current sharp recession, but the general picture has remained one in which, since the mid-1980s, *huge* numbers of young Americans have experienced poverty each year.

How “bad” is this picture? One way to answer this question is to compare poverty rates for youths with those for adults and the elderly in America. This is done in Exhibit 2.3 which again displays Official data from the U.S. Census Bureau. As can be seen in this new figure, prior to 1970, Official poverty rates were highest for elderly persons (those over age 65), but rates for the elderly then *fell sharply* and have since been similar to rates for adults. In contrast, Official poverty rates for young Americans *fell modestly* during the late 1960s, *grew markedly* for the next 15 years, *stayed at high levels* for a decade or so, *fell slightly* in the late 1990s, and have since again been *growing*. Or, to provide another perspective for thinking about the issue, since the mid-80s, annual poverty rates for young people have been roughly *twice* those recorded for either adults or elderly Americans.

Why did poverty rates for the elderly fall sharply a generation ago? It does not require rocket science to answer this question. America had established its social security program during the 1930s, and during the late 1960s and early 1970s the numbers of elderly persons receiving benefits from that program grew significantly. As more and more elderly persons received those benefits, and eventually those from Medicare, poverty rates for this age group fell. Thus, this history provides a lesson from which Americans might learn as they think about poverty among their youngest citizens. American ideology stresses that able-bodied adults should become wage earners, but youths and the elderly are normally exempted from this requirement because they are thought to be more needy and less able to fend for themselves. Americans have already set up good, tax-supported services—social security and Medicare—that provide significant financial support for the elderly. These services were designed to reduce poverty for retirees, and they have worked.<sup>17</sup> Americans have yet to set up equally effective support services for young people, but there is no theoretical reason why they should not do so.

Why did poverty rates for youths change over the years? In part these shifts have reflected advances or retreats in the nation’s economy, thus slight shifts in youth poverty rates have often matched parallel shifts in poverty rates for adults. But this does not fully explain why Official youth poverty rates grew markedly in

**Exhibit 2.3. Official Poverty Rates by Age: 1966 to 2004**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960-2005 Annual Social and Economic Supplements

the 1970s and early 1980s nor why they fell slightly in the late 1990s, nor why they are again growing today. As we shall see shortly, the marked growth of youth poverty that began a generation ago was also tied to shifts in the composition of American families (and particularly growth in the numbers of families headed by single women); sharp growth in the income gap between The Rich and The Poor in America (generating cuts in earnings for low-income families); and loss of federal benefits due to conservative “reforms” begun under President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the modest shifts in (Official) youth poverty rates in the late 1990s reflected both legislative actions and problems with the Official Method, whereas youth poverty rates are currently soaring because of America’s current recession which has pummeled low-income families.

Regarding earlier legislative actions, in 1996 Congress passed a bill, signed by President Clinton, that was designed to “end welfare as we know it.” This law forced a host of single mothers off welfare rolls and into employment, and far-right analysts have argued that this action generated more incomes for their families and thus reduced poverty among their children. The only trouble with this argument is that those mothers were also no longer eligible for tax-supported

benefits they had previously received, so that many of the families they led were *not* better off but actually *lost* net disposable resources.<sup>19</sup> This has meant that, while these families would no longer appear on Official poverty rolls, they were nevertheless still impoverished and would appear as such in better estimates of youth poverty rates, such as those provided by the Comparative Method. (This argument is easy to confirm; look again at Exhibit 2.2 which shows how Comparative and Official youth poverty estimates diverged in 1997 and 2000.) If nothing else, this story should remind us again about the remarkable deficiencies of the Official Method—as well as the shakiness of superficial, ideologically driven analyses of poverty data.

To summarize then, although exact numbers of impoverished youths will vary depending on year and method used for assessing poverty, all data sources indicate that *at least one fifth of all American youths have experienced poverty in recent years, and this rate is now soaring*. Growth in the Official poverty rates registered for youths since 1976 have reflected at least three forces: *shifts in the composition of American families (and particularly, growth in the numbers of families headed by single mothers), recent and ongoing reductions in standards of living for low-income Americans, and legislation-driven reductions in benefits for low-income American youths and their families*. And although I do not review the data here, the same forces have generated a sharp increase in the numbers of American families living in “severe or deep poverty” during this period—that is, those who must survive on less than *half* the income specified by the Official (“Orshansky”) thresholds.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Problems Associated with Youth Poverty*

Another way to assess the damage caused when one fifth or more of America’s youngest citizens are forced to endure poverty is to consider the challenges they face. What are their lives like; what problems do they encounter that youths from middle- and upper-income homes need not face; and how serious are those problems?

It is not easy to answer these questions because official census data provide little information about problems faced by young Americans, so for answers we must turn to surveys that have studied problems experienced by American youths. Subsequent chapters detail evidence from such efforts, but it is useful to anticipate the thrust of their concerns here. It is hard, however, to come to grips with the *huge* span of problems faced by impoverished youths. To quote Sue Books on the subject, “as a group, poor children [in America] bear the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill.”<sup>21</sup> Let us begin by sorting those problems into three types—those stemming from the *homes* of those young people, the *neighborhoods* in which they live, and the *schools* they attend.

*Home-based problems.* Since we normally decide whether youths experience poverty by assessing resources in their homes, it follows that *impoverished American youths always come from homes that lack the full set of tangible (or*

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*material) resources needed for a “minimum ‘decent’ standard of living.”* Such deficiencies create many forms of problems.

Some problems are associated with the buildings that house those youths and their families. Too often those buildings lack adequate bathroom or kitchen facilities; have no sewer or septic service; lack reliable heating or cooling systems; have few or no electrical outlets in crucial rooms; have holes in their floors, cracks in their walls, or roofs that leak; are severely crowded; have walls covered by toxic, lead-based paints; or are plagued by rats, mice, and other vermin—and some of these problems can create severe, lifelong, physical or neurological handicaps for children.

Other home-based problems involve issues of food, nutrition, and health. Too often low-income youngsters (and their parents) do not have enough to eat or are fed diets that are based on junk foods, lack crucial nutrients, or are loaded with inadvertent poisons. Too often also those victims lack health insurance; have no regular access to dental or medical facilities; receive little or no preventive health care, and are subject to risks of chronic and possibly serious illnesses that are routinely screened and treated for youths who come from middle- or upper-income homes.

Still other problems reflect the grinding realities of inadequate incomes. Often the parents who head impoverished families: must work long hours at insecure and inflexible jobs that prevent them from meeting their children after school or responding to others’ needs in their households; find they cannot afford child care costs; must pay inflated rents for homes or apartments from which they may be evicted; and cannot cover crucial utility bills. These problems pose unending stresses for parents. As a result, they may develop chronic depression, withdraw into alcoholism or drug addiction, become sexual predators or violent abusers of others, or fail to sustain loving relationships with other persons in their families. Often too those parents move frequently with their children to distant cities, hoping thereby to escape from problems or find better jobs, or—worse—when they have only minimal resources, those persons may become homeless and must live in shelters, in automobiles, or on the streets. Moreover, older youths in impoverished families may face strong pressures to drop out of school and seek unskilled, low-paying employment in order to supplement the meager incomes of their homes.

And home-based problems may also reflect the fact that impoverished parents simply cannot afford to buy the equipment and experiences that would support the education of their children. Tragically, their homes often lack books and other reading materials, paper and writing tools, computers, or dedicated spaces where youths can do their homework. And parents from impoverished homes can rarely afford to pay for privately financed field trips, summer enrichment programs, or private tutorial services when their children need help with academic subjects.

Not all of these problems appear in each impoverished home, of course. But *many* do, some of the latter are truly serious, and when they are present, the physical, emotional, and cognitive growths of youths in those homes are

constrained and distorted. As well, American youths who experience long-term poverty may be faced with years of unending stress that restrict their abilities to cope with even simple life challenges.

*Problems in neighborhoods.* Problems in the homes of impoverished youngsters are bad enough, but *American youths often live in poverty ghettos where they are surrounded by other impoverished families, a stressful physical environment, and minimal public facilities and social services, and these conditions spawn other problems.* As we shall see later, poverty ghettos are less likely to appear in other advanced countries, thus in the U.S. such ghettos also generate problems for impoverished youths that are often unique.

*Rural poverty ghettos* in the U.S. are often isolated environments where only a few elements of the country's broad range of cultures are present, lives are dominated by the limited concerns of specific ethnic or religious groups, drug and alcohol abuse may abound, higher education (or completing school at all) are not valued highly, and youths may be pressured to abandon their own aspirations in order to meet the needs of other persons within extended families.

In contrast, youths living in America's *urban* (or, sometimes, *suburban*) ghettos often experience neighborhoods where Black, Hispanic, or immigrant families are concentrated; many adults are unemployed and few possess educational qualifications; streets and buildings are rife with decay, violence, theft, ethnic conflict, and gang warfare; walls are covered with graffiti; streets are rarely cleaned of trash and dead animals; vehicles filled with commuters who roar past on train tracks or freeways; jobs for youths and opportunities for advancement are scarce; parks, museums, and theaters are not available; and merchants charge exorbitant prices for food and other necessities.

And wherever they are found, American poverty ghettos often feature concentrations of alienated, disaffected, and often angry young people; few-if-any adult role models who portray economic or professional success; inadequate clinics, nursing, and hospital facilities; a shortage of affordable public transportation or public libraries; and few recreation facilities designed to serve the needs of youths. And too often those ghettos are plagued by poisons in the air, water, and food that ghetto residents must ingest.

Not surprisingly, some of these problems pose truly severe burdens for impoverished youths. And although specific poverty ghettos will not feature all of these problems, some inevitably appear in each poverty ghetto, and all such problems generate burdens for the youths who must endure them.

*Problems in schools.* In addition, impoverished American youths often encounter problems in the schools they attend, and again these problems are often unique to the United States. At least three types of school problems may be distinguished. First, some school-based problems appear because of laws or customs pressuring students to enroll only in local schools, and this means that *impoverished students living in America's poverty ghettos are likely to attend neighborhood schools that enroll large numbers of impoverished youths.* Severe

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concentrations of poor youths within schools typically create climates of alienation and despair (if not anger and violence) among students, and those schools often report high rates of transiency among students and teachers. Such conditions mean that schools with high-poverty rates find it very hard to provide high-morale environments that are physically safe, emotionally supportive, and educationally challenging.

Second, impoverished youths often encounter problems because of the peculiar way in which America funds public schools. Public education in other advanced countries is largely funded by state or national governments which provide *equal* funds for each student enrolled in each local school—and a few enlightened countries even provide *extra* funding for schools serving concentrations of needy students. In sharp contrast, public schools in America are operated by local school boards, and more than half of their funding comes from taxes paid by the communities those boards represent. This means that whenever a poverty ghetto is served by its own local school board, that board simply cannot extract sufficient funds from constituents to provide adequate support for its school. And when poverty ghettos appear as neighborhoods within a larger metropolis, the board serving that large city often finds reasons for providing extra funds for schools serving affluent families. All of which means, of course, that *most schools in America's poverty ghettos receive restricted funding—i.e., per-student funding that is one third or less than that provided for schools serving more affluent students.*

Restricted funding generates many problems for impoverished American youths. Schools with miserable funding may be housed in unsafe, overcrowded buildings with inoperative toilets, leaking roofs, broken windows, inadequate heating or cooling systems, and vermin infestations. Too often those schools have difficulty competing with better-funded, suburban schools for qualified and talented teachers, and key courses in their curricula may be taught by unqualified personnel. Often those schools cannot afford needed computers, audiovisual equipment, up-to-date curricular packages, musical instruments, art supplies, and libraries. (In the worst cases, they may have no funds for buying textbooks, basic laboratory equipment, uniforms for student athletes, or goal posts for their football fields!) In contrast with more affluent schools, they may be unable to hire nurses, counselors, or other health professionals, let alone staff responsible for outreach programs in their communities, and they rarely have resources for funding field trips, enrichment programs, and special curricula designed for student groups in their neighborhoods. And if these problems were not sufficient, schools in crime-ridden urban ghettos often must use some of their meager funds to erect barbed-wire fences, hire armed guards, and install metal detectors at their entrances.

Problems in schools that suffer from both poverty concentration and miserable funding may be truly draconian, but impoverished American youngsters are also punished by a third type of problem reflecting *discriminatory practices* appearing in many American schools. Among such practices are: *American tracking, remedial, and enrichment programs that are designed to provide extra*



*resources for “talented” students* (who, because of biased selection procedures, more often come from affluent homes) while denying those resources to “less deserving” students (who are more often impoverished); and *America’s long summer academic “vacation” which interrupts learning for all students but is particularly hard on youths from impoverished families* (who cannot afford to pay for youths’ summer enrichment experiences). These practices also do not often appear in other advanced nations, so the problems they generate for impoverished American youths also tend to be unique.

*Summary.* To summarize then, within the United States, impoverished youths suffer from at least five different sources of problems which may be truly serious:

- those stemming from their impoverished families;
- those arising in the impoverished ghettos in which they often live;
- those reflecting poverty concentration in the schools they often attend;
- those resulting from miserable funding for the schools they attend; and
- those generated by discriminatory practices common in American schools.

Few impoverished youths encounter the full panoply of these problems, but all will have to face some or more of them. And this means that America has organized its society so that impoverished youths must bear *a host* of often serious burdens that are not borne by nonimpoverished youths and are often unknown to those living in affluent and middle-income homes. And unfortunately, these burdens are *more* likely to appear in the U.S. than in other advanced nations.

How do American youths respond when forced to cope with a huge number of intractable, poverty-generated problems? Responses will differ from youngster to youngster, of course, but let’s examine how such events affected one real victim. Exhibit 2.4 was written by Valerie Polakow, a scholar-activist, who then directed a center for the study of child and family problems and has written extensively about women and children in poverty, homelessness, and child care policies in America and elsewhere. In this quote she describes her recent experiences with “Michael” who has experienced both poverty and homelessness.

Michael’s story is unique for the scope and severity of problems he has experienced, but in the U.S. at least some such problems are loaded onto the backs of *all* impoverished young people. And this means that youth poverty poses a truly massive challenge in the United States. As we now know, each year since the mid-1980s, one fifth or more of all young Americans have experienced poverty; thus this scourge afflicts more infants, youngsters, and adolescents in the country than any other known challenge; and rates for youth poverty are now growing. Nor is youth poverty an innocent experience. Within America, impoverished youths experience a host of problems stemming from their homes, their neighborhoods, and their schools. Some of these problems are mild, but others are truly severe, and collectively they place huge burdens on the backs of impoverished youngsters that are neither experienced nor understood by those in typical middle- or upper-income homes in the U.S. Thus, in America, the scope of youth poverty is wide, deep, pernicious, and too often misunderstood.

**Exhibit 2.4. Michael's Story**

Michael is a bright, articulate, 8-year-old who has experienced four episodes of homelessness in his young life. He was born into homelessness after his mother, eight months pregnant, fled to Michigan to escape his father's violence. During the latest episode, when the family fled from drug and gang violence at a public housing site, Michael was so traumatized that as I drove the family to a shelter, he lay on the floor of my car, screaming and clutching his pillow as he cried: "I hate this life—why can't I live in a place like other kids—it's not fair—I won't have friends no more at school—it's the worst thing in the world when you don't got no home. I never want to go in that shelter." Michael lay crying on the floor, curled up in a fetal position, and refused to leave the car to set foot in the shelter. An hour later, after being coaxed inside he sat on the stairway, angrily shouting about his mother, "Why does she do this to us—why can't we have a regular home like other kids—I can't go to school no more 'cos my friends will find out I'm in a shelter—I hate her, I hate her—I'm gonna run away from here ...."

During the three months that Michael spent alternating between the shelter and a "welfare motel" he experienced terrible nightmares, became very fearful, and lashed out aggressively at classmates in school. He ran away from school twice in the middle of the day and was punished by suspension. After the family was rehoused, Michael witnessed renewed threats of violence against his mother, by his father, who had tracked her down in Michigan. At that point Michael snapped. One afternoon the school janitor found him trying to crawl into the furnace, saying he wanted to die. Soon after, he was hospitalized for 14 days at a children's psychiatric unit. When I visited him in the hospital he told me, "I don't got no reason to live." ...

Michael was forced to endure both the trauma of homelessness and the terror of violence against his mother [and sister]; yet, during these months, he did not receive any intervention services from either of the two schools he attended. When he and his family lived at the welfare motel, his mother was forced to use a cab to get him to school, despite the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act provisions. The result was many absences from school and a rapid drain on her limited resources. When the family was rehoused in a different area, Michael had to change schools, losing friends and a supportive classroom teacher. When his episodes of aggressive and unmanageable behavior began at his new school, there were persistent reports of misbehavior to his mother, followed by school suspensions. Until Michael became suicidal and was hospitalized, there had been no psychological or educational interventions available to support him, despite clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. Rather, he was considered a burden—one of "them," a kid who did not fit—whose destitution and continuing family upheaval disrupted the classroom. What future do such children have? In many ways, Michael serves a poster child for the "other" America—one of the many discards along the path of invisibility.

—Valerie Polakow (2003, pp. 95-96)

## WHICH YOUTHS ARE IMPOVERISHED?

In the popular discourse on poverty, for decades the poor have been assigned the roles of “deserving” and “undeserving” in a morality play staged for others .... In antiyouth discourses, the young, especially the poor and young people of color, are being used in much the same way. Public discourses like those on teenage pregnancy, youth violence, and to some extent educational reform, depict [impoverished] young people in ways that scapegoat them for some of the nation’s most serious problems and offer the nation a simplistic picture of itself: one populated by two groups of people—the responsible, respectable (and usually older and white) majority, on one hand, and the irresponsible, dangerous (and often younger and dark) minority, on the other.

—Sue Books (1998, p. 184)

When asked to think about poverty, many Americans assume that it is limited to specific groups in the population, and—by extension—such beliefs are sometimes also applied to poverty among young people. Beliefs such as these are not only associated with the unique history of the country but are also promoted by media portrayals of poverty and propaganda issued by far-right sources. Let’s take a look at some of these stereotypes and see whether they really apply to youths in America, and if so whether they help us to understand America’s huge rates of youth poverty.<sup>22</sup>

*Blacks, Hispanics, and Youth Poverty*

One of the strongest set of beliefs about poverty in the United States is that much of it is generated by *African-Americans*; thus many Americans believe that most of those who are poor are also Black and that most Blacks are also poor. So strong is this association that when a recent survey of American adults asked, “‘What percent of all the poor people in this country would you say are Black?’,” the median response was 50 percent. And when another survey asked, “‘Of all people who are poor in this country, are more of them Black or more of them White?, 55 percent of ... respondents chose Black, compared with 24 percent who chose White (with 31 percent volunteering ‘about equal’).”<sup>23</sup>

In addition, some Americans assume that poverty problems appear because too many *Hispanics* have been allowed into the country, although this belief is more likely to surface in locales where poor Hispanic immigrants are clustered. But whether it is tied to Black or Hispanic identity, the presumed association between race (or ethnicity) and poverty tends to generate additional notions; crucially that prejudicial shortcomings thought to be characteristic of persons in those groups—such as “stupidity,” “laziness,” “irresponsibility,” “criminality,” or other supposed character defects—are responsible for the bulk of poverty and its associated problems.<sup>24</sup>

As it happens, widespread belief in these stereotypes has only recently evolved. As noted above, in earlier years Americans tended to associate poverty

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with immigrant groups from Ireland, Scandinavia, and Southern or Eastern Europe, “forgotten” communities in Appalachia, and desperate refugees who fled the American “dust bowl” in the 1930s. And although many impoverished Blacks had long lived in rural areas of the South, their plights were largely ignored by the bulk of mostly White Americans living in the North. And only a trickle of Hispanics were then entering the United States.

All of this began to change during the Great Depression and World War Two. Large numbers of poor Black Americans began migrating out of the South, and many moved into more-visible ghettos in northern cities. In addition, earlier discriminatory practices that had limited federal support for impoverished Black families came under attack, so larger portions of federal aid were thereafter awarded to African-American families.<sup>25</sup> Then, in the 1960s, leaders of the civil rights movement began to place greater emphasis on economic discrimination, urban riots that rocked the nation during the summers of 1964 through 1968 called attention to Black urban poverty, and many Hispanic immigrants began to flood into southwestern states and major American cities, notably New York, Chicago, Miami, and Los Angeles.

These factors set the stage for shifts in America’s images of poverty, but those shifts seem to have been touched off by changes in the way poverty was portrayed in the mass media. Prior to 1960, for example, poverty was rarely featured in America’s news magazines, and most of those depictions did not focus on African-Americans. By 1965, however, many poverty stories were appearing in those sources, the bulk of such stories featured Black Americans, and these trends continue to this day.<sup>26</sup> Given such media stress, it is hardly surprising that many Americans began to assume that poverty was “largely a Black problem,” nor is it hard to understand why beliefs that poverty is also a “Hispanic problem” began to appear among Americans living in venues where newly arrived, impoverished Hispanic immigrants were concentrated.

Be that as it may, beliefs that poverty is largely confined to Blacks or Hispanics have serious consequences. They encourage Americans to “explain” poverty by citing the supposed shortcomings of these groups and to conclude that poverty is unimportant because it is largely confined to “them.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, the presumed close tie between poverty and race confuses thinking about both issues and distorts debates about programs designed to reduce the burdens of either.

As was noted in Chapter One, striking examples of such confused thinking appeared in public discussions of Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans. Other examples surfaced in the way in which beliefs about poverty and race distorted debates about welfare programs. Although minor “reforms” to America’s welfare system had appeared under Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter, serious attacks on the concept of welfare erupted early in the Reagan years, and in his first campaign for the presidency, Bill Clinton was led to promise that he would “end welfare as we know it.” This promise was largely ignored during Clinton’s first two years, but conservative Republicans took control of Congress in 1994 and thereafter placed pressure on the president for serious welfare reform. Finally, in 1996, President Clinton agreed to a reform act that would reduce

governmental assistance for poor adults and help (or force) them into employment. As various authors have pointed out, debates involved in these events would have been far different had not Americans believed that the bulk of its poorest citizens are “persons of color” with character defects and that America’s welfare programs had been unfairly lavished on those undeserving individuals.<sup>28</sup>

Well, are beliefs about a truly close tie between poverty and persons of color justified? Is it true that most poor youths in America are Black (or Hispanic) and that most Black youths (or Hispanic youths) are poor? Answers for such questions may be found in data published by the U.S. Census Bureau which reported Official poverty figures from 1997 for four racial/ethnic categories of impoverished American youths: those from families who said they were *White*, those from families who self-identified as *Black*, those from families claiming to be *Hispanic* (and could be of any race), and those from families who said they were of “*Asian or Pacific Island*” descent. The graphs set forth in Sections A and B of Exhibit 2.5 were derived from these data.

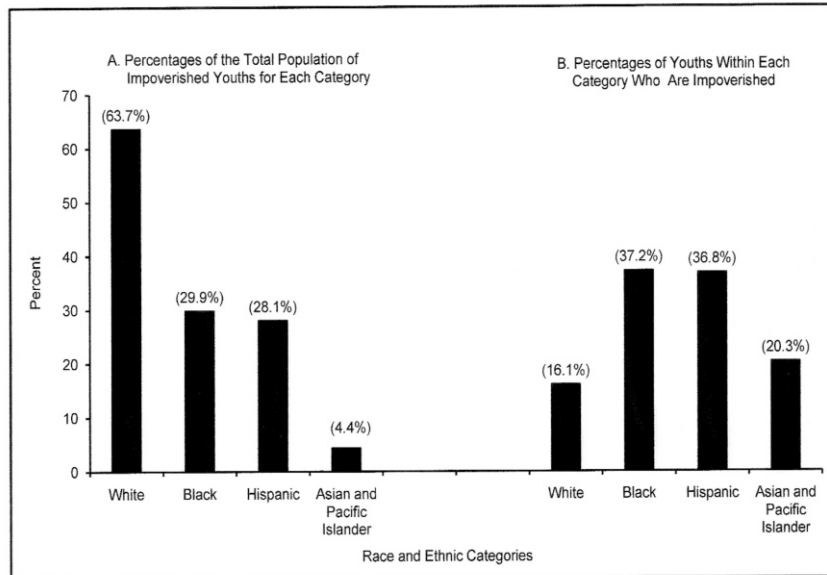
Section A reports percentages in the total population of impoverished youths appearing in each of these four categories, and as can be seen there, most impoverished youths in the country did *not* then come from families who were identified as *Black*, *Hispanic*, or of “*Asian and Pacific Island*” descent; rather nearly two thirds (63.7%) came from families who said they were *White*! This is hardly surprising, given that the bulk of American families have long been classified as “White” in census data, but since 1997 was not dissimilar to other recent years for poverty rates, it confirms that the tragedy of impoverishment is *not* confined to either Black or Hispanic youths in the U.S. When it comes to *numbers* of youths, then, impoverishment is an all-American problem.

But are Black and Hispanic youngsters more likely to be impoverished in America? To answer this question, turn to Section B of the exhibit. The stereotype would have it that poverty is far more likely among Black and Hispanic youngsters, and in partial confirmation of this belief, Section B indicates that poverty rates were indeed higher for *Black* and *Hispanic* youngsters in 1997. But does this mean that “most” Black and Hispanic youngsters were then impoverished? No, it does not. As can be seen, in 1997 only about one third of youths in each of these two groups were impoverished, so the bulk of youths in both groups are *not* impoverished.

And this means that both of the key stereotypic claims about truly close ties between poverty and race (or ethnicity) are not supported for American youngsters. Although *poverty rates are greater for Black and Hispanic youngsters in America, most of the country’s impoverished youngsters are actually White, and the “typical” Black or Hispanic youth does not come from an impoverished home.* And this means that if youths from these two groups should actually share widespread character “defects” (however unlikely this seems), those “defects” are *not* responsible for the bulk of America’s youth poverty problems.

This does not mean, of course, that impoverished youths who are Black or Hispanic face challenges that are identical to those faced by other youths from poor

**Exhibit 2.5. Proportions of Impoverished Youths in Various Race and Ethnic Categories**



Source: *Poverty in the United States: 1997* (Dalaker, J., & Naifeh, M., 1998, Table C-2).  
 Note: Youths of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

families. Rather, stubborn prejudices, unique cultural histories, ghetto-based segregation, and persisting discrimination combine to guarantee that the experiences of impoverished youths will differ, at least in part, depending on race and ethnic identity, and those from Black and Hispanic families often face truly *severe* challenges in America. (Indeed, evidence bearing on some of these challenges is explored below and in Chapter Four.)

*Does Youth Poverty Persist?*

Next, we turn to another poverty stereotype that appears in both far-right propaganda and the mass media—the notion that much of American poverty is *persistent* and that America’s high rates of youth poverty appear largely because many families (particularly those who are Black or Hispanic) are mired in poverty and persist in an impoverished, dependent state, year after year. Is this belief justified? Is the bulk of American youth poverty generated by families who are permanently mired in impoverishment, and if not, what do we know about poverty spells and the likelihood that young Americans will experience poverty over the years?

One cannot answer these questions by looking at information from the U. S. Census Bureau, for such data concern merely the number of persons who experience poverty during a given year. To answer them, one must turn to *panel* studies in which a sample of persons is studied, again and again, over the years. Although many panel studies concerned with young Americans have appeared, most have focused on youths who were teenagers when the studies began and thus have provided little information about the poverty experiences of infants or young children.<sup>29</sup>

An exception to this generalization appeared, however, in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). This study began, in 1968, when persons from 4,800 households, chosen to match the nonimmigrant American population, were contacted and interviewed. The sampled households contained about 18,000 people, including persons of all ages, and during subsequent years the PSID has endeavored to recontact these persons annually. Some of the questions asked in the study have concerned family income, and this means that the PSID has been able to track the economic prospects and poverty experiences of young persons and their families over subsequent years.<sup>30</sup>

These features of the PSID are very attractive, but several limitations of the effort should also be noted. For one, the study began in the late-1960s, its initial data were collected more than a generation ago when rates for youth poverty were lower than they are today, and this means that some effects found in PSID studies may no longer apply. (To illustrate, from its beginning the PSID had generated somewhat *lower* estimates for poverty rates than those reported in Official statistics, and scholars have not yet fully agreed upon explanations for these differences.<sup>31</sup>) For another, since its initial sample was restricted to non-immigrant families, PSID data generate good evidence for Black and White families, but they provide little information for Hispanics. For a third, PSID data files provide details about both the families and neighborhoods of youths but no information about the schools to which they are exposed. And finally, *all* panel studies face problems because some persons in the original sample cannot be found later on or are unwilling to participate in subsequent waves of data collection. (Fortunately, this last issue seems to have generated only minor problems for PSID.)

Bearing in mind both the strengths and limitations of the PSID, what do findings from this effort suggest about the persistence of poverty among young Americans?<sup>32</sup> Above all, they do *not* suggest that the bulk of impoverished youths come from families that are mired in poverty. (True, one can certainly find such families in the United States, but they generate fewer than 10% of youth poverty cases.) Nor, for that matter, do they suggest that most youth poverty is *transient* in nature and is not repeated in subsequent years. (Families with children can also be found who experience but a single poverty episode lasting a year or less, but such families generate only about a quarter of all youth poverty cases, and less than 15% of impoverished families endure a nonrepeated poverty episode that lasts for two or more years.) Instead, the bulk of youth poverty is generated by families that experience *repeated* episodes of on-and-off poverty. The latter

families cycle back and forth between states of poverty and “near poverty” and have difficulty ever breaking out of the low-income hole into comfortable, middle-income lives.

Putting these ideas together, PSID evidence suggests that “more than 50% of those who are poor at any given time are in the midst of a spell of poverty [and/or near-poverty] which will last ten years or more.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, the fact that substantial amounts of youth poverty are volatile means that an astounding 35 to 40% of all youngsters in America will experience at least one episode of poverty before they reach legal age.

PSID evidence also indicates that differing poverty patterns are associated with specific types of families. Families that experience only transient poverty are more often *White*, are frequently headed by a male parent with 12 or more years of education, are more likely to have three or fewer children, and may never experience poverty subsequently. Those that endure repeated episodes of poverty and near-poverty may be of *any race* and are often headed by a parent who lacks a high school education. And those few families that suffer from permanent, unremitting poverty are more often *Black*, are often headed by a woman with little education, and are likely to involve many children.<sup>34</sup>

Given the volatility of many poverty experiences, PSID analysts have also begun to examine events associated with a family’s entry into and exit from poverty. Not surprisingly, the same types of events seem to be involved in both processes. These include: loss (or gain) of a parent, loss (or gain) of a parental job, loss (or gain) in availability of work hours, loss (or gain) in work opportunities for others in the family, and disabilities that afflict (or no longer affect) the head of the family.

To summarize then, PSID evidence suggests that the bulk of youth poverty is *not* generated by families that are mired in a permanent, impoverished state. Nor is most of that poverty generated by families that experience only a short, transient poverty event (although more than a third of American youths will experience poverty before they are 18). Rather, *much of American youth poverty is generated by families that suffer from repeated poverty experiences and have difficulty climbing out of the low-income hole.*

### *The Geography of Youth Poverty*

Two generations ago, Americans often assumed that poverty was centered in southern states—particularly in the Appalachian Highlands, the sharecroppered fields of the Deep South, and the drought-ridden dust bowls of Texas and Oklahoma—as well as in northeastern port cities where impoverished immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were clustered. Current media images suggest, however, that poverty is now largely a product of the ethnic ghettos of large urban centers, and, by implication, the rest of the nation need not worry about poverty. Are the latter beliefs accurate when it comes to contemporary youth poverty?



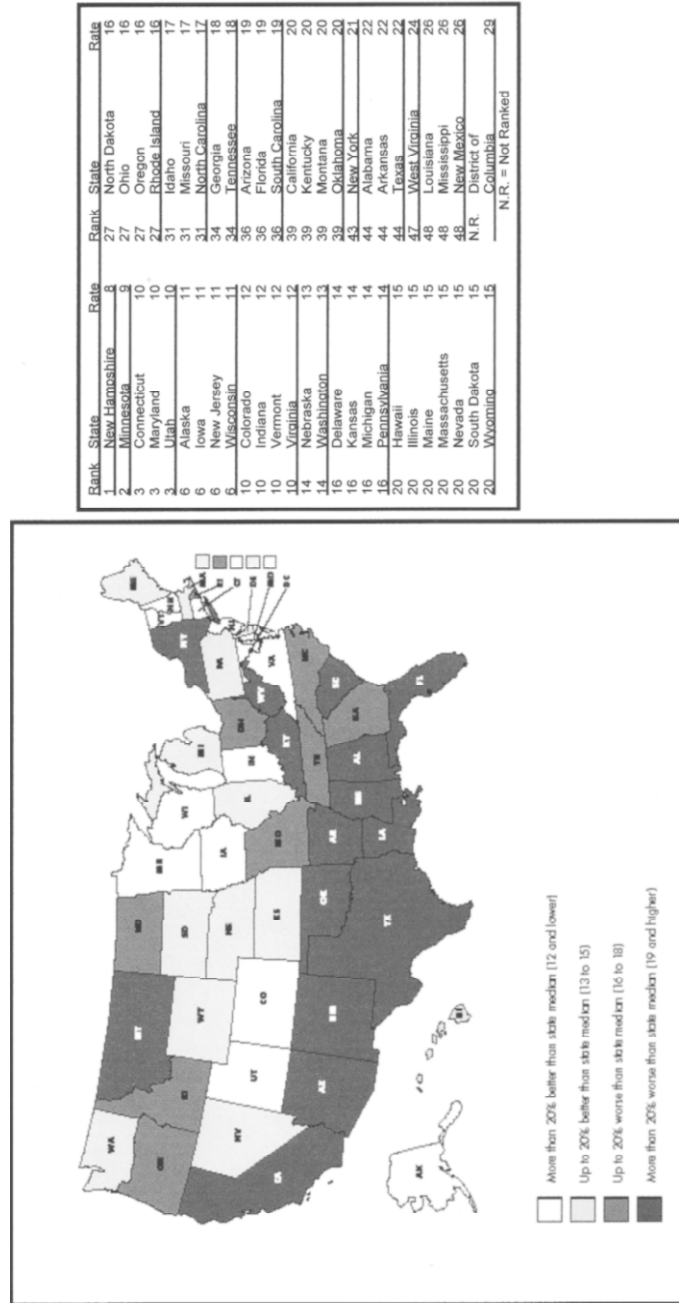
As is sometimes true for stereotypes, these images reflect at least some reality. Take a look at Exhibit 2.6 which portrays Official 2003 figures for poverty among “children” on a state-by-state basis.<sup>35</sup> As can be seen in the figure, excessive rates of youth poverty certainly occur in New York and California, and one must assume that these high rates reflect concentrations of youth poverty in the large urban areas of New York City, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay area. In addition, the “state” now reporting the highest rate of youth poverty is the District of Columbia where data come exclusively from a large urban population. On the other hand, note that high rates of youth poverty still persist now in the Appalachian Highlands, the Deep South, and the southwestern states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

When pushed to their limits, however, stereotypes may also mislead. If one were to judge by the mass media or some scholarly works focused on urban poverty,<sup>36</sup> almost all of youth poverty would surely be found in the centers of America’s major cities, but this is simply not the case. Several years ago, analysts at the Children’s Defense Fund used data supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau to calculate the proportions of impoverished youths who lived in central-city, suburban, and rural venues in 1992. According to their estimates, slightly less than half (44%) of all youth poverty cases were to be found in America’s central cities, whereas nearly a third (31%) appeared in suburbs, and fully a quarter (25%) were located in rural areas.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that *although the bulk of American youth poverty is now located in urban centers, it appears too in suburban and rural communities.*

This does not mean that youth poverty is scattered randomly throughout the United States. On the contrary, youth poverty in America is often *ghettoized*—is concentrated in specific residential neighborhoods that stand apart from others where middle-income and affluent people more often live. Some of these ghettos are indeed found in urban centers (witness the infamous ghetto neighborhoods of South Los Angeles or the South Bronx in New York City), but others (such as East St. Louis, Illinois) are suburban, whereas still others are rural (such as the impoverished, culturally isolated hamlets of Appalachia or the Deep South, the rural barrios of the Southwest, depopulating rural communities of the Upper Midwest, or America’s struggling Indian reservations).

America’s poverty ghettos have appeared for historical reasons, some of them inadvertent, some the product of ugly prejudice or discrimination against minority groups. Among the former, and in sharp contrast with cities in Europe, most American cities are surrounded by hinterlands that can be developed for suburban housing, and ever since World War Two, real estate developers and the federal government have been promoting suburbs around those sites where White families with similar incomes and outlooks can live in proximity. This process has created residential ghettos for both those who move to the suburbs and those who are left behind in urban cores. Among the latter, discriminatory procedures followed by many real estate firms, lending practices common in banks, and federal government policies have long promoted segregated urban housing, and public funds have often been used to erect clusters of high-rise

**Exhibit 2.6. Percent of Children in Poverty: 2000**  
(data reflect poverty in 1999)



Source: Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003).

housing units designed for impoverished families from specific minority groups, so urban poverty ghettos in the U.S. are overwhelmingly populated by Blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants. One would think this distressing, but American discrimination-based, urban poverty ghettoization has actually *increased* since the 1980s. This process has been prompted by shifts in federal policies regarding desegregated schooling, and a fuller description of it appears in Chapter Seven.

Poverty ghettos are not unique to the United States, of course; indeed such enclaves appeared years ago in some European cities, for example. But whenever poverty ghettos are tolerated, they are associated with at least two nasty outcomes: Residents of those ghettos lack resources and cannot afford to maintain their own public facilities and social services, so either those facilities and services rot or they must be supported by reluctant largess from the wider society. And, by physically isolating those who are poor, they allow middle-income and affluent citizens to turn their backs and look away from poverty problems. These outcomes are well known, and many advanced nations now take steps to dismantle or prevent the growth of poverty ghettos. But as a rule, the United States does *not* take such steps, indeed American poverty ghettos, mostly populated by minorities, are now more prevalent and segregated than before World War Two, or indeed a decade ago,<sup>38</sup> and this means that—in sharp contrast with most other advanced nations—*many impoverished youths in America now face problems stemming, not only from their homes, but from the poverty ghettos where they often live.*

This does not mean that the problems faced by youths are identical in all types of poverty ghettos. As was suggested earlier, urban, suburban, and rural ghettos differ somewhat in the problems they pose, and young Americans who are crowded into high-poverty, central-city ghettos may face truly awful challenges. Chapter Five examines some of the effects of ghetto-associated poverty problems.

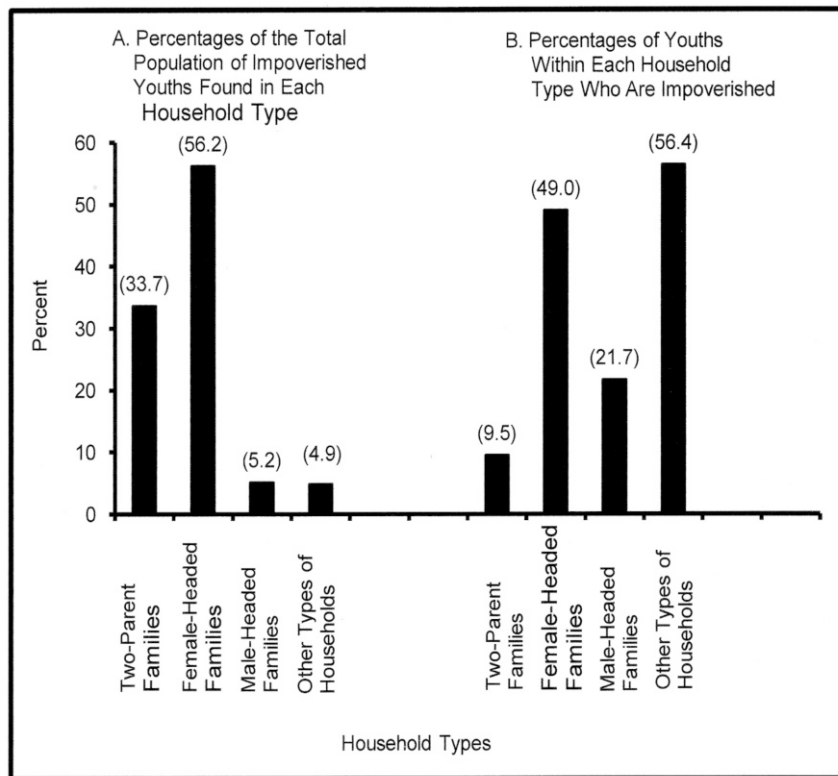
#### *Youth Poverty and Single-Parent Families*

Another media-promoted stereotype has it that poverty is largely confined to families headed by single, unmarried mothers. (After all, single-parent families have but one breadwinner, and many single mothers have only restricted opportunities for employment.) Moreover, this idea has also been embraced by far-right propagandists who sometimes claim that America's youth poverty problems could be "solved" if only unwed mothers could be induced to (re)marry.<sup>39</sup> Do such ideas hold up when we look at the evidence?

Partial answers for this question may be found in Exhibit 2.7 which displays Official 1997 youth poverty rates, obtained again from the U.S. Census Bureau, for four types of households—those families headed by *two parents*, a *single mother*, a *single father*, and "*other*" types of households. (Two-parent families included those where youths were living with both a "father" and a "mother," whether those persons were married, were unmarried biological parents, or were stepparents of the youths. "Other" types of households included those headed by

grandparents or two adults of the same sex, those embedded within larger household units, foster-parent households, and orphanages or other nonstandard living venues.)

**Exhibit 2.7. Proportions of Impoverished Youths in Various Types of Households**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau data accessed through the web at [census.gov/macro/031998/new2\\_001.htm](http://census.gov/macro/031998/new2_001.htm)

As can be seen in Section A of the exhibit, in 1997 more than half of all impoverished youths were indeed living in homes headed by a single mother, so since poverty rates for 1997 were not dissimilar to those for other recent years, the stereotype which associates youth poverty with single mothers is partially supported. However, two exceptions to this generalization should also be noted. For one, in 1997 large numbers of impoverished youths—indeed more than one third of the total—were living in *two-parent* families! Thus, forces beyond those associated with divorce and unwed motherhood also now help to generate

American youth poverty. As well, Section B of the exhibit suggests that—although poverty rates are indeed high for female-headed families, male-headed families and “other” types of households may be relatively rare in the United States, youths living in these two types of venues are *also* likely to suffer impoverishment.

Youth poverty rates for household types during recent years seem to be a straightforward matter, but if we look at the historical record, we learn that the story is more complex. If we look at data for 30 years ago, for example, we discover that fewer American families were then headed by single parents, particularly single mothers, and data documenting such changes are also available from the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>40</sup> To illustrate, in 1968 fully 88% of all American families with children were headed by a father and a mother, 11% had only a mother, and 1% had a single father. In contrast, by 1997 the proportion of dual-parent families had fallen to 71% while those for families headed by single mothers and fathers had risen to 24% and 6% respectively. These historic shifts are widely discussed and have provided fuel for far-right propagandists who have fulminated about “the ‘decline’ (sic) of the traditional American family.” Other, more balanced analysts have thought they might reflect higher rates of female employment, hence more financial independence among wives, less tolerance for marital discord and spousal abuse, and more acceptance of single parenthood in today’s America. Although the latter interpretations differ sharply from those of far-right pundits, most authors writing about the issue have stressed that families headed by only one parent are likely to face unrelieved responsibilities, restricted incomes, and the problems those events generate.

Such problems apply to all single parents, regardless of gender. However, single mothers in America bear an additional burden. For years, women in the United States have been paid less than men. Data bearing on this issue come again from the U.S. Census Bureau which provides annual figures for salaries earned by men and women.<sup>41</sup> These data show that in the late 1960s the average woman earned less than 60% of the average salary earned by men for full-time, year-round work. This disparity has shrunk slightly over the years, and recently the typical woman receives as much as 70% as does the typical man for full-time work, but this still represents a huge gulf between the salary prospects of men and women. Moreover, women hold the majority of low-paid jobs in America, and of those who hold low-paid jobs, women are also paid more poorly than men.<sup>42</sup>

Many processes have helped to create disparities in salaries for American men and women, among them the fact that women have traditionally been slated for entry into low-paying occupations, lack of needed services for working mothers such as tax-supported child care centers and paid maternity leaves, salary-setting practices that make promotions less likely for women who take time off to rear children, and outright discrimination against women who are denied promotions open to men or are paid lower wages for equivalent work. Most of these processes are shameful and have been challenged in other advanced nations where equal salaries for men and women are often mandated by law, but Americans have so far failed to ratify a proposed constitutional amendment that

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would guarantee such rights, and it seems likely that, as of now, women in the United States will continue to receive the short end of the salary stick. And this means, in turn, that many American families headed by single mothers will continue to experience poverty simply because those mothers cannot find jobs that pay a living wage. This reasoning also helps us understand why youth poverty rates shot upwards after the mid-1970s, for this was a period of sharp growth in the number of families headed by single mothers, and although many of those mothers worked at full-time jobs, they were paid only poverty-level wages.

To summarize then, *recent years have brought sharp increases in the numbers of American families headed by single parents (particularly mothers), a process that has burdened parents with additional problems—particularly mothers who have fewer opportunities to earn a living wage—and this process has been a major reason for the spike in youth poverty rates that began in the 1970s.* However, *American youth poverty rates are also high among families headed by two parents and single fathers, and this suggests that additional forces creating youth poverty are also at work.* (Regarding the contention that youth poverty would disappear if only single women were induced to (re)marry, no research seems yet to have addressed this absurd thesis.)

### *Youth Poverty and Parental Employment*

Yet another stereotype bearing on youth poverty appears only occasionally in the mass media but is heavily promoted by far-right ideologues—the notion that impoverished parents are lazy and simply don't work enough; thus many of America's "poverty problems" would disappear if only impoverished parents could be persuaded (or were forced) to work for a living. Is this nasty stereotype accurate, and might it help us understand America's huge rate of youth poverty?

Actually, it is blatant nonsense. In today's America, the bulk of parents in impoverished families are *employed*, and their employment tends to be in full-time, year-round jobs. Recent results supporting this picture have come from the National Center for Children in Poverty, again making use of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, concern low-income households earning less than 200% of Official Poverty Thresholds, and are displayed in Exhibit 2.8. (In this figure, employment rates for two-parent families apply to the major breadwinner of the family.) As can be seen in the figure, *American employment rates differ for households headed by two parents, a single father, and a single mother—but none of these family types is likely to be headed by an unemployed person; rather the "typical" parent in such households is employed in a full-time, year-round job.* In addition, when parents (particularly mothers) work only part of the year, more than half of those persons report that they are unable to find year-round employment, more than a third of those who work part-time complain that they cannot find full-time work, and the bulk of low-income parents who do not work at all say that they have to take care of family members or report that they are disabled.<sup>43</sup>

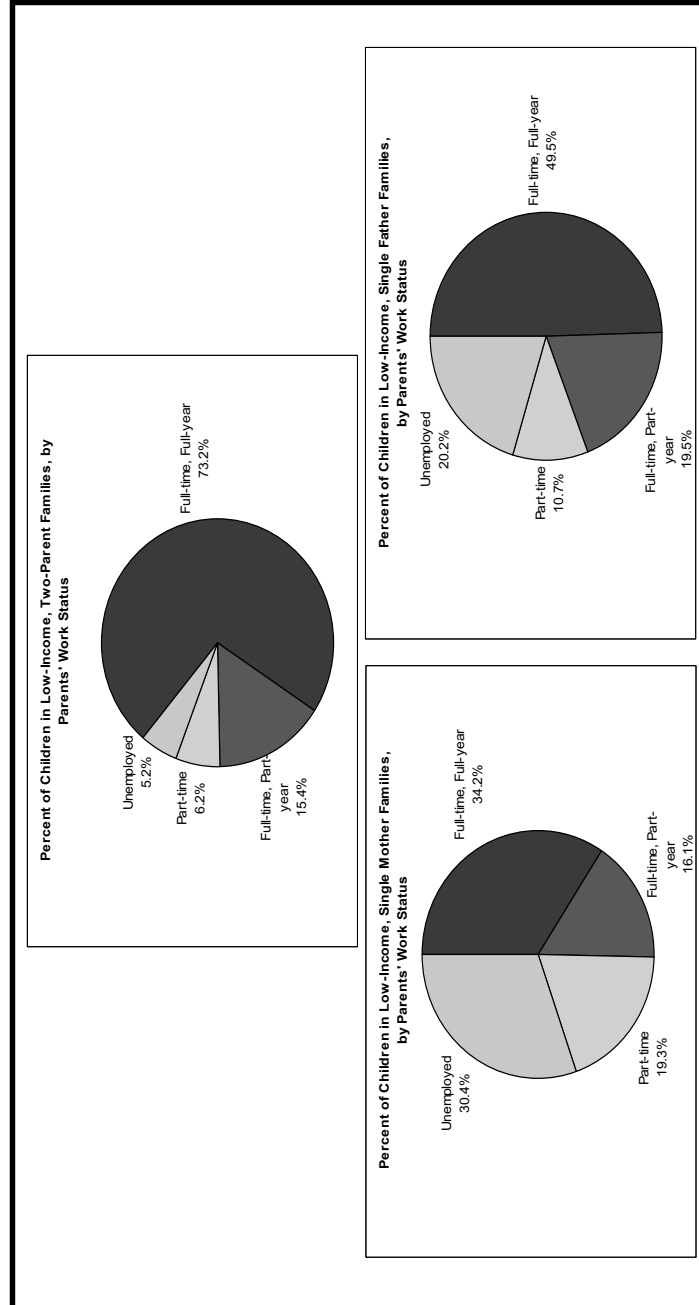
*Parental Salaries and Youth Poverty*

But if most parents in impoverished American families are employed—and often in full-time, year-round jobs—how can we account for the fact that so many of those families are impoverished? Unraveling this puzzle begins with a simple truth—those parents are paid *miserable* wages. One of the saddest economic facts of American society is that the bulk of its low-income parents are paid poverty-level salaries, and the buying power of those salaries has been shrinking for a generation.

It is easy to document these claims. For 10 years, from 1997 to 2007, America's federal minimum wage was mired at \$5.15 per hour, but it was recently raised in three small steps and was then again frozen in the summer of 2009 at \$7.25. Such figures are remarkably stingy. Never, since the federal minimum wage was first established in 1938, has it “been sufficient to raise a family [of four] out of poverty if only one family member works” full time, and the inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage is now sharply less than in 1968, when it was most generous.<sup>44</sup> Why should such policies have prevailed? Raises in the federal minimum wage require congressional action in the United States, and those changes have always provoked opposition from conservative forces that value profits over poverty relief. Moreover, Congress has always made certain that minimum wage legislation would not apply to all jobs in the country. So it remains true that if a parent works full time, is the sole wage earner in a family with children, and can only find a job paying the federal minimum wage, that person does *not* earn enough to keep his or her family above the Official poverty threshold.

But is this scenario likely? Right-wing economists like to claim that the typical wages earned by unskilled workers are largely set by market forces, and that raising the federal minimum wage has little impact on average wages but, rather, limits employment and throttles economic growth.<sup>45</sup> Thus it is appropriate that we look also at figures for the actual salaries of low-income parents and the funds available in their families. I begin with salaries earned. According to analyses of census data reported by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), during each year since 1973, 25 to 30% of American workers earned not more than a “poverty-level wage”; i.e. a wage “that a full-time, year-round worker must earn to sustain a family of four at the poverty threshold.”<sup>46</sup> True, the wage threshold figure cited by EPI is greater than the federal minimum wage, but EPI analyses indicate that a single wage earner would have to earn \$9.04 per hour for a family of four—expressed in “equivalent 2003 dollars”—to keep his or her family out of poverty. This suggests, in turn, that low-income families of four persons can “make it” in America as long as *both* parents work and their combined incomes exceed the “poverty-level wage” threshold, but such families sink quickly into poverty if one parent drops out of the labor force for any reason—such as illness, loss of a job, or the need to provide care for infants or sick children. Since events such as these occur frequently, this sounds like a recipe for disaster, and too often that disaster cannot be avoided in the United States.

**Exhibit 2.8. Percent of Children in Low-Income Families by Parents' Work Status**



Source: Ayana Douglas-Hall (with kind assistance from Heather Koball, March, 2005).



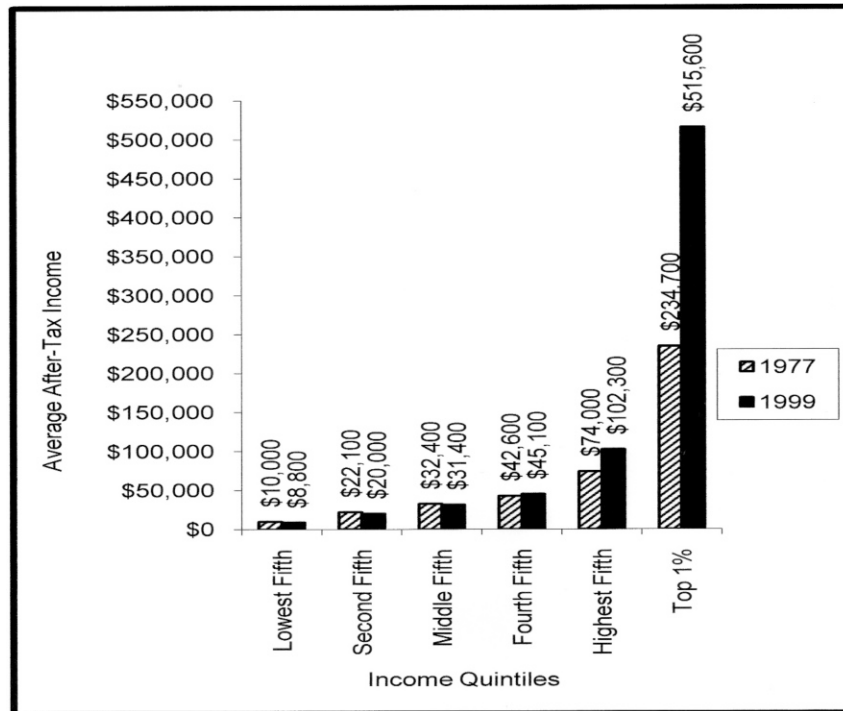
Is there no alternative to this cruel picture? Indeed there is. As we shall see in Chapter Three, other advanced nations differ from America in that their low-paid workers receive higher average salaries, and this means that their low-income families are less likely to be driven into poverty when one parent loses employment. So one obvious way to change the American picture would be to pay better salaries to low-income workers.

How does America's miserable salary performance translate into funds available for low-income families? Another report from The Economic Policy Institute, based on data for 1997-1999, estimates that among families headed by one or two parents with earned income and containing one to three children under the age of 12, more than 28% had total incomes which fell below 200% of Official Poverty Thresholds.<sup>47</sup> At first blush, this does not sound alarming, but careful analysis reveals that many of these families could *not* afford to pay for their basic needs. Although both parents worked at full-time jobs, they were paid such low wages that they could not bring home the income needed to provide "a minimum 'decent' standard of living" for themselves and their children.

But has this picture changed in recent years? Until the onset of America's current deep recession, federal statistics and mass media images in the United States painted glowing portraits of economic growth, and many Americans assumed that the standard of living for all persons has been steadily improving since World War Two. Moreover, for a generation or so this belief was based on reality; indeed, for three decades beginning at the end of World War Two, America's per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew each year at a comfortable 1 to 2% rate, and both high-income and low-income Americans benefitted from this growth. In the mid-70s, however, comfortable annual growth in per capita GDP came to an end, and since then America's national economy has *not* grown in per capita terms. Instead, subsequent years have produced little real growth, and the richest of Americans—long used to annual gains in their own incomes—have since maneuvered to create a redistribution of resources so that the inflation-adjusted incomes for their families would continue to *rise* (which meant, of course, that incomes for families earning low- or middle-level wages would *decline*.)

Many Americans are still unfamiliar with this redistributive process, for until recently it was not often discussed in the mass media (let alone propaganda from far-right sources). Let us portray it visually. Exhibit 2.9 displays average after-tax incomes (adjusted for inflation) that were earned by households in each quintile of the American population in 1977 and 1999. As can be seen in the exhibit, households in the bottom three income categories all *lost* purchasing power during this 22-year period, while those in the two highest categories *gained* purchasing power, and incomes enjoyed by the 1% of households *shot ahead* astoundingly. (In percentage terms, typical households in the lowest income category lost 12% of their purchasing power, those in the next lowest category lost 10%, and middle-income households lost 3%. Average households in the second-highest category gained 6%, those in the highest quintile gained

**Exhibit 2.9. Estimated Average After-Tax Household Income in 1977 and 1999**



Sources: Congressional Budget Office data analyzed by Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Reprinted in the *New York Times*, September 5, 1999, p. 16. See also *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich* (Phillips, K., 2002, p. 129).

Note: Incomes adjusted for inflation and expressed as 1999 dollar values.

38%, and those few who were already Super-Rich in 1977 enjoyed incomes in 1999 that were 120% greater!)<sup>48</sup>

Many problems are generated for a society when those who are very rich earn ever-larger incomes at the expense of poor and middle-income workers, and the redistributive process now taking place in America has been condemned by many wise commentators.<sup>49</sup> A host of forces have helped to generate this process (many of them associated with organized far-right pressures on the federal Congress),<sup>50</sup> but to explore them here would divert us from youth poverty and its problems. For the present, it is sufficient to note that low-income Americans have been hit hard by this process, and the purchasing power of their already meager incomes has been *slipping* since the 1970s.

Taken alone, the data in Exhibit 2.9 suggest that poverty rates should have increased for all types of low-income Americans, but since the mid-70s *older* Americans have been sheltered from income loss by social security and Medicare benefits, and many *adults* have dealt with it by working more hours during the day or more days during the year. Such supports and options are not available to most low-income youths, however, so the major burden of America's ongoing redistribution of incomes has fallen on its *youngest* citizens. And this fact also helps us understand why youth poverty rates began to spike in the mid-70s and has since remained so high. As purchasing power in low-income families has declined, poverty for youths in those families has ballooned.

To sum up then, we've now examined several aspects of parental income that bear on youth poverty issues. Taken together, they paint a sad picture in which *the bulk of low-income parents in America are paid poverty-level salaries, and the buying power of those salaries has been shrinking for a generation, thus miserable parental wages also play a major role in creating and sustaining high rates of youth poverty in America.* Low parental wages also do not fully explain youth poverty, however, since they focus solely on *incomes* available in impoverished families. Youth poverty is also created by *unfairly high tax bills* and *lack of social benefits* for youths and their families, and I've not yet provided reviews of these two issues. (Nor will I do so here. Effective tax relief for low-income families and tax-supported social benefits appear more often in other advanced countries, so it is more convenient to discuss them in Chapter Three which explores youth poverty in comparative perspective.)

#### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

It's now time to take stock. What have we learned about youth poverty, its assessment, its causes, and its scope in America? And what follows from the findings we have unearthed?

"Poverty" normally connotes lack of tangible resources but is usually assessed by comparing funds available in a family (or household) unit with some threshold indicating a minimal, acceptable standard of living. Controversies have arisen over how to tally available funds and how to set poverty thresholds, and several methods are now used to estimate American poverty rates, but those methods generate findings about youth poverty that complement one another.

Those findings contradict a number of stereotypes about poverty commonly expressed in the United States. Above all, they confirm that youth poverty poses a massive challenge in America, that its scope is both wide and deep, and that it affects not only single-parent families and Black, Hispanic, or immigrant households from urban ghettos but also two-parent families and White households from suburban and rural venues throughout the nation. And because impoverished youngsters often live in poverty ghettos and attend schools where challenges are great and funding is restricted, they are burdened by problems—often severe—stemming not only from their homes, but also from their neighborhoods and schools. Middle- and upper-income Americans who have not

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personally experienced poverty are sometimes tempted to dismiss it as a rare or aberrant state, an unfortunate product of personal deficiencies or “local conditions,” a minor inconvenience, a type of event that has largely disappeared in the “World’s Most Successful Democracy,” or a challenge that can be overcome by all persons who have sufficient “get up and go.” But when it comes to young Americans, such images are wildly off-the-mark. Rather, youth poverty should be recognized as a condition that creates grinding, relentless problems which engulf the lives of millions of America’s youngest, most vulnerable, least blameworthy citizens.

Moreover, youth poverty generates huge costs for the United States. Many of those costs are born by those who experience the ravages of poverty, of course. In 1994 the Children’s Defense Fund published a frightening review of evidence concerning the effects of poverty among America’s youths. In her summary of that evidence, Marion Wright Edelman wrote:

As [the evidence shows,] poverty stacks the odds against children before birth and decreases their chances of being born healthy and of normal birthweight or of surviving; it stunts their physical growth and slows their educational development; frays their family bonds and supports; and increases their chances of neglect or abuse. Poverty wears down their resilience and emotional reserves; saps their spirits and sense of self; and subjects them over time to physical, mental, and emotional assault, injury, and indignity.

Poverty even kills. Low-income children are:

- 2 times more likely to die from birth defects.
- 3 times more likely to die from all causes combined.
- 4 times more likely to die in fires.
- 5 times more likely to die from infectious diseases and parasites.
- 6 times more likely to die from other diseases.

[And] child poverty stalks its survivors down every avenue of their lives. It places them at greater risk of hunger, homelessness, sickness, physical and mental disability, violence, educational failure, teen parenthood, and family stress, and deprives them of positive early childhood experiences that help prepare more affluent children for school and then college and work.

—Marion Wright Edelman (1994, pp. xvi-xvii)

But the costs of youth poverty are borne, not only by its obvious victims, but also by the society at large. When American teenagers respond to poverty by dropping out of school, engaging in early and unprotected sex, embracing illegal drugs, and joining violence-prone street gangs, they become major actors in dramas that generate the country’s huge rates of early pregnancy, venereal diseases, addiction, murders, incarceration in prisons, and early deaths. These problems create major costs for the society at large, and middle- and upper-income Americans also pay for those latter costs when youth poverty is ignored.

As I draft this chapter, a presidential election is again underway, and Americans are being asked again to address serious challenges that threaten their nation—a stubbornly persisting recession, escalated global warming, declining supplies of cheap fuel, a decaying infrastructure, spiraling medical costs, an exploding national debt, devastations wrought by massive storms and unregulated greed in the financial market, and excessive costs of the world’s largest military machine and questionable foreign wars. These challenges are real, but so is the challenge posed by American youth poverty. For when the United States allows a fifth or more of its young people to bear the burdens of poverty, it tolerates a huge horror. Youth poverty is *not* a small matter in America. Rather, it is a massive, ongoing social tragedy that poses problems for both millions of young Americans and the nation at large. It is long since time that youth poverty and the problems it creates be added to the list of serious challenges that threaten the United States.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ruggles (1990, p. 15).
- <sup>2</sup> Useful discussions of the concept of poverty may be found in Betson and Michael (1997); Bradbury, Jenkins, and Micklewright (2001); Citro and Michael (1995, pp. 19-23); Farmer, Ilvento, and Luloff (1989); Ruggles (1990, pp. 15-16); and Tomaskovic-Devey (1988).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen, and Bernstein (2001, pp. 5-7); Callan and Nolan (1991); Citro and Michael (1995, pp. 24ff); Förster (1994); Garner, Short, Shipp, Nelson, and Paulin (1998); Glennerster (2002); Orshansky (1988); Renwick and Bergmann (1993); Ruggles (1990); Sawhill (1988); Smeeding (2002a, b); Smeeding, Rainwater, and Burtless (2001); U.S. Census Bureau (1999); Watts (1986).
- <sup>4</sup> For details, see Orshansky (1963, 1965).
- <sup>5</sup> See Fisher (1992) for a history of the Orshansky thresholds and their subsequent use by government agencies.
- <sup>6</sup> The figures appearing in Column One are “simplified” versions of a more complex set of “statistical poverty thresholds,” prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau, that reflect the exact numbers of children and adults in each household. These “simplified” figures are used to determine eligibility for federal support programs; the more complex “statistical poverty thresholds” are used for computing poverty rates. Separate poverty thresholds are prepared for the states of Alaska and Hawaii.
- <sup>7</sup> Burtless (1994, 2000), Eberstadt (2002), Short, Garner, Johnson, and Doyle (1999).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Citro and Michael (1995), Dalaker and Naifeh (1998), Danziger and Weinberg (1994), Garner, Short, Shipp, Nelson, and Paulin (1998), Proctor and Dalaker (2002).
- <sup>9</sup> Cauthen and Lu (2003).
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen, and Bernstein (2001), Citro and Michael (1995), National Priorities Project and Jobs with Justice (1999), Renwick and Bergmann (1993).
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Berrick (1995), Ehrenreich (2011), Kozol (1995), Newman (1999), Polakow (1993), and Schein (1995).
- <sup>12</sup> According to Mark Levinson (2012, p. 43): “Several organizations have attempted to quantify what a family requires to meet basic needs. The Economic Policy Institute has created Basic Family Budgets for more than 600 localities across the country. Wider Opportunities for Women has developed a Self-Sufficiency Standard for different family types in more than 80 localities and 36 states, and the National Center for Children in Poverty has designed Basic Needs Budgets.” All of these efforts show that families must have an average income of at least twice the current poverty level to cover basic expenses.
- <sup>13</sup> In recent years the thresholds set for “free” and “reduced-price” lunches have been based on the “simplified” thresholds for each household size that are provided by the U.S. Census Bureau.

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Under this procedure, children and adults are weighted equally when computing household size. Gunderson (1971) provides a useful history of federal programs that have provided nutritional support for students over the years.

- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Bradbury, Jenkins, and Micklewright (2001); Förster (1994); and Vleminckx and Smeeding (2001).
- <sup>15</sup> Citro & Michael (1995, pp. 58-61).
- <sup>16</sup> See de Lone (1979, p. 7). Interestingly, the European Union has recently “been using a measure of 60 percent of median [net] incomes as its poverty line” see Glennerster (2002, p. 87). This means that when the LIS group or UNESCO adopts a standard of one half of median net income for comparative studies, this standard is less stringent than that now commonly used in European countries.
- <sup>17</sup> From its inception, the social security system has also been attacked by right-wing ideologues, and during his second term President George W. Bush proposed partial “privatization” of the system, but this scam was not accepted by Congress or the American people.
- <sup>18</sup> See Huston (1991, p. 310).
- <sup>19</sup> Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, and Wolfe (2000).
- <sup>20</sup> Pugh (2007).
- <sup>21</sup> See Books (2004, p. 37) who provides a good summary of the topic. In addition, Books cites reviews of problems associated with poverty among youths reported by the Children’s Defense Fund (2002), Duncan & Brooks-Gunn (1997a, 2001), the National Commission on Children (1991), Polakow (1993, 2003), and Sherman (1997).
- <sup>22</sup> Note that both Iceland (2003) and O’Hare (1996) refer to poverty stereotypes as “myths” that apply to all poor persons, but I prefer to leave open the question of whether they apply to poverty among *young* Americans.
- <sup>23</sup> Gilens (1999, p. 68).
- <sup>24</sup> See Gilens (1999), Chapter Three; and Neubeck and Cazenave (2001), Chapter One.
- <sup>25</sup> See particularly Turner (1993) and Piven and Cloward (1971/1993).
- <sup>26</sup> For details, consult Gilens (1999), Chapter Five.
- <sup>27</sup> A truly odious example of this type of reasoning may be found in a recent column by Charley Reese (2005)
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, Gilens (1999) and Neubeck and Cazenave (2001).
- <sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, these studies *can* provide valuable information about how poverty affects the school achievements of American teenagers, and I cite results from several of them in Chapter Four.
- <sup>30</sup> See Hill (1992) or Rank (2004, p. 91).
- <sup>31</sup> See especially Duncan (1984, pp. 38-40). Since the initial PSID sample did not include immigrant families, higher rates of poverty among those families may account for part of the effect.
- <sup>32</sup> Note that only a few PSID studies have focused on *youth* poverty—see, for example, Ashworth, Hill, and Walker (1994), Corcoran and Chaudry (1997), Duncan and Rodgers (1988, 1991), Gottschalk and Danziger (2001), and Rank and Hirschl (1999)—and I have drawn heavily from these sources. When needed, I have used additional information from PSID analyses of poverty among *all* families in America—see especially, Bane and Ellwood (1986), Duncan (1988), Duncan and Rodgers (1988), Iceland (2003, pp. 48-51), and Stevens (1994, 1999).
- <sup>33</sup> Iceland (2003, p. 49). Also see Magnuson and Votruba-Drzal (2009, pp. 153-155).
- <sup>34</sup> See, among other sources, Orland (1990).
- <sup>35</sup> Also see Iceland (2003, pp. 51-59).
- <sup>36</sup> See Coulton and Pandey (1992), Jargowsky (1997), or Wilson (1987), for example.
- <sup>37</sup> Edelman (1994).
- <sup>38</sup> See Jargowsky (1996, 1997), and Kneebone, Nadeau, and Berube (2011).
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Rector, writing for the Heritage Foundation, has asserted that America’s youth problems would largely disappear if single mothers could be induced to (re)marry and go to work!
- <sup>40</sup> Dalaker and Naifeh (1998, Table C-3).
- <sup>41</sup> Current Population Reports, Series P60, U.S. Census Bureau (various years).
- <sup>42</sup> Kim (2000); U.S. Census Bureau (2002).
- <sup>43</sup> Douglas-Hall and Koball (2004).
- <sup>44</sup> Oregon State University (2008).

- <sup>45</sup> Such contentions have been challenged by Card and Krueger (1996) who provide data showing that increases in minimum wages mandated by various states have led to *larger* average salaries and *no* loss in jobs.
- <sup>46</sup> Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto (2005, p. 125). Figures for “poverty-level” wages are provided in Table 2.9 from the same source.
- <sup>47</sup> Boushey, Brocht, Gundersen and Bernstein (2001, p. 13).
- <sup>48</sup> Nor have such trends faltered in the years since 1999. More recent data released by the Congressional Budget Office (2011, Summary, p. 5) indicate that, between 1979 and 2007, real shares of net income (after federal benefits and federal taxes were taken into account) *fell* by 2-to-3% for households in each of the four lowest income quintiles, whereas those for the top income quintile *grew* by 10%, and those for the top 1% of households more than doubled.
- <sup>49</sup> See, for example, Duncan and Murnane (2011), Phillips (2002), and Winnick (1989). Citing evidence from Aaronson and Mazumder (2007), Duncan & Murnane also note that intergenerational mobility has also declined sharply in the U.S. since 1980, which means that it is now increasingly likely that children of poor families will have “to repeat that experience” (p. 3).
- <sup>50</sup> See also Hacker and Pierson (2010).

## CHAPTER THREE

### **YOUTH POVERTY IN THE INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD**

Despite high rates of economic growth and improvement in the standard of living in industrialized nations throughout the twentieth century, a significant percentage of American children are still living in families so poor that normal health and growth are at risk .... It does not have to be this way: in many other countries child poverty afflicts only one-half to one-quarter as many children as the United States.

—Lee Rainwater & Timothy M. Smeeding (2003, p. 132)

President Obama’s second Inaugural Address used language to reaffirm America’s commitment to the dream of equality of opportunity: “We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American; she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.” ... [But] the gap between aspiration and reality could hardly be wider. Today, the United States has less equality of opportunity than almost any other advanced industrial country. Study after study has exposed the myth that America is a land of opportunity. This is especially tragic: While Americans may differ on the desirability of equality of outcomes, there is near-universal consensus that inequality of opportunity is indefensible.

—Joseph Stiglitz, writing in the *New York Times* (2013, February 13)

This chapter expands the scope of our quest and explores how the American treatment of low-income youths stacks up when compared with the treatment of such youths in other advanced, industrialized nations. In it we examine youth poverty rates in advanced countries, consequences of national differences in youth poverty, and social policies that other nations use to reduce poverty for their youths. As shall be seen, the United States lags far behind other advanced nations and has much to learn from them about policies that can reduce youth poverty and prevent its worst consequences.

In addition, the chapter also explores stereotypes about how youths and their families are treated in America and other nations. As Chapter One also suggested, Americans tend to assume that their country leads the advanced world in wages paid, benefits offered, and social services provided for low-income parents and their families, and that—as a result—youth poverty rates are lower in the U.S.



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than elsewhere in the advanced world. Such beliefs are part of a larger mythic Tale about America. All countries embrace stories, “Tales” about their national identity, their history, and how they fare when compared with other nations. A key Tale about America portrays the United States as a “new and different” country, a uniquely successful, moral and compassionate, democratic, well-educated society that has become a beacon of light and hope for down-trodden persons throughout the world.<sup>1</sup>

Versions of this Tale have been around for many years. Consider, for example, the words of Thomas Jefferson in a letter sent to John Adams, both former presidents of the republic, when both men had retired from political life:

And even should the cloud of barbarism and despotism again obscure  
the science and liberties of Europe, this country remains to preserve  
and restore life and liberty to them.

—Thomas Jefferson (1821)

Or the inscription that appears on the base of The Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

—Emma Lazarus (1849-1887)

Or the image of America as portrayed recently in the lead editorial of an influential British journal:

More than any other country, America defines itself by a collective dream: the dream of economic opportunity and upward mobility. Its proudest boast is that it offers a chance of the good life to everybody who is willing to work hard and play by the rules.

—*The Economist* (2006, June 17, p. 13)

In its full flowering, this Tale begins with stories about European settlers who came voluntarily to North America—fleeing from poverty, religious per-secution, and autocratic governments they had encountered elsewhere. These brave folks found and tamed a vast wilderness that contained extensive resources, dangerous animals, and “savages,” but they persevered through hard work, inventiveness and discovery, education, moral conduct, and help for one another. And eventually, through wars of independence and inspired leadership, they formed themselves into a country that was, and still is, uniquely democratic, open, prosperous, compassionate, well educated, and devoted to personal freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Some elements of this Tale are grounded in reality, of course, but some also involve distortions, confused thinking, or outright lies about the real history and persisting social problems of the United States. Among other issues, the Tale ignores the fact that many persons were brought involuntarily to North America

as slaves or indentured servants, that much of the “wilderness” European settlers encountered was already occupied by Indian nations which thought *they* owned the land, that America has long been plagued by racial and gender discrimination, huge disparities in income and wealth and other forms of social injustice in the U.S., and that America has often used its military might to help its corporations extract resources from other, weaker nations.

Nevertheless, the Tale is widely embraced by Americans who often repeat its major tenets without much thought—indeed, I am one of those Americans who bought into this Tale in my younger years. Given its questionable claims, why do so many Americans endorse this Tale? One answer to this question reflects America’s recent experiences with international conflict in which the United States defeated military and ideological challenges from other nations and emerged as the world’s only Super-Power. Another stems from the fact that in the years immediately following World War Two, America did indeed lead the world in standard of living, education, research in the physical and biological sciences, and technological innovation. But why does belief in the Tale persist today when American military dominance has become questionable and other nations have shot ahead in standard of living and industrial leadership?

One reason why this Tale is so durable reflects how history is taught in America’s schools. Almost all high school students in the country are required to take an American history course, and in this course they are exposed to major ideas, images, and values bearing on their nation. But what content is stressed in these courses? To explore this issue, James Loewen conducted an innovative study of American history textbooks, and his findings appeared in a 1995 book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.<sup>3</sup>

As a rule, these texts portrayed American history as a set of stories in which “every problem [facing the nation] has already been solved or is about to be solved” (p. 13), or as a simpleminded morality play in which American initiatives have overcome all evil forces. What did these stories suggest for students? “You have a proud heritage. Be all you can be. After all, look at what the United States has accomplished” (p. 14). And if such stories were not sufficient, in their final chapters, these texts assured readers “that the American tradition remains strong—strong enough to meet the many challenges that lie ahead’ [or that] ‘the American adventure will surely continue’ [or that] ‘most Americans [are] convinced that their free institutions, their great natural wealth, and the genius of the American people [will] enable the U.S. to continue to be—as it always has been—THE LAND OF PROMISE” (p. 255). Needless to say, such messages provide few insights about serious, unsolved problems involving impoverished families, immigrants, persons of color, discrimination against women, social class disparities, corporate greed, ecological disasters, political corruption, or unjust wars that have long plagued the United States.

Small wonder, then, that so many Americans have embraced the notion that their country leads the world in success and benevolence; most were fed propaganda expressing this Tale in a high school history course they were required to take. But is America actually the uniquely successful and benevolent

## CHAPTER THREE

nation portrayed in this Tale? Is it true, for example, that America “leads the world” in its care for needy persons, particularly youths who are impoverished? And what is known about how advanced nations differ in consequences that follow from youth poverty as well as social policies that can reduce youth poverty and its vicious effects? Answers for such questions can be found in comparative research on these issues, and to this research I now turn.

### YOUTH POVERTY AND ITS EFFECTS IN ADVANCED NATIONS

Recent demographic, economic, and public policy trends indicate that high poverty rates for American children are a persistent feature of the nation’s economic and social landscape .... In any year about three-quarters of America’s 15 million poor children under the age of 18 live in families that receive some government income maintenance bene-fits. About one-quarter, falling through all safety-net programmes, receive nothing. Other countries provide much more generous bene-fits to poor children. Blank and Hanratty<sup>4</sup> [for example] estimate that if the USA adopted the Canadian system of social benefits, child poverty could be reduced by more than half.

—Sheldon Danziger, Sandra K. Danziger, & Jonathan Stern (1997, p. 181)

Chapter Two revealed that many millions of young Americans, more than one fifth of all youths in the land, experience poverty each year. But how does the United States look when its youth poverty record is compared with those for other advanced nations? And how does it fare when consequences generated by that poverty are compared among advanced countries?

#### *Youth Poverty Rates Compared*

To answer the first of these questions, analysts use techniques that generate comparable youth poverty rates in various countries, and as we know from Chapter Two this is normally done using the Comparative Study Method. This technique uses official data from each nation and creates poverty estimates by counting the numbers of households whose net income falls below a standard fraction of median net family income. Net family income is calculated by beginning with the value of cash earned in each household, subtracting the value of taxes the household pays, and adding back the value of tax-supported benefits the household receives. Most studies also set the poverty threshold at one half of median net income for each nation.

Many studies of youth poverty have now appeared that use this method, most of them based on statistics collected by the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) group, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Results from these studies have differed slightly, of course, depending on the countries compared

and the years when data were generated. But *all* of these studies have found that America “leads” the advanced, industrialized world in its rate of youth poverty, and that other advanced nations often generate poverty rates that are *much* smaller than those found in the United States! A display of typical results, based on national data from the late-1990s and covering 22 advanced countries, may be found in Exhibit 3.1. This figure was adopted from one published in 2005 by the Innocenti Research Centre, an affiliate of UNICEF, but other similar figures (or equivalent tables) may easily be found.<sup>5</sup>

As can be seen, the youth poverty rate reported for America in Exhibit 3.1 was 21.9%, while those for key nations in Western Europe hovered around 10% (or *half* the American rate), and those for Nordic countries were typically about 5% (or less than *one quarter* of the rate in America). Moreover, others have reported similar huge national differences, with the United States again “leading the pack,” when rates for moderate or truly severe youth poverty are compared.<sup>6</sup>

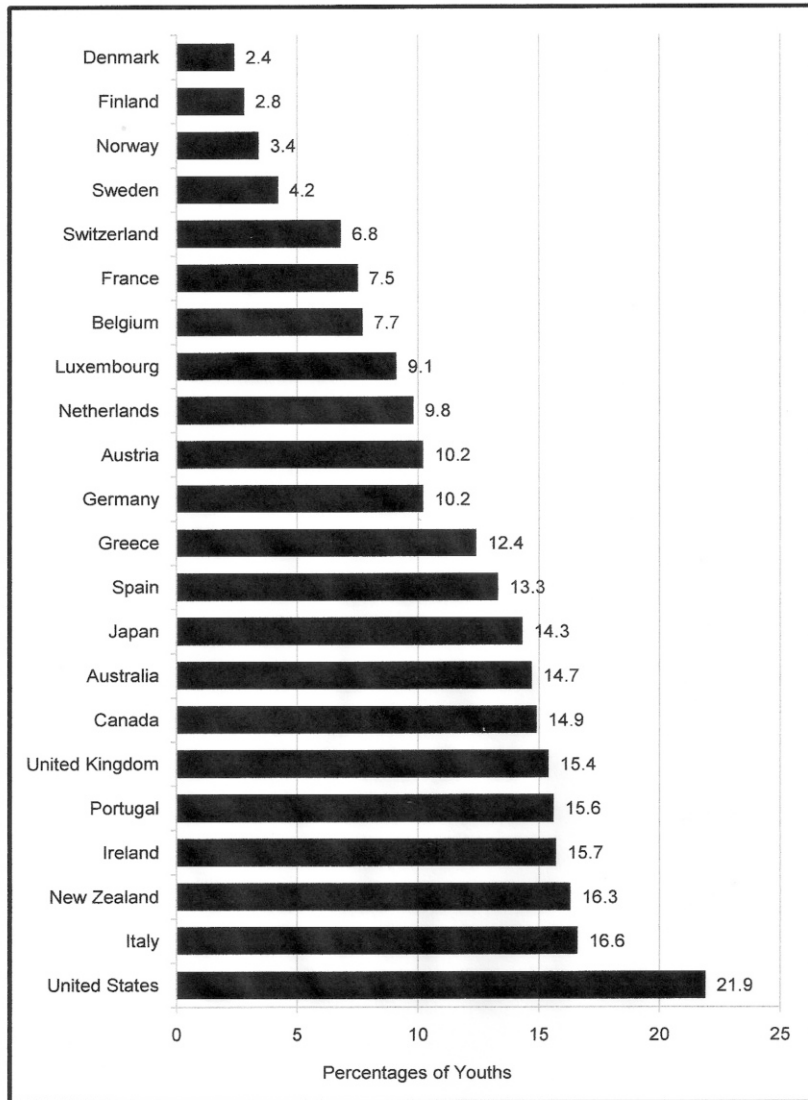
It is also useful to note that results displayed in the exhibit actually *underestimate* the disparity between youth poverty rates for America and other advanced nations. As we know from Chapter Two, current studies using The Comparative Method do not include the values of medical costs in their calculations. This makes little difference when comparing poverty rates among other advanced nations, each of which has a tax-supported health care system that pays universal benefits. But the United States has no such system, most Americans must cover the costs of health care with their own posttax dollars, and the bulk of low-income American families are not protected by health insurance or membership in a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO). This means, among other things, that low-income families in the United States are *less* likely to receive preventive health care and are *more* vulnerable to financial ruin from catastrophic illness than are low-income families in comparable nations. Thus, the real gulf between youth poverty rates for America and other advanced nations is *larger* than Exhibit 3.1 would indicate.

Nevertheless, Exhibit 3.1 indicates that *the youth poverty rate in America is not only the highest in the advanced, industrialized world but is at least twice to four times as high as those in other advanced nations*, and this is astounding. Among other things, it means that if you are a young person from an advanced country, you are *far more likely* to come from an impoverished family if you live in the United States than if you live elsewhere. This conclusion strongly challenges American beliefs that the United States is a uniquely successful and benevolent nation. Far from providing *more* help for low-income youths, America actually provides *much less* help for low-income young people than does the rest of the advanced, industrialized world.

#### *Consequences of Youth Poverty*

Some Americans find it hard to believe that their country has the *worst* youth poverty record in the advanced world, and when I speak about this conclusion in public talks, I am sometimes questioned by good-hearted folks who ask whether

**Exhibit 3.1. Percentages of Youth Poverty in Advanced, Industrialized Nations**



Source: *Child Poverty in Rich Countries 2005* (UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, 2005, p. 4).

Note: Data displayed are the percentages of youths under the age of 18 who were living in families with net incomes less than 50% of median net income for all families in each country during the most recent years for which data are available.

it is truly valid. “Surely, the American record can’t be that bad,” they reason. “Perhaps there is something wrong with the Comparative Study Method. Can other evidence be found which helps to confirm that the United States ‘leads’ the advanced, industrialized world in youth poverty?” Indeed, such evidence may be found in studies focused on the *consequences* of youth poverty.

A great deal of research has examined the outcomes of youth poverty in America, and many authors have reviewed these efforts.<sup>7</sup> Much of this work has concerned how youth poverty affects the *cognitive skills* and *academic performances* of young people, but since these outcomes are closely tied to success in education, I summarize them and their findings in Chapter Four. However, other studies have explored outcomes that may or may not be tied to education, including those involving the *health, sexual behaviors, social adjustments, crimes and delinquencies, early mortality, and subsequent employability* of impoverished young Americans. The latter efforts have produced many findings suggesting links between youth poverty and negative outcomes. To illustrate, studies in the United States have reported that youth poverty is associated with chronic diseases and stunted growth, early pregnancies and births among teenagers, poor peer relations, high rates of criminal convictions and imprisonments, abuse from parents and others in the family, crimes of violence, high incidence of deaths among poor youngsters, and reduced abilities to find employment and earn a decent living in later life.

Such results make sense, given what is known about the grinding realities of American poverty. But if youth poverty generates similar negative effects in other countries, it should follow that whenever an advanced country generates a low youth poverty rate, it should also experience low rates of consequences associated with that poverty. And if America “leads” the advanced world in youth poverty, it should also “lead” in rates for those unwanted outcomes.

*Teenage births.* As it happens, other advanced nations also collect data bearing on some of these outcomes. For example, such nations are greatly concerned about teenage births. Although births to very young women are common in third-world countries, they occur less often and are more problematic in the industrialized world. Advanced countries share concerns about the health, welfare, and educational prospects of their young people. But pregnancy, giving birth, and caring for newborn infants pose major challenges for a young mother and her family, thus in advanced nations, a teenage birth nearly always threatens the mother’s future education, places the health of that mother and her infant at risk, increases her chances for subsequent poverty, and may reduce her prospects for marriage and good employment.<sup>8</sup>

Given concern for such problems, most advanced nations now collect data on rates of births to teenage mothers. Some have also begun to explore causes for teenage births, and studies in America, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere have reported that poverty and poverty-related events are *major* precursors of such events.<sup>9</sup> This is hardly surprising. Impoverished youths are often alienated and bored, have weak educational records and few job prospects, and may hold no

**Exhibit 3.2. Rates of Teenage Births in Advanced, Industrialized Nations**



Source: *Teenage Births in Rich Nations* (UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, p. 4).

Note: Data displayed are the numbers of births to women aged 15 through 19 for every 1,000 women of the same age in each country recorded in 1998.

viable concept of a future for themselves that involves success. Such youths may view early sexuality and pregnancy as exciting options or as a means for avoiding difficulties in their current lives.

Comparative summaries of national data for teenage births have also begun to appear, and such a summary appears in Exhibit 3.2. This figure was again adopted from a study published by the Innocenti Research Centre, this time in 2001, and the data it displays are numbers of births recorded for 1998, in each country, for every 1,000 young women between the ages of 15 and 19.<sup>10</sup> As can be seen, the birth rate reported for America was a whopping 52.1 births for every 1,000 teenage women, whereas births reported for nations in Continental Europe ranged from 8 to 14 per 1,000 teenagers, and those for a few nations were as low as 5 or 6 per 1,000.<sup>11</sup> The data indicate, then, that America also “leads” the advanced, industrialized world in rates for teenage births.

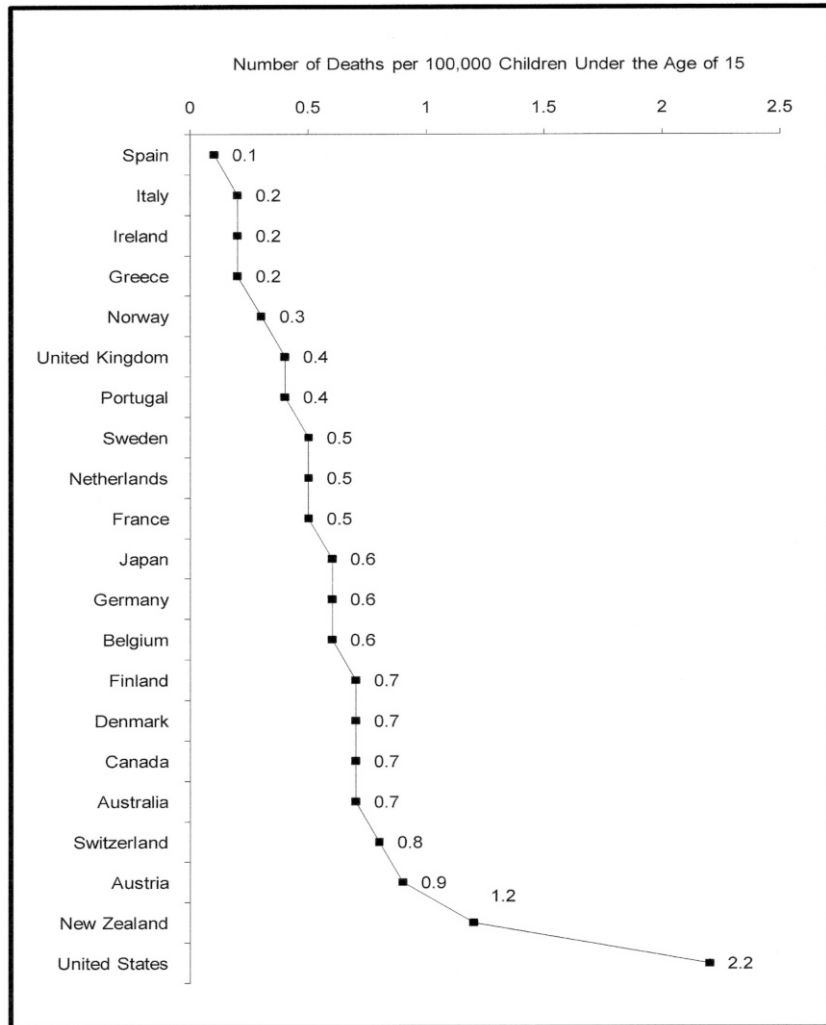
Such a finding is provocative, but does it mean that youth poverty is alone responsible for national differences in this outcome? This seems unlikely. Clearly, the ranking of nations for these two types of events are similar, but they are not identical. (To confirm this, compare Exhibits 3.1 and 3.2.) And studies of the various causes for early pregnancy have reported that other factors (such as poor parental education and low occupational status, inadequate parental supervision, and lack of access to reproductive services) are also involved when teenage pregnancies and births occur. Rather, let us assume merely that youth poverty is a *major* factor associated with teenage pregnancies in advanced countries, and this implies that America “leads” other advanced nations in teenage births in large part because of its unfortunate “leadership” in rates of youth poverty.

*Child abuse and deaths from malnutrition.* Many advanced nations also report data on the maltreatment of young people in their country. Abusing infants, children, and adolescents through neglect and physical violence is despicable, and studies in the United States, Canada, Sweden, and elsewhere have reported that poverty plays a major role leading to such harmful events.<sup>12</sup> To quote Leroy Pelton, “there is overwhelming and remarkably consistent evidence ... that poverty and low income are strongly related to child abuse and neglect and to the severity of child maltreatment.”<sup>13</sup> Again, this makes sense. Parents and others in impoverished homes often experience great stress, and stress seems to be a strong, proximal cause of hostility and violence in the family. As well, child abuse also reflects ignorance about how to treat other persons, and ignorance is more likely to appear in impoverished families. All of which suggests that if the United States “leads” other advanced nations in its rate for youth poverty, it should also “lead” them in its rate for youth maltreatment.

It should be easy to assess this conjecture, but studying it is actually quite difficult. Nations differ in how they define abuse or maltreatment and whether the data they collect apply to infants only, to children of various ages, or even to adolescents. Worse, affluent families have resources (not available to poor families) that can be used to “hide” evidence of child abuse, and nations also differ



**Exhibit 3.3. Rates of Child Deaths from Maltreatment in Advanced, Industrialized Nations**



Source: *Child Maltreatment Deaths in Rich Nations* (UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, 2003, p. 4).

Note: Data displayed are the numbers of deaths from maltreatment among children under the age of 15 for every 100,000 children of the same age group in each country. Figures represent an annual average of deaths reported for the most recent five-year period during the 1990s for which data are available from each country.

in steps they take to prevent such deceptions. The conjecture can be assessed indirectly, however, by comparing national data for *deaths* from the maltreatment of infants and children—a dreadful escalation of abuse that is easy to define and hard to hide.

A display of such data was also published by the Innocenti Research Centre, this time in 2003, and some of the Innocenti results appear as Exhibit 3.3. Data in this figure represent annual numbers of deaths per year from maltreatment of youths under the age of 15 per 100,000 youths in this same age group, reported for each advanced nation during the latest five-year period in the 1990s for which information was available.<sup>14</sup>

As can be seen in the exhibit, America again came in with the highest rate, 2.2 deaths from maltreatment per 100,000 infants and children, a rate nearly twice that for New Zealand, the next nation in the display. Continental nations from Western Europe tended to report rates averaging 0.6 or so, and a few nations reported rates as low as 0.1 or 0.2. Thus, America again “leads” other advanced nations in a harmful outcome for youths—this time in its rate of deaths from the maltreatment of infants and children—and since no other causes for such large differences in death rates have been uncovered, this result would have been unlikely had not the United States also “led” those nations in its rate of child poverty.

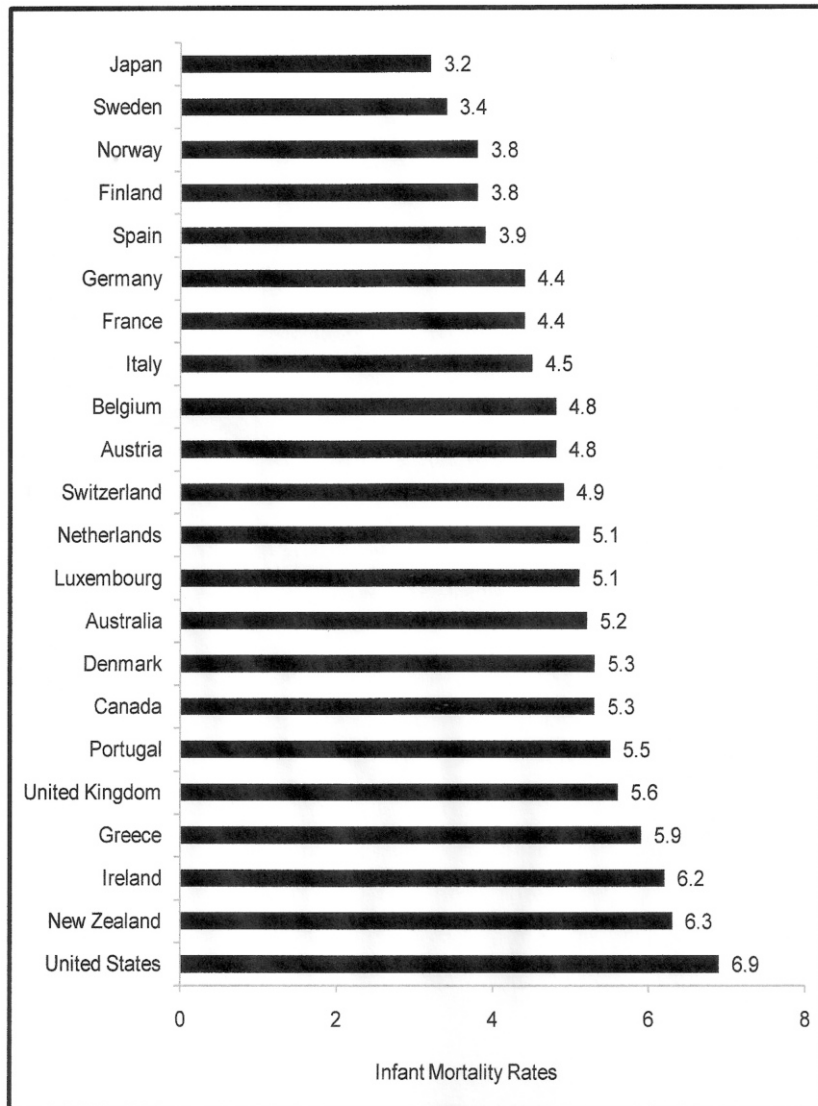
*Infant mortality.* Advocates for America’s youngest citizens—infants under the age of one year—have long known that the United States also generates excessive rates for infant mortality. Ever since the 1970s, American rates for deaths among infants have exceeded those for most advanced, industrial nations, indeed have sometimes been worse than rates recorded for some third-world countries! And although infant mortality rates have improved in most nations over the years, America has continued to hold its position as “the leader” among advanced nations when annual statistics have appeared for rates of infant mortality.<sup>15</sup>

To see how advanced nations fared in rates for infant mortality during a recent year, take a look at Exhibit 3.4. The data displayed there were published by OECD in 2005 and represent the numbers of infant deaths each nation reported for every 1,000 live births for the year 2000. As can be seen, the United States again generated the *worst* rate, 6.9 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, whereas those for most other advanced countries were less than 5.0.<sup>16</sup>

Although these differences seem to be small, America’s uniquely poor performance is shocking. As we shall see shortly, the United States spends far more per capita for health care than other advanced, industrialized countries. America also prides itself on its leadership in medical innovations, world-leading hospitals and other treatment facilities, and research into the causes of disease, and one might expect that these advantages would generate truly *low* rates of infant mortality in the United States.

Why doesn’t this happen? Although other factors—such as congenital abnormalities, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, and inadequate parental education—also help to generate deaths among infants, poverty has been

**Exhibit 3.4. National Rates Reported in 2000 for Infant Mortality by Advanced, Industrialized Countries**



Source: OECD *Health Data 2005: Infant Mortality by Rate, Deaths per 1,000 Live Births* (OECD, 2005).

Note: Data displayed are numbers of deaths among infants under the age of one year reported for each 1,000 live births.

#### YOUTH POVERTY IN THE INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD

identified as a truly strong factor leading to infant deaths in America.<sup>17</sup> Again, this makes sense. In the United States, family and youth poverty are associated with premature births, insufficient prenatal care, nutritional inadequacy, low birth weight, and lack of medical care for infants and children, and these stressors—all prevalent in America—are closely tied to deaths among infants. Poverty is *less* likely to generate such stressors in the rest of the advanced world where incipient youth poverty is reduced through better tax-supported social benefits, and this suggests that youth poverty plays a unique and unfortunate role in America, creating deaths among infants that are prevented in other advanced nations. And largely for this reason, America's "leadership" in youth poverty leads to yet another harmful consequence, this time to uniquely high rates of infant mortality.

*Other consequences.* Advanced nations also report data for other negative outcomes for which the United States is also the "leader" but for which ties to youth poverty are more tenuous. To illustrate, for years the U.S. has led the rest of the advanced world in rates for deaths among youths from traffic accidents and homicides,<sup>18</sup> but America also leads other advanced nations in average highway miles driven and numbers of weapons owned per capita, so it seems unlikely that youth poverty is the only major factor generating these consequences.

Nevertheless, *American "leadership" in youth poverty is clearly a major factor standing behind America's "leading" rates for teenage births, deaths from maltreatment of infants and children, and child mortality.* That a country which thinks of itself as blessed, successful, and benevolent should generate such miserable records for these harmful outcomes is shocking, but at least such results should help to persuade Doubting Thomases that the American youth poverty record is real, that the United States truly lags behind other advanced nations in the treatment it metes out to its youngest, most vulnerable citizens.

#### WHY ARE YOUTH POVERTY RATES LOWER ELSEWHERE?

The United States suffers from greater earnings and income inequality, higher poverty rates, and less movement out of poverty than almost every other OECD economy. Due to the highly unequal distribution of income in the United States, low-wage workers and low-income households are almost universally worse off in absolute terms than their low-wage, low-income counterparts in other, less-affluent OECD countries. Further, American workers work longer hours and have less in the way of social supports for families than workers in other OECD countries.

—Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, & Sylvia Allegretto (2005, p. 421)

Imagine a world in which mothers could take a few months away from their jobs following the birth or adoption of a child, without sacrificing either job security or their paychecks. Imagine a world in

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which both mothers and fathers could spend substantial time at home during their child's first year, while receiving nearly all of their wages. Imagine a world in which mothers and fathers could choose to work part-time until their children are in primary school without changing employers or losing their health benefits. Imagine a world in which the normal workweek was thirty-seven or even thirty-five hours, and parents had the right to take occasional days off, with pay, to attend to unexpected family needs. Imagine a world in which all parents had the right to place their children in high-quality child care provided by well-educated professionals. Imagine a world in which this child care was provided at no cost or very low cost to parents . . . . A world such as this, indeed, can only be imagined by American parents. It is a reality, however, for parents in [many other advanced] countries.

—Janet C. Gornick & Marcia K. Meyers (2003, pp. 1-2)

Once good-hearted Americans understand that youth poverty really *does* pose a larger problem in the United States, they begin to wonder about reasons for this distressing fact. How are other advanced nations able to generate much lower rates for poverty among youths? What poverty-generating forces plague America that are weaker elsewhere, and what actions have other countries taken to reduce poverty for their youngest citizens?

### *Wages for Low-Income Workers*

As I have suggested, poverty in the households of young Americans is generated by at least three types of events: miserable salaries paid to parents and other adults in the household, excessive taxes levied on those households, and lack of social benefits that provide support for youths and others living in them. Advanced nations differ in how they handle these three types of events, but the United States lags behind other advanced nations for all three.

Let us look first at wages for low-income workers. As in the United States, many other advanced nations enact laws that mandate minimum wages for persons who are paid for their work, but countries differ in their minimum wage laws and how those laws are monitored and enforced. Federal laws in America state that national, minimum wage legislation applies *only* to firms that engage in interstate commerce, but some states have adopted supplemental, minimum wage laws that apply to *all* firms operating within their borders. In addition, federal and state laws are *not* well enforced in America, and throughout the country, employees are often hired who are willing to work, “off the books,” for sub-standard wages.

Other advanced countries have developed their own laws and customs bearing on minimum wage issues. In a few such nations, no minimum wage legislation has been adopted since most employees work at jobs backed up by strong union contracts, and these contracts create a national consensus for what

constitutes a minimum fair wage. In other countries, national legislation has been passed that sets minimum wage provisions, and these provisions are enforced through monitoring programs and stiff fines for firms or individuals who pay sub-minimal wages. And still other countries adopt differing minimum wage standards that apply in various sectors of the economy—for example, to “entry-level” versus “experienced” workers, to those who are “citizens” versus those who are “guest workers,” or to other subgroups in the population.

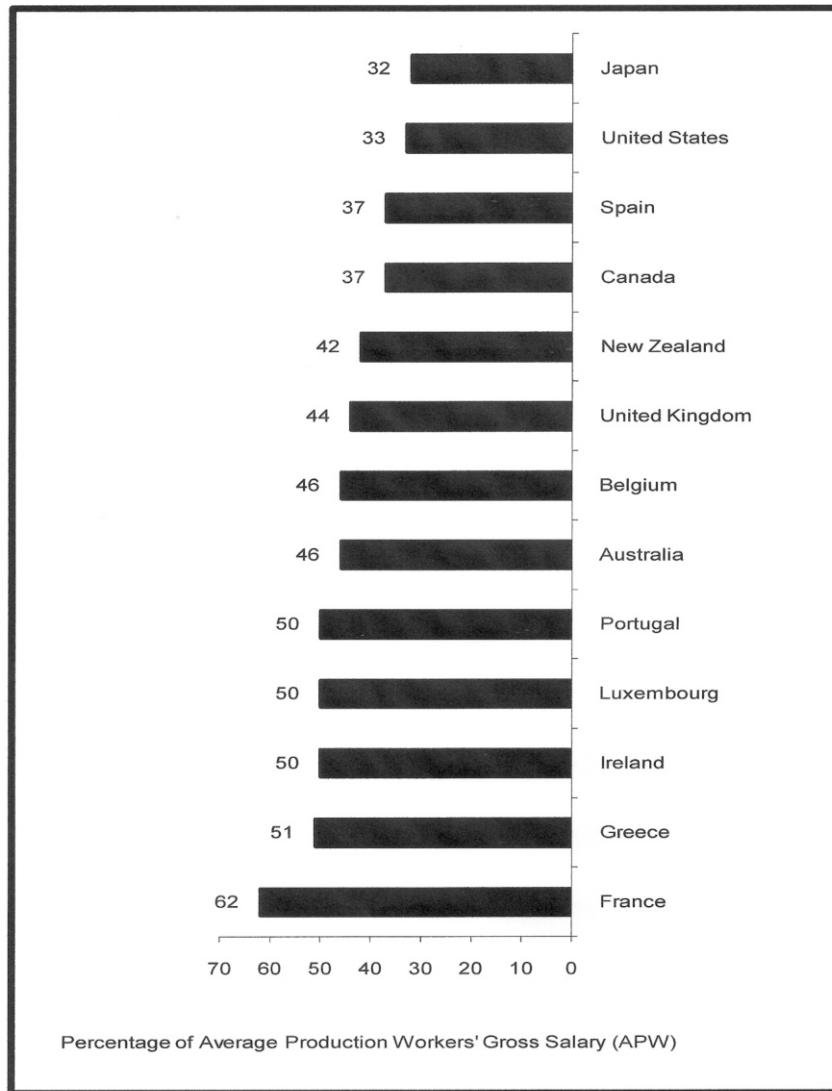
Such differences aside, a number of advanced, industrial nations also *have* enacted legislation setting a universal, national floor for minimum wages, and it is possible to compare those provisions if one uses a standard way to express their values. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has recently been doing this by expressing each country’s minimum wage as a percentage of the average gross wages paid to production workers (APW) in that nation. (Thus, if a country’s minimum wage was set at 33% of APW, for example, this would mean that the smallest salary an employer could legally pay a worker would be a third of the salary earned by the typical production worker in that nation.) Comparative information about minimum wage figures in place during 2002 may be obtained from a 2004 OECD report entitled *Benefits and Wages: OECD Indicators*, and a graph of data from this source appears as Exhibit 3.5.<sup>19</sup>

As can be seen in the exhibit, figures for minimum wages vary among advanced nations, but the national figure set in the United States is *less* than those currently set in all but one of the other advanced nations displayed; indeed, by comparison with minimal wage figures specified in many other countries, the figure for America is *much* smaller. Thus, America lags sharply behind most other advanced countries when it comes to setting a reasonable floor under salaries for low-income workers.

Let me put some flesh on the bare bones of this disparity. As we know from Chapter Two, since 2009 the minimum wage in the U.S. has been frozen at \$7.25 per hour. As I write this paragraph (in 2013), the minimum wage in Australia is roughly \$15.00 per hour, although the rate for fast-food workers is set at roughly \$16.00, slightly greater than the basic, “decent” wage level currently being requested by American fast-food workers.<sup>20</sup> Why this huge national disparity? In Australia, as in most advanced countries, minimum wages are adjusted each year, either automatically or by an independent commission that responds to changes in the cost of living, but in America they require congressional action, are subject to political controversy, and are rarely adjusted. If we are to believe far-right pundits, it would be economically ruinous to set the minimum American wage at the levels that now prevail in Australia, but Australian businesses and national economy are booming and unemployment in that country is minimal.

As in Chapter Two, however, it is reasonable to ask whether minimum wage laws “matter.” If we look at the group of advanced nations, are differences in minimum wage standards associated with parallel differences in wages for low-income workers? Or to rephrase this question, does the United States also lag

**Exhibit 3.5. Sizes of National Statutory Minimum Wages in Advanced, Industrialized Nations**



Source: *Benefits and Wages: OECD Indicators 2004* (OECD, 2004, Table A.1)

Note: Data displayed are the values of minimum wage requirements, in place in 2002, as percentages of Average Production Workers' Gross Salaries (APW).

behind other advanced, industrial countries in *salaries* paid to workers who hold down low-income jobs?

Again, it is difficult to answer this question. It is not useful to compare *hourly* wages paid to low-income workers, since advanced countries differ in the numbers of hours adults are required to work per week, month, or year (with the United States again leading the pack in hours of work required). And who qualifies as a “low-income worker”—those who hold down specific types of unskilled jobs (such as farm workers, day laborers, fast-food workers, or housemaids—jobs which may be unionized and thus may earn large salaries in some nations); or workers whose wages are ranked at the bottom among salaries paid in each country? And how do we judge the size of salaries paid to low-income workers in each nation; do we compare them with other salaries paid in that country, or do we compare them with salaries in other nations using an “absolute” scale of value?

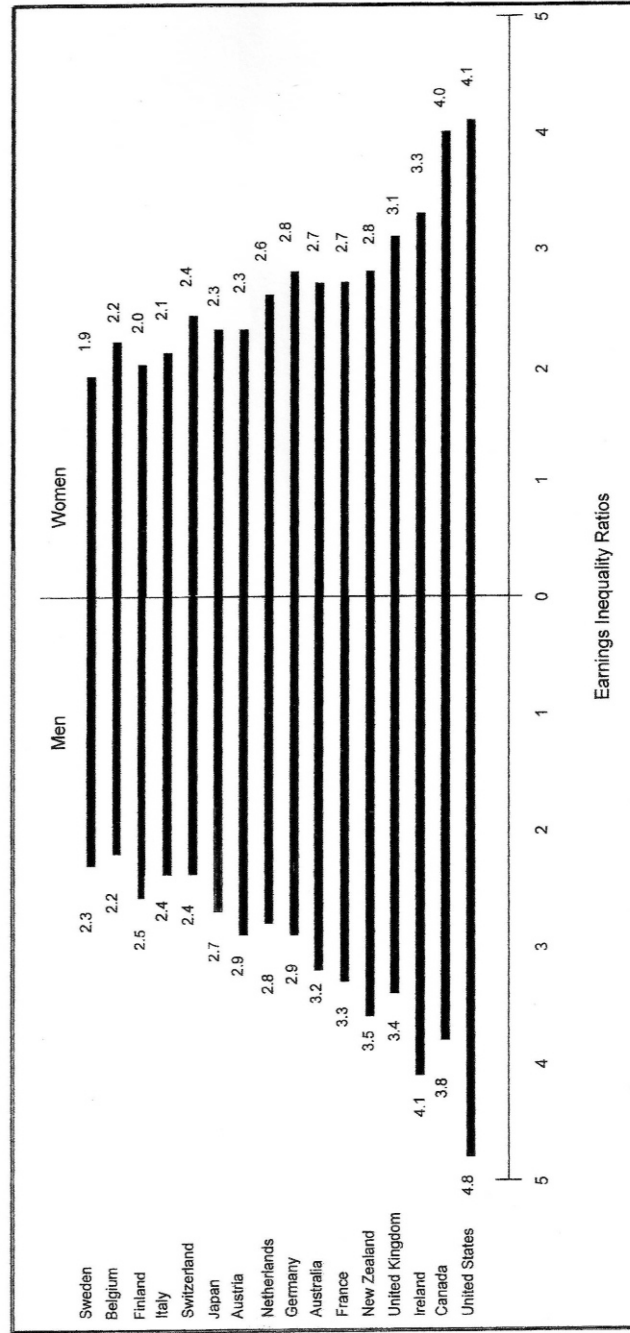
Analysts have long quarreled over such issues,<sup>21</sup> but a useful method for comparing how nations treat low-income workers has recently appeared in which the full range of *annual* salaries paid to workers are computed for each country, and then an *Earnings Inequality Ratio* is computed showing how earnings at the 10th percentile of salaries paid in that nation compare with those at the 90th percentile. Thus, in each country, workers whose salaries fall at the 10th percentile (that is, those with demonstrably “low” wages in that nation), are compared with workers who earn annual salaries at the 90th percentile (and therefore earn “high” wages), and the ratio computed tells us how the former are doing compared with the latter. To illustrate, if the *Earnings Inequality Ratio* were to be 2.0 for a given country, this would mean that its “typical high-income” workers are paid twice as much, on average, as its “typical low-income” workers, whereas a ratio of 5.0 would mean that the former are paid roughly five times as much.

Annual data for salaries in advanced nations are again available from OECD, and an analysis of such data for salaries paid in the late 1990s appeared in a book recently published by Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Sylvia Allegretto. These authors used the method I have just described and calculated separate *Earnings Inequality Ratios* for male and female workers. Exhibit 3.6 displays some of their results.<sup>22</sup>

As can be seen in the exhibit, ratios reported differed sharply among the nations compared, but those for both men and women were *greatest* in the United States where the ratio for men was 4.8 and that for women was 4.1. (Thus, in the typical American business, manufacturing plant, law firm, government office, hospital, school system, or university—for example—workers near the top of the salary ladder were likely to be paid four-to-five times as much annually as those near the bottom of the ladder.) In contrast, ratios for Continental nations in Western Europe averaged around 2.8 or 2.9, whereas those recorded for the most egalitarian country, Sweden, were 2.3 for men and 1.9 for women.



Exhibit 3.6. Earnings Inequality Ratios in Advanced, Industrialized Countries During Recent Years



Source: Basic data were obtained from OECD files and represent salaries paid during a recent year in the 1990s in each country. Analysis prepared by Mishel et al. (2005, Table 7.10, p. 399).

Note: Data displayed are ratios computed by dividing annual salaries paid to workers at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of all salaries divided by annual

(Some readers may be bemused rather than alarmed by the small disparities in Earnings Inequality Ratios reported by Mishel and his colleagues. If so, they may be remembering the much larger disparities reported in the media for other rich and poor comparison groups. To illustrate, citing data from the World Bank and Public Agenda, Kevin Phillips recently estimated that Americans in the top fifth of the income distribution earn eleven times as much as those in the bottom fifth, whereas in Japan and Belgium, for example, the top fifth earns less than five times as much as the bottom fifth.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the gap between high and low family incomes has increased sharply in the U.S. since the 1970s,<sup>24</sup> and during recent years of obscenely high salaries for CEO's, those who lead major U.S. corporations may earn several hundred or more times as much as the workers in their firms! Such ratios are, of course hugely larger than comparable ratios found in other industrialized countries.)

All such data indicate, of course, that low-income American workers typically are paid a smaller portion of their nation's "salary pie" than are equivalent low-income workers in other advanced countries. Moreover, as Mishel and his colleagues also noted, their data indicate not only that low-income American workers receive salaries which are relatively small when compared with those paid in other nations, but also that those salaries have less purchasing power than equivalent salaries paid to low-income workers elsewhere.

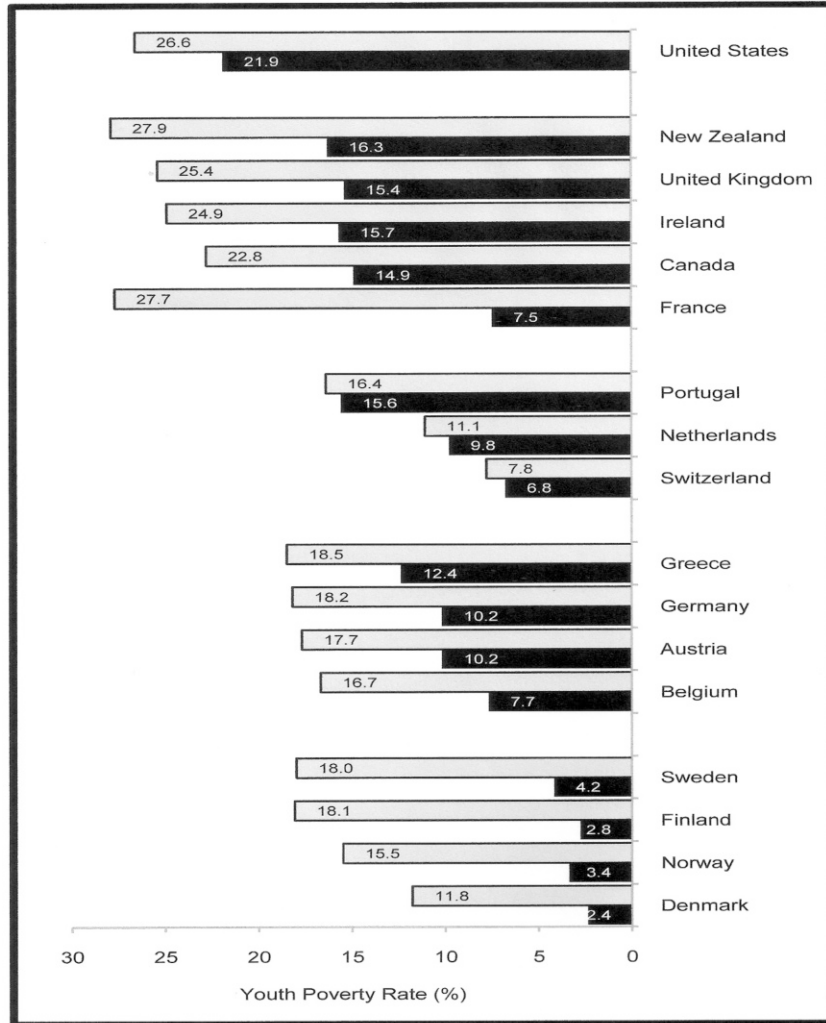
To summarize then, the evidence indicates that *low-income workers are paid less well in America than elsewhere in the advanced, industrialized world and that such disparities apply to both men and women who work for low wages.* Thus, we have learned not only that the United States lags behind most other advanced countries in its minimum wage, but also that American workers who hold down low-income jobs earn less, on average, than their counterparts elsewhere in the advanced world. Poor salaries paid to wage earners are but one factor leading to youth poverty in America, but it surely cannot help America's young people when most of their parents are paid wages that *lag behind* those paid to low-income parents in other advanced, industrialized nations.

#### *Taxes, Social Benefits, and Poverty Reduction*

The fact that average wages paid to low-income American workers lag behind wages paid elsewhere means, in turn, that average cash income in America's low-income households is also lower than cash incomes in most other advanced nations,<sup>25</sup> but what about taxes and social benefits? Most advanced countries tax low-income households sparingly, and most provide social benefits for those households. Such actions ought to reduce poverty levels in low-income households, but does this actually occur? And if it does, do advanced nations differ in the effects of such policies for reducing youth poverty?

Data bearing on these questions again appeared in the 2005 report of the Innocenti Research Centre which provided *two* youth poverty estimates for 17 of the 22 advanced nations we have been tracking: The base level percentage of each country's youths who would have been impoverished if their households

**Exhibit 3.7. The Impact of Taxes and Social Benefits on Youth Poverty Rates**



Source: *Child Poverty in Rich Countries* (UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre, 2005, Figure 9).

Note: The lighter bars show youth and poverty rates if calculations were based only on household income. The darker bars show youth poverty rates after taxes and the value of social benefits are included in calculations. Poverty lines in both cases are 50% of median income and are based on data from the mid-1990s reported by the Luxembourg Income Study. Benefits paid for pensions, education, and health care are not included.

had to depend on cash incomes alone, and the percentage who remained impoverished when taxes and social benefits are included in the picture. Both estimates were based on statistics reported by national governments, and both represented the proportion of youths living below the same national poverty line in each country—calculated as 50% of adjusted median net income. Results from the Innocenti analysis appear in Exhibit 3.7.<sup>26</sup>

As can be seen in the exhibit, youth poverty rates for all countries for which data are displayed were lower when taxes and social benefits were included in the picture, and this means that advanced nations *do* reduce youth poverty by restricting tax burdens and providing social benefits for low-income households in which those youths live.

However, nations differ greatly in the nature and size of this effect. Of the 17 nations covered: four (Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden) generated moderate base levels of youth poverty but reduced poverty rates *sharply* through tax relief and the provision of social benefits; four (Belgium, Austria, Germany, and Greece) also began with moderate base levels of youth poverty but generated only *moderate* decreases in those rates; three (Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Portugal) generated moderate-to-low base levels of youth poverty but reduced those rates only *slightly*; and five (France, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand) began with high base-level youth poverty rates but reduced those rates *substantially* (or *spectacularly* in the case of France) through tax relief and social benefits.

And then there was America. Alone among the nations compared, the United States generated a *high* base-level poverty rate but reduced that rate only *slightly* through tax relief and the provision of social benefits. Thus we have discovered another way in which America fails uniquely to meet the needs of impoverished youths. It belongs to a small “club” of advanced nations where base poverty rates for low-income households are high, but unlike other members of the “club,” it provides only minimal help for those households through tax breaks and social benefits.

Thus, other advanced nations differ sharply from the United States in their willingness to impose taxes and provide social services for low-income households, but what do we know about these different responses? What strategies are pursued in other nations to reduce taxes and provide social benefits for those in need—strategies that are missing or only weakly pursued in America? Many authors have written about this complex topic, and I follow their insights in the brief reviews I provide here.<sup>27</sup>

### *Tax Relief*

Each advanced nation collects taxes, of course, and each tries to adjust those taxes so as to provide relief for low-income persons and their families. A popular way for doing this is to reduce payroll and income taxes for workers who are paid low wages.

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“Payroll taxes” are those assessed against earnings and are normally deducted from salaries paid to workers, and “income taxes” are those assessed against annual incomes (which reflect both “earned” and “unearned” incomes such as returns from investments). It is convenient to sort such taxes into two categories: *social security contributions* that are earmarked for retirement or medical benefit programs, and *general taxes* that support the remaining budget of each nation. This distinction is needed because in most countries social security contributions are levied as flat-rate taxes whereas general taxes are assessed on a variable-rate, “progressive” basis. (Flat-rate tax schemes require that low- and high-income workers pay the same percentages of their earnings for taxes, so they offer little or no advantage to those with low incomes. In contrast, “progressive” tax systems set higher taxation rates for those with high incomes, thus provide extra relief for low-income persons and their families.) In addition, some advanced nations provide additional relief by assigning even lower tax rates to families thought to be particularly needy—for example, to those families with a single parent or a nonworking or low-income spouse, those with disabled persons, or those with children.

As a rule, advanced nations that impose larger social security contributions on workers also collect smaller general taxes (and vice versa), and if we look at tax rates assessed by national governments in advanced countries, rates in America seem to be about “average.”<sup>28</sup> However, initial looks can be deceiving, and several factors combine to increase the real tax bite for low-income American workers and their families.

For one thing, the United States sets a “cap” on social security contributions which means that those taxes presently apply to only the first \$90,000 of a worker’s income. Thus, unlike most advanced nations, America does *not* have a flat-rate system for social security contributions, nor is its system “progressive.” Instead, low- and middle-income workers are charged *larger* rates for social security payments than are high-income workers; the American system is actually “regressive!”

For another, the American Congress is notoriously swayed by the interests of wealthy persons, and over the years it has responded to these interests by enacting scores of special provisions in the income tax code that allow The Rich to reduce their tax burdens. To illustrate, “unearned incomes” (e.g., returns from investments) are taxed at a very low rate in America, but this boon is rarely available to low-income families. Thus, the federal income tax code is not truly “progressive” in the United States; by comparison with other advanced countries, rich persons are taxed at far lower rates in America, and middle- and low-income Americans must pick up the slack.

For a third, most American workers also pay payroll and income taxes to state (and sometimes to local) governments. Most of these latter taxes are assessed on a flat-rate basis, and many are capped so that high-income earners are given additional tax breaks. As well, some state and local governments gather additional revenues through sales taxes that are applied to tangible purchases made within their jurisdictions, and these too are flat-rate taxes (which fall more

heavily on low-income families who spend proportionately more for tangibles). In contrast, some other advanced countries may flesh out national needs through sales taxes, but the needs of cities, states, regions, or provinces are met through funds disbursed from the national purse, and all of this means that Americans (but not others) typically pay additional taxes for local services which (again) fall more heavily on those with low incomes.

And finally, the United States imposes yet another tax burden on its citizens that is rare elsewhere. Most advanced countries fund education through general tax revenues, but in the United States the bulk of funding for public schools is generated through additional taxes levied by local school districts. School districts typically do this by taxing those who own property in the district using a flat tax rate. In theory, this form of taxation imposes a larger burden on corporations or individuals who own properties with high value, lower taxes on those who own modest homes, and no tax at all on those who pay rent. In practice, corporations are often able to “bargain” with the state or district for tax relief, thus increasing tax burdens for individuals, and landlords usually recover the costs of school taxes by charging tenants additional rent.

As well, the American school tax system generates sharp differences in tax burdens and support for public schools in differing school districts. Since the bulk of school funding comes from local districts, affluent districts (with highly valued properties) are able to generate good funding for their schools with *low* tax rates. In contrast, impoverished districts (with poorly valued properties) must charge *high* tax rates for even minimal support of education, and this creates higher tax rates for many low-income families.

Putting these various facts together, we learn that tax burdens in the U.S. fall more heavily on persons with few resources, that *low-income American workers (and their families) typically shoulder a larger proportion of their nation's tax burden than low-income workers in other advanced countries*. And this means, in turn, that, even when they have minimally adequate incomes, struggling American families tend to have less posttax cash with which to stave off poverty.

This sounds bad, but inadequate, low-end salaries and excessive tax liability do *not* constitute the full set of factors generating poverty for young people and their families. Poverty also appears because those with low incomes lack social benefits, so we must also look at how social benefits provided in the United States stack up when compared with those furnished elsewhere.

#### *Cash-Award Benefits*

As it happens, advanced nations provide many types of social benefits that are designed to reduce the burdens of low income, and the mix of benefits furnished varies sharply among those nations. Analysts have used various schemes for sorting out these differences, but they commonly make a distinction between benefits that are “means tested” versus those that are “entitlements.” *Means-tested* benefits are furnished to all qualifying families, households, or persons who can prove they are “needy” usually by displaying evidence of inadequate

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income. (Within America, for example, “free” and “reduced-price” school lunches are means-tested benefits because they are awarded only to students from families which certify that they have low incomes.) In contrast, social benefits are classified as *entitlements* when they are provided to all qualifying families, households, or persons, regardless of whether recipients are or are not “needy.” (Social security and Medicare benefits in the U.S. are entitlements because they are paid equally to all eligible elderly persons, be those persons rich or poor.)

The distinction between entitlements and means-tested benefits is important for several reasons. Entitlements are thought to be a less efficient way to support those with “real needs” and cost more to fund because they are paid to “all” qualified recipients, hence legislatures hesitate to adopt them. Once in place, however, they tend to be both popular and durable since *many* persons in the population reap rewards from them. In contrast, means-tested benefits are presumed to be more efficient and less costly. But since they provide help only for those who are “needy,” over time they tend to create resentment among middle- and upper-income citizens, and long-term support for them is less secure. As well, means-tested benefits often require those with “needs” to undergo a costly “ceremony of degradation” if they are to receive benefits as well as a tax-supported bureaucracy to maintain records and guard against cheating.

These facts are widely understood, and most advanced countries have adopted a combination of entitlements and means-tested benefits to provide aid for low-income families and the youths who live in them. Some of those benefits come in the form of *cash awards* that are designed to relieve problems triggered by low income. Cash awards appear in various forms and are normally funded through tax revenues, although some are also supplemented by contributions from employers and from employed workers who might benefit from them down the road.

Cash benefits should not be confused with *income tax relief*. Since cash awards may be quite sizable, providing them can prove costly for advanced nations. Given this fact, some countries—such as the United States, for example—try to “solve” problems for those with low incomes by reducing tax liabilities rather than by providing cash awards. This strategy may please legislators but often provides only minimal help for those with need. (As a rule, low-income persons and their families pay fewer income taxes, and this means that a reduction in tax liability typically generates little additional income for them. By comparison, a cash award of \$100, for example, puts \$100 of disposable income in the pockets of *all* who receive such benefits.) Thoughtless analysts and far-right propagandists sometimes amalgamate cash benefits and tax relief when comparing social services among nations, but the comparative summaries I provide here are limited to cash awards.

To simplify a complex topic, I distinguish here among six types of cash benefits and base most of my comments on the 2004 *Benefits and Wages* report from OECD cited previously.<sup>29</sup>

*Unemployment benefits.* First, all advanced nations offer at least some cash assistance for unemployed workers, and these awards provide valuable help for low-income families when salaries normally earned through employment are suddenly missing. Two forms of unemployment help are commonly recognized: *Unemployment Insurance* (UI) awards, commonly funded through contributions from employers and workers themselves, which provide temporary compensation for lost earnings while workers who have just lost their jobs are seeking employment; and *Unemployment Assistance* (UA) awards, funded largely through taxes, which provide longer-term aid for job-seeking workers who cannot qualify or are no longer eligible for UI benefits. As a rule, most UI awards are treated as entitlements whereas UA awards are more often means tested.

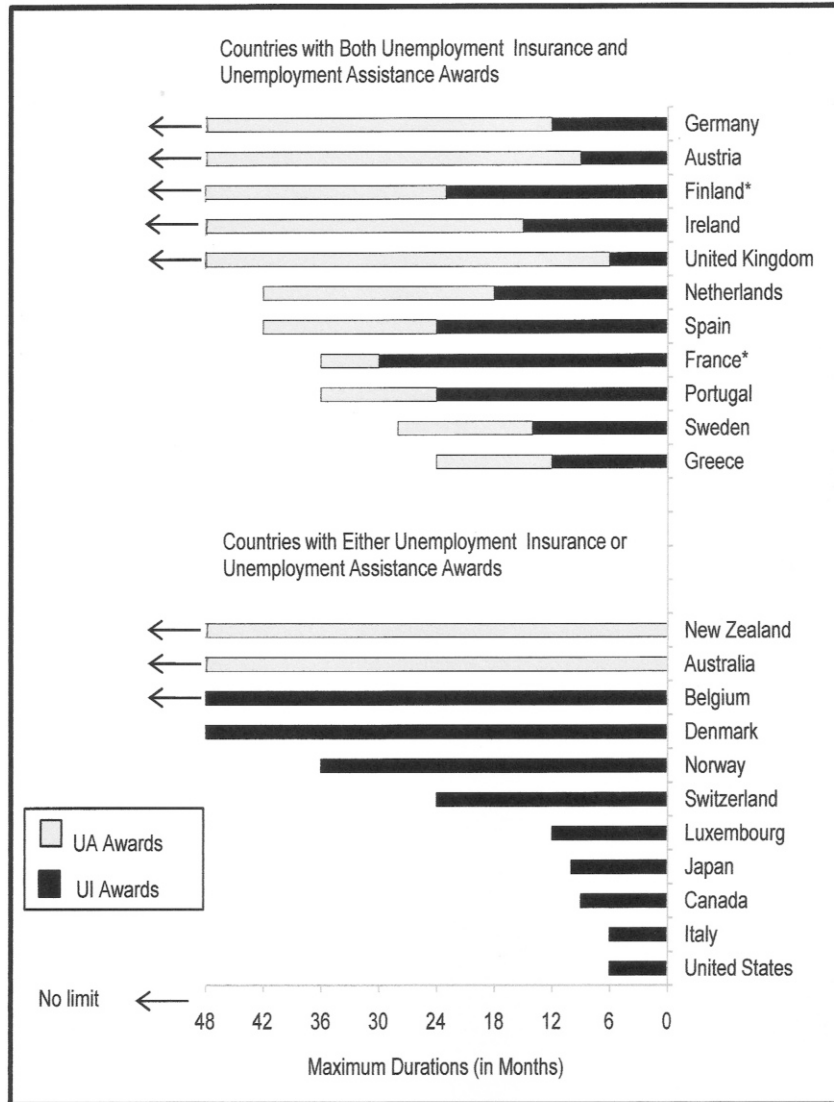
Terms and conditions for unemployment benefits vary among advanced countries, but a good feel for their major features may be gained if we display maximum durations and amounts of such benefits, offered in each nation, for a “typical” worker. Data needed to make such comparisons appeared in the 2004 OECD report, and some of this information is displayed in Exhibit 3.8.<sup>30</sup> To simplify things, data in the exhibit are restricted to awards available in 2002 for a 40-year-old male worker with a 20-year employment record. Details about months of award durations appear in Exhibit 3.8a, while those for award amounts—expressed as percentages of average wages paid to production workers (APW)—are displayed in Exhibit 3.8b.

As can be seen in the exhibit, the 22 countries we’ve been tracking differed sharply in awards they offered. Some nations (such as the United Kingdom) provided both UI and UA unemployment benefits, but amounts of those benefits were quite small. Other countries (Luxembourg, for example) provided far more generous benefits, but those benefits were limited to UI coverage and were terminated after only a few months. One nation (Germany) stood out because it provided truly generous UI and UA benefits for unemployed workers that could last for four years or more. In sharp contrast, the United States provided *only* UI benefits, tied Italy in *last place* for duration of unemployment support, and provided a *lower* level of support than did the latter country. By comparison then, American support for unemployed workers in 2002 was truly stingy.<sup>31</sup> But the burdens of unemployment fall more heavily on those with low incomes, so this means that in 2002 those burdens were greater in the United States than in comparable nations.

*Housing benefits.* Second, most advanced nations also provide tax-supported help with housing costs for low-income families, and this help can take various forms. Some of these—such as subsidized housing or low-interest housing loans—do not involve cash benefits. However, some countries also provide cash awards for low-income families to help them with high rental costs, and the conditions and sizes of these benefits available in 2002 were also reviewed in the 2004 OECD report.<sup>32</sup>



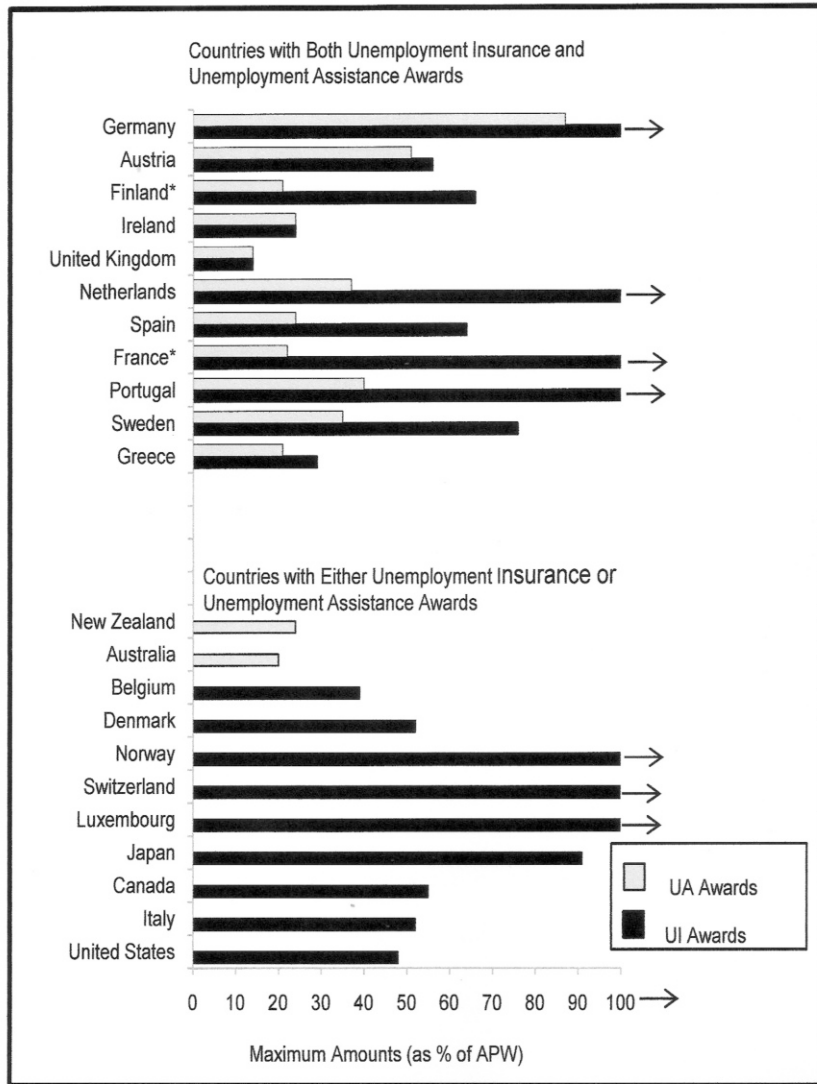
**Exhibit 3.8a. Maximum Durations of Basic Unemployment Benefits**



Source: *Benefits and Wages: OECD Indicators* (OECD, 2004, Tables 1.2 and 1.3).

Notes: Figures given display maximum durations and amounts of awards available in 2002 for a 40-year-old worker with a 20-year employment record when UI and UA awards are both offered. Figures for durations report the total number of award months available. Most award levels would be reduced if a worker is employed part time and are supplemented when a dependent spouse or dependent children are present.

**Exhibit 3.8b. Maximum Amounts of Basic Unemployment Benefits**



\*In Finland, maximum amounts of UI awards vary depending on the worker's salary. The amount listed here is for a worker who earns the APW.

\*In France, the initial duration of awards is six months, but such awards are renewable.

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To summarize findings of the OECD review: In 2002, 11 out of the 22 advanced countries offered cash assistance, funded through national budgets, to help with rental costs for low-income families from all corners of their lands. Most of these awards were means tested, and in some countries—France and the United Kingdom, for example—those awards could be as high as 20% of average wages paid to production workers (APW) in the nation. The remaining 11 countries—including the United States—provided no such nationwide assistance, although in most of the latter countries, means-tested cash housing allowances were provided in certain regions or cities where housing costs are notoriously high. Such awards were typically funded from the national purse, but in the U.S. they were largely funded through state or local taxes.

By comparison then, during 2002 the United States fell into the bottom half of advanced nations when it came to cash assistance for housing costs borne by low-income families.

*Family benefits.* Third, all advanced countries provide tax-supported benefits for married couples with children, and these benefits can take several forms—including lower rates for income taxes and tax-supported family health or recreation facilities. However, some family benefits also involve cash awards, commonly called *family allowances*, that are paid directly to parents from the public purse. Such allowances are provided, not for a set term, but for as long as married couples have dependent children and fall into two categories: allowances given equally to all qualifying families—entitlements—that are provided in the bulk of advanced countries; and allowances that are paid only to families with demonstrable “need”—means-tested awards—that appear in all but one of remaining advanced nations.

A summary of rules and basic award levels for family allowances in each country may again be found in the 2004 OECD report.<sup>33</sup> As this source notes, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom all provided family allowances as entitlements in 2002. These awards were mostly of modest size with the typical nation paying an allowance of 6% or less of average wages for production workers (APW) for a couple with but one child aged 3-12, although all of these countries provided larger awards for families with more children.

Of the remaining eight nations, Australia, Canada, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, and Spain provided *means-tested* family allowances that gave targeted assistance to families with low incomes. The provisions of these latter awards also differed from country to country, and again awards were generally modest in size, and larger allowances were provided for families with more children.

Alone among these 22 advanced nations then, *only* the United States did not provide family allowances in 2002.<sup>34</sup> Americans are often stunned when they learn that *all* parents with children in some advanced nations are given tax-supported assistance in the form of cash. But they are rarely aware that such

assistance is actually “The Rule” in the advanced, industrialized world, and that America is the only advanced nation that *fails* to provide such assistance. And, needless to say, lack of this form of help falls most heavily on *poor* families in America.

*Child care benefits.* Fourth, advanced nations also provide various types of tax-supported benefits for young children who are not yet eligible for public school enrollment. These may include income tax credits that provide relief for parents when their children are very young and various types of tax-supported day care and preschool facilities (see below). In addition, in 2002, three of the advanced nations we have been tracking—Australia, Denmark, and France—also provided means-tested *cash* awards for low-income families with young children designed to supplement or replace missing day care and preschool facilities.<sup>35</sup> These awards were given for various purposes—e.g., to help pay for “child care in approved day-care or nursery centres or services of professional carers at their own or the parents’ home.”<sup>36</sup>

When available, these awards could be quite substantial. In France, for example, the maximum benefit payable for one child could be as high as 28% of average wages for production workers (APW) in that country. No such cash benefits were available in the other 19 nations, including the United States, which means that low-income families in the latter countries had then to fend for themselves if they did not have access to tax-supported day care and preschool facilities, and few of these provisions have changed since 2002.

*Single-parent benefits.* Fifth, it is widely understood that families headed by single parents are more likely to experience poverty than those with two parents, and many advanced countries respond to this fact by providing tax-supported social benefits for the former. As with other benefits, some countries offer reductions in income tax rates for single parents, but others provide cash awards for single parents with children. Of the 22 nations we have been tracking, 10—Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, and Sweden—provided such cash awards in 2002.<sup>37</sup> The bulk of these awards were means tested, although in three of these countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), they were entitlements, and in one country (Norway) a complex award system prevailed in which a portion of awards were means tested while the remainder were entitlements.

While some of these awards were modest, in other cases they could be substantial. In France, Ireland, New Zealand, and Norway, for example, the awards provided could equal more than 25% of average wages paid to production workers (APW). Most of the remaining countries—including the United States—offered merely lower income tax rates for families headed by single parents, which means that single parents with low incomes received few if any benefits from these latter programs.

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*Social assistance benefits.* Sixth and last, in most advanced nations, needy people who lack sufficient access to other forms of cash support are given basic, means-tested, cash awards, or *social assistance*, to shore up their incomes.<sup>38</sup> In two of the 22 countries we have been tracking—Australia and New Zealand—social assistance is paid to needy *individuals* in the form of Special Benefits that are “available to people in severe financial hardship who have no other means of support and for whom no other benefit is available.”<sup>39</sup> Eighteen other countries, in contrast, provide social assistance for needy *families* with benefit amounts that vary depending on family composition. Of the remaining two countries, the OECD report does not make clear whether cash awards for social assistance are provided in Greece, but *no* such awards are offered in the U.S.—although the United States offers Food Stamps to needy families that can be used to purchase some types of commodities.<sup>40</sup>

The amounts of social-assistance benefits provided vary from country to country and can be quite substantial, and in many cases social assistance awards can be used to supplement other cash awards when the latter are “insufficient.” The typical advanced country, for example, may pay 20 to 30% of the wages for average production workers (APW) for each head of the household, an additional 10 to 20% of APW for each spouse, and from 5 to 10% of APW for each child in qualifying families. In sharp contrast, Food Stamps provided in the United States can only be used to purchase specific food-stuffs and have far less cash value—5% of APW for each head of household, an additional 4% for each spouse, and 4% for each child in qualifying families.

*Commentary.* It is easy to understand why these six types of cash awards would benefit low-income families and reduce rates of poverty for youths in advanced countries. In addition, it is clear that, when it comes to these awards, the U.S. generates a miserable record. Let’s run down the list:

- *unemployment benefits*—of the 22 advanced nations we examined, America offers the skimpiest cash awards for unemployment;
- *housing benefits*—unlike a number of other advanced nations, America offers no nationally funded cash awards for housing;
- *family benefits*—alone among the nations surveyed, America offers no cash based family allowances to parents with children in their homes;
- *child care benefits*—unlike some other advanced nations, America offers no cash awards for child care;
- *single-parent benefits*—although some other advanced nations offer such benefits, America offers no cash awards for single parents; and
- *social assistance benefits*—among the 21 advanced nations for which information is available, America offers the least valuable social assistance awards (and these are in the form of Food Stamps, not cash).

Thus we must conclude that: *When it comes to cash-award benefits which generate help for impoverished youths and their families, such benefits are widely available and provide substantial help in other advanced nations but not in the United States.* Not only is this one more instance in which the American record is

underwhelming, but the lack of such benefits would have to be *major* reasons for America's uniquely high rate of youth poverty.

#### *Noncash Benefits*

Alas, the American record does not improve when it comes to other types of social benefits. Advanced nations also support various, additional facilities and social services that provide noncash benefits for citizens. The bulk of these—paved highways, public parks, police and fire-fighting forces, water and electric utilities, sewage treatment plants, libraries, and the like—serve the needs of many in the population, be they young or old, rich or poor. However, other facilities and services are targeted for persons with specific needs—such as those who are members of disadvantaged groups or are mentally retarded, physically handicapped, language impaired, seriously ill, too young or too old, or are threatened by poverty. I turn now to three types of noncash benefits that bear strongly on the needs of low-income families and the youths who live in them.

*Strong day care and preschool facilities.* As all parents with young children have learned, caring for toddlers is an exhausting task that requires periodic relief. As well, the provision of challenging experiences for those youngsters is important if they are to grow and develop their language, numerical, social, motor, and emotional skills. And for these reasons, most parents in advanced countries will enroll their toddlers in facilities that provide day care and preschool experiences if such facilities are available and affordable. Well-managed day care centers and preschools are expensive however, and paying for them privately strains the budgets of both low- and middle-income households headed by *two* parents. But when a household is headed by a *single* parent, choice may no longer be an issue. If that parent is the family's sole wage earner, holds down a full-time job, and has no access to (often untrained) child-minding help from others, she (or, less often, he) either *must* enroll the family's young children in such a facility, or those children will endure make-do alternatives.

Aware of such dilemmas, all advanced countries have set up tax-supported programs that generate partial or full funding for facilities providing day care and/or preschool experiences. Provisions of those programs vary greatly from country to country, however. In some nations, such facilities are fully funded for all toddlers, but in other countries middle- and upper-income families must pay portions of tuition costs. In some countries, only part-time day care or preschool facilities are funded, whereas in others full-time facilities are the rule. In some nations, preschool care is offered only to older toddlers from "needy" families. In some countries, tax-funded day care or preschool facilities appear only in urban centers, and parents from rural locales receive cash awards to help them pay for private facilities or home care. In some nations, two types of facilities are provided—those for children below and above the age of three, whereas in other venues, preschool services are available only for children three years of age and

older. And preschool support programs differ depending on national customs concerning the age at which children are allowed to enter public education.

Given such divergent patterns, it is hard to find good comparative summaries of day care and preschool programs. OECD brought out such a summary in 2001,<sup>41</sup> but its topical coverage was limited. In 2003, however, Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers published a useful, comparative summary of such programs available in 2000 or thereabouts, basing their work on publications from OECD and other sources.<sup>42</sup> Although their work was confined to only 12 advanced countries, it provides a useful discussion of most features of day care and preschool programs, and the data I report below comes from this source.

Of the 12 countries reviewed by these authors, seven (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands) provided *numerous* tax-supported day care facilities for toddlers under the age of three, whereas the other five nations (Germany, Luxembourg, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) did not. This means that each of the former nations enrolled *at least 17%* of their one- and two-year-old toddlers in publicly funded day care facilities, whereas enrollments in the latter were 6% or fewer. When it came to older youngsters, seven countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) enrolled *75% or more* of their children in tax-supported preschool facilities, whereas the remaining five countries (Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Canada, and the United States) all enrolled fewer youngsters.

Differences in enrollment were also reflected in disparities in public spending on preschool programs. Those countries where enrollments were high (such as the Nordic countries and France) *all provided at least \$3,000* (in equivalent U.S. dollars) of tax support per child in their populations for day care and preschool care, whereas those countries where enrollments were low (such as the United States) spent *less than \$700* per child from the federal purse. Higher levels of funding helped to generate more impressive care, better equipment, higher educational standards for staff, more years of coverage for day care and preschool programs, as well as longer hours of care available within countries where public spending was greater. (As well, better funded, strong day care and preschool programs also generate significant educational advantages for impoverished youngsters—see Chapter Six.)

The bottom line? Tax-supported facilities for day care centers and preschools varied greatly among advanced nations, but such facilities tended to be strong, well supported, and served many youngsters in Scandinavia and key countries in Central and Western Europe. In contrast, such facilities were weaker, less well supported, and served fewer youths in other nations, including the United States. Lack of such facilities poses real problems for middle-income households in America, but those problems are far worse for low-income households, particularly those headed by a single parent who is the sole wage earner in the family. In the latter, child care for young children must be provided by older siblings, relatives, other (usually untrained) persons, or TV sets(!)—or the household limps along without care for its youngest members.

*Paid leave policies.* Most advanced countries have also adopted laws that mandate periods of *paid* leave from work for adult employees, particularly those who are parents. Such laws respond to various needs and emergencies for workers and their families. Most specify the number of days or weeks of paid leave to which all workers are entitled for each type of challenge, and the salaries paid for some types of leaves may be limited or means tested. Leaves mandated by these laws may be funded by employers, governments, contributions from employees themselves, or some combination of all three. They are particularly valuable for low-income persons and families, of course, who would otherwise have to respond to needs or emergencies by paying for unsanctioned leaves out of their meager savings—and risk being fired from their jobs for taking such leaves—or by foregoing leaves altogether. Summaries of key leave policies that had been adopted in advanced nations by the year 2000 or thereabouts were also provided by Gornick and Meyers,<sup>43</sup> and again I draw most of what I have to say on the subject from this source.

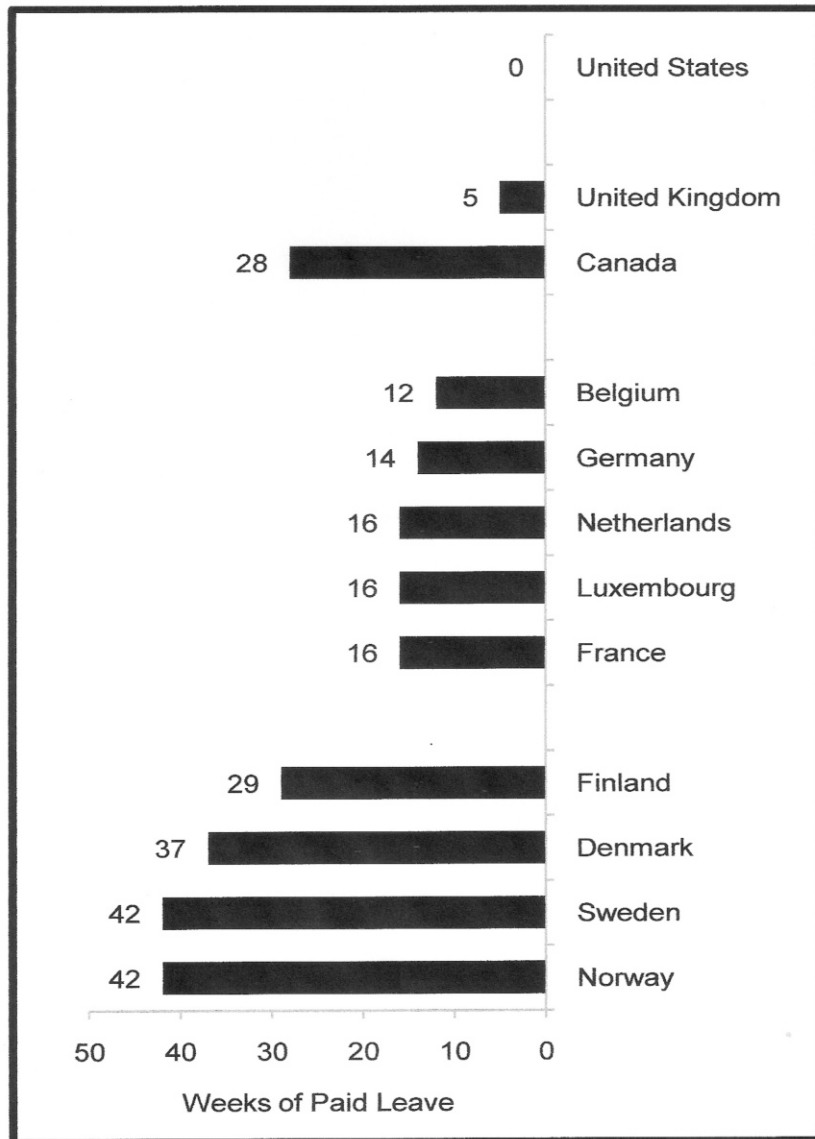
Of the 12 advanced countries reviewed by these authors, all but one had enacted laws requiring that working women have access to *paid maternity leaves* to cover pregnancy, parturition, recovery from childbirth, and care for newborn infants. Provisions of these laws varied among nations, and although most countries specified maximum lengths of maternity leaves as a universal entitlement, some limited or means tested the sizes of leave payments. Willingness to make use of such leaves varied slightly among nations, but in most countries *most* women took full advantage of these boons. Gornick and Meyers also provided a figure indicating numbers of weeks of paid maternity leave mandated in each of the twelve nations they tracked, and I have reproduced this figure as Exhibit 3.9. As can be seen, among these nations, Norway and Sweden led the way with 42 weeks of mandated paid leave for each pregnancy, whereas only America had *no* federal law mandating such leaves. (Indeed, until recently the United States had established *no* national policies for maternity leaves, but during the Clinton administration it finally enacted a law granting women the right to take *unpaid* leaves for maternity.)

Some of these advanced countries also had laws that mandated *paid paternity leaves* for fathers who need to help their wives and families when births occur. Provisions of these latter leaves also varied among nations, and all were less generous than provisions for paid maternity leaves. Of the 12 nations tracked by Gornick and Meyers, seven also mandated paid paternity leaves, but France, Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States offered no such boons.

Most of these advanced countries also mandated *paid family emergency leaves* so that parents could cope directly with the illnesses or other crises of children (and, in some cases, spouses or partners). Provisions of these latter laws also varied, but laws in most countries specified the number of paid leave days one may take during a year to cope with illnesses for each child (or spouse, or partner). Some nations also made separate provisions for children who become disabled or chronically ill. Of the 12 advanced nations tracked by Gornick and



**Exhibit 3.9. Paid Maternity Leave in Advanced, Industrialized Nations, Approximately 2000**



Source: *Families that Work* (Gornick, J. C., & Meyers, M. K., 2003, Figure 5.2).

Meyers, only three—Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States—did *not* mandate paid family emergency leaves, although all of these latter countries guaranteed the right to take *unpaid* leaves for such emergencies.

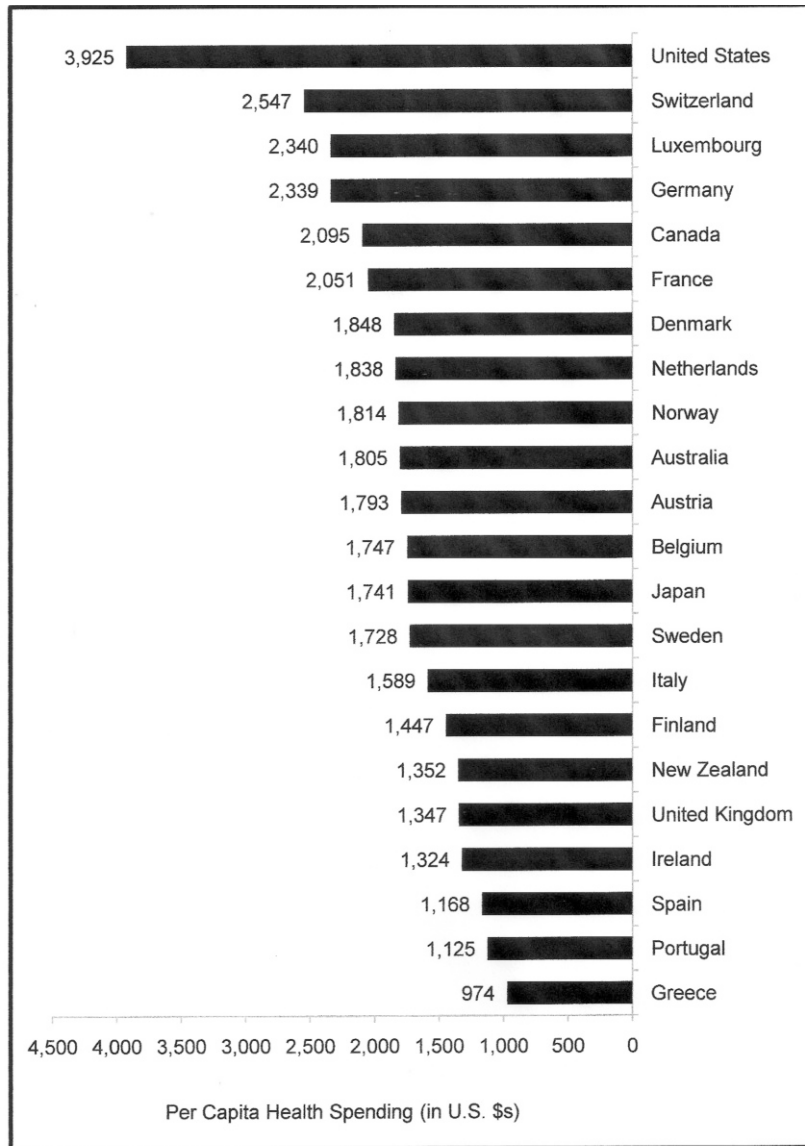
Many other advanced countries also mandate additional forms of paid leave that do not bear specifically on problems faced by low-income families. To illustrate, most of the 12 nations tracked by Gornick and Meyers specified the minimum number of *paid vacation days* that must be awarded to workers during each calendar year—a benefit that improves lives for workers at all income levels. And of these 12 nations, 10 specified that at least 20 (or in some nations, up to 25) working days of paid leave must be made available for vacations each year, whereas one other country (Canada) mandated at least 10 working days for vacations. And again, alone among the countries reviewed, the United States had no federal law in place specifying minimal days of paid leave for vacations.

Implications? The bulk of advanced nations now mandate various types of paid leaves that respond to needs and problems experienced by workers and their families. Such policies allow working parents to devote time to these demands while still retaining their incomes and job security. They provide both substantive help and relief from worries for families at all income levels, but for low-income families they can prevent catastrophic loss of employment, financial crisis, and inadequate care for those who are ill. Nations that “lead the way” when it comes to leave policies tend to be found in Scandinavia and Western Europe, whereas among advanced nations (at least those reviewed by Gornick and Meyers), America has the *worst* paid leave policies. And this means, of course, that impoverished youths in America suffer more because their parents cannot afford to take leaves to deal with their problems.

*Tax-supported, national health care systems.* Health care costs have long been a concern in advanced nations, and those costs are now escalating sharply. This escalation poses a serious challenge everywhere, but the challenge is worse in the U.S. where the per capita costs of health care are highest in the world.

How much more do Americans pay for health care? Answers for this question may be found in recent publications by Gerard Anderson and his colleagues from Johns Hopkins University. Drawing on evidence largely from OECD, these scholars have been studying health care costs, access to health care, and outcomes of differences in health care support among advanced, industrialized nations.<sup>44</sup> An article they published in 1999 provided estimates for average per capita health care costs within advanced countries during 1997, and they converted costs in each country into U.S. dollar equivalencies using purchasing power figures available for that year. Data they reported for the 22 advanced nations we have been tracking are given in Exhibit 3.10. As can be seen there, Anderson and his colleagues estimated that the typical American paid \$3,925 for health care during 1997, whereas per capita health care costs for *all* other countries that year were less than two thirds of the American figure, and health care cost disparities such as these persist to this day. These are huge differences.

**Exhibit 3.10. Per Capita Spending for Health Care in Advanced, Industrialized Nations for 1997**



Source: *Health Spending, Access, and Outcomes: Trends in Industrialized Countries* (Anderson G. F., & Poullier, J. P., 1999, Exhibit 1).

Why should health care costs be so much greater in America? Although several reasons may be cited, the major one is that *all* other advanced nations have tax-supported, national health care systems that provide entitlement services for citizens, legal residents, and often visitors, whereas the United States does not. Instead, health care costs in the U.S. are covered through a patchwork of private and public programs that serve only specific persons in the population, add hugely to administrative costs, and require that most Americans pay personally for health care costs out of posttax dollars.<sup>45</sup>

Some critics have claimed that the U.S. has no tax-supported health care services, but this is not true. Rather, the American government has already set up a hodgepodge of public, tax-supported programs that serve only specified persons in the population. Some of these support health needs for designated groups, such as members of the armed forces, veterans, and some high-status civil servants (e.g., federal judges, federal legislators, and top-level federal administrators). As well, three larger health care programs are also funded through federal taxes: Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP. *Medicare* is an entitlement program that supports a wide range of health needs, but only for elderly Americans. *Medicaid* is a means-tested program that is supposed to defray health care costs for those with low incomes, but responsibility for its services are assigned to the states, and state programs vary sharply in the ranges of persons they cover and the benefits they provide. In addition, securing payments from Medicaid involves a lot of bureaucratic hassle, eligibility for it may require low-income persons to forego employment or dispose of meager resources, and federal support for it is both threatened and inadequate. The *State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)* is a means-tested program that was designed to fund health insurance for struggling families with children whose modest incomes are too high to qualify for Medicaid. However, coverage and services funded through SCHIP again vary sharply among the states, the program is underfunded and politically controversial, and it has failed to stem growth in the numbers of noninsured children from families it was designed to serve.<sup>46</sup>

Given limitations of such programs, it is small wonder that the bulk of nonelderly Americans do *not* now have access to tax-supported health care services, and low-income Americans, who might or might not have their health expenses covered by Medicaid and SCHIP, have learned not to depend on them. Given such conditions, nonelderly Americans are strongly encouraged to purchase health insurance from private companies or become members of Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs). But these investor-owned services are expensive, and most Americans who use them do so because the bulk of their costs are supported through "benefit packages" provided by employers.

The custom of tying health care benefits to employment provides support for some (although not all) working Americans and their families, but it has obvious flaws. Health care benefits are expensive, and firms that offer them must cover their costs by reducing salaries, raising prices, or cutting profits. (And for this reason, large firms in the United States often find it difficult to compete with firms in other advanced countries where workers' health care costs are covered

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by taxes.) In addition, workers are normally unable to retain health benefits if they lose their jobs or the firm that employs them closes down, and often those benefits disappear when workers retire. Worse, many firms do *not* provide health benefits, and this is particularly true for smaller firms, those that pay minimal wages, and those that are not under pressure from unions. The system also leaves unemployed persons out in the cold, and each year the number of firms offering health care benefits declines because of escalating health care costs.

Large administrative costs are also generated when health care costs are covered by private insurance companies and HMOs. Such organizations establish and enforce their own rules and procedures, generate huge amounts of paperwork, must provide salaries for those who labor in and manage their offices as well as profits for their investors, and require the presence of a federal bureaucracy that supervises and monitors their work. (As well, in order to maximize profits, private insurance companies constantly create additional rules and paperwork designed to *reduce* the scope of health care costs they must pay for.) Such administrative costs and disincentives are largely avoided in other advanced countries.

All of this sounds bad, but the American system creates additional problems. When nations have a tax-supported, universal health care system, much of their citizens' medical costs are covered by "pretax" Euros (or Kroners, or Pounds Sterling, whatever). Within the U.S., in contrast, most health care costs are covered by "posttax" dollars, and this means that Americans typically pay additional, "hidden," taxes to cover their medical costs. In effect, Americans with a given level of medical expenses have less posttax, discretionary income than do citizens with equivalent medical expenses in other advanced nations.

Individuals and families in other advanced countries also need not worry about paying personally for the huge costs of a catastrophic illness—such as acute leukemia, badly broken limbs, open-heart surgery, life-threatening birth defects, lung cancer, Parkinsonism, rheumatoid arthritis, severe spine injuries, Alzheimer's Disease, massive strokes or heart attacks, and the like—whereas such possibilities remain a constant threat for Americans who do not have and cannot afford medical insurance or the cost of joining an HMO. As I write, at least 46 million persons in the U.S. have *no* insurance or HMO coverage for health care costs, and a million or more persons join their ranks each year. Many of these people live in families where parents are unemployed, earn low incomes, or have no access to health benefits provided by an employer. The chance of any one individual coming down with a catastrophic illness during any given year is small, but over the years most families will experience one or more of these horrors, and when this happens in other advanced nations, those families need not declare bankruptcy. Within the United States, in contrast, catastrophic illnesses can generate financial ruin for families, and this is especially true for those families with low incomes. When catastrophic illness strikes then, the American health system *drags* many families into poverty.

And if such problems were not hair-raising enough, the American health care system creates yet another type of burden less often found in other advanced

countries. *Preventive* health care is both more humane and less expensive than *reactive* health care which only kicks in when the victim is truly ill. This is widely understood, and most nations with entitlement-based, national health care systems set up networks of tax-supported clinics that offer preventive health services for their residents, particularly those who are vulnerable to health problems such as recent immigrants, disadvantaged minorities, the elderly, persons with low incomes, infants, and children. Such clinics generate lower rates of chronic diseases and longer lives in those countries, and their governments are spared the extra costs of treating serious illnesses that could have been avoided with early treatment. In contrast, the American system provides few incentives for setting up such clinics. HMOs typically provide clinics for their members, of course, but other Americans often have no access to such facilities, and those who are uninsured often must choose between ignoring the early signs of serious illness or seeking treatment at the (costly) emergency rooms of their local hospitals. Not surprisingly then, the average American has a shorter life span than average persons in other advanced countries, and again the burdens of inadequate preventive care and its tragic effects fall more heavily on those with low incomes in the United States.

To summarize then: America differs from *all* other advanced nations in that it does not have a tax-supported, national health care system which provides universal, entitlement-based health services. As a consequence, Americans pay more for health services, and these additional costs are imposed alike on persons with high incomes as well as those with middle and low incomes. But when compared with low-income families in other advanced nations, *low-income families in America pay much more for health services, are more often provided only substandard health care, cannot afford or cannot find preventive health services, suffer more from chronic illnesses and shortened life spans, and are more likely to be faced with financial disasters generated by catastrophic illness.*<sup>47</sup> And this means, of course, that impoverished American youths are likely to pass through infancy and childhood without receiving the medical services that middle- and upper-income American youths take for granted—that they are likely to enter primary schools, for example, without ever having visited a pediatrician, an optometrist, or a dentist. And as we shall see shortly, the handicaps they suffer as a result pose serious problems for them as they struggle to succeed in schools.

*Commentary.* As with cash-award benefits then, it is easy to understand why access to tax-supported, noncash social services such as:

- strong day care and preschool facilities,
- paid leave policies, and
- entitlement-based, universal health care systems

provide benefits for low-income families which help reduce rates of poverty for youths in many advanced countries. And when it comes to these services, it is clear that needs for them are *less* often met in the U.S., and this creates additional costs for low-income families. Thus, we should now conclude that *when it comes to typical noncash benefits which generate help for impoverished youths and*

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*their families, such benefits are widely available and provide substantial help in other advanced nations but not in the United States.*

Given such sharp differences in the availability of tax-supported, cash and noncash benefits, how do these differences affect the daily lives of low-income youths? The ideal way to answer this question would be to study the problems and activities of low-income youngsters in differing countries, or perhaps to interview youths from those nations about their daily experiences, but to the best of my knowledge such studies have not been reported.

Recently, however, a striking book has appeared, written by Judith Warner, a perceptive and articulate journalist, who contrasted her own experiences of motherhood and family life in two advanced countries, France and the United States.<sup>48</sup> Although Warner focused on mothers and the problems of middle-income, professional women with children, much of what she writes speaks also to the lives of families and youths with low incomes. Exhibit 3.11 provides a sample of her observations, but one must read more extensively in her book to truly understand her outrage about the lack of tax-supported social supports in the United States and how American mothers are encouraged to blame themselves for problems this creates. As well, Warner argues that France offers a good model for benefits that ought to be available in the United States—a thesis that was initially promoted a decade earlier in careful studies published by Barbara Bergmann.<sup>49</sup>

### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Putting the evidence of this chapter together, we learn that America stands alone among advanced nations for its miserable treatment of low-income families and the youths that live in them. When compared with other nations, salaries earned by low-income workers are lower in the United States, income taxes and social security contributions paid by such workers are more burdensome, and social benefits available to low-income families elsewhere are either missing or poorly supported in the U.S. And as a result, the poverty rate among youths is far higher in America than in comparable nations, and this generates—in turn—“world leading” rates of the nasty problems that poverty creates.

As in Chapter Two, these findings sharply challenge a number of stereotypes that Americans tend to embrace. I began this chapter by observing that many Americans assume their country leads the advanced world in wages paid, tax benefits offered, and social services provided for low-income parents and their families, and that—as a result—youth poverty rates are lower in the U.S. than in—let us say—Europe, Japan, or Australia. Alas, these beliefs are stunningly at odds with the evidence. When compared with how other advanced nations treat these vulnerable, disadvantaged families and the youths who live in them, the United States has the *worst* record for success and benevolence, standard of living, moral conduct, and care for the needy.

**Exhibit 3.11. Judith Warner's Story**

If you have been brought up, all your life, being told you have wonderful choices, you tend, when things go wrong, to assume you made the wrong choices—not to see that the “choices” given you were wrong in the first place .... Similarly, when, for the full course of your motherhood, you live and breathe the overheated smog of The Mess, you tend not to even notice it around you .... It came as a shock to me because, for my first three and a half blessed years of motherhood, I knew something very different .... I didn't realize it then, but I was in paradise.

I was living in France, a country that has an astounding array of benefits for families—and for mothers in particular. When my children were born, I stayed in the hospital for five comfortable days. I found a nanny through a free, community-based referral service, then employed her, legally and full-time, for a cost to me of about \$10,500 a year, after tax breaks. My elder daughter, from the time she was eighteen months of age, attended excellent part-time preschools where she painted and played with modelling clay and ate cookies and napped for about \$150 per month—the top end of the fee scale. She could have started public school at age three, and could have opted to stay until 5 P.M. daily. My friends who were covered by the French social security system (which I did not pay into) had even greater benefits: at least four months of paid maternity leave, the right to stop working for up to three years and have jobs held for them, cash grants, after their second children were born, starting at about \$105 per month.

I didn't realize what a unique gift [I had then] ... how good I had it in France overall. I had no basis for comparison. True, when I spoke to my friends who'd become mothers back home in the States, I was struck by how grim and strange their lives sounded. One friend warned, as my first pregnancy advanced, “You'd better stop trying to have a career.” Another was spending her entire after-tax salary on child care. And another, after eight gruelling years of medical school and internships, was feeling guilty about leaving her baby with a part-time sitter to pursue her career as a psychiatrist.

All this sounded crazy to me. I figured my friends had to be bringing their problems upon themselves. The one who wouldn't fire an obviously inadequate nanny? Well, she's always suffered from liberal guilt. The one who drove herself to a state of nervous exhaustion after a year of sleepless nights in the “family bed?” Well, she had a problem with separation anxiety. This all seemed very foreign. I just couldn't relate.

And then I moved back to America ....

—Judith Warner (2005, pp. 9-11)

Do you find this shocking? I certainly do. As was suggested early in the chapter, when I was young I too embraced the Tale that my country, the United States, was uniquely successful and benevolent. And when I first began to explore evidence for this chapter, I fully expected to find at least one or two realms where the U.S. “leads the way” in policies that support the lives of low-income youths and their families. Alas, I've yet to find those realms, and I'm still shocked to have learned about the *many* types of programs, pioneered in other nations, that truly solve problems for disadvantaged youths—programs that are ignored or only weakly mirrored in my country.



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In addition, if you are like me, you may have been struck by the sharp disjuncture between how America and other advanced nations spend revenues they collect through general taxes and social security contributions. Rates collected in the U.S. for such revenues are comparable to rates for revenues gathered in many other advanced nations, but other advanced countries use far more of those revenues to fund benefits for low-income families and the youths who live in them. If the United States devotes only a fraction of its tax-and-contribution revenues to such benefits, what on earth does it do with the remaining revenues it collects; what alternative “needs” does it fund?

If one were to judge from far-right propaganda and media preoccupations, a good deal of those revenues are “wasted” because they support unnecessary entitlement programs, graft and corruption, and lazy persons who merely pretend to be needy. But other advanced countries also fund entitlement programs—and graft, corruption, and laziness are hardly confined to the United States—so these are not satisfactory answers. Rather, Americans annually spend more than half of their federal tax dollars *supporting a massive military budget, fighting foreign wars, and making huge annual interest payments* on their national debt, whereas other advanced nations spend far smaller portions of their taxes on weapons, foreign wars, and debt servicing.

Let us explore the size of these differences. The only other advanced nation I know well is Australia, where I have lived on several occasions. During one of these visits I had opportunity to compare federal budgets and social benefits in Australia and my native land. At that time (when America was *not* pursuing disastrous, highly expensive, foreign wars), spending for military needs in the United States was consuming a “mere” 40% of its federal budget, whereas Australia was then devoting a “huge” 4% of its federal budget to such purposes! What was Australia doing with the remaining 36% of its federal budget? Funding the bulk of an entitlement-based, universal health care system (of course), as well as paying for student tuition in its universities, conducting research related to national needs, building and maintaining transportation and infrastructure facilities, supporting innovative social programs for elderly persons, and—of course—financing benefits for low-income families and their youths. Imagine what the United States might do to meet other pressing needs and fund better social benefit programs if 36% of its federal budget were suddenly to be freed up!

But when I make this point in public lectures, I am sometimes challenged by good hearted Americans who ask: “But isn’t it true that Australia and other advanced nations have small military budgets precisely because they know that, if push comes to shove, America will defend them?” Indeed, this is surely true, but who then are the suckers? Ever since the Second World War and—more recently—the fall of the Soviet Union, Americans have been told that their country, its values, its culture, and its political persuasions are now triumphant in the world—that this is now The American Era. It would be passing strange if the price of such dominance was that the United States had to endure a lower standard of living than was common in the other advanced nations it was “protecting” with its arms—but, alas, it seems that such a lower standard of living

is exactly what Americans have been imposing on both middle-income and impoverished families and youths in their land.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Robert Reich (1987) for the concept of “Tales” used to express major themes in American myth culture. Various authors have discussed issues involved when trying to determine whether organized beliefs are part of a dominant ideology—see, for example, Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1980) and Scott (1985).
- <sup>2</sup> Contemporary versions of the tale may be found in many places, see for example Peterson (1993, pp. 48-50), Rank (2004, pp. 171-176), and Reich (1987, pp. 9-11).
- <sup>3</sup> Loewen (1995).
- <sup>4</sup> Blank & Hanratty (1993).
- <sup>5</sup> Data for Exhibit 3.1 came from United Nations Children’s Fund (2005, Figure 1, p. 4). Similar data may be found in Bergmann (1996, p. 6); Bradbury and Jäntti (2001a, p. 15; 2001b, p. 70); Bradshaw (2000); Coder, Rainwater, and Smeeding (1989, p. 322); Gornick and Meyers (2003, p. 74); Rainwater and Smeeding (2003, p. 21); and Smeeding (2002b, Figure 1). Note also that the exhibit compares data for 22 nations chosen to represent the advanced, industrialized world. Whenever possible, I will use these same countries when reporting comparisons throughout the chapter. Some types of data are not always available from all countries, however, and I will alert readers when countries are “missing” from a comparison.
- <sup>6</sup> See Smeeding (2002b); Smeeding, Rainwater, and Burtless (2001); or United Nations Children’s Fund (2005).
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Brooks-Gunn (1995); Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997); Chase-Landsdale and Brooks-Gunn (1995); Danziger, Danziger, and Stern (1997); Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997a, 2000); Hill and Sandfort (1995); Huston (1991); Jencks and Mayer (1990); McLoyd (1998); and Sherman (1994).
- <sup>8</sup> Danziger, Sandefur, and Weinberg (1994); Klerman (1991a, b); Maynard (1995).
- <sup>9</sup> See Alan Guttmacher Institute (1994); Danziger, Danziger, and Stern (1997); Hofferth (1987); Hogan and Kitagawa (1985); Jones et al. (1985); Klerman (1991a); Maynard (1997); Social Exclusion Unit (1999).
- <sup>10</sup> See United Nations Children’s Fund (2001, p. 4).
- <sup>11</sup> Moreover, other studies have found that America generates a much higher rate of teenage abortions than most other advanced nations—see United Nations Children’s Fund (2001) or Singh and Darroch (2000). And since most pregnancies end in abortions or births, this also means that the teenage pregnancy rate is higher in American than in the rest of the industrialized world.
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Janson (2000); Meyers, et al. (2002); Sedlak and Broadhurst (1996); Trocmé, et al. (2001). All of these sources stress that other factors such as prior parental experiences with violence and single parenthood also play a part, but poverty seems to be the strongest identifiable cause of abuse.
- <sup>13</sup> Pelton (1994, pp. 166-167).
- <sup>14</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (2003, p. 4). Note also that the Innocenti Research Centre provided no data for Luxembourg in its 2003 report, so that country is not included in Exhibit 3.3.
- <sup>15</sup> Williams and Kotch (2001) provide useful references for recent studies that have confirmed American “leadership” in infant mortality during recent years. As these authors also point out, America also “leads” other advanced nations in rates of injuries among infants and young children.
- <sup>16</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005). Also see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004).
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, Danziger, Danziger, and Stern (1997); Hofferth (1987); Sherman (1994); Stein, Campbell, Day, McPherson, and Cooper (1987); Stockwell, Swanson, and Wicks (1988); Wise, Kotelchuck, Wilson, and Mills (1985).
- <sup>18</sup> Heuveline (2002); Williams and Kotch (2001).

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- <sup>19</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Table A.1). Note that Exhibit 3.5 displays data for only 13 of the 22 advanced nations we have been tracking. The OECD report provides no information about minimal wages in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. Most of these latter have enacted no national, minimum-wage statute.
- <sup>20</sup> See Jaisal Noor of the Real News Network (2013) interviewing Salvatore Babones of the University of Sydney.
- <sup>21</sup> Indeed, economists have developed a host of wonderfully obscure concepts—“Gini Coefficients,” “Theil Coefficients,” “Lorenz Curves,” and the like—for comparing various aspects of income and wealth inequality among advanced nations. Much of this literature makes technical points that would add little to my presentation here.
- <sup>22</sup> Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto (2005, pp. 397-399). Note that Exhibit 3.6 displays data for only 16 of the 22 nations we have been tracking. Data for the remaining six nations—Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, and Spain—were apparently not available and were not reported by Mishel, et al.
- <sup>23</sup> Phillips (2002, Chart 3.6, p. 124).
- <sup>24</sup> Duncan and Murnane (2011).
- <sup>25</sup> If typical family composition was the same and able-bodied adults always worked for wages in each advanced country, average incomes for low-income households would also be very low in the United States. But low-income adults are *more* likely to seek employment in America—because American ideology praises those who work for a living, and because tax-supported social services are weak in America—although this is less true elsewhere. And this means that low-income households in a few advanced countries actually have *less* cash income than low-income households in the United States.
- <sup>26</sup> See United Nations Children’s Fund (2005, p. 21, Figure 9). As in Exhibit 1, net youth-poverty estimates are based on total household income after the values of taxes are deducted and the values of transfers for social benefits are added back. Figure 9 in the UNICEF report provided no comparative data for Austria, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, and Spain.
- <sup>27</sup> See, for example, Bergmann (1996); Bradbury, Jenkins, and Micklewright (2001); Bradshaw, Ditch, Holmes, and Whiteford (1993); Cornia and Danziger (1997); Gornick and Meyers (2003); Kamerman and Kahn (1989, 1991); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004); McFate, Lawson, and Wilson (1995); Vlemminckx and Smeeding (2001); and Vroman and Brusentsev (2005).
- <sup>28</sup> See Bradshaw, Ditch, Holmes, and Whiteford (1993) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003).
- <sup>29</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004). Note that my coverage here is confined to cash awards that offer targeted help for low-income youths and their families. Advanced nations provide additional types of cash awards for other needy persons in their populations, such as those who are elderly and young adults who lack work experience, but these provide little direct help for low-income youths and are not reviewed here.
- <sup>30</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Tables 1.2 and 1.3).
- <sup>31</sup> Also see data displayed in a recent book by Wayne Vroman and Vera Brusentsev who calculated a “generosity index” to express the level of support provided for unemployed workers in different countries. Of the nations these authors surveyed, 13 came from the OECD list displayed in Exhibit 3.8, and (according to their figures) the United States provided the *least* generous benefits for unemployed workers (see Vroman & Brusentsev, 2005, Table 3.3).
- <sup>32</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Table 1.6).
- <sup>33</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Table 1.7).
- <sup>34</sup> America does provide brief, terminating cash assistance for low-income families under its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, but benefits under this program are not based on the current number of children in each family but rather on family size at time of application. In addition, benefit amounts and durations under the program vary from state to state.
- <sup>35</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Tables 1.8, 1.9).

## YOUTH POVERTY IN THE INDUSTRIALIZED WORLD

- <sup>36</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, p. 39).
- <sup>37</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Table 1.10).
- <sup>38</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, Table 1.4).
- <sup>39</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004, p. 31).
- <sup>40</sup> Prior to 1996, the United States had a benefits program in place entitled Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) that provided larger cash awards for social assistance. That year AFDC was replaced by a less generous program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as part of the “Welfare Reform” package sponsored by President Bill Clinton and passed that year by Congress.
- <sup>41</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001).
- <sup>42</sup> Gornick and Meyers (2003, Chapter 7).
- <sup>43</sup> Gornick and Meyers (2003, Chapter 5).
- <sup>44</sup> See, for example, Anderson and Poullier (1999), Anderson and Hussey (2001), and Anderson, Frogner, Johns, and Reinhardt (2006).
- <sup>45</sup> Most of what I write in this section describes the American health care system just before passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, enacted by Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2010. Although this act addresses one or two of the problems that have traditionally plagued American health care, it does not remedy the bulk of those problems, it does not set up a tax-supported, national health care system (but rather, reinforces the roles of health insurance companies and HMOs, the costliest features of American medicine), its provisions are still an anathema to far-right Republicans, and because they are complex and pose only minimal challenges for my presentation, I do not describe those provisions here.
- <sup>46</sup> Espe (2007).
- <sup>47</sup> See Sapolsky (2005).
- <sup>48</sup> Warner (2005).
- <sup>49</sup> See Bergmann (1993, 1996).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### POVERTY IN HOMES AND EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

If there is one universal finding from educational research, it is that poverty is at the core of most school failures. And this is as true for white children from Appalachia as for black and Hispanic children from inner-city slums.

—Harold L. Hodgkinson (1995, pp. 176-178)

This chapter expands the scope of our quest and takes a careful look at links between *poverty in the homes* of young Americans and their *failure in education*. And since we know from Chapter Two that “impoverished” youths are those who live in impoverished homes, the findings examined in this chapter also concern key links between *youth poverty* and *educational failure*. Three key questions are addressed in this chapter:

- First, are youths from impoverished homes more likely to fail in education, and if so, is the association between poverty and educational failure a *strong* one? (As shall be seen, controversies have arisen over such matters, and these have reflected both confusions between the concepts of social class, family income, and poverty as well as inadequacies in tools used to assess poverty. But studies that circumvent these issues have reported consistent and strong findings about the tie between family poverty and educational failure for American youths.)
- Second, is the association between poverty and educational failure *causal*; do the experiences of poverty in their families *cause* youths to fail in American schools? (Again, controversies have arisen about this issue. Poverty effects have been confused with those of race, ethnicity, and other “risk” factors associated with failure, and far-right voices have argued that its effects on educational failure are not caused by the experiences of poverty but rather are the product of poor persons’ personal or cultural “deficiencies.” Such confusions and arguments are crucially important for how Americans think about education and its improvement.)
- Third, what do results from research on this topic *suggest* for American beliefs about forces leading to success in the United States and whether American schools do or do not create a “level playing field” for youths in the country?

This last question bears on another mythic Tale that is widely embraced in the United States. The Tale I now describe involves two beliefs about the causes of success, the first concerned with *individual efficacy*. As various authors have noted, success in America has long been thought to reflect personal initiative—the abilities, self-confidence, hard work, and knowledge possessed by the individual. According to Robert Reich, for example, Americans have long embraced notions about “The Triumphant Individual.”

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This is the story of the little guy who works hard, takes risks, believes in himself, and eventually earns wealth, fame, and honor. It's the parable of the self-made man (or, more recently, woman) who bucks the odds, spurns the naysayers, and shows what can be done with enough drive and guts. He's a loner and a maverick, true to himself, plain speaking, self-reliant, uncompromising in his ideals. He gets the job done.

—Robert Reich (1987, p. 9)

Or, here is how Randy Albelda and Chris Tilly express the same idea:

The United States—far more than other countries—worships the “individual.” People admire and promote the ability of individuals to rise above adversity and take control of their environment through self-initiative. Stories of “self-made men” abound, and a whole folklore glorifies the “rugged individual,” underscoring the notion that people's fortunes (or misfortunes) are largely of their own making.

—Randy Albelda & Chris Tilly (1997, p. 19)

However, the concept of individual efficacy is only part of beliefs about accomplishment in the United States; the American success story also embraces a second notion about *the need for education*. Although a few persons may “make it” by themselves, success in most fields is also thought to require additional knowledge and skills provided through schooling. Aware of this need, the United States pioneered and now supports an extensive network of public schools and universities that offer access to knowledge and skills deemed necessary for success. Such institutions are presumably open to all persons and are designed to create a “level playing field” for everyone who wants to learn. And since these conditions are thought to be met in the main, the concept of individual efficacy is also assumed to apply *within* American schools and universities where success is also thought to reflect the abilities, self-confidence, hard work, and knowledge possessed by the student.

Again, many authors have given voice to this second idea. According to Richard Leone, for example, “one of the twentieth-century keys—perhaps the central one—to achieving upward mobility in the United States [has been] the public education system.”<sup>1</sup> Or, consider the phrasing of Isabel Sawhill and Sara McLanahan:

The United States has long been viewed as a place where with hard work most people can succeed, whatever their family background ... [But] Americans have [also] viewed education as the primary way for children from less advantaged backgrounds to move up the economic ladder. And America was the first country to provide free elementary education to all children, at least in the northern states.

—Isabel Sawhill & Sara McLanahan (2006, pp. 3, 8)

Taken by itself, this second belief can also imply that education provides a *sufficient* antidote for poverty in the U.S. Consider, for example, the enthusiastic words of President Lyndon Johnson, uttered in 1965 upon signing an Elementary and Secondary Bill: “I know that education is the only passport from poverty.”<sup>2</sup> Such beliefs can, in turn, provide an excuse for arguing against other social policies that would provide direct relief from poverty, and I return to this unfortunate outtake in Chapter Seven.

Other authors have acknowledged American beliefs in the powers of education but have also raised questions about its premises. A key question asks whether the educational system lives up to its ideals, whether that system actually provides equal access and a “level playing field” for all students. Consider how this concern is raised, for instance, by Roslyn Mickelson and Stephen Smith:

Parents, politicians, and educational policy makers share the belief that a “good education” is *the* meal ticket. It will unlock the door to economic opportunity and thus enable disadvantaged groups or individuals to improve their lot dramatically. This belief is one of the assumptions that has long been part of the American Dream ... [a dream which] assumes that American society is open and competitive, a place where an individual’s status depends on talent and motivation, not inherited position, connections, or privileges linked to ascriptive characteristics like gender or race. To compete fairly, everyone must have access to education free of the fetters of family background, gender, and race.

—Roslyn Mickelson & Stephen Smith (2001, p. 376)

But despite these beliefs, American education has *not* always provided equal opportunities for students who are disadvantaged because of race, gender, ethnicity, lack of language fluency, or family circumstances, and Mickelson and Smith continue by noting that “since the middle of [the twentieth] century, the reform policies of the federal government have been designed, at least officially, to enhance [such] individuals’ opportunities to acquire education.” So, although the system is thought to provide a “level playing field” for the bulk of students, it does not always treat “disadvantaged” youths fairly, and most Americans would agree that such inequities should be rectified.

Why have these inequities appeared? Here the Tale breaks into competing diagnoses with differing implications for action. Some Americans believe that problems are generated by *structural features* of the society or educational system and that these can be remedied by appropriate remedial actions. An example of this type of reasoning appeared in the Supreme Court’s 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision which argued that prospects for Black students were inherently harmed by racial segregation in schools and concluded that the latter should be abolished.

Other Americans (led by far-right voices) argue that the fault lies largely with the *educators* who staff some of America’s schools and universities; that these persons too lack appropriate abilities, self-confidence, willingness to work

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hard, or knowledge needed to perform well on their jobs. And this type of reasoning undergirded President George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* legislation which blamed teachers and school principals when "disadvantaged" students did not earn acceptable achievement scores in their schools.

These competing diagnoses have generated controversies and conflicting prescriptions for action, but advocates from both sides of the debate would agree that education is needed to provide the knowledge and skills needed for success, that the American public education system was formed, at least in part, to provide these boons for all who want to learn, and that—even though the current system may not always treat some youths fairly—it provides a "level playing field" for most students.

Putting these ideas together, we discover a second mythic Tale—the *American Success Story*—which stresses both individual initiative and faith in American education. As with earlier Tales, the American Success Story is associated with stereotypic beliefs, among them:

- that most youths in America can succeed if only they have sufficient talent, motivation, and access to education;
- that, in America, success in education leads to success in life;
- that most American students who fall behind in schools do so because they are lazy, stupid, or lack self-discipline;
- that American students who lack language fluency, or are Black or Hispanic, or come from other "disadvantaged" groups may bear unique burdens that handicap them for education, but well-run schools can overcome these handicaps; and
- that because public education is open to all who want to learn in America, it largely provides equal opportunities for rich and poor alike.

These beliefs may or may not be correct, of course, and we should also expect to find findings bearing on them in this chapter.

As it turns out, a great deal of research has now appeared that explores links between youth poverty and educational failure. As we shall see, this research has taken various forms and generated a host of findings, but the issues addressed by this research and the conclusions it has generated are easy to understand. To this research I now turn.

### EXPLORATORY SURVEYS, CONFUSIONS, AND A STRONG ASSOCIATION

Poverty, often measured under the labels of family income level, occupational prestige, social class, socioeconomic status or background, and economic disadvantage, is the most consistently associated indicator of poor academic achievement and school failure.

—Deborah Land & Nettie Legters (2002, pp. 4-5)

We begin with early studies that explored associations between poverty and educational failure, and immediately we encounter a challenge. Studies examined in earlier chapters were focused on *one* type of event—youth poverty—but



studies concerned with causes and effects always explore relations among (at least) *two* types of events—in our case, youth poverty and educational outcomes. This means that we must now examine more complex research designs that are subject to problems not encountered heretofore. These problems have spawned several forms of research, each associated with different types of findings.

As a rule, research concerned with relations among events begins with exploratory studies that examine cases where those various events can be assessed. When making such studies, investigators prefer to examine *all* cases in a population where such events might co-occur, but this is often impossible. And when it can't be done, investigators normally begin by conducting *exploratory surveys* based on samples of cases that should be sizable and provide an unbiased portrait of conditions in the population. Such surveys may or may not find significant relations among the events, of course, but when they do, findings from those studies are reported in published works where claims about those relations can be supported by appropriate tables, graphs, statistics, or other displays of evidence.

(To illustrate this process with a familiar analogy, research on the presumed tie between cigarette smoking and lung cancer among adults began with exploratory surveys, based on large and hopefully unbiased samples drawn from the adult population. These studies found sharply higher rates of lung cancer among adults who said they “had” versus those who said they “had not” smoked cigarettes for years, and findings from these studies appeared in professional publications along with supportive tables, graphs, correlations, or other statistics.)

Unfortunately, research on the presumed tie between youth poverty and educational failure did not begin this cleanly. Rather, it began with confusions that still plague studies of the topic. Although many small-scale surveys concerned with factors leading to educational outcomes had appeared earlier, the first, large, survey-based study of the issue did not appear until 1966. That year a young and talented sociologist, James Coleman, and several colleagues published an influential book entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* which reported results from a major, federally financed survey, based on a massive national sample, that investigated events leading to educational outcomes. Many findings appeared in this report, but in phrasing a key conclusion from their work, the authors wrote that:

Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his [sic] background and social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, [as well as their] neighborhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school.<sup>3</sup>

This conclusion appeared to confirm what many scholars and educators had long believed—that the *social class*—or *Socioeconomic Status (SES)*—of a youth's background is the major factor responsible for that youth's educational achievements and subsequent life chances in America, and many authors have

since embraced, reiterated, and built arguments based on this claim.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a host of researchers interested in the effects of disadvantage have since reported studies that have examined ties between the *SES* of youths' homes and outcomes for those youths in America.

Alas, this conclusion is also associated with problems. For one, authors often interpret findings about the impact of youths' *SES* as if they were findings about the impact of youths' *poverty*, and this is both confusing and unwise. As it happened, in 1982 Karl White published a thorough review of the nearly 200 survey-based studies (including The Coleman Report) that had, by then, examined relations between *SES* and academic achievement. White concluded that when those studies dealt with outcomes for individual students, they typically found only *weak* relations between social class and educational achievement(!),<sup>5</sup> and subsequent research has not challenged White's conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

What might account for this surprising result? Typical measures for *SES* bundle together at least three types of indicators for the social class of youths' homes—*family income*, *parental education*, and *status of the father's occupation*—and sometimes other indicators as well. This would make sense if one were to study the effects of *SES* in a typical European country during the 18th or 19th centuries where social class boundaries were rigid and such indicators were strongly co-related. But (although positively associated) family income, parental education, and occupational status are *not* strongly co-related for families in today's America,<sup>7</sup> so when researchers lump these three (and other) indicators together, they create mushy *SES* measures that are tied only *weakly* to student success. And this means, in turn, that empirical support for the key claim quoted above from The Coleman Report has always been weak. (In Chapter Six we revisit The Coleman Report and learn that the famous claim I quoted above reflected faulty methods used for analyzing data.)

What happens when researchers break apart mushy *SES* measures and examine the separate effects of family income, parental education, and occupational status? These three events have differing implications, so we should not be surprised to learn that they generate somewhat different results. As Karl White also noted, in "typical" studies, *family income* generates the strongest ties with education, *parental education* generates somewhat weaker results, and *occupational status* generates the weakest effects. Again, these differences should not surprise us. Of these three types of events, parental income should be most closely associated with poverty in the family, the unacknowledged elephant in America's living room.

But some authors also write about results they have found for *family income* as if those results were generated strictly by *poverty*, and this is also unwise. Typical studies of family income compute statistics for the *full* range of incomes and, in effect, assume that differences in income have the same impact on student outcomes at the top, middle, and bottom of the income range—but is this reasonable? All American families would likely rejoice if they received a \$10,000 raise in annual income (for example), but such an increase would have but little effect on the standard of living for affluent families. For poor families, however,

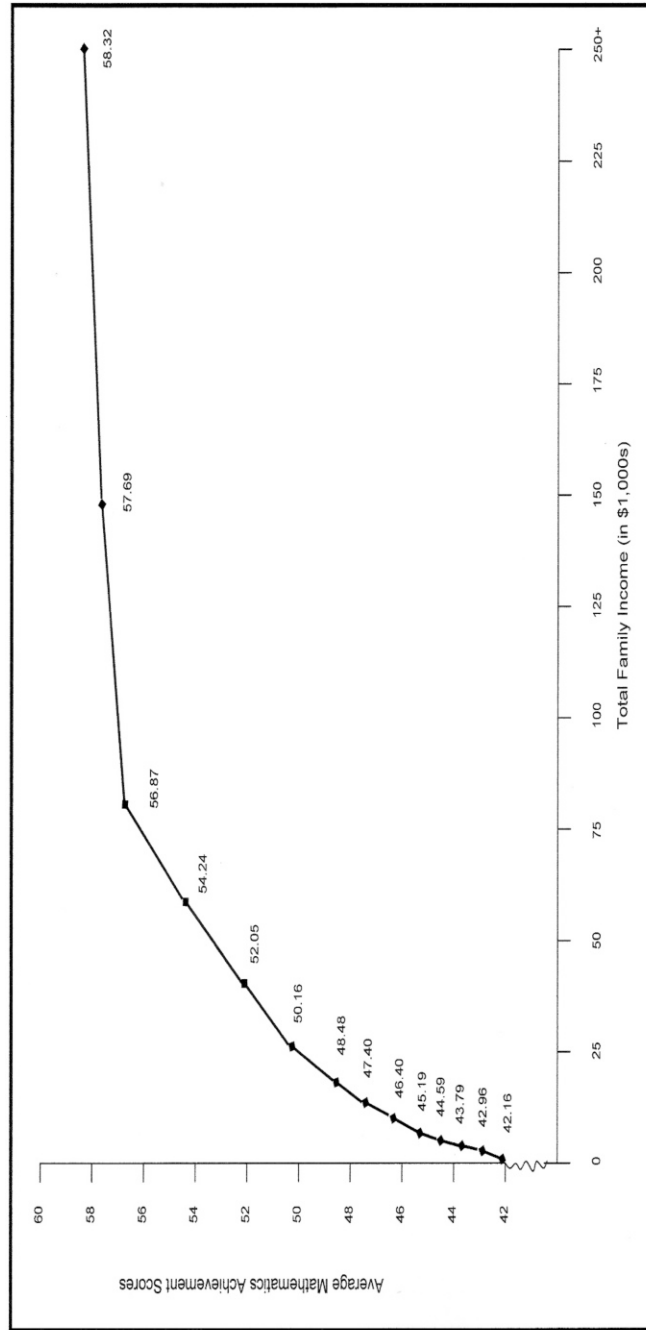
an increase of \$10,000 in annual income would make a *huge* difference in whether they could put food on their tables, let alone in whether they could support education for their youngsters. And this means that a given income difference should have *stronger* effects on student success for impoverished families, but *weaker* effects for families with middle- or upper-level incomes.

This argument suggests that family income and most forms of youth success—in education or in life—are *not* related in a simple, linear fashion, and it is easy to find evidence that illustrates this effect. For example, Exhibit 4.1 displays results from a nationwide survey, conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, that examined academic success for students who were in the eighth grade in 1988.<sup>8</sup> The data displayed are average mathematics achievement scores earned by students from families with various levels of income. As can be seen in the figure—if students in the study came from impoverished homes, even small additions to their family’s incomes would have typically helped them earn sharply improved achievement scores, but for students from middle-income and affluent families, small increases in their family’s incomes would have generated only minuscule achievement gains.<sup>9</sup> And this means that studies which examine ties between family income and educational outcomes (averaged across the full income range) will normally generate weaker findings than studies which explore ties between family *poverty* and the same outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

This does *not* mean that studies of the tie between family income and student success *always* report nonlinear effects. On the contrary, other studies have found *linear* relations between family income and some types of success indicators. To illustrate, Exhibit 4.2 displays national results drawn from the 2003 administration of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), an inventory designed to assess student potential for college performance.<sup>11</sup> This time the data displayed are average SAT scores earned by students from families with differing levels of average annual income, and—as can be seen—these results show that a family income and average SAT scores are linearly related across the full range of family incomes displayed. (In brief, each gain of \$10,000 in family income is typically associated with an additional 20 points or so in students’ SAT scores, and this finding seems to appear at all studied levels of family income.)

Why should the effects displayed in Exhibits 4.1 and 4.2 differ? For one thing, the data in Exhibit 4.1 came from a sample that included students from families representing the *full* range of incomes, but those in Exhibit 4.2 came from high school seniors who volunteered to take the SAT, thus reflected a sample that *did not* include the bulk of poor students. (Youths from impoverished homes often drop out of school early on, thus never become high school seniors; and even if they are still enrolled for the senior year, they often have weak academic records, poor morale, or limited aspirations—and, as a result, they avoid taking the SAT.) For another, studies based on surveys tend to show that family poverty has smaller effects for *older* students, but this trend may reflect an artifact. As we shall see shortly, it appears, in part, because most surveys ask only about “recent” poverty experiences, and most studies of poverty impact on

**Exhibit 4.1. Total Family Income and Average Eighth-Grade Students' Mathematics Achievement Scores**



Source: The data are from the first wave of *National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988--(NELS 88)* (National Center for Education Statistics (1996/2000)). The exhibit was prepared with assistance from Kevin Payne.

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate their family income by choosing from among various categories, each representing an income range. Data points in the figure represent the mid-points of these salary ranges.

SAT scores ask only about family income earned “last year.” And for a third, families higher on the income scale often give stress to enrollment in “the best colleges” and are able to offer many advantages that help their youngsters earn the high SAT scores that promote this goal. Such advantages are often referred to as *cultural* or *social capital*, and I shall also have more to say about them below.

Furthermore, data from the very recent past have begun to indicate that students from truly rich American families are beginning to soar ahead of students from both impoverished and even *middle-income* homes. Why should this be occurring now? As we already know, incomes for The Rich have been shooting ahead in recent years, while incomes for middle-income and poor Americans have been stagnant or have shrunk. And this means not only that rich families have enjoyed ever-increasing sources of disposable funds but also that they have been able to invest ever-larger shares of those funds in experiences providing educational advantages for their youngsters.<sup>12</sup> And this process is now generating another, important but so far smaller, type of nonlinear educational advantage associated with income in the U.S.

Be that as it may, well-informed scholars have long known that family income and educational outcomes are normally related nonlinearly, and some researchers have adopted complex strategies for adjusting family income data so that the “real” effects of income differences can be estimated. But these well-intentioned efforts miss the point. If *family poverty* is the true elephant in America’s living room, one should be studying the effects of poverty (rather than those of income), and this requires that one compare results for students from homes that are and are not *impoverished*. And when this is done, well-designed surveys find that poverty is *strongly* tied to student failure. Moreover, many such studies also report that student failure rates are sharply higher when those youths experience multiple years of poverty or come from “very poor” (rather than merely “moderately poor” or “near-poor”) families.<sup>13</sup>

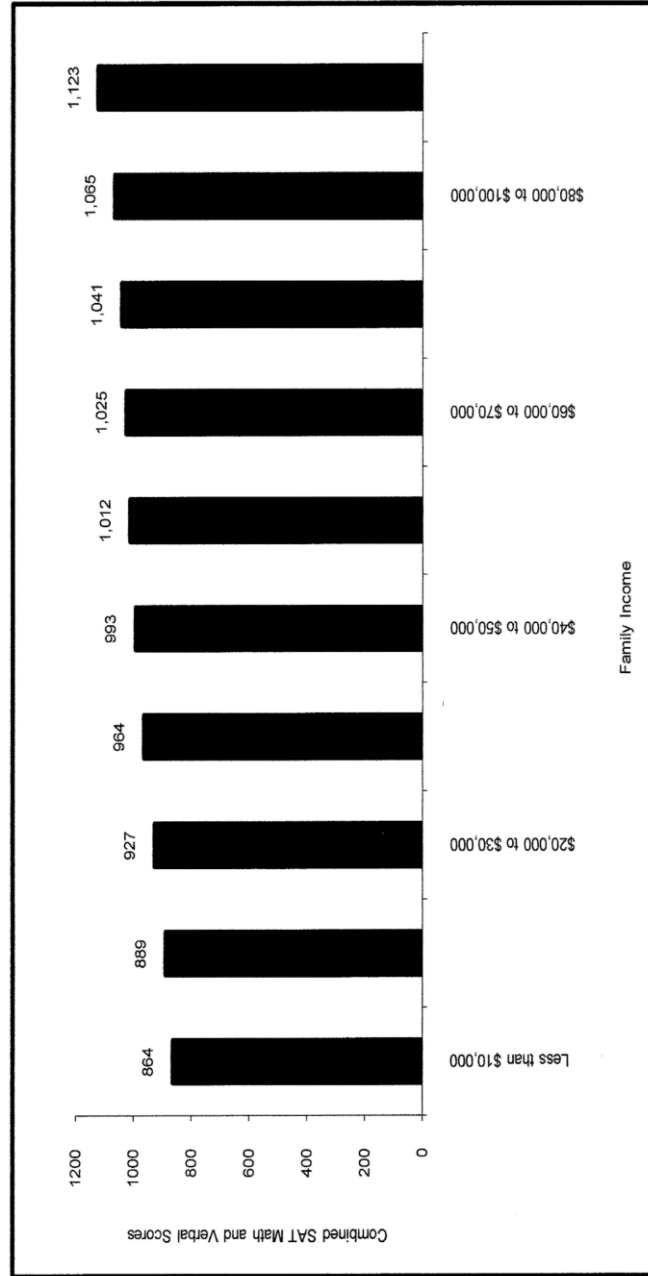
How strong are the ties between family poverty and student failure? Since researchers study many types of student outcomes, there is no simple answer for this question. Some feeling for the impact of poverty may be gained, however, by looking at data for several types of outcome. If we compare primary-age American youths who are and are not poor, on average the former:

- score 9 points lower on IQ tests at age 5;
- are 1.3 times more likely to be afflicted by learning disabilities and developmental delays in the early grades;
- score 11 to 25 percentiles lower on academic achievement tests from age 3 onwards; and
- are 2 percentage points more likely to fall behind normal grade level for every year spent in poverty.

These early outcomes are also associated with derivative problems, of course. By the time they reach the upper grades, typical impoverished American youths:

- are twice as likely to have repeated a grade,
- are twice as likely to have been expelled or suspended, and
- are 2.2 times as likely to have dropped out of school.<sup>14</sup>

**Exhibit 4.2. Average Combined SAT Mathematics and Verbal Scores by Family Income for the 2003 SAT Cohort**



Source: *Is the SAT a Wealth Test? Modeling the Influences of Family Income on Black and White Students' SAT Scores* (Dixon-Román, E., Everson, H. T., McArdle, J. J., & Michna, G. A., 2005).

By any standard, such data indicate *strong* links between youth poverty and educational failure in the United States.

Another way to judge the strength of links between family poverty and educational failure is to compare them with ties generated by other factors thought to place youngsters “at risk” for failure. Surveys that have made such comparisons almost always find that the ties between poverty and educational failure are *stronger* (and sometimes much stronger) than those found for other “risk” factors. This does not mean that all other “risk” factors have minor effects. On the contrary, sizable ties with educational failure are also found for some such factors, and this is particularly true for students who come from families that are Black or Hispanic, who live in a family with only one parent, or whose parents have completed only low levels of schooling. But however strong these latter ties, associations generated by family poverty are nearly always stronger.

To summarize then, many good exploratory surveys have now appeared that compare educational outcomes for students who do and do not experience poverty, and these studies lead to an initial finding that *family poverty and student educational failure are strongly associated in America*. As well, such surveys have indicated that *deeper levels of poverty are tied to higher rates of student failure in the U.S.* But despite the clarity of these findings, other survey-based studies have continued to appear that claim to have looked at the impact of poverty but have actually examined educational outcomes associated with the full range of family incomes or mushy SES scales. These latter studies have continued to generate weaker estimates for “poverty effects” (of course), and this has confused some researchers and reviewers. Whenever possible, my coverage from here on focuses on studies where *poverty* itself is assessed.

#### CAUSAL ISSUES, OTHER TYPES OF RESEARCH, AND ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Poverty takes an enormous physical, emotional, and economic toll on families, neighborhoods, and communities and therefore on children and schools. Denying the significance of poverty in schooling in the face of decades of research, testimony, and common sense requires profound naiveté or a frightening level of willed ignorance.

—Sue Books (2004, p. 134)

Let us assume, then, that studies based on exploratory surveys have uncovered a strong association between a *crucial event* and an *outcome*—in our case, student poverty and educational failure. Does this mean that the first of these events “causes” the other to appear—that poverty in their families is a crucial condition which generates failure for students, and that if we were to ameliorate that poverty, we would also improve educational chances for a fifth or more of America’s youngsters? Such a conclusion would be tempting but premature.

(To continue with an earlier analogy, once results from exploratory surveys were available, researchers were tempted to assume that smoking caused lung cancer, but this need not have been the case. Perhaps samples in those surveys

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were not truly unbiased, or persons with incipient lung cancer develop greater desires to smoke, or smoking and lung cancer interact in some weird way, or both reflect some unexamined but potent causes—such as genetic conditions or environmental stressors—that generate them both. And advocates for tobacco companies asserted for years that each of these alternative explanations might be possible, hence they argued that no public action should yet be taken to curtail smoking. So more information was then needed if one was to conclude that smoking actually *causes* lung cancer.)

The same reasoning applies to contentions that findings from surveys mean that poverty in the family *causes* educational failure. Far-right advocates, who have always opposed spending tax dollars to reduce poverty or improve public education, have also asked whether poverty actually causes student failure, and though reasonable persons might question their compassion, good sense, ideological commitments, or respect for research, more evidence would surely be needed if one were to make strong cases for the claim that youth poverty *causes* educational failure and for policies based on this conclusion. Several strategies are available for securing such evidence, each generates new types of information, and each has been used subsequently.

### *Panel-Study Evidence*

One way to strengthen the case for causality is to examine temporal evidence. If two types of events are known to be co-related and we learn that the first type of event occurs before the second, we are tempted to assume that the former is a cause and the latter an effect. And if we learn that variations in the strength of the first type of event appear over time and are matched by shifts in the strength of the second, our belief in causality is fortified. (To illustrate, survey-based studies of persons who smoke cigarettes have found that one must smoke for some years before lung cancer appears, and other studies of those who manage to quit smoking have found that, with each passing smoke-free year, chances for cancer decline. Both findings encourage belief that smoking is, indeed, a cause for lung cancer.)

Similarly, temporal evidence concerned with the tie between poverty and student failure has begun to appear. Much of this evidence has come from *panel studies*, in which large and hopefully unbiased samples of youths are followed over time, while some of their families fall into and climb out of poverty, and the educational consequences of these experiences are explored. I described one of these panel studies, the *PSID*, in Chapter Two (where challenges faced by panel research were also discussed briefly). Useful evidence has also come from other panel studies such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (*NLSY*), the Infant Health and Development Project (*IHDP*), the National Longitudinal Surveys (*NLS*), and the National Survey of Families and Households (*NSFH*), as well as longitudinal work growing out of the Detroit Area Study (*DAS*), the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (*WLS*), the NICHD-sponsored Study of Early



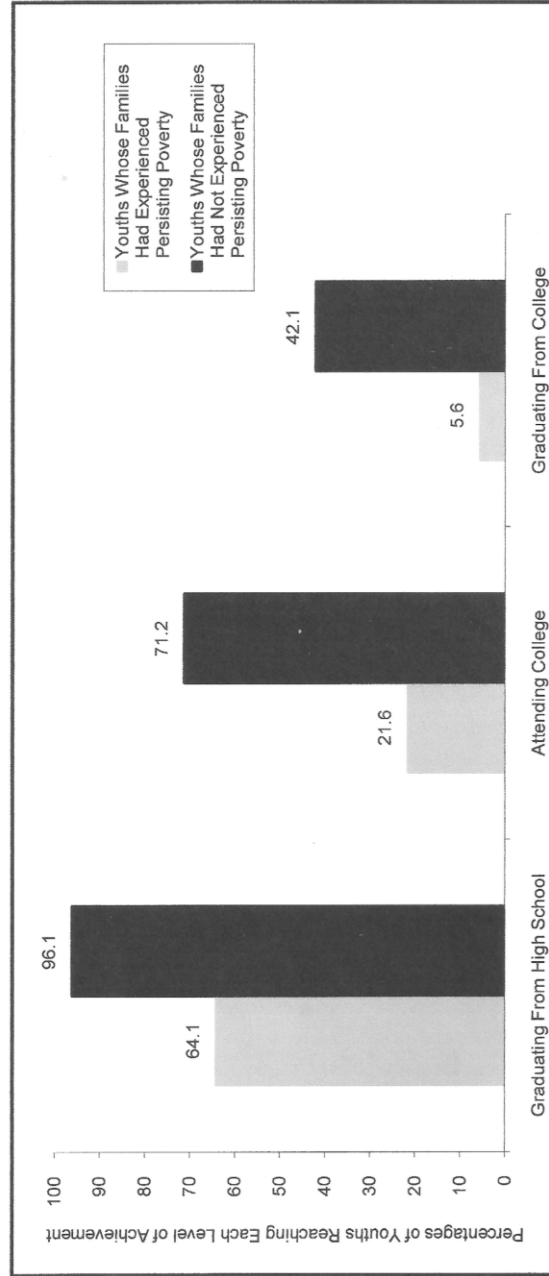
Child Care (SECC), and other data sources.<sup>15</sup> What findings have appeared from these efforts?

First, panel studies find that *when American families suffer from longer spells of poverty, youths from those families have poorer prospects for success in education.* Moreover, educational prospects are worst for youths from families that suffer unrelieved poverty.<sup>16</sup> Such findings seem to make “obvious” sense. Poverty effects surely “pile up” over time for youths. As well, families that experience only a short spell of poverty may find temporary ways to continue promoting education for their youngsters, but families that must endure years of poverty have few opportunities to accumulate resources and should find it much harder to support educational efforts. This finding also implies that a good deal of simple survey evidence about the strength of ties between poverty and student failure ties should be questioned. Many surveys ask questions only about poverty experienced “recently,” thus their findings bundle together effects from youths who have experienced both short-term and long-term poverty. A better understanding is generated when poverty effects for these two types of youths are studied separately.

Second, panel studies also find that the trajectory of poverty experiences matters; *when impoverished American families sink further into poverty over time, educational prospects for their youths worsen, but when poverty in such poor families lessen over time, educational prospects for youngsters in those families are improved.*<sup>17</sup> Again, such findings are intuitively appealing. Parents who are already stressed by poverty may find additional poverty nearly unbearable, whereas for such parents even small increases in resources may signal relief and prospects for a better future. Thus, minor shifts in resources for poor families may trigger sharp differences in parental morale, hence living environments (and educational prospects) for their children.

Third, panel-study evidence also suggests that exposure to poverty has differing effects depending on the age of the youth and the sequencing of poverty experiences. *Studies focused on American preschool or primary-age youngsters have reported strong and direct ties between poverty and student cognitive development;* indeed panel studies have reported that poverty so challenges impoverished preschoolers that, by the time they first enter the schoolhouse door, many of them already lack the cognitive and academic-readiness skills needed to “make it” in American education. (To illustrate, Greg Duncan, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Pamela Klebanov report that, even when other family characteristics are controlled for, persistent poverty during the first four years of life is associated with an average *nine* point difference in measured intelligence at age five!)<sup>18</sup> In contrast, ties reported for teenagers have been more complex. As we already know, typical survey-based studies had found strong links between poverty and educational failure when they focused on the primary years but weaker effects when they took on the secondary years,<sup>19</sup> but panel studies provided additional evidence on the subject. Thus they have found that *prospects for educational success are worst for American adolescents who have experienced constant poverty, somewhat impaired for those who have experienced*

**Exhibit 4.3. Levels of Educational Achievement at Age Twenty-Five for Youths Born in the Years 1966-1970 Who Had and Had Not Experienced Persisting Poverty**



Sources: *The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility* (Haveman, R., & Smeeding, T, 2006, p. 132) and *Economic Inequality in College Access, Matriculation, and Graduation* (Haveman, R., & Wilson, R., 2005).

Note: Data displayed are for youths who lived in families that had and had not experienced persisting poverty. Annual poverty was computed for each family each year by dividing total income by the national poverty-level threshold for families of equivalent size and was averaged for all years when youths were aged 2 through 15. Youths whose families had not experienced persisting poverty were from the top quartile of all families. Those who had experienced persisting poverty were from the bottom quartile.

*poverty only during their early years, and least affected for adolescents who have been impoverished only when they were older.*<sup>20</sup>

The events portrayed in this third finding are less self-evident, and several reasons have been suggested for them. For one, it may be that “schools and neighborhoods begin to matter more [than families] ... once youths reach school age.”<sup>21</sup> For another, parents differ in how they react to the strains of poverty, and differences in their coping strategies may matter more for older youths.<sup>22</sup> For a third, poverty is associated with deficiencies in youths’ physical and social environments, and although these deficiencies can inflict serious tolls on the minds and bodies of very young children, they may have weaker effects on older youths. And for a fourth, teachers and others tend to form judgments about the abilities of students shortly after they enter primary school and may decide early on that youths from impoverished homes are “losers.” Such judgments can affect how those students are treated in the early grades, hence their subsequent careers in American education, but such processes may appear less often in secondary schools.

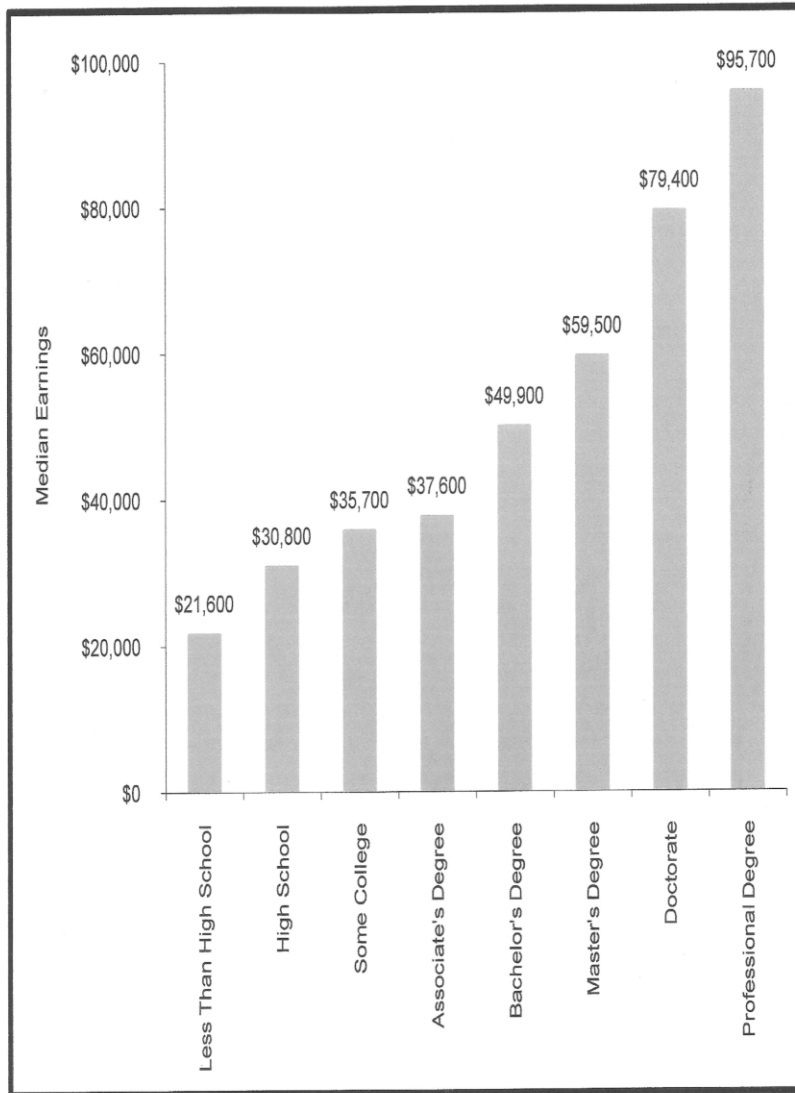
None of these reasons contradicts the others, and all may account, in part, for the complex finding for adolescents. But whatever the reasons for it, they do not suggest that family poverty has inherently weak effects for older youths but rather indicate that evil effects presumably cumulate when poverty is unending, and teenagers exposed to its grinding effects may actually be *worse* off than their younger siblings. And they imply that in order to study the true educational effects of poverty for teenagers, one should ask not only about their recent poverty experiences but also about whether they experienced poverty during their early years. But since this is not often done in surveys concerned with poverty among adolescents, survey evidence has tended to paint a portrait of poverty effects for teenagers that is unfairly weak.

To illustrate actual outcomes for older youths who had experienced *persisting* poverty, take a look at Exhibit 4.3. The data displayed in this figure were assembled by Robert Haveman and Kathryn Wilson and came again from PSID files. As it happened, youths appearing in the PSID had been born during the 1966-70 period, and the authors recently looked at educational accomplishments those youths had completed by age 25. In order to estimate effects for persisting poverty, the authors computed family poverty rates for all years when those youths were aged 2 to 15 (using the Official Method). Families were then rank ordered from those that had been “least impoverished” to those that had been “most impoverished” during these crucial years, and Exhibit 4.3 contrasts results for youths from the top quarter and bottom quarter of this rank.<sup>23</sup>

As can be seen in the exhibit, the authors found *huge* differences in the educational accomplishments of adolescents from families that had and had not experienced persisting poverty. Large differences such as these support the claim that educational prospects for older youths in the United States are sharply curtailed when they have experienced persisting poverty.

But does failure to complete educational qualifications matter in today’s America? Oh my, yes. Once upon a time, working-class youths needed few such

**Exhibit 4.4. Median Annual Earnings for Individuals by Educational Attainment, 2003**



Sources: *Education Pays 2004* (Baum, S. B., & Payea, K., 2004, Figure 1, p. 10).  
Also see *Tearing Down the Gates* (Sacks, 2007, Figure 15, p. 306).

qualifications to find employment on farms, in mines and mills, as domestic servants, or in family owned businesses, and some skilled occupations (such as tool-and-die making) provided both job security and a good income for youths with but modest formal educations. But such opportunities have largely disappeared today in the United States. Instead, undergraduate education is now required if one is to enter even modest careers, and postgraduate degrees are required for most high-status occupations and professions. As a result, level of educational attainment in America is now closely tied to entry into desirable occupations and to the rewards one will earn as an adult through employment

To illustrate such effects, take a look at Exhibit 4.4. This graph, based on data from the College Board and assembled by Peter Sacks for his 2007 book, *Tearing Down the Gates: Confronting the Class Divide in American Education*, displays average (median) annual American earnings in 2003 for eight differing levels of educational attainment. As expected, persons who had not completed high school were then receiving the smallest annual earnings on average (\$21,600), whereas persons who had earned only a bachelor's degree were averaging more than twice that amount (\$49,900), and those with professional degrees were averaging more than four times as much (\$95,700).<sup>24</sup> Such findings not only support American beliefs about the importance of education but also confirm that the typical youth who experiences persisting poverty experiences a huge educationally associated disadvantage in today's America.

Taken together then, the panel-study findings reviewed above certainly strengthen belief that family poverty *causes* educational failure. We know from Chapter Two that most impoverished American families are not "mired" permanently in poverty but rather that many poverty experiences ebb and flow over time. The findings we've now reviewed suggest that these shifts are often matched by changes in educational prospects for youths who live in those families, and it is tempting to assume that such effects would not have appeared unless poverty is truly a cause. But note that an airtight case for causality has still not been made. Perhaps educational failure is actually caused by other experiences, closely tied to poverty, that also ebb and flow over time. Or perhaps these temporal findings have appeared because families "prone to experience persisting poverty" are substantively different from other families in crucial ways. Or perhaps, because panel studies are always conducted in the real world where many educationally relevant events change over time, these findings have been generated by the latter rather than by poverty itself. So additional evidence is needed if an airtight case for causality is to be made.

#### *Studies with Controls*

Another way to approach the causality issue is to apply controls to survey or panel-study data to see whether other "risk" factors can be found that explain away an effect that concerns us. (To illustrate again with the smoking-cancer analogy, researchers concerned with this issue began next to explore whether other factors thought to promote lung cancer—for example, exposure to high

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levels of toxic, urban smog—might be responsible for the smoking-and-cancer link. To do this, they conducted new studies that collected data, not only about cigarette smoking and lung cancer, but also about exposure to urban smog and other “risk” factors that might be carcinogenic, and they looked to see whether evidence for the smoking-cancer link disappeared when these other factors were taken into account.)

Several statistical techniques can be used for probing the joint effects of two or more factors, but all allow researchers to estimate the *net* impact of each factor, controlling for the effects of others, when all are used to account for a specific outcome. And when the net impact of a crucial factor remains substantial in such analyses, researchers assume that the factor is more likely to be *causal*. (Thus, when using survey data that assessed two or more risk factors, cancer researchers typically found that, although urban smog had its own, weak, independent effect on lung cancer, the strong association between cigarette smoking and cancer did *not* disappear when a control was introduced for smog. Nor, over time, were they able to find *any* other risk factor that explained away the smoking-cancer link, and these results strengthened beliefs that smoking was, indeed, a *cause* for lung cancer. But alas, these results still did not mean that an airtight case had yet been made. It remained possible that additional risk factors, not yet studied or even thought about, might have generated the apparent effect of smoking. Eventually, however, scholars and the public grew restless and declared that “enough was enough,” that sufficient studies with reasonable controls had now appeared, and that together these studies suggested that smoking was indeed a *cause* for lung cancer.)

Similarly, researchers concerned with student failure have begun to explore whether other risk factors are responsible for the apparent effect of student poverty. To illustrate, many studies have found that African-American youths are also “at risk” for failure in education, and we know from Chapter Three that Black youths more often experience poverty. Thus it is reasonable to ask whether the apparent effect of student poverty is created, at least in part, because of the effects of *race*. To explore such issues, surveys or panel studies are conducted that collect data about student failure, poverty, and other risk factors (such as race), and then researchers probe these data to see whether the impact of poverty disappears when such factors are taken into account. The result? Researchers overwhelmingly report that *although other American risk factors (such as race) may generate their own, usually weaker net effects on educational failure, controls for those effects do NOT explain away the impact of poverty*. Thus, these findings suggest that poverty is indeed likely to *cause* educational failure.

However, (as with smoking and lung cancer) our story does not end with this tentative finding. So far, researchers have focused on only a handful of risk factors associated with students’ families—such as *race and ethnicity, atypical family structures* (i.e., families that have but one parent or a stepparent), *excessive family size, low level of schooling completed by parents, parental unemployment, inadequate parental motivation, and “inappropriate” sources of parental income* (such as welfare payments). These factors represent long-standing interests of

scholars or politicians and are easy to study because indicators for them often appear in school records and panel-study files. But other family factors that might be responsible for the poverty-failure link—*mental health problems, low parental intelligence generated by poor genetic endowment, habitual behaviors stemming from “a culture of poverty,”* and the like—have often been slighted, and for these latter the jury is still out. This is too bad. Although such factors may be difficult to assess in surveys or panel studies, they provide excuses to blame parents for poverty in the family and thus are likely to appear in far-right claims about the “true” causes of poverty effects. Although indirect evidence has appeared concerning most of them, the clearest way to test claims about them would be to gather appropriate survey or panel-study evidence and then see what happens to the effects of poverty when controls for these factors are also applied.<sup>25</sup>

Additional risk factors associated with individual youths (rather than with their families) have also been studied as controls, and these have included *gender, atypical age,* and various *health problems*. Again, such factors represent common interests that are easy to assess, and none has yet been found to “explain away” the strong effects of youth poverty. But other individual risk factors have also been largely ignored, among them *specific youths’ abilities, self-confidence, work habits,* and *stores of relevant knowledge*.<sup>26</sup> As was suggested earlier, these latter represent crucial elements of the American Success Story, and far-right propaganda also has it that students who stand high on these factors will always triumph over poverty. Again, the clearest way to test such claims would be to gather additional survey or panel-study evidence about these factors and then see what happens to the effects of poverty when controls for such factors are applied.

Thus, the “bad news” about studies with controls is that such studies have not yet explored the full range of factors that may possibly place students “at risk.” But additional “good news” from these studies should not be slighted. So far, we’ve sought an answer for but one question: What is found when *other* risk factors are examined as possible sources for apparent poverty effects? What about the reciprocal question: What is found when *poverty* is examined as a source that generates apparent effects for other risk factors? Studies with controls have also addressed the latter question, and, as a rule, they find that *poverty accounts for much (although not all) of the apparent effects of other American risk factors*. In addition, findings also suggest subtle differences in poverty effects depending on the risk factor being examined. Let’s explore this issue by looking at findings for three crucial risk factors.

First, it has long been known that students from homes headed by a single parent often have trouble with education, and this has provoked both concern and theories about the advantages of living in a “traditional” home headed by two parents.<sup>27</sup> But single-parent homes are also more likely to be impoverished, so it is reasonable to ask, do the apparent educational effects of single parenthood appear merely because families with but one parent are more often poor? In this case, the answer is a simple *yes*. Studies of this issue have generally found that *the apparent ties between single parenthood and educational failure in America effectively disappear when controls for poverty are added to the analysis*.<sup>28</sup>

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Youths from families with but one parent, then, seem to have trouble with education largely because those families are so often impoverished.<sup>29</sup>

Second, somewhat different results appear if we look at research on the impact of race. It has also long been known that students who come from Afro-American families also have trouble with education, and this fact has generated widespread concern.<sup>30</sup> But Black families are also more often impoverished, thus we should again ask, do the apparent ties between race and educational outcomes appear merely because Black students are more often poor? The answer to this second question is complex. As a rule, studies of the issue report that poverty accounts for *much* of the apparent educational effects of living in African-American homes, but ties between race and educational failure do *not* fully disappear when controls for poverty are applied.<sup>31</sup>

Why not? Some authors have argued that the social environments of Black homes more often lack features that promote early cognitive development, and several studies have suggested that these features help to explain Black-White differences in student success.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, other authors have argued that Black youths are also more often subjected to problems from the world beyond their families—among them persisting (indeed, increasing) isolation in urban poverty ghettos, racial stereotyping, discriminatory treatment by others, inadequate work opportunities, and lack of adult role models.<sup>33</sup> Factors such as these should also help explain why Black-White differences appear in student success, and studies have also tended to support this latter argument.<sup>34</sup> But research to date has not fully disentangled how problems in the home, neighborhood, and society-at-large interact to debase chances for Black students. Nevertheless, research clearly suggests that *poverty is responsible for much—but not all—of the educational disadvantages experienced by Black youngsters in America.*

Yet another pattern of results appears in a third example. We know from studies based on surveys that low levels of schooling completed by parents are also associated with youths' educational failure, and that parents who possess few schooling credentials are more often poor,<sup>35</sup> but does poverty explain away the apparent effects of low parental schooling? The answer to this question is again complex. Most studies of the issue report that *controlling for poverty nearly always reduces the size of apparent failure effects for parental schooling in America, but low levels of parental schooling remain associated with negative effects on educational success that are independent of poverty.* The relative strength of the latter ties seem to differ, however, depending on the age of the student. Most studies of preschool and primary youths report that net ties for poverty are *stronger* than those for parental schooling. In contrast, studies of youths in secondary schools sometimes find that net ties for poverty are *weaker* than those for parental education. What might be responsible for this odd reversal of net effect sizes?

In the 1970s and 80s, influential theorists began to argue that lower- and working-class children are handicapped for education, not only by poverty, but also by processes in the family that are not always tied closely to poverty. For Basil Bernstein, handicaps are generated when parents use only limited *linguistic*



*codes*—when they tend to respond physically rather than verbally when communicating with their children.<sup>36</sup> For Pierre Bourdieu, handicaps appear because families lack *cultural capital*—the habits, skills, and information necessary for full participation in middle- or upper-class institutions.<sup>37</sup> And for James Coleman, youths are handicapped by lack of *social capital*—when their families do not have “the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children” that appear in middle- or upper-class homes.<sup>38</sup> These theories differ in processes they stress, and it would be difficult to devise simple measures to assess those processes. All three theories imply, however, that students will be handicapped if they come from homes where parents have had little or no schooling, and this notion is easy to assess. And all three theories suggest that these handicaps should be greater at the secondary level where more complex knowledge, skills, and parental supports are required for student success.

However persuasive such arguments, it is not yet clear that parental-schooling effects truly trump poverty effects for secondary students because this apparent finding may also reflect an artifact. As noted earlier, many survey-based studies concerned with poverty impact among adolescents have asked only about income that families earned “recently,” but adolescents are more strongly affected when poverty also appeared early in their lives, and this means that some studies with teenagers have generated estimates for poverty effects that are unfairly weak. But studies so far completed cannot tell us how much of the odd reversal of strength estimates for net poverty and parental-education effects is due to this artifact and how much it reflects real-world processes in the families of adolescents. Stay tuned for future research on the issue.

Despite such unresolved problems, research to date clearly indicates that family poverty plays a key role helping to generate the apparent educational effects of crucial risk factors such as single parenthood, racial identity, and parental schooling. This does not mean that poverty always accounts for the effects of other factors the place students “at risk” for failure. To provide a counterexample, many studies have also examined the educational impact of *gender* differences. These studies have found that young boys tend to face greater risks for language-associated outcomes (and, as a result, tend to fall behind girls in the primary grades), that older girls face greater risks when it comes to mathematics and the physical sciences (in the secondary grades), that more and more young women are now earning undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, that neither gender is particularly handicapped for other educational outcomes, and that somewhat different patterns of handicap appear depending on student age and criteria used to assess educational success.<sup>39</sup> But for the most part, the burdens of poverty seem to affect boys and girls quite similarly, and this means that poverty is *not* responsible for most of gender differences in educational outcomes.

To summarize findings in this section then, studies with controls have so far generated two broad findings. On the one hand, *the apparent effects of poverty on student failure in America are reduced modestly but remain substantial in*

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*analyses when controls are introduced for other risk factors. On the other, the apparent effects of many other American factors known to place students at risk for failure are often eliminated or reduced substantially when controls are introduced for poverty.* These findings again make an attractive case for concluding that poverty is a key *cause* for educational failure. But also bear in mind that other, possibly crucial, risk factors have not yet been examined in studies with controls, and the case for poverty as the major cause for failure will be strengthened when this is done.

### *Pathway Analysis*

Yet another way to build a case for causality is to uncover the pathways or mechanisms through which a crucial event affects outcomes with which one is concerned. (To return again to our smoking analogy, researchers concerned with lung cancer had long wondered “why” it was associated with cigarette smoking. Was this because smoking itself generated carcinogenic consequences or because smoking was inadvertently associated with other cancer-inducing events? This question was answered, at least in part, when lung tissue studies began to appear showing how long-term smoking stressed those tissues with concentrations of soot particles and other irritants known to promote cancer.)

Similarly, scholars and others concerned with educational failure have asked “why” it is so often associated with poverty in students’ families. Is it because poverty itself generates burdens that make education more difficult for students or because poverty is inadvertently associated with other failure-inducing events? And to answer this question, researchers have begun to explore the mechanisms—or *pathways*—through which poverty might be linked to educational failure.<sup>40</sup> Since poverty in the family generates many, many types of burdens, it generates a host of pathways that might lead to student failure. Here I focus on five pathways that have generated considerable interest and research.

*Inferior housing.* Low-income families in all advanced nations tend to live in less desirable homes, but this tendency is truly severe in the United States where family poverty is more widespread, families relocate more often, most children are supposed to move away from parental homes when they marry, rent controls are largely nonexistent, and governmental support for low-income housing is minuscule. As a result of these forces, many impoverished American families live in inferior housing, housing they cannot afford, or (sometimes) no housing at all. According to recent data released by the U.S. Census Bureau and Department of Housing and Urban Development, impoverished youths are *far* more likely to experience housing: that is “substandard,” that is seriously crowded, that is afflicted by mice or rats, that was “too cold” for 24 hours or more “last winter,” and that costs their families more than 30% of their monthly income.<sup>41</sup> Such conditions generate many problems, of course.

One of these is *lead poisoning*. According to the Children’s Defense Fund, lead poisoning is “the most serious and most common environmental health

hazard for children.”<sup>42</sup> Some years ago much of lead poisoning reflected additives that were then allowed in gasoline, but today its major source is the white, lead-based paint that appears on the interior walls of older homes. This type of paint was once common in America, but its use is now banned, and today it is found largely in poorly maintained, older homes where it generates dust that can be inhaled as well as “tasty” strips of peeling paint attractive to preschoolers. Young people are particularly vulnerable to poisoning from lead, and in 2003 nearly a *half-million* American youngsters between one and five years of age had elevated blood-lead levels, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>43</sup> And, for obvious reasons, elevated lead rates are highest among children from poor families; indeed, according to Sue Books, lead “poisoning rates are eight times higher among low-income children than children from upper income families.”<sup>44</sup>

But does this matter in education? Good lord, yes. Again, quoting Sue Books, “even at low levels, lead poisoning can cause learning disabilities, hyperactivity, and behavioral disorders, and at higher levels, mental retardation and even death.”<sup>45</sup> Or, according to Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg Duncan:

At very young ages, lead exposure is linked to stunted growth, hearing loss, vitamin D metabolism damage, impaired blood production, and toxic effects on the kidneys. Additionally, even a small increase in blood lead level above the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention current intervention threshold ... is associated with a decrease in intelligence quotient.<sup>46</sup>

It is small wonder, then, that many impoverished American youngsters do poorly in education. They have been allowed to ingest a poison that damages their minds and bodies, thus creating serious, sometimes permanent problems for them that affect not only their school performance but also their later lives. Thus for some of them, high levels of educational attainment are now and will remain forever an *impossible* goal.

Note also that this problem could be wiped out if Americans were only willing to screen all youngsters for lead poisoning and, when necessary, help to eliminate lead paint in their living quarters. But although federal regulations require lead screening for all children served by Medicaid, even this requirement is often ignored,<sup>47</sup> and no federal program to clean up lead-based paints in older homes now exists.

Alas, the story of problems generated by inferior American housing only begins with lead poisoning.<sup>48</sup> Poor youths are also more likely to live in homes afflicted with *internal water leakage* (causing molds and fungi), as well as infestations of *mice, rats, cockroaches, and other vermin*, and these conditions subject those youths, not only to bites from rats, but also to higher rates of asthma and other chronic respiratory problems. Often too the homes they live in are *crowded* (with more than one person per room) which means that, in those homes, personal space is in short supply, uninterrupted sleep tends to disappear, interpersonal conflict becomes more likely, and infections spread more easily.

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Frequently also, impoverished parents must *pay too much* for housing, which means that, in their homes, thermostats must be turned down, and electric lighting must be curtailed. Such problems are bad enough, but those parents may also be unable to pay even minimal heat and electric bills which means that their utilities *may be turned off* during extreme heat or the depths of winter—the latter leading to hypothermia and the use of portable heaters (which generate house fires) as well as candles employed for lighting and warmth. Conditions such as these are both dangerous and distracting and can lead, over time, to serious, chronic illnesses. And when impoverished American families find they are too poor to pay even for housing and utilities, they may end up moving incessantly or living in vehicles or on the street.<sup>49</sup> Small wonder then, that such problems too are tied to youths' educational failure.

In short then, *serious problems associated with inferior housing in America create pathways through which family poverty is tied to youths' educational failure.*

*Poor nutrition and lack of food.* A second type of pathway linking poverty with educational failure concerns food. Throughout advanced countries, budgets are strained for low-income families, and this means that those families tend to eat frugally. But poverty is more severe in the U.S., and America provides only weak dietary help for low-income families (through food stamps for families and school-lunch subsidies for students). This means that inadequate amounts of food and poor nutrition (i.e., diets that lack even basic nutrition or are loaded with junk foods) are rampant among impoverished America families, and this creates several types of problems.

For one, various studies have reported that poor nutrition among low-income pregnant women leads to serious physical problems that affect the infants to whom they give birth—problems such as *prematurity, low birth weight, infant mortality*, and grave physical disabilities such as *spina bifida* and *anencephaly* (being born with part of the brain missing). Thus, in America, youths from impoverished families are more likely to begin life with physical handicaps because their mothers were fed inadequately or improperly while they were in the womb.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, other studies have uncovered ties between poor nutrition and physical problems for impoverished youths themselves. To illustrate, persisting iron deficiency, more often found among impoverished youths, generates *iron-deficiency anemia*, and this can interfere with brain chemistry, problem solving, motor coordination, and concentration. In addition, poor nutrition leads to *stunted growth* (usually assessed as low height for the youth's age) which, in turn, has been tied to learning problems and low scores on tests of academic ability. And because impoverished youths are often fed poor diets and may ingest inadvertent poisons, they are more likely to develop other physical problems that will make success in education less likely—*reduced hearing acuity, visual impairment, physical disabilities* serious enough to limit daily activities, or *mental retardation*. Within America then, poor nutrition also affects poor youths directly

by imposing physical problems on them that reduce their abilities to cope with education.

And for a third, impoverished American youths are also likely to experience *hunger*, to live in families where meals are skimpy or missing, to arrive at school having eaten but little for dinner and breakfast, and are forced to depend on the school's free or reduced-price meals for daily sustenance and growth—boons that are *not* generally available during weekends, holidays, and America's long summer educational "break." Not surprisingly, such conditions generate consequences. Among young Americans, chronic hunger is tied to fatigue, concentration problems, irritability, weight loss, and higher rates of colds and ear infections. And such problems lead, for example, to lower *arithmetic scores*, more *grade retention* in the lower grades; more *suspensions* from school for teenagers; more trouble *getting along* with others, and greater likelihood of being sent to a *school psychologist*.<sup>51</sup>

In sum then, *serious problems associated with poor nutrition and lack of food also create pathways through which American family poverty is tied to youths' educational failure.*

*Restricted resources in the home.* So far we have considered two pathways that involve health problems, but many authors argue that a major reason why impoverished youths have difficulty with schools is that the homes they live in lack crucial *resources*, that they lack features—common in middle- or upper-income homes—which promote and enable educational success. To illustrate, impoverished families often: cannot afford to buy books and writing implements, let alone computers; cannot afford to pay school fees; live in homes that are crowded and lack study spaces; have overstressed parents who cannot find time to help children with basic literacy and numeracy skills, let alone homework assignments; and do not have funds needed to provide youngsters with "proper clothing" or "enrichment" opportunities. Lack of one or two of such crucial resources might not matter greatly, but when homes lack a host of them, children from those homes are surely handicapped for education.

This pathway has been studied for both preschoolers and elementary students in a vigorous program of research focused on a standard instrument used for assessing features of their homes.<sup>52</sup> In its original form, this instrument, called the *Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment* (HOME) inventory, asked questions about 55 features thought to provide cognitive stimulation and emotional support for youngsters. In typical studies, some of HOME's questions were answered by parents, while others were addressed by observers who watched mothers and children interact. A slightly different form of the HOME inventory was also developed for older youngsters, and over time a shorter form of the inventory was also evolved which assessed only 26 features of the home environment.

Many useful findings have appeared from studies where the HOME inventory was used, some of them focused on subsections of the inventory, their meanings, and their ties with education. For our purposes, however, two broad

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findings stand out. First, poverty and low HOME scores are strongly related; thus when homes of preschoolers are impoverished, those homes are also likely to earn low scores on the HOME inventory. Second, HOME scores strongly predict preschoolers' cognitive development and academic readiness as well as achievement scores earned in the elementary grades; thus when HOME inventory scores are low, students from those environments often do badly in the early grades. Moreover, when these two effects are juxtaposed in evidence from panel studies with controls, research finds that HOME scores account for "up to half the effect of income on the cognitive development of preschool children and between one-quarter and one-third of the achievement scores of elementary school children."<sup>53</sup> Taken together, these findings provide impressive support for the argument that *in America, serious problems associated with restricted resources in the home also create pathways through which family poverty is tied to primary-grade youths' educational failure.*

*Parental stress reactions.* But what about adolescents? Recent poverty experiences may have somewhat different educational effects for older than for younger youths, but this does not mean that those effects vanish for teenagers. And if such effects occur, what events in the family generate them?

One answer to this question is suggested by another tradition of research that was touched off by publication, in 1974, of a seminal book by Glen Elder entitled *Children of the Great Depression*.<sup>54</sup> This work used interviews to explore the subsequent lives of various Americans who were adolescents during the 1930s when many of their families had to cope with poverty and parental job loss. Surprisingly, these stressful events seemed not to have affected those youths directly. Rather, youths were affected negatively when their parents became irritable, tense, and explosive; when conflicts over finances erupted between their parents; and when their parents became punitive, arbitrary, and inconsistent in disciplining their children. And these parental reactions led, in turn, to temper tantrums, negativism, moodiness, hypersensitivity, and feelings of inadequacy in their teenage children—distress responses with long-term consequences.

Talented people were intrigued by these notions, and many scholarly works and studies have been published exploring their claims and implications.<sup>55</sup> Most studies from this effort have focused on the conditions that, together with poverty, lead to parental stress, on exploring how fathers and mothers, as well as sons and daughters, may react differently to that stress, and on the various distress responses that may be triggered for adolescents. For our purposes, the major finding from this effort has been that parental job loss and poverty in the home seem not to lead directly to adolescent stress, but rather that the latter appears when parents "act out" in response to poverty, and that these parental reactions reflect not only the realities of financial strain but also other factors such as experiences of marital discord and instability in the family. Unfortunately, studies from this tradition have rarely examined real-world effects of stress for teenagers when their parents "act out," but at least two panel studies with controls have begun to explore how such events affect youths' educational

outcomes. One of these studies concerned adolescents and indeed found significant ties between such events and adolescents' *grade-point averages*,<sup>56</sup> whereas the other focused on youths in the early grades, found (again), that for these youngsters, restricted resources in the home were tied to lower *educational achievement*, but also that, for these young people, parental stress was associated not so much with educational but rather with *behavioral problems*.<sup>57</sup>

Findings such as these provide insight about another pathway through which poverty in the family is linked to educational failure and help us understand why that linkage poses somewhat different problems for teenagers. When compared with youngsters in the primary grades, adolescents are more likely to have developed relations with others outside the home, are more often struggling with self-concept concerns, and are more often sensitive to disruptions in family dynamics. Thus, we should not be surprised to learn that experiences of family poverty may not affect teenagers directly, but that those adolescents can become distressed and suffer in education when their parents "act out." These findings provide support for the argument that, *serious problems created when American parents "act out" also create pathways through which family poverty is tied to adolescent youths' educational failure.*

*The huge costs of higher education.* Yet another pathway concerns the huge costs of higher education in America. Unlike other advanced countries, the United States encourages "all" students to enter and complete degrees in colleges and universities but then fails to provide adequate funding for these institutions from federal, state, and other public sources. As a result, the bulk of non-impooverished American youths will eventually enroll in some form of higher education, but this option is largely foreclosed for impooverished youths since postsecondary students in the U.S. face *huge* (and escalating) bills for tuition, fees, and academic supplies, as well as food and accommodation (if youths are living away from home), and these massive costs are only minimally offset by scholarship help available to a few "talented" or "needy" students.<sup>58</sup>

Once upon a time, the costs of American higher education were more modest, and parents from middle-income families were often able to cover most of them from savings, but this is no longer possible. In recent years, the costs of higher education have shot ahead alarmingly, and only truly affluent families can now keep up with them. Typical students from middle-income homes now cover some of those costs by working part- or full-time and by borrowing heavily from federal programs or the banks. As a result, hours that were once available to students for studying have now been curtailed by work needed to fend off fiscal needs, and many middle-income students find that they owe substantial sums—\$50,000 to \$100,000 or more—when they finish their bachelor's degrees. As well, American students who complete doctoral or professional degrees may incur debts of \$250,000 or more.

Such arrangements create many problems: They debase standards for higher education. They impose substantial indebtedness on youths from middle-income homes during the years when they are trying to begin their professional

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careers, marrying, and creating their own families. And they create barriers that foreclose access to higher education for all but a few youths from low-income families. In part, the latter barriers are all too real. Impoverished adolescents have precious few personal or family resources with which to pay for higher education, whatever they are able to earn is often needed in their homes, and they may find it difficult to obtain student loans. But in part, such barriers also reflect parental ignorance. Studies consistently find that low-income parents tend to underestimate the availability of student aid and overestimate college costs.<sup>59</sup>

Impoverished adolescents are well aware of these fiscal barriers, of course, and this awareness leads many of them to forego or disparage aspirations for higher education and the doors that such an education can open. Thus, *in America, serious problems associated with the huge costs of higher education also create pathways through which family poverty is tied to youths' educational failure.*

*Other pathways.* We've now examined five types of pathways that provide links between poverty in the home and educational failure for American youths, but the list is far from complete. For example, as we know from Chapter Three, lack of a tax-supported, entitlement-based, health care system in the U.S. means that impoverished youngsters are likely to appear in schools suffering from chronic illnesses, poor vision, dental cavities, and other correctable medical problems. In addition, various scholars have claimed, that poverty generates *parental mental health problems, overuse of harsh and inconsistent discipline, and low or inappropriate expectations for student success.* If so, these may also play key roles in reducing educational chances for youths, and evidence has also begun to appear that backs these latter claims.<sup>60</sup> In addition, scholars and activists have long argued that youths from impoverished homes are likely to experience foster care or incarceration in orphanages or prisons, to live in inadequate neighborhoods, and to attend substandard schools, so these environments may also serve as "pathways" that reinforce the corrosive effects of poverty in the family. The latter arguments are insightful, but they concern the effects of forces from *outside* the family, and I delay their discussion until the next two chapters.

Thus, although research on pathways linking poverty with educational failure is still underway, studies so far available indicate that *poverty in American students' families creates serious problems which, in turn, generate burdens that sharply reduce those students' chances for success in education.* No impoverished student experiences the full panoply of family associated problems we have reviewed, of course, but all such students endure at least some of them, and this seriously impairs their chances in school.<sup>61</sup> Results such as these help us understand why the crucial events of family poverty *should* be linked to lack of educational success, and they again bolster our belief that family poverty *causes* educational failure. But however persuasive, even these results do not fully make an airtight case for causality. They cannot tell us, for example, whether—as some far-right authors would have it—poverty in the family is intransigent because it reflects genetic insufficiencies among parents,<sup>62</sup> or a debilitating



“culture of poverty” that promotes laziness and dependency,<sup>63</sup> or—as advocates for youths and education claim—poverty is malleable because it reflects huge inequities in how people are treated<sup>64</sup> and that it and its effects would be relieved if those inequities were countered. These causal alternatives affect, not only our understanding, but they have profound implications for how to construct effective, compensatory programs. They are addressed, at least in part, by yet another research strategy to which I now turn.

### *Experiments*

Finally, we consider one last strategy—experiments—that are also used for exploring causal issues. The concept of “experiment” involves two basic ideas—*prediction* (to test a theory) and *manipulation* (of crucial events)—and each has spawned a literature. It is the latter, however, that is usually involved when searching for causes, and I focus on it here.

*Manipulative experiments* are conducted when a researcher creates two or more treatment conditions representing possible causes and then checks to see what happens as a result of those manipulations. If an effect appears in “experimental” conditions (where a potential cause is present) but not in “control” conditions (where it is absent), experimenters conclude that a causal relation has been confirmed. Furthermore, to make sure that inadvertent effects are ruled out, experimental materials (such as physical objects or human subjects) should be assigned randomly to experimental and control conditions, and other events that might affect results should be held constant. And since these last requirements are met best in environments where the researcher can control such events, most manipulative experiments are conducted in laboratories.

*Laboratory experiments* are very popular in the physical and biological sciences (and among some social psychologists) where they offer striking advantages over research based on observation alone. They facilitate tests of key theories (or hunches), they allow researchers to explore extreme treatment conditions that occur rarely in the observed world, and they suggest ways that one might accomplish long-sought goals. On the other hand, what works in the laboratory may not work in the real world, and the limitations of laboratories may ruin some types of manipulations, so effects developed in laboratory experiments are often supplemented by *field experiments*, placed in real-world settings, where researchers have less control over other events that may affect results.

The main problem with manipulative experiments is that practical, legal, or moral constraints may make it impossible to set up desired treatment conditions. This problem plagues some of the physical and biological sciences—notably astronomy, geology, and paleontology (where potential causes tend to appear only in distant galaxies or the unmanipulable past), and even physics (where some crucial experiments would require construction of prohibitively expensive equipment). The problem also appears in biomedical research where legal and moral constraints prohibit some experiments. (No one today would be allowed to set up an experiment in which randomly chosen groups of young Americans are

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and are not encouraged to smoke cigarettes!) It is even more true in social research where the experimental manipulation of key potential causes—such as race, gender, age, physical or mental handicaps, marital disruption, poverty, or natural disasters—is either impossible, illegal, immoral, (or possibly fattening).

However, additional problems appear when one conducts laboratory experiments with human beings. Most potential subjects shy away from laboratory settings, and many effects discussed in social or biological theories take weeks, months, or years to evolve, and this means that when experiments are called for, social (and biological) researchers often study effects when one *alleviates problems* rather than effects *created by such problems*, and must design complex, expensive experiments, placed in *field* settings, that are laid within a limited venue and historical context, where human subjects are likely to disappear over time, and lots of things can go wrong. (Regarding the latter issue, for example, consider what would have been the likely outcome had a social researcher been conducting a field experiment in Manhattan on techniques for changing opinions about “foreign visitors” that began just before and was to have ended shortly after 9/11/2001, the date when spectacular attacks by “foreigner visitors” brought down the city’s World Trade Center towers!)

Worse, researchers, participants in a field experiment, and the public at large often care deeply about social and biomedical experiments and the results those efforts “ought” to find, and these desires plus knowledge or rumors about the experiment can distort not only the conduct of the effort, but also the results it generates. Extensive research has documented such distortions, and to prevent them biomedical researchers have evolved the concept of the “double-blind experiment” in which subjects in all conditions are given “treatments” (such as pills) that are superficially similar, and both subjects and those who talk with them about the experiment are kept in the dark about which persons are given which treatments. Unfortunately, “double-blind experiments” can only be approximated in the social realm.

These many problems mean that *social* researchers face substantial difficulties when they seek to test hypotheses (or hunches) with field experiments, and—truth told—even the most impressive social experiments laid in field settings can be criticized for their shortcomings. This *does not* mean that such experiments should be abandoned. It *does* mean that evidence from those experiments is always suggestive, never definitive. The federal government under President George W. Bush touted field experiments as the “gold standard” for social research and argued that federal funding should be concentrated on social experiments, but this claim reflected either ignorance or desires to curtail funding for research on crucial but unmanipulable topics (such as race, gender, poverty, and natural disasters) that might challenge the Bush Administration’s ideological commitments. Better we should understand that social experiments in the field are but part of the investigative armament. Like other forms of social research, they are flawed but useful tools that can help generate both understanding and empirical support for defensible social policies.<sup>65</sup>

The problems I have just noted apply largely to the *preplanned experiment* laid in a field setting, but there is yet another form of social experiment we should also consider, the *ex post facto experiment*. In the latter case, field events not planned for experimental purposes will have generated “experimental and “control” conditions, but—after they have occurred—a shrewd researcher recognizes that a “field experiment” has been created, analyses its data, and reports its findings. Such experiments are not always subject to the full panoply of problems that plague preplanned experiments, but they create their own issues. In particular, the researcher normally has had no control over *ex post facto* “experimental” and “control” conditions, so he or she must investigate these conditions carefully to make sure that the “only” way in which they differ is in the crucial experience whose effects are being investigated, and unfortunately this stipulation is not always met. Nevertheless, the *ex post facto* social experiment is also a valuable investigative tool and can generate useful insights.

Given the many problems of social experiments laid in the field, we should not be surprised to learn that experiments concerned with ties between poverty and student failure have not often appeared. Here I review two types of field experiments that have explored what happens when poverty in students’ homes is alleviated. In Chapter Five I take up two additional experiments that have examined effects when impoverished families move to new venues where neighborhoods and schools are less besieged by poverty, and several experiments concerned with improving conditions found in American schools are described in Chapter Six.

*The negative income tax experiments.* In the early 1960s President Lyndon Johnson declared a “War on Poverty” in the United States, but from its inception, the “War” was controversial. Basic premises of the “War” were challenged by social conservatives, and many of its antipoverty programs were first authorized and then not funded adequately by Congress. Some programs were also not immediately successful, some—notably welfare payments for specific needs—were hedged about with demeaning conditions and may have encouraged deception, laziness, and dependency among adult recipients, and some generated expensive bureaucracies needed to administer programs or monitor the behaviors of the (potentially “irresponsible”) persons who were to benefit from them.

These concerns eventually prompted a suggestion that a better way to fight the “War” might be to bring low-income families out of poverty simply by giving them monthly cash awards, and since those families presently paid no income taxes, these potential awards were thought of as “negative income taxes.” Such awards, it was argued, would not only relieve poverty but would also promote employment among potential wage earners in families (because the latter would no longer be punished for “success” but would also, like other workers, be encouraged to improve life for their families by seeking employment). Proposals for such awards were controversial, however, so a decision was made to set up set up federally funded pilot programs—field experiments—to see how adults from families who received such awards would actually behave; to study, for example,

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whether they would seek out or forego paid employment, and how they would react to the “largess” of unearned income. Thus, the primary focus of the preplanned *negative income tax experiments* was upon how these awards would affect the *adults* in awardee families (who were viewed as potential wage earners), but researchers were also allowed to explore how awards would influence others (and particularly the youths) in those families.

Altogether, four, expensive, federally funded, negative income tax experiments were undertaken between 1968 and the mid-1970s. (Thus, although this effort was begun just before the close of the Johnson years, most of it unfolded after Richard Nixon became president.) In all of these experiments, impoverished families which met criteria for participation were assigned randomly to either an “experimental” or a “control” condition but were not informed about treatments offered to other families or given details about the experiment. (In each experiment, family impoverishment was assessed through the Official Method.) “Experimental” families thereafter received monthly cash awards, but “control” families did not. Both groups were also paid to complete periodic audit forms, and additional interview data were collected periodically from participating families.

The four experiments differed substantially in their venues, the types of poor families they studied, their dates, details of their designs, and the data they collected.<sup>66</sup> The *New Jersey Negative Income Tax Experiment* took place in five, midsize, urban settings (four from New Jersey, and one from eastern Pennsylvania), studied 1,216 “intact” families that contained at least one adult male who was healthy and able to work, was begun in 1968, and lasted for three years. The *Rural Experiment*, involved nonurban locales in Iowa and North Carolina, studied 730 families that could be headed by a male, a female, or even an elderly person, and spanned a three-year period between 1970 and 1972. The *Gary Experiment*, took place in Gary, Indiana, studied 1,780 overwhelmingly Black families, many having only a female head-of-household, was again a three-year effort, and was begun in 1971. And a fourth effort, the *Seattle/Denver Experiment*, was located in these two, major, metropolitan centers, involved more than 4,800 families (including Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics), studied families with at least one adult and one or more dependent children, was begun in 1971/72, and was planned so that the effects of awards could be studied over 3-, 5-, and 20-year time spans. However, in the mid-1970s rumors began to circulate about a controversial finding that had appeared in the earlier Negative Income Tax Experiments—that women in experimental families more often sought divorces!<sup>67</sup> The thought that giving unearned income to poor families would “promote” divorce was too much for right-wing critics, so enthusiasm for negative income tax experiments evaporated, and supports for evaluating long-term effects of the Seattle/Denver Experiment were cut off.

Nevertheless, all four experiments provided data about how family members were affected during a three-year span, and all secured reports about student outcomes in education. These reports covered such issues as student attendance records, academic grades, achievement test scores, comportment in

school, level of education attained, and high school completion, but coverage of these issues, as well as grade levels of students studied, varied among the four experiments. Educational findings from the four studies were strikingly similar, however. Without exception, they indicated that students from “experimental” families were *more* likely to experience success in education! Not all effects reported were substantial, but most were, and all indicated that students from “control” families—i.e., those still mired in poverty—were *less* likely to experience educational success.<sup>68</sup>

None of these experiments was “perfect,” of course. Among other features, each dealt with only a specific type of impoverished family, each lasted for only three years, each lost track of some participants over time, and none dealt fully with problems arising from participants’ evolving awareness of experimental design features. Each was also conducted more than a generation ago when youth poverty rates were lower, Americans still paid lip service to a “War on Poverty,” young American men were subject to the draft, and controversies associated with the Vietnam War were at their height. And all four experiments dealt, not with the effects of *poverty*, but rather with the effects of *poverty alleviation*, and it can be argued that the latter encompass only a portion of the poverty picture. Above all, the four experiments were planned to provide maximum information about effects for the *adults* who led experimental families; effects for *youths* in those families were of lesser interest, and this slant influenced the designs of efforts in crucial ways.

Nevertheless, collective results from the negative income tax experiments are striking. They suggest strongly that *educational chances would be improved for impoverished young Americans if only direct financial assistance could be provided to alleviate poverty for their families.*<sup>69</sup> And they help make the case that family poverty is not only malleable but is, itself, a *cause* for American youths’ educational failure.

*The New Hope Project.* Times have changed in the United States. In 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected president, and this ushered in the first of several conservative and centrist administrations that have since dominated the national, American political scene. Far-right attacks on federal welfare programs grew apace during this period, a consensus gradually emerged among conservatives that “workfare was better than welfare,” and in 1996 Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed a bill that was designed to “end welfare as we know it.” This bill forced many single mothers off welfare rolls and into full- or part-time employment but provided little federal support for services that would help with the parental and child care needs they could no longer provide in their low-income families.

This sounds like a recipe for disaster,<sup>70</sup> but saner heads were also at work. In particular, a coalition in the city of Milwaukee—led in part by Julie Kersick (a labor organizer), David Riemer (a policy expert with governmental experience who had authored an insightful book on welfare policy<sup>71</sup>), and Tom Schrader (CEO of the Wisconsin Gas Company)—preplanned and assembled support for a

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demonstration project—a field experiment entitled the *New Hope Project*—that would explore outcomes if impoverished adults (who were willing to work) were provided help with basic income, parental, and child care needs. Initial funding for the project was provided by local sources, but major foundations provided funding for evaluations of results from the project, and those evaluations were conducted by scholars who had long been concerned with the effects of youth poverty in America.

Thus, in August of 1994 the project opened the first of two offices in impoverished Milwaukee neighborhoods that were charged with recruiting potential participants for a preplanned experiment on poverty alleviation.<sup>72</sup> Participants would be adult volunteers of either gender who were living in homes where incomes were less than 150% of the Official federal poverty threshold and who were willing to work for 30 or more hours per week. Each interested person would be randomly assigned to an “experimental” or “control” condition, and although persons in both conditions would still be eligible for federal and state assistance programs, individuals in the “experimental” condition would be offered 36 months of additional New Hope benefits. The latter included: “an earnings supplement that raised income above the poverty line; subsidized child care; subsidized health insurance; if needed, a temporary community-service job; [and] respect and help from New Hope staff.”<sup>73</sup>

All who agreed to participate in the project were volunteers whose morale was crucial and from whom it was hoped to collect data on several occasions, but half would *not* be receiving additional New Hope benefits, and this posed a problem for staff. (How could staff persuade volunteers to participate when half would receive no benefits?) The problem was “solved” by deciding to tell all participants, up front, that they were to be in an experiment, that they had a 50-50 chance for receiving New Hope benefits, but a lottery would determine their fate, and that it was important to set up both conditions to see whether New Hope benefits should be offered to more people in the future. As it happened, this tactic was only partially successful. Although most persons assigned to the “control” condition took it with good grace, a few were angry, resentful, or cynical about procedures, and “recruiting was rendered more difficult when disgruntled would-be participants painted a negative picture of the program in discussing it with their relatives and neighbors.”<sup>74</sup>

By the end of 1995, however, the New Hope Project had recruited 1,357 participants who had been assigned, randomly, to either the “experimental” or “control” condition, and of these persons 745 were deemed literate in English and were responsible for one or more children who were then from 1 to 10 years of age.<sup>75</sup> Roughly nine tenths of these parents were women, more than half identified themselves as African-American and more than a quarter were Hispanic (which meant that Whites constituted only about one tenth of the group), nine tenths were not living with a spouse, half had three or more children in their households, and half had not yet reached age 30. Most were now living in impoverished urban neighborhoods, most had been employed full-time on at least

one occasion, but most were now unemployed or were working part-time or at poorly paid jobs.

Three sources were tapped for information about the educational progress of youths from these households: the youths themselves, their parents, and their teachers (who were told that their students were in a “study” but were not informed about the design of the experiment). Initial evaluation data were gathered two years after participants entered the project (while New Hope benefits were still being distributed), and a second wave of data were collected three years later (after benefits had ceased).

What effects were created by New Hope efforts? *First*, and to the surprise of project staff, not all “experimental” participants took full advantage of the benefits they were offered! Although nearly 90% of participants received at least one month of earnings supplements, only slightly more than half used subsidized child care benefits, and only about half drew upon health insurance help. Various reasons seemed to underlie these patterns of benefit use. To be eligible for benefits, an “experimental” participant had to have worked 30 hours per week during each prior month and have a household income below a specified threshold, and earnings supplements were adjusted each month to reflect shifts in income and household size. These requirements generated both complexity and hassles for participants. As well, additional requirements had to be met for child care and health insurance benefits, and some participants did not understand all requirements, became confused or resentful, or thought that staff were “cheating” them. In addition, some participants cycled into and out of the project depending on employment opportunities, and some decided to opt out of “workfare” in order to pursue further education.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, New Hope benefits *did* generate poverty relief for typical participants—poverty levels were *reduced* for “experimental” participants and their households, both substantially during the project and modestly afterwards.

*Second*, New Hope benefits generated *modest improvements* in the school performance of children in “experimental” households, especially in reading. This effect appeared not only in standardized tests of achievement but also in both parental and teacher assessments of student performance. It also appeared in both the initial evaluation study (conducted while the project was underway) and in the second wave of evaluation data (collected two years after the project’s termination), and it was found for both younger (age 6-10) and older (age 11-16) students. In contrast, findings for achievement in mathematics were unimpressive.

And *third*, surprising differences appeared for the performances and prospects of *boys* versus *girls*. Boys in “experimental” households earned stronger scores for school performance (especially in reading), whereas gains for girls were weaker. In addition, boys in the “experimental” condition reported stronger aspirations for college and occupational attainment, and they were given higher ratings for positive social behavior by both parents and teachers, but these additional effects were missing for girls.

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What are we to conclude, then, about the New Hope Project and its effects? For openers, it is clear that the New Hope experiment shared many of the same flaws encountered in the negative income tax experiments. (Like each of the earlier efforts, for example, the New Hope experiment lasted only three years and generated results for only a limited range of impoverished households.) However, additional flaws plagued the New Hope effort. First, benefits taken up by participants in the “experimental” condition varied from person to person, and these different patterns of benefit use may have generated their own effects. Second, because of ideological pressures then current in America, participants had to be adult volunteers who were willing to work 30 hours or more per week, and these requirements made participation both more likely for persons with “get up and go” and less likely for some types of impoverished persons—those with physical or mental handicaps, for example, those responsible for infant care, and those who were heading large families but receiving only minimal help from extended family members. Third, both staff and participants were given information about which persons were “experimental” and which were “control” subjects, and this violation of a crucial requirement for social experiments may have distorted results.

In fact, the latter problem may have created one of the key New Hope effects. It is widely understood that, by comparison, boys more often experience difficulties with reading in the early grades, and these gender differences are magnified when those boys come from impoverished or minority homes. Minority parents know firsthand about this issue and often worry about what lies ahead for their sons if, as so often happens, educational success eludes them, they lose confidence, and they drop out of school at an early age. But parents in the “experimental” New Hope condition not only received additional aid, they were *told* that they had “won the lottery,” that their families were being given “unprecedented” help, and they may have viewed this news as a signal that they should henceforth provide extra encouragement and help for their needy *sons*.

But subject response to knowledge about the experiment may not be the only culprit; another design feature may also have helped generate this odd finding. Not surprisingly, boys in “control” families earned quite *low* scores for educational progress, indeed scores well below the middle of most evaluation scales, but girls from “control” families earned much higher scores. It is also possible that the evaluation scales used in New Hope provided “experimental boys” with greater leeway to earn improved scores whereas those scales made it harder for “experimental girls” to generate such differences.

Problems such as these make it difficult to interpret gender-difference effects from the project, and I will not attempt to unravel the issues here. But what are we to make of the other New Hope effects, that New Hope benefits not only reduced poverty but also generated modest improvements in the school performance of children in “experimental” households, especially in reading? It is possible that these latter effects were also caused, in part, by inappropriate information given to subjects (and the fact that subjects may have felt more comfortable helping their children in reading than in mathematics), but please



note that New Hope effects were quite similar to results reported for the earlier negative income tax experiments, and this suggests that these latter New Hope effects should be taken seriously. If so, New Hope results also suggest that *educational chances would be improved for impoverished young Americans if only financial assistance could be provided to lift their families out of poverty*, and the New Hope Project again helps to make the case for a *causal* relation between poverty and school failure.

This does not mean, of course, that *all* problematic experiences associated with youth poverty are “wiped away” when youths’ families are lifted out of poverty. If we take findings from pathway research seriously, some youths will bear scars from early poverty experiences for the rest of their lives. But results from the Negative Income Tax and New Hope experiments certainly suggest that educational outlooks for many American youths will be improved if their families are lifted out of poverty, and such results support not only the claim that ongoing poverty experiences *cause* negative effects in education, but also that those negative effects can be reduced if poverty is ameliorated.

#### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Once again, it is time to take stock. Three questions were asked at the beginning of this chapter. First, are youths from impoverished families more likely to fail in American education, and if so, is the association between poverty and failure *strong*? Second, is the association between poverty and educational failure causal; does poverty in their families *cause* youths to fail in American education? And third, what do results from research on this topic *suggest* for our understanding of the American Success Story which has it that individual initiative counts but that education is also needed for success, and that the American education system generally creates a “level playing field” for youths in the country?

Regarding the first of these questions, many, many studies find that, *in America, poverty in the home and educational failure are strongly linked for youths*. Regardless of how that poverty and educational outcomes are assessed, findings indicate that youths from poor homes more often fail in education, and failure rates are higher when that poverty is deeper and lasts longer.

Regarding the second question, massive evidence from multiple sources also suggests that, *in America, poverty in their homes causes youths’ educational failure*.

- Panel studies find that longer spells of family poverty, increasing severity of that poverty over time, and early poverty experiences are *all* associated with higher failure rates.
- Studies using statistical controls find that ties between poverty in the home and educational failure are *not* eliminated when other major “risk” factors are included in the picture, and the inclusion of poverty in the home tends to explain *many* of the effects of those other factors.

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- Studies of potential pathways find that the link between family poverty and educational failure is generated, in part, by inferior housing, poor nutrition and lack of food, restricted resources for education in the home, parental stress reactions, and the exorbitant costs of higher education.
- Studies from field experiments find that when poverty in the home is alleviated, students are *less* likely to fail in education.

Truly, as the quote from Sue Books reprinted earlier in the chapter would have it, to deny the causal tie between poverty the home and educational failure in the face of such extensive findings would require “profound naïveté or a frightening level of willful ignorance.”

Regarding the third question, the American Success Story has it that education in the United States provides a “level playing field” for most youths in the country. The findings we have reviewed make clear that, when it comes to impoverished youths, *this claim is simply absurd*. Youths from poor American households experience a host of serious problems, and they bring burdens created by those problems with them when they enter the schoolhouse door. Some of those burdens involve physical or mental handicaps those youths acquired in their early years, but additional burdens are also created by ongoing malnutrition and hunger, lack of cognitive stimulation and emotional support in their homes, angry parental reactions to the stress of poverty, and the excessive costs of higher education. Burdens such as these create serious educational handicaps for impoverished youths in the U.S., and these handicaps are reflected in their excessively high rates of educational failure. Nor is this serious problem likely to disappear soon. Indeed, since family poverty is now increasing in the U.S., handicaps and educational failure generated by that poverty are also now escalating.<sup>77</sup>

How do impoverished American youths react to repeated experiences of educational failure? Turned off by such aversive events, many of them become truants and eventually drop out of education, thus failing to complete high school. But those who remain enrolled face a serious dilemma. Given lack of an American rhetoric concerned with youth poverty, how do they interpret the fact that their educational records look weak when compared with those of other youths from nonimpoverished homes? One way to interpret such failures is created if they themselves embrace the American Success Story—widely promoted by parents, teachers, and the society at large—but if impoverished youths truly embrace the Success Tale, they must conclude that they are indeed “losers,” that they lack the abilities, energy, or discipline needed for true success in education (and life). Alternatively, they might decide that the Success Tale is nonsense—that they have been fed malarkey when it comes to schooling, that the “system” is rigged against them, and that they should aspire only for limited (or illegal) goals. *So impoverished, older American youths are presented with a true Hobson’s Choice—one alternative leading to self-denigration, the other leading to anger and rejection of education and its associated value system.*

Lest you think I am exaggerating this dilemma, take a look at Exhibit 4.5 which provides quotes from two groups of impoverished high school boys who

were studied in the mid-1980s by Jay McLeod, a young ethnographer, then working on his dissertation. These two groups—*The Brothers* and *The Hallway Hangers*—appeared in a school that enrolled students from both affluent and nonaffluent backgrounds, and both groups came to McLeod’s attention because they were impoverished and their outlooks were so disparate. So the author spent a lot of time with each group and was eventually able to interview them about crucial issues in their lives. The excerpts reprinted below concern their differing reactions to failure and schooling, and—as can be seen—one group responded by blaming themselves, while the other responded by concluding that the Success Tale was an absurdity. Although these reactions differed sharply, neither would have promoted beliefs that such youths should strive for higher education, and neither group expressed insights about how poverty had burdened them as they tried to cope with the challenges of schooling.<sup>78</sup>

So much for boys, but how do impoverished girls in high school typically interpret the fact that they too have earned only weak academic records? As currently promoted, the American Success Story applies not only to boys but also to girls, so older, impoverished girls also face the same interpretative dilemma—whether to blame themselves for failure or rubbish the Success Tale in their thinking. But for girls, two factors tend to mute the force of this dilemma. For one thing, by comparison with boys, impoverished girls are more often called upon to respond to the needs of others in their families, to provide “babysitting, housecleaning, errand running, attending to people, and sometimes meeting complex family problems” in their homes,<sup>79</sup> and this both loads them with additional responsibilities and provides them an alternative standard against which to judge their accomplishments. For the other, girls within America are still exposed to a competing ideology which stresses that their eventual status and rewards in life will be determined, not by their own achievements, but rather by achievements of the man (or men) they will marry, and this ideology implies that their own academic records may not be all that important. Such factors suggest that, by comparison with boys, girls from impoverished homes may be somewhat less devastated by experiences of academic failure, and indeed, drop-out rates are lower for girls than for boys in American schools.

Despite such potential gender differences, it is brutally clear that family poverty matters in American education—that when both boys and girls come from impoverished homes, they bring serious, poverty-generated burdens with them when they enter the schoolhouse door, and these burdens cause many of them to suffer repeated failures and eventually to drop out of the competitive chase. What might be done to alleviate these problems? Earnest and caring American educators have long hoped that through personal efforts they could somehow “make up” for the handicaps of poverty, and (egged on by far-right propaganda) politicians have long sought for strategies that would “reform” *public education* so that it indeed provides a “level playing field” for all students. But such well-intentioned and “reform” efforts simply cannot overcome the effects of family poverty. Poverty in the home creates *serious*, often intransigent, burdens for youths, and all the efforts of educators and educational “reform” laws in the

**Exhibit 4.5. Poverty, Achievement Ideology, and Reactions to Failure**

[Earlier] I noted *the Brothers'* widespread belief in the reality of equality of opportunity. Like most Americans, they view this society as an open one, [and] crucial to this widely held notion is a belief in the efficacy of schooling .... Education is viewed as the remedy for the problem of social inequality; schooling makes the race for prestigious jobs and wealth an even one .... [When asked] why they work hard in school, [they responded]:

**Derek:** I know I want a good job when I get out. I know that I have to work hard in school. I mean, I want a good future. I don't wanna be doing nothing for the rest of my life.

**Craig:** Because I know by working hard it'll all pay off in the end. I'll be getting a good job.

**Mike:** Get ahead in life; get a good job.

[How then do such youths explain their poor academic records? Since they] believe in equality of opportunity and reject the idea that they have less of a chance to succeed in school than do middle- or upper-class students, ... the Brothers attribute their mediocre academic performance to personal inadequacy—laziness, stupidity, or lack of self-discipline.

**Super:** I would try—if I had more study skills, I bet you I'd be trying my hardest. I bet I'd be getting good grades .... I dunno; I just can't seem to do it.

**Mokey:** I try my best to do as good as anyone else. But there's some real smart people up there, plus I can't seem to get to work especially during football. It's hard.

**Mike:** I did horrible [my freshman year in high school]. I used to do good. I got all A's in grammar school. Now I'm doing shitty. I guess I started out smart and got stupider.

If one accepts the equality of opportunity line of reasoning, those who are not "making it" have only themselves to blame. Clearly, the self-esteem of the Brothers suffers as a result of their inferior academic performance ....

[In contrast,] *the Hallway Hangers* do not "buy" the achievement ideology because they foresee substantial barriers to their economic success, barriers that this ideology fails to mention .... Convinced that they are headed into jobs for which they do not need an education, [they] see little value in schooling. **Jinks** perfectly summarizes this view: "Even if you get a high school diploma, that don't mean shit. A lot of people say, 'Oh, you need it for that job.' You get a high school diploma, and they're still gonna give you a shitty job. So it's just a waste of time to get it." ....

[In addition,] for the Hallway Hangers, perhaps the highest cost of going to school every day is the deferred income from full-time work .... **Chris** and **Jinks** comment on the tension between school and employment directly.

**Chris:** Jay, lemme tell you how I feel about school. I wanna go to school; I'd like to go 'til like 11:30 and even then at about twelve o'clock work until about five. Y'know, so I could go to school plus make some money.

**Jinks:** You won't like that brother, cuz that's what I do. That's what I do. He'll start going to work, getting a little money in his pocket, and he'll always want more ....

[Why such a need for cash? In part,] the world that the Hallway Hangers inhabit, with its preponderance of drugs and alcohol, demands financial resources .... Moreover, believing they have missed out on the indulgences of American consumerism, they are starved for immediate financial success.

**Slick:** Y'know what it is, Jay? All of us down here, we just don't wanna make a buck; we wanna make a fast buck. We want it *now*. Right fucking now. And you know why? Not cuz we're stupid and can't wait for anything, but because we've never had it ....

The desire of these boys to go for the fast buck, to focus only on the present, becomes understandable in light of the uncertainty of the future and their bona fide belief that they may [shortly] be in prison or dead.

—Jay MacLeod (1987, pp. 97-106)

land cannot undo the handicaps those burdens create. If America truly wants to reduce the burdens created by poverty in the home, it must adopt policies—common in other advanced countries—that sharply curtail *home-based poverty*, and until this is done, the vision of an education system that can offer equal opportunities is a cruel hoax.

Paradoxically, this does not mean that encouragement and help should be denied to American youths who are handicapped by poverty. On the contrary, like all students, those youths will create better personal records in education (and life) when they are encouraged to do their best and are given help with tasks crucial to success. And this tells us that one should be careful to distinguish between two claims implicit in the American Success Story. American education simply cannot, provide a “level playing field” that overcomes *all* of the evil effects of poverty, but this still leaves room for personal initiative and better schooling. And even those youths who are most damaged by poverty deserve respect, for they too will do better when they receive appropriate encouragement and help in education.

Nor do the results we have examined in this chapter mean that the burdens borne by impoverished American youths are created solely by problems in their homes. On the contrary, as studies we will examine in the next two chapters indicate, additional burdens are created for them by the impoverished neighborhoods in which those youths often live, as well as by the challenges, inadequate funding, and discriminatory practices prevalent in the schools they often attend. Prospects for those youths would also be improved if policies were adopted that also reduced these latter injustices.

But these latter observations should not be taken to mean that the burdens created by poverty in the home are minor, nor that it is possible to overcome the effects of those burdens through educational effort—no matter how well-intentioned that effort or how thoughtfully that effort is restructured. As long as

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massive numbers of American youngsters are exposed to poverty in their families—as long as the United States is unwilling to provide the forms of relief for home-based poverty that are common in other advanced industrialized nations—youths exposed to that poverty will experience serious problems, they will bring burdens from that poverty with them when they enter the schoolhouse door, those burdens will handicap them for education, and those youngsters—indeed all Americans—will be losers.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Leone (2000, p. 5).
- <sup>2</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States (1966).
- <sup>3</sup> Coleman et al. (1966, p. 325).
- <sup>4</sup> Note that The Coleman Report also attracted considerable debate, and some early critics attacked the validity of its key conclusion—see, for example, Bowles and Levin (1968); Cain and Watts (1970); and Hanushek and Kain (1972). But these voices were largely ignored by the bulk of scholars and researchers who already “knew” that a student’s social class controlled his or her educational outcomes.
- <sup>5</sup> White (1982).
- <sup>6</sup> Recent reviews of poverty and SES effects in American education may be found in Books (2004), Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997), Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Liaw, and Duncan (1995), Corcoran (1995), Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997b, 2000), Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith (1998), Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2000), Haveman and Wolfe (1995), Hill and Sandfort (1995), Huston, McLoyd, and Garcia Coll (1994), and McLoyd (1998).
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Alwin and Thornton (1984, Table 2).
- <sup>8</sup> The data are from the first wave of *NELS 88*, an ongoing panel study being conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (1996/2000). The exhibit was prepared with assistance from Kevin Payne.
- <sup>9</sup> For another example of this nonlinear effect, see Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor (2001).
- <sup>10</sup> Consult Corcoran and Adams (1997) for figures similar to that in Exhibit 4.1 which display nonlinear relations between incomes of youths’ families and whether those youths experienced poverty as adults.
- <sup>11</sup> The data displayed appeared in Dixon-Román, Everson, McArdle, and Michna (2005). Expanded analysis of the effects of poverty and race on SAT scores may also be found in Dixon-Román, Everson, and McArdle (2013).
- <sup>12</sup> See Reardon (2013).
- <sup>13</sup> See, for example, Orland (1990) or Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997).
- <sup>14</sup> These data come from various studies, but useful summaries of their findings appeared in Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997, p. 58) and Sherman (1994, p. 62), and my numbers are drawn from these sources.
- <sup>15</sup> See, for example, Orland (1990) or Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997). See, among others sources, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Smith, Duncan and Lee (2003); Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Duncan (1996); Byrd and Weitzman (1994); Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor (2001); Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994); Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith (1998); Guo (1998); Schoon, et al. (2002); and Wagmiller, Lennon, Kuang, Alberti, and Aber (2006); as well as studies reported in a book edited by Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (1997a).
- <sup>16</sup> See, for example, Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994); Korenman, Miller, and Sjaastad (1995); Orland (1990); Schoon, et al. (2002); Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); or Wagmiller, Lennon, Kuang, Alberti, and Aber (2006).
- <sup>17</sup> See Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor (2001); Elder, Nguyen, and Gaspi (1985); Galambos and Silbereisen (1987); and Moore, Gleit, Driscoll, Zaslow, and Redd (2002).
- <sup>18</sup> Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994).
- <sup>19</sup> See, for example, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997b, Table 18.1).

- <sup>20</sup> Evidence and arguments supporting this effect may be found in Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor (2001); Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997b, 2000); Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith (1998); Farkas and Beron (2004); Guo (1998); McLoyd (1998); and especially Wagmiller, Lennon, Kuang, Alberti, and Aber (2006).
- <sup>21</sup> Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997, p. 62).
- <sup>22</sup> See Conger, Conger, and Elder (1997); Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, and Simons (1994).
- <sup>23</sup> Although the data for Exhibit 4.3 came from analyses reported by Haveman and Wilson (2005), the numbers displayed are from a summary table appearing in Haveman and Smeeding (2006, p. 132).
- <sup>24</sup> Sacks (2007, p. 306). Note also the interesting “reversal” between average salaries earned by those who had completed doctorates and professional degrees. Doctorates may be more prestigious within the academy, but those with professional degrees—mainly doctors and lawyers—still earn more, on average, within the “real world” of America.
- <sup>25</sup> For indirect evidence contradicting some of these far-right claims, consult Corcoran (1995); Corcoran, Duncan, Gurin, and Gurin (1985); and McLoyd (1998).
- <sup>26</sup> Note that a few studies have also begun to explore the joint educational effects of poverty and *low levels of students’ measured intelligence*, an emotionally loaded issue that has attracted attention from hereditarians, far-right propagandists, and the public at large. This issue is also complex, but to discuss it here would take us away from key concerns in the chapter.
- <sup>27</sup> Consult, for example, Amato and Keith (1991); Cherlin and Furstenberg (1991); Haveman and Wolfe (1995); McLanahan and Sandefur (1994); or Seltzer (1994).
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, Downey (1994). In addition, parallel results were reported for poverty and the educational effect of stepparenthood by Downey (1994, 1995).
- <sup>29</sup> In fairness, youths from a single-parent family may also suffer from additional problems not clearly associated with education—disruptive behavior, emotional immaturity, early pregnancies, and the like—and these latter may not always be tied closely to poverty (see McLanahan, 1997).
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998); Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Smith, Duncan, and Lee (2003); Corcoran and Adams (1997); Garibaldi (1997); Hedges and Nowell (1999); Jencks and Phillips (1998); Miller (1995); Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990); Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003); and Trent (1998)—as well as many of the chapters in a powerful, recent, edited work by Carter and Welner (2013).
- <sup>31</sup> See, for example, Carneiro and Heckman (2002) as well as Wilson (1980, 1993).
- <sup>32</sup> See Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Duncan (1996); Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Smith, Duncan, and Lee (2003).
- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, Wilson (1980, 1987, 1993, 1996).
- <sup>34</sup> See Corcoran and Adams (1997).
- <sup>35</sup> See, especially Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994); Haveman and Wolfe (1995); and Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997).
- <sup>36</sup> Bernstein (1970).
- <sup>37</sup> Bourdieu (1984).
- <sup>38</sup> Coleman (1988).
- <sup>39</sup> For summaries and discussions of such differences, see the recent encyclopedia concerned with gender and education edited by Barbara Bank (2007).
- <sup>40</sup> Several terms are used to designate mechanisms or processes that account for observed effects. The term “pathway,” was used for this purpose by Arloc Sherman (in 1994)—also see Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) and Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (2000)—and I have adopted this usage in my text.
- <sup>41</sup> Sherman (1994, p. 18) citing public use data files for 1989 released by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- <sup>42</sup> Children’s Defense Fund (2001, pp. 38-39).
- <sup>43</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2003).
- <sup>44</sup> The quote is from Books (2004, p. 39), but the data she cites came again from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2003).
- <sup>45</sup> Books (2004, p. 39). See also Needleman, Riess, Tobin, Biasecker, and Greenhouse (1996) and Needleman, Schell, Bellinger, Leviton, and Allred (1990).

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- <sup>46</sup> Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997, p. 60). See also Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (1988); Schwartz (1994); Schwartz, Angle, and Pitcher (1986); and Schwartz and Otto (1991).
- <sup>47</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office (1999).
- <sup>48</sup> Arloc Sherman (1994, pp. 18-23) provides both extensive citations and good summaries of research bearing on housing problems experienced by impoverished youths.
- <sup>49</sup> For evidence concerning educational effects when youths move incessantly or are homeless, consult the Special Section in a recent issue of *Educational Researcher* edited by Ann Masten (2013). One of the studies in this section (Herbers, et al., 2013) also provides independent estimates for the net effects of these problems and student poverty.
- <sup>50</sup> Again, consult Sherman (1994, pp. 13-17) for citations and summaries of research concerned with food and nutrition problems.
- <sup>51</sup> See Alaimo, Olson, and Frongillo (2001).
- <sup>52</sup> See, for example, Baker and Mott (1989); Bee, et al. (1982); Bradley, et al. (1989); Bradley, et al. (1994); Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Duncan (1996); Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, and Liaw (1995); Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Smith, Duncan, and Lee (2003); Caldwell and Bradley (1984); Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); Clarke-Stewart and Apfel (1978); Crosnoe and Cooper (2010); Deutsch (1973); Gottfried (1984); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, McCarton, and McCormick (1998); Menaghan and Parcel (1991); Sameroff, Seifer, Barocas, Zax, and Greenspan (1987); Siegel (1982); Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); Sugland, et al. (1995); and Wachs and Gruen (1982).
- <sup>53</sup> Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (2000, p. 190). The authors cite Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, McCarton, and McCormick (1998) and Smith, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997) as sources for these estimates.
- <sup>54</sup> Elder (1974).
- <sup>55</sup> See, for example, Brody, et al. (1994); Conger, et al. (1992, 1993); Conger, Conger, and Elder (1997); Conger, Conger, and Scaramella (1997); Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, and Simons (1994); Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (1994); Elder, Nguyen, and Caspi (1985); Lempers, Clark-Lempers, and Simons (1989); McLeod and Shanahan (1993); McLoyd (1990, 1997, 1998); and McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, and Borquez (1994). In addition, summaries of related works supporting parallel claims may be found in Liem and Liem (1978); Parker, Greer, and Zuckerman (1988); and Pearlman, Menaghan, Lieberman, and Mullan (1981).
- <sup>56</sup> Conger, Conger, and Elder (1997).
- <sup>57</sup> Yeung, Linver, and Brooks-Gunn (2002).
- <sup>58</sup> See the College Board (2008a, b).
- <sup>59</sup> Mundel (2008).
- <sup>60</sup> See Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (2000) and McLoyd (1998).
- <sup>61</sup> Rothstein (2013) provides another good summary of pathways associated with family poverty that debilitate education for American youths.
- <sup>62</sup> See, for example, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) or Rowe and Rodgers (1997).
- <sup>63</sup> As argued by Oscar Lewis (1961, 1966, 1968). Also see Banfield (1970); Harrington (1962), and W. B. Miller (1958, 1965).
- <sup>64</sup> See, for example, Hannan (1978) or Valentine (1969).
- <sup>65</sup> In fairness, the position I argue here is controversial. Barbara Schneider, Martin Carnoy, Jeremy Kilpatrick, William Schmidt, and Richard Shavelson (2005) recently brought out a book which argues that field experiments are truly the “gold standard” for social investigations and are altogether the BEST way to generate evidence about causal inferences in social research. To make this argument, they would restrict questions about causality to phenomena that can indeed be manipulated. Thus, they asserted that “race and gender are attributes of the student that cannot typically be altered or manipulated and thus cannot be said to be causes of differences in mathematics achievement” (p. 17). If one were to take this argument seriously, it would be impossible to establish causality not only for effects associated with race, gender, and poverty, but also for those spawned by a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina!
- <sup>66</sup> Salkind and Haskins (1982) provide brief, comparative descriptions of all four experiments.



- <sup>67</sup> Actually, this finding should have been anticipated. Divorce costs money, and once basic needs have been met for experimental families, unhappy (perhaps mistreated) wives could afford to seek a better life—see, for example, Groeneveld, Tuma, and Hannan (1980).
- <sup>68</sup> Again see Salkind and Haskins (1982) for a summary of these findings. Details of findings can be found in Mallar (1977); Mallar and Maynard (1979); Manheim and Minchilla (1978); Maynard and Crawford (1977); Maynard and Murnane (1979); and McDonald and Stephenson (1979).
- <sup>69</sup> See also Dahl and Lochner (2008), Duncan and Murnane (2011, p. 17), and Morris, Duncan, and Clark-Kauffman (2005).
- <sup>70</sup> Indeed, such a disaster was predicted by Paul Edelman (1997) shortly after his resignation from the Clinton administration, and subsequent events have largely confirmed his judgment.
- <sup>71</sup> Riemer (1988).
- <sup>72</sup> See various sources, particularly Bos, et al. (1999); Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007); Huston, et al. (2001, 2003, 2005).
- <sup>73</sup> Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007, p. 4).
- <sup>74</sup> Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007, p. 43).
- <sup>75</sup> “An additional 67 Asian adults with children (primarily Hmong) were not included because of cultural and language differences that made the assessment tools inappropriate for them” (Huston, et al., 2001, p. 321).
- <sup>76</sup> See Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007, pp. 39-40).
- <sup>77</sup> See Bailey and Dynarski (2011) and Reardon (2011).
- <sup>78</sup> MacLeod (1987).
- <sup>79</sup> Dodson (1999, p. 14). See Books (2004, pp. 43-44) for an expanded version of this argument.

## POVERTY IN NEIGHBORHOODS AND EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

Children from affluent schools know more, stay in school longer, and end up with better jobs than children from schools that enroll mostly poor children. Children who live in affluent neighborhoods also get into less trouble with the law and have fewer illegitimate children than children who live in poor neighborhoods. ... These patterns have convinced many social scientists, policy analysts, and ordinary citizens that a neighborhood or school's social composition really influences children's life chances. But this need not be the case. The differences we observe could simply reflect the fact that children from affluent families do better than children from poor families no matter where they live [or which schools they attend].

—Christopher Jencks & Susan E. Mayer (1990, p. 111)

This and the next chapter explore links between poverty in the neighborhoods and schools of young Americans and educational failure. They discuss how research is conducted on these issues and summarize what is now known about the educational effects of poverty in the nonhome environments of young Americans. As will be seen, poverty-associated features of neighborhoods and schools are now known to have *independent* effects on educational failure, but impoverished American youths often live in impoverished neighborhoods and attend public schools afflicted by poverty. Small wonder then that the bulk of those youths have trouble with education; they are likely to bear *three* types of burdens—those stemming from their stress-filled homes, the limited and dangerous neighborhoods where they live, and the poverty-debilitated schools they must attend—burdens that are neither borne nor understood by typical middle- and upper-income Americans.

Findings concerning these issues challenge yet another mythic tale that is widely embraced in the U.S. As was pointed out in Chapter Four, many authors have discussed the striking American tendency to believe in individual efficacy, to assume that individuals in the U.S. can overcome all obstacles if only they have sufficient abilities, self-confidence, willingness to work hard, and appropriate knowledge. But belief in individual efficacy has a downside; it also provides Americans with a convenient if prejudicial way to interpret failure. In brief, Americans tend to believe that persons who fail do so because of their *own* deficiencies rather than because the environment has made success difficult or impossible. Following usage suggested by William Ryan, I shall refer to this belief as the tendency to *Blame Victims* for their misfortunes.<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

It is easy to find examples where “successful” Americans, particularly those who embrace far-right ideologies, blame The Poor for poverty. Sometimes responsibility is assigned to impoverished mothers:

There is a dirty little secret about the problem of out-of-wedlock births to poor women. The dirty little secret is that very large numbers of them are rotten mothers. And by rotten mothers I don't mean all of them, obviously. But I do mean that there are very large numbers of children who are being left alone, all day and into the night, not because the mother is out searching for a job, but because she's partying.

—Charles Murray (from comments made in a symposium on illegitimacy in America, 1994)

Sometimes the acid of disapproval is sprayed onto poor persons who come from the “wrong” racial or ethnic groups:

The culture of black America is the most significant for an understanding of today's nonwork and poverty. Although less than a third of blacks are poor in a given year, a majority of long-term poor come from this group. Evidently, the worldview of blacks makes them uniquely prone to the attitudes contrary to work, and thus vulnerable to poverty and dependency.

—Lawrence M. Mead (in his book, *The New Politics of Poverty*, 1992, p. 148)

Sometimes despised traits among The Poor are said to result from government handouts:

The welfare system has paid for non-work and non-marriage and has achieved massive increases in both. By undermining the work ethic and rewarding illegitimacy, the welfare system insidiously generates its own clientele .... Welfare bribes individuals into courses of behavior which in the long run are self-defeating to the individual, harmful to children, and increasingly a threat to society.

—Robert Rector and William Lauber (writing for the Heritage Foundation, 1995, p. 23)

But overwhelmingly, The Poor themselves are said to bear responsibility for their plights:

A majority of poor people ... are poor because they did it to themselves. They failed to educate themselves .... They develop[ed] drug or alcohol addictions .... They never developed good work habits or even good grooming .... They never learned to handle money .... Finally, as sad as it is to say it, some people are poor because they are stupid and/or lazy.

—Charley Reese (in a newspaper column dated November 3, 2005)

These four examples differ in their reasoning and in the negative traits assigned to impoverished persons. But they all blame The Poor for being impoverished, thus fail to acknowledge environmental conditions that make poverty likely or inevitable. And they all focus attention on poor *adults*—or more specifically on *parents* in impoverished families—thus avoiding any thought about the plights of *youths* in those families and policies that might improve serious problems in the homes, neighborhoods, and schools where the lives of these youths are played out.

Things get more complicated when Americans try to explain the link between poverty and educational failure, and a bit of history is needed if we are to understand the current state of American debates about this issue. The last time the United States took serious, collective note of poverty and its effects was in the 1960s, during the administration of Lyndon Johnson. But public concern for such issues was swept away with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan—an event that initiated an era of conservative and centerist American governments. Such governments have *not* wanted to talk about poverty or other social ills, and during this latter era the pernicious effects of these maladies have often been misrepresented, brushed aside, or assigned to inappropriate causes.

A striking example of such processes was begun, in 1983, with government release of an incendiary document, *A Nation at Risk*.<sup>2</sup> This work, released by the Reagan White House with great fanfare, claimed that America's public education was now facing a dangerous *Crisis*, that it was suffering from a recent, tragic decline—a charge said to be confirmed by both longitudinal and comparative studies—and because of this fact, the nation was losing its leadership in industry, science, and innovation. It mattered not that this work cited no evidence for its alarming charges, that some of its claims were clearly false whereas others were misleading or reflected poverty and other social maladies, and that the nation was then, and has since, continued to display impressive leadership in the crucial fields it cited. But “never before had such trenchant rhetoric about education appeared from the White House. As a result the press had a field day, tens of thousands of copies of [the work] were distributed, and many Americans thereafter read or heard, for the first time, that [their] public schools were ‘truly’ failing.”<sup>3</sup> Nor does the story end at this point. The subsequent decades have generated scores of follow-on reports from federal, business, and far-right sources, countless books, and hundreds of opinion pieces, editorial comments, and assertions by pundits claiming—in the face of missing or contradicting evidence—that public education throughout the United States has been declining and is now seriously deficient.

And who's to blame for this alarming Crisis? Although a few spokespersons have blamed parents, school board members, or even youths themselves for it,<sup>4</sup> the vast bulk of pundits have blamed *teachers* and *school administrators* for supposed problems in the public schools where they labor. Many examples may be found where such educators are blamed for The Crisis, but one is sufficient to illustrate the rhetoric. Commenting on supposedly expensive attempts to “reform” American education, Martin Gross has written:

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What have all these reforms and trillions [sic] of dollars wrought? Have they paid off in better public school performance? Absolutely not. There has been no significant improvement in the quality of public education, and under present management, there is little hope for the future . . . .

Nothing has worked because the supposed reforms have not attacked the core of the problem: the makeup, theories, and opinion of the Education Establishment—the 5 million “professionals,” from classroom teachers to state education commissioners, who constitute the near-monolithic force that controls our public schools, from kindergarten through senior high school.

That Establishment has shown itself to be an advocate of low standards, laxity, false educational theory, and poor selection and training of teachers. It suffers from an inability to pass on the accumulated knowledge of civilization from one generation to the next. As time passes, that mental bank decreases, setting up the specter of grave prospects for the future.

—Martin L. Gross (in his book, *The Conspiracy of Ignorance*, 1999, pp. 9-10)

It matters not that little evidence has ever appeared that would support such assertions or that, whenever it appears, “poor school performance” is closely tied to poverty in students’ homes, neighborhoods, and the schools they attend—and that these harsh conditions victimize not only the students but also the educators in those schools. Like many others influenced by far-right assumptions, Martin Gross assigns sole responsibility for a supposed Crisis in American education to the teachers and administrators who labor in the nation’s schools. Thus once again, *individuals* are said to be responsible for unwanted outcomes, and since this is the case, far-right rhetorics argue for policies that focus on motivating, sanctioning, or getting rid of those individuals—the administrators and teachers—who are deemed responsible for the problem, or abolishing the public schools in which they labor.

Such policies seem to “make sense” within the American context, and propaganda for them is frequently buttressed by media accounts in which incompetent teachers and administrators are portrayed. But even highly competent educators face huge challenges when they must labor in schools where neighborhoods are destitute, many students are impoverished, funding is inadequate, and punitive procedures rule the curriculum. And this means that far-right educational “reform” policies have had, at best, only limited success and have sometimes created additional, serious problems for schools. (More on the latter concerns in Chapter Seven.) Worse, they lead Americans away from even thinking about poverty and other problems in the homes, neighborhoods, and schools of impoverished youths which create much of educational failure. In the words of William Ryan, “the ideology of Blaming the Victim so distorts and

disorients the thinking of the average concerned citizen that it becomes a primary barrier to effective social change.”<sup>5</sup>

To sum up then, the American tendency to Blame Victims plays a major role in confused thinking about youth poverty and its educational effects. As will be recalled, in Chapter One I asked why Americans should have so much difficulty thinking clearly about youth poverty and the plights of impoverished youngsters in schools. We now learn that the tendency to Blame Victims helps to create these outcomes, and I also return to this issue and related matters in Chapter Seven. For the present it is sufficient to ask: What can we conclude about the effects of problems appearing in the impoverished *neighborhoods* and *schools* to which nonaffluent youngsters are often subjected? These questions have also been addressed by research, and to such efforts I now turn. For convenience, this chapter reviews research on the impact of *neighborhood* poverty; Chapter Six examines studies concerned with the effects of poverty issues in *schools*.

#### NEIGHBORHOOD POVERTY AND ITS EFFECTS

I remember so clearly my first visit to Chicago’s public housing. It was a spring afternoon in 1985, and I was visiting a ten-year-old boy, Lafayette, who was the subject of a local magazine’s photo essay for which I was writing the text. When I walked into his seven-story high-rise at the Henry Horner Homes, the smells overwhelmed me; spilt wine, urine, fetid puddles. The darkness enveloped me; I navigated the halls by running my hands along the dirtied cinderblock walls. One elevator didn’t work. The breezeway cut through the building like an open tunnel, as if the architects had forgot to design doors for the lobby. And the stories I heard astonished me. In the couple of hours I had with Lafayette, he told me of a young girl who just a couple of weeks earlier had been shot in the leg while skipping rope outside the building, and of a teenaged boy who, after being shot in a gang altercation, stumbled into the breezeway and died on the stairwell. Lafayette sensed my horror—my disbelief. He took me by the arm, walked me to the stairwell, and pointed out the brownish blood stains on the steps. He wanted me to believe.

—Alex Kotlowitz (2000, in a Foreword written for a book by Leonard Rubinowitz & James Rosenbaum on the Gautreaux Program, p. ix)

It sounds so simple. Unlike many other advanced countries, the United States tolerates poverty ghettos (often featuring Black, Hispanic, and other minority families in urban settings), and this means that poor American families often live in enclaves where they are surrounded by other impoverished families.<sup>6</sup> Such concentrations of poverty may affect youths in various ways—by creating environments where boredom, ugliness, despair, lack of opportunities, disaffected

peers, inappropriate adult role models, and personal crises are common. And because poor persons have little political clout, those enclaves also tend to lack citizen services often found in other American neighborhoods, and they may be plagued by high rates of crime, drug addiction, gang warfare, and environmental pollution. Problems such as these place *additional* burdens on youths who come from impoverished homes, and it should be easy to detect effects of those extra burdens in higher rates of educational failure for youths whose families live in poverty ghettos.

But as is so often the case, the devil is in the details. Despite long-standing American interest in the effects of living in “disadvantaged” neighborhoods, relatively few studies have distinguished between effects generated by *poverty* versus those created by other forms of neighborhood disadvantage, and of these only a small handful have looked at ties between neighborhood poverty and educational outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Three research strategies have predominated in this small group of studies: surveys, occasional panel studies based on samples of youths in which data concerning neighborhood features and student outcomes are compared (using controls for family features), and field experiments that track effects for youths’ educational outcomes when families are relocated out of impoverished neighborhoods. Dilemmas have plagued each type of effort, but all three have also generated useful information.

#### *Dilemmas in Surveys and Panel Studies*

I turn first to surveys and panel studies concerned with the effects of neighborhood poverty and begin with five dilemmas common in these efforts.

*First*, such studies have differed over how to identify and assess “neighborhoods.” As a rule, *neighborhoods* are thought to be compact territories that surround a target person’s home and that have features which can affect the person,<sup>8</sup> but this does not tell us how to recognize a neighborhood or detect its boundaries. Most authors seem to believe that neighborhoods are quite small. But how small is small? Should we assume that city blocks, political precincts or wards, ethnic or racial enclaves, subdivisions, or other types of familiar, urban entities are examples of neighborhoods, or that townships, ex-urban “barrios,” Appalachian “hollows,” Indian reservations, or entire, depopulated counties in America’s Great Plains States constitute rural neighborhoods?<sup>9</sup>

Little is yet known about what follows when such familiar entities are assumed to be neighborhoods, so investigators have been forced to use arbitrary means to identify neighborhoods in their studies. Some have used territorial units provided by the U. S. Census Bureau, such as *census tracts*, *enumeration districts*, *minor civil divisions*, or “*individuals’ neighborhoods*” (as identified in the Bureau’s Public Use Microdata Sample file),<sup>10</sup> but others have used “convenient” territorial entities, such as *postal (“Zip”) codes*, *school districts*, or *areas close to target schools*. Such decisions can affect results in various ways, but—as a rule—we would expect that studies will discover only weak effects for neighborhoods when they use a unit that is “inappropriate” or “too large.”

*Second*, we might expect that research concerned with neighborhood poverty would begin by studying what happens when concentrations of poor families are found in neighborhoods, but—surprisingly—this did not happen. Instead, early studies began by exploring the effects of neighborhoods thought to be “disadvantaged” for various reasons, and this diffuse focus created confusion about whether those studies were generating information about poverty, other types of neighborhood problems, or “all conditions” that might generate neighborhood disadvantage.

This confusion persists in recent studies where controls are used to sort out the independent effects of neighborhoods and families. To illustrate, many investigators write movingly about the impact of neighborhood *poverty*, but only a few of their studies have yet explored effects for poverty itself. Instead, those studies have often looked at effects of *proxies* for neighborhood poverty—for example: low average neighborhood scores for family income or SES; the presence in neighborhoods of many disadvantaged families; high rates of joblessness; excessive residential mobility; and the like. As we learned in Chapter Four, the use of such proxies for poverty is likely to generate confusion and weak results.

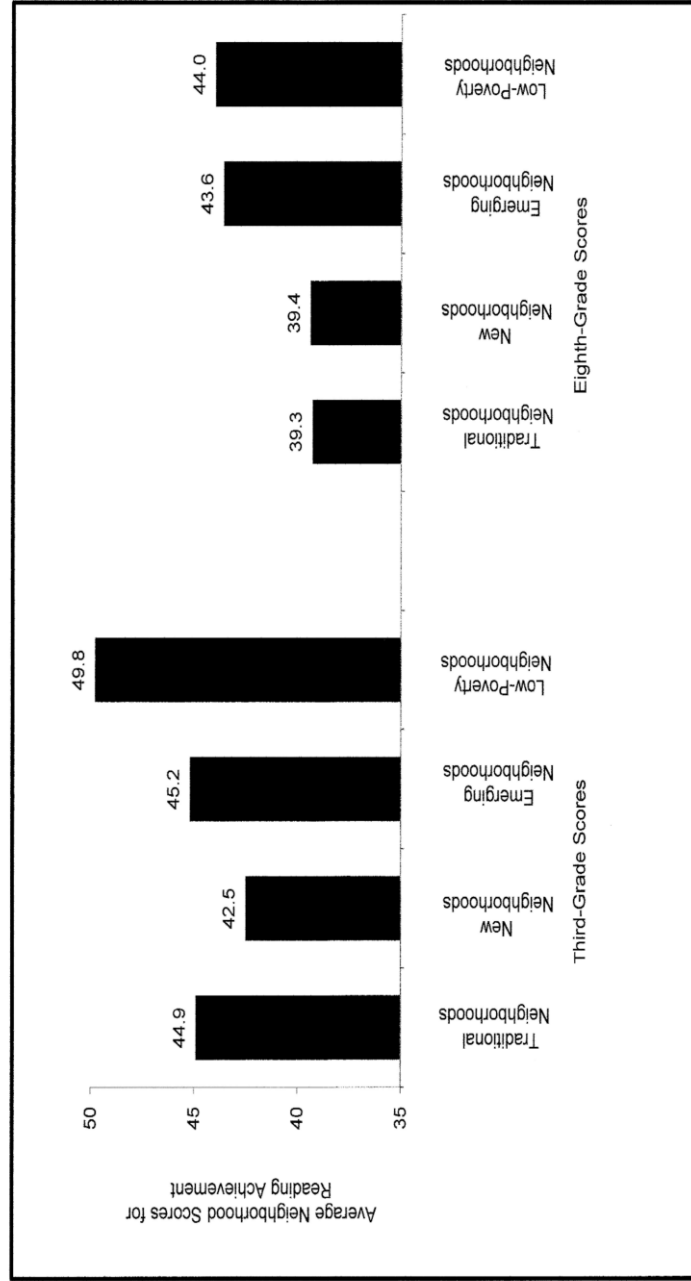
As well, studies of the effects of neighborhood poverty have inadvertently ignored a number of *crucial* problems that often appear in poverty ghettos—low expectations for success and demands for help expressed by youths’ families or peers; challenges posed by environmental degradation and pollution; crime, violence, illegal drug use and street gangs; inadequate health, recreation, and transportation facilities; and the like.<sup>11</sup> To ignore such problems distorts our understanding of neighborhood effects, and this is particularly true when it comes to crime, violence, drug use, and street gangs. When asked about reasons for choosing where to live, American parents often cite these latter problems as major concerns, and ethnographic studies suggest that such problems can lead to severe disruptions in the lives of youths.<sup>12</sup> I return to this issue later in the chapter.

*Third*, survey-based studies often assume that neighborhood features are more likely to affect *older* youths (who spend more time out of their homes), and most such studies have focused on how adolescents or young adults are affected by *current* features of their neighborhoods. But is this reasonable? In Chapter Four we learned that poverty in the family has stronger effects when it persists for several or more years, and *persistent* neighborhood poverty may also create stronger effects.<sup>13</sup> In addition, evidence has appeared indicating that, as with poverty in the family, problems in disadvantaged neighborhoods also affect *young* children.<sup>14</sup>

And if these were not sufficient concerns, Chapter Two noted that concentrations of poverty have recently been increasing in America’s neighborhoods—particularly in the country’s older cities and among Hispanics and African-Americans,<sup>15</sup> and this means that even when an urban youth remains living in the same home, the previously attractive neighborhood of that home may eventually become a poverty ghetto.



**Exhibit 5.1. Average 1988 Reading Scores for Impoverished and Nonimpoverished Neighborhoods in the City of Cleveland**



Source: *Geographic Concentration of Poverty and Risk to Children in Urban Neighborhoods* (Coulton, C. J., & Pandey, S., 1992, Table 1).

An illustration of how this last process can affect educational outcomes appeared in a study published by Claudia Coulton and Shanta Pandey. These authors examined longitudinal data from the city of Cleveland that allowed them to sort its neighborhoods into four categories depending on the years when those neighborhoods became poverty ghettos: “traditional” neighborhoods where dense poverty was in place prior to 1970; “new” neighborhoods where it appeared between 1970 and 1980; “emerging” neighborhoods where it had surfaced by 1988 (the date of the study); and “low-poverty” neighborhoods where it had not (yet) appeared. They then computed average third-grade and eighth-grade reading achievement scores earned in each type of neighborhood in 1988, and their findings appear in Exhibit 5.1. As can be seen, lower average achievement scores appeared in “traditional” and “new” neighborhoods, whereas slightly higher scores were found in neighborhoods where poverty was then “emerging.” But the highest scores were earned by youths in neighborhoods that had not (yet) experienced poverty.<sup>16</sup>

Such findings suggest that good temporal evidence is also needed if we are truly to understand how the education of American youths is affected by living in poverty ghettos, but such evidence is as yet scanty.<sup>17</sup>

*Fourth*, most surveys and panel studies concerned with neighborhood effects have used data from major sources that were designed to explore outcomes for youths as individuals. For practical reasons, the samples used in such studies were often constructed so that the youths studied came from only a few neighborhoods, thus each neighborhood examined typically included the homes of more than one youth appearing in the study. This meant that data for youths in such studies represented *individual events*, whereas data about their neighborhoods represented *collective events* that may have applied conjointly to two or more youths in the sample.

This is a distinction that matters. We are on firm grounds as long as we want to use data from these surveys to estimate the strength of ties between features of youths (or their homes) and their educational accomplishments, thus comparing *individual* events with *individual* outcomes. But what then happens when we add neighborhood characteristics to the analysis? Since the latter are *collective* events, all youths in each neighborhood will have the same scores for such characteristics, data for neighborhoods will have less variability than data for youths and their families, and—if familiar statistical procedures are used to analyze data—estimates for neighborhood effects will be distorted. This problem has long been understood, and methods for dealing with it have been available for some years,<sup>18</sup> but these methods have often been ignored in research on the effects of neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup>

*Fifth* and last, families do not always remain in the same neighborhood, and this is particularly true in the United States where families move frequently. Given American mobility habits and the fact that poverty ghettos pose many problems for parents and their children, why do some poor families remain in those ghettos? Many forces conspire to keep them there, of course; housing is often cheaper in poverty ghettos, discriminatory practices may make moving to

other neighborhoods difficult, support in times of need may be available from friends or relatives who also live in the ghetto, and families may feel more comfortable when surrounded by familiar others with whom they share racial or ethnic identities and life history experiences. But if opportunities appear, some parents will *move* out of poverty ghettos while others will *stay* in them, and these two types of parents may differ in significant ways. Perhaps the former have more energy, ambition, or information about housing alternatives whereas the latter are more cautious, bound to others in the neighborhood, ignorant, or immobilized by personal problems. All of these notions sound plausible, but little research has yet appeared concerning them.

This issue is important because it challenges our interpretation of neighborhood effects. One normally assumes that youth effects associated with poverty ghettos reflect problems that appear in those neighborhoods. But suppose those effects also appear because parents who have remained in those ghettos differ substantially from parents who have moved? How can we separate effects associated with parental moving decisions from effects generated by problems in ghetto environments? Thoughtful researchers are aware of this issue, and they try to address it by measuring parental characteristics that should predict whether a parent is a “mover” or a “stayer” and then using those measures as controls when estimating net neighborhood effects. But those researchers then worry that they might not have controlled for important parental characteristics, and these worries remain unresolved.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Conclusions from Surveys and Panel Studies*

Despite these dilemmas, a small number of truly well-constructed surveys and panel studies have now appeared that explore associations between neighborhood poverty (or its problems) and educational outcomes. What can we conclude from these efforts?

*Neighborhood poverty effects.* Let’s begin with The Big Picture. Studies from this tradition have consistently found significant ties between neighborhood poverty (or poverty-associated problems) and student failure.<sup>21</sup> As well, such ties have been reported for both poverty and several types of problems created by it, for both younger and older youths, and for differing educational outcomes. And studies have also reported that evidence for these ties is still present even when controls for the effects of poverty in the family or home are entered into the analysis. These consistent findings suggest, not only that poverty in neighborhoods and youths’ educational failures are associated, but that the former create problems that are likely *causes* for the latter. Thus our initial conclusion should be that neighborhood poverty in the U.S. truly matters, that it places additional burdens on youths which make educational failure more likely; that *when American youths live in poverty ghettos, in addition to problems stemming from their homes, they experience problems originating in those neighborhoods which threaten educational success.*

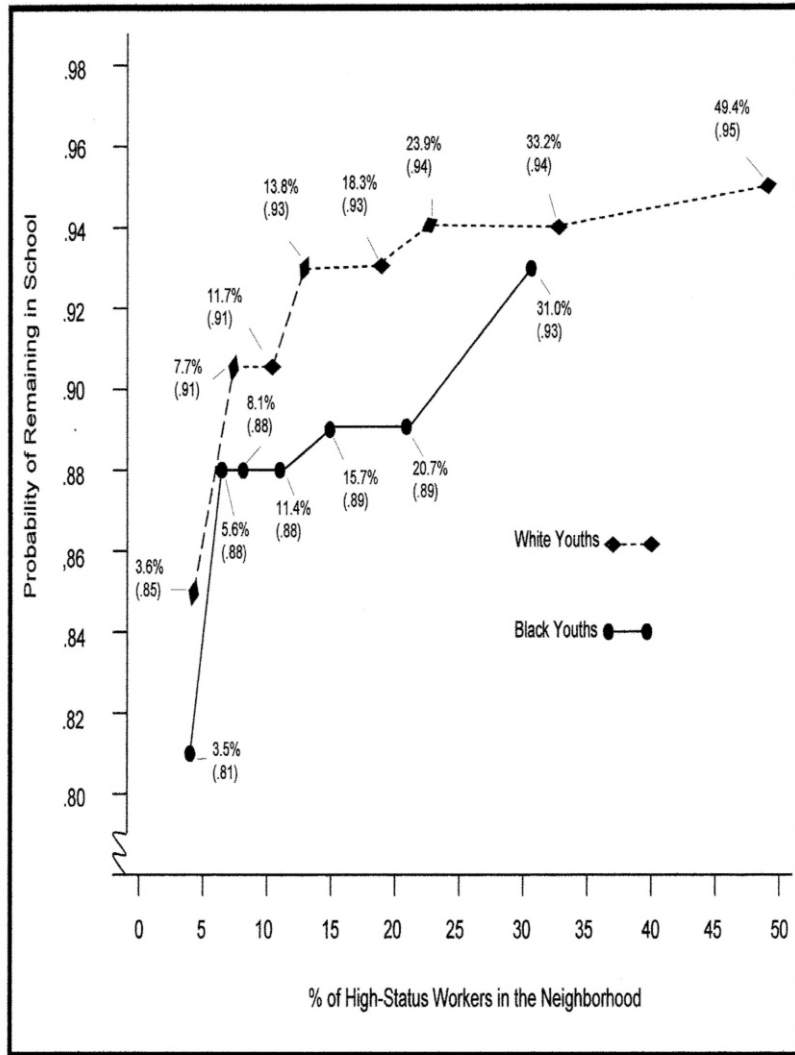
In addition, several researchers have reported that the size of effects found for neighborhoods were somewhat smaller than those found for families, and some have argued that such differences suggest a second conclusion—that for American youths, poverty in the home is a more serious issue than poverty in the neighborhood. At first blush, this conclusion seems to make sense. After all, American youths typically spend more time in their homes than “out and about,” at least during their early years, and during these years, events in their homes presumably have more impact than neighborhood events. And because of this conclusion, some authors have argued that efforts to counteract the effects of youth poverty should focus on the home and family rather than on the neighborhood or community.

But this conclusion may be premature. Older youths typically spend a lot more time out of their homes, and the persistence of dilemmas in surveys concerned with neighborhood effects may mean that typical estimates for the size of those effects are too small. Nevertheless, some advocates who want to Do Something about problems faced by youths in America have picked up this claim, and I return to it later.

It is also useful to repeat that findings of ties between neighborhood poverty and educational failure have been found for both *older youths* and *young children*. The former findings should hardly be surprising, but few scholars would have thought that poverty in the neighborhood also depresses educational outcomes for young children, and it is useful to explore why the latter effect appears. Evidence suggests that it comes about because parents too may be upset by significant problems in ghetto neighborhoods and, as a result, become less able to provide supportive environments in their homes.<sup>22</sup> Thus, neighborhood effects may appear, not only because youths are influenced *directly* by neighborhood problems, but also because they are influenced *indirectly* by problems created for others in their families. Such indirect processes deserve further study. As well, findings that neighborhood poverty also affects young children suggest that American youths who live in poverty ghettos may form early scars from those experiences that are carried forward into adolescence and beyond, but little is yet known about the latter topic, and it too deserves further research.

*Disadvantaged and advantaged others.* Surveys and panel-based studies have also begun to explore the pathways through which impoverished neighborhoods affect student outcomes. Much of this effort has focused on two features common in poverty ghettos: the presence of *disadvantaged others*, and the absence of *advantaged others*. Theorists have long argued that the accomplishments of youths will suffer when those persons are surrounded by concentrations of others who are disadvantaged, but surprisingly, most studies *have not* found such effects. Instead, studies typically *have* found that youths’ educational accomplishments tend to falter when those youths live in neighborhoods where advantaged others are in short supply. These studies have used various measures to indicate concentrations of advantaged or disadvantaged others, and the same findings have appeared for all such measures.<sup>23</sup>

**Exhibit 5.2. Estimated Net Effects of Percentage of High-Status Workers in the Neighborhood and Probability of Teenagers Remaining Enrolled in School**



Source: *The Epidemic Theory of Ghettos and Neighborhood Effects on Dropping Out and Teenage Childbearing* (Crane, J., 1991, Figure 1 and Tables A2 and A3).

Note: Data analyzed were for urban teenagers, aged 16-19. Controls for family characteristics were included in the analyses.

These consistent findings suggest another conclusion, that *when American youths live in neighborhoods where only a few advantaged others are found, their chances for educational success are reduced*. Why should this effect appear, and why should concentrations of disadvantaged others matter so little? Three types of answers have been suggested for these questions. The first stresses processes of *socialization*; it may be that when older advantaged others (particularly adults) appear in the neighborhood, those persons become role models for youths, and the latter come to understand that “making it” through education is possible.<sup>24</sup> The second stresses ability to *mobilize resources*; it may be that advantaged others are able to use their “affluence and influence in the wider society to bring into the neighborhood resources that make local institutions and services better” for youths.<sup>25</sup> The third stresses the impact of *relative deprivation*; it may be that youths compare their own accomplishments with the achievements of nearby peers, and they will work harder to “keep up” with advantaged peers whose achievements they envy.<sup>26</sup> All, some, or none of these arguments may prove useful for answering the question, but additional studies will be required if the issue is to be resolved.

As phrased above, this second conclusion suggests a simple, straightforward effect that should apply to most types of neighborhoods, persons living in them, and youths in America, but key studies have also reported findings suggesting that things may not be that simple. To illustrate, the relation between lack of advantaged others in neighborhoods and educational failure may not be linear. In 1991, for example, Jonathan Crane reported a study based on a huge data set then available from the Census Bureau’s Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file.<sup>27</sup> After controlling for family characteristics, Crane found that net high school retention rates for urban youths are *sharply* lower in neighborhoods where *very* few adults with high-status jobs appear—see Exhibit 5.2. And, as also indicated in the figure, the same nonlinear effect was found for both White and Black youths.<sup>28</sup>

The effect displayed in Exhibit 5.2 should be familiar, since it is similar to a nonlinear effect that was discussed in Chapter Four (look again at Exhibit 4.1). There we learned that living in a “truly impoverished home” sharply handicaps youths for education. The effect displayed in Exhibit 5.2 suggests that youths who live in a “truly impoverished neighborhood”—where high-status persons are in very short supply—also face sharply escalated handicaps. In addition—and to the surprise of few persons familiar with the American scene—Crane’s analyses indicated that this effect is particularly strong for Black male youths who live in the worst of the country’s urban ghettos.

Crane’s estimates for the impact of high-status persons also revealed that youths’ educational prospects vary only slightly as one moves through the *middle* of the advantaged-others scale. This implies that it may not matter much whether youths live in neighborhoods that are “moderately impoverished,” “about average in impoverishment,” or “moderately affluent”—their chances for educational success may be about the same. In contrast, chances for youths seem to be far worse in neighborhoods that are “truly impoverished” (that contain vanishingly

few advantaged others), and reflecting this line of thought, key investigators have suggested that the major negative effects of living in urban poverty ghettos appear when neighborhood poverty rates are at least 40%.<sup>29</sup> In effect, they argue that negative consequences for youths crop up far more often when neighborhood poverty exceeds a “tipping point,” and that studies of neighborhood poverty effects should focus on comparing neighborhoods that are above and below the “tipping point.”

Despite these arguments and the intuitive appeal of Crane’s findings, other published studies of neighborhood effects have largely ignored them, and this is a shame. In addition, at least one other study has appeared suggesting that a second, nonlinear effect may also appear that is associated with truly *affluent* neighborhoods. In 1997, Greg Duncan, James Connell, and Pamela Klebanov reported a panel study based on PSID data which found that the educational outlook for teenagers “is significantly greater in neighborhoods with higher-than-average numbers of affluent families.”<sup>30</sup> (Note that this second nonlinear effect was also hinted at for Black youths in Crane’s study—look again at Exhibit 5.2—but Duncan and his colleagues found that the effect held not only for male and female Black youths but also for youths who were White and female.) If confirmed in subsequent research, this suggests that truly affluent neighborhoods may provide educational advantages similar to those provided by truly affluent families that we learned about in Chapter Four.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, findings from several studies suggest that the relation between lack of advantaged neighbors and educational failure may vary in other subtle ways among youths who differ by race and gender.<sup>32</sup> An illustration of this point was also reported by Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov. After controlling for family characteristics, these authors found that the presence of *various* types of high-SES families in the neighborhood increase chances for completing high school among only three types of youths: White males, White females, and Black females. But “that affluent neighbors enhance Black males’ educational attainment only if those neighbors are [also] Black.”<sup>33</sup> This latter finding implies that the presence of “appropriate” role models may be uniquely important for young, Black, American males.

As these various findings illustrate, surveys and panel studies that explore ties between neighborhood poverty and student failure can generate both insights and useful information, but well-planned research on this important topic is as yet skimpy, and dilemmas have often plagued the effort. More well-designed studies concerned with this issue are now needed.

### *Experiments*

Given the relative dearth of well-planned surveys and panel studies concerned with neighborhood poverty effects, we might expect that experiments on the topic would also be hard to find—but we would be wrong. On the contrary, useful experiments addressing this concern have already appeared based on programs where youths and their families were relocated—out of public housing ghettos

and into other types of neighborhoods. These programs were touched off by court orders designed to redress racial discrimination and were funded through awards from the America's federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). But because these programs relocated youths and their families into more affluent neighborhoods, these programs also provided opportunities to construct field experiments that explored outcomes when neighborhood poverty was relieved. And although these experiments have also been associated with dilemmas, two have provoked widespread interest, and I summarize them here.

*The Gautreaux program.* American public housing complexes were first constructed during the 1930s and were designed to provide temporary, low-rent shelter for families during the Great Depression. After World War Two, however, Chicago—like other northern cities—was flooded with Afro-American immigrants fleeing from rural poverty and discrimination in the Deep South, and over time its high-rise public housing enclaves became dangerous, largely Black, poverty ghettos filled with long-term residents. Responding to these conditions, plaintiffs filed a brief against the Chicago Housing Authority in 1966 charging that the authority had employed racially discriminatory policies in the administration of its low-rent public housing decisions, and in 1976 the U.S. Supreme Court issued a consent decree designed to redress problems caused by those decisions.

The initiative evolving from this decree, *the Gautreaux program*, offered vouchers from the federal Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to impoverished Black families living in public housing enclaves that would pay much of their rent if they moved into privately owned, rental dwellings located, either in suburbs that were mostly White and “middle class,” or in other neighborhoods of the city that were largely Black and less privileged. But most families willing to relocate were not allowed to choose between these two options. “Although in principle, participants [had] choices about where they [were to] move, in actual practice they [moved] where the program [happened] to have housing openings at the time.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, the Gautreaux program became an ex post facto experiment in which more than 4,000 impoverished Black families from high-rise public housing ghettos were offered an opportunity to relocate, largely on a random basis, either into rental housing located in a mostly White suburb where neighborhoods and schools were more advantaged, or into “equivalent” quarters in a largely Black city district whose neighborhood and school had fewer advantages.

From the beginning, it was assumed that Gautreaux families who were relocated into White suburbs were “strangers in a strange land,” and it was not at all clear how youths and their families would fare in such new and unfamiliar environments. Optimists thought that those resettled into the suburbs would benefit because job opportunities were more plentiful there, fewer families were impoverished, and schools were less problem ridden. Pessimists thought that racial prejudice and discrimination, lack of appropriate role models, and higher educational demands in the suburbs would pose insurmountable challenges for



those youths and their families. And other naysayers—influenced either by suspicions about the supposed genetic deficiencies of Blacks or by Oscar Lewis's theory about the "culture of poverty"<sup>35</sup>—argued that Black youths and their families from the ghettos were so disabled that they could not take advantage of opportunities offered if moved out of the city.

Results from the program clearly favored the suburbs, however. In 1982, when the program had been in place for only a few years, James Rosenbaum and his colleagues began to interview Gautreaux families with school-age youths, seeking to learn how relocation had affected their lives. Then in 1989, when those youths were age 18 on average, the same researchers reestablished contacts with 162 of those families—114 "experimental" families from the suburbs, and 48 "control" families from city neighborhoods. Information given during these second interviews provided abundant evidence that youths in the suburbs had fared better in education than those relocated within the city. Only 5% of the former had dropped out of school—whereas 20% of the latter were drop-outs, and 40% of the former had been placed in a college-track program—versus 24% of the latter. Among older youths, 54% of those from the suburbs had attended college—versus 21% of youths from the city, and 27% had enrolled in a four-year college—versus only 4% of the latter. Moreover, when comparing employment records for older youths, the researchers found that those from the suburbs enjoyed multiple advantages; on average, they were more likely to be enrolled or working; if not in college they were more likely to be employed full-time; they were typically paid better wages; and their jobs were more likely to provide benefit packages in addition to salaries.<sup>36</sup>

These findings suggest that the bulk of Gautreaux youths who had moved to the suburbs enjoyed a better start in education (and life) than youths who had relocated to other sites in the city, and these results attracted attention from various authors who argued that they confirmed that impoverishment in neighborhoods truly matters and that opportunities to move to advantaged neighborhoods *can* make a difference for American youths (and their families) who were previously mired in poverty ghettos.<sup>37</sup> But are such conclusions warranted? Yes and no.

Experiments with human subjects are most persuasive when those subjects are similar to others in the general population and are assigned randomly to treatment conditions where they experience consistent and crucially different treatments. As well, in order to make sure that results reflect those treatment conditions (and nothing else), subjects and others involved in such experiments should be kept in the dark about which subjects are assigned to which treatments and the outcomes those treatments should generate, and (since this was an *ex post facto* experiment) the researchers should have explored all factors that might have contaminated the "experimental" and "control" conditions carefully.

Unfortunately, most of these requirements were compromised in the Gautreaux program. Almost all of the Gautreaux families were Black and were headed by a single mother who was a current or former welfare recipient and had been living in public housing for two or more years—and for these reasons, they

did not represent the full range of impoverished families in America. In addition, participation in the program was limited to families that were willing to move out of public housing—indeed had *applied* to participate in the Gautreaux program—and did not have more than four children, large debts, or a history of “unacceptable housekeeping.” Thus, in some ways the Gautreaux families were an elite group whose characteristics did not match those of other, more “disorganized” families who also live in some of America’s public housing ghettos. These problems do not mean that Gautreaux findings are worthless, of course. On the contrary, they tell us a lot about what happens when well-organized, female-headed, Black families who are willing to move out of public housing ghettos are given opportunities to do so.

In addition, Gautreaux families were *not* always relocated into city or suburban communities on a random basis. Several venues for relocating ghetto families were sometimes available, and when this occurred, authorities would sometimes use family characteristics to help decide which venue was “more appropriate” for that family. As well, families could accept or decline an offer to relocate under the program, and a substantial number of families never took up the option. And families relocated into city and suburban communities did not always remain living in those venues; some families found their new neighborhoods unpleasant, and—over time—they moved to other, “similar” communities in the Chicago area, but others moved into “dissimilar” communities, and still others moved out of the Chicago area and fell out of the study. And this meant, among other things, that the small sample of families interviewed by Rosenbaum and his colleagues did not represent all types of families in the program. As well, most administrators and many families involved in the program knew about its experimental nature and held firm expectations about the outcomes it “should” generate; indeed, Gautreaux families who were relocated to suburban neighborhoods were thought to be “pioneers” who would, if they were successful, be opening the doors of opportunity for other similar families. And all involved in the Gautreaux program assumed that, regardless of where they were relocated, youths and their families would lead better lives if they moved out of public housing, but evidence to assess this assumption was not collected. Again, these latter problems do not mean that Gautreaux findings should be ignored. But they certainly suggest that effects reported for the program may have reflected other forces in addition to those stemming from the differing venues into which families were relocated.

Finally, relocated families in the Gautreaux program were subjected to several types of new experiences that were bundled together, but little information was collected to explore which of those experiences were responsible for its effects. And this meant, in particular, that investigators could not establish whether youths relocated to the suburbs did better because of they were living in new and different *neighborhoods*, attending new and different *schools*, or perhaps both.

Despite such concerns, one cannot but be impressed with the effects reported by Rosenbaum and his colleagues. They suggest, not only that

## CHAPTER FIVE

opportunities available in the Gautreaux program made a *real* difference for impoverished youths who had previously been forced to live in public housing, but also that moving from a Black, impoverished, urban ghetto to a White, “middle-class” suburb—and attending its advantaged school—can open up *significant* doors in education (and life) for Black youths from impoverished but well-organized and ambitious families.

*Moving to Opportunity.* The Gautreaux program was begun a generation ago, and reports of its impressive effects began to circulate in the early 1990s. But those reports also raised questions about the design of the program, its analyses, and the meaning of effects reported for it—and a revamped and larger, pre-planned, experimental program, *Moving to Opportunity* (MTO), was begun in 1994. This new effort was deliberately “designed to assess the impact of providing families living in [public housing developments] with opportunities to move to neighborhoods with lower levels of poverty,” and this was again to be promoted by giving HUD vouchers to selected families that would pay much of the rent for apartments in less-impoverished neighborhoods.<sup>38</sup> In all, 4,248 families from public housing ghettos were recruited for the MTO program between 1994 and 1997 in five major American cities: Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City. Eligible families had to be living in neighborhoods where the poverty rate was at least 40%, and each participating family had to be living below the poverty line, to have at least one child under the age of 18, and to be in good standing with the housing authority. As was true in the Gautreaux program, most MTO families were headed by single mothers—and most youths in those families were either “non-Hispanic African-Americans” or “Hispanic (Black or non-Black).”<sup>39</sup>

A lottery system was used to assign each participating family to one of three treatment conditions: a *control group* who were not offered housing vouchers but could remain living in public housing; a “*Section 8*” *group* who received vouchers that could be used in any neighborhood where private housing was available; and an *experimental group* who were given vouchers that could only be used to defray rent costs in an urban neighborhood where the poverty rate was less than 10%. Families in the experimental group also received mobility counseling and were allowed to make subsequent moves to alternative neighborhoods, if they chose, after living in an approved, low-poverty neighborhood for a year. Families in the control group and Section 8 group could also make subsequent moves to new neighborhoods, and typical families in all three groups made at least one subsequent move before 1992, when most data about results of the MTO experiment were collected. As with the earlier Gautreaux program, sizable numbers of families in the experimental and Section 8 groups decided not to use the housing vouchers they had been offered, but many did so, and results reported for the effects of MTO were generated by comparing responses from these “complying” families with responses from families in the control group.

Data were gathered by interviewing parents and youths from participating families, by administering achievement tests to those youths, and by consulting various data files for information about the neighborhoods and schools those youths had experienced. Attempts were made to contact all of the 4,248 MTO families, and data were obtained from most participants. Thus, by comparison with the limited evidence available for Gautreaux, MTO evidence came from a wider range of sources, many more participants, and families that had, and had not, remained living in neighborhoods to which they had originally been assigned.

Early results from MTO were promising.<sup>40</sup> To illustrate, Jens Ludwig, Helen Ladd, and Greg Duncan looked at evidence from a small sample of Baltimore youths aged 5 to 12 whose families had been in MTO for four years and found that youths from the experimental group earned somewhat higher test scores for reading and math achievement, and Tama Leventhal and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn reported similar results for male youths from a small sample of New York City youngsters, aged 6 through 10, who had been in the MTO program for three years.<sup>41</sup> However, when Lisa Sanbonmatsu, Jeffrey Kling, Greg Duncan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn examined data, collected in 2002 for the full range of MTO families who had by then been in the program from four to seven years, they found *no* significant advantages in achievement test scores—or, for that matter, in school behaviors or school engagement—for youths in either the experimental or Section 8 group!<sup>42</sup>

Why on earth should the well-intentioned MTO experiment have generated such weak, long-term educational effects? At first blush, these results appear to contradict the strong effects reported for the Gautreaux program and were clearly a surprise to Sanbonmatsu and her colleagues. However, part of the puzzle is resolved when we remember that—in contrast with data reported for Gautreaux—data for the MTO experiment came from a *nearly full* sample of youths in the study, and we learn that many MTO families in the control group had moved subsequently to new neighborhoods where poverty was less grinding, whereas some in the experimental group had moved to other neighborhoods where poverty was more prevalent.<sup>43</sup> These moves by families meant that average differences in exposure to neighborhood poverty were *smaller* than had been planned when MTO was designed, and if we are to take the survey results reported earlier by Jonathan Crane seriously (look again at Exhibit 5.2), the educational effects generated by MTO should indeed have been minor.

However, this argument does not fully unravel the puzzle. Control and experimental youths did indeed experience different levels of exposure to neighborhood poverty, and these differences were associated with reduced stress for youths' parents as well as significant effects for youths' physical health, mental health, and their willingness to engage in risky behaviors.<sup>44</sup> As well, subsequent reanalyses of MTO data have indicated that significant educational effects *did* appear for youths who had been living in extremely disadvantaged, crime-ridden neighborhoods in Chicago and Baltimore.<sup>45</sup> Thus one must ask again, why should neighborhood poverty differences have generated such weak

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effects for most *educational* outcomes in the MTO experiment? Sanbonmatsu and her associates explored several answers for this question, but the most compelling answer is generated by the fact that, on average, control and experimental youths experienced only modest differences in the *schools* they attended! (Indeed, these two sets of schools differed only slightly for proportions of impoverished students enrolled, average students' scores on state exams, and youths' descriptions of school climate.) Thus, families in the experimental group were *not* exposed to the high-status, high-achieving, suburban schools that were featured in the Gautreaux program—and these contrasting schooling conditions for experimental subjects may have generated quite different results for the two experiments.

If correct, this answer also suggests that neighborhood effects may be generally weaker than school effects when it comes to youth poverty and educational outcomes. This thesis may or may not be correct, and I return to it in Chapter Six. For the present, however, MTO findings suggest that if one desires to improve educational prospects for American youths from families that are impoverished, that live in urban poverty ghettos, and that are headed by single mothers from minority groups, little will be accomplished by merely helping those families move to another urban neighborhood with somewhat less poverty.

This conclusion is tentative, of course. Other experiments with differing designs are now needed if we are to truly understand conditions that must be met if relocating youths and their families out of American poverty ghettos is to generate improved prospects for education (and life).

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite weak results from the MTO experiment, one cannot help but be impressed by other findings from research reviewed in this chapter. Well-constructed surveys and panel studies have consistently found that neighborhood poverty in America and its associated problems are significantly tied to educational failure and that these effects are distinct from those generated by poverty in youths' homes. Moreover, neighborhood poverty has been found to disrupt educational progress for both older youths and young children—in part, because it creates problems, not only for youths themselves, but also for their parents.

As well, such studies have generated knowledge about the educational impact of two problems commonly found in impoverished neighborhoods: the presence of *disadvantaged* others, and the absence of *advantaged* others. Surprisingly, the former condition seems to generate few effects, but the latter has been tied consistently to educational failure—although the effects of advantaged others tend to be sharply stronger when neighborhood poverty is extreme, and those effects are found to differ in subtle but understandable ways depending on the race and gender of youths.

Taken together, these findings suggest that neighborhood poverty in America truly *matters*, that it is associated with significant problems which

depress educational prospects for youths. Moreover, findings from the Gautreaux experiment suggest that, at least for Afro-American youths, those prospects can be improved if they and their families are relocated out of urban poverty ghettos and into middle-income, predominantly White suburbs, where problems are fewer and schools are also not debilitated by poverty.

It should be restressed, however, that research on the effects of impoverished neighborhoods is truly in its infancy. Although results from well-constructed surveys and panel studies so far completed are consistent and impressive, only a *few* such studies have yet appeared, and only *two* serious experiments have yet surfaced concerned with effects that follow when impoverished families are relocated out of poverty ghettos. As well, studies of neighborhood effects have been plagued by dilemmas that have placed limits on their implications and coverage of issues that we ought to know more about.

Above all, well-constructed surveys seem not yet to have explored how youths' prospects in education are affected by the excessive crime, violence, drug addiction, and gang wars that often plague America's urban poverty ghettos. Sensitive observers have long assumed that such effects are tragic, and lurid portrayals of them sometimes appear in the popular press—see, for example, a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece by Bob Herbert that is excerpted as Exhibit 5.3. But, to the best of my knowledge, little evidence has yet appeared concerning the numbers of impoverished youngsters who are exposed to such horrific experiences and what those exposures do to their ability to cope subsequently with education (and life). Such knowledge is essential, not only for understanding, but also for planning effective programs to deal with these truly hideous problems.

Meanwhile, how do findings from studies of neighborhood effects bear on the American tendency to blame *teachers* and *school administrators* for educational failure in poverty ghettos? In brief, findings from these studies pose a severe challenge to the blaming thesis. Clearly, if poverty in the neighborhoods of ghetto schools create serious problems for students, those students also bring burdens created by *neighborhood* problems with them as they enter the school-house door—burdens that can ruin their prospects in education. And given this fact, the mind boggles with the thought that American teachers and administrators in poverty-ghetto schools should somehow be blamed for such problems and burdens. Rather, it should be understood that those educators too bear additional burdens because, while laboring in neighborhoods that are highly stressful, they are being asked to provide an education that will somehow “rescue” their deeply challenged students—an education that will somehow allow those students to “catch up” with peers in other schools who do not bear the burdens of family and neighborhood poverty.

This does not mean that such “rescue” missions have no effects, nor that all educational strategies provide equivalent support for challenged students, nor that all educators are equally able to inspire and provide aid for impoverished students from poverty ghettos. Indeed, we shall review studies in Chapters Six that explore

### Exhibit 5.3. Listen to the Children

The teen-ager called to ask if he could be excused from classes. Something bad had happened. He had attended a christening and a shootout had erupted. "I have to go with my mother to visit my brother in jail," the boy told school officials. "He's up for attempted murder. Then I'm going with her to bring my other brother's body home. He was killed in the shootout and I still have to go to the doctor because I got shot in the pelvis." Officials of the Bushwick Outreach Center, an alternative high school in Brooklyn, were understanding. They said yes, the boy could be excused.

Another time a student asked if could "delay" coming to school for a week. "We found my brother dead in the hallway this morning," he said. Yes, school officials replied. Of course. A week's absence would be O.K.

Once there was a time when kids stayed home because of the flu, or a cold, or a stomach ache. Serious illness was unusual and the death of a student was rare. That is no longer the case in inner-city schools. Like a poisonous wind, misfortune and tragedy are sweeping relentlessly across the children of the big cities.

Teachers and guidance counsellors recalled some of the other reasons given by students for missing classes at Bushwick Outreach. "The guy upstairs got shot and the blood dripped on my mother's head, so we're moving." "My uncle was killed in front of the house." "My girlfriend gave birth to twins and they're both dead." Ellie Weiss, a teacher, remembers a girl who told her she couldn't come to school because one of her grandmother's foster children had been raped, beaten, and murdered in a city park. Ms. Weiss knew the student was telling the truth because the story was already in the newspapers ....

The excuses at Bushwick Outreach provide a chilling glimpse into the real lives of big-city youngsters across America. "I'm moving. The marshal is putting us out." "I have to be tested for TB. My mother tested positive." "I can't come to school until my bruises heal." Times have changed. Lunch boxes and thermoses are out. Guns and knives are in. Before the roll call you have to walk through a weapons detector. These kids don't go to pep rallies. But they do go to funerals. Death is so prevalent that some schools are equipped with mourning room ....

"It's like we're living in some kind of weird place," Ms. Weiss said. "It's shocking. It's very upsetting. Students come to school who are cut up or shot up, or we hear from kids who can't come to school because people are after them."

We have not even begun to confront the enormity of this problem. We have children across America living in neighborhoods as lawless as Mogadishu. We have children who believe that the death of other children is normal .... A three-year study of "Adolescents in High-Risk Settings" was released last week by the National Academy of Sciences. It says, "We believe that the problems of America's young people are getting significantly worse, not better" .... [Meanwhile] the big story in Washington is the struggle over the federal budget, but that means nothing to the children of the cities. They're nobody's constituents. We hear about them mostly when they are killing somebody, and sometimes when they are dying. Given a chance, most of the country would like not to hear from them at all.

—Bob Herbert, from an Op-Ed piece published in the New York Times (1993)

just such issues. But let it be understood that if educators fail in urban, poverty-ghetto schools, those educators need *help*—help in such forms as additional resources, knowledge about better strategies for teaching, needed revisions of educational curricula and structures, more collegial support, and personal encouragement—not *blame*. And this, in turn, means that blame-based programs for educational “reform” in ghetto schools need serious rethinking.

Clearly then, findings about neighborhood effects pose significant challenges to the notion that teachers and school administrators are to be blamed whenever impoverished students fail in America. But they are surely not the only challenges faced by this notion. As we shall see, additional and serious challenges are posed by findings about burdens created for those students within America’s *schools*, and to this research we turn in Chapter Six.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ryan (1971).

<sup>2</sup> National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Berliner and Biddle (1995, p. 140).

<sup>4</sup> Former President George H. W. Bush provided an example in which parents are blamed in remarks that he delivered at a public high school (in 1991):

The ringing school bell sounds an alarm, a warning to all of us who care about the state of American education .... Every day brings new evidence of crisis .... Our schools are in trouble. But before we point fingers, assign blame, how many of us demand more of our children, ourselves, our schools? Survey after survey suggests too many parents ... remained unconcerned, unconvinced that the state of their own schools should worry them .... What happens at home really matters. And when our kids come home from school, do they pick up a book or do they sit glued to the tube watching music videos? Parents: Don’t make the mistake of thinking your kids only learn from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. You are, and always will be, their first teachers .... Here’s another shocking number. Children in one study said the average parent spends just 15 minutes a day, 15 minutes, in conversation with them. Most people spend that much time on coffee break.

Chubb and Moe provided an example in which blame was assigned to America’s school boards in their influential book (published in 1990), *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*. An example in which students are blamed appeared in a lead chapter written by Tommy M. Tomlinson—formerly Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the administration of the Senior President Bush—for a (1992) book he also edited, *Hard Work and High Expectations: Motivating Students to Learn*:

The most troubling part of all of this is how pervasive is the indifference of U.S. students to high achievement or even doing their best. Not only do low-ability and low-achieving students study the least, even though they need to study the most just to keep up, but high ability or low, U.S. public school students are collectively not committed to high academic achievement.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan (1971, p. xv).

<sup>6</sup> See, among other sources, Anyon (1997), Darling-Hammond (2013), Kingsley and Pettit (2003), Ladson-Billings (2013), and Rothstein (2013).

<sup>7</sup> For useful reviews of some of these efforts, consult Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Liaw, and Duncan (1995); Crowder and South (2003); Ellen and Turner (1997); Gephart (1997); Jencks and Mayer (1990); Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000), and Nettles, Caughy, and Campo (2008). An impressive two-volume work on the topic, edited by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Greg Duncan, and Lawrence Aber (1997) has also appeared.



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- <sup>8</sup> Some researchers also make a distinction between *neighborhoods* and *communities*, the latter being thought of as aggregations “of individuals who share resources and a common sense of identity” (Darling & Steinberg, 1997). But this is only one of many definitions of “community” that have appeared over the years, and those who have studied environmental effects on educational outcomes have often used techniques for identifying “communities” that are similar to those used by other researchers for identifying “neighborhoods.” Most investigators now use the term *neighborhood*, and I have followed this usage.
- <sup>9</sup> Linda Burton and Townsend Price-Spratlen (1999) argue that research on neighborhood effects for youths should begin by finding out how those youths conceive their neighborhoods and that their notions may be sharply at odds with how their parents and other adults think about the “same” neighborhood environments.
- <sup>10</sup> A census tract is an area containing, “on average, 4,200 people that local authorities deem to be a ‘neighborhood’” (Aaronson, 1998, p. 924). Enumeration Districts, substitutes for tracts, are used when respondents reside in untraced areas and typically contain less than 600 people. Minor Civil Divisions, used as a last resort, are typically townships and average about 6,000 people (Crowder & South, 2003, p. 669). “Neighborhoods” identified in PUMS data were “about the same size as census tracts ... [but were] formed by computer, using geographic keys associated with each household record” (Crane, 1991, p. 1232).
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, Ceballos and McLoyd (2002); Pinderhughes, Nix, Foster, Jones, and The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (2001); and Shumow, Vandell, and Posner (1999).
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Billy (2001) or Burton (2001).
- <sup>13</sup> Aware of this possibility, some researchers have generated estimates for neighborhood features by calculating average scores for youths’ teenage years, but a recent study suggests that negative effects for education are worse when adolescents have *recently* moved into a distressed neighborhood—see Crowder and South (2003).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Chase-Lansdale and Gordon (1996); Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, and Smith (1998); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997).
- <sup>15</sup> See again Jargowsky (1996, 1997) and Kneebone, Nadeau, and Berube (2011).
- <sup>16</sup> See Coulton and Pandey (1992, Table 1). These authors used census tracts as proxies for neighborhoods, and poverty ghettos were judged to have appeared when 40% or more of the households in a tract had incomes that fell below Official Poverty Thresholds. Coulton and Pandey did not discuss the possibility that tracts would climb out of ghetto status if gentrification occurred. Crowder & South (2003) have also found that, for Black teenagers, the negative educational effects of living in distressed neighborhoods has increased over the past quarter century.
- <sup>17</sup> See, for example, Crowder and South (2003).
- <sup>18</sup> See Bryk and Raudenbush (1992), Greene (1993); and Goldstein (1995).
- <sup>19</sup> Exceptions to this generalization may be found in Ainsworth (2002), Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov (1997), and Garner and Raudenbush (1991). The latter study made early use of Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM), the technique now widely used to deal with this problem. Unfortunately, the study also used data drawn from Scotland, and whether its findings apply to the American context is not known.
- <sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Aaronson (1997, 1998) tried to address this issue by comparing data from siblings who came from the same families. The author reasoned that since siblings had had the same parents and had been given the same exposure to neighborhood experiences, any neighborhood effects he found could not have reflected differences in parental decisions to move or remain in ghettos. His sample was small, however, and other problems constrained his results.
- <sup>21</sup> See, for example, Aaronson (1997, 1998); Ainsworth (2002); Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Sealand (1993); Chase-Lansdale and Gordon (1996); Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); Clarke (1992); Connell and Halpern-Felsher (1997); Crane (1991); Crowder and South (2003); Datcher (1982); Dearing (2004); Duncan (1994); Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994); Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov (1997); Ensminger, Lamkin, and Jacobson (1996); Flores (2002); Halpern-Felsher et al. (1997); Jencks and Mayer (1990); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997); Shumow, Vandell, and Posner (1999); Stewart, Stewart, and Simons (2007); and Turley (2002, 2003).

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- <sup>22</sup> See Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, and Duncan (1994); Ceballos and McLoyd (2002); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997); Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000); Nettles, Caughy, and Campo (2008).
- <sup>23</sup> Findings supporting the contrasting effects for concentrations of advantaged and disadvantaged persons have been reported by Ainsworth (2002); Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Sealand (1993); Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); Crane (1991); Duncan (1994); Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1994); Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov (1997); Ensminger, Lamkin, and Jacobson (1996); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997); Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000); and Turley (2002).
- <sup>24</sup> Jencks and Mayer (1990) and Wilson (1996).
- <sup>25</sup> Crane (1991, p. 1234).
- <sup>26</sup> Turley (2002).
- <sup>27</sup> Crane (1991).
- <sup>28</sup> See Crane (1991, Figure 1 and Tables A2 and A3). Note also that Crane reported estimates for net high school drop-out rates, but in Exhibit 5.2 these were converted into retention rates so as to facilitate comparisons with Exhibit 4.1.
- <sup>29</sup> See, for example, Ellwood (1988) or Sawhill, O'Connor, Jensen, and Coulton (1992).
- <sup>30</sup> Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov (1997, p. 240). Aaronson (1998) and Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997) have also explored nonlinear effects in data linking concentrations of advantaged neighbors with educational success or failure.
- <sup>31</sup> See again Reardon (2013).
- <sup>32</sup> See, for example, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, and Sealand (1993); Chase-Lansdale, Gordon, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov (1997); Crowder and South (2003); Datcher (1982); Duncan (1994); Ensminger, Lamkin, and Jacobson (1996); Flores (2002); Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, and Gordon (1997); and Turley (2003).
- <sup>33</sup> Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov (1997, p. 238).
- <sup>34</sup> Kaufman and Rosenbaum (1992, p. 230).
- <sup>35</sup> See Lewis (1961, 1966, 1968).
- <sup>36</sup> See Kaufman and Rosenbaum (1992); Rosenbaum (1991, 1995); Rosenbaum, Kuliecke, and Rubinowitz (1987, 1988); Rosenbaum, Rubinowitz, and Kuliecke (1986); and Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000). Additional reports from Rosenbaum and his colleagues have also been published concerned with other aspects of the Gautreaux Program and its effects, and a good list of these references appears in Rubinowitz and Rosenbaum (2000, pp. 227-228).
- <sup>37</sup> See, for example, Orfield (1997, pp. 25-27).
- <sup>38</sup> Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, and Brooks-Gunn (2006, p. 6).
- <sup>39</sup> Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, and Brooks-Gunn (2006, p. 9).
- <sup>40</sup> See Goering and Feins (2003).
- <sup>41</sup> Ludwig, Ladd, and Duncan (2001); Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2004).
- <sup>42</sup> Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, and Brooks-Gunn (2006). Note that similar results were also reported by Kling, Liebman, and Katz (2007).
- <sup>43</sup> Kling, Liebman, and Katz (2007); Sanbonmatsu, Kling, Duncan, and Brooks-Gunn (2006).
- <sup>44</sup> See Katz, Kling, and Liebman (2001); Kling, Liebman, and Katz (2007); and Kling, Ludwig, and Katz (2005).
- <sup>45</sup> See Burdick-Will, Ludwig, Raudenbush, Sampson, Sanbonmatsu, and Sharkey (2011).

## CHAPTER SIX

### POVERTY IN SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL FAILURE

A 500-pound gorilla is trying to enter our discussion of the standards for equal opportunity to learn for all American children. The gorilla represents the most serious inequities among American schools, inequities that most of us know exist. These inequities among schools reflect fundamental inequalities in the distribution of power and resources in American society. Yet available statistical studies tend to obscure the educational effects of attending grossly inadequate schools. Thus we tend to feel helpless in making policy recommendations in this arena. We bar the gorilla from the room.

—Elizabeth G. Cohen (1996, p. 111)

Alas, impoverished American youths are burdened not only by problems stemming from their homes and neighborhoods, they often attend “grossly inadequate schools,” and this creates even more burdens for them.

As it happens, many types of problems appear in American schools, but three major types, uniquely prevalent in the U.S., are associated with poverty. One arises when public schools enroll *a great many impoverished students*, for schools always face additional challenges when the bulk of their students are poor. A second appears because the U.S. tolerates *huge differences in funding* among its public schools, and—in America—impoverished students are more often found in schools with inadequate funding. And a third reflects *discriminatory procedures* in public schools that create additional hurdles for impoverished youths—procedures that often reflect interests of The Rich and Powerful. These three types of problems are quite different, and largely separate traditions of research have grown up for them. They nevertheless combine to create excessive burdens for impoverished students,<sup>1</sup> and a few studies have also begun to explore their joint effects. I begin my coverage with research focused on schools where impoverished students are concentrated.

#### STUDENT POVERTY CONCENTRATION

Rising income inequality has intensified residential segregation by earnings and ethnicity in recent decades. Poor families tend to be concentrated in high-poverty neighborhoods, and their children are likely to attend schools with other poor children. More affluent families with children tend to live in communities inhabited by other

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prosperous families. And the last twenty years have not seen greater integration but rather growing racial isolation in the public schools. African-American and Latino children tend to be concentrated in struggling, high-poverty schools; white students have surprisingly little interaction, on the whole, with minority students.

—Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristin Lewis, & Eduardo Borges Martins  
(writing in *The Measure of America*, 2008, p. 85)

Public schools that serve large numbers of disadvantaged students are found in many countries, and some advanced nations respond to this challenge by providing extra resources for such schools. But even where this is not done, concentrations of student poverty and other forms of disadvantage are thought to be problems that are imposed on some schools by external, largely intransigent forces, and governments in most advanced countries—including the United States—regularly collect data about such schools and their problems. These data reveal that America has, proportionately, *more* schools with concentrations of impoverished students, and this is easy to understand. As we know, the U.S. tolerates an inordinate rate of youth poverty, and poor families are often crowded into poverty ghettos in the U.S. that are served by public schools with truly dense concentrations of poor (and often minority) students.

### *Differences in Student Poverty Concentration*

This does not mean that all students in United States attend schools where poverty concentration is high. What is now known about the distribution of student poverty concentration in America? How many American students attend public schools where large numbers of impoverished students are enrolled, where are those schools located, and what types of students appear in those schools?

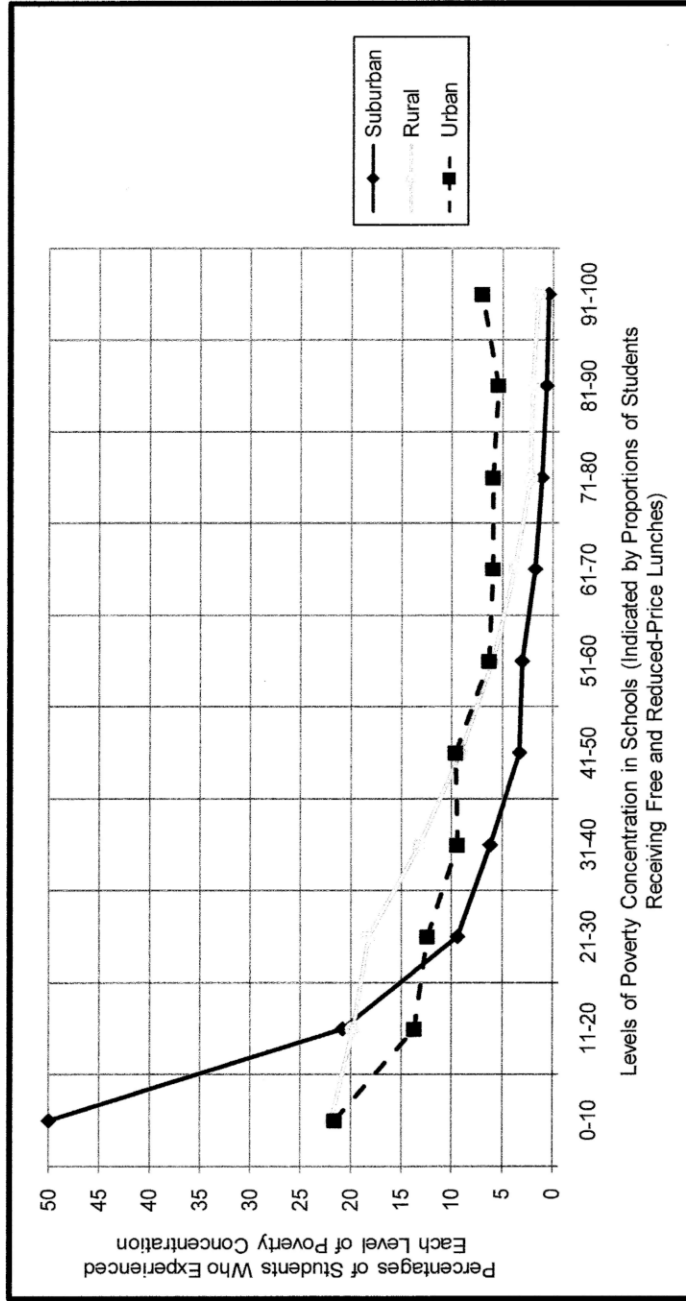
These questions have been addressed in various surveys sponsored by America's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). To illustrate, in 1987/88 the NCES conducted a major National School and Staffing Survey, and—drawing from these data—Laura Lippman, Shelly Burns, Edith McArthur (and others) reported that while half of all American youths were then enrolled in schools where 20% or fewer students received free and reduced-price lunches, another quarter attended schools where 21 to 40% received such supplemental lunches, and another quarter were studying in schools where those receiving such lunches numbered 41% or greater.<sup>2</sup> As we know from Chapter Two, students only receive supplemental lunches if incomes in their families do not exceed 185% of the Official (“Orshansky”) thresholds, but these are stingy standards, and most students who receive supplemental lunches come from families that struggle with poverty. It follows then that *roughly half of America's public school students are enrolled in schools where 20% or fewer of the students served come from impoverished homes, but another quarter attend schools where poverty concentration ranges from 21 to 40%, and another quarter must cope with schools where at least 41% of students are impoverished.*

Where are schools located that have high levels of poverty concentration? Common wisdom holds that poverty concentration is not often found in suburban schools and that schools in urban neighborhoods more often experience a great deal of student poverty—and evidence from surveys tends to confirm these beliefs. To illustrate, take a look at Exhibit 6.1, based again on data drawn from the NCES 1987/88 survey by Lippman and her colleagues, which plots the percent of students from suburban, rural, and urban neighborhoods who were found in schools with differing levels of poverty concentration.<sup>3</sup> As can be seen, that year the overwhelming bulk of *suburban* students were attending schools where poverty concentration was 10% or less. In contrast, sharply fewer *rural* students attended such low-poverty schools, but nearly a quarter of *urban* students were enrolled in schools where poverty concentration was 61% or greater. This means that *extreme student poverty concentration is largely an urban problem in America, whereas only some rural schools and most suburban schools enroll only a few impoverished students*. Many parents in the U.S. understand this fact and assume that high levels of poverty concentration create problems for many urban (and some rural) schools, and these beliefs help to generate widespread desires to “move to the suburbs.”

Common wisdom also has it that poverty concentration is greater for Black and Hispanic students, as well as those who lack language fluency, and survey evidence again tends to confirm these stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> Although a few White American students also appear in schools where student poverty concentration is high, large numbers of Black and Hispanic students, as well as students whose primary language is not English, are often found in such (largely inner-city) schools.<sup>5</sup> These associations also tend to reinforce American confusions about the comingled effects of poverty and minority status, of course. When problems appear in schools with large numbers of impoverished students, Americans often associate such problems with the fact that those schools enroll many Black, Hispanic, or language-challenged students rather than with the key but less-evident fact that most students in those schools are also *poor*.

The basic reason why so many impoverished Black, Hispanic, and immigrant American students are now crowded into inner-city schools is that those schools largely serve *segregated*, impoverished, inner-city ghettos. In fact, the U.S. has long had a sad history of close association between residential and educational segregation based on race, but earlier on this association was more often found in The Deep South. As more Blacks (and Hispanics and immigrants) appeared in northern cities after World War Two, however, the association was recreated in such major urban centers as New York City, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Boston, Baltimore, Washington, DC, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay area, and the like. Shortly after the War and—responding to the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (which declared that segregated schools were unconstitutional), passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965 and active encouragement of desegregation programs by the federal government—residential and educational segregation actually *decreased* in America, and by 1980 only 63% of America’s Black students were attending predominantly

Exhibit 6.1. Type of Neighborhood Schools and Disparities in Poverty Concentration



Source: *Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty* (Lippman, L., Burns, S., & McArthur, E., 1996).  
 Note: Figures are the percentages of students from each of three types of schools—suburban, rural, and urban—who experienced the indicated levels of poverty concentration.

minority schools. All of this changed with the election of President Ronald Reagan, however. “Desegregation policies were largely abandoned by the federal government, courts were asked to end judicial oversight of desegregating [school] districts,” and a number of Supreme Court decisions have since whittled away at the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. As a result, the segregation of America’s urban schools and inner-city poverty ghettos has again been *increasing*. “By 2000, 72 percent of the nation’s Black students attended predominantly minority schools ..., more than one-third of African American and Latino students ... attended schools with a minority enrollment of 90 percent to 100 percent,” and no end to this process is yet in sight. This does not mean, of course, that all schools in America’s urban poverty ghettos are now filled-to-the brim with impoverished minority students, but many are, and this reflects both persisting White prejudice and deliberate (far-right) federal policies favoring segregation.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Poverty Concentration and Student Failure*

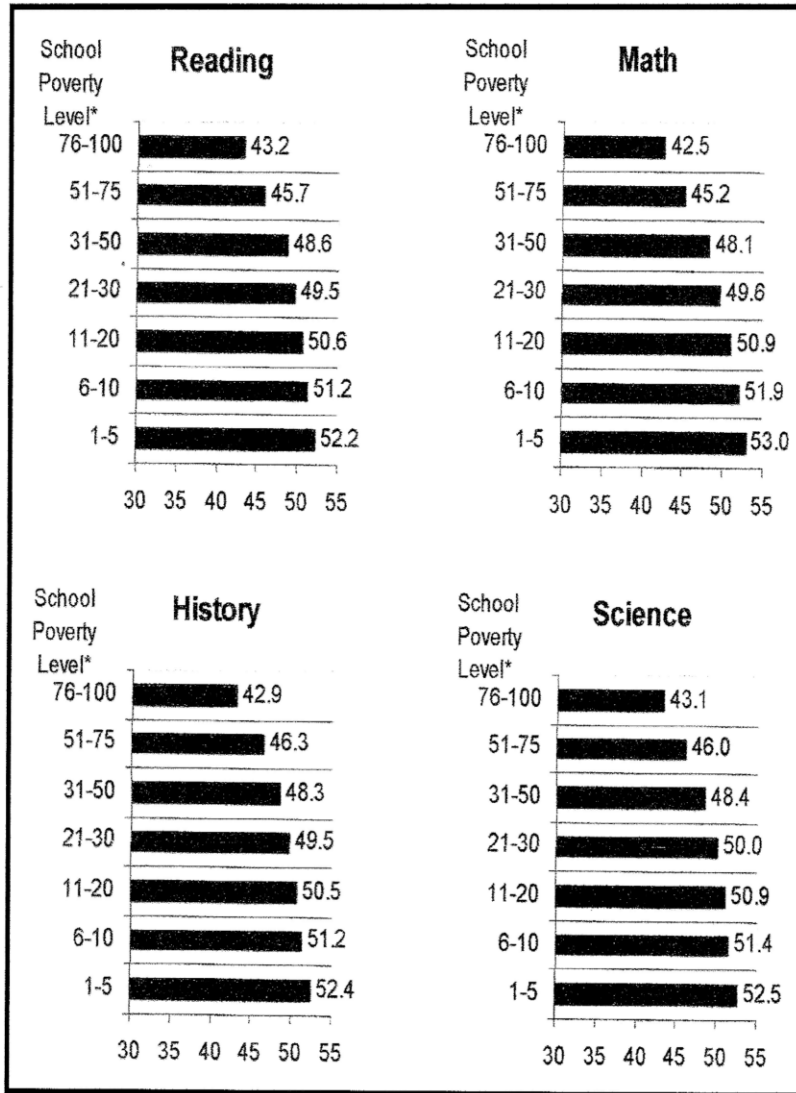
So much for findings about how student poverty concentration is distributed among American schools, but what happens in schools when poverty concentration is high? Such schools presumably experience problems, but do these problems help create educational failure?

*Surveys and panel studies.* Questions such as these have been addressed in surveys and a few panel studies where data were collected about both poverty concentration and indicators of student success.<sup>7</sup> For example, about a decade ago Judith Anderson, Debra Hollinger, and Joseph Conaty drew data from the first wave of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (*NELS:88*) and were able to calculate average achievement scores earned that year by eighth graders from schools where differing proportions of students had received supplemental lunches.<sup>8</sup> The results they found are given in Exhibit 6.2. As can be seen there, average achievement scores were sharply *lower* whenever more of their students were eligible for sponsored lunches and the same pattern of effects appeared in achievement scores for four, different topics: reading, mathematics, history, and science.

Anderson and her colleagues were not alone in reporting that poverty concentration is associated with poor educational outcomes. To the best of my knowledge, *all* studies concerned with this issue have reported such associations, and they have been found for *many* outcome indicators. These consistent results suggest a simple conclusion: *American students enrolled in schools with high levels of poverty concentration often have difficulty with academic success.*<sup>9</sup>

But what are we to make of this conclusion? Does it appear because of problems in *schools* where poverty is concentrated, or does it merely reflect problems in the distressed *neighborhoods* that embed those schools or the impoverished *homes* in which their students live? Such questions clearly matter; if we are to make the claim that poverty concentration creates negative outcomes

**Exhibit 6.2. Average Test Scores by School Poverty Concentration Level for Eighth-Grade Students in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988**



\* Percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

Source: *Re-examining the Relationship Between School Poverty and Student Achievement* (Anderson, J., Hollinger, D., & Conaty, J., 1993).



for students, we must isolate its effects from those generated by the neighborhoods and homes inhabited by such students. What findings appear when this is done?

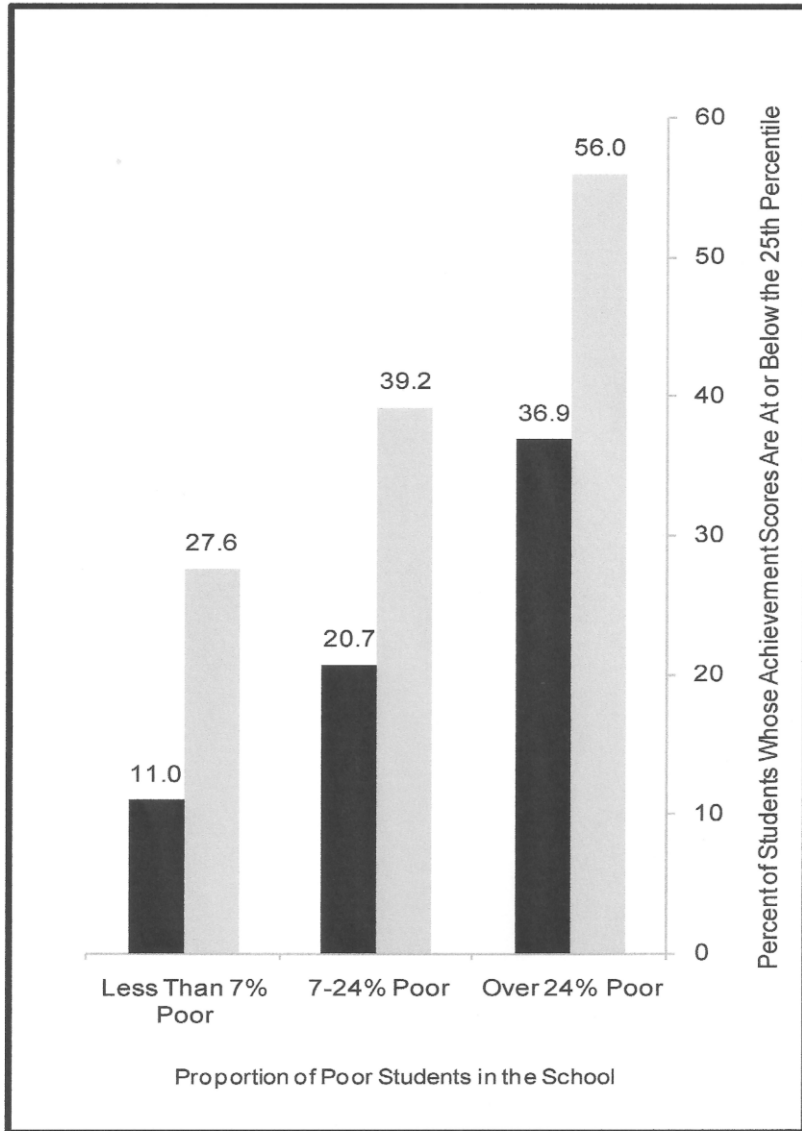
Unfortunately, most research concerned with this question has avoided looking at data for *neighborhoods*, so little is yet known about how poverty concentration in neighborhoods and schools interact to create joint effects.<sup>10</sup> This is a shame. High-poverty schools are often embedded in neighborhoods where industrial pollution, illegal drug use, violence, gang warfare, and other neighborhood problems are severe, and it is long since time that researchers studied how such problems reinforce those created by scholastic poverty concentration to create difficulties for educators and students.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, *many* survey-based studies have appeared that explore how poverty in students' homes interacts with poverty concentration in schools.<sup>12</sup> These studies suggest that *poverty in American homes and poverty concentration in American schools are independently and negatively associated with student outcomes*. A good illustration displaying such effects appeared in an article coauthored by Mary Kennedy, Richard Jung, Martin Orland, and their associates.<sup>13</sup> Analyzing data from the Sustaining Effects Study, a national survey of primary students, these authors examined achievement scores for students from poor and nonpoor families who were enrolled in schools with low, moderate, and high levels of poverty concentration. (In their data, student poverty was assessed using the Official—"Orshansky"—Method.) The authors then calculated the percentage of students in each school whose achievement scores were unacceptably "low"—i.e., whose scores fell below the 25th percentile rank for all student scores—and a version of the figure reporting their results appears as Exhibit 6.3. As can be seen there, the authors found that average outcomes are worse (a) *when school poverty concentration is high*, (b) *when students come from impoverished homes*, and (c) *that these two outcomes tended to operate independently*.

Results appearing in Exhibit 6.3 (and those from other studies) suggest that the high concentrations of poverty in schools are indeed associated with depressed academic achievement. And if so, schools laboring with high poverty concentrations impose *additional* burdens on the students and educators who toil in them, burdens not borne and often misunderstood by those familiar only with schools where poverty concentration is low. But does scholastic poverty concentration truly *cause* negative student outcomes? Results we have reviewed came merely from survey data and, as we know, it is risky to draw causal conclusions from survey evidence alone. How might we strengthen the case for a causal relation between scholastic poverty concentration and depressed student outcomes?

First, we might explore whether the association between poverty concentration and student outcomes holds up when additional controls are entered, not only for poverty in the home, but also for poverty in the neighborhood, but as we know, research addressing this issue is largely missing.

**Exhibit 6.3. Percent of Students Whose Achievement Scores Fall At or Below the 25th Percentile Rank by Student and School Poverty Status**



Source: *Poverty, Achievement and the Distribution of Compensatory Education Services* (Kennedy, Jung, & Orland, 1986).

Second, we might also study whether the association between poverty concentration and student outcomes holds up when additional controls are entered for miserable school funding, another type of poverty-generated disadvantage in America that is strongly associated with segregated, inner-city schools.<sup>14</sup> Many writers have assumed that American schools with high levels of poverty concentration are also likely to receive inadequate financial support, and data we shall examine shortly tend to confirm this assumption. But these two types of disadvantage need not appear in the same schools, and they may not generate the same problems. If we are to explore such issues, however, we need information from studies that juxtapose effects found, not only for poverty concentration, but also those found for miserable school funding, and it is also hard to find such studies.

Third, we might explore whether specific problems in schools serve as pathways linking scholastic poverty concentration with student failure, and here we are on somewhat firmer ground. A number of studies have begun to report ties between high levels of student poverty concentration and such problems as:

- difficulty attracting and retaining skilled and qualified teachers;
- frequent turnover of teachers and students during the school year;
- lower teacher expectations for students' academic success;
- lower levels of academic demand placed on students;
- frequent classroom disruptions caused by alienated, badly behaved students;
- high concentrations of students who have been arrested; and
- student absenteeism.<sup>15</sup>

This is a good beginning, but—with the exception of research on the effects of “skilled and qualified teachers” (see later in the chapter)—so far it is difficult to find studies that have reported ties between such problems and academic failure.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although promising, this tradition of research has not yet completed the case for multiple pathways linking poverty concentration with educational failure.

To summarize then, evidence from surveys and panel studies that would make an airtight case for scholastic poverty concentration being a *cause* for academic failures has only begun to appear. Although it seems likely that poverty concentration creates such effects, additional studies are needed to resolve the issue.

*An experiment.* As we know from Chapter Four, evidence from field experiments can also help resolve questions about causality, and an interesting ex post facto experiment concerned with the effects of poverty concentration in American schools has recently been reported by Heather Schwartz.<sup>17</sup> As the author describes it, the experiment appeared in procedures that had been underway for several years in Montgomery County, Maryland, suburb to Washington, DC, which is one of the 20 wealthiest counties in America. Although fewer than 5% of the county's residents are impoverished, it also houses substantial numbers of African-American, Hispanic, and immigrant families (as well as a few of Asian descent); many students in its schools

represent racial minorities; and one third of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. But despite these challenges, for years the county has also pioneered innovative programs in its high-achieving public schools, and as a result, “the county graduates nine in ten of its students, ... two-thirds of its high school students take at least one Advanced Placement course, and the average SAT score of the district greatly exceeds the national average.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition, Montgomery County has been a leading venue where residential ghettoization is discouraged. It has long operated an inclusionary zoning program requiring real estate developers to set aside a portion of homes they build to be rented or sold at below-market prices. As well, the county’s Housing Authority Commission purchases one third of the latter and operates them as federally subsidized rental housing facilities for impoverished families. These low-rent homes are scattered throughout the county and thus are zoned into nearly all of the county’s primary schools. Given that average rents in these facilities are less than a quarter of average housing rentals in the county, access to these facilities is very popular which means that *several thousand* “eligible” families apply for possible occupancy every two years, when the Housing Commission announces openings, but—alas—only about 2% can be selected, by lottery, for housing offers. (To become “eligible,” each family must pass a criminal background check and provide proof of sufficiently low income.) Families that win the lottery are offered up to two choices of randomly selected housing units that are sized appropriately for needs in their families. About 93% of families accept the first-offered option, but should a family turn down both offers, it is dropped from the lottery.

For historical reasons, the county’s K-through-6th-grade primary schools also vary substantially in concentrations of impoverished students, with recent concentration rates (assessed by reports from schools about numbers of their students receiving supplemental lunches) ranging from 1% to 72%. And this means that some students from impoverished families who have “won the lottery” attend schools where poverty concentration is low, but others are assigned to schools where it is moderately high, and—because most families stay put in their assigned homes—the bulk of students remain in their same schools throughout their primary years. These arrangements create conditions for an interesting *ex post facto experiment* in which “control” students endure multiple years of exposure to schools with higher concentrations of poverty, and “experimental” students enjoy multiyear experiences in schools where poverty concentration is lower, and Heather Schwartz designed her research to explore outcomes from this experiment—using standardized tests of mathematics and reading competency—during the 2001-2007 school years.

In her report, the author describes results for about 850 students who had remained in the same school for at least two years during this period.. (Not surprisingly, 89% of the impoverished families from which these students came were headed by single mothers. In addition, 72% were Black, and 16% were Hispanic, but only 6% were Asian.) These students had attended 114 primary schools, and slightly less than half of the latter had reported supplemental-lunch

student poverty rates of less than 20%, so students in these “low-poverty schools” became “experimental” subjects in Schwartz’s initial analyses, whereas “control” subjects were those in “high-poverty schools” where supplemental-lunch rates exceeded 20%. (Later on the author tried out different ways of constructing “experimental” and “control” groups, and results from the latter analyses were also reported.) And since the bulk of students in the study had attended the same primary school for up to seven years, the author was able to compare student achievement records of “experimental” and “control” students for their first through seventh years of attendance at their schools.

The author’s analyses revealed several major findings. *First*, only minimal differences in achievement appeared between “experimental” and “control” students during their first two years in school—both were low, of course, by comparison with achievement scores earned by nonpoor students in their schools—but the “experimental” and “control” records began to diverge thereafter, and by students’ fifth-through-seventh school years, the differences were not only significant but were truly substantial. In fact, by the end of sixth grade, typical “experimental” students had made up *half* of their initial deficiencies in achievement, but average achievement-score deficiencies for “control” students had *not* changed!

*Second*, the same pattern of results was found for both mathematics and reading achievement, although differences for the former were slightly larger.

*Third*, differences between scores for “experimental” and “control” students gradually weakened as the author set higher “cutting points” for her analyses (thus placing more students from “high poverty schools” in the “experimental” group).

*Fourth*, roughly similar results appeared when the author used a different technique for assessing poverty concentration in schools (and readers should consult the author’s report if interested in this latter finding).

So, what are we to make of this interesting experiment? For one thing, it was conducted in a privileged environment where most students in the county came from relatively affluent homes, expectations for school success were high, and scholastic poverty concentration was typically low—and this means that “experimental” students were subjected to educational environments that are fairly typical of American suburbs, but “control” students were *not* placed in schools typical of America’s inner-city ghettos. Moreover, and as the author correctly points out, results from this study’s “experimental” students strongly support those from “experimental” students in the Gautreaux program (reviewed in Chapter Five) and suggest again that conditions in privileged, suburban *schools* can truly “make a difference” for youths who come from impoverished but ambitious and reasonably well-organized homes.

But what are we to make of the results Schwartz reports for “control” students? Despite experiencing what the author describes as a “generally privileged,” suburban school environment for up to seven years (and not enduring “extreme” levels of poverty concentration), by Grade 6 the achievement deficits of “control students” had *not* improved. And this suggests either that scholastic

## CHAPTER SIX

poverty concentration is so important that it explains *all* of the significant results reported in this experiment (*and* the Gautreaux program), or that—just possibly—the schools attended by “control” students also had other deficiencies—and unfortunately the author’s report does not rule out the latter possibility. Rather, her subsequent analyses suggest that many of the schools attended by “control” students had already been flagged by the county for several years of “low academic achievement,” but the author did not provide information about why these “low achieving” schools should have differed from others. Nor, surprisingly, did she provide any data about scholastic funding levels for the county as a whole or for its individual schools. Thus, it remains possible that the remarkably low scores generated by “control” students were generated, not only by higher levels of poverty concentration, but also by other significant problems in the schools they attended.

Such concerns also tell us that, although results from this experiment also help make the case for a causality claim, that case is still not airtight. In summary of research on scholastic concentration then, we now know that high levels of poverty concentration in schools are strongly associated with student failure and that this association appears for both impoverished and nonimpoverished students, but although it seems likely that this relationship is *causal*, research to date has not yet nailed down the latter claim.

### INADEQUATE SCHOOL FUNDING

To my knowledge, the U.S. is the only nation to fund elementary and secondary education based on local wealth. Other developed countries either equalize funding [throughout the state] or provide extra funding for individuals or groups felt to need it. In the Netherlands, for example, national funding is provided to all schools based on the number of pupils enrolled, but for every guilder allocated to a middle-class Dutch child, 1.25 guilders are allocated for a lower-class child and 1.9 guilders for a minority child, exactly the opposite of the situation in the U.S. where lower-class and minority children typically receive less than middle-class white children.

—Robert Slavin (1999, p. 520)

Many studies have documented how specific resources, including better-qualified teachers who are paid competitive salaries, smaller class sizes, and ... redesigned schools with advisors, planning time for teaching teams, and support systems for students contribute to student achievement gains.

—Linda Darling-Hammond (2013, p. 94)

We turn now to a second poverty-associated, structured challenge that appears in American education. Unlike other advanced nations, the United States tolerates large disparities in levels of tax support for its public schools. Thus, within America one finds some of the world’s best-funded, most innovative, best-

equipped and staffed, highly attractive, tax-supported schools—as well as badly underfunded, inadequate, depressing and dangerous but also tax-supported, educational hovels (institutions that would not be tolerated in other advanced nations)—and refers to all of these entities as “public schools.” And because the bulk of American school funding comes from taxes collected by local school boards, impoverished students are also likely to attend schools where per capita support for education is weak, and thoughtful Americans also argue that such schools also face problems and find it difficult to provide suitable environments for education.

Several pages ago I suggested that concentrations of student poverty are thought to reflect circumstances that are external to education and largely intransigent. In sharp contrast, inadequate school funding is created by political decisions, is clearly rectifiable, and has long been a bone of contention in the United States. Advocates for youths, education, and struggling American communities complain that resources in poorly funded schools are insufficient and mount campaigns for more equity in funding, while affluent Americans and their advocates defend traditional funding practices, seek to restrict information about how funds are allocated, support legislative and legal battles seeking to block greater funding equity, and try to persuade the American public that funding inequities do not matter or that “throwing money at schools” merely wastes tax dollars.<sup>19</sup> The latter processes have created two problems that distort research on school funding.

For one, little reliable information is available about the actual funds provided to individual public *schools* in the U.S.<sup>20</sup> This is a shame but hardly surprising. In America, the bulk of school funding comes from school districts, and most decisions about how to allocate those funds are made by an elected school board and staff members who collectively manage each district. Most of these persons are at least moderately affluent or beholden to affluent constituents, and they often find reasons for providing extra funds for schools that serve “deserving” students (i.e., those likely to come from well-to-do families). But such decisions also mean that funding is curtailed for other schools which do not serve affluent youths, and if such unfair practices were to be made public, they would likely provoke outrage. So school authorities tend to resist attempts to uncover how funds are allocated, and this means that most studies concerned with deficient funding have not been based on reports for *schools*. Rather, those studies have had to use *proxy* data presumed to reflect levels of school funding (typically, reports about resources available in schools) or have examined funding levels for larger entities (such as *school districts* or *states*) for which data are readily available.

For the other, interest in funding differences and their effects is great, and this means that studies about such issues appear regularly. But the funding topic is also politicized, and persons who conduct research on this issue tend to be committed either to the defense of disadvantaged students and public education or to the interests of affluence—the former trying to “prove” that deficient funding generates student failure, the latter seeking to discredit this claim. This

does not mean that all research and reports concerned with the effects of funding are shoddy or biased. On the contrary, many studies, reviews, and discussions of this topic are unbiased, well conducted, and honestly reported. But some (particularly those from far-right sources) are not, and readers should be on the lookout for flawed works which make outrageous claims about questionable “research” on funding effects and be prepared to discount those claims.

Neither of these problems is fatal, but each has weakened honest research and its impact. Bearing these problems in mind, what good evidence has so far appeared concerned with inadequate funding and educational failure?

### *Funding Disparities*

Since little is yet known about funding for individual *schools*, we can only guess about the numbers of American public schools that are superbly, adequately, minimally, and miserably funded. Nevertheless, good funding data are available for *states* and *school districts* in the U.S., and those data reveal sharp differences in funding levels.

In 1998, for example, the state with the highest average level of public school funding (adjusted for differences in cost of living) was New Jersey, with an annual funding rate of \$8,801 per student, whereas the state with the lowest average level was Utah, with a yearly per-student rate of \$3,804. This means that the typical student attending a public school in New Jersey was then provided *more than twice* the fiscal resources allocated to his or her counterpart in Utah. Nor were these differences in state funding atypical. As a rule, average per-student funding for public education is sharply higher in America’s Northeast and Upper Midwest than in the Deep South or elsewhere in the nation.<sup>21</sup>

But *between*-state funding differences are only part of the story. Disparities in funding for school districts are also substantial *within* many states. To illustrate, districts in Alaska that were rated at the 95th percentile for per-student funding in 1998 received an average of \$16,546 per student for the year, whereas school districts ranked at the 5th percentile received only \$7,379. Other “winners” in the state funding inequality derby that year included Vermont (where school districts at the 95th and 5th percentiles received averages of \$15,186 and \$6,442, respectively), Illinois (where the figures were \$11,507 and \$5,260), New Jersey (\$13,709 and \$8,401), New York (\$13,749 and \$8,518), and Montana (\$9,839 and \$4,774).<sup>22</sup>

This suggests that school districts in many states vary sharply in funds available for their students, but it does not tell us how many districts in the country receive each level of funding. Data bearing on this issue were reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 1998, and Exhibit 6.4, prepared from tables they reported, displays the number of *sizable* American school districts that reported various levels of funding in 1995.<sup>23</sup> As can be seen in the exhibit, that year 451 of these districts (roughly 6% of the total) reported annual per-student funding at \$10,000 or more—and sometimes *much* more that year, thus receiving “superb” support for education. In sharp contrast, 2,167



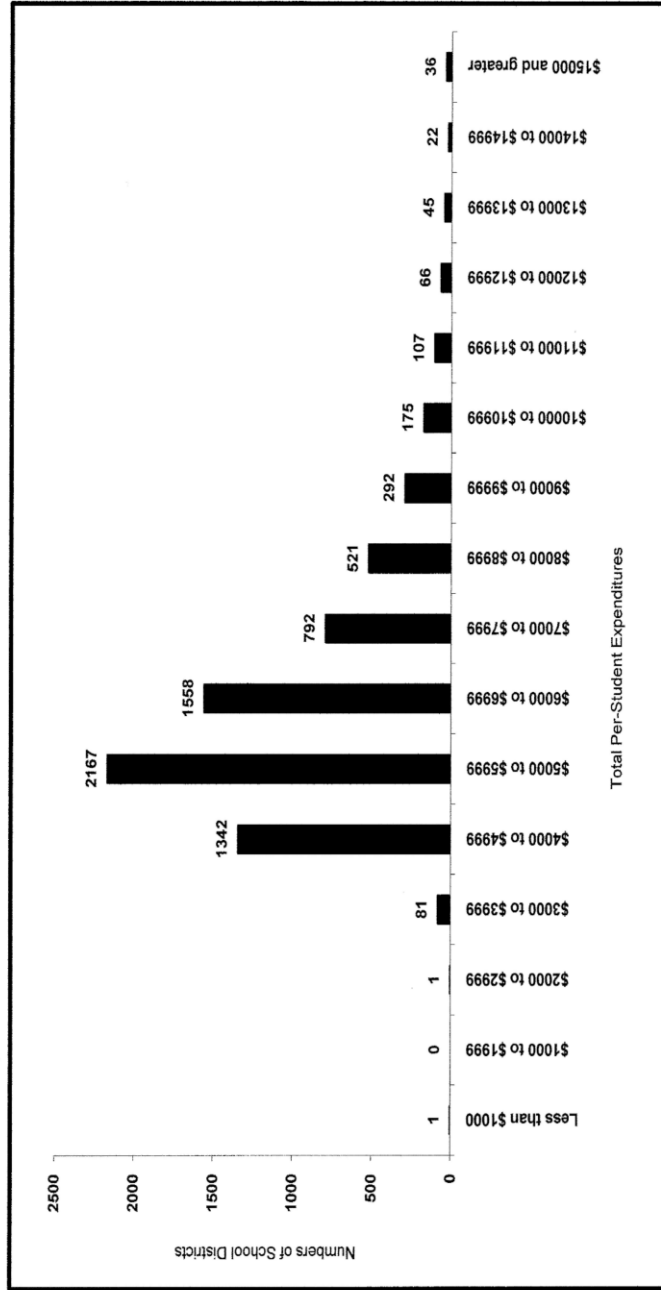
districts (or 30% of the total) reported “minimally adequate” per-student funding ranging from \$5,000 to \$5,999, 1,342 districts (20% of the total) reported “substandard” funding ranging from \$4,000 to \$4,999 per student, and 83 districts (1%) reported “truly miserable” funding of \$3,999 or less. And this means, of course, that districts with “truly miserable” funding had to make do with one third or less as much per-student support than was provided in districts where funding was “superb.”

Why do such large disparities in funding appear among states and school districts in the United States? The American constitution places responsibility for public education on the states, and nearly all states have, in turn, assigned that responsibility to local school districts which have traditionally raised funds for public education through taxes on property in their jurisdictions.<sup>24</sup> But property values are a form of wealth that closely mirrors income, and—because of ghettoization—American communities vary sharply in the values of properties within their borders. This means that wealthy states and school districts have traditionally found it easy to provide good or excellent funding for schools while their impoverished counterparts find it difficult or impossible to provide even base-level funding for public education. In addition, inner-city school districts in the U.S. are also likely to be venues where impoverished Black, Hispanic, and immigrant families are concentrated, so racial and ethnic segregation provide additional reasons for failure to provide equal school funding in prejudiced, White-dominated America.<sup>25</sup>

American funding disparities are associated with problems, of course, and compensatory financial support, designed to assist with those problems, is now provided to schools and school districts from both federal and state coffers. But these latter, commonly called “categorical grants,” only partially alleviate differences in base-level funding, and this means that *large disparities in funding for public education have long appeared among American states and school districts, and these are associated with sharp differences in wealth within those venues.*<sup>26</sup> And as Robert Slavin suggests, wealth-associated funding disparities are rare or nonexistent in other advanced nations.

The fact that America alone ties funding for public education to local wealth has disturbing implications. For one, America’s best-funded schools are likely to appear in its wealthiest suburban communities, whereas cash-starved schools are more often found in its urban and rural venues where per capita wealth is in short supply, student needs are greater, and (inner-city) schools may face severe student poverty concentration and environmental challenges. In addition, students from minority groups are rarely found in wealthy suburbs, whereas students in less-advantaged venues are often Black, Hispanic, Native American, or language challenged. But customs and laws in the U.S. stress that taxpayers are required only to support schools within districts where they own property, and this means that wealthy, suburbanite, White Americans are often oblivious of, care not about, or seek to justify funding shortfalls in other, nonwealthy, “less deserving” districts—and resist efforts to provide greater funding equity through federal, state, or local initiatives.

Exhibit 6.4. Disparities in Reported Funding for Sizable School Districts



Source: *Unequal School Funding in the United States* (Biddle & Berliner, 2002b).

For a second, we already know that schools with high concentrations of impoverished students often appear in impoverished communities, but we now learn that, in the U.S., those schools are also likely to be underfunded. And this means that, *within America, high levels of student poverty concentration and inadequate funding often appear together*. It is easy to illustrate this association. Exhibit 6.5 again displays 1995 NCES data reported for American school districts that are sizable, only this time, we examine data concerned with average numbers of impoverished students who appeared at each level of funding for school districts.<sup>27</sup> As can be seen, levels of poverty concentration and funding are indeed linked. In 1995, school districts with lower levels of per-student funding were also likely to report greater numbers of impoverished students, whereas districts with higher levels of funding often reported smaller average levels of student poverty.

To say the least, it is disgraceful that American districts or schools with large numbers of poor students tend also be given less funding. Both conditions presumably generate problems, and it is scandalous that the U.S. should tolerate an educational system that tends to provide *fewer* resources for schools which are also struggling to cope with problems created by large concentrations of impoverished students.

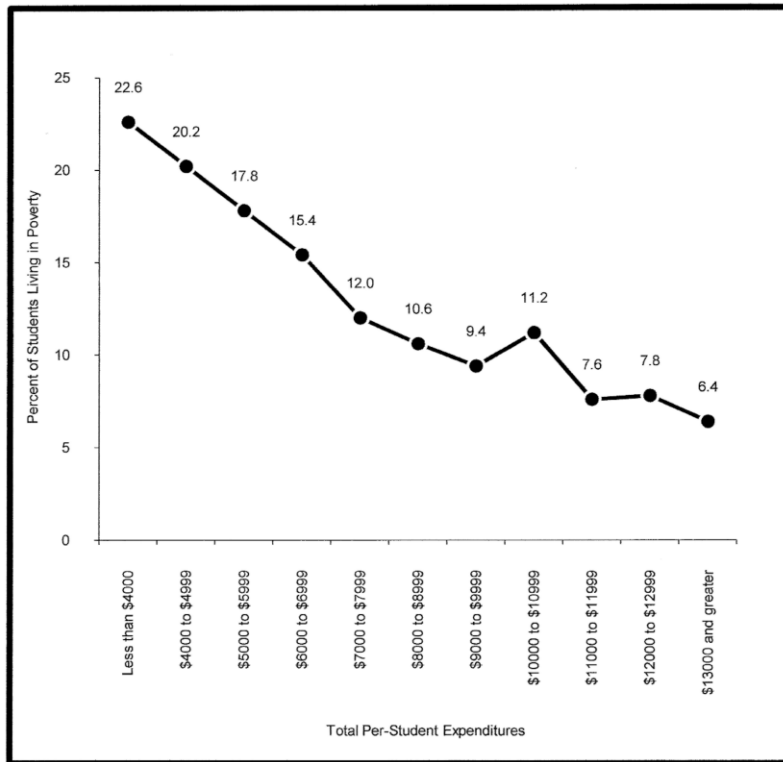
And for a third, wealth and income are closely tied, so the American system also generates *less*-adequate school funding for youths who are impoverished. As we know, an American myth has it that public education in the U.S. provides unique opportunities and a “level playing field” for students. But the American system actually provides *less* funding and *fewer* resources for youths from low-income homes, and this means that when talented youths come from impoverished homes, such youths typically receive a better education in *other* advanced countries!

#### *Outrageous Claims*

Deficient school funding can, of course, be abolished through political or legal action, and this means that interest in the effects of funding is strong in America, and literally hundreds of survey-based studies have now appeared on the topic. What claims have been made about these studies, and what have they actually found?

Given self-interest among those who are affluent, it is small wonder that their advocates (and far-right propagandists) often resist calls for more equitable funding. This resistance takes several forms, but one of the strangest is to claim that research shows that students do just about as well in well-endowed and cash-starved schools! This thesis is absurd, and no sensible person would have embraced it prior to 1960. However, the mid-60s touched off a string of prominent but flawed studies, reviews of studies, and arguments which suggested that school funding is unrelated to school achievement, and one can learn from this strange history.

**Exhibit 6.5. Per-Student Funding and Average Student Poverty Rates Reported for Sizable School Districts**



Sources: *Unequal School Funding in the United States* (Biddle & Berliner, 2002b, p. 57) prepared using information from the *Common Core of Data for 1995, School District Data Book* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

As we know from Chapter Four, in 1966 a young and talented sociologist, James Coleman (and his colleagues), published a massive, survey-based study concerned with student achievement—commonly called *The Coleman Report*—that had been commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics.<sup>28</sup> This study reported many results, but its third section announced a truly startling conclusion—that factors related to students’ home backgrounds and peer groups in their schools were strongly related to student achievement, but that the level of school quality (and, by implication, level of school funding) had little or no impact.

This unexpected conclusion was widely trumpeted by the press, the public was led to believe that research had “proven” that differences in resources (and funding levels) in public schools had little effect, and the fat was in the fire.

Conservative forces hostile to the public sector rejoiced because their negative opinions had been vindicated, while educators and advocates for disadvantaged students became alarmed and began to “explain away” the report’s conclusions and to attack its authors. Somehow, at the time, almost nobody noticed that serious flaws had crept into The Coleman Report—flaws that had *reduced* the size of its estimates for school effects.<sup>29</sup> But these flaws were not then understood, findings of the report were vigorously promoted, and its questionable conclusion that level of school quality has little impact became enshrined as “received wisdom.”

At about the same time, major economic theorists such as Milton Friedman and Kenneth Boulding began to voice suspicions about the effectiveness of public education,<sup>30</sup> and a host of small, survey-based studies—mostly conducted by economists and often based on small and questionable samples—began to appear asking whether “investing” in public education had desired effects. These and related efforts led, in turn, to a 1981 review of studies on the topic by Eric Hanushek, then a young economist, who summarized his efforts by claiming that “the available evidence suggests that there is no relationship between expenditures and the achievement of students and that such traditional remedies as reducing class size or hiring more teachers are unlikely to improve matters.” This claim was based, in part, on the author’s poor choice of a method for analyzing findings from studies he had examined, but he also went on to make additional claims not related to his findings: “Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that schools will move toward more efficient operations, either on their own or through consumer pressures. More attention should be given to developing direct performance incentives.”<sup>31</sup>

Hanushek’s claims were too much, of course, for far-right advocates who wished, not only to throttle calls for funding equity but also to promote the use of “performance incentives,” and they jumped on his review like a dog on a bone. Hanushek was lionized, encouraged to expand his efforts and to republish his claims in numerous journals, and his claims were rephrased, endorsed by leaders in the Reagan administration,<sup>32</sup> and distributed widely by the far-right propaganda machine. Serious criticisms of the studies he had reviewed and analysis methods he had used were ignored,<sup>33</sup> as were other reviews of funding-effect studies that had generated conclusions which contradicted those of Hanushek.<sup>34</sup> But advocates for affluent Americans were so comforted by the thought that providing additional funds for schools serving disadvantaged students would merely waste money that Hanushek’s claims became staples of shallow and far-right educational thought and remain so to this day.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, critics of public schools (including Hanushek) have also claimed that funding for education has increased sharply in recent years, but that this increase has not generated achievement gains. To illustrate, here is what Benno Schmidt said to justify his decision to resign as president of Yale University in order to head a new, national, for-profit, private school program:

## CHAPTER SIX

We have roughly doubled per-pupil spending (after inflation) in public schools since 1965 ... yet dropout rates remain distressingly high .... Overall, high school students today are posting lower SAT scores than a generation ago. The nation's investment in educational improvement has produced very little return.<sup>36</sup>

Claims such as this have been strongly challenged by scholars who have examined the actual use of educational funds over the years. To illustrate, Karen Miles and Richard Rothstein conducted a careful study of spending patterns between 1967 and 1991 within nine American school districts.<sup>37</sup> The authors found that recent legislative mandates and court decisions had assigned many new responsibilities to public schools that were designed to meet the needs of disadvantaged students, and these mandates had raised the costs of education sharply. As a result, about one third of new funding dollars during this period went to support special education students, 8% went to dropout prevention programs, alternative instruction, and counseling aimed at keeping students in school, and another 8% went to expand school lunch programs. In addition, 28% went to fund increased salaries and health care costs for a teacher population whose average age had been increasing, and so forth. Taken together then, very few additional dollars were available for needs associated with basic instruction. Small wonder that, during this period, additional “investments” in public schools had generated few achievement gains for basic topics.

To summarize—an early, influential, but flawed study, flawed reviews of weak research, and flawed reasoning concerning spending increases—as well as advocacy from conservative economists and far-right ideologues—have all supported the claim that level of funding for public schools is not tied to educational success, and belief in this absurd claim has distorted debates about school funding policies. But what findings appear when one actually *looks* at good studies of the issue—studies based on well-structured surveys with sizable and appropriate samples?

### *Miserable Funding and School Failure*

Well-constructed studies concerned with funding levels and student outcomes have explored data from various entities, ranging from schools and school districts to larger collectivities such as states or regions in the nation. In addition, they have studied effects for both funding and proxies for funding (such as resources in schools) and have looked at many types of outcomes. Despite these differences, almost *all* of these studies have found that poor funding for education and student failure are, indeed, linked significantly.<sup>38</sup>

In one sense, such consistent findings are remarkable, since most of these studies also made a questionable assumption—that the relation between funding levels and student outcomes is *linear*—and this decision may have weakened their findings. Why should this be so?

As we learned in Chapter Four, the relation between level of family income and *student* outcomes is not linear, and students from truly impoverished homes

typically do very badly in education. (Look again at Exhibit 4.1.) It is easy to understand this effect—severe poverty in the home creates *many* intolerable burdens for young Americans, and these sharply reduce their ability to cope with education. But this nonlinear relation also creates problems for researchers, because simple statistics (such as correlation coefficients) do not reflect the strong impact of severe poverty, thus they provide unfairly weak estimates for the effects of poverty in the home.

As it happens, this same reasoning should also apply to the impact of funding for *schools*. Schools that receive truly miserable funding should also create *many*, severe burdens for their students, and this means that students from those schools should also typically do very badly in education. So, the relation between level of funding for schools and student outcomes should also be nonlinear, and when simple statistics (such as correlation coefficients) are used to estimate the strength of school-funding effects, those estimates should also paint only a weak picture of the effects of miserable funding.

Once we've thought about it, this argument appears to be obvious, but it seems not to have occurred to most investigators, and visual displays of the actual relation between educational funding levels and student outcomes are hard to find. As with studies of poverty in the home, however, it is again easy to use other forms of analysis which compare outcomes for schools when funding is miserable, mid-range, and exemplary, and a few good studies have already begun to do this.<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, these latter studies have reported especially strong ties between level of funding and student outcomes.

Taken together then, several types of findings support the claim that poor school funding is, indeed, associated with student failure. But does this mean that such findings make an airtight case for a *causal* tie between funding and student outcomes? Hardly. For openers, such results might also appear because schools with deficient funding are also more often required to cope with poverty problems stemming from students' homes, neighborhoods, or schools, and these latter problems can also generate effects which may be confused with those of inadequate funding. To make a stronger causal case, then, requires that controls for these other forms of poverty be entered into the analysis to see whether deficient funding has a *net* impact when other types of poverty effects are set aside.

Various studies have also done this (typically controlling for poverty in the family), and reviews of these latter have also now appeared.<sup>40</sup> These reviews have used several techniques for summarizing evidence and have examined differing groups of studies employing both stronger and weaker controls for poverty,<sup>41</sup> but each of these reviews has concluded that, in America, funding level has a *net* impact on educational outcomes beyond those generated by other forms of poverty. Here is how this conclusion was phrased by Rob Greenwald, Larry Hedges, and Richard Laine in 1996:

The general conclusion of ... this article is that school resources are systematically related to student achievement and that these relations

are large enough to be educationally important. [In particular,] global resource variables such as [Per-Pupil Expenditures] show strong and consistent [net] relations with achievement.<sup>42</sup>

Conclusions such as these suggest that, regardless of other poverty effects, *poor school funding is also associated with educational failure in America*; excellent funding and educational success tend to appear together, and educational failure more often appears when funding is inadequate.

But at a deeper level, does this mean that net funding disparities *cause* differences in outcomes? This now seems reasonable, but since most findings supporting such effects come from surveys, other explanations for the apparent effects of funding are still possible, and more evidence is again required if an airtight case is to be made for causality. One way to strengthen the case would be to conduct experiments to assess effects when school funding is increased, and far-right sources regularly produce anecdotes suggesting that only minimal (or unwanted) effects are likely to follow when additional funds are provided for public schools. But despite such absurd claims, well-designed experiments on the topic seem not to have appeared.

A second way to make the case for causality would be to explore pathways through which funding and educational outcomes are linked, and here we are indeed on firm ground. As we shall see shortly, extensive research has now appeared on the educational effects of key pathways—*resources* within schools that are associated with funding—and this research provides impressive evidence confirming that funding-linked resources are also tied to student outcomes. This evidence makes a very strong case for causality, and we may now safely conclude that common sense is confirmed; school funding and educational outcomes are indeed linked causally. Thus, *within America, miserable funding for schools generates restricted resources which, in turn, debase educational outcomes for their students*. Excellent funding allows affluent American schools to pay for resources leading to higher levels of student achievement; whereas schools with restricted funding cannot afford such resources and, as a result, generate weaker achievement records.

#### *Multiple Disadvantages*

Many consequences follow because miserable school funding generates failure in American schools. Among others, life is far more difficult for students and educators in poorly funded schools and this means that miserable funding makes a mockery of America's boast that its public education system provides a "level playing field." But alas, miserable funding is only part of the story. As we already know, within the United States, poor funding and concentrations of impoverished students often go hand in hand. And this means that, too often in America, urban schools that are burdened by high concentrations of impoverished students are often *denied* the resources they most need for education, whereas such resources are often *lavished* on schools attended by affluent students who live in the



suburbs. The former schools are *multiply disadvantaged* whereas the latter are *multiply advantaged*, and—when taken to extremes—this tends to create not one but *two* public education systems in America—the former too often serving only minorities and the latter serving only White populations—which “diverge on every measure of educational quality: the skills and qualifications of the teachers; the physical state of facilities; the breadth and rigor of their curriculums; [as well as] instruction in art, music, ... physical education [and the like].”<sup>43</sup>

Lest anyone assume that such claims exaggerate differences between multiply advantaged and disadvantaged American schools, please look at Exhibit 6.6. This portrayal of two, contrasting public high schools from the Chicago metropolitan area was published by Jonathan Kozol in 1991 and represents what he observed when visiting these schools two decades ago.<sup>44</sup> One of these schools, New Trier, serves students from wealthy, White suburbs and has traditionally enjoyed superb funding, whereas the other, Du Sable, is sited in an African-American, urban slum and was then trying to cope with miserable funding from the Chicago School District. Nor has the huge gulf in poverty concentration and funds available for these two schools decreased greatly in the past 20 years. As Jonathan Kozol has recently noted, the sharp disparity in educational environments between such schools has been remarkably tenacious in America.<sup>45</sup>

Neither New Trier nor Du Sable represents the “average” American high school, of course, but certain things follow when a society tolerates such sharp disparities between public schools designed for “winners” and “losers”—among them, strong senses of entitlement and self-worth, disinterest in the lot of others, unchallenged prejudices, and desires to live in gated communities among students in the former; and anger, despair, alienation, “accidental” pregnancies, crime, imprisonment, and early deaths among youths in the latter. As a result, *neither* type of school supports the American ideal of a middle-class society where racial, ethnic, and religious differences are welcome, opportunities are offered to all, the society benefits because *many* people are educated, and young persons learn how to participate in the give-and-take of representative government. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how the American experiment in democracy could survive if New Trier and Du Sable were to become the norm.

One additional consequence of America’s tolerance for public schools that diverge sharply in multiple advantages bears on evidence from comparative studies of national differences in educational achievement. Results from such studies regularly appear in the American press, many of these studies have found that “average” American scores on achievement tests are not the highest in the world, and far-right propaganda asserts that such findings confirm that America’s public schools are, indeed, facing a Grave Crisis.

Such claims fail to note that, in America, the *bulk* of public schools do not generate “average” achievement records. Because of ghettoization, funding disparities, and racial or ethnic prejudices, America creates far too many schools that are Multiply Disadvantaged and some that are Multiply Advantaged, whereas such wildly divergent educational environments simply don’t appear in other

**Exhibit 6.6. A Tale of Two High Schools**

*Writing in the early 1990s, Jonathan Kozol contrasted the learning environments of two Chicago-area, public high schools, one—New Trier—serving affluent suburbs, the other—Du Sable—located in one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. He began his tale by describing how students fall behind in the city’s under-funded primary and junior high schools. In contrast,*

[Most children from suburban] towns like Glencoe and Winnetka ... learned to read by second or third grade. By the time they get to sixth or seventh grade, many are reading at the level of the seniors in the best Chicago high schools. By the time they enter New Trier High, they are in a world of academic possibilities that far exceed the hopes and dreams of most schoolchildren in Chicago. “Our goal is for students to be successful,” says the New Trier principal. With 93 percent of seniors going on to four-year colleges—many to schools like Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, Brown and Yale—this goal is largely realized.

New Trier’s physical setting might well make the students of Du Sable High School envious. The *Washington Post* describes a neighborhood of “circular driveways, chirping birds and white-columned homes.” It is, says a student, “a maple land of beauty and civility.” While Du Sable is sited on one crowded city block, New Trier students have the use of 27 acres. While Du Sable’s science students have to settle for makeshift equipment, New Trier’s students have superior labs and up-to-date technology. One wing of the school, a physical education center that includes three separate gyms, also contains a fencing room, a wrestling room and studios for dance instruction. In all the school has seven gyms as well as an Olympic pool. The youngsters, according to a profile of the school in *Town and Country* magazine, “make good use of the huge, well-equipped building, which is immaculately maintained by a custodial staff of 48.” ...

“This is a school with a lot of choices,” says one student at New Trier; and this hardly seems an overstatement if one studies the curriculum. Courses in music, art, and drama are so varied and abundant that students can virtually major in these subjects in addition to their academic programs. The modern and classical language department offers Latin (four years) and six other foreign languages. Elective courses include the literature of Nobel winners, aeronautics, criminal justice, and computer languages. In a senior literature class, students are reading Nietzsche, Darwin, Plato, Freud, and Goethe. The school also operates a television station with a broadcast license from the FCC, which broadcasts on four channels to three counties.

Average class size is 24 children; classes for slower learners hold 15 ... In addition, every freshman at New Trier is assigned a faculty adviser who remains assigned to him or her through graduation. Each of the faculty advisers—they are given a reduced class schedule to allow time for this—gives counseling to about two dozen children. At Du Sable, where the lack of staff prohibits such reduction in class schedules, each of the guidance counselors advises 420 children ... [And] New Trier’s “temperate climate” is “aided by the homogeneity of its students,” *Town and Country* notes. “Almost all are of European extraction and harbor similar values.” Eighty to 90 percent of the kids here,” says a counselor, “are good, healthy, red-blooded Americans.”

[In sharp contrast,] even substitute teachers in Chicago are quite frequently in short supply .... “We have been in this class a whole semester,” says a 15-year-old at Du Sable ... “and they still can’t find us a teacher.” A student in auto mechanics at Du Sable says he’d been in class for 16 weeks before he learned to change a tire. His first teacher quit at the beginning of the year. Another teacher slept through most of the semester. He would come in, the student says, and tell students, “You can talk. Just keep it down.” Soon he would be asleep. “Let’s be real,” the student says. “Most of us ain’t going to college .... We could use a class like this.”

The shortage of teachers finds its parallel in a shortage of supplies. A chemistry teacher at the school reports that he does not have beakers, water, Bunsen burners. He

uses a popcorn popper as a substitute for a Bunsen burner, and he cuts down plastic soda bottles to make laboratory dishes ....

Du Sable high school ... would be shunned—or probably shut down—if it were serving a white middle-class community. The building, a three-story Tudor structure, is in fairly good repair and, in this respect, contrasts with its immediate surroundings, which are almost indescribably despairing. The school, whose population is 100 percent black, has no campus and no schoolyard, but there is at least a full-sized playing field and track. Overcrowding is not a problem at the school. Much to the reverse, it is uncomfortably empty. Built in 1935 and holding some 4,500 students in past years, its student population is now less than 1,600. Of these students, according to data provided by the school, 646 are “chronic truants.”

The graduation rate is 25 percent. Of those who get to senior year, only 17 percent are in a college-preparation program. Twenty percent are in the general curriculum, while a stunning 63 percent are in vocational classes, which most often rule out college education. A vivid sense of loss is felt by standing in the cafeteria in early spring when students file in to choose their courses for the following year. “These are the ninth graders,” says a supervising teacher; but, of the official freshman class of some 600 children, only 350 fill the room. An hour later the eleventh graders come to choose their classes: I count at most 170 students.

The faculty includes some excellent teachers, but there are others, says the principal, who don’t belong in education. “I can’t do anything with them but I’m not allowed to fire them,” he says, as we head up the stairs to visit classes on a day in early June. Entering a biology class, we find a teacher doing absolutely nothing. She tells us that “some of the students have a meeting,” but this doesn’t satisfy the principal, who leaves the room irate. In a room he calls “the math head-quarters,” we come upon two teachers watching a soap opera on TV. In a mathematics learning center, seven kids are gazing out of the window while a teacher is preoccupied with something at her desk. The principal again appears disheartened ....

In a twelfth-grade English class, the students are learning to pronounce a list of words. The words are not derived from any context; they are simply written on a list. A tall boy struggles hard to read “fastidious,” “gregarious,” “auspicious,” “fatuus.” Another reads “dour,” “demise,” “salubrious,” “egregious,” and “consommé.” Still another reads “aesthetic,” “schism,” “heinous,” “fetish,” and “concerto.” There is something poignant, and embarrassing, about the effort that these barely literate kids put into handling these odd, pretentious words. When the tall boy struggles to pronounce “egregious,” I ask him if he knows its meaning. It turns out that he has no idea. The teacher never asks the children to define the words or use them in a sentence. The lesson baffles me. It may be that these are words that will appear on one of those required tests that states impose now in the name of “raising standards,” but it all seems dreamlike and surreal.

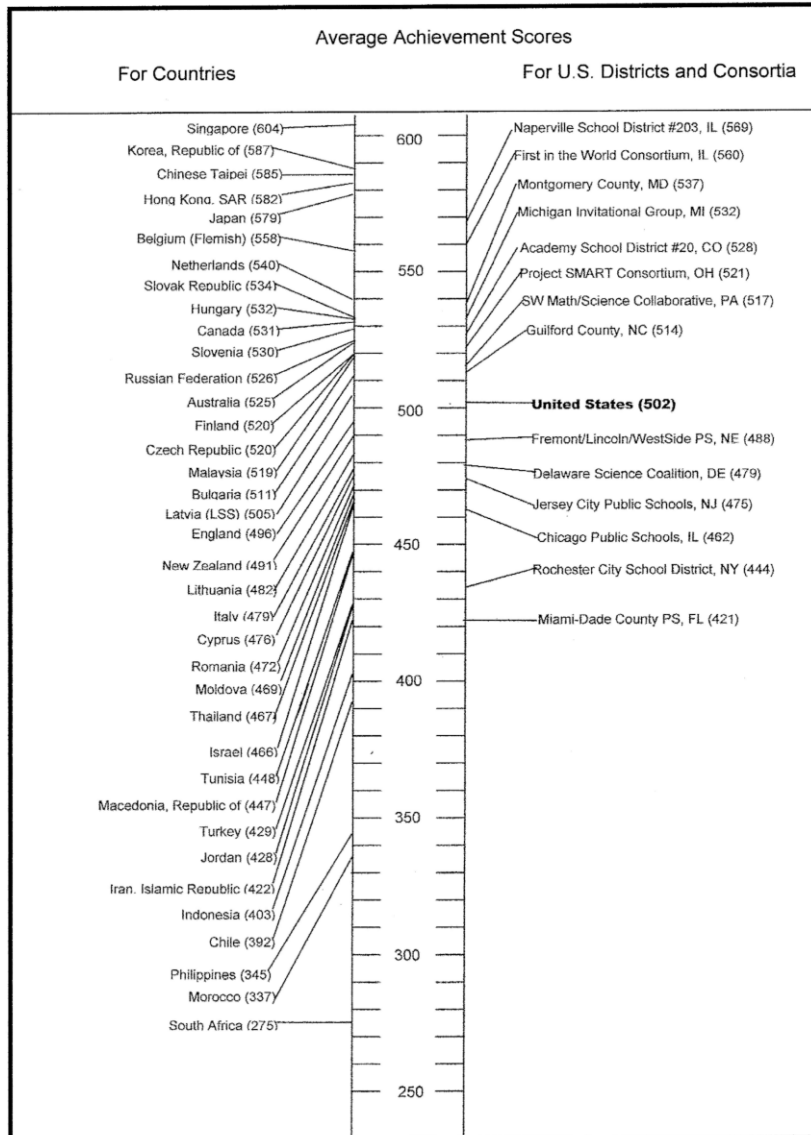
What accounts for these astounding differences between two public high schools in one metropolitan area?

The wealth of New Trier’s geographical district provides \$340,000 worth of taxable property for each child; Chicago’s property wealth affords only one-fifth this much. Nevertheless, *Town and Country* gives New Trier’s parents credit for “willingness to pay enough ... in taxes” to make this one of the state’s best-funded schools .... By this logic, one would be obliged to say that “unsupportive attitudes” on the part of ... the parents of Du Sable’s children translate into fiscal selfishness, when, in fact, the economic options open to the parents in these districts are not even faintly comparable. *Town and Country* flatters the privileged for having privilege but terms it aspiration ....

[As well,] “it took an extraordinary combination of greed, racism, political cowardice and public apathy,” writes James D. Squires, the former editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, “to let the public schools in Chicago get so bad.” He speaks of the schools as a costly result of “the political orphaning of the urban poor ... daytime warehouses for inferior students ... a bottomless pit.”

—Jonathan Kozol, writing in *Savage Inequalities* (1991, pp. 52-72)

**Exhibit 6.7. Average Mathematics Achievement Scores for Eighth-Grade Students in Various Countries and Selected American Districts and Consortia**



Source: *Mathematics Benchmarking Report, TIMSS 1999—Eighth-Grade: Achievement for U.S. States and Districts in an International Context* (Mullis, I. V. S. et al., 2001, Exhibit 1.1, p. 39).

advanced nations.<sup>46</sup> And this means, of course, that achievement scores earned by schools in the U.S. will also diverge widely, will range from scores that are among “the best in the world” to others that are “abysmal,” but that such extreme variation among school-achievement scores is rare elsewhere.

Most comparative studies do not provide data which display this effect, and very few people seem to be aware of it. Data illustrating it were provided in 2001, however, in a study brought out by *IEA* (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement). This study, a “Benchmarking Report,” part of *IEA*’s Third International Mathematics and Science Study series, reported average eighth-grade math achievement scores earned, not only by many advanced, developing, and third-world nations, but also by a selection of American states and a handful of school districts and educational “consortia” in the U.S.<sup>47</sup> Most data in this report appeared in complex tables, but it is easy to mine those tables for average scores earned by other nations and to compare them with scores earned by American school districts and consortia, and results from this analysis are displayed in Exhibit 6.7.

As can be seen in the exhibit, average scores earned by American districts and consortia varied sharply. Two of these entities—the Naperville School District and the (self-styled) “First in the World Consortium”—represent the affluent suburbs of Chicago where most schools are Multiply Advantaged, and both entities earned achievement scores that were, indeed, among “the best in the world.” In sharp contrast, the Miami Dade County Public School District serves large numbers of impoverished students and struggles constantly with inadequate funding—which means that many of its schools are Multiply Disadvantaged—and this district earned scores that looked good only when compared with scores from third-world nations!<sup>48</sup>

Given such wide disparities, one can only conclude that “average” achievement scores for the United States tell us very little about the state of American education. Rather, the true moral to be taken from such comparative studies should be that multiply advantaged American schools are, indeed, doing well, but that America’s multiply disadvantaged schools perform miserably because they must cope, not only with problems created by concentrated poverty and inadequate funding, but also with problems generated by students’ impoverished homes and neighborhoods. And if Americans truly want to improve their country’s record for educational achievement, they should address these serious issues.

#### *Funding, Resources, and Outcomes*

But to claim that achievement scores in some American schools are dragged down by inadequate funding does not tell us about the mechanisms that generate such outcomes. What are the pathways—the *resources*—through which funding and outcomes are linked? Which resources appear regularly in well-funded schools but only rarely in poorly funded schools? And what is known about ties between those resources and educational outcomes? To these questions I now turn.

*Funding and resources.* It seems almost axiomatic; well-funded American schools should have more resources such as teachers with stronger qualifications, more professional staff, smaller classes, better equipment and facilities, innovative and wide-ranging curricula, strong extracurricular opportunities, and educational programs that stress individual attention and traditions of excellence. And yet, far-right propaganda frequently argues that the effects of funding differences are exaggerated, that many of these resources appear if and only if a school has “good leadership,” and that additional funding is often wasted on inefficiency, “frills,” and bloated administrative budgets. Well, who is right? Do well-funded schools actually enjoy needed resources for education that poorly funded schools cannot afford?

Strangely, almost no research has addressed this question. Since very little is known about funding for individual *schools* in the U.S., it is hardly surprising that studies concerned with ties between funding and resources among those schools are few and far between. In contrast, it would be easy to study this issue among *school districts* or *states*, but studies of these latter types are also rare.

An exception to this complaint appeared, however, in a 1994 study by William Hartman who examined data available for funding and resources among school districts from the state of Pennsylvania.<sup>49</sup> After establishing that large differences in district-level funding had long been present in the state, the author showed that indicators for two types of resources—*teacher qualifications* and *staff abundance*—differed consistently among well-funded, mid-range, and poorly funded districts. In detail, teachers with more years of experience, stronger academic records, and higher salaries were more often found in well-funded districts, and higher levels of funding were also associated with the presence of more teachers, more administrators, and more professionals providing support per student.

But does this mean that differences in *funding* caused these effects? Hartman was not quite willing to make this claim and pointed out that most of the well-funded districts he studied were located in the attractive, affluent suburbs of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and the advantages of living in such neighborhoods might also have helped those districts hire and retain larger and more-qualified personnel. But note that this possibility also implies that teachers with strong qualifications might respond not only to level of funding but also to neighborhood factors (or level of poverty concentration!) when making decisions about where to work, and Hartman was unable to sort out the relative strengths of such influences. Clearly, additional evidence would be needed to nail down the case for funding.

Two interesting studies illustrate how such evidence might be generated. In 1997 Harold Wenglinsky published an analysis of information from a sample of 182 “nationally representative” school districts for which data could be matched from two sources: *NAEP* (the National Assessment of Educational Progress) and the *School District Data Book* (a public source concerned with data about districts available from the National Center for Education Statistics).<sup>50</sup> Among other results, Wenglinsky’s findings indicated that greater funding was associated

with the presence of more teachers per student within districts, and that this effect held up even when a controls were entered for the *SES* of individual students. And in a 1991 study of all school districts from the state of Texas, Ronald Ferguson found that stronger district-level funding was associated with more teachers per student and higher salaries paid to teachers.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the latter effect was also found to hold up even when controls were entered for *SES* levels in districts and other factors important in teacher recruitment. Thus, Ferguson concluded that:

A primary cause of inequity across districts in the quality of education is that districts of higher average socioeconomic status find it easier, with any given salary scale, to attract teachers with strong skills and experience. [But] other things being equal, teachers are also attracted to districts that pay higher salaries.<sup>52</sup>

As well, recent studies reporting data from trial programs in California have indicated that providing financial incentives encourages academically qualified teachers to work and remain in high-poverty schools.<sup>53</sup>

All of these studies have involved limitations of course, but taken together, their findings imply that American school districts with better funding use those funds, in part, to pay for needed resources. Please bear in mind, however, that such studies have so far focused on but a narrow range of resources—*teacher qualifications* (and in the case of Hartman's work, *staff abundance*)—and little knowledge seems yet to have appeared linking funding levels with other types of resources also presumably tied to funding levels—small classes, better equipment and facilities, innovative and wide-ranging curricula, strong extracurricular opportunities, educational programs that stress individual attention or traditions of excellence, and the like. Clearly, more studies of how funds are used in American education are now in order.

*Resources and outcomes.* Research on links between funding and resources may be hard to find, but this is *not* the case for research on ties between resources and educational outcomes. Rather, a *huge* number of studies have been published concerned with the latter issue; indeed, in some ways such efforts constitute the heartland of American educational research. These studies have unearthed a great deal of knowledge about the effects of key resources, and many useful ideas about how to improve education have evolved from that knowledge. But the huge scope of these efforts poses a challenge for my coverage here which will, of necessity, be restricted to only a few types of funding-associated resources—four cases where research has generated clear implications for improving education, and two others where such implications are more murky.

*Teacher qualifications and salaries.* Additional funds can be used, of course, to hire teachers with stronger qualifications. As in all demanding fields, good teaching requires both dedication and professional knowledge, and this means that teachers with stronger academic backgrounds, more years of

experience, and better teaching skills should generate better outcomes for students, and—as a rule—they should also earn better salaries. Research evidence strongly supports such claims; indeed, scores of well-constructed studies, based on surveys, have found that *better educational outcomes appear when American teachers have had more appropriate academic preparation, have had more years of experience, earn higher scores on tests of teaching skills, and are paid higher salaries*—thus stronger teacher qualifications are resources that matter—for both impoverished and nonimpoverished students.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding the issue of academic preparation, various advocates are now promoting programs, such as “Teach for America,” that recruit morally committed undergraduates, who are completing degrees in fields other than education, to spend a year or more teaching in disadvantaged urban schools within crime-ridden neighborhoods. These recruits soon learn that it is *very* difficult to teach in such distressed venues, and although some are able to cope, many respond by adopting teaching styles that “dumb down” the curriculum and focus instead on classroom control, while others respond to stress by resigning from their posts. In contrast, recruits with degrees in education have more often been exposed to courses in child development, learning theory, and classroom management, as well as to experiences of supervised student teaching, and this means that they are more likely to know about how to control difficult classroom environments, pursue meaningful curricula, and respond supportively to the needs of disadvantaged students. Thus, studies of the issue generally find that recruits with academic preparation in *education* create better outcomes for such students.<sup>55</sup> (This does not exhaust the topic of “Teach for America,” of course. Leaders of the program are now exploring ways to provide recruits with needed information about impoverished environments, child development, and classroom management and such efforts will surely improve the scene.)

Regarding the issue of teacher pay, far-right sources are hostile to teachers’ unions and often argue that, because of union desires to link wages to years of experience, ties between teachers’ qualifications and salaries are weak, hence little is accomplished when teachers are given higher pay.<sup>56</sup> But Ronald Ferguson and Helen Ladd have shown that highly qualified and successful teachers are often lured away from poorly funded school districts by higher salaries,<sup>57</sup> and Susanna Loeb and Marianne Page have found that high salaries also help well-funded school districts compete with other sectors of the wage market for the services of teachers with strong qualifications.<sup>58</sup> Thus, in America, higher salaries attract teachers with stronger qualifications who, in turn, create better educational outcomes. And this also means that districts and schools that can afford to hire qualified teachers more often generate educational success, whereas districts and schools that cannot do so have difficulty escaping failure.

*Staff abundance.* Funds can also be used to hire more staff, and educators have long been convinced that larger numbers of professional staff help to generate better educational outcomes. Again research evidence supports this claim. Well-constructed studies, based on surveys, have found that *better out-*



*comes appear when American schools and school districts are able to hire more staff per student*—thus greater staff abundance is also a resource that matters.<sup>59</sup> In fairness, the bulk of these studies have examined data for abundance of *teachers*, and findings that better outcomes appear when more teachers are hired hold up even when controls are entered for student poverty and other factors known also to affect success.

But what are we to make of these findings? Some authors assume that the presence of more teachers means that average class size is smaller in the school or district and argue that such findings tell us something about the effects of smaller classes, but this need not be the case. In today's America, teachers are asked to perform many roles *outside* of the classroom—among them counseling and mentoring students, coaching and leading student performances, helping troubled students, grading papers, supervising lunchrooms and study halls, preparing classroom materials, planning curricula, supervising extracurricular activities, reaching out to parents, and the like—and the fact that more teachers appear on the payroll may mean merely that contacts between teachers and individual students are more likely or that a larger workforce is needed to relieve an otherwise unbearable, out-of-class workload for teachers. Thus, when it comes to these findings, it is sufficient to conclude that, in America, *larger teacher-student ratios lead to better educational outcomes*; affluent districts and schools where teachers are in abundance are more able to generate educational success, whereas educational failures are more likely to appear in cash-starved districts and schools where teachers are in short supply.

*Classroom size.* Such caution does *not* mean that research is missing on the effects of classroom size. On the contrary, literally hundreds of studies have now appeared concerned with this latter topic, with methods ranging from well-constructed surveys to statewide demonstration programs, as well as both small-scale and major experiments, and these efforts have generated both controversies and well-documented conclusions.

Regarding controversies, additional funds are generally needed if class size is to be reduced, and this means that advocacy groups have made sharply differing claims about findings from class-size research. According to The American Federation of Teachers, “taken together, these studies provide compelling evidence that reducing class size, particularly for younger children, will have a positive effect on student achievement,”<sup>60</sup> whereas The Heritage Foundation (a leading purveyor of far-right propaganda) asserts that, “there’s no evidence that smaller class sizes alone lead to higher student achievement.”<sup>61</sup> Well, which claim is right? What has research shown about the effects of small classes in America?

Answers to this question have differed over time. Teachers have long believed that good things follow when class size is reduced, and they began to explore this notion with small-scale experiments early in the last century! By the 1960s, scores of such studies had been reported, and initial reviews of such efforts generally concluded that differences in class size generate few (if any)

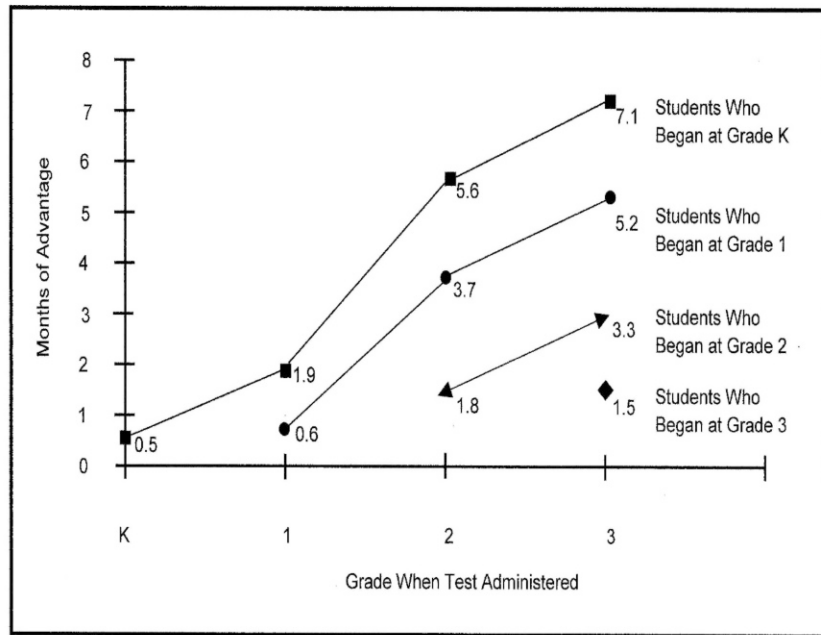
effects. Better reviewing techniques (such as meta-analysis) began to appear in the 1970s, however, and when reviewers applied the latter tools to classroom-size research,<sup>62</sup> a consensus gradually emerged “that short-term exposure to small classes generates ... gains in student achievement and that those gains are greater in the early grades, in classrooms with fewer than 20 students, and for students from groups that are traditionally disadvantaged in education.”<sup>63</sup>

Well-designed, large-scale surveys have also investigated the effects of small classes,<sup>64</sup> demonstration programs featuring reductions in class size have appeared in several American states (such as Indiana and Wisconsin), and another state (California) created a small-class initiative that “provided a near-textbook case of how a state should *not* reduce class size.”<sup>65</sup> Such efforts have generated useful information, not only about the effects of small classes, but also about conditions that should and should not be present if large-scale reductions in class size are to succeed.

But the most impressive class-size initiative yet conducted has been Tennessee’s Project *STAR* (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio)—arguably the largest and best-designed, preplanned, field experiment ever undertaken in education.<sup>66</sup> In the mid-1980s, the Tennessee legislature funded a four-year study to compare the achievements of early grade students assigned randomly to one of three conditions: *standard classes* (with one certificated teacher and 20 or more students); *supplemented classes* (with one teacher and a full-time, noncertificated teacher’s aide); and *small classes* (with one teacher and about 15 students). Schools from throughout the state were invited to participate, but those participating had to have space available for each type of classroom, so the sample for the first year of the program involved “only” 79 schools, 328 kindergarten classrooms, and about 6,300 students! Treatment conditions for these three types of classes were kept in place while students progressed through Grades K, 1, 2, and 3, and at the end of each year, students’ achievements in reading, word-study skills, and mathematics were assessed.

Not surprisingly, some students had moved away from their schools during subsequent years of the program, but in each case they were replaced in their classes by other, again randomly chosen, students, so it was also possible to compare effects for students who had been in the program for one, two, three, or four years. And when this was done, investigators found that, when compared with standard classes, supplemented classes had generated little of interest, but *small* classes had generated substantial, extra achievement gains in all subjects for students, and that the longer their exposure to small classes, the greater the gains. Moreover, these gains were *not* small. Exhibit 6.8 displays the average number of months of measured gain in reading achievement for students participating in Project STAR. As can be seen there, when tested during Grade 3 (for example), the reading achievement level of typical students who had experienced small classes from kindergarten onwards averaged a full 7.1 months *greater* than the achievement level of equivalent students who had been taught in standard classrooms. In addition, achievement gains were even greater for

**Exhibit 6.8. Average Months of Grade-Equivalent Advantage in Reading Achievement Scores for Project STAR Students in Small Classes**



Source: This figure appeared originally in an article by Bruce Biddle and David Berliner (2002a) that reviewed research on small classes and their effects. Data for the figure appeared originally in *The Enduring Effects of Small Classes* (Finn, Gerber, Achilles, & Boyd-Zaharias, 2001), and the figure was prepared with help from Jeremy Finn.

students traditionally disadvantaged for education—those from impoverished and African-American homes.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, small-class achievement gains were found to persist even when students returned to standard classrooms. When alerted to initial, promising results, the Tennessee legislature authorized a second, follow-up study to track STAR student accomplishments through the 12th grade, and this follow-up study found that typical students who had experienced small classes scored more highly on achievement tests during subsequent primary and secondary years, earned better academic grades, remained in school more often through the 12th grade, and indicated greater interest in college by taking either the ACT or SAT exam. Moreover, these upper-grade differences were, again, larger for students traditionally disadvantaged for education.

What are we to make of such findings? Most analysts suggest that small classes work their magic because such a context strengthens interactions between teachers and individual students, and this allows students to learn the rules of

standard classroom culture and how to cope successfully with education—tasks that are more difficult, of course, for disadvantaged students. In addition, other theorists focus on the classroom itself, arguing that the small-class context is less disruptive, reduces conflict, provides more support for students, and promotes greater focus on subject matter. These arguments are not mutually exclusive, but it will take additional research, based on observations in small classes, to sort them out.

Findings such as those from the STAR experiment do not answer all questions about small class effects of course, and additional knowledge should continue to surface from research on this interesting topic. But research to date warrants a clear conclusion—*well-conducted programs that reduce the size of classes in the early grades are resources that generate greater educational success, not only for all students, but particularly for impoverished students and others who are disadvantaged in American public education.* And, for whatever it may be worth, research to date has provided little consistent evidence concerning the effects of class size in middle or high schools in the United States. (I return to implications of the latter non-finding shortly.)

*Strong preschool programs.* Additional funds can also be used to support preschool programs for youngsters who are not yet old enough for school entry. As we know from Chapter Three, strong preschool programs appear widely in Scandinavia and in key countries from Central and Western Europe. Those programs provide high-quality care for both advantaged and disadvantaged youths, are professionally staffed, and generate both support for overburdened parents and experiences needed if youngsters are to grow and develop appropriate language, cognitive, and social skills.

Strong preschool programs such as these are not widely found in the United States, although the country's Head Start program provides *basic* preschool experiences for some impoverished youngsters. However, funding for Head Start has been niggardly (and may be cut further due to sequestration), Head Start facilities vary sharply in quality, some of those facilities may be staffed by persons with no professional training or qualifications as educators, and early results from research on Head Start effects were not impressive. (Note, however, that recent analyses of Head Start effects have confirmed broadly positive although modest educational effects for the program.<sup>68</sup>) As well, other studies of weak preschool programs in America have sometimes failed to confirm long-lasting advantages for those programs, and such findings have led some far-right critics to claim that preschool programs are inherently ineffective.

Such claims are challenged, however, by evidence from field experiments and other studies focused on high-quality preschool programs in American contexts.<sup>69</sup> Let's look at some of this evidence. The *Perry Preschool Program*, for example, provided innovative, high-quality preschool experiences, between 1962 and 1967, for three- and four-year-old, impoverished, African-American youths from Ypsilanti, Michigan (a suburb of Detroit) who were judged to be "at high risk of school failure." Participating youngsters were enrolled in 2.5-hour,

small-class sessions each weekday morning that were taught by experienced teachers who were certificated in both special education and preschool education. Curricula during these sessions emphasized active learning, decision making, and problem solving, and their details were planned carefully with participating youths. Each teacher also made regular, supportive 1.5-hour home visits seeking to involve youths' mothers in the educative process.

Long-term effects of these experiences were evaluated by comparing outcomes, at age 27 and again at age 40, for 128 youngsters—64 “experimental” youths who had participated in the project, and 64 “control” youths who had not done so.<sup>70</sup> Substantial differences were reported for these comparisons. At age 27, project participants:

- had completed an average of almost one full year more of schooling;
- had spent an average of 1.3 fewer years in special education; and
- were 44% more likely to have graduated from high school.

In addition, by age 27, sharp reductions in rates of teenage pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births had appeared for female participants. And by age 40, male participants:

- were 46% less likely to have served time in jail or prison,
- and had a 33% lower rate of arrests for violent crimes.

Moreover, by age 40, participants were earning 42% higher median monthly incomes and were 26% less likely to have received government aid in the form of welfare or food stamps during the previous decade.

Impressive results were also reported for a second, small, preschool experiment, the *Abecedarian Project*. This effort, began in 1972, again involved “at risk,” impoverished, African-American youngsters, but this time those youths were from a small town in North Carolina, came from families mostly headed by single mothers with minimal education, and were much younger—4.4 months of age on average when the experiment began. In all, 111 youths participated, and these were assigned randomly to “experimental” and “control” groups that were or were not provided high-quality preschool experiences. “Experimental” group participants were enrolled in year-round, full-day, small classes in which the curricula stressed educational games emphasizing language development and cognitive skills. Staff responsible for these curricula were given intensive, in-service training, and efforts were again made to involve mothers in the program.

Long-term effects of the *Abecedarian Project* were assessed by comparing results for “experimental” and “control” participants at age 21, and substantial, persisting advantages were again found for participants who had received preschool assistance. On average, at age 21 they were found:

- to have reading skills that were 1.8 grade levels higher,
- to have math skills that were 1.3 grade levels higher,
- to have slightly higher IQ scores,
- to have completed a half year more of education,
- to be more often enrolled in school, and
- to have more often attended or be attending a college.<sup>71</sup>

In addition, at age 21 those who had attended preschools were more often working at skilled jobs and less likely to have become teenage parents.

Other, exploratory, high-quality preschool programs have also been shown to improve outcomes for disadvantaged youths, and a number of American states have begun to adopt high-quality preschool programs for such youths, including—crucially—those from impoverished families, and results from these programs have also been encouraging.<sup>72</sup> As well, the state of Oklahoma has begun a statewide, high-quality, preschool program that involves certificated teachers. This program is voluntary but now enrolls about two thirds of all eligible four-year-olds in the state. Recent evaluations of the program have revealed educational gains for all types of participants, but larger gains have appeared for “disadvantaged” students; i.e., those from families that are African-America, Hispanic, or impoverished.<sup>73</sup>

Taken together then, evidence also indicates that *strong preschool programs are resources that generate greater educational success, not only for all students, but particularly for impoverished students and others who are disadvantaged in American public education*. The wording of this conclusion is similar to the one stated above for small classes in the early grades and suggests several follow-on questions: Are these two types of resources complementary or redundant in their effects; and if the latter, which resource is more effective, and which is more costly? Researchers seem not yet to have addressed the first of these questions, but thoughtful studies of the latter two have begun to appear.<sup>74</sup> Details of these studies need not concern us here, but their authors have stressed that if either of these resources was to be widely adopted, costs incurred would be *no more than modest* and far less than what America would gain through increased economic productivity and reduced costs for institutions—such as prisons—that are presently needed to cope with educational failure. I return to this argument in Chapter Seven.

*Intensive curricula.* So far, we have dealt with research bearing on four types of funding-associated resources where findings suggest clear ways to improve education, but things are not always so simple. We turn now to research on two additional types of resources, also associated with funding, where implications are somewhat murkier.

Additional funds can also be used to support the teaching of “additional” curricular topics such as more offerings in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, health care, and social services, and these options often appear in American schools serving affluent youths where students are encouraged to expand their horizons and explore a wide range of vocational and avocational interests. Such *interest-enlarging curricula* are rare in schools that serve nonaffluent youths, however, and little is now known about how they might affect such disadvantaged students.

In sharp contrast, curricula can also be restructured so that students suffering from poverty or other forms of disadvantage are given more intensive exposure to “basic” topics deemed crucial for their development. Some advocates argue, for

example, that if disadvantaged students are to “make it” in American education, they need early exposure to *intensive curricula* in reading, mathematics, or other basic subjects. Innovative programs designed to provide such exposure have also sprung up, and research on the effects of those programs has begun to appear.

A good example of this type of research may be found in studies concerned with *Success for All*, an innovative curricular program that provides intensive, early grade experiences in *reading* for disadvantaged students.<sup>75</sup> Key elements of this program include:

- daily 90-minute reading classes, each of which is formed by grouping together students of various ages who read at the same performance level;
- a reading curriculum that focuses on language development, teaching students the distinct sounds that make up words, blending sounds to form words, and developing reading fluency;
- daily one-on-one professional tutoring for students needing extra help with reading; and
- cooperative learning activities (in which students work together in teams or pairs) starting in Grade 2 reading classes.

Success for All was initially developed by Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University in response to problems facing the public schools of Baltimore, where many students come from disadvantaged homes and often fail to develop reading skills crucial for subsequent success in education (and life). The program has since been actively promoted, however, by Slavin and others, and it has been adopted in many high-poverty schools. Interest in Success for All has been substantial, and this has led to various studies designed to examine its effects.

Most of these studies have used designs that compared student achievements in different schools where Success for All had and had not been adopted. These studies have consistently found better student outcomes in the former, but we should question the meaning of such findings. Success for All requires that schools adopt procedures which are sharply different from those found in most primary schools, and this means that Slavin and his colleagues normally require that, if a school is to participate, at least 80% of its teachers must agree to adopt the program. But this requirement may mean that Success for All appears only in schools where teachers are exceptionally bright, energetic, or more interested in alternatives to traditional curricula, and these differences in teacher intelligence, energy, or outlook may also help to generate better student outcomes. As well, increased funding is required if schools are to adopt Success for All, and better outcomes may also reflect the presence of other types of resources also associated with more generous funding.

Such issues were largely avoided in a recent, preplanned field experiment that compared student outcomes for two sets of schools that had both voted to adopt Success for All: an “experimental” group where the program was implemented in Grades K, 1, and 2; and a “control” group where implementation of the program was delayed until Grade 3. Reading outcomes were assessed for students at the end of the first, second, and third years of program implementation, and when this was done, students in experimental schools were

found to have earned higher scores for indicators of reading competency such as *passage comprehension*, *word identification*, and *word attack skills*.<sup>76</sup> (This meant that, by the end of the third year, typical second graders in “experimental” schools scored 25 to 30% higher in grade level for reading skills than did their counterparts in “control” schools.)

Such findings suggest that Success for All does, indeed, improve early reading skills for typical students in high-poverty schools, but they do not yet provide information about long-term outcomes of the program, nor how the program affects those students who actually enter school with good reading skills, nor how such intensive focus on reading skills affects other desired outcomes of education in the early grades such as achievements in mathematics, social skills, interests in education, or ability to cope with classroom culture. As well, questions remain about how the program would be implemented in schools with mixed populations of impoverished and nonimpoverished students. Although promising then, it is not yet clear that Success for All and similar programs based on intensive, focused curricula will truly help prospects for many impoverished students in American schools.

*School size.* Americans have also long believed that larger secondary schools provide significant advantages—among them a wider variety of curricular and non-curricular activities, higher-quality programs in the performing arts, sports teams that “shine” in statewide competitions, and cost savings generated by economies of scale, and—reflecting such beliefs—the typical high school in the U.S. grew sharply in size during the last century. High schools with 1,500 to 2,000 students now appear regularly in larger American school districts, and some urban high schools in the U.S. now enroll 20,000 or more students!

As it happens, larger schools are also plagued by various problems, many associated with *anomie*. In brief, students are known personally in smaller schools, but personal relationships are far more difficult to sustain when hundreds of different students appear in one’s life on a daily basis. And this means that, in large schools, both teachers and students find it harder to get to know one another, and interactions among students become less personalistic and are more often driven by racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes, or (in the worst cases) by gang membership. Such problems impose additional burdens on students, of course, and these burdens fall more heavily on those who already bear extra burdens generated by poverty, race, ethnicity, or lack of language skills. Thus, we should not be surprised to learn that, according to Linda Darling-Hammond, a host of survey-based studies have found that, for disadvantaged students:

Smaller schools appear to produce higher achievement, lower dropout rates, lower rates of violence and vandalism, more positive feelings about self and school, and more participation in school activities. [And] in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, initiatives to create small, personalized, urban schools have been able to produce higher achievement and substantially better graduation and college-going rates for low-income students of color and recent immigrants.<sup>77</sup>



Findings such as these have attracted attention, of course, and a “small schools movement” has been underway since the 1990s—spurred on by major philanthropies such as the Annenberg Challenge and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—which argues the case for smaller schools and promotes strategies for downsizing or restructuring all large *secondary* schools in the U.S.<sup>78</sup> And other authors have extended the debate, arguing that the typical American *primary* school is also too large.<sup>79</sup> But does current evidence support such proposals and arguments?

Yes and no. As it happens, almost all findings linking school size to educational outcomes have come from *secondary* schools—and few if any studies have reported such findings for *primary* schools—and this pattern of results sharply reverses findings we noted earlier for class-size effects which, as a rule, are reported for *primary* but not *secondary* schools. Moreover, both sets of findings make sense. Students in primary schools spend most of their time in one classroom; for them, experiences in that *classroom* are preeminent. But high school students enter multiple classrooms during the day and often spend a lot of time in nonclassroom school venues; so for them, the individual classroom becomes less important but characteristics of their *schools* should have a stronger impact in their lives.<sup>80</sup>

Regarding arguments that *all* large high schools should be downsized, few would quarrel that, for disadvantaged secondary students, school size is tied to educational outcomes; indeed, findings supporting this claim have appeared in a host of studies. The picture is less clear, however, for nondisadvantaged secondary students, for whom the effects reported for school size have been weaker or ambiguous. Moreover, this pattern too makes sense. By comparison, the typical nondisadvantaged student is burdened with fewer home- and neighborhood-based problems that interfere with education, hence is more able to withstand the challenges of anomie and can take advantage of the wider range of curricular and extracurricular opportunities typically offered in larger high schools.

But should American education now be restructured so that *two* types of secondary schools are offered for students: smaller, more supportive, but more narrowly focused schools for students who are disadvantaged by poverty, race, ethnicity, or unfamiliarity with American culture; and larger, less supportive, but more broadly focused schools for students who are not so disadvantaged? I cannot resolve this conundrum here, but its presence suggests that, as was the case with research on the effects of intensive curricula, the policy implications of research on the effects of school size are as yet a bit murky.

This does not mean that murky implications plague the bulk of research on the effects of funding-related resources. On the contrary, a *vast* amount of research has now appeared confirming that educational failure becomes more likely when students do not have access to funding-related resources. But in the United States, not all schools (or school districts) are able to afford such resources, and students in these venues often bear multiple burdens that are not borne by students in well-funded schools (or districts). This supports strongly the

## CHAPTER SIX

case for causality and means that, *within America, differences in levels of educational funding generate resources that CAUSE parallel differences in educational outcomes*, and because of American customs that tie educational funding to level of wealth within communities, impoverished youngsters in the U.S. are also much more likely to experience inadequate school funding and its resultant educational failure. As Sue Books has observed, “in school, poor children on the whole have fewer ‘highly qualified’ teachers, fewer buildings in good repair conducive to learning, fewer extracurricular activities, fewer guidance counselors and nurses, school lunches that are less nutritious, and less of almost everything else that money can buy for schools.”<sup>81</sup>

### DISCRIMINATORY PROCEDURES

In the field of education, the term *deficit* is tied almost exclusively to intellectual or achievement criteria and is thus associated with those who do not do well in school. By virtue of their poverty, children become culturally, socially, and intellectually deficient and at risk for nonspecific but certainly negative outcomes; they are expected not to do well in their school or postschool lives.

—Ellen Brantlinger (2003, pp. ix-x)

The [questionable] central rationale for tracking is that differences in curriculum and teaching are essential to address the differences in students’ abilities and that addressing these differences benefits both high- and low-tracked students.

—Jeannie Oakes (2005, p. 225)

So far, we have examined research on two types of structured problems that appear *among* America’s public schools: concentrations of impoverished students, and inadequate funding. And as we have seen, both of these challenges are more often found in schools that serve impoverished students, and both are associated with significant problems that reduce educational prospects for those young Americans.

But these are not the only types of structured problems that create burdens for impoverished students; other challenges reflect discriminatory procedures *within* American public schools—procedures that often reflect interests of The Rich and Powerful—and two of these latter challenges have been studied extensively. I turn now to those studies and their findings.

#### *Tracking, Enrichment, and Remediation*

Public education was invented in the U.S. during the 19th century when most citizens lived in small towns or isolated farm houses. Not surprisingly then, during that century the typical public school was a one-room schoolhouse where students of various ages were exposed to a single curriculum. As towns grew larger, however, it seemed sensible to replace one-room schools with larger

schools that provided more curricular alternatives: *standardized* primary schools where K-6 (or K-8) classrooms offered day-long, grade-appropriate curricula for students of specific ages; and *comprehensive* junior and senior high schools which sponsored many types of “courses” for students with differing needs, interests, and talents.

In theory, all courses in such secondary schools were to be open to students with appropriate qualifications. In practice, however, key courses were bundled into small numbers of “tracks” designed to provide appropriate education for students who were to follow specific career paths. Although the selection of tracks varied among school districts, the following list would have been fairly typical: a track of *college-preparatory* courses—such as “Geometry” and “Latin”—for boys who would be preparing for professional careers through subsequent enrollment in postsecondary institutions; an *industrial* track with courses—such as “Drafting” and “Woodworking”—for boys who were to proceed from high school into careers in the trades; a *commercial* track featuring courses—such as “Typing” and “Shorthand”—for girls who were destined to become receptionists and secretaries; and a *general education* track consisting of less-demanding courses for students who would shortly drop out of school to take jobs requiring only minimal education. Students were assigned to one of these tracks by staff in the school (who were presumably familiar with each student’s background), and it was assumed that most students would remain within the track to which they had been assigned throughout their high school years.

Although this early, public school tracking system reflected needs within the job market, it was also premised on the Social Darwinian notion that students could be ranked in terms of innate abilities, and that such abilities would reflect not only their home backgrounds but also their gender, ethnicity, and school conduct. Thus, students assigned to the “college prep” track were more often the high-achieving sons of White, affluent, native-born, and professionally qualified parents, whereas students in the “general education” track more often came from impoverished, minority, or immigrant families—or had annoyed teachers by their impulsive, “troublemaking” behaviors.

Such a tracking system created obvious constraints for students. By comparison, however, the system that had evolved in the United States imposed fewer constraints than those common in other advanced countries where students were (and still are) tracked into *distinct* types of high schools. “For example, between the ages of 11 and 13 Swiss children are sorted early on into one of three different types of secondary school—a *Realschule*, a *Sekundarschule*, or a *Gymnasium*,” each of which promotes only limited career options, so that “by age 16 students [have been induced to] select among three well-marked paths through school—quit, apprenticeship training, or college preparatory.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Germany also distinguishes among three types of high schools—the *Hauptschule*, the *Sekundarschule*, and the *Gymnasium*—whereas four distinct types of high schools appear in The Netherlands—the *VBO*, the *MAVO*, the *HAVO*, and the *VWO*—and so it goes.<sup>83</sup>

Despite greater presumptive flexibility in the early American tracking system, questions began to surface about it after World War Two. For one thing, the job market was evolving; opportunities were beginning to disappear for those who could not complete high school, and jobs in the industrial and commercial world were requiring more and more postsecondary education. And for another, the civil rights movement of the 1960s heightened concerns about equity, and those concerns generated questions about the classist, sexist, and racist assumptions underlying early tracking procedures. As a result, many secondary schools began to abandon career-oriented tracks but retained a modified form of tracking in which “objective” criteria were used to sort students into groups thought to possess more or less academic talent, and these groups were allowed to take either “high-track” or “low-track”—or sometimes “enriched” or “honors” versus “general” or “remedial”—versions of crucial courses presumably suitable for their abilities.

The primary tools used for making such “objective” judgments were scores from I.Q. tests or other assessments of achievement or ability. Beliefs had long been common among some psychologists and privileged Americans that students differ in terms of a single, immutable, general, native-ability factor—“intelligence”—that governs their educability, and that this factor can be reliably assessed by scores from I.Q. tests.<sup>84</sup> So it seemed only reasonable that such scores would become a major tool used for sorting students into tracking programs. But I.Q. tests were not the only tool used for making tracking decisions. Such decisions were also based on achievement test scores, on students’ academic records, on teachers’ and counselors’ judgments about students’ capacities to learn, on students’ or parents’ preferences, and on other data presumed to provide unbiased information needed to sort students into more or less talented groups.

Thus, as time wore on, *tracking programs* in American schools became ones that use I.Q. tests and other supposedly objective tools for sorting students into groups that are presumably ranked in terms of innate academic talent, and these groups are then induced to enroll in demand-differentiated courses deemed “appropriate” for their capacities to learn. What kinds of courses are now tracked in American secondary schools? Answers to this question have varied widely, but tracking has been particularly popular for courses in *English, Mathematics, Science, Vocational Education, Foreign Languages, and Social Studies*,<sup>85</sup> and—over time—completion of high-demand courses in these fields have also become tokens needed for entrance into high-status, undergraduate colleges or universities. As well, within-class tracking has also spread into some of America’s elementary schools.

American tracking programs are popular for both superficial and subtle reasons. Among the former, many Americans assume that both talented and struggling students will learn more when clustered into homogeneous classrooms where they are challenged by “appropriate” curricular materials, and many educators assume that classroom teaching is more easily conducted when students with similar levels of knowledge are clustered together. Among the latter, given greater home support for education, the sons and daughters of privileged parents

tend to do very well on tests designed to assess general academic talent, so tracking provides marvelous excuses for spending extra tax dollars on enhancement programs that will benefit those students. Affluent parents are aware of this, and as a result, ambitious, upper-middle-class parents tend to support tracking. Educators are not unaware that tracking tends to favor privileged students, of course, and thoughtful scholars have begun to explore how the latter rationalize support for it.<sup>86</sup>

Tracking programs have also attracted both controversy and research, and some of these activities have concerned intelligence and its measurement. Many research findings now indicate that students differ in terms of not one but *many* types of talents and that even “intelligence” (as assessed by I.Q. tests) is *not* solely a product of native, immutable forces but also responds to experiences—often associated with race, ethnicity, gender, national background, poverty, or home advantage—that encourage or hinder intellectual growth.<sup>87</sup> Given such evidence, it has become increasingly difficult to justify basing tracking decisions on scores from I.Q. tests. In addition, many studies have found that tracking decisions are often plagued by racial, ethnic, or economic prejudice and that tracking programs fail to increase the achievements of students from advantaged homes while imposing “failure” labels as well as substandard curricula, less-qualified teachers, weaker demands for success, and fewer contacts with counselors or successful peers on students from disadvantaged homes, and findings such as these have led key researcher-advocates, such as Jeannie Oakes, to inveigh against tracking and promote detracking initiatives. Such findings and advocacies have helped to fuel public debates about tracking and have led a number of American school districts to do away with explicit tracking.<sup>88</sup>

This does not mean that tracking is now dead in the United States. Far from it. *Explicit* tracking still persists (or has recently reemerged) in some American school districts,<sup>89</sup> and where it has been discarded, it has often been replaced by “*soft*” or “*hidden*” forms of tracking in which schools retain their menus of demand-differentiated courses, and students are allowed to “choose” whether they will enroll in high- or low-demand versions of those courses. Such programs allow school districts to argue that they have done away with tracking while still placating ambitious, affluent parents by offering “honors” or “advanced” versions of key courses that will allow their sons and daughters to qualify for entrance into high-status undergraduate programs. Not surprisingly then, researchers who have studied soft tracking programs, such as Samuel Roundfield Lucas, also report that students enrolled in their high-demand courses come largely from affluent, White homes whereas students in low-demand courses come more often from less-affluent and often minority homes whose parents either do not understand or lack the skills and free time needed to cope with such status-confirming arrangements.<sup>90</sup> Findings such as these suggest that “soft” versions of tracking tend to create the same types of problems as does explicit tracking, and this has led advocates to argue that *all* forms of tracking should be abolished.

How do such findings bear on problems faced by impoverished students? On the one hand, features common in research on tracking make it difficult to

answer this question cleanly. To illustrate, many studies have found that *impoverished* students have difficulty in American schools, and yet, much of research on tracking is driven, not by concern for *poverty*, but rather by worries about the “*social class*” of students, and tracking studies generally use composite measures to assess students’ social class rather than measures that focus cleanly on students’ poverty. Thus, we cannot yet be certain whether findings from tracking studies reflect poverty itself, lack of parental education, and/or other phenomena that are often bundled into “social class” measures. Again, most tracking studies draw only from survey evidence, thus are subject to questions about whether the findings they report do or do not reflect causal relations, but such questions are addressed in only a few tracking studies that use panel study designs or statistical controls to help rule out the effects of other processes—such as poverty in the home—that can be confused with those of tracking. On the other hand, findings from tracking research make sense, are robust, and indicate strongly that tracking programs steer students who are disadvantaged by race, ethnicity, or social class into low-demand courses where they are confronted with lower-quality curricula, academic expectations, teachers, and support from others—and where (surprise!) their academic prospects deteriorate from year to year—and it would be astounding if such findings did not also apply to students who are impoverished. Thus, research provides strong (albeit indirect) evidence suggesting that *tracking programs in America impose additional problems on students who are impoverished, problems that help reduce their chances for educational success.*

#### *The Long Hot Summer*

As it happened, during the 19th century the United States evolved a public education calendar that featured a summer “break” that typically lasted 10 weeks or more whereas other advanced nations developed calendars with shorter summer holidays. Many authors have assumed that the American practice reflected seasonal demands associated with agriculture. They have suggested that during the summer, the bulk of youths in the U.S. were needed to help tend and harvest crops or serve the needs of farm laborers, but this interpretation has been challenged by historian Kenneth Gold who argues that early rural schools in the U.S. actually closed in the spring and fall (so that students could help with both planting and harvesting) whereas urban schools often reflected the chaotic schedules of students’ working-class parents. But as the century wore on, educational reformers struggled to create standardized school calendars, and they were then also influenced by prestigious American voices which argued that students could be harmed by *too much* schooling(!), thus reformers “strove for ways to reduce time spent studying, because long periods of respite could save the mind from injury. Hence the elimination of Saturday classes, the shortening of the school day, and the lengthening of [summer] vacation—all of which occurred over the course of the nineteenth century.”<sup>91</sup>

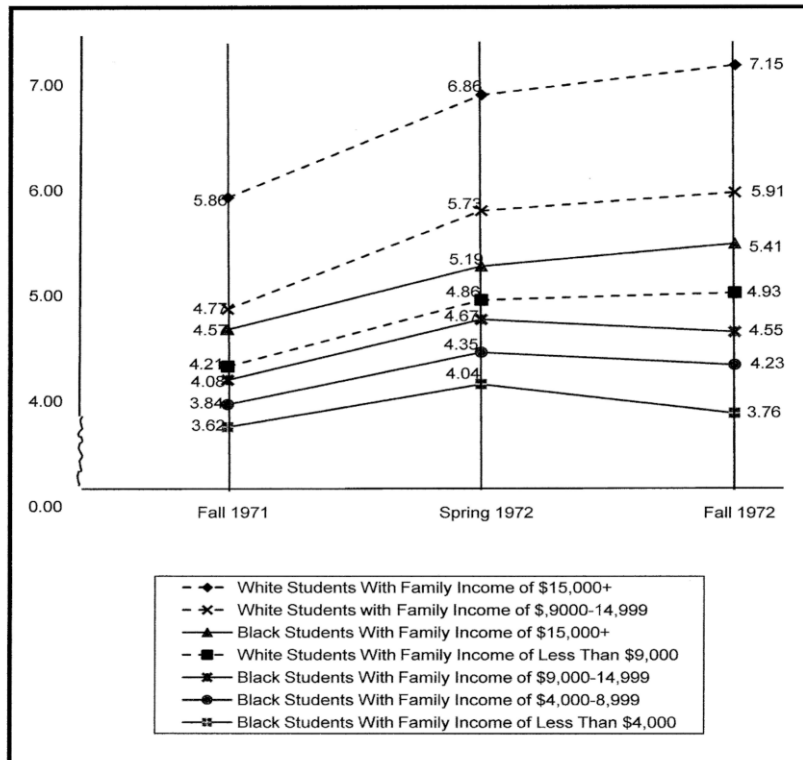
For various reasons, such forces have played smaller roles in other advanced nations, and most of these latter countries have traditionally scheduled shorter summer “breaks” (and more annual school hours) into their educational calendars. Be that as it may, the long summer break for public schools is now widespread in the U.S., is popular among students and parents throughout the land, is strongly defended by teachers’ unions, and has spawned derivative institutions such as summer school programs for students, camps and enrichment programs (attended largely by affluent youths) as well as summer sessions at universities where teachers and school administrators study for postgraduate degrees.

America’s long summer break has also attracted criticisms. One set of critics points out that it generates a significantly shorter school year than those of other competitor nations, and this presumably helps to explain why America so often seems to “fall behind” in international comparisons of academic achievement. Whatever the merits of this complaint, other critics have raised a second criticism that links the long summer break to differences in achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The latter argument points out that *all* students tend to forget academic material when not in school, that this effect is striking during America’s long summer break, and that the effect is more pronounced among disadvantaged youngsters because the latter have less access to books, enrichment programs, and other activities that help students retain and apply academic material.

This second criticism has been around for at least three decades, and early support for it appeared in a 1978 book by Barbara Heyns, *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling*.<sup>92</sup> Heyns’ research was based on data collected in the early 1970s from students attending Atlanta public schools who were then being assessed regularly for achievement, and the author was able to study achievement scores earned by sixth and seventh graders during both the first few and last few weeks of several, consecutive school years. (Note that students appearing in Heyns’s samples had to have been assessed during each of the crucial dates she studied, and each sample was constructed so that it contained roughly equal numbers of Black and White youths.) Exhibit 6.9 displays average grade-equivalent reading achievement test scores earned by the 1,493 youngsters in the author’s sample who were sixth graders during the autumn of 1972.

As can be seen in the exhibit, Heyns’s study generated four basic findings about reading achievement, three representing effects we have previously discussed. *First*, she found that family affluence (or poverty) mattered; on average, students from affluent families earned better achievement scores than did students from nonaffluent families—and this effect appeared for both White and Black students. *Second*, students’ race also mattered; on average, White students earned better achievement scores than did Black students—and this second effect appeared for both affluent and nonaffluent students. And *third*, schooling also mattered; on average, all types of students enjoyed sizable gains in achievement scores during the 1971/72 school year—and these schooling effects were smaller, on average, for *nonaffluent* than for affluent students.

**Exhibit 6.9. Mean Grade-Equivalent Achievement Test Scores of Word Knowledge for Sixth-Grade Atlanta Students**



Source: *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling* (Heyns, B., 1978, p. 45, Table 3.1).

In addition, *fourth*, America's long summer break also mattered; by comparison with achievement gains during the previous school year, average gains during the 1972 summer break were sharply smaller for all types of students—and this effect was most pronounced for *nonaffluent* students who typically *lost* ground during the summer (and, thus, fell even further behind affluent students while school was not in session).

Heyns has not been the sole researcher to have reported such findings, of course. Similar results have surfaced repeatedly during subsequent years,<sup>93</sup> and in 1996 Harris Cooper and his colleagues published a meta-analysis reviewing 39 studies of the issue in which they concluded that, among primary students, the long summer break substantially depresses the academic achievements of youths, particularly those who are disadvantaged, for both reading and mathematics, and that these effects are slightly larger for mathematics than those for reading.<sup>94</sup>



To summarize then, extensive panel-study research indicates that *the long summer “break” in the American academic year is associated with substantial reduction in academic achievement among primary students, and this effect is worse for students from impoverished homes*. Can nothing be done to deal with this problem? The most obvious way to confront it would be to reduce the length of America’s summer break, of course, but this would likely provoke controversy. Aware of this, a number of school districts have tried other approaches that provide supplemental, summertime help for impoverished youngsters in the form of “free” or “loaned” books and other academic materials. Initial evidence suggests that such programs *can* reduce, at least in part, the size of summer break disadvantage for impoverished youngsters, and that evidence is summarized in a recent article by Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen.<sup>95</sup> Such results are encouraging, but this strategy does not address other problems associated with the long summer break.

#### FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Again it is time to take stock. Early in Chapter Five we noted several striking aspects of myth culture in the United States, one being the American tendency to believe that individuals are personally responsible for outcomes in the U.S. and its downside, the belief that individuals should be blamed whenever failure occurs. And as we noted, since the early 1980s, far-right propaganda has been promoting a form of this myth in which a dangerous “Crisis” is said to be afflicting many of the country’s public schools whose widespread “failures” are supposedly confirmed by evidence from comparative studies and standardized tests of student achievement. And as the argument goes, major blame for this Crisis should be assigned to the *teachers* and *school administrators* who are employed in those schools; and education policies should now be focused on motivating, sanctioning, or getting rid of those employees and/or the schools in which they labor.

We’ve now examined a great deal of evidence suggesting that these myths are misguided, that failure within America’s public schools is neither universal nor is associated systematically with personal shortcomings among America’s teachers and administrators. Rather, as was noted in earlier chapters, much of school failure in the U.S. is a product of burdens created by poverty in the *homes* of students and impoverishment in students’ *neighborhoods*. To say the least—it is difficult to understand why teachers and administrators might ever be blamed for these types of burdens which typically generate high failure rates for impoverished students and classrooms or schools where such students are concentrated. In fact, teachers and school administrators may also be victimized by these burdens because they pose significant challenges for the professional labors of educators and can impose stressful or dangerous conditions on their lives.

As well, evidence set forth in this chapter suggests that unfortunate, poverty-associated processes now present in American *schools* also create serious

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burdens that generate educational failure. Thus, within the U.S., burdens are greater when *large numbers of impoverished students appear in schools, school funding is grossly inadequate, and discriminatory procedures* are tolerated that thwart the efforts of impoverished students. Although these three types of burdens also typically generate higher failure rates for impoverished students, classrooms, and schools, they too are not likely to be under the control of teachers and administrators. Rather, educators in those schools too are often victimized by the very problems such burdens create.

This does not mean that poverty is the sole source of problems faced by American schools, nor does it mean that all educators who labor in America's schools cope equally well with those problems. Like persons in all professions, teachers and administrators vary in the levels of knowledge, skills, and motivation they bring to their jobs, and this suggests that such differences also play a part in creating educational success and failure for students. But it makes no sense to argue that even the most dedicated and talented teachers and administrators can overcome the often severe burdens that are imposed on American education by poverty-associated processes, nor have any well-crafted studies appeared that would support such a claim. Thus, policy "reforms" that are focused solely on the efforts of teachers and school administrators simply *cannot* accomplish the goal for which they are touted—eliminating educational failure in the U.S.

But this may not be the worst effect of such policy "reforms." Most of America's educators are dedicated professionals who care deeply about students, schools, and the future of their country. Many are also worried about burdens that poverty can impose on students and are aware of the unfairness involved when they or other educators are blamed for educational failures that are the product of those burdens. So "reform" policies based on the thesis that educators are to be blamed for the bulk of educational "failures" are bound to depress morale among thoughtful teachers and administrators. Such policies may also warp curricula, distort educational assessments, and ruin educational experiences for students—and I return to some in these latter effects in Chapter Seven.

And this brings us to the last task of our quest. If blame-based policies are inappropriate for coping with youth poverty and its effects, what can and should be done to cope with the major problems identified in this book? What strategies might be followed that would help reduce America's appalling scope of youth poverty, and what tactics might be pursued that would reduce the evil effects of poverty processes in American schools? These are serious questions that have also engaged the efforts of many scholars and researchers. Much knowledge and useful insights have evolved from these efforts, and to these latter contributions I turn in the next and last chapter.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Darling-Hammond (2013), Ladson-Billings (2013), Levin (2007), Orfield (2013), and Rothstein (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Lippman, Burns, and McArthur (1996, p. 7).

- <sup>3</sup> Lippman, Burns, and McArthur (1996, figure 1.7, p. 8 and table 1.8, p. A-10).
- <sup>4</sup> See Orland (1990).
- <sup>5</sup> See Orland (1990, p. 51).
- <sup>6</sup> The quotes are from Darling-Hammond (2013). See also Ladson-Billings (2013) and Orfield (2013).
- <sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995); Ellinger, Wright, and Hirlinger (1995); Kennedy, Jung, and Orland (1986); Lippman, Burn, and McArthur (1996); Orland (1990); Puma, Jones, Rock, and Fernandez (1993); Puma et al. (1997); and Rouse and Barrow (2006).
- <sup>8</sup> Anderson, Hollinger, and Conaty (1993, p. 24).
- <sup>9</sup> As phrased, this conclusion ducks the question of whether poverty concentration in schools creates sharply more problems when it exceeds some “tipping point.” Several authors have made this claim usually citing an influential study by Michael Puma, Calvin Jones, Donald Rock, and Roberta Fernandez (1993). But no “tipping point” appeared in the data reported in this study, and its authors did not make such a claim in their text. Nor does such a claim appear in a second, follow-up report based on the same data set—see Puma et al. (1997). Nor have I yet found other studies that report nonlinear effects for differing levels of student poverty concentration. My current guess is that this claim is mythic, although it probably reflects the all-too-real “tipping point” phenomenon for neighborhood poverty concentration that was discussed in Chapter Five.
- <sup>10</sup> A partial exception to this generalization appears in a study reported by James Ainsworth (2002). This author examined features of neighborhoods (defined by ZIP-code boundaries) in which students had lived for at least two years. Students in the study came from the nationwide NELS:88 sample of eighth graders; and achievement, family, and school data were available for those students from both 1988 and 1990. The author found that *family features*, concentrations of *advantaged persons* in neighborhoods, and average *level of teacher quality* in schools were all tied to student achievement scores. In addition, consult a suggestive finding appearing in an experimental study reported by Schwartz (2010) that is summarized later in this chapter.
- <sup>11</sup> Note, however, that Planty and Devoe (2005) report that, in 2002, high schools with concentrations of 10th-grade students for free or reduced-price lunch were more likely, than other schools, to respond to neighborhood problems by installing metal detectors on their doors and bars on classroom windows.
- <sup>12</sup> For recent studies of this relationship, consult Anderson, Hollinger, and Conaty (1993); Borman and Dowling (2010); Kennedy, Jung, and Orland (1986); Myers (1986); and Orland (1990).
- <sup>13</sup> Kennedy, Jung, and Orland (1986, p. 21).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Darling-Hammond (2013), Ladson-Billings (2013), and Rothstein (2013).
- <sup>15</sup> See, among other sources, Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, and Wyckoff (2011); Duncan and Magnuson (2011); Farkas (2011); Kirk and Sampson (2011); Ingersoll (1999, 2002); Ingersoll and Gruber (1996); Oakes (1990); Puma et al. (1997); Raudenbush, Jean, and Art (2011).
- <sup>16</sup> For an exception, consult Rumberger and Palardy (2005).
- <sup>17</sup> Schwartz (2010).
- <sup>18</sup> Schwartz (2010, Introduction).
- <sup>19</sup> The phrase appeared in Hanushek (1981).
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, concerns expressed in Picus and Wattenbarger (1996).
- <sup>21</sup> See, for example, data reported in *Quality Counts*, an annual publication of *Education Week* (2000 or 2008).
- <sup>22</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (1998). In addition, see Baker, Sciarra, and Farrie (2010) where several techniques are used for evaluating states in terms of the degree to which they allocate educational funding fairly (among affluent and poverty-ridden school districts) and fairness ratings are provided for all 50 states.
- <sup>23</sup> This exhibit, originally published as Figure 2 in Biddle and Berliner (2002b, p. 54), was drawn from data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (1998, pp. 103-104). Results displayed were for districts that enrolled more than 1,000 students for Fiscal Year 1995.
- <sup>24</sup> Hawaii and the District of Columbia provide exceptions to this rule. Schools within each of the latter entities are bundled together into a single school district.
- <sup>25</sup> Again see Darling-Hammond (2013), Ladson-Billings (2013), Orfield (2013), and Rothstein (2013).

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- <sup>26</sup> See Parrish and Hikido (1998).
- <sup>27</sup> An earlier version of this exhibit was published as figure 3 in Biddle and Berliner (2002b, p. 57). It was prepared using information from the “Common Core of Data” for 1995, drawn from the “School District Data Book” that was released by the National Center for Education Statistics (in 2000). As in Exhibit 5.6, results displayed were for districts that enrolled more than 1,000 students for Fiscal Year 1995. Another exhibit, again drawn from NCES data, that displays the same effect may be found in Parrish and Hikido (1998, p. 24).
- <sup>28</sup> Coleman et al. (1966).
- <sup>29</sup> Among other problems, the report’s authors had failed to use available scaling techniques to validate their procedures, had made serious mistakes when assigning indicators to major variables in the study, and had failed to look at crucial variables that are likely to be associated with school effects. In addition, the authors had used a nonstandard procedure for statistical analysis which generated falsely deflated estimates for school effects. Among others, Borman and Dowling (2010) have provided a useful reanalysis of data from The Coleman Report which confirms that schools are associated with significant and independent effects.
- <sup>30</sup> Friedman (1962) pioneered an influential thesis hostile to the public sector and called for privatizing public education. Boulding (1972) questioned whether “investments” in public education had generated desired effects.
- <sup>31</sup> Both quotes are from Hanushek (1981, p. 19).
- <sup>32</sup> To illustrate, William S. Bennett expressed several versions of Hanushek’s claims while serving as Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration. On February 26, 1988, for example, he opined, “Money doesn’t cure school problems,” and three days later his reasoning became more explicit, “We’ve done 147 studies at the Department of Education. We cannot show a strong, positive correlation between spending more and getting a better result” (Baker, 1991, p. 4).
- <sup>33</sup> In his reviews, Hanushek bundled together results from strong and weak studies, and many of the latter used questionable measures, inappropriate analysis methods, or data from small samples that did not represent the full range of American schools. And Hanushek ignored effect sizes that were reported in the studies he reviewed, but instead generated his conclusions by counting the numbers of studies that had generated “statistically significant” findings. This archaic procedure provides only weak and sometimes biased information and is largely ignored in more sophisticated reviews of quantitative studies, based on meta-analyses, which *do* generate estimates for effect sizes.
- <sup>34</sup> For criticisms of Hanushek’s methods and conclusions, as well as findings that contradict the latter, consult Baker (1991); Fortune and O’Neil (1994); Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996); Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994); Laine, Greenwald, and Hedges (1996); MacPhail-Wilcox and King (1986); Rebell (2007); Spencer and Wiley (1981); Taylor (1997); and Versteegen and King (1998).
- <sup>35</sup> See, for example, Grubb (2009).
- <sup>36</sup> Cited in Rothstein (1993).
- <sup>37</sup> Miles and Rothstein (1995).
- <sup>38</sup> See summaries of findings provided, for example, by MacPhail-Wilcox and King (1986) and Darling-Hammond (2010, Chapter Four).
- <sup>39</sup> See, for example, Fortune and O’Neil (1994); or Hartman (1994).
- <sup>40</sup> See, for example, Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996); Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994); and Laine, Greenwald, and Hedges (1996).
- <sup>41</sup> To illustrate, some studies have based estimates for disadvantage among students’ families, schools, or neighborhoods on data for SES rather than poverty.
- <sup>42</sup> Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996, p. 384).
- <sup>43</sup> See Burd-Sharps, Lewis, and Martins (2008, p. 85), Darling-Hammond (2013), Ladson-Billings (2013).
- <sup>44</sup> Kozol (1991).
- <sup>45</sup> Kozol (2005, pp. 321-324). Also see a recent work by James Ryan (2010) who paints another frightening portrait, based on contemporary data, of two schools from one metropolitan area (Richmond, Virginia) that represents extremes of the multiple-advantage/disadvantage scale. Ryan argues that recent decisions by America’s Supreme Court have made such outcomes far more likely.
- <sup>46</sup> See Educational Testing Service (1991); or McKnight et al. (1987).

- <sup>47</sup> See Mullis et al. (2001).
- <sup>48</sup> Note that Payne and Biddle (1999) also provided data that foreshadowed the size of effects appearing in Exhibit 5.10, and a recent study conducted by *PISA* (the Program for International Student Assessment)—an arm of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD)—reported that the achievement scores they obtained were more affected by students’ “socioeconomic status” in the U.S. than in other advanced nations, a finding argued to reflect the fact that, in America, schools serving disadvantaged students are provided fewer resources for education (see Cavanagh, 2007).
- <sup>49</sup> Hartman (1994).
- <sup>50</sup> Wenglinsky (1997).
- <sup>51</sup> Ferguson (1991).
- <sup>52</sup> Ferguson (1991, p. 466).
- <sup>53</sup> See Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd, and Vigdor (2008), and Steele, Murnane, and Willett (2010).
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, Crosnoe and Cooper (2010); Darling-Hammond (2000, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2013); Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005); Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005); Grubb (2008); Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996); Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994); Strauss and Sawyer (1986); Verstegen and King (1998); and MacPhail-Wilcox and King (1986).
- <sup>55</sup> See, for example, Darling-Hammond (2000); Easton-Brooks and Davis (2009); and Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002).
- <sup>56</sup> See, for example, analyses reported by Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky (1997).
- <sup>57</sup> Ferguson (1991); Ferguson and Ladd (1996).
- <sup>58</sup> Loeb and Page (2000).
- <sup>59</sup> For reviews, see Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996) and MacPhail-Wilcox and King (1986).
- <sup>60</sup> See Murphy and Rosenberg (1998, p. 3).
- <sup>61</sup> Rees and Johnson (2000).
- <sup>62</sup> See Glass and Smith (1979); Educational Research Service (1980); Glass, Cahen, Smith, and Filby (1982); and Hedges and Stock (1983).
- <sup>63</sup> See Biddle and Berliner (2002a, p. 13). Also consult this source for additional references and an accessible review of the various traditions of research on classroom size.
- <sup>64</sup> See, for example, Elliott (1998); Ferguson (1991); Ferguson and Ladd (1996); and Wenglinsky (1997).
- <sup>65</sup> Biddle and Berliner (2002a, p. 20).
- <sup>66</sup> See Finn and Achilles (1990); Finn, Gerber, Achilles, and Boyd-Zaharias (2001); Finn, Gerber, and Boyd-Zaharias (2005); Folger (1989); Grissmer (1999); Krueger (1999, 2003); Krueger and Whitmore (2001); Mosteller (1995); Nye, Hedges, and Konstantopoulos (1999).
- <sup>67</sup> Note that only a few students from Hispanic homes lived in Tennessee during the 1980s, and effects for such students were not reported by STAR investigators.
- <sup>68</sup> Deming (2009).
- <sup>69</sup> Useful summaries of some of these studies may be found in Burd-Sharps, Lewis, and Martins (2008, pp. 98-100) and Crane (1998).
- <sup>70</sup> See, for example, Barnett (1985, 1992, 1996); Belfield, Nores, Barnett, and Schweinhart (2006); Schweinhart (2004); Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart (1993); and Schweinhart and Weikart (1998).
- <sup>71</sup> See Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, and Ramey (2001); Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, and Miller-Johnson (2002); Masse and Barnett (2002); and Ramey, Campbell, and Blair (1998).
- <sup>72</sup> See Burd-Sharps, Lewis, and Martins (2008, pp. 99-100) and Wong, Cook, Barnett, and Jung (2008).
- <sup>73</sup> Ellinger, Wright, and Hirlinger (1995) and Gormley and Phillips (2005).
- <sup>74</sup> See, for example, Harris (2009), Levin (2009), Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, and Mann (2002), and Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, and Robertson (2011).
- <sup>75</sup> See Slavin et al. (1996, 1998).
- <sup>76</sup> See Borman et al. (2005a, b; 2007).
- <sup>77</sup> Darling-Hammond (2010, p. 64). Consult Cotton (1996) and Darling-Hammond, Ross, and Milliken (2007) for detailed reviews of studies concerned with the effects of school size.

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- <sup>78</sup> Good examples of advocacy works that cite research on the effects of high school size may be found in Darling-Hammond's recent book, *The Flat World and Education* (2010), and an earlier review article authored by the Executive Director for Education of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Tom Vander Ark (2002).
- <sup>79</sup> See Delavan (2009), for example.
- <sup>80</sup> Note also that Betts, Zau, and Rice (2003), analyzing data from San Diego, reported stronger effects for class size at the primary level and for teacher qualifications at the secondary level, but reports from other sources would challenge the latter claim.
- <sup>81</sup> Books (2004, p. 135).
- <sup>82</sup> Lucas (1999, p. 2). Also see Sauthier (1995).
- <sup>83</sup> Hirsch (1994).
- <sup>84</sup> See, for example, Burt, Jones, Miller, and Moodie (1934), and Herrnstein and Murray (1994).
- <sup>85</sup> Oakes (1985 or 2005, pp. 49-50).
- <sup>86</sup> See Brantlinger (2003).
- <sup>87</sup> See, for example, Eysenck and Kamin (1981); Fischer et al. (1996); Gould (1981); Hilliard (1990); Kamin (1991); Lovaglia, Lucas, Houser, Thye, and Markovsky (1998); Nisbet (2009), and Turkheimer, Haley, Waldron, D'Onofrio, and Gottesman (2003).
- <sup>88</sup> See Mathis (2013), Tyson (2013), and Oakes (1985, 2005) for summaries of evidence as well as innovative research on tracking and its effects. The last source also summarizes and comments on "The Tracking Wars" that have erupted during the past two decades. Also see Oakes (1990); Oakes and Lipton (1990); and Slavin (1987, 1990).
- <sup>89</sup> Yee (2013).
- <sup>90</sup> Lucas (1999).
- <sup>91</sup> Gold (2002, p. 253).
- <sup>92</sup> Heyns (1978).
- <sup>93</sup> See, for example, Hayes and Grether (1983), Entwisle and Alexander (1992); Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (1977, 2000), and Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2001, 2007).
- <sup>94</sup> Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996).
- <sup>95</sup> Allington and McGill-Franzen (2009).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### THE AMERICAN CONTEXT, STRATEGIES, AND TACTICS

I end ... with a call for action. American children ... face high odds of experiencing poverty, violence, family disruption, drug addiction, and poor schooling. Proposals for new programs are consistently greeted with statements that there is no money, that the national deficit is already out of hand. Yet money is found for other crises—[bailing out our financial institutions and our endless] Middle Eastern military operations ... are two salient examples. The welfare of children is also a crisis, and we ignore it at our peril. “Children are ever the future of a society. Every child who does not function at a level commensurate with his or her possibilities, every child who is destined to make fewer contributions to society than society needs, and every child who does not take his or her place as an adult diminishes the power of that society’s future.” ... Without major changes in public policies for children, our future will be bleak.

—Aletha Huston, writing in *Children in Poverty: Child Development and Public Policy* (1991, p. 313) and quoting from F. Horowitz & M. O’Brien (1989, p. 445)

As previous chapters have made clear, the United States lags seriously behind other advanced nations in its treatment of impoverished youths; and because of the close tie between youth poverty and educational failure, the U.S. pays huge costs for this neglect in wasted lives, high rates of serious social problems, and stunted national development. Why on earth are such costs tolerated in America, and what might be done to cope with them?

This chapter seeks answers for these questions. It begins with a brief discussion of major themes in American culture, seeking to understand how these have led to the country’s present problems with youth poverty and its impact in education. It continues by discussing strategies likely to govern success when seeking to improve outlooks for impoverished American youths and their schools. And it closes with a discussion of promising tactics, based on research reviewed in earlier chapters, that can help achieve these goals.

#### THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

It is easy to identify a set of reasons that explain why progress in alleviating child poverty has been so difficult in the United States.

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They include the anti-tax and anti-government strain in our national character that has become an increasing part of our political discourse, based in part on perceptions that the government has not performed well in many areas and that money devoted to government is largely wasted. Our ideology of individualism holds that people ought to stand on their own feet and that government help undermines the habit of independence. Many unattractive behaviors are attributed to parents who are the direct beneficiaries of government benefits for children—an avoidance of work, disorderly family relations, loose sexual behavior, the feckless procreation of children the public must support, and the misspending of the money [those parents] receive for necessities on “luxuries” and “vices.”

—Barbara Bergmann (1996, p. 10)

[Within America] it’s hard to think of a more satisfying solution to poverty than education. School reform involves relatively little money and no large-scale initiatives, asks practically nothing of the nonpoor and is accompanied by the ennobling sensation that comes from expressing faith in the capacity of the poor to overcome disadvantage by themselves.

—J. Traub writing in “What No School Can Do,” an article in the *New York Times Magazine* (2000, p. 54)

Anyone who writes about major themes in American culture faces a daunting challenge. The United States is an enormous country with a unique, short-term political history that tolerates a diverse population, the accumulation of great wealth, and many competing value-and-belief systems. Key groups within America often hold antithetical views about problems facing the country, prominent Americans express discordant beliefs about conclusions to be drawn from scientific evidence or historical experiences, and American political debates are often chaotic and tend to be dominated by the interests of wealth.

Nevertheless, all is not chaos within the United States, and a host of authors, fascinated by The American Experience, have written about shared themes in its culture.<sup>1</sup> It would be nearly impossible to review the full range of insights expressed in these works, and many of those insights are not relevant to problems addressed in this book. But some authors have written insightfully about American themes bearing on youth poverty and education, and what I write now draws from their works.<sup>2</sup> Which of these themes offer insights that help us understand America’s reluctance or inability to think clearly, debate sensibly, and adopt policies that confront the country’s massive youth poverty and its dreadful educational impact? Herewith nine themes and examples that provide partial answers for these questions.

### *Individualism*

In contrast with other advanced nations, Americans more often assume that social



outcomes are produced by the actions of *individuals* and downgrade the effects of other forces involved in their creation.<sup>3</sup> This stance encourages both personal enterprise and competitiveness and justifies assigning rewards and punishments to individuals who are thought to be responsible for “successes” and “failures.” At its best, individualism promotes creativity, optimism, and a sense of efficacy among Americans. At its worse, individualism leads to ugly social philosophies, such as that of Ayn Rand, the dog-eat-dog economics of Milton Friedman, and the far-right political extremism of Tea Party adherents and their allies. And it encourages conclusions that poverty appears because poor persons suffer from negative personal traits and that educational failures result from the personal deficiencies of educators—victim-blaming notions that will not solve problems faced by impoverished youths and their educators.

Individualism is also associated with other value and belief systems in America. One of these is *personal freedom*—freedom to *do* whatever one wants (unless one’s conduct interferes “too much” with other persons or violates moral and legal constraints), and freedom *from* “unreasonable” restrictions imposed by institutions or governments. And another is the complex belief-value system of *unfettered capitalism* which allows and encourages individuals to accumulate great wealth through innovation, marketing, quasi-legal and political shenanigans, business-government “partnerships,” and the poorly compensated labor of others.

#### *Communitarianism*

But as many commentators have also reminded us, individualism has not been the only major theme dominating American culture.<sup>4</sup> Indeed many of the founding fathers were suspicious of unfettered individualism, and their writings often stressed need for a constraining belief-value system based on commitment to *communities*. This latter theme also appears over and over again within American history—in the concept of “Christian charity,” in New England town meetings, in events leading to America’s constitutional convention which created a new federal government, in reciprocal assistance common among prairie families who needed help with barn building and came together for quilting bees, in Jane Addams’ Hull House movement, the Social Gospel, the writings of John Dewey, and the professions of social work and community development, in Americans’ widespread willingness to join service clubs, support charities, and respond to needs created by environmental disasters, in creation of the country’s national park system, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the Great Society, and other political initiatives that have promoted equity, shared environmental resources, and social justice. Thus, *communitarianism* has also played a prominent role in American culture, one sometimes opposed to the dominant value of individualism, one in which poverty is more often viewed as a disaster to be remedied than as a reflection of personal flaws, one that recognizes the roles played by poverty and other forms of disadvantage in helping to generate educational failures, one that challenges narrow goals for public education.

*Adult Orientation*

Both individualism and communitarianism are largely focused on America's adults. Individualism assigns inordinate powers to *adults* as actors in public dramas who are thought to be those who create, use, and enjoy or suffer from those actions, and—particularly in the hands of far-right activists—this can lead to proposals for “solving the poverty problem” by punishing impoverished parents until they “reject welfare and decide to work for a living.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, communitarianism stresses the need for *adults* to be engaged in public debates and be willing to participate with others in collective efforts. Neither belief-value system focuses on the activities, treatment, or needs of *youths*, and this focus contrasts sharply with major themes in the cultures of other advanced countries.

France, for example, views youths as the key persons who will honor and promote French culture in the future, thus who need to be protected and appropriately socialized. Norway believes that youths should become informed and active participants in the nation's political life, and it sets up youth clubs and training camps with this goal in mind. Sporting achievements are strongly valued in Australia, and youths there are provided with dedicated athletic facilities and are encouraged to participate regularly in sports and recreation.<sup>6</sup> In sharp contrast, the chief role assigned to youths in America is that of “consumer”—of manufactured toys, fast foods, pop music, child dedicated TV and motion picture offerings, cell phones and other electronic gadgetry, and “the latest” fashionable garments—not because these products are necessarily good for youths, but rather because they generate profits for industry.<sup>7</sup> Although American adults are often deeply concerned about children in their own families, they are provided little ideological or institutional support for thinking about other youths in the nation.

*The Importance of Public Education*

Individualism and communitarianism are also alike in that each stresses the need for a widely *educated* populace if American democracy is to thrive. To work efficiently, individualism requires the presence of adults who can make thoughtful and informed choices; communitarianism demands the presence of adults who respect others and both understand and honor the traditions of collective decision making. Awareness of these needs grew out of The Enlightenment and were well understood by America's Founding Fathers who assumed that education was a *public* responsibility. (John Adams, for example, helped to write a state-supported guarantee of citizens' rights to obtain an education into the Constitution of Massachusetts, and Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were both involved in establishing Virginia's first, publicly supported, university.) So it is hardly surprising that America led other nations in setting up the world's first public primary schools whose curricula stressed both acquiring basic skills and learning the forms and traditions of representative democracy. Nor is it surprising that the U.S. pioneered other features of public education during the 19th and early 20th centuries (such as much-expanded

curricula that responded to evolving needs in the nation), that public education gradually became a Major Institution in the country (with all the strengths and problems of such organizations), and that Americans began to assume that their public education system was, of course, the “best in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

At least four forces have now brought this comforting thought under attack, however:

- *For one*, and in contrast with education practices now common in other advanced countries, the U.S. developed a *comprehensive* secondary school system in which all students were subject to enrollment and many curricular options were offered. Such a system presumably keeps the doors of opportunity open for all students, but over time it has led to resentment and discontent among affluent parents who see little reason to pay for “frivolous courses” and the costs needed to educate students who are thought to be “less talented,” “less motivated,” and often from the “wrong” ethnic or racial backgrounds.
- *For another*, and responding to serious lacks of social services in America, public education has had to take on numerous noneducative tasks. Today, the country’s public schools commonly offer free and assisted meals for low-income students; nursing, counseling, and other medical services for students and their families; “special education” programs for students with disabilities; “outreach” programs in which the needs of students’ parents are addressed directly; interschool athletic competitions; “adult education” classes for adults and senior citizens in their communities; and the like. In other advanced nations, such tasks are often funded by collateral institutions, but such burdens are paid from the core budgets of public education in the U.S., they have increased sharply in recent years, and policies requiring the funding of such noneducative tasks has generated both misunderstanding and resentment. (In fact, some Americans argue now that public education *alone* can cure poverty or other major social problems in the nation, and far-right advocates like to pretend that increases in the budgets of public schools, actually driven by noneducative costs, indicate that those schools are “failing.”)
- *For a third*, for some years the country has been besieged by hysterical press reports, based on comparative studies, which purport to show that American public education does *not* “lead the world” in achievement levels for core skills such as literacy, numeracy, and scientific knowledge. In part, these reports reflect misinterpretations of data from American schools (see Chapter Four), in part they reflect inadvertent acceptance of the industry-serving notion that these core skills are the only ones that “matter” (despite long-standing American commitments to broader goals for education), and, over time, they have generated worries about the vaunted “leadership” of America’s schools.
- *And fourth*, since the early 1980s, American education has also come under energetic and dishonest attacks from far-right forces representing the interests of super-rich individuals, ultraconservative foundations, religious

fundamentalists, racial and ethnic bigots, private schools, affluence, big business, those who hate unions, entrepreneurs who want to make money by offering private services to public schools, and ideologues who would abolish *all* public institutions.<sup>9</sup> I will have more to say about this attack in the last theme discussed below.

Taken together, forces such as these have caused Americans to become worried about their public education system, have set agendas for public debates about that system, and have generated misguided and sometimes tragic proposals and programs attempting to “reform” the system. These outcomes reflect the depth of American concerns for public education, but they have also repeatedly diverted attention away from *real* problems faced by public schools—and crucially, those associated with youth poverty and its pernicious effects.

### *Exceptionalism*

Americans also tend to assume that their country is *exceptional*, “a city on a hill,” “a beacon of light and hope among nations.” Among all countries, the U.S. is presumed to be the most energetic, richest, most moral and compassionate of nations; uniquely endowed with natural resources; the world’s leader in intellectual enterprise, science, technology, innovation, the media, and the arts; the world’s most successful military power, the only truly “safe” repository for weapons of mass destruction. Most of these beliefs are at least questionable, of course, but collectively they justify a form of chauvinism in which Americans focus largely on events in their own nation and assume that what goes on in other countries will be of little interest or irrelevant to their concerns (unless those events should intrude on American interests, of course).

Such a stance is sharply at odds with those of most other advanced nations whose interdependence with other countries is more self-evident, and this means that citizens of those nations are more likely to be aware of or to have thought more about life in other countries—and in particular, to know more about how other nations handle issues bearing on poverty, youths, and education.

As well, American exceptionalism has a second downside; since the blessed condition of the U.S. is unique, it is also likely to be envied if not resented by other peoples, hence Americans must always be vigilant and guard the country’s treasures, its borders, its accomplishments and privileges, and this can lead to knee-jerk reactions of fear and aggressiveness towards “outsiders” presumed to threaten the country and its interests. A lucid portrayal of this issue was provided by Robert Reich in his 1987 book, *Tales of a New America*, and Exhibit 7.1 provides an abridged version of his words.

As can be seen, Reich stresses that the targets of American worries about “The Mob at the Gates” have shifted over the years, and currently they are most often centered on “foreign terrorists” or “radical Islamists.” But whatever the presumed source, threats to American interests from “foreign enemies” often take precedence over pressing domestic concerns—including those of impoverished children and public education.

**Exhibit 7.1. The Mob at the Gates**

[This] mythic story is about tyranny and barbarisms that lurk “out there.” It depicts America as a beacon light of virtue in a world of darkness, a small island of freedom and democracy in a perilous sea. We are uniquely blessed, the proper model for other peoples’ aspirations, the hope of the world’s poor and oppressed. The parable gives voice to a corresponding fear: we must beware, lest the forces of darkness overwhelm us. Our liberties are fragile; our openness renders us vulnerable to exploitation or infection from beyond.

Hence our endless efforts to isolate ourselves from the rest of the globe, to contain evil forces beyond our borders, and to convey our lessons with missionary zeal to benighted outsiders .... The American amalgam of fear and aggressiveness toward “them out there” appears in countless fantasies of space explorers who triumph over alien creatures from beyond. It is found in Whig histories of the United States, and in the anti-immigration harangues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ....

In this century Woodrow Wilson grimly rallied Americans to “defeat once and for all ... the sinister forces” that rendered peace impossible; Franklin Roosevelt warned of “rotten apple” nations that spread their rot to others; Dean Acheson adopted the same metaphor to describe the Communist threat to Greece and Turkey immediately after Hitler’s war; to Eisenhower, South Vietnam was the first in a series of dominoes that might fall to communism; to John F. Kennedy it was the “the finger in the dike,” holding back the Soviet surge. The underlying lesson: We must maintain vigilance, lest dark forces over-run us.

—Robert B. Reich (1987, pp. 8-9)

*Hostility to Corrupt Elites*

For years, Americans have also been suspicious of and hostile to the “malevolence of powerful elites, be they wealthy aristocrats, rapacious business leaders, or imperious government officials.”<sup>10</sup> In prerevolutionary years these concerns were centered on the British crown and other powerful aristocrats living in European countries, and the American colonies insisted that titles of nobility be proscribed when they designed their own governments. But the colonies were also initially governed by authorities sanctioned from London, so those colonies also quickly learned to resent domestic government officials, and over the years this resentment was extended to those who were *elected* to govern whenever their actions were thought to be so nonresponsive, corrupt, or to reflect stances with which voters strongly disagreed. And when it became clear that America’s industrial revolution was generating, not only desired innovations, new products, and wealth for a few, but also pollution, grinding poverty, and urban miseries for many workers and their families, suspicion and hostility were also extended to business leaders deemed responsible for such outcomes. Today, antagonism towards governments is more likely to be expressed by The Right, while suspicion and hostility towards business leaders more often comes from The Left,

but both forms of response are widely shared by the American public, and either or both forms tend to appear during political debates over domestic agenda.

Interestingly, this “American parable differs subtly but profoundly from a superficially similar European mythology. The struggle is only occasionally and incidentally a matter of money or class. There are no workers pitted against capitalists at the heart of this American story. It is, rather, a tale of corruption, decadence, and irresponsibility among the powerful, or conspiracy against the broader public.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, along with Lord Acton, Americans tend to believe that any form of “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” a good deal of political rhetoric in the U.S. reflects depredations by powerful forces in business and government, and many of the country’s severe problems now imposed on impoverished youths and public education can, indeed, be traced to self-serving actions by powerful, well-organized, and self-serving elites. And it suggests that, as in the past, once Americans begin to think clearly about youth poverty and its dreadful effects in education, they can be mobilized to *do something* about such issues.

#### *Race and Ethnicity*

Americans are also profoundly *racist*. This is hardly surprising given the country’s early history of slavery, its viscous Civil War, and the angry reconstruction period that followed. But legal segregation, overt discrimination, and race-based violence against Blacks were also prevalent until quite recently in America, particularly in the Deep South, and these ugly practices reflected not only prejudices and ideologies, but also differences between the cultures of White and Black Americans, as well as greater affluence among the former and long-entrenched poverty among the latter. Most laws allowing discrimination and racial segregation have now been abolished, but many Americans remain hyperconscious about racial cues, some are outright bigots, and housing and educational segregation still persist in the country. In fact, racially based, discriminatory practices by real estate agents, banks and other lending agencies, as well as federal policies, have been the major forces leading to residential *ghettoization* in the U.S. which leads, in turn, to the clustering of affluent adults into urban neighborhoods or suburbs where they communicate largely with one another and assume that they bear little or no responsibility for what goes on in America’s urban (or rural) poverty-racial ghettos.<sup>12</sup>

Americans also tend to be confused about the interrelated effects of poverty and Black identity. Many thoughtful commentators have written about the latter concern, but a particularly trenchant expression of the issues was provided by Steven Shulman in 1990, and Exhibit 7.2 quotes from his text.

Not surprisingly, the myths noted by Shulman provide potent reasons to avoid even thinking about, let alone helping, impoverished American adults, and as other authors have pointed out, such myths are also applied, willy-nilly, to impoverished youths.<sup>13</sup>

### **Exhibit 7.2. American Myths About Black Poverty**

Unlike [poverty], a person's race is visible. The black poor are not simply poor. They visibly represent a set of stereotypes that support the values and sense of worth of the non-poor. In the era when racism was openly expressed, blacks were identified with laziness, promiscuity, and stupidity. Today these stereotypes are expressed in a more roundabout fashion: black poverty is blamed on welfare disincentives (that is, laziness), out-of-wedlock births (that is, promiscuity) and lack of human capital (that is, stupidity). Despite the lack of evidence supporting any of these explanations for black poverty, they persist in the academic literature as well as the popular imagination. They are values not in the instrumental sense of reinforcing positive life processes, but in the ceremonial sense of reinforcing status distinctions. It is far more comfortable to perceive black poverty as resulting from the deficiencies of the black population than to see it as the outcome of a racial hierarchy that skews the distribution of income toward whites. The former has the pleasant corollary of explaining the successes of whites as resulting from their alleged characteristics, such as hard work, self-discipline, and skills. The latter has the unpleasant connotation of discrimination that deserves to be ended but that inevitably entails equalizing the competition for a limited set of rewards. Furthermore, the former reflects and reproduces the individualistic ethos of the marketplace, while the latter calls into question capitalism's self-images of opportunity and democracy. It is no wonder that racial myths have proved so enduring. They are part and parcel of the myth of America itself.

—Steven Shulman (1990, p. 1014)

Some Americans have also responded badly to various immigrant groups—including, in turn, persons of German, Irish, Scandinavian, Italian, Eastern European, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hispanic and other extractions. In fairness, these ugly responses to immigrants have not generally been as severe as those imposed on Black Americans, and they have often been restricted to locales where concentrations of specific types of immigrants were high. But since most immigrant groups have also been impoverished, some Americans are also confused about the interrelated effects of poverty, ethnicity, and immigrancy.

#### *Guns and Violence*

Gun ownership is also far more prevalent in America than in other advanced nations, and again this reflects a complex history that is unique to the U.S. Given frontier conditions, early rural homes in America were likely to own rifles used for hunting game and for defense against wild animals and "savage Indians." These weapons were then used when the American colonies formed militias to fight their wars of independence, and an ambiguously worded "right to bear arms" clause was subsequently written into an amendment to the U.S.

Constitution. Violence and the use of personal weapons were also common in the West and in unrest preceding and responding to the country's Civil War. Enthusiasm for gun ownership is now more popular in rural areas and among hunters, gun collectors, survivalists—and now, Republicans—and the use of weapons is promoted by a noisy and politically powerful advocacy group, the *National Rifle Association*, whose deep pockets are filled with contributions from The Gun Industry.

But as Michael Moore taught us in *Bowling for Columbine*, the biggest factors now driving American enthusiasm for guns are violence and fear.<sup>14</sup> *Violence* against individuals has also had a long history in America and was used both to settle grudges in colonial times and extensively by Whites against Blacks in the Deep South and Indians in the West. Today it is greatly promoted by Hollywood films, video games, TV programs for children(!), and nightly news programs throughout the country whose implicit marketing slogan is “If it Bleeds, it Leads.” And the rate of weapon-driven urban violence is far greater in the U.S. than in other advanced countries, so the nightly media have a lot of material to work with. The result? *Fears* about violence and weapon use are now endemic in America, sales of weapons tend to spike after episodes of horrendous slaughter are displayed on American TVs, and (fuelled by gang fights over illegal drugs) personal violence and gun use are now widespread in America's poverty ghettos, imposing enormous miseries on impoverished American youths and the public schools they attend. Media portraits of American violence also tend to vilify impoverished teenagers and again distract attention from issues created by youth poverty and its educational impact.

*The Far Right, Money, Lies, and Activism*

America's ability to confront serious domestic problems has long been bedeviled by political conservatism, the machinations of wealth, racism, and constitutionally based, structural constraints, and these constraints created a “moderately conservative” ideology that was embraced by most Republicans and some Democrats during much of the 20th century.<sup>15</sup> Dominance of this ideology has recently been challenged, however, by at least four forces:

- those created when, in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act (which drove White Southern supremacists into the Republican Party);
  - those generated by demands for immediate social change and “immoral” conduct displayed by left-leaning college students in the 1960s (which offended and frightened social conservatives);
  - those induced by hyperinflation and the unexpected stagnation of the American economy in the 1970s (which aroused fiscal conservatives and prompted creation of archly conservative think tanks and propaganda mills);
- and



- those let loose in the 1980s by well-planned attacks on the efficacy and legitimacy of the Federal Congress by Newt Gingrich, then Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives.

These and related forces have now produced a new, *far-right* version of conservatism that subscribes to a radical form of individualism; believes that the quest for community and the federal government are “antithetical to the strivings of free individuals,” and is “contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime, scornful of compromise, unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science, and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”<sup>16</sup> As I have stressed, Americans who advocate far-right positions represent various interests, but far-right activities are largely bankrolled by a small, energetic, ideologically and selfishly driven set of very wealthy persons and right-wing foundations which promote their interests through massive investments in ultraconservative “think tanks” and front organizations, political activism on campuses, slanted and dishonest propaganda, talk show hosts, and both direct and hidden support for political candidates.<sup>17</sup>

This movement’s vigorous attacks on the poor and public education began in the early 1980s, and its well-financed and dishonest propaganda have created both confusion and destructive policies regarding these issues. But now, and aided by eruption of the (far-right funded) Tea Party in 2010, the movement has seized control of the Republican Party, both in the federal Congress and in a number of state houses where it has wreaked havoc during the past several years, prevented appointments of key persons to administrative and judicial posts, imposed further deprivations on needy persons, and stalled legislative actions needed to address major problems now facing the country and its states. Needless to say, the *far-right movement* does not respect the aims and values held by traditional American conservatives (let alone those held by liberal or progressive Americans), but until saner voices recover control of the Republican Party, the American electorate becomes disenchanting with that party, or innovative means are found to sideline its lunacies, political action is unlikely to appear concerning the country’s serious, domestic problems—including those associated with youths, poverty, and education.

To give an example of well-financed, far-right, antipublic education activism at work, let us trace the money trail from a major source through to a typical piece of dishonest, far-right propaganda. As it happens, one of the best-funded far-right sources, The Bradley Foundation, centered in Milwaukee, has long held interests in promoting both far-right control of Wisconsin politics and American private schools as the proper alternative to the country’s supposedly “crisis-ridden,” and “clearly failing” public education system. Regarding the latter, “Bradley has spent over \$31 million since 2001 [funding] organizations promoting education privatization, academics providing favorable pro-privatization pseudoscience, media personalities promoting the privatization agenda, and ... aggressive, pro-privatization media and lobbying efforts.”<sup>18</sup> And over this period the foundation has made major grants to at least 20 nationally based far-right front organizations that promote school vouchers and priva-

tization, including (and crucially, for our purposes) the “Barry Goldwater Institute for Public Policy Research” and the “Alliance for School Choice.”<sup>19</sup>

And what does this support generate? One answer for this question is suggested by a recent document, *Report Card on American Education*, sponsored by one of the most prominent, far-right, front organizations, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) which “might best be described as a ‘corporate bill mill’ that helps conservative state legislators become a vessel [sic] for advancing special interest legislation.”<sup>20</sup> To aid its antipublic education goals, this organization has also long sponsored a string of book-length reports supposedly evaluating the country’s public schooling, and in its latest, 18th edition, the report’s authors, Matthew Ladner and Dave Myslinski, not only recapitulate stale claims about the much-touted “failures” and “crisis” state now presumed to threaten the country’s public schools, but also claim to provide *research-based* rankings of American states “on a handful of education policies around ALEC’s agenda of free-market enterprise, limited government, and federalism that will presumably solve these supposed problems.”<sup>21</sup>

But how honest is the authors’ discussion of such issues? This question is answered in a recent review of the “Report Card,” cowritten by Matthew Lubienski and Jameson Brewer, and Exhibit 7.3 reprints, in full, their summary of this review.

### Exhibit 7.3. Review of “Report Card on American Education”

The 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the American Legislative Exchange Council’s (ALEC) *Report Card on American Education: Ranking State K-12 Performance, Progress, and Reform* draws on ratings from market-oriented advocacy groups to grade states in areas such as support for charter schools, availability of vouchers, and permissiveness for homeschooling. The authors contend that these grades are based on “high quality” research demonstrating that the policies for which they award high grades will improve education for all students. This review finds that, contrary to these claims, ALEC’s grades draw selectively from these advocacy groups to make claims that are not supported in the wider, peer-reviewed literature. In fact, the research ALEC highlights is quite shoddy and is unsuitable for supporting its recommendations. The authors’ claims of a “growing body of research” lacks citations; their grading system contradicts the testing data they report; and their data on alternative teacher research is simply wrong. Overall, ALEC’s Report Card is grounded less in research than in ideological tenets, as reflected in the high grades it assigns to states with unproven and even disproven market-based policies. The report’s purpose appears to be more about shifting control of education to private interests than in improving education.

—Christopher Lubienski & T. Jameson Brewer (2013, Summary)

As can be seen in the exhibit, the claims made in the “Report Card” were surprisingly unanchored in discernable evidence but were based, rather, on far-fight ideological tenets. This then was not a work of scholarship but rather one of profoundly dishonest propaganda. Why on earth would those who produced this

work have behaved in such a way? Would you believe that its senior author, Matthew Ladner, has recently spent time as a staff member in various far-right organizations devoted to school privation including—surprise!—the “Barry Goldwater Institute for Public Policy Research” and the “Alliance for School Choice”? (My, how the dots form a pattern.)

But do the claims of such pseudoscientific propaganda pieces have an effect in the real world of American public opinion and policy-making? Unfortunately, the answer to this question must be “yes.” Since the same claims appear from multiple sources, all too often they are picked up by uninformed press outlets, are repeated by ignorant or right-wing news commentators, and eventually creep their way into public opinion and the rhetorics and demands of far-right politicians. Meanwhile, the less well-funded, less repeated voices of honest evidence about excessive American youth poverty and its corrosive impact in education are often lost amidst the welter of dishonest but well-financed, far-right propaganda blasts that blame The Poor and attack America’s public schools. And this funding imbalance is yet another reason for American ignorance (or confusion) about the huge youth poverty education Elephant in its living room.

#### GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

Americans are accustomed to think that the primary beneficiaries of child care, income supplementation, and medical care programs are parents, and in particular, mothers, rather than children. One reason for that attitude is that most of the American programs focus on families at the bottom of the income scale. Unlike the French programs “for children,” which benefit families up and down the income scale, American programs go to the least respected members of the population, those whose behavior is regarded as the least prudent and who appear to be making the least effort to extricate themselves from poverty. (That many African-American families who receive the benefits have had the cards stacked against them by racial discrimination does not usually enter into the discussion.) In contrast to the French, who generally regard income supplements as deserved and sensible help to struggling families, Americans tend to view these programs as necessary but regrettable assistance to “people who sit in the wagon instead of helping to pull it.” ... The spotlight often plays on the deficiencies of these adults rather than on the needs of their children when American programs for child well-being are discussed.

—Barbara R. Bergmann (1996, pp. 19-20)

But let us assume that radical, far-right, political voices can be neutralized, and Americans are once again able to engage in sensible, evidence-based legislative debates about serious problems now facing the nation, which strategies are more likely to help build programs that will relieve massive youth poverty and its awful effects in American education? Answers for this question are suggested,

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not only by longstanding, cultural themes and recent events in the U.S., but also by the related experiences of other advanced nations, and I phrase some of these answers as eight strategies designed to help with the task of building programs to confront The Unacknowledged Disaster.

### *Focus on Youths*

As Barbara Bergmann suggested in the above quote, many Americans hold negative attitudes and opinions about impoverished adults. These are often fuelled by associated beliefs that the bulk of poor persons are Black or Hispanic and share negative traits with other adults in these minority groups. But American *youths* are less likely to be tarred by such negative stereotypes, so whenever possible, programs designed to address poverty and its educational effects should be focused on youths rather than adults. And this means, for example, that American programs providing poverty-relieving services for youths should be easier to establish than those that provide such services for their parents, their families, or other adults.

### *Entitlements*

*Means-tested* benefit programs are often portrayed as being more focused and less expensive, but they require assessment of eligibility (which can generate additional costs) and often lead to victim-blaming and resentment among those receiving and those paying for such benefits. So whenever possible, *entitlement-based* programs are preferable in the American context. (To illustrate, *social security* is an entitlement program and is wildly popular among Americans; whereas *Medicaid*, in contrast, is a means-tested program and is more often attacked.) Thus, for instance, if new day care and preschool facilities are to be planned for Americans, those facilities should be designed so that *all* appropriately aged youths are entitled to use them.

### *Poverty Focus*

If a means-tested benefit program is required in America, if possible it should be based on poverty rather than on race, ethnicity, or other indicators of need (however pressing). The U.S. has long been concerned about issues associated with race, ethnicity, and other indicators of need, and prejudice, discrimination, and legal battles have swirled around these indicators, so they represent “hot button issues” for many Americans. In contrast, little public attention has been given to *poverty*—the major creator of misery for American youngsters and public schools in the country—so programs designed to alleviate poverty itself are not only more likely to be effective but are also less likely to provoke needless, irrelevant opposition. To illustrate, if programs designed to alleviate high levels of student scholastic concentration are planned, those programs

should be based on poverty rather than on race, ethnicity, or other indicators of student need.

#### *Federal and State Support*

Given extensive economic ghettoization and large differences in state-level ability and/or willingness to fund social services in America, support for programs designed to deal with youth poverty and its educational effects normally should not be based on *local* support; better that support should come from *state* sources; best it should be funded at the *federal* level. To illustrate, various programs providing partial, compensatory support for underfunded schools are now provided from federal and some state sources—and at least one state, Hawaii (as well as the District of Columbia), now provide equal educational funding for all students in their jurisdictions. Programs such as these could be strengthened through various strategies—such as setting national or statewide standards for minimal support of education combined with compensatory funding for impoverished school districts.

#### *Multiple Rationales*

Given extensive, competing demands for funding and America's traditionally weak support for impoverished youths and their education, advocates should always plan to provide *multiple rationales* for programs designed to ameliorate youth poverty and its educational effects. For example, advocates for strong day care/preschool facilities should be prepared to explain how such programs not only relieve youth poverty, but also improve educational outcomes for young children, respond to the needs of those children's parents, help the economies of their local neighborhoods and the development of a corps of child development experts, and generate advantages that will accrue for the society down the road such as increased economic, scientific, and artistic productivity as well as reduced rates of crime and incarceration, drug addiction, and mental health problems.

#### *The Marketing of Evidence*

In the typical, small, advanced nation, social distances between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers tend to be minimal, and this means that when well-written reports of policy-relevant research appear, those reports often attract attention from media sources, may stimulate quick changes in local practices, and may even provide bases for political debates and innovations in national policies. But the United States is *not* a small nation, its researchers, practitioners, and policymakers tend to live in different worlds, researchers in it generate huge amounts of policy-relevant research (often expressed in technical jargon) whose findings are unlikely to appear in the public media or practitioner-oriented sources, and where political decisions are more often dominated by the interests

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of wealth and power. Thus, even though concerned researchers have an enormous advantage in American policy debates—they have the *evidence*—that evidence must be *marketed* if it is to have an impact. (To provide an example of poor marketing, many studies have appeared reporting unfortunate outcomes when graphic violence is portrayed on TV or video screens, but the bulk of this evidence has not generated media reports, and changes in violence-oriented media presentations or policy debates concerning the issue have been strikingly absent in the U.S.) Researchers normally know little about marketing, so in America this suggests long-term need for agencies whose task is to market policy-relevant research evidence bearing on youth poverty and its educational impact. Funding for such agencies should be sought from foundations and other sources committed to the welfare of young Americans and their education.

### *An Advocacy Organization*

Given the forms of American democracy, the nation's conservative traditions, and its current backlog of serious, unsolved problems, it will require a lot of time, good planning, and organized effort to focus political activities on programs designed to reduce the country's levels of youth poverty and its unwanted educational effects. And this suggests, in turn, the need for a well-financed *advocacy organization*, presumably based in the nation's capital, that can help develop and provide leadership and lobbying services for such programs. (To illustrate, in 1972 the National Organization of Manufacturers announced that it was moving its headquarters from New York City to Washington, DC, and this organization has since provided highly successful advocacy services for the interests of Big Business.) Americans seriously concerned with poverty, youths, and public education need such a "presence" in the country's Seat of Power, and professional groups representing their interests should be tapped to provide collective support for such an organization.

### *Political Leadership*

Significant changes in American public policy are also unlikely to appear without savvy political leadership, especially when those changes concern severe domestic problems in the country. This suggests need for improved, direct contacts between those generating research on youths, poverty, and education and politicians who serve both in Washington, DC and the country's state capitals. Such contacts might take several forms, but an attractive alternative might be to sponsor regular seminars concerned with specific youth poverty education topics that bring researchers, practitioners, and policymakers into direct contact. Participants in such seminars should be chosen carefully and should involve researchers who can articulate findings clearly, practitioners concerned with the issues, and policymakers with appropriate interests who have known (or potential) interests in leadership. Funding for such efforts could be provided by

teacher associations, foundations, and other advocacy groups committed to improving the lives of young Americans and their education.

*Commentary*

A common theme underlies the last three of these strategies—that simple links between youth poverty education research and political action are hard to come by in today’s America. In fairness, this thought has also occurred to other scholar-activists, and some have already begun to explore ways to improve this link. To illustrate, in 2008 the Economic Policy Institute, a major think tank concerned with income inequality, poverty, and education, sponsored a new advocacy organization, the *Broader, Bolder Approach to Education* (BBA), whose mission is to involve “scholars, practitioners, and policymakers” in joint activities promoting more sensible, poverty-sensitive reforms for public education in America. This organization has already produced a powerful review of some of the failures of far-right reforms associated with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, and I return to this review shortly.<sup>22</sup>

TACTICS FOR REDUCING YOUTH POVERTY

A great nation faces up to its shortcomings and acts to remedy them. American history is full of examples of our doing that. We ended the evil of slavery, outlawed child labor, created Social Security and Medicare to give older Americans a measure of security, guaranteed voting rights for women and African Americans and ended legal racial segregation.

Now our task and opportunity is to save our children, families, communities, and nation by ending child poverty. Let us keep our eyes on what children need to grow up healthy and productive, and not allow ourselves to be sidetracked by ever-shifting political winds or be deterred by the endless stream of excuses attempting to justify national indifference and neglect to children who are our growing edge. It will cost money to end child poverty, but ... individually and collectively we will be richer for having done so. The great undertaking of saving America’s children will save America’s soul and our future.

—Marion Wright Edelman, President of the Children’s Defense Fund, writing in an Introduction to *Wasting America’s Future* (Arloc Sherman, 1994, p. xxix)

I turn now to specific, tactical suggestions. As thoughtful readers will have noted, findings unearthed in Chapters Two through Six have implied various ways through which youth poverty could be reduced and education could be improved in America, and most of what I write below draws from these materials. I begin with tactics focused on *reducing America’s massive youth poverty*.

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Before beginning, however, a disclaimer is in order. As we know from Chapter Three, poverty in the U.S. reflects at least three forces: poor wages paid to low-income workers, a regressive tax structure, and lack of benefits for impoverished youths and their families. Although tempted, I will not discuss tactics here that focus on *salary* and *tax* issues. Such tactics are frequently discussed in other sources and would also help reduce poverty rates for American youths, of course, but adults would surely be seen as the primary beneficiaries of salary and tax proposals, and this would create needless burdens for those seeking to help youths in the U.S. Fortunately, this is less true for *benefit-based* tactics, and to the latter I now turn.

### *Cash Benefits*

Installing cash-benefit programs in the U.S. would have two obvious advantages: They would provide flexibility in that additional dollars are available to recipients which could be used, if necessary, to meet unexpected needs; and they would provide immediate relief for poverty. Advocacy tactics designed to promote four of the benefits reviewed in Chapter Three could be structured so they focus on the needs of *youths*. In addition, I also review a fifth type of cash award, first pioneered in the U.S. and discussed in Chapter Four, that would provide benefits for *families*.

*Housing awards.* As noted, half of the 22 advanced countries for which data were reviewed in Chapter Three provide cash assistance, funded through national budgets, to help with rental costs for *all* eligible, low-income families in their borders, and most other advanced countries provide such assistance in regions or states where housing costs are notoriously high. Most housing benefits are *means tested*, so larger awards are paid to families with less income and/or more children, and in some countries those allowances can be as high as 20% of average wages paid to production workers in that country. No such benefits are available at the national level in the U.S. (although in a few locales, housing benefits are provided through state or local taxes), but families that are “homeless” or cannot afford even modest housing are now attracting concern in America, and interest in this problem could be tapped to organize a “national program to eradicate homelessness” through provision of appropriate housing awards. As noted in Chapter Four, evidence indicates that such a program would generate immediate benefits for impoverished youths, and advocacy efforts could be focused on such outcomes.

*Family awards.* Chapter Three also reveals that the U.S. stands alone among the advanced nations reviewed in that it *fails* to provide universal, per-child cash assistance to families with dependent children. Most such programs involve only modest awards, but they reduce youth poverty, and most other advanced nations treat them as *entitlements*. Such a program would cost little in the U.S. and would provide significant help for youths and their families who suffer from severe



poverty, but rhetorics that would support such a program are hard to find in today's America. Some European countries justify family awards because they are thought help raise birthrates among native-born citizens, but widespread concern for a nativist birthrate that is "too low" has not (yet?) surfaced in the U.S. and would surely be viewed as anti-immigrant. A better tactic would be to point out that such a program would be a less expensive and *directly* focused way to reduce America's massive youth poverty rate, and such rhetoric would surely fly in today's America.

*Child care awards.* Three of the 22 advanced nations examined in Chapter Three—Australia, Denmark, and France—also provide universal, *means-tested* cash awards for low-income families with young children to supplement or replace missing day care and preschool facilities. Such awards can also be substantial; in France, for example, the maximum child care award can be as high as 28% of average wages paid to production workers. Most other countries, including the U.S., currently offer merely lower income tax rates for families headed by single parents, and this provides little or no help for single parents with low incomes. A true child care award program would also provide relief for impoverished American infants and toddlers, and it could easily be built into a wider effort that provided nationally funded, strong day care and preschool services (see below).

*Single-parent awards.* It is widely understood that youths in families headed by single parents (and particularly, single mothers) are likely to experience poverty, and of the 22 advanced nations tracked in Chapter Three, 10 provide cash awards for such families. The bulk of these awards are *means tested*, and larger awards are given to families with more children and less access to other income sources. In some countries these awards are also substantial and can equal more than 25% of average wages paid to production workers. Most other advanced countries, including the U.S., offer merely lower income tax rates for single parents with children, and this provides little or no help for impoverished youths. It can be argued that single-parent, cash-benefit awards might already have appeared in America were it not for far-right propaganda which feeds on American confusions between race and poverty. Be that as it may, large numbers of impoverished, single-parent families have now appeared in the U.S., and once Americans understand that such families can be of *any* color or ethnicity, strong pressure could be organized to provide cash-benefit relief for them.

*A negative income tax.* Yet another form of cash award was actually pioneered in the U.S., the negative income tax, and it also deserves discussion. As we know from Chapter Four, early in the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson declared a "War on Poverty," and as part of that "War" his administration set up several field experiments designed to see what would happen if families with inadequate incomes were provided monthly cash awards or "negative income taxes." This benefit strategy was thought of as an attractive alternative to the costly and

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“corrupting” influences of means-tested welfare payments for specific family needs, experiments concerning it continued into the early years of the Nixon presidency, and results from those experiments indicated benefits for both adults and youths in experimental families. But they were terminated abruptly when rumors began to circulate that women who received such awards more often sought divorces(!) If instituted today, negative income tax awards would require only that recipients file their normal, annual tax returns, so would be viewed as *entitlements* and would make a good deal of sense in the American context. But to make such awards palatable, Americans would have to become convinced that *family* poverty remains a serious and continuing issue for the country, and that single-parent, impoverished families can be of any color or ethnicity.

### *Noncash Benefits*

Noncash benefits put no dollars in the pockets of recipients, but some can certainly be focused on the needs of *youths*, and I review one such program below. In addition, I also discuss a second noncash benefit program now missing in the U.S., which, although focused on the needs of *all* Americans, would nevertheless generate far-ranging benefits for impoverished youths.

*Strong day care and preschool facilities.* As Chapter Three also revealed, tax-supported day care and preschool facilities vary a good deal among advanced nations, but well-funded, well-staffed facilities for preschool youngsters are already present in Scandinavia and some countries in Central and Western Europe. Such programs are not only focused on the needs of youths but also provide significant relief from poverty for low-income families. At present, the U.S. provides only one preschool program that is federally supported, Head Start, but its funding and provisions are weak, its coverage and staffing are shaky, and it remains politically controversial. Moreover, as we know from Chapter Six, high-quality preschool programs also generate greater educational success, not only for all students, but particularly for impoverished youths and others who are disadvantaged in American education. This knowledge has already led Oklahoma and a few other states to begin exploring such programs with support from state taxes. As well, federal interest in a nationwide preschool program has also begun to appear from the Obama administration, and poll data indicate widespread public support for such a program. Thus, an appropriately strong day care and preschool program would now appear to be within reach in the American context. Such a program could be structured as an *entitlement* and would offer many benefits for Americans.

*A tax-supported, universal health care system.* Although universal health care systems are not focused specifically on the needs of youths, the lack of such a system in the United States is so striking and vicious in its effects on impoverished youths that action concerning it should also be recommended. As we know from Chapter Three, *all* other advanced nations have installed such

systems, but for years the United States has limped along with an expensive, jury-rigged system that provides tax-supported coverage for a few groups but leaves the bulk of the population either to depend on the tender mercies of insurance companies and HMOs or to have no health coverage at all. The current American system provides very little help for impoverished families (and their youths), and the Patient Affordable Care Act recently enacted by Congress provides only skimpy relief for these needy people. Nor will effective relief appear until the U.S. at last adopts a tax-supported, *entitlement*-based, universal health care system. Powerful forces—representing the interests of insurance companies, HMOs, and major drug manufacturers—now stand in the way of such an action, but the media seem now to be willing to report on the outrageous woes of the country’s present health care system, and one can hope that the next wave of American health care “reform” will actually set up some type of health system in which basic health coverage is provided for *all* through federal taxes.

#### TACTICS FOR REDUCING POVERTY EFFECTS IN EDUCATION

We are aware—and over 30 years of research has consistently demonstrated—that academic achievement in U.S. schools is closely correlated with student [poverty]. To really improve ghetto children’s chances, then, in school and out, we must (in addition to pursuing school-based reform) increase their social and economic well-being and status before and while they are students. We must ultimately, therefore, eliminate poverty; we must eliminate the ghetto school by eliminating the underlying causes of ghettoization.

—Jean Anyon, writing in *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform* (1997, p. 164)

We turn, finally, to tactics that can reduce the harsh effects of poverty in American public education, again basing most of the suggestions put forth on evidence reviewed in earlier chapters,

But again, a disclaimer is in order. As was noted in Chapter Six, an immense amount of good research has appeared concerned with how to reduce problems plaguing American education, and although they cover a lot of territory, the recommendations made here focus on poverty-related issues and do not fully cover the wide range of such contributions.

#### *How Not to Proceed*

I begin, however, with a topic, *not* dealt with in Chapter Six—the effects of America’s blame-based, market-oriented “reform” programs, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Given the prominence and controversial nature of these programs, it is not surprising that a good deal of research has appeared on them during the past two decades. As we know, these programs—begun during the administration of President George W. Bush but continued during that of

President Barack Obama—have *not* responded to the country’s youth poverty and its appalling effects in education, so they simply cannot have succeeded in accomplishing their announced goals of “improving education and eliminating the achievement gap” in America. But these programs have also generated serious problems, and these problems have been revealed by good studies of their effects. Although tempted, I’ve so far avoided discussing these studies—because they have dealt with a wide variety of effects, many not directly related to problems associated with poverty.

Recently, however, an excellent review has appeared from scholars supported by *Broader, Bolder Approach to Education* that covers crucial, youth poverty-related effects of the “reforms,” and we can learn from this work. For various reasons, prominent and harsh attempts to implement the Bush/Obama “reforms” have appeared in three of the country’s major cities—Chicago, New York City, and Washington, DC—and high-profile leaders responsible for these three initiatives—Arne Duncan and Mayor Rahm Emanuel (in Chicago), Joel Klein and Mayor Michael Bloomberg (in New York City), and Michelle Rhee (in Washington, DC)—have since been touting the supposed “successes” of those programs and arguing that equivalent “reforms” should be adopted widely in the country.<sup>23</sup> Such advocacies have, in turn, prompted research concerning the *real* effects of reforms in these three cities. Building on these studies as well as their own evaluation efforts, Elaine Weiss and Dan Long have prepared a detailed survey of the claims and actual outcomes of these three “reform” efforts, and their work has appeared as a major BBA report entitled *Market-Oriented Education Reforms’ Rhetoric Trumps Reality*.<sup>24</sup>

As a rule, these “reform” efforts focused on three tactics: “test-based teacher evaluations, increased school ‘choice’ through expanded access to charter schools, and the closure of ‘failing’ and underenrolled schools,” and proponents for these actions have argued that they have and will “boost student and narrow longstanding race- and income-based achievement gaps” among students. However, the Weiss and Long report found “that the reforms delivered few [such] benefits and in some cases harmed the students they purport[ed] to help.”<sup>25</sup> In particular, the report found that:

- Test scores increased less, and achievement gaps grew more, in “reform” cities than in other urban districts.
- Reported successes for targeted students evaporated upon closer examination.
- Test-based accountability prompted churn that thinned the ranks of experienced teachers, but not necessarily bad teachers.
- School closures did not send students to better schools or save school districts money.
- Charter schools further disrupted the districts while providing mixed benefits, particularly for the highest-need students.
- Emphasis on the widely touted market-oriented reforms drew attention and resources from initiatives with greater promise.

- The reforms missed a critical factor driving achievement gaps: the influence of poverty on academic performance.
  - Real, sustained change requires strategies that are more realistic, patient, and multipronged.
- Weiss & Long (2013, Executive Summary, p. 3)

Thus, not only were these “reforms” ineffective, they actually caused *harm* in these major cities. Despite what their proponents have claimed, these “reforms”—central to efforts in these three cities and to No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top—have *failed* to accomplish their announced goals. Indeed, they have provided a veritable roadmap showing *how not to proceed* if Americans sincerely want to improve their public schools and provide a more equitable education for the country’s huge number of students who suffer from poverty and other disadvantages.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Home-Based Tactics*

So much for what doesn’t work; we turn now to evidence-based tactics that should actually *reduce* the evil effects of poverty in American education, focusing again on *youth* centered programs, and begin with those reflecting home-generated burdens that impoverished students bring with them when they enter the schoolhouse door.

*Improving housing.* As we know from Chapter Four, impoverished American youths are far more likely to live in houses that are “substandard”; that are seriously crowded, have lead-based paint on their walls, lack adequate plumbing or electrical facilities, are infested with vermin, lack adequate heating and air conditioning, or cost more than 30% of their families’ monthly incomes. Such problems place severe burdens on the backs of impoverished youths that reduce their ability to cope with education, but they can be remedied.

One way to address “substandard” housing problems would be to provide cash-based, targeted housing allowances to low-income families and, as we know from earlier in this chapter, this strategy has been pioneered in other advanced countries and might also be adopted in America. Other strategies could be targeted for specific housing problems, and one of these was also foreshadowed in Chapter Four. A school-based program could be set up that evaluates all youngsters for level of lead in their bodies together with follow-up visits to the homes of affected youngsters and tax-based assistance that defrays the costs of removing or covering lead-based paint in affected homes. (Although *means tested*, such a program could be defended on medical grounds.) Other, possibly companionate, youth centered programs could combat such problems as inadequate plumbing, poor electrical facilities, inadequate heating, and missing air conditioning, as well as vermin infestations. All such programs would make good sense in the American context but would have to be designed carefully to

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accommodate significant regional, rural/urban, and ethnic differences in housing needs and standards across the nation.

*Upgrading nutrition and food sufficiency.* Chapter Four also revealed that poor nutrition and lack of food within America's low-income families generates several types of problems for impoverished youths. Among others, those youths may suffer lifelong disabilities because their mothers experienced inadequate nutrition during their pregnancies, because those youths have correctable disabilities reflecting their current poor nutrition, and because their families cannot afford to feed them. The latter two problems are already partially addressed by America's national program that provides free- and reduced-price lunches for eligible students and by supplemental food programs that fund other meals in some urban school districts, but these programs normally do not cover nutrition during the summer months, remain controversial, and are now under attack.<sup>27</sup> One way to proceed would be to make youth nutrition a national priority and to expand national support for it within schools so that, if needed, *all* meals are supported for eligible youths on a year-round basis, but this would require an expanded, *means-tested* program that does not solve the problem of poor maternal nutrition. Another tactic would be to emulate earlier programs in which doctors wrote *prescriptions* for tax-supported food to supplement nutrition for impoverished families. If such a program were set up today, eligibility for food help would continue to be established for students (and their families) within schools, but prescriptions could then be written for appropriate food supplementation that feeds *all* within those families.)

Both of these programs could be strengthened if they were associated with tax-supported medical examinations for all students, early each school year. Such exams would provide information about *all* disabilities students experience, not only those generated by poor nutrition and hunger, but also those that are normally detected by pediatricians, dentists, and optometrists in other advanced countries—and when correctable conditions were detected for youths, *means-tested* support could be provided for youths with those needs. (Needless to say, focused health care programs for students would not be needed if America were to adopt a tax-supported, universal health care system.)

*Providing home-based educational resources.* As Chapter Four also stressed, the absence of appropriate resources in the home constitutes a major barrier for the educational success of young children. Some of these resources are tangible, and it would be relatively easy to remedy their lack through appropriate tactics. To illustrate, middle- and upper-income American families normally buy appropriate school supplies for their children, and a bustling industry serves their needs at the beginning of each school year. In contrast, students eligible for free- and reduced-price lunches come from families that cannot afford adequate nutrition, let alone school supplies, and tax-supported programs could be initiated to provide such supplies (and pay student fees, when necessary). Another resource need concerns clothing, for impoverished families are often unable to

provide their children with clothes that provide basic weather protection, let alone garments that are “stylish.” Other advanced countries “solve” the latter problem by mandating that all students wear uniforms that are standard for each school, in some countries this requirement is supplemented by grants for needy families so their children too can attend school properly attired, and the U.S. could emulate such practices.

In addition, impoverished homes may lack other, less tangible resources needed to support education—adequate study space for their children, parental time to attend meetings at schools or support their children’s homework efforts, freedom from parental stress created by the grinding burdens of poverty, and the like—and it would be harder to meet these needs without national or state programs that provided significant relief from the burdens of family poverty.

*Helping with higher education accessibility.* Although all American youths are encouraged to acquire an undergraduate degree, this action is now very expensive in the U.S. But very little financial help is provided to help defray those expenses, and this disjuncture is now foreclosing postsecondary educational opportunities for the bulk of low-income youths in the country. As Chapter Four also noted, this problem is less severe in other advanced countries where need-based aid is more widely available and higher education costs are more modest for youths who are citizens or legal residents. Shortly after World War Two, the United States Congress passed a “G.I. Bill” that provided various benefits including *entitlement-based* aid to help defray undergraduate (and postgraduate) costs for all men who had served in the armed forces. This program allowed many, many veterans from low-income homes to obtain higher degrees, and it could serve as a model for legislation that would extend such aid to all youths who were citizens or legal residents of America.

#### *Neighborhood-Based Tactics*

Chapter Five indicates that impoverished American youths bear additional, neighborhood-generated burdens when they enter the schoolhouse door, and these findings also suggest tactics that could improve their education.

*Phasing out poverty ghettos.* As we know, the U.S. tolerates urban ghettos with high concentrations of families that are impoverished, and where violence, crime, and despair are endemic. Most of these ghettos have populations that are overwhelmingly Black, Hispanic, or have recently immigrated from non-English-speaking countries, and this pattern of isolating impoverished, “minority” persons in urban ghettos has deep roots in American history, prejudice, and discrimination. Such ghettos generate serious problems for youths, their educational chances, and the schools they attend.

This does not mean that such ghettos must be tolerated; indeed, we have already encountered a good example of how one American county has taken action which, over time, has reduced its poverty ghettoization. Chapter Six

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recounts an *ex post facto* experiment, designed by Heather Schwartz, that was based on a longstanding, ghetto-discouraging policy in Montgomery County, Maryland.<sup>28</sup> This policy requires that all real estate developments in the county be designed so that a portion of their newly built homes can be rented or sold at below-market prices. As well, the county itself purchases one third of the latter homes and operates them as federally subsidized, low-rent facilities for impoverished families, and this two-pronged approach has generated an outcome in which impoverished families are scattered throughout the county. In fairness, the policy has *not* served the needs of all interested families, but it has already begun to attract attention from other suburban jurisdictions seeking ways to discourage poverty ghettoization and can serve as a model for such local efforts. It would be less useful for addressing ghettoization in America's inner cities, since the latter would not involve new housing construction but rather revamping existing housing, as well as changing ghetto-promoting laws and practices that vary substantially across the country. But to address the latter would require serious national debates about the role that is to be played by America's urban centers, the needs that must be met if those roles are played, and how to fund those needs. Since America's major cities are plagued by *many* problems, such debates are long overdue, and activists concerned with reducing poverty ghettoization could be leaders in those debates.

*Reducing violence.* Chapter Five also reveals that impoverished American youths have better educational records when at least some advantaged families live in their urban-ghetto neighborhoods, and, as William Julius Wilson has reminded us, a major force driving advantaged families out of those neighborhoods is the violence generated by gangs fighting turf wars over illegal drugs.<sup>29</sup> That violence generates astounding rates of early death and incarceration among impoverished minority youths and generates endless problems for public schools in those neighborhoods. Such problems create a clear need for tactics that will reduce the rate of violence in such neighborhoods.

Since much of America's urban violence is drug related, the country could reduce drug-related violence by programs that combine legalization of such drugs with professional, drug-related counseling for youths and medical help for those persons who become addicted to drugs. A few American states are beginning to drift in this direction by passing laws that legalize the possession of marijuana, and a number of media outlets have begun to ask whether America's current, expensive, and violent "War on Drugs" is not an obvious failure. Such initiatives could be built on to spark a national debate over illegal drug policies. Such a debate is also long overdue, for it would inevitably consider policies that should improve educational chances for impoverished youths as well as save the many lives and huge costs now wasted on America's ineffective "Drug War."

### *School-Based Tactics I—Coping With Poverty Concentration*

Poverty imposes many problems on schools, and we turn now to the first of three



sets of tactics focused on education that should improve prospects for impoverished youths and lead to enhanced, more equitable public schooling. We begin with tactics focused on student poverty concentration.

*Phasing out poverty ghettos (again).* Chapter Six tells us that student poverty concentration is largely urban based and is strongly associated with academic failure in public schools. Given that most American schools serve their immediate neighborhoods, the basic condition creating scholastic poverty concentration is the persistence of urban poverty ghettos in the country, and the key tactic for lowering that concentration would have to be phasing out those ghettos. Tactics for this purpose were discussed a few paragraphs earlier, and it is clear that eliminating such ghettos will take both time and careful effort.

*Good teaching in ghetto schools.* What might be done to address school-based problems created by *current*, ghetto-associated, student poverty concentration? One answer to this question is suggested by the experiences of inspired teachers who have found ways to provide meaningful experiences for students in high-poverty classrooms. Testimonies from such teachers have stressed the need for several, concurrent tactics: close, personal relationships with *all* students in the classroom combined with personal contacts with students' parents or guardians (often involving home visits); setting and expressing high standards for achievement for all students; expressing and enforcing standards for classroom conduct that prohibit weapons, fist fights, bullying, or other forms of violence; and creative approaches to subject matter presentation that involve clear and intriguing lecturing, one-on-one teacher-student interactions, and classroom groupings in which students with greater subject matter insights mentor and encourage their classmates. Needless to say, pursuing such tactics simultaneously places high demands on teachers, and the few schools where such tactics are promoted tend to have programs in place that recruit and reward talented teachers who are devoted to "rescuing" needy students as well as summer workshops that provide focused training for new recruits who are to teach in high-demand classroom environments. Nevertheless, this approach remains challenging, and those teachers willing to attempt it should be given both support and rewards.

*Breaking the ghetto-poverty concentration bond.* Another way to reduce problems associated with student poverty concentration is to break the bond which ties that concentration to urban poverty ghettos, and tactics for doing this are now being pioneered in a few school districts around the nation. The innovative program underway in Wake County, North Carolina, is the best known of these efforts, and Gerald Grant has provided details of its history, tactics, and effects in his inspiring book, *Hope and Despair in the American City*.<sup>30</sup>

Wake County has one major city, Raleigh, the state capital, and for historical reasons it entered the 20th century with only two school districts, one

serving that city, the other serving the rest of the county. After the Second World War, concerns about the county's schools and the county's future were voiced, and fears were raised that if the county continued to segregate its Black-urban-poverty core from its White-affluent suburbs, it would depress chances for youths who lived in the core and forfeit opportunities for economic growth. So in response to such worries, the county's two school districts voted to amalgamate, and Wake County opened its first integrated schools in 1976. From the beginning, this step required that students be *bused* from their homes to schools which, although nearby, were not strictly in their neighborhoods, and at first this busing program was designed to reduce student *racial* concentrations in specific schools. Over time, however, court decisions in the U.S. whittled away at the legitimacy of busing for racial reasons, and the Wake County school district became the first in the nation to bus students for *economic* reasons, mandating that no school in the county should enroll more than 40% of students who were eligible for federally assisted lunches.

*Busing* of Black or impoverished students was not the only tactic employed, however. Recognizing that the program also required that White students from affluent families be relocated, the school board set up attractive *magnet school programs* in many urban schools and pumped money into those schools so that White and affluent students would be attracted and could be bused to them. Concerned with student achievement levels, it also created *achievement-level quotas* for individual schools, eventually mandated that *95% of all county students should achieve at or above grade level (!)*, and set up a *Wake Leadership Academy* to train educators for key posts in the new program. Results of these tactics have been astounding. Ninety-one percent of all county students now pass tough, state-administered achievement tests in mathematics and reading; a huge 76% of all county students take SAT tests for college entrance—earning basic scores that are 40 points greater, on average, than those from students elsewhere in the country; the district's Black/White and poverty-related achievement gaps are now lower than those in *any* other of the nation's school districts; and the program is widely popular among both urban and suburban parents living in Wake County.

Partly because of the program's successes but also reflecting the attractions of North Carolina's famed "Research Triangle," families have been flooding into Wake County, and those new immigrants have included both impoverished Hispanics and affluent Whites from the nation's northern suburbs. The former have created serious, additional challenges for the Wake County district (which now enrolls more than 143,000 students), and the latter have arrived with parental memories of previous, more-segregated school districts in which their children did not have to be bused to obtain a "good" education nor attend schools where up to 40% of students are impoverished or—worse—are from minority groups they dislike or fear. Over time, discontent with the program spread in the suburbs, and in October, 2009, when candidates ran on party slates for the first time but only 8% of the electorate turned out to vote in an off-year, off-month election, well-organized, Republican voters managed to elect a bare majority of members

on the county's amalgamated school board. This far-right majority soon announced plans to *scrap* the Wake diversity program in favor of a new plan designed to stress neighborhood schools by dividing the county into "community school zones or districts," and a huge brouhaha broke out. After protests, marches, resignation of the district's superintendent and various stalling actions, a new political action committee—"Wake Up Wake"—was formed to represent the 94% of parents who were satisfied with treatment of their children under the existing program, and a new, pro-program board was chosen at the next election. Bitter feelings remained, however, and the program had clearly been damaged.

What are we to make of this history? On the one hand, this highly successful program required amalgamation of only *two* local school boards, its presence was a thorn in the side of well-organized, affluent voters, and creating programs similar to it would require, not only good will and sustained leadership, but also consolidating the multiple district boundaries that presently girdle most of America's larger cities. But on the other, it tells us that, with enough good will and sustained leadership, it is possible to *break* the bond linking American ghettoed housing and student poverty concentration, and that well-planned programs for doing so can have spectacular effects. And this optimistic, inspiring message is long overdue in today's America.

#### *School-Based Tactics II—Improving Funding and Resources for Impoverished Schools*

Next, we turn to tactics designed to increase support for schools that are now miserably funded and cannot afford basic resources needed if impoverished students are to be treated equitably.

But before considering such tactics, it is good to remind ourselves about the horrific school-funding problem in America. As we know now, the U.S. stands alone among advanced nations in that it provides *less* funding for schools serving students who suffer from impoverishment. As Chapter Six notes, so bad is this problem that, across the nation, affluent, suburban school districts will spend \$12,000 or more per year for every enrolled student, while miserably funded schools, often found in city centers, must make do with as little as \$3,000 per student. As a result, the latter schools may lack even minimal resources needed to provide basic human decency for students, let alone those required for educational success.

And lest you think I'm exaggerating this problem, please look carefully at Exhibit 7.4 which describes conditions in a badly underfunded, middle school in the San Francisco Bay area. (The description appeared originally in a class-action lawsuit, *Williams v. California*, that was filed in 2000 on behalf of California's low-income students of color, but it was excerpted and reprinted by Linda Darling-Hammond, 2013, and Exhibit 7.4 reprints the latter version.) Although this school does not represent the "typical," urban school in the U.S., it certainly displays conditions in some of the country's worst-funded schools and exhibits the heart of the country's school-funding problem. Why on earth would anyone

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expect students to achieve academic success when incarcerated in such an educational hovel?

*Abolishing inadequate funding.* As we know from Chapter Six, substantial differences in per-student funding for school districts appear both between and within individual states in America. Alleviating the former would require federal action, of course, and to the best of my knowledge, no initiative has yet surfaced that advocates such an action. In contrast, and under pressure from court decisions, a few American states have now begun tactics that provide more-equal, within-state funding for their schools.

**Exhibit 7.4. Conditions at Luther Burbank, a Miserably-Funded School**

At Luther Burbank, students cannot take textbooks home for homework in any core subject because teachers have enough textbooks for use in class only .... For homework, students must take home photocopied pages, with no accompanying text for guidance or reference, when and if their teachers have enough paper to use to make homework copies .... Luther Burbank is infested with vermin and roaches, and students routinely see mice in their classrooms. One dead rodent has remained, decomposing, in a corner of the gymnasium since the beginning of the school year. The school library is rarely open, has no librarian, and has not recently been updated. The latest version of the encyclopedia in the library was published in approximately 1988. Luther Burbank classrooms do not have computers. Computer instruction and research skills are not, therefore, part of Luther Burbank students' regular instruction. The school no longer offers any art classes for budgetary reasons .... Two of the three bathrooms at Luther Burbank are locked all day, everyday .... Students have urinated or defecated on themselves at school because they could not get into an unlocked bathroom .... When the bathrooms are not locked, they often lack toilet paper, soap, and paper towels, and the toilets frequently are clogged and overflowing .... Ceiling tiles are missing and cracked in the school gym, and school children are afraid to play games in the gym because they worry that more ceiling tiles will fall on them during their games .... The school has no air conditioning. On hot days class-room temperatures climb into the 90s. The school heating system does not work well. In winter, children often wear coats, hats, and gloves during class to keep warm .... Eleven of the 35 teachers at Luther Burbank have not yet obtained regular, non-emergency teaching credentials, and 17 of the 35 teachers only began teaching at Luther Burbank this school year.

—Linda Darling-Hammond (2013, p. 78, quoting from Williams et al. v. State of California, 2000)

To illustrate, consider the case of New Jersey.<sup>31</sup> After a mere 30 years of stalling, litigation, and *nine* court decisions declaring that the state's inequitable funding practices violated New Jersey's Constitution, in 1998 the state finally began to provide additional funding for impoverished school districts. But these additional funds were not to be used for "any old purpose," rather, they were to

be spent implementing “a new state curriculum linked to the state standards; support whole school reform; ensure early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds as well as full-day kindergarten; educate preschool teachers; reduce class sizes; invest in technology; ensure adequate facilities; and support health social services, alternative, and summer school programs to help students catch up.” In addition, an early literacy program was begun that provided reading coaches and professional development for teachers in kindergarten through third grade.<sup>32</sup>

The result? “By 2007, New Jersey had substantially increased its standing on national reading and math assessments, ranking among the top five states in all subject areas and grade levels on the NAEP and first in writing. It was also one of four states that made the most progress nationally in closing performance gaps between White, Black, and Hispanic students in fourth- and eighth-grade reading and math. By 2007, although parity had not yet been achieved, Hispanic and Black students scored between 5 and 10 points above their peers nationwide, depending on the test. The state also reduced the achievement gap for students with disabilities and for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, a New Jersey program that had provided thoughtfully planned, additional funding for impoverished school districts had created enviable outcomes, and it and similar programs from a few other states provide evidence about likely, equally impressive results if such help were available across the nation. Program details and results from these states should be widely disseminated, and federal action to help other states set up such programs is now needed.

*Improving teacher qualifications.* I turn now to tactics for improving specific, funding-related *resources* in American schools. Chapter Six reviewed evidence showing that teachers with better qualifications are more likely to generate high levels of achievement but that such teachers are less often found in underfunded schools. (Indeed, as Exhibit 7.4 suggests, underfunded schools are often staffed with young teachers with minimal qualifications and little, if any, prior classroom experience—persons who will either shortly leave teaching or move to better-supported schools.) Chapter Six also implied that several tactics might be employed for addressing this issue.

- *For one*, better student outcomes appear when teachers have had more appropriate academic preparation, and this suggests a strong need for teacher-training programs that provide information and supervised experiences focused on coping skills appropriate for impoverished students and disadvantaged schools. Most American teacher training does not have this focus today, but it is badly needed if poverty continues to debilitate the lives and education of many, many American youths.
- For another, better outcomes also appear when teachers have had more years of experience, and this implies need for programs that reduce teacher turnover or recruit experienced teachers into disadvantaged schools. Such programs might employ various tactics ranging from salary loadings and salary ladders for teaching in such settings to collective engagement in

experimental programs designed for disadvantaged students and schools and led by dedicated principals and curriculum specialists. Research suggests that both types of tactics can work, but that the latter are more effective.<sup>34</sup>

- For a third, better student results appear when teachers earn higher scores on tests of teaching skills, and this indicates need for programs that regularly assess such skills and provide rewards for teachers who do well on them and training for those who don't. Programs that assess and reward *teaching* skills are not often found in today's impoverished American schools (which must struggle, instead, with federal demands for programs that assess student *output* and unfairly punish educators and schools when poverty ruins their chances for success on the latter). Programs that assess and help to develop teaching skills are fairer and more effective, and although they normally involve examining teacher classroom behavior, their development and wider adoption should be encouraged.
- And fourth, better results also appear when teachers are paid higher salaries. Not only do such salaries generate a more-talented pool of teacher-trainees, they also help well-funded schools retain and attract more-qualified teachers. But in today's world, underfunded American schools normally do not have the wherewithal to pay high salaries to teachers. The need for programs that provide impoverished schools with compensatory funds for this purpose would be widely understood in America, and such programs should be developed and promoted.

These four suggestions certainly do not exhaust the topic of tactics useful for improving teacher qualifications in America. Chapter Seven of Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Flat World and Education* reviews tactics used in other nations for this purpose and offers the author's own suggestions for workable tactics in the U.S. Readers are encouraged to learn from this source.<sup>35</sup>

*Reducing early grade class size.* Chapter Six concluded that well-conducted programs which reduce the size of classes in the early grades generate greater educational success, not only for all students, but particularly for those who are impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged in American schools. Given widespread awareness of this effect, several American states have already begun programs to reduce class size in the early grades, and such programs have been most successful when they have mandated class sizes of 20 students or fewer, when they have made provision to increase the flow and funding of teachers for the early grades, when they have provided additional funds to allow schools to add or reconfigure their buildings for extra classroom spaces, and when those programs have included workshops to help retrain older teachers for the transition to smaller classes. Although it would require a federal initiative, a national program that mandates and helps to fund small classes in the early grades is now in order. Such a program would be viewed as an *entitlement* that benefits all early grade students, and it would likely garner widespread support in today's America.

*Strong day care and preschool facilities (again).* And although this tactic was also recommended earlier because it helps to reduce the level of family poverty, Chapter Six revealed that high-quality preschool programs generate educational success, not only for all students, but particularly for those who are impoverished or otherwise disadvantaged. Many Americans have also become aware of this effect, and as we know, several states have begun programs to provide such services, and the White House has begun an initiative that would provide national support for such programs. This initiative has a good chance for success and should be supported strongly.

### *School-Based Tactics III—Reducing Discriminatory Procedures*

Finally, a third set of problems are also faced by impoverished students in today's American schools—common discriminatory procedures that are known to reduce their educational successes. Two such procedures were reviewed in Chapter Six, and distinct tactics are in order to confront these two issues.

*Alternatives to tracking.* Extensive research confirms that American tracking procedures steer students who are disadvantaged by race, ethnicity, or social class into low-demand courses where they are confronted with lower-quality curricula, academic expectations, teachers, and support from others—and where (surprise!) their academic prospects deteriorate from year to year—and it would be astounding if such findings did not also apply to students who are impoverished. Pressures for tracking are likely to persist in the U.S. as long as the country remains committed to comprehensive public high schools and affluent parents control most of its school boards, but these pressures can be countered by evidence showing, not only that disadvantaged youths suffer badly from tracking, but also that advantaged youths are not hurt when tracking is abolished. In response to this information, “lighthouse” schools in various corners of the nation have now set up instructional programs where all classes are de-tracking, and results from these programs are impressive.<sup>36</sup> Such programs provide models for what good de-tracking programs might look like, but pressure to retain tracking is strong in America, and wide distribution of research-based knowledge about the effects of tracking and de-tracking is now needed.

*Coping with the long hot summer.* Substantial evidence also indicates that the long summer “break” in the American academic year is associated with reduction in academic achievement among primary students, that this effect is worse for students from impoverished homes (whose parents are less able to provide supplemental support for summer learning), and that the effect is weaker in other advanced nations with shorter summer holidays. Knowledge about this effect has also spread widely among American educators, and a number of school districts have begun trial programs to deal with it. Those programs feature various tactics ranging from summer school sessions for impoverished youths, to book-loaning plans, and summer “enrichment” opportunities for youths (and sometimes their

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families) focused on music, theater, and the arts. Initial results from such programs have been positive indeed, and these and related tactics should be pursued vigorously. Many school districts cannot afford such programs, however, so to solve the problem fully would require supplemental funding from state or federal sources.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Yet one more recommendation is needed that is associated with a major American cultural theme. As we know, commitment to broad educational goals has long been present in the U.S. From their beginnings, public schools in America were asked not only to provide instruction in “The Three Rs,” but also to prepare students for thoughtful participation in a democracy (and this latter goal has *not* been assessed in comparative studies).<sup>37</sup> Over the years, American schools have also expanded their core curricula to include *many* different subjects—literature and history, civics, hygiene and psychology, foreign languages, music, theater, and the arts, for example—and American high schools now offer instruction in a host of career-related subjects ranging from typing and auto mechanics to computer programming, ballet dancing, and flower arranging. In other advanced countries, subjects such as these latter are often taught in nonacademic secondary schools whose students have failed to pass gateway, academic exams, but Americans are committed to “comprehensive” high schools in which many subjects are offered and students can sample various interests and career lines. And because institutions that provide collateral support for youths are largely missing in the U.S., American schools typically provide additional nonacademic services for students—such as athletic programs that provide entry into professional sports, driving instruction, free meals for students from low-income homes, nursing services, and community outreach programs. Thus, curricula in American schools are far broader than those typically undertaken in other advanced countries (and this difference has also *not* been assessed in comparative studies).

Why then is the U.S. so often pilloried when comparative research fails to show that it leads the world in such core subjects as native language acquisition, mathematics, and science when other “competitor nations” often feature narrower curricula that focus only on these subjects? One answer to this question is suggested by incessant corporate pressure in America which stresses the need to upgrade standards in these core subjects, hence to begin appropriate training for more American scientists and engineers who are thought to be needed if the country is to maintain its “leadership”—pressure that is oblivious to the needs of impoverished students, of course. But if Americans are truly committed to broad goals for their educational system, they should recognize this pressure and respond to it by stressing companionate needs for a more inclusive education system that provides not only core instruction but also equity for all students and access to a broad range of academic subjects, career paths, civic responsibility, democratic leadership, health information, social awareness, opportunities to



explore the arts, humanities, hobbies, and sports—and, if needed, supportive services. And this suggests, in turn, that the country should now begin serious *national* debates concerning the goals Americans want for youths of the nation and how best to structure their educational system and collateral institutions to meet those goals.

Which brings me back to major concerns stressed throughout this book. America is currently afflicted by a *huge* Elephant in its living room—a massive, unacknowledged disaster that ruins lives and debilitates education for millions of the nation’s youths. Research concerning the nature and extent of that catastrophe has been reviewed throughout earlier chapters, and that research reveals that, in America, millions of impoverished youths and those charged with educating them are presently being given monstrously unfair, raw deals. But such conditions need not be tolerated. The U.S. is still a country with vast stores of good will and high aspirations, where debates concerning sensitive issues are tolerated and free speech is encouraged, and where democratic political processes needed to solve pressing problems may yet be restored. And—as this chapter has suggested—research points ways for understanding and coping with this massive calamity. The strategies and tactics reviewed in this chapter will require hard, dedicated, and sustained effort, but they *are* doable, and this should give hope to all concerned Americans. The goal of a society where no youth is impoverished and no school must struggle with underfunding, punishment, and inequity may be distant goals, but a few, evidence-based, efforts leading towards these goals have already begun with spectacular success. It is now time to build on these efforts with a national commitment to dispel the Elephant and confront *The Unacknowledged Disaster*.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Good insights about themes in American culture can be found in writings authored by some of the country’s Founding Fathers, among them John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. However, most scholars credit Alexis de Tocqueville with producing the first, broad-gage description of American culture in his two-volume work, *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840).
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bellah, Madsen, and Sullivan (2008), various chapters in Biddle (2001), Books (2004), Chomsky (2000), Dewey (1900), Dionne (2013), Edelman (1994), Frank (2004), Grant (2009), Hacker and Pierson (2010), Huston (1991), Kantor and Lowe (2013), Katz (1986/1996, 1989, 1995), Mann and Ornstein (2012), Pizzigati (2012), Reich (1987), Spring (1985, 1986), Tyack (1974), and Wilson (1987, 1993, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> For works that discuss individualism in America, consult Albelda and Tilly (1997), Bellah, Madsen, and Sullivan (2008), Dionne (2013), Glass & Rud (2012), Kluegel and Smith (1986), and Reich (1987). Feather (1974) provides comparative evidence showing that individual explanations for success and failure are more prominent in America than in another advanced nation—Australia.
- <sup>4</sup> For general works discussing communitarianism, consult Dionne (2013), Etzioni (1993), Glass and Rud (2012), Nisbet (2009), and Selznick (2002).
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Bergmann (1996, pp. 19-20, 117).
- <sup>6</sup> Biddle, Bank, Anderson, Keats, and Keats (1981).
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Finkelstein, Reem, and Doner (1998).
- <sup>8</sup> See Spring (1985, 1986) and especially Tyack (1974).

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- <sup>9</sup> See Berliner and Biddle (1995).
- <sup>10</sup> See Reich (1987, p. 12).
- <sup>11</sup> This quote again comes from Reich (1987, p. 12).
- <sup>12</sup> For good discussions of American ghettoization and its effects, consult Anyon (1997) and Bishop and Cushing (2009).
- <sup>13</sup> This point is made by Bergmann (1996, pp. 10-11), for example.
- <sup>14</sup> Moore (2002).
- <sup>15</sup> For discussions of American conservatism, consult Nash (1976) and Sombart (1906/1976). Hacker and Pierson (2010) provide a good discussion of the machinations of wealth. Dionne (2013) cogently describes structural problems in American politics.
- <sup>16</sup> The quotes are from Mann and Ornstein (2012, Introduction). Also consult Dionne (2013) and Hacker and Pierson (2010).
- <sup>17</sup> In fairness, my account here stresses the recent efflorescence of far-right activism in America, but far-right voices of extremism and unreason have also long been present in the country (see McGirr, 2002 and especially Lipset & Raab, 1978). As well, a narrower view of the far right may be found in Berliner and Biddle (1995, pp. 133-135), but far-right activism is now better financed, is better organized, and has a far wider scope than was the case two decades ago.
- <sup>18</sup> One Wisconsin Now (2013, p. 2).
- <sup>19</sup> One Wisconsin Now (2013, p. 4).
- <sup>20</sup> The quote describing ALEC is from Fischer (2013, p. 26). To read the latest ALEC “Report Card,” consult Ladner and Myslinski (2013).
- <sup>21</sup> Lubienski and Brewer (2013, p. 1).
- <sup>22</sup> To access the BBA’s full mission statement, consult Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (2008). The review to which I refer appears in Weiss and Long (2013).
- <sup>23</sup> The Chicago program was begun when Arne Duncan was Chief Executive Officer of Chicago Public Schools but has been continued under the leadership of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. (Emanuel was formerly Chief of Staff in the Obama White House, and Duncan is now Secretary of Education in the Obama administration.) The New York City program was begun by Joel Klein, then Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education, but it has since been continued by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The Washington, DC program was begun under the leadership of Michelle Rhee, then Chancellor of Washington, DC Public Schools.
- <sup>24</sup> Weiss and Long (2013).
- <sup>25</sup> Both quotes are from Weiss and Long (2013, Executive Summary, p. 3).
- <sup>26</sup> Note that an excellent book has just appeared from Diane Ravitch entitled *Reign of Error* (2013) that lists and discusses the roles played by major persons and organizations advancing far-right agenda designed to weaken public education and promote private schools, reviews errant claims that are issued by these sources, explores the actual effects of their efforts, and advances alternative options for supporting and improving public education for *all* students. Since this work covers some of the same issues as those addressed in this book and provides additional corroborative details, concerned readers are urged to read and learn from it.
- <sup>27</sup> As I write, the U.S. Senate has passed a “compromise” version of this year’s farm-support bill that provides support for large agri-businesses but slashes funds for school lunches, but even its reduced benefit provisions seem to be too much for House Republicans, who have proposed an alternative bill that eliminates food stamps for impoverished families!
- <sup>28</sup> See again Schwartz (2010).
- <sup>29</sup> Wilson (1987, 1996).
- <sup>30</sup> Grant (2009). Details I cite about the program and its history come from this source.
- <sup>31</sup> Detailed descriptions of the history, features, and effects of the New Jersey program are given in Darling-Hammond (2010, pp. 122-130; and 2013, pp. 96-97), and I have based my presentation on these sources.
- <sup>32</sup> Darling-Hammond (2013, p. 96).
- <sup>33</sup> Darling-Hammond (2013, p. 97).
- <sup>34</sup> Darling-Hammond (2010, pp. 220-222).
- <sup>35</sup> Darling-Hammond (2010). Details of such efforts in other advanced nations may also be found in an excellently researched recent book edited by Marc Tucker (2011), but readers should also be warned that the latter work overreaches when stating its conclusions (see Biddle, 2012).

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<sup>36</sup> See Tyson (2013), among others.

<sup>37</sup> See Levin (2013) for an insightful discussion of this issue.

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