

02-09-2022

Introduction and Overview: Intergenerational Mobility in the Modern Era in
Intergenerational Mobility: How Gender, Race, and Family Structure Affect Adult Outcomes

Jean Kimmel, Editor

Western Michigan

University

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.upjohn.org/up_press



Part of the [Income Distribution Commons](#), and the [Social Welfare Commons](#)

Citation

Kimmel, Jean. 2021. "Introduction and Overview: Intergenerational Mobility in the Modern Era." In *Intergenerational Mobility: How Gender, Race, and Family Structure Affect Adult Outcomes*, Jean Kimmel, ed. Kalamazoo, MI: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, pp. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.17848/978088099.Ch1>

This title is brought to you by the Upjohn Institute. For more information, please contact repository@upjohn.org.

Intergenerational Mobility

**How Gender, Race, and Family
Structure Affect Adult Outcomes**

Jean Kimmel
Editor

2021

W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research
Kalamazoo, Michigan

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kimmel, Jean, editor.

Title: Intergenerational mobility : how gender, race, and family structure affect adult outcomes / Jean Kimmel, editor.

Description: Kalamazoo, Michigan : W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Summary: "This volume presents a complex portrait of the interrelationships among parents' marital status and education, child gender, and the nature and success of children's transitions into adulthood. The first three chapters focus on differences in parents' investments in their children, while the final three chapters focus directly on intergenerational income mobility"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021035853 (print) | LCCN 2021035854 (ebook) | ISBN 9780880996785 (paperback) | ISBN 9780880996808 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Social mobility. | Child development. | Families—Economic aspects.

Classification: LCC HT612 .I58 2022 (print) | LCC HT612 (ebook) | DDC 305.5/13—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035853>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035854>

© 2021

W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research
300 S. Westnedge Avenue
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49007-4686

The facts presented in this study and the observations and viewpoints expressed are the sole responsibility of the authors. They do not necessarily represent positions of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

Cover design by Carol A.S. Derks.

Index prepared by Diane Worden.

Printed in the United States of America.

Printed on recycled paper.

1

Introduction and Overview

Intergenerational Mobility in the Modern Era

Jean Kimmel

Western Michigan University

There is a growing literature examining the decline in labor market status experienced by lesser-educated men in the past half century. Despite workplace advances in automation and rising real wages for most workers during much of this period, lesser-educated men have experienced declining employment rates and real wages, along with declining marriage rates. At the same time, intergenerational mobility has waned, and there is growing concern that achieving a comfortable middle-class lifestyle has become unattainable for those Americans not born into privilege. Of particular concern, and a key focus of this edited volume, is that linkages between labor market and marriage declines are serving to exacerbate inequality due to a potentially lifelong burden on the children, particularly males, who do not grow up in stable, two-parent households. These burdens experienced during childhood seem to hinder both future economic independence and marriage probability, thereby contributing to an ever-worsening gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” in our society. Autor and Wasserman (2013) argue that the social and economic problems associated with the labor market decline for low-skilled men are exacerbated because low-income children are becoming increasingly likely to grow up without fathers in the household, a family structure that confers, on average, disadvantage to these children that is greater for male children.

The inspiration for this Sichel Series was drawn from the narrative that there is a gendered disadvantage associated with being raised by a single parent, specifically that boys suffer more from disadvantaged family structures than do girls. Of most concern is the potential intergenerational impacts—namely, that these struggling men are less

likely to become financially independent adults and less likely to marry the mothers of their children, leading to more children being raised by unmarried mothers.

This volume includes written versions of all six public lectures from the 2019–2020 Sichel Series. The first three chapters focus on differences in parents' investments in their children, while the final three chapters focus directly on intergenerational income mobility.

Chapter 2, written by Rachel Connelly and Jean Kimmel, is titled "A Comparison of U.S. Parents' Time with Children by Child Gender and Family Structure." The authors begin by discussing Autor and Wasserman (2013), who paint a concerning picture of a gendered intergenerational connection in economic status that exacerbates the disadvantage experienced by children who grow up in single-mother families. One element of this narrative is the presumption of a gendered single parent disadvantage that the authors suggest could be explained in part by single mothers' spending more time with their daughters than their sons. Connelly and Kimmel focus their empirical research on measuring parenting time input to determine if it varies by child gender and parents' marital status. Their chapter attempts to answer two related questions: 1) Do boy children raised by single mothers receive less parenting time than female children raised in similar family circumstances, and 2) Is there a child gender difference in parenting time for children residing with their married parents? The authors use regression-based methods in order to control relevant and possibly confounding factors, such as parents' education and children's ages.

Connelly and Kimmel's chapter includes an expansive review of the literature focusing on the challenges faced by children who grow up in single-mother families. Most relevant, Lundberg (2005) presents a conceptual framework to explain why parenting behavior may vary by child gender. She explains that the two basic sources of these differences by child gender are systemic bias by gender in the utility that parents receive (or believe they may receive) from parenting boys versus girls and cost differences associated with raising boys versus girls. Another possible explanation is that girls may simply be easier to manage than boys, particularly at younger ages. Lundberg, McLanahan, and Rose (2007) document that married fathers of both sons and daughters devote more time to their sons than to their daughters, and that the daughter advantage in single mothers' parenting time is a greater relative advan-

tage (compared to time with their sons) than the daughter advantage seen for married mothers.

As Connelly and Kimmel explain, there is a theoretical basis within the economics literature for the presumption that parental time inputs influence children's development. As described in the chapter, economists have provided the framework to explain that differential parental time inputs may explain variation in adult outcomes. However, the question of whether there are actually differences by child gender in the time that parents spend with their children (and whether this gender gap varies by parents' marital status) is an empirical question.

Connelly and Kimmel use data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) for the years 2003 through 2017 and examine parenting time constructed with two separate ATUS measures: primary child care time and time engaged in any activity in which children are present. As Connelly and Kimmel explain, these ATUS data are best suited for the task of the chapter. The empirical strategy in the chapter is three-fold: comparison of means, regression that permits controlling both parent and child characteristics, and then using the regression results to construct predicted time use measures for a "representative" person. Connelly and Kimmel describe three main findings. First, parents of preschool children devote approximately equal time to their sons and daughters. Second, there are large differences in the time that parents spend with their teenaged children, based on child gender and parents' marital status. Mothers, both married and single, spend more time with their teenage girls, while fathers, both married and single, spend more time with their (cohabiting) teenage boys. Third, focusing on race, there are only small differences in primary child caregiving time between Blacks and non-Blacks in similar family situations, and there are no substantive differences in the existence, size, or direction of the child gender gap. The results presented by Connelly and Kimmel suggest that if male children suffer a greater single-mother disadvantage than female children, the cause is not differences in parenting time. Perhaps boys are more vulnerable to family stress, or maybe boys actually need more parenting time than girls at young ages.

Chapter 3 is titled "Behavioral Insights, Parental Decision Making, and Investments in Children's Development," by Ariel Kalil and Susan Mayer. The authors begin by documenting weak economic mobility in the United States. As they note, about half of children raised in the

bottom quintile of the income distribution will remain in this quintile when they reach adulthood, and 70 percent remain in the bottom half of the income distribution. The authors explain that parenting styles play a substantial role in influencing child outcomes. They suggest that “applying behavioral science to the study of parenting can potentially yield new insight into why parents make (or fail to make) decisions to spend time, money, attention, or affection promoting their children’s development and why these decisions are likely to differ by parental advantage. The assumption we make is that if advantaged and disadvantaged parents made equally optimal parenting decisions, differences in future academic and financial outcomes of their children would also narrow, and intergenerational mobility would increase” (p. 84).

Kalil and Mayer explain that the most common theories used to explain intergenerational mobility fail to provide adequate explanation for the widely acknowledged correlation between child and adult outcomes. Those explanations rely on measures of parent advantage based on economic or social factors. However, the link between economic advantage and child outcomes is weak, and there is little evidence that supplementing disadvantaged parents’ income influences child outcomes to any substantive degree.

One reason the traditional approaches fail to adequately explain the persistence of disadvantage, according to Kalil and Mayer, is that so much of children’s critical human capital development occurs in the first few years of life, before even starting formal schooling, and before differences in parental economic resources could play a meaningful role in passing on parental advantage to children. The authors suggest that there may be systematic differences in parents’ interactions with their children that may be playing a meaningful role in their development. Understanding the sources of these differences could inform policy that might increase intergenerational mobility.

The authors note that empirical evidence shows no meaningful gap between advantaged and disadvantaged parents in their understanding of what is important for their children, and most parents seem to have access to the resources and time needed to implement these goals. However, disadvantaged parents are less likely to follow through and actually do the things with their children that they believe are important. Drawing from the relatively new field of behavioral economics, the authors assert that these differences are driven by cognitive biases that

differ, on average, by the degree of parental disadvantage. The three biases described in this chapter are present bias, attribution bias, and automacity. According to Kalil and Mayer, narrowing this gap will also narrow the gap in outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged parents. By gaining a better understanding of how these biases might influence parents' decision making, behavioral tools could be developed to help narrow the gap between aspirational and actual parenting.

Present bias, also known as hyperbolic discounting, describes the tendency to overweight the present over the future and can result in less willingness to delay gratification. Parents whose decisions suffer from excessive present bias will be less likely to engage in activities with their children that have future payoffs but little immediate benefit. Attribution bias involves mistakes parents make when trying to understand their children's behavior, making it more difficult for parents to modify misbehavior or encourage better choices.

The third type of cognitive bias Kalil and Mayer describe is what they call automacity—the spontaneity with which many parenting decisions are made. This bias arises from the fact that many daily parenting decisions that are important for children's longer-term development are made quickly, automatically, instead of deliberately. Automacity bias can be difficult to correct because it results from learned behavior that has become habit. The authors suggest that automacity in parenting may be more likely to produce ineffective automatic responses with disadvantaged parents.

Kalil and Mayer devote the remainder of their chapter to descriptions of local, small-scale interventions designed by the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab at the University of Chicago to improve parenting by mitigating cognitive biases in parenting. These studies were implemented with experimental design (including treatment and control groups) to permit rigorous study of their impacts. The Parents and Children Together Study targets families with children participating in Head Start with a behaviorally informed intervention to increase the time that parents read with their children. As part of the process to design a meaningful program, extensive surveying of parents was undertaken in advance, revealing that the parents understood the importance of reading to their children and confirming that they had access to appropriate reading material. The researchers designing the intervention hypothesized that parents were struggling to follow through on

their own beliefs due to “present bias,” and therefore reminders about reading and specific goal setting were incorporated to assist parents in meeting their own goals with their children. Evaluation of program impacts revealed that the intervention produced meaningful increases in reading with children for those parents who had been, prior to the intervention, falling short of their own desired reading goals. Importantly, the cost of this intervention was relatively low, suggesting that it is feasible to implement these sorts of behaviorally based interventions.

A second example of a behavioral intervention described by the authors is a program called Show Up to Grow Up (SUGU), which was an intervention designed to improve attendance in Chicago-area preschool programs. Chronic absence and lateness can contribute to children’s failing to develop the behavioral skills necessary for kindergarten success, and one problem identified by the researchers can be described as “inaccurate beliefs.” Parents tend to underestimate both the number of days their own children have been absent and their children’s absences relative to that of other children. Another aspect of inaccurate beliefs that this program was designed to address is the mistaken impression of some parents that preschool is not important for their children’s development. The SUGU program adopted an approach in which parents would receive text messages describing what their children were learning in school, serving both to inform the parents about what has been going on in the classroom and to emphasize that substantive activity occurs daily and should not be missed without good cause. Texts also were sent to remind parents about attendance and absences. Evaluation of the SUGU program showed that the program reduced chronic absences by 9.3 percentage points, with a smaller impact on increased attendance days. The biggest impacts were seen for children whose parents who had expressed, at the start of the study, less concern about absences.

Chapter 3 provides convincing evidence that disadvantaged children could be beneficiaries of the adoption of interventions informed by behavioral science. By identifying parents’ cognitive biases that may exacerbate preexisting inequalities experienced by disadvantaged children, and designing thoughtful, low-cost interventions designed to nudge behavior in positive directions, child development in the first few years of life could be improved, and disadvantaged children could enter kindergarten on a more equal footing with children from more advan-

taged backgrounds. These interventions could lead to improvements in intergenerational mobility.

Chapter 4, “Gender Differences in (Some) Formative Inputs to Child Development,” is written by Michael Baker. He begins with the fundamental observation that early childhood environmental factors play an important role in child development and help determine adult outcomes. The more favorable these environmental factors, the stronger the opportunity for successful human capital development and the better these adult outcomes. He notes that some previous evidence suggests that parenting time may vary by child gender.

Given what has already been cited about differences by gender in parents’ time and interactions with children, Baker examines gender differences at the earliest stage of life. As Baker explains, the bulk of the existing empirical research examining the impact of early life environmental factors has focused on socioeconomic status, given its close association with the average quality of these early life factors. Baker extends this research to examine gender, motivated by the argument that gender differences that seem to emerge later in life may be linked to very early gender differences. Baker examines four such early life factors: medical care at birth for low birth weight (LBW) newborns, breastfeeding, maternal depression, and differential parenting style. He relies on a variety of different data sources for both the United States and Canada. Wherever possible, to be comfortable assuming that child gender is randomly assigned, he focuses on first-born children.

Baker begins his empirical analyses with an examination of gender differences in the need for and receipt of medical care upon birth for LBW newborns. Particularly for very low birth weight (VLBW) male children, providing additional care (as measured via hospital costs and hospital length of stay) improves survival rates as well as improved child development. Male LBW and VLBW newborns experience somewhat lower survival rates than comparable female newborns, with contributory factors being higher rates of sudden infant death syndrome deaths and respiratory system-related deaths. Baker’s examination of medical interventions for at-risk newborns shows that interventions, on the margin, matter more for male VLBW newborns, suggesting that reallocating medical resources (or providing extra resources) towards VLBW males may be beneficial. He suggests that the medical intervention guidelines currently based on a single threshold for VLBW new-

borns might be modified to produce separate thresholds for male and female newborns.

Next, Baker examines the child gender difference in the incidence and duration of breastfeeding, an environmental factor associated with (somewhat minor) positive benefits. His data and empirical analyses reveal that while male and female newborns are breastfed at the same rate, female babies are breastfed slightly longer than males, with a very small difference of a handful of days at most.

Baker's empirical analyses continue with an examination of gender differences in parenting style that includes two elements: new mothers' mental state and the nature of parent-child interactions. Interestingly, his results show that mothers of newborn boys suffer higher rates of maternal depression than mothers of newborn girls. Although his research cannot identify the cause(s) of this newborn gender difference in maternal depression rates, Baker notes that it is possible that mothers' bodies experience a greater inflammatory response to male fetuses. Regardless of the cause, maternal depression may impact the mother-newborn interaction and with maternal depression rates that vary by the newborn's gender, male newborn babies may experience reduced quality mothering very early in life. The final early life intervention that Baker examines is the nature of the parent-child interaction. Canadian survey data reveal that, on average, boys are considered more difficult and that the boy child-parent interaction is more confrontational. It is not possible to know the source of these gendered parent-child interaction patterns, but one could speculate that it arises from multiple factors that could include gender differences in child behavior or maternal mental status.

Baker concludes that his results "paint a picture of male disadvantage" in the outcomes that he studies, a disadvantage that may place boys on a different life trajectory than girls. These carefully documented gender differences speak to the possibility of gender differences in opportunity and economic mobility that arise very early in life but could carry lifetime implications.

The final three chapters of this volume focus specifically on inter-generational income mobility. Chapter 5, "Household Structure and Socioeconomic Mobility: The Role of Mothers," is written by Sarah Kroeger.

Kroeger examines the intergenerational link between mothers and their daughters. While there has been a good bit of previous research examining intergenerational mobility through connections between fathers and sons, there has been little corresponding research focusing on mothers and their daughters. Her analysis focuses on the relationship between mothers' marital status and education and their adult daughters' outcomes.

The chapter begins with a summary of the relationship between maternal marital status and child outcomes, focusing on both the theory underlying this relationship and empirical evidence. Marital status is closely linked to household income, making it difficult to disentangle the individual, direct effects of marital status versus family income (and possibly other related factors) on children. Kroeger explains that it is important to understand the mechanisms by which marital status and income interact to influence child outcomes because single motherhood is becoming more common, particularly for lesser-educated women. If there is an interaction between marital status and economic status on children's outcomes, this could further widen gaps over time in income, education, and health.

As Paula Fomby notes in Chapter 7, there has been substantial evolution in family structure over time in the United States. In 1960, nearly three-fourths of children grew up with two married parents in their first marriage, while only 9 percent lived with a single parent. Just over half a century later, less than half of children were residing with two married parents, while over a quarter were living with a single parent. The percentage of all births to an unmarried woman increased from 5.3 percent to nearly 40 percent over the same time period. As Kroeger explains, the rise in single motherhood is attributable to a change in marriage patterns, not a change in underlying fertility behavior.

Kroeger carefully ties her research on the link between single mothers' circumstances and their children's adult outcomes to the existing literature on intergenerational economic mobility. Although the specific mechanisms are unclear (as Fomby explains in her chapter), the link between maternal marital status and child outcomes is quite strong, with these children faring less well on any number of outcome measures. As one example, children of single mothers are three times more likely to live in poverty as adults compared to children who grew up with two married parents. However, if the single parent family structure

were the key causal factor, then we would expect to see increases in child poverty consistent with the increase in single parent families; yet, this is not seen in the time trend data. Additionally, were single motherhood the key, we would see comparable child outcomes for all single mothers, without differences by the mother's education. Kroeger also explains that single mothers, on average, have completed fewer years of education than their married counterparts; as is well established in the education economics literature, low education is strongly linked to lower lifetime earnings. This suggests a third independent source of the single-mother disadvantage—having a parent with less education could affect child outcomes via lower household income.

The new empirical research presented in Chapter 5 asks the question, Is there any interaction between maternal marital status and the intergenerational correlations in household income and education? She uses data from the Child/Young Adult Survey of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79). This Child/Young Adult Survey is a sampling of the children born to female respondents in the NLSY79, respondents who were aged 14–22 at the start of the survey in 1979. Kroeger begins her empirical work by establishing baseline correlations between parent and child education and income. She regresses child outcomes on maternal outcomes (with adjustments for birth cohort to reflect average changes over time) and finds the intergenerational education elasticity (between child and mother) is estimated to be 0.26, while the intergenerational income elasticity is 0.45. She states that these results are consistent with previous research. Note that a higher elasticity indicates a closer link across generations, implying less intergenerational mobility.

Next, Kroeger stratifies regressions by the mother's marital status at the time of the child's birth, producing an education elasticity of 0.243 for married mothers and 0.299 for cases of unmarried mothers, suggesting less education mobility with single-mother families. However, the pattern is opposite when looking at the intergenerational income elasticity, with a greater elasticity (less income mobility) for married mothers (0.361 for unmarried mothers and 0.411 for married mothers). Kroeger notes that her results suggest there are subtle differences in the influences of maternal income versus maternal education. Kroeger says, "A reasonable interpretation of these estimates is that maternal education becomes a more important determinant of child outcomes when moth-

ers are unmarried. This is intuitive, since we would expect maternal intergenerational effects to be especially pronounced for mothers who are the only caregiver for their child. But with respect to household income, the relationship is more nuanced” (p. 157).

These findings point to complex interrelationships among maternal marital status, maternal education, and household income in intergenerational impacts. For example, Kroeger’s results suggest that having a mother who was married at the time of the child’s birth is associated with a stronger intergenerational education link. Kroeger notes that maternal marriage increases the effect of a mother’s college education by 0.39 years of school. Focusing on household income, she finds that maternal marital status does not affect the strength of the correlation between maternal household income and the child’s income as an adult.

Kroeger concludes that a mother’s education has a bigger impact on her children’s educational attainment than her marital status at the time of the child’s birth. Additionally, children are influenced more by their mothers’ level of educational attainment when the mother is unmarried. Overall, her results point to mother’s educational attainment as a potential policy lever because, as she explains, the positive impacts of improving maternal education carries the potential for improving outcomes for generations. She suggests that policy measures that support postsecondary degree completion for single mothers would be effective, given their relative low cost and potential for high return.

Chapter 6, by Bhashkar Mazumder, is titled “Race and Intergenerational Mobility in the United States.” Mazumder provides a thoughtful review of the research literature, much produced himself, on race differences in rates of intergenerational mobility. He begins by noting that the gap in median household income between white and Black households is 42 percent—and that this gap has held constant since 1972. The contribution of Mazumder’s chapter lies both in his coverage of the topic and in his careful presentation of the associated methodological developments. His review offers evidence on the magnitude and persistence over time of this intergenerational mobility gap, as well as some insight into the various contributory factors. By identifying the factors that contribute to intergenerational linkages in economic outcomes, he seeks to identify policy suggestions that might help ameliorate this race gap.

As noted by Mazumder, the earliest studies of intergenerational economic mobility were conducted by sociologists who examined the link across generations in social status, in which status was proxied by the parent's occupation. These studies of social mobility revealed that parents' social status is linked more closely to that of their adult children for whites than for Blacks. Economists expanded on this research by focusing on a broader array of adult outcomes, particularly income. The earlier economics research relied on measuring linkages across generations with two methods: intergenerational earnings elasticities and transition probabilities. The first studies that used these methods relied on what perhaps could be considered the gold standard of data sources: longitudinal survey data in which socioeconomic data are available both for parents and their adult children.

Looking back at the history of economics research examining the connections across generations in economic status, Mazumder notes that the earliest historical research was conducted by Collins and Wannamaker (forthcoming), who use merged census data and find substantial evidence of large racial economic mobility gaps. Turning to the modern era, Datcher (1981) relied on longitudinal data to show that intergenerational linkages are much stronger for whites than Blacks. Following the work of Datcher, economics research focused on the persistence of poverty across generations. Corcoran and Adams (1997) found much more poverty persistence across generations in Black families, with childhood economic factors found to be important.

The modern approaches of studying intergenerational income mobility rely largely on two measures: the intergenerational elasticity and transition probabilities (likelihood of moving from one point in income distribution to another), developed by Solon (1992) and Zimmerman (1992) in their broader studies of intergenerational mobility that did not examine race. The first economics research to use these techniques with a focus on race was Hertz (2005). Hertz's results showed that the expected income of Black children (conditioned on parent income) is 40 percent lower than that of whites. Examining adult children born into the bottom income decile showed that 42 percent of Blacks remained in the same income decline while only 17 percent of white children did.

Mazumder (2014) offered the dual contribution of better data along with a revised methodological approach that he refers to as "mobility in

ranks.” He finds that Black children are far less likely than white children to achieve a higher rank in the income distribution, as adults, than that of their parents. He also finds racial differences in the probability of downward mobility, noting a nearly 20 percentage point gap favoring whites in the probability that a child born into the top half of the income distribution will fall into the bottom half of the distribution as an adult. Mazumder calculates quintile transition matrices that show that “51 percent of Blacks who start in the bottom quintile will remain there as adults compared to just 26 percent of whites. The matrices imply that if this mobility process continued over time, the ‘steady state’ distribution of income would converge to one in which there is a permanent Black underclass, where 39 percent of Blacks would perpetually remain in the bottom quintile and only 8 percent in the top quintile. This is, of course, a stunning and sobering finding and suggests that there is a fundamental lack of opportunity for African Americans in the United States” pp. 176–177).

Pathbreaking work by Chetty et al. (2018) relies on the use of population-wide data drawn from administrative databases with a modified empirical approach. They note that the expected rank of Black children (holding constant parent characteristics) falls substantially below that of white children. A key finding of Chetty et al. is gleaned from their stratification by both race and gender. When focusing on individual income for women, there is no race difference in expected rank, but there are large race differences in expected rank when focusing on individual income for men. The absence of a race gap for women serves to inform the discussion of the source of the race gap noted for men.

Mazumder presents new empirical evidence in this chapter that the overall income elasticity increased from 0.21 in the cohort born around 1950 to 0.50 for the cohort born about 10 years later. (A larger elasticity means that an adult child’s income is more closely associated with the income of his parents.) Mazumder’s new research focuses on race and finds that, despite the substantial decline in overall mobility, there has been no discernible closing of the race mobility gap.

The most striking conclusion of Mazumder’s careful review of both previous and new evidence is the depressing persistence of the racial gap in intergenerational mobility, making clear that the so-called American Dream of economic mobility is an illusion for nonwhite America. Its persistence through the most recent data shows that declines in

unionization, worsening monopsony power in local labor markets, and skill-biased technological change—factors that may be responsible for declines in overall economic mobility—are not to blame for the persistence in the racial mobility gap.

Chapter 6 concludes with a brief discussion of possible policy solutions that might prevent what appears to be movement toward a permanent large Black underclass. Mazumder points to the evidence that quality human capital plays some role in limiting intergenerational mobility for Blacks and offers suggestions for how to reduce the gap in the quality of human capital investment that may be depressing intergenerational mobility. He also suggests that other early life interventions may also be helpful, including addressing environmental concerns such as lead in paint, and water or air pollution. He notes that without a substantial shift in policy, there will be no income convergence and no closing of the income gap or the gap in intergenerational mobility.

The final chapter, “Accounting for Race Differences in How Family Structure Shapes the Transition into Adulthood,” is written by Paula Fomby. It expands on Mazumder’s review of the literature on the racial gap in intergenerational mobility by delving into the question of how family structure shapes the transition into adulthood, with a focus on differences by race. She notes that the extensive literature that examines intergenerational mobility concludes that growing up in a stable two-parent family confers substantial long-term benefits to children that persist well into adulthood. When researchers talk about evolving family structures in the United States, the standard framework looks to the immediate post–World War II period (the time period from 1946 to about 1964), when most adults got married early in adulthood, women had several babies, two-parent families resided in single-household dwellings, and health improvements produced declining child and adult mortality. This portrait of family life is treated as the long-term historical norm, and deviations from that norm beginning in the 1960s are treated as such. However, according to Fomby, household and family organization in this post–World War II era was largely a historical aberration. Examining the causes and consequences of the evolution of family and household organization that began 20 years after World War II must be considered in this context.

In the mid-1960s, well over 90 percent of adults were married, and nearly the same percent of children lived in two-parent households.

Moving into the 1970s and beyond, divorce rates grew, and although fertility rebounded from its low from the baby bust in the early 1970s, it never returned to the three or more children per mother seen at the peak of the baby boom. The rate of single parenthood grew, as did the percentage of couples living together outside of marriage. Currently, about 40 percent of children do not reside in two-parent households. When this “traditional” family structure was at its peak, there were notable differences between white and Black children. According to Fomby, there was an approximate 25 percentage point racial gap that favored white children in the percentage of children living with two parents in 1960. Family structures have evolved since that time—44 percent of Black children resided with two parents in 2019 compared to about 77 percent of white children.

Not only are there differences in the evolution of family structure by race, but also in the transition to adulthood. The racial gap in high school graduation has closed in recent years, but there has been a persistent gap of about 10 percentage points in college graduation rates. There are also substantial differences in fertility patterns, with about 70 percent of births to Black women occurring outside of marriage, compared to about 28 percent of births for white women.

Along with these changes in family structure, equally substantive social and cultural changes include the introduction of birth control, which made it possible for women to control their own fertility, and the relaxation of divorce laws. Economic changes include dramatic increases in female labor force participation, real-wage stagnation, and rising rates of return to education, all of which contribute to increasing inequality. At the same time, supportive systems like health insurance, child care, unionization, and criminal justice have not evolved correspondingly, and thus they continue to favor the “traditional” family structure of two married parents living in two-generation households. This failure to evolve harms children who are not raised in these “traditional” structures, resulting in a disproportionate burden on Black children.

Given the dramatic qualitative differences in the experiences of family structure during childhood and in the transition into adulthood among white and Black youth, are racial differences in adult transitions the result, at least in part, of different family structures? Empirical evidence suggests that the link between family structure and adult

outcomes is less strong for Blacks than for whites. Fomby argues that family structure does not actually matter more for one racial group than another; instead, “The social construction of the family as it is theorized, measured, and articulated in social science research and public expression reflects the biases of the actors who predominate in that discourse” p. 199 . There has been the presumption that the “traditional” two-parent family is optimal, overlooking strengths of other family forms.

This deficit model is based, at least in part, on the patriarchal norms of the 1970s, when this literature was in its infancy. Father absence has been blamed for compromised transitions to adulthood experienced more often for Black children. Research in the 1980s worked to debunk this notion, disentangling the interrelated factors associated with difficult adult transitions, focusing on economic strain and family stress as causal factors. Unfortunately, despite some progress in this reorienting, the bulk of research continues to frame the single-mother upbringing in terms of a “deficit model.”

An important development in the study of family structure has been to rethink how family is defined. Black children are more likely to be raised in three-generation households (about 1 out of 9 Black families versus about 1 out of 20 for white families). Interestingly, studies of the relationship between residing with a grandparent and child cognitive development suggest that such coresidence is favorable for Black children but not for white children. Another development (made possible by the increased availability of better data sources) is increased study of involvement of nonresident fathers in their children’s lives. Finally, contributions from sociologists have offered a better understanding of the importance of extended social networks for Black families (beyond multigenerational households and involvement of nonresident fathers) in managing the hardships of minority life.

Fomby reminds the reader both that the evidence linking family structure to more difficult transitions to adulthood is not particularly convincing, and that this framing of single-mother families as providing a disadvantaged upbringing to the children raised in these families reflects more the norms for those creating the research than some objective ideal. More research is needed into the various types of extended family/extended networks that provide the protective umbrella for Black children to understand the implications for their adult transitions

and to design any needed policy solutions to address any accompanying deficits.

These chapters present a complex portrait of the interrelationships among child gender, parents' marital status, and the intergenerational transmission of inequality. No chapter addresses the precise hypothesis proposed by Autor and Wasserman (2013), namely, that the gendered single-mother disadvantage that disfavors boys is contributing to growing intergenerational inequality. Instead, each of these six chapters offers evidence on various pieces of this puzzle.

Connelly and Kimmel examine mothers' and fathers' parenting time with an eye toward identifying systematic differences by marital status and child gender that might provide evidence of gendered parenting time driving the so-called gendered single-mother disadvantage—that is, the notion that sons are damaged more than daughters from being raised by a single mother. Connelly and Kimmel show that parenting time for preschool children does not vary by child gender, leading them to reject the notion of a gendered single-parent disadvantage arising from gendered parenting time. Kalil and Mayer use insights from psychology to explain differences in parenting strategies. They use the results of small-scale experiments to show that inexpensive policy interventions can modify parenting behavior in ways that would be expected to improve child development. Baker focuses on differences in maternal health investments by gender that manifest very early in life. He starts with a focus on gender differences in health outcomes for low (and very low) birth weight newborns, noting that very low birth weight male infants may be receiving a suboptimal amount of health care at the time of their birth. Baker's data show no meaningful difference in breastfeeding patterns by child gender, but he does show that mothers interact, on average, somewhat more negatively with young sons than young daughters.

Kroeger finds that mothers' education and household income play important independent roles in influencing their daughters' economic status in adulthood, with maternal education particularly important for children raised by unmarried mothers. Mazumder describes the existing literature along with original research to document the lack of progress in narrowing the race mobility gap and offers the warning that, without innovative policy interventions, this gap is likely to become permanent. His policy suggestions include improvements in the quality

of human capital investments and improvements in health investments, particularly reducing environmental health disparities, especially early in life. Fomby examines potential race differences in the role of family structure, including parents' marital status and multigenerational households. She observes that policy development has been hindered by bias in how family structures are described by researchers and policy makers, concluding that better, less biased research is necessary for developing specific policies that might contribute to narrowing race gaps in intergenerational mobility.

What common lessons can be drawn from these six very distinct chapters? First, there appears to be sufficient evidence to conclude that gender matters, but in complex ways. Male fragile newborns may merit more medical resources than current agendered policy permits. Girls may be more influenced by their mothers' educational attainment than that of their fathers. Second, while education is not a panacea, there is some evidence that education (formal and within the family) may be able to reduce the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage in part by mitigating the negative impact of growing up in a single-mother family. Finally, and perhaps most important, it is clear that more research is needed to connect all the pieces of the puzzle. We need stronger evidence of the precise nature of the gendered single-mother disadvantage along with a better understanding of its specific causes, particularly since we have ruled out the mothering time-deficit hypothesis. For example, the experimental approach of Kalil and Mayer could be applied to studies of school interventions to examine whether boys would benefit from increased schooling support. Perhaps the structure of school places a disproportionate burden on boys, particularly at young ages, and if so, targeted support might be particularly useful for boys. The combination of improved parenting strategies along with targeted school support, along with expanded access to higher education, could serve to help ameliorate the gendered single-mother disadvantage, resulting in improved intergenerational mobility.

References

- Autor, David, and Melanie Wasserman. 2013. *Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education*. Washington, DC: Third Way.
- Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter. 2018. "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective." Working Paper No. 24441. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Collins, William J., and Marianne H. Wannamaker. Forthcoming. "African American Intergenerational Economic Mobility Since 1880." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*.
- Corcoran, Mary, and Terry Adams. 1997. "Race, Sex, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty." In *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*, Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, eds. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 461–517.
- Datcher, Linda. 1981. "Race/Sex Differences in the Effects of Background on Achievement." In *Five Thousand American Families: Patterns of Economic Progress*, vol. 9, Martha S. Hill, Daniel Hill, and James N. Morgan, eds. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, pp. 359–390.
- Hertz, Tom. 2005. "Rags, Riches and Race: The Intergenerational Economic Mobility of Black and White Families in the United States." In *Unequal Chances: Family Background and Economic Success*, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and Melissa Osborne Groves, eds. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 165–191.
- Lundberg, Shelly. 2005. "Sons, Daughters, and Parental Behaviour." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 21(3): 340–356.
- Lundberg, Shelly, Sara McLanahan, and Elaina Rose. 2007. "Child Gender and Father Involvement in Fragile Families." *Demography* 44(1): 79–92.
- Mazumder, Bhashkar. 2014. "Black-White Differences in Intergenerational Economic Mobility in the United States." *Economic Perspectives* 38(1).
- Solon, Gary. 1992. "Intergenerational Income Mobility in the United States." *American Economic Review* 82(3): 393–408.
- Zimmerman, David J. 1992. "Regression Toward Mediocrity in Economic Stature." *American Economic Review* 82(3): 409–429.