

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

“How cultural factors shape children’s social and economic outcomes”

Washington, D.C.

Friday, July 24, 2020

PARTICIPANTS:

Host:

FRED DEWS
Managing Editor, Podcasts and Digital Projects
The Brookings Institution

Guests:

RON HASKINS
Senior Fellow Emeritus, Economic Studies
The Brookings Institution

MELISSA KEARNEY
Professor, Department of Economics, University of Maryland
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Economic Studies
The Brookings Institution

DAVID WESSEL
Senior Fellow and Director, Hutchins Center on Fiscal and Monetary Policy
The Brookings Institution

* * * * *

PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria. The podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. On this episode, I speak with Ron Haskins and Melissa Kearney, co-editors of the *Future of Children* journal. About the journal's new addition that focuses on how cultural factors, including religion, parenting styles, role models, mentors and the media shape economic outcomes.

Haskins is a senior fellow emeritus in economic studies at Brookings. And Kearney is the Neil Moskowitz professor of economics at the University of Maryland as well as a Brookings non-resident senior fellow. Also, in this episode, David Wessel, senior fellow and director of the Hutchins Center on fiscal and monetary policy at Brookings has another economic update in which he shares his concerns about the nation's economic outlook.

You can follow the Brookings podcast network on Twitter @policypodcasts to get information about and links to all our shows, including Dollar and Sense, the Brookings trade podcast, the Current and our events podcast. First up, here's David Wessel.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. If I had to write a headline on an economic outlook story today, it would simply read uh oh. Just a few weeks ago, it looked the economy was beginning to emerge from the medically induced coma we put it in as states loosened lockdowns and businesses began to reopen. But the surge of COVID cases, particularly in the south and west has undermined that optimism.

California, Texas and Florida which account for close to 28 percent of the U.S. economy have reinstated restrictions on indoor and group activities. Data from the Census Bureau's weekly survey of households finds that the number of people with jobs has been falling for the past four weeks.

Chase Bank says spending on 30 million of its credit and debit cards did rebound in May and June but has since plateaued. Economists at Standard and Poor's say, "although our best case if for a gradual recovery through next year, the surge in COVID-19 and hospitalizations has raised concerns that a more likely a scenario is that the COVID-19 recession has not bottomed out".

In short, the economy is being held hostage by the Coronavirus. Congress and the Federal Reserve responded quickly and forcefully to the pandemic but they talked about all this fiscal and monetary policy as building a bridge to the other side of the virus. Well, it now looks like the bridge wasn't long enough to get across the abyss.

Yes, Congress has appropriated \$3 trillion already and yes, the Fed has spent trillions buying bonds but there is now an obviousness to do more. To help families, to sustain businesses so they'll be around when the virus recedes and to prevent state and local governments from slashing services and laying off workers to comply with balanced budget requirements.

Yes, this means a bigger budget deficit and more federal debt and yes, we'll have to do something about that someday. But particularly with interest rates so very low, that someday is not today.

Now with all this renewed worry about the economy, you might wonder why the stock market keeps going up. I certainly do. I can think of three explanations. One, the market is optimistic that we're going to find a successful treatment or vaccine in a matter of months. Two, with the Fed and the bond market keeping interest rates so very low, stocks are the only attractive investment option. And three, the market is just plain nuts.

DEWS: And now, on with my interview with Ron Haskins and Melissa Kearney. Melissa and Ron, welcome to you both back to the Brookings Cafeteria. It's been a long time for both of

you.

KEARNEY: Thanks for having us.

HASKINS: Thank you.

DEWS: Yeah, I ran the tape. Melissa, I had you on four years ago to talk about why the poorest kids quit high school. Ron, you were on six years ago to talk about how to make government programs work. So, it's been too long so it's nice to see you both again. Ron, let me start with you because you've recently announced your retirement. Congratulations and can you just speak a little bit about that.

HASKINS: Well, I'm already retired. It happened at the end of June so I've been retired for a couple of weeks and so far, so good. I'm not sure how much I'm going to like it, it's a huge change, of course. I have a lot of little things planned that I'm hoping will keep me occupied and be interesting. I'm going to continue some scholarly work. I still have some projects left from the last year or so at Brookings, including this one.

My life will not completely change and hopefully it will change gradually so I'll continue some scholarly work. I'm going to do some work with non-profits. I'm going to spend more time with my grandkids and I'm going fishing.

DEWS: That's terrific. And Melissa, when we spoke four years ago, I believe you were on the staff at Brookings. Can you talk about what you've been up to in the years since and where you are now?

KEARNEY: Sure. So, I'm still a non-resident fellow at Brookings and I'm always happy to have an opportunity to engage with Brookings events and work and people. But my main time gig is still faculty member at the University of Maryland. I'm on the economics faculty there where I teach undergraduate microeconomic theory along with undergraduate and PhD level

public economics.

I spend a lot of time advising PhD students. My teaching and research really focuses still on questions related to inequality and poverty in the U.S. and the best way government policies and programs can help economically disadvantaged populations.

DEWS: Terrific. Well, we're here to talk about the latest addition of the *Future of Children*. A journal about social policy and it's co-published between Brookings and Princeton University. Ron, could you introduce listeners who might not know about it to the *Future of Children* journal what it's all about, how long it's been around, that kind of thing.

HASKINS: Melissa and I are both senior editors to the *Future of Children* and we've both been doing it for a long time. We've published 29 volumes of the *Future of Children* since we took over the journal in 2004. We also do a policy brief which is about a 3000 word overview and discussion of what we consider to be one of the most important issues in each journal issue. And we release that at the same time as the journal Melissa and I wrote the one for this journal issue. Melissa was the first author on that and I think we've done 29 on those also. And we have addressed a huge number of issues over the years, including children in the military, health issues, early childhood education, K-12 education, child abuse and neglect and many other issues have been addressed.

Normally, each journal issue addresses one topic and selects many subtopics within that topic. And they're usually 7 or 8 chapters in each of the journal issues. So, there's an introduction and then 7 or 8 chapters and then often a conclusion and then the policy brief. Each issue has that.

DEWS: The listeners can find it on the Brookings website, brookings.edu. But more directly, you can go to futureofchildren.princeton.edu to find all the additions of the journal, all the policy predicts and so on.

HASKINS: If you just Google *Future Children*, it will come up and just click on Princeton and you can get everything.

DEWS: The edition that you're here to talk about today is titled, *How Cultural Factors Shape Economic Outcomes*. So, let's dive in. Can you first talk about what is meant by culture and also what is not meant by culture?

KEARNEY: Yeah, what we really mean by the word culture in this volume is simply the elements of life that are very consequential to the way people experience life that are not so obviously in the policy domain. So, things like family and parenting as opposed to labor market conditions or government transfer programs.

So, I'll acknowledge in the outset that there's a huge literature across different fields studying where culture comes from and what it reflects. That is not what this volume is about. We're really using culture in a more colloquial term, the kinds of things that I think most lay people would think matter for the way kids' lives are shaped. Their families, their peers, media influences.

And as it turns out, there's a lot of social science research that speaks directly to that. So, one of the things we're hoping to achieve with this volume is that by defining the amorphous topic of culture in terms of specific elements that we can measure and we have evidence on. The volume can help make headway in advancing the conversation about how various cultural elements contribute to children's outcomes and how they can be leveraged to improve outcomes for children.

And one of the reasons why I think the *Future of Children* is a really nice outlet for this collection of essays is because the *Future of Children* is meant to be an accessible journal and it strips jargon, academic jargon away and just speaks as much as possible in plain English. And

so, this is really important when we're talking about these kinds of elements to get things out of academic journals into public conversation.

So, if I can just give one example, for example, labor economists write a lot about network effects. And I don't think most labor economists who write about network effects think about it in terms of culture or use the world culture. But what a network effects means, it means the way people associate and interact in their communities. Through their churches and synagogues, civic organizations and neighborhood groups.

I think most people, lay people would think of that as a cultural element. And that's the kind of evidence we're highlighting in this journal. We're talking about things like what economists would call network effects, what lay people might refer to being involved with my church and we're trying to document exactly how things like that matter for children's outcomes.

HASKINS: Fred, let me add one thing to that. And that is that from the very beginning, it was the intent of the editors to get jargon out. We want to address an audience that's professional but not necessarily researchers. So, teachers and practitioners and others who might not be familiar with the jargon.

And so, from the very beginning, we've tried to get as much jargon as we could out of the journal. And in that regard, we've been very fortunate over this entire period we've had two editors who have edited every article in the journals. And the editor now is a guy named John Wallace and he's a great pro. It's kind of bad that we have to return the articles to the authors sometimes because he removes lots and lots of words to make it shorter and crisper and to make it more intelligible.

So, that has been a very important part of the journal to make it intelligible to normal professional people who are not necessarily researchers. I even understand him.

DEWS: Let's start with the very top in the introductory essay that's authored by the both of you. Where you connect culture to social mobility to the American dream. Can you just briefly talk about how culture connects to the concept of social mobility and why that's important.

KEARNEY: So, as it turns out, all of these elements that we have stipulated are reasonably considered part of culture matter a lot for children's outcomes and rates of social mobility. Things like family structure, parenting practices, social networks, media influences. Scholars have documented that all of these have causal links with children's outcomes both in the short term and often later in their adult life.

We see this at the individual level and we also see some suggestion of this at the aggregate level. Places where there's higher levels of religiosity, where there's a greater share of households being headed by two parent families. Those places have better social mobility outcomes. Some of that data work was uncovered recently with the path raking research from the opportunities Insights project at Harvard. That's the social science research lab led by economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues. They've used millions of U.S. tax records to characterize social mobility rates and localities across the United States.

And that data exercise revealed large variation across places in rates of social mobility. And to my mind, one of the most striking things about their data work was that it revealed that many of the features of a place that correlate with upward mobility have more to do with what I would characterize as cultural elements than policy per se.

So again, issues like family structure, social capital and measures of religiosity are more highly correlated with an area's rate of social mobility than are factors to just college tuition and progressive taxation. Work from that lab has also documented that two of the strongest

predictors of upward mobility rates for Black boys are the presence of Black fathers in a neighborhood and a measure of racial animus.

So, that's the kind of data work and evidence that I think really called for a volume like this where we said let's try to unpack a lot of this. Let's explore how we can actually measure these concepts and what the evidence says and bring these kinds of murkier harder to think about, harder to measure, maybe harder to effect elements into the conversation about how to improve the lives of American children.

DEWS: Let's move into some of the substance of the articles. Ron, as you mentioned earlier, there are 8 separate essays in this addition on all different kinds of topics. I'm only going to focus on a few of them. We could have a whole entire podcast episode on every single essay in this. But, of course, both of you feel free to pull in any other pieces from the journal edition that you want to.

But I'm going to start with the very first article. It's by Daniel Hungerman of Notre Dame University. He talks about religious institutions and economic well-being. And he notes the fact that religious participation is associated with beneficial outcomes for individuals and the communities that these institutions serve. So, kind of generally speaking, how do religious congregations effect community well-being?

KEARNEY: I think one of the most helpful things to my mind about Dan Hungerman's chapter was that he spoke specifically to the issue of religious congregations and what they do and then separately what religiosity can do. So, in terms of religious institution, he gives a stat that I thought was pretty astounding. He says there's over 380,000 religious congregations in the U.S. And he talks about the ways in which these congregations affect community well-being.

The first is that congregations very frequently provide social services to help those in

their community, including both members and non-members. And he reports from a nationally representative sample of congregations that over 80 percent of U.S. congregations provide social services and that takes a variety of forms. The most common type is food assistance. Many of these congregations will run a food pantry. But he also tabulates data showing that they provide assistance with housing, healthcare services and immigrant services among others.

A second way that congregations really affect community outcomes in the U.S. is by playing a very large role in the education sector. And according to this data, Catholic schools are by far the most common type of private school in the U.S. serving almost 2 million students. And, of course, many of those students are not actually Catholics themselves but choose to attend those schools.

And a third way that he describes congregations affecting community outcomes is through explicit community organizing.

DEWS: The other side of that issue, Melissa as you just mentioned from institutions, is the question of religiosity. Can you talk about what Hungerman says about the effect of religiosity on individuals?

KEARNEY: Yeah. I think his chapter provides a really fascinating review of studies on this question. Because, of course, it's a very difficult question to answer because of the well-known problem of separating causality from correlation. Meaning that, you know, if we see that individuals who engage in a religious community or report to being religious themselves have different outcomes how do we know that those differences are caused by the religiosity as opposed to something else about the person.

He describes a large number of studies that find that highly religious individuals report better outcomes among a wide range of measures. They report being healthier, happier, they're

less likely to commit crimes, they're less likely to use drugs, more likely to vote and are more likely to give to charity.

And some of the ways that economists have come up with to identify causality in all this is quite clever. So, one example he gives is the investigation of what happens when blue laws are repealed. So, blue laws are restrictions on certain types of economic activity during a religious day of observance. So, for example, in many places there used to be a restriction on alcohol sales on Sundays.

So, Hungerman and his co-authors have investigated, what happens when those blue laws are repealed? And what they find is that religiosity declines and then as a consequence, risky behavior such as heavy drinking increases among those who report religious before the repeal occurred.

So, reviewing a whole bunch of studies that do clever things like this to try and isolate causality, he concludes based on his reading of the evidence three things. One, religious groups appear to discourage on healthy behaviors and of such have played an important role on promoting educational attainment.

He also reviews evidence suggesting that religious participation has been found to increase an individual's tolerance for others. And in some circumstances, this has shown up as being particularly beneficial for the advance of a belief that like women should get more schooling, for example.

And the third thing that he concludes from the evidence is that religion appears to help provide a measure of insurance for individuals against negative shocks. So, someone who is more likely to report being religious or have access to religious institutions for a variety of reasons. They have a community and a set of resources to fall back on when they hit bad times

and that's good for their overall economic well-being.

DEWS: So, one of the things that I found especially interesting in this article on religion is the fact that there's been a measurable decline in religious belief or at least religious affiliation over the past few decades. So, what are the consequences of that shift for social service delivery to vulnerable populations especially?

KEARNEY: He does, in this chapter, the author has a pretty striking figure showing that starting in the early 1990s, the share of Americans who report having no affiliation with a religious congregation rose from fewer than 10 percent to more than 20 percent. So, as you mentioned, that's a pretty stark decline in religious affiliation.

And I think the author makes the important connection to the extent that this decline in religiosity will lead to a reduction in the number and the activity associated with religious congregations, that could lead to a sharp withdraw of social services provided to those vulnerable communities. And so, the impact will extend beyond the individuals who disassociate with a religious congregation to the vulnerable populations that often are the greatest beneficiaries of the services those congregations provide.

Now whether or not unaffiliated charities or the public sector in government will step in to make up for that loss of social services I think is an important question. It's not clear that that's something I personally would be optimistic that would happen.

DEWS: Let's move on to a new set of topics. There's a pair of articles on family practices and family structure in which the authors explore the effects of those on children. In the first, Ariel Kalil of the University of Chicago and Rebecca Ryan of Georgetown, yay Georgetown my alma mater. Write that, and I'm going to quote here, "parenting behavior probably accounts for around half of the variance in adult economic outcomes". And I'll say intergenerational mobility.

Maybe Ron, you can start by addressing this finding. Can you kind of unpack what they're talking about there?

HASKINS: Well, a good way to think of it is that in accounting for the differences between adults in mobility and economic success and so forth. What they're saying is that about half of it is attributable to differences in parenting behavior with the adults when they were kids. So, they get set during childhood and they have affects that reach all the way into adulthood. That's why many of us are interested in developmental issues because we think they affect adult behavior.

So, this is a particularly important issue. Parenting is a particularly important issue because it has affects that reach all the way into adulthood. And that's what they mean by half the variance being accounted for by parenting behaviors.

DEWS: And when we talk about intergenerational mobility, just to set the scene for listeners. The way I understand it is that social scientists, economists think about people in terms of quintiles. The bottom 20 percent, top 20 percent and the three 20 percent groups between we can measure where children and families are at some point in time. Maybe they're in the bottom 20 percent and then we can look at where they are X number of years later when they're grownups. And we can see which of the 5 percentage quintiles they're in and we can then see well did they move from one to the other or are they stuck in one. Is that the framework there?

HASKINS: Yeah, that's one of the ways it's done. I mean, there are a number of different ways it's done but that is one of the ways. I don't know if that's the most frequent way but it is the frequent way that it's done. It's pretty easy to understand for people even who are not social scientists and the question is whether kids can move across those quintiles.

So, they are born into the bottom quintile. Let's say that's incomes below \$20,000. And

when they get to be 30 or 35 that they're in the middle quintile that's serious progress. For others it might mean they decline in quintiles which that's a problem. So yeah, quintiles are a typical way of measuring progress across generations.

DEWS: The authors of this piece, Kalil and Ryan, they make an interesting distinction between authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles. Can you explain those differences?

HASKINS: Yes. There a whole list of these differences that developmental psychologists have examined over the years and they turn out to be quite important. Basically, the idea is that authoritative parents both authoritative and authoritarian parents believe in having rules and enforcing the rules. You might even call them both strict but the difference is how they enforce the rules and how much they listen to the children.

So, authoritarian parents are less likely to listen to the kids, negotiate with the kids. They try to impose rules from the outside onto the kids and give the kids less flexibility in participating in the decision making. Whereas authoritative parents who also believe in being strict are likely to negotiate with the kids and let them have a word in what the decision is about what the rules should be and how they should be enforced.

Another big and important difference is in punishment and taking actions with children to punish them for what they do wrong. Again, there are big differences between authoritative and authoritarian parents. Authoritarian parents are much more likely to use harsh and demanding punishment. Whereas authoritative parents are much more likely to use punishment that might involve negotiation. And again, there would be rules and violating rules would involve something but not physical punishment in most cases.

So, there are differences on these and many other dimensions between authoritative and authoritarian parents. And there also is a lot of research showing that these differences in

parenting styles do lead to the differences in turnout for kids.

So, kids who have authoritarian parents are more likely to have difficulties, especially in adolescents. And when they get to be adults, they're more likely to act out. And kids who were raised by authoritative parents are more likely to be reasonable, to pay attention to rules that are set by others and they flourish when they're in a setting. Including a school or any other community setting, where the decisions about the rules and the punishments are made by involving negotiations and giving the kids a chance to express themselves.

DEWS: Well again, I'll just add for listeners that the article is not just about those two parenting styles. There's a lot of dimensions, as the term you used, Ron.

HASKINS: Right.

DEWS: In the article and they talk about the research that shows the different kinds of outcomes that different dimensions of parenting lead to. Let me use that as a springboard to the second really parent focused article. It's by Melanie Wasserman of UCLA. And she explores studies on family structure, in particular.

And she writes that, and again, I'll quote here. "The evidence supports an emerging consensus that growing up in a family without biological married parents produces more adverse consequences for boys than for girls." Can you walk us through that finding?

KEARNEY: Sure, I'll take this one. So, at this point it's well established in the literature across a variety of disciplines that children who grow up in households without two biological married parents experience more negative behavioral issues. We see that they attain less education and have lower incomes in adulthood. And this finding has been with us for a long time and there was a *Future of Children* volume on this issue probably a decade ago now.

What's new in the research and what Melanie Wasserman's chapter focuses on is that

these relatively worse outcomes appear to be especially large. Meaning that the negative consequences are especially bad for boys. Right, so to put it directly, boys who grow up in mother only homes appear to have more behavioral issues and worse educational outcomes. And that gap with their peers growing up in two parent homes is larger than it is for girls.

Let me just pause for a moment before we talk about that to point out that the reason why this is so concerning to those of us who worry about children's well-being and study the issues is because there has been a really vast transformation over the past few decades in U.S. family structure. Such that an increasing number of kids now are raised in a household with only one parent.

So, between 1960 and now the share of children living with two parents has fallen from 90 to 70 percent and that's been explained by a rise in the share living with a mom only. So, that fracture has risen from fewer than 10 percent to over 20 percent.

And this is not evenly experienced across the educational graphic group at all, right. This change has been almost exclusively driven by non-college educated populations. So, kids being born to less educated lower income moms are substantially less likely than kids being born to college educated moms to grow up with the benefit of two parents in the home.

Okay, so now Wasserman documents that this relative disadvantage is larger for boys, what do we make of that? And her chapter very helpfully runs through a variety of potential explanations. So, it could be that moms preferentially invest more in their daughters or spend more time with them. That would be a difference in parental investment.

She suggests that there might be some evidence for that, that that's happening. And in homes with two parents, the dad makes up for that by spending more time with the boys. The boys growing up with mothers only don't get that additional attention from dad. It could also be

that boys are more sensitive to parental inputs. So, that having a parent who spends time with you and reads to you is just more beneficial for boys than girls. It's less clear in her review of the evidence that that's what's going on.

But another set of potential explanations which she does say that there is some evidence for is that correlated factors outside the home are also partially responsible for this gap. So, what that means is kids who grow up in single parent homes live in different types of neighborhoods and attend different types of schools than kids who are predominantly raised in two parent homes. And it could be that those neighborhood deficiencies or school deficiencies show up in worse outcomes for boys.

So, for example, among children raised in homes with two biological parents, boys are 10 percentage points more likely than are girls to be suspended from school in 8th grade. But when you look at girls and boys who are growing up with a single mother, that gender gap widens to 25 percent.

So, the boys who are being raised in homes without dads, they're just much more likely to get in trouble with school and have interactions with the criminal justice system. Again, some of that seems to be because of the lack of parental input in the house that comes from the absence of a dad. Some of it seems to be the way they interact with neighborhood and school factors.

DEWS: Melissa, you mentioned factors outside the home earlier. You also mentioned different levels of educational attainment among parents in influencing the differential outcomes for boys especially versus girls. Are there any other factors that influence that outcome say income of parents or even race?

KEARNEY: Yeah. So, this is the trick with all this empirical research to try and isolate those factors. So, in the literature on different effects of family structure, clearly having two

parents in the house contributing income means a higher level of resources for the household. And what the evidence suggests is that some of this is driven by income but not all of it.

With regard to race, we know that kids who are non-White are much more likely to be raised in single parent homes. And it seems that some of that is potentially driving the disadvantage of Black and Hispanic boys in particular. There's also evidence from that data work that I mentioned earlier from the opportunity insights lab that for Black boys who live in the same neighborhood as White boys.

So, sort of controlling for income and neighborhood effects, it seems that having more Black dads in the neighborhood, right not even just in one's home, is particularly beneficial for Black boy's upward mobility prospects. And it also suggests that controlling for income and all of those neighborhood effects, having a neighborhood that exhibits a higher level of racial animosity as is measured is particularly harmful for Black boys. So, exactly there is factors both internal to the home and external to the home that affect the differential outcomes of kids growing up in low income settings or kids who are minority.

DEWS: I want to bring up one other question or issue about this particular article. And it's an issue that I've heard some people respond to this kind of research with. Research that says evidence supports that growing up in a family with biological married parents is the best. Well, does that mean that growing up without that is not the best. More particularly, that seems to diminish other family structures including same sex couples and single parent households that do seem to be successful. So, kind of anecdotal versus empirical. Can you address that kind of question?

KEARNEY: This is always a tricky one and an uncomfortable one, right? Family structure is a very fraught issue and a lot of people don't want to talk about it for that reason. We

don't want to come across as diminishing other types of families.

Now, of course, we're talking in generalities and in average, right. So, of course, there are many single parent homes that are highly resourced and the kids have terrific outcomes, right? But on average, we see that kids who are being raised in single parent homes on average their outcomes are worse.

And I think it's important to acknowledge that and it's important to acknowledge this new set of studies using a variety of data sources written by a number of different authors suggesting that that's particularly harmful for boys. Because all of us who study and advocate children, I'd like to think we're all on the same team in wanting to figure out how best to help these kids.

And so, if what we're seeing is that boys from these homes are particularly disadvantaged, I'm willing to venture that most parents as well as child advocates want to figure out how best to help those boys overcome whatever deficiencies they're experiencing. And so, if the data consistently points to an absence of fathers in the home is detrimental to boys, well that puts a spotlight on the many initiatives around the country that are engaged in fatherhood initiatives.

Trying to get fathers to be involved in a productive beneficial way in family life whether or not they are married to the mom, right. But there's a lot of groups around the country working on fatherhood initiatives and this kind of evidence in my mind speaks to the importance of studying those kinds of initiatives to see if fatherhood initiatives could help kids.

Another way that people are trying to address these deficiencies for boys is through mentoring programs and this relates to another chapter in the volume. But for example, the Becoming a Man program, that's a program with a curriculum that's explicitly aimed to help high risk male high school students in urban settings develop socioemotional and relationship skills.

And this might be something that we think boys growing up in these kinds of family environments are not getting at home and so these kinds of initiatives look like they could be really affective.

And so, as much as it's uncomfortable and I don't think any of us want to come across as if we're judging people or dismissing certain family types. I think it's productive to look at what the evidence says about how kids are experiencing life and potentially experiencing a disadvantage and then think about the best ways to make up for that.

DEWS: Just as a side note, Ron. When Melissa mentioned fatherhood initiative, I recall that you've been involved in national fatherhood initiative work, is that right?

HASKINS: Yes, I have. I've worked with Joe Jones in Baltimore and others on fatherhood projects. And in general, the things Melissa says are correct as usual. And the fatherhood projects seem to have some modest, not huge but a modest impact on involving fathers with their children and the children behavior improving. And especially if the kids are in trouble, the fathers can have an impact in improving the kid's behavior.

One other point, Melissa mentioned an earlier volume of the *Future of Children* on marriage. And there was an article in that in the 2015 version. There actually have been two of these journals that focused on marriage. And in the 2015 journal, there was an article devoted specifically to gay and lesbian couples.

And one thing that's interesting in the article is that there are now an increasing number because the laws have changed so much. That there are an increasing number of married gay and lesbian parents who have adopted children or one of them may have had a child before they came into the marriage.

And so far, I have to say that it seems that the impact of having gay or lesbian parents is

not negative. You get the same kind of effects or at least similar effects as you get with families who are males and females. Now this is right at the beginning of this literature. I don't think it would be a good idea to accept that finding as the final conclusion.

But it's surprising in view of what many people thought was going to be a problem that gay and lesbian couples were going to have problems raising their kids and that kids would bear the brunt of it. And so far, research does not bear that out.

DEWS: Let's move on to a final article that I'd like to deep dive into and that's your article, Melissa with Phillip Levine and he's at Wellesley College. And in that piece, you focus on role models, mentors and media and their effects on children's socioeconomic status. Can you start first by defining those three terms?

KEARNEY: Yes. So, we define a role model loosely as a person who sets an example for another individual to imitate. So again, much like we're using culture in a colloquial sense, we think about a role model in the way I think most lay people would think about a role model.

And then we think it's useful to make a distinction in role models and mentors even though it's a nuanced distinction and many role models are mentors and mentors are role models. But we think of a mentor specifically as a person who acts as an advisor, a trusted counselor, some sort of guide or coach. And that could be someone who is an official mentor or not an official mentor.

We put media along with role models and mentors which might strike some as an odd grouping. But it turns out that one of the most important ways in which media content can influence the behaviors and activities of young adults in children is through the portrayal of role models and mentors. Right, so kids are exposed to people through media characters that they see and identify with and those characters give information, they set an example. And one of the

ways in which the media content can influence kids is pretty similar to the way we think about role models and mentors affecting kids' outcomes.

DEWS: Melissa, I remember a few years ago that you were involved in a study of the MTV show, I think it was called 16 and Pregnant. So, there's a media influencer. Can you just briefly summarize what your findings in that study were. I mean, it made a big splash I remember in the communications department at Brookings when you were promoting it. But I know it's an important piece of research.

KEARNEY: It is, it is. It is a paper that documents the effect that media can have on kids attitudes and outcomes. Now it's funny to go right from talking about mentors on media to the role of 16 and Pregnant but let me take it apart.

So, 16 and Pregnant and the Teen Mom franchise, those shows were reality TV shows that portrayed young, pregnant 16 year olds into their early days of being moms. And the bottom line is the shows gave a reality depiction of how difficult life is for teen moms. And so, that's not a mentor effect but it was probably an information effect, right.

So, for young girls who maybe didn't realize how hard it would be if they became pregnant, this show looked like it gave them reason to be more cautious. And what we found was that in places where more people were watching MTV, when that show came on the air, in those places, again where people were more likely to be watching MTV before. When that show came on the air, you saw a sizeable reduction in subsequent teen childbearing rates.

And we matched that up with data from Google search and Twitter and find some evidence supporting a mechanism which is when the show airs, we see spikes in the places and larger spikes in places where more people were watching MTV of people searching for how to get birth control. People mentioning the show explicitly by name, et cetera.

I want to mention another study that also finds a link between media portrayal and family outcomes but in a very different way, right. So again, I think what we're finding is more consistent with this show. And by the way, it didn't intend to do this, we've talked to the MTV producers. It didn't intend to do this when it set out with the show, it just intended to entertain. But it turned out it had an implicit pro-social message by making kids aware of how hard this would be.

A different paper preceding ours by Eliana La Ferrara and colleagues looked at what happened when these telenovelas, these soap operas came to certain parts of Brazil. And in these telenovelas, you often saw smaller families and more divorce than was common in the areas where the soap operas were airing. Subsequent to the introduction of these soap operas, she finds that family size decreases and divorce increases.

And so, it's a very different response. In that sense, it looked like people in the areas that had exposure to this media content were more likely to adopt the behaviors that they saw portrayed by characters they related to. And I think it's really interesting to unpack how media effects outcomes and there's a variety of different channels.

There's information provision, there's role model, there's storytelling that's compelling. But the evidence seems pretty clear that media content does influence a variety of behaviors, attitudes and outcomes.

DEWS: Going back to role models and mentors for just a moment, can you talk about some examples of how those two phenomena improve children's economic and social outcomes.

KEARNEY: Yeah, okay. So, conceptually, again, people have tried to parse out, you know, what are the different things that role models, for example, do. So, role models set a moral or ethical example. They can serve as a symbol of special achievement. They could be a nurturer

or explicitly have a mentoring capacity where they help students.

It's really hard to tease out empirically the different roles but there's a lot of different evidence of role model and mentor effects in different settings that support a variety of mechanisms. So, let me give a few examples. There's a number of studies documenting that girls who happen to be assigned a female teacher in a STEM subject, in a science, technology, engineering or math class are more likely to stick with STEM, right.

So, there seems to be some positive effect of having a female teacher for young girls and sticking with those subjects that are traditionally male dominated. Same kind of evidence for same race teacher or mentor effects. If a student at a community college just happens to get a same race teacher or a minority student in particular gets a minority teacher in a field like that, they're more likely to stick with the field.

And there's a variety of explanations. It could be that having a teacher of your same sex or race sort of signals to you hey, I can do this too, I'm seeing an example of someone who looks like me be successful. There is some evidence that perhaps Black teachers hold Black students to higher standards or expectations which benefits the kids.

So again, there's certainly evidence across a variety of settings that having a same race or same sex teacher could be beneficial for students. But there's potentially a number of different ways that's happening.

In terms of mentors, there's a lot of evidence now from sort of the randomized control trial programs that assign mentors to students in a variety of settings that well designed mentoring programs can really benefit kids. Improve their educational outcomes, lessen their involvement with crime, for example.

DEWS: You mentioned that gender could be an important factor in mentors and role

models. What about other factors like race or even income?

KEARNEY: So, like I said, there's evidence that same gender same race role models and mentor's matter. But there's a separate issue about whether mentors are particularly important for let's say kids from minority backgrounds or lower income backgrounds. And I think there's some reason to think that that might be true.

So, if we just look at income differences, we know from the data that kids who grow up in low income homes are much less likely to have adults in their neighborhood that are working, that are higher income, that are college graduates et cetera. So, you might say that there's fewer role models of economic success available to lower income individuals.

And so, programs that try to match children from economically disadvantaged home with let's say aspirational role models that could be effective. Similarly, for Black youth as we discussed when we were talking about the family structure chapter, we know that Black boys are less likely to have dad's in their home, right.

So, some of these programs that have explicitly designed mentoring programs to reach high risk minority boys, they could potentially be quite impactful on that score. Again, I think the question though about how important it is for the mentor or the role model to be of the same race or same sex to be effective, it's less clear.

There's evidence again that like having a teacher of your race can make a difference. But do our mentoring programs have to be designed in such a way, I'm not sure. On that point, I'll mention one recent study that I was involved with. It's a community college setting down in Fort Worth, Texas. And with my collaborators from Notre Dame, we worked with Catholic charities Fort Worth and the local community college to design a mentoring program to help the students at the local community college get through school.

So, community college completion rates are really low for low income and minority populations in particular. So, this mentoring program randomly assigned a set of low income students to have access to a mentor. And what we found was that this really increased completion rates for female students. The program didn't seem to have a substantial effect on the outcomes for men.

Whether that was because all of our counselors and mentors in the program happened to be female, I'm not sure. Or whether it's because young men trying to get through community college have a different set of issues to overcome, I'm not sure. We need more research to better figure out these different mechanisms and the best way to give help whether it's through a mentoring program or another way to struggling youth and young adult.

DEWS: Melissa and Ron, as we wrap up here, I just want to note that we've only discussed in some detail half of the articles in this *Future of Children* journal. So, as we end this episode, I wonder if you can just reflect what you hope readers of the journal and also listeners of this episode will take away.

HASKINS: A number of the findings that we mention here are important and potentially directly relevant to public policy from the article that I talked about by Ryan and Kalil. And also, the article by Wasserman that Melissa talked about. That these programs for parents are extremely important.

Mother programs are really important. We have a lot of good studies on programs usually called home visiting programs that try to help moms do a better job, especially in early childhood and especially disadvantaged mothers. And we need to continue that and expand that and learn more about these programs and how they work. So, that's one I think important conclusion.

I think also the studies that Melissa mentioned on mentoring are very important. And

especially these studies that she mentioned in the last part of community colleges and other ways to have an impact on boys and girls and minorities focusing on STEM programs.

I might mention in that regard that we're engaged in the study now in something called Kentucky fame which is quite a big program that involves kids from primarily from Kentucky but other states as well. And that study show far is showing that these kids that go through a very well designed program, a two year program, of course, has a real impact on kids and their education and on their employment and on their earnings from their original job. And that the differences caused by the program are equally great for minorities as they are for other kids.

So, those kinds of findings mostly in this volume but others outside the volume as well are really important. And the illustrate the point that one of the reasons that we were so happy to start *Future Children*, we feel that the journal has been a success is that we have published many articles that review the kind of findings that we reviewed here today. And that if they have a broader impact, we'll improve education and improve kids' opportunities and in the long run, reduce inequalities in America.

KEARNEY: I have two additional things I hope that this journal accomplishes. Which is the first is given the mounting evidence that these factors that I'll continue to refer to as cultural factors really matter for kids. I hope that this journal issue succeeds in giving policymakers and practitioners and journalists and advocates a way to talk about those fraught issues that's based on precise definitions and data and evidence.

So, as you said, Fred, people get uncomfortable when we talk about things like family structure or parenting. But given the evidence on how important these things are, if we really want to help kids in this country, we can't afford to not talk about them.

And so, hopefully this issue gives us a way to succinctly and rigorously quantify what these

issues are and how they influence kids' outcomes and how policymakers and programs can leverage them. So, that's my first hope is that this journal will help advance discussion on these topics.

Second, I think there's an optimistic undertone to the journal when you read it in its entirety. There's a lot we can do to improve the outcomes for children that don't require huge government intervention or congressional action. So, that's not to say that I don't think the federal government shouldn't be doing more and spending more to help kids in this country, I do think that. But in the meantime, while we wait for a federal commitment to children that comes with an increase in spending on kids in this country, there's a lot that local programs and small interventions in communities can do to improve the outcomes of kids.

DEWS: Well, let's end it there. Melissa Kearney, Ron Haskins, I want to thank you both for sharing your time and your expertise to talk about the future of children today.

KEARNEY: Thanks so much, Fred.

DEWS: And Ron, I hope the fishing is great. You can find the *Future of Children* on how cultural factors shape economic outcomes online at futureofchildren.princeton.edu or just search for *Future of Children* journal.

The Brookings Cafeteria podcast is possible only with the help of an amazing team of colleagues. My thanks to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo, Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press who does the book interviews. Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita and Chris McKenna for their collaboration and Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

The Brookings Cafeteria is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network which also produces Dollar and Sense, the Current and our events podcasts. Email your questions and comments to me at bcp@brookings.edu. If you have a question for a scholar, include an audio

file and I'll play it and an answer on the air. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. You can listen to the Brookings Cafeteria in all the usual places. Visit us online at brookings.edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2020