

Children in Poverty: Implications for Research, Public Policy

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Approximately 20 percent of US children under the age of six live in poverty, the highest rate of all developed countries. What are the effects and outcomes of children who are raised in poverty? What are some of the ways in which low income may directly affect children's development? Of the many programs implemented to try and eradicate poverty, which have been successful?

These are some of the questions APS Fellow and Charter Member Jeanne Brooks-Gunn addressed in her research on children in poverty and the direct public policy implications of poverty. Brooks-Gunn received the APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award and delivered her award address at the Annual APS Convention in Atlanta.

Brooks-Gunn, a developmental psychologist at Columbia University, Teachers College, is widely known for her collaborative research with economists, sociologists, demographers, epidemiologists, pediatricians, and reproductive endocrinologists on national survey studies, large scale longitudinal studies, and local experimental studies.

One of the first questions Brooks-Gunn investigated was "How early do the effects of poverty affect children?" The answer – very early. She looked at the effects of poverty on IQ scores, and when controlling for other socio-demographic characteristics, found a five-point IQ difference by age three. She also found that family income has a stronger effect on school performance in childhood than in adolescence.

Brooks-Gunn said economists studying poverty frequently refer to a theory called Selection Bias, arguing that money really might not matter at all because "families who are poor are different from the start." To test this argument, Brooks-Gunn did a sibling analysis looking at families who had different incomes when different children were born. She looked at the timing of the income change to see if it mattered when the family was poor. The analysis showed that "being poor in the first four years of life had more of an impact on high school graduation rates than being poor in childhood or early adolescence did."

"It's difficult to alter the trajectory of poor kids who enter school with low scores," she said. As a developmental psychologist, these findings were very important to Brooks-Gunn, but they were very surprising to the economists she worked with, who never expected to find an early childhood effect.

Brooks-Gunn said some psychologists and sociologists have formed a theory to examine how poverty might influence children. The Family Stress Model asserts that poverty affects children through its trickle-down effect on the family. For example, poor parents might be more likely to suffer from depression and therefore less responsive to their children's needs, perhaps even less supportive and more punitive. This, in turn, affects the children's outcomes.

Economists, on the other hand, have developed a Resource Model, which looks at what money can buy, and how this affects children. According to Brooks-Gunn, they are not as interested in effective parenting skills, but the materials parents can buy, such as toys and educational playthings to improve a child's ability to learn.

Brooks-Gunn tested these two models and found that for a child's cognitive development, the availability of learning stimulants mattered much more, supporting the Resource Model theory. Yet when she looked at school behavior, the Family Stress Model played a bigger role.

Brooks-Gunn also looked at how a change in income level can alter the trajectory. In two yet-to-be published studies, she found that ascending family status during the elementary school years does make a positive difference, though completely overcoming the effects of poverty at a young age seems almost impossible.

Through her research on children in poverty, Brooks-Gunn has shown that the detrimental effects of poverty on child development start at a very early age and do not change over time. Her experimental studies have also shown firm evidence that parental income and parenting skills are very influential in children's outcomes, proving that "parents do matter."

Editor's Note: Coverage of other award addresses at the APS Annual Convention will continue with Susan Carey in October and Anne Treisman in November. Sheldon Cohen's James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award Address appeared in August.