

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

HOW CULTURAL FACTORS SHAPE  
CHILDREN'S ECONOMIC OUTCOMES

A PRINCETON-BROOKINGS FUTURE OF CHILDREN EVENT

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. KEARNEY: Good afternoon. I'm Melissa Kearney, and I'll be moderating this webinar we're having today. So I want to thank everyone who has logged on to join us for today's conversation. We're going to be talking about the topic of how cultural factors affect children's economic outcome. And the conversation we're having is based on the latest issue of the "Future of Children" that came out recently. This is a journal co-produced by Brookings Institution and Princeton University. The current issue was edited by Ron Hopkins and me and features eight chapters on a range of topics related to the general idea of how cultural factors shape children's economic outcomes and economic disparities in this country.

We're delighted that today we have four of our author/panelists with us to talk about these issues. But before I turn it over to the panelists, I'd like to give some framing for the journal because I appreciate that once we start talking about cultural factors, things quickly get complicated and complex, and the word "culture" sounds personal and like it's laden with value judgement. So that is what we're not trying to be about today.

What we're trying to be about today and in this journal is the rigorous social science evidence that says that a lot of factors that most people would think of as cultural, things like parenting, families, peer influences, media influences, these things are really instrumental to kids' outcome. And so part of our goal with this conversation and this issue of the journal is to put that evidence out there for policymakers and the public to know about and be aware about, with the goal of better designing programs and policies to improve children's outcomes in the U.S.

So I want to be clear, we're using the term "cultural" in a colloquial way, the way most people would use it to refer to issues like parenting and family and peers and media, not in the way many academics and scholars across disciplines have grappled with where culture comes from and what it reflects.

So with that introduction, I want to highlight that today's conversation is going to be focused on four specific cultural factors. Parenting, family structure, beliefs about opportunity and social

mobility, and the social influences of role models, mentors, and media.

And I'm really delighted that we have our four authors of those chapters with us to talk about those topics. Before I introduce them I do want to acknowledge that the issue takes up an additional four issues, and so I refer all of our viewers to the full volume that can be downloaded for free on the Future of Children website. So if you just Google "Future of Children," you'll get to the Princeton website and you'll have access to all of the issues.

Okay. So with us today are four of our authors. Rebecca Ryan is the Developmental Psychologist who's a Professor in the Psychology Department at Georgetown University. She's written extensively about socioeconomic disadvantage and children's home environments and well-being, as well as on the relationship between parenting and children's development. And she'll talk about the chapter that she co-authored in this volume with Ariel Kalil on parenting.

We also have Melanie Wasserman with us. She's a labor economist on the faculty of UCLA's Anderson School of Management. Her research focuses on gender differences in educational and labor market outcomes. And what she wrote about for this issue and will talk about today, is about the disparate impacts of family structure on different groups of children.

Third we have Mesmin Destin with us. He's a social psychologist who is on the Northwestern faculty in both the School of Education and Social Policy and the Department of Psychology. Mesmin directs the Multidisciplinary Lab Group and investigates social psychological mechanisms underlying disparities in adolescences and young adult outcomes. His chapter in this volume and what he'll be focusing on today is the role of beliefs about opportunity in mobility and shaping children's outcomes.

And our fourth author who with us today is Phil Levine, who is a professor of economics at Wellesley College. My long-time collaborator and frequent co-author. Phil is an empirical economist who applies statistical methods to study a wide range of social issues, including fertility and abortions, teen childbearing, gun ownership, and more generally to evaluate the effectiveness of policies designed to improve the well-being of disadvantaged youth. Today he'll talk about the chapter that he and I co-

authored on role models, mentors, and media influences.

So with that, to kick this off I am going to ask Rebecca and then Melanie and then Mesmin and Phil to each give us brief highlights from their respective chapters. So, Rebecca, over to you.

MS. RYAN: Sure thing. All right, let me share my screen first, and then I'll get going. That look good?

MS. KEARNEY: Looks good.

MS. RYAN: Great. So thanks Brookings and Melissa for having me, and thanks to everyone who tuned in to the Webinar today.

I'm going to quickly summarize my chapter with Ariel Kalil, describing the role of parenting practices and the role that parenting practices might play in understanding socioeconomic differences in children's early outcomes.

We start with the well-known fact that the economic advantages correlated across generations, and that intergenerational correlation exists for lots and lots of reasons, but we argue that there's evidence that parenting practices likely play a role.

And we say likely, because parents are the single greatest influence on children, if for no other reason than children spend the vast majority of their waking hours with their parents, particularly in the first five years of life, which is the focus of the chapter.

We also know that parents' engagement in children's development, the kinds of things that parents do with children that predict their cognitive and behavioral outcomes at school entry vary by socioeconomic status. Things like income and education. I'm describing the literature on that variation is a focus of the chapter.

And I should just say that we take it as a given that parents' engagement matters for children's outcomes and development. We recognize that the vast majority of the literature demonstrating a link between what parents do with children and children's development and outcomes is correlational.

But we also talk about possible cognitive evidence of the amount of time that parents spend with children on enriching activities. Things like reading and telling stories, do predict their cognitive test scores, and also evidence that interventions that reduce parents' use of things like harsh punishment do improve children's behavioral outcomes. So we think there's evidence that there is at least in part a causal link.

Development psychology distinguishes parenting behaviors that predict child outcomes along two or key dimensions. Level of cognitive stimulation and levels of emotional support. Cognitive stimulation includes things like enriching behaviors, reading, and other literacy activities, doing arts and crafts, taking kids on outings or activities. Positive socioemotional interactions involve parental warmth and consistency as well as a lack of harsh discipline or physical punishment.

Descriptively, variation in these behaviors, taken together, explain up to half of the variance in adult outcomes by SES, things like educational attainment and a third of the differences in children's early and later school outcomes by economic status.

In the chapter we wrestle with what research says about why these differences in parenting behavior exist, and we see five dominant theories in the literature that are posited.

Most obviously is money. Or parents simply can't potentially afford the goods and services that make these kinds of activities possible.

Second is time. It's entirely possible that low income parents have less time available to spend engaging in enriching activities with children or investing in children because of longer or more irregular work hours.

Finally is information. The idea here is that because of social and economic circumstances, advantaged and disadvantaged parents might have access to different information about parenting or might have different parenting goals or ideals.

Our reading of the literature is that differences in money and time might explain for sure some of the differences in children's experiences, but that much of the differences in parenting behavior remain unexplained after accounting for these particular factors.

We also don't find a lot of support for the idea that differences in information explain parenting behaviors, given strong evidence from our work and other people's work, that lower and higher income parents have really similar goals for children, value similar characteristics in children, and have similar ideas about parenting itself.

We see more empirical support for the idea that higher levels of daily stress among low income parents impact the quantity and quality of their parenting. The idea here is that the emotional stress associated with parenting in a context of economic strain and instability can undermine emotional and mental resources in ways that affect parents.

There's also new evidence that cognitive barriers are what are sometimes called biases in parenting behavior. The idea here is that parenting decisions, like lots of decisions, are complex, and parents rely on heuristics or short cuts to simplify those decisions. Research suggests that advantaged or disadvantaged parents, because of the context of scarcity, can experience this complexity differently, resulting in different patterns of decision making.

So for example research finds low income parents might be more present biased as a result of the context of scarcity in decision making and overweigh present outcomes compared to future ones, and make different parenting choices as a result.

And finally, emerging research on how economic scarcity impacts emotional well-being is demonstrating that these two mechanisms might act on one another. That is high levels of stress associated with low income can increase cognitive load and enhance the impact of cognitive biases, like present biases, on parents' decision making.

Because both emotional stress and cognitive biases help explain parenting differences in part, we think one key to closing the gap in what families do with children would be to create or expand programs and policies that target both stress reduction and potentially user behavioral ends to promote targeted parenting behaviors that we know help children be best prepared for school entry and after. And I can talk a little bit more about what we say in the chapter about those kinds of programs and policies during the panel discussion.

Thanks a lot.

MS. KEARNEY: Great. Thank you so much. Next up we'll have Melanie Wasserman give some highlights from her chapter on the disparate effects of family structure.

MS. WASSERMAN: Okay. Great. Can you see and hear me?

So I'm delighted to share with you this chapter, the highlights of the chapter that I wrote on the disparate effects of family structure. The U.S. families have experienced substantial changes over the last 50 to 60 years. And this is really reflected in the living arrangements of children which are graphed on this slide.

So we see a sizeable decline in the fraction of children who live with two parents. Here we're using the U.S. Census definition of parents, which include biological, adopted, and step-parents. There's also been kind of a commensurate increase in the fraction of children who live with just one parent. And this is primarily their mother.

So I would say it's now well-known and widely discussed that children who grew up in families with two continuously married parents experience more behavioral issues, attain less education, and have lower incomes in adulthood. I would say less discussed however is how the effects of family structure may differ across different groups of children.

And that's where I really see the role for this chapter in terms of kind of contributing to the discourse and also kind of synthesizing the most recent evidence. So I focus on the disparate effects of family structure based on different child and parental attributes.

The child attributes that I focus on are child gender, so whether family structure has different effects based on whether the child is male or female, or whether there are disparate effects of family structure based on parental attributes such as mother's characteristics, like the age at birth and her educational background.

And, you know, just a note on, you know, why we should care about disparate effects, so I think by kind of zeroing in and isolating the groups of children who are kind of most effected by family structure, we can kind of better target policies and programs accordingly.

So I'll start by summarizing the evidence of disparate effects by child gender. And throughout this discussion you'll notice that I'll use kind of a dichotomous of the family structure. We'll talk about married versus unmarried families or one parent versus two-parent families. And I want to acknowledge that there are many family types, many complex family types, and family types may not be kind of consistent throughout one's childhood. And so here just for kind of simplicity and because of the way the research kind of defines family structure, I use this kind of dichotomous definition.

So there's an emerging consensus that boys are more, I would say adversely effected by growing up outside of a two-parent family relative to girls. And we see this during childhood, particularly for behavioral outcomes such as suspensions and externalizing behavior, which includes disruptive and delinquent behavior.

And so boys overall experience more suspensions and more externalizing behavior relative to girls. But among children who are raised by single mothers, the gender basis suspensions more than double.

So interestingly, when we look at academic outcomes such as standardized test scores, boys and girls seem to respond I'd say pretty similarly to different family types.

Given these results of the disparate effects of family structure on boys during childhood, we might ask ourselves whether this persists into adulthood. And the answer appears to be yes. So we have some evidence for high school graduation as well as for employment at age 30. And so while women's employment at age 30 appears to be virtually in variance or insensitive to their family structure growing up. For men, they have substantially lower employment rates if they grew up in a single-parent family.

A notable exception to the I would say more adverse consequences of growing up outside of a two-parent and continuously married family for boys pertains to mental health and risky behavior. So here the research shows that teenage girls' rates of smoking and self-reported mental health appears to be more responsive to their family structure than those of boys.

So next I want to turn the evidence of disparate effects by maternal resources. And here

I would say maternal resources are going to be proxied by maternal age at birth as well as educational background.

And the conjecture here is that the gains to growing up in a married versus unmarried or two-parent versus one parent household might be determined by the level of the mother's initial resources for two reasons. So the mother's resources could determine what she alone is able to provide for the child. In addition, mothers' resources and attributes might determine the resources and attributes of her partner since marriage tends to join individuals who have similar socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

And what we observe here is that the say benefits of growing up in a family with married parents relative to unmarried parents indeed differ based on maternal resources. So for outcome such as high school graduation, we see that the gains to growing up in a married family, for mostly among children of mothers in the middle of the age or education distribution. Whereas for things like college graduation, the gains occur mostly among children of mothers with more education and who were older at the time of birth.

And I think that this is, you know, a really interesting area of research. And I, you know, here represents a call for more evidence of the disparate acts of family structure based on other parental characteristics.

And so, you know, this will kind of conclude my initial remarks. I intended to, you know, just draw additional attention to the kind of differential benefits or harms of growing up in certain family types for certain groups of children. And I would say the research overall indicates that, you know, growing up outside of the family with two parents who are continuously married yields especially negative consequences for boys relative to girls. And that the research also shows that the benefits of marriage seem to depend on maternal characteristics, so parent attributes, and mostly accrue to the children of mothers who are relative more advantaged.

And with that I'll leave it there.

MS. KEARNEY: Great. Thank you so much. And next up, Mesmin Destin.

MR. DESTIN: Okay, I think we're ready. Good afternoon. I'm focusing on sort of a bit of a broader sociocultural factor in the chapter that I wrote, which is sort of the prevailing messages and beliefs that people have throughout society about the nature of socioeconomic status itself. And the possibilities that exist or don't exist in society for experiencing economic mobility moving up the economic ladder and distribution, and the consequences those beliefs may have for young people as they are pursuing their goals.

So we know more and more about the actual rates of mobility thanks to researches like Raj Chetty. And this is a visualization from the "New York Times" of some of their data, showing the different likelihoods that people have of reaching higher economic status based on the background that they came from.

And so as you can see from different simulations or variations of these data, there is some mobility that occurs in society, those who are starting at lower income levels do reach a variety of income levels. But you also see a large amount of stickiness where you start off in life and your family's economic background is strongly associated with where you might end up as well. And you have an increased likelihood in staying in both those lower economic backgrounds if that's where you started.

What's become interesting in psychology goes beyond what the actual rates are, but what are people's beliefs about these rates, what you might call sort of the American Dream, how much do people believe that you can move up the economic ladder and there may be variation in these beliefs that's meaningful.

And what people have found in some research is first that people tend to overestimate the amount of mobility that happens in society. So here we see the estimates of people when they're thinking about someone who's starting on the bottom of the income distribution, their estimates of how likely they are to end up at different income levels.

And in this research we see that people are expecting individuals from lower income levels to move up at higher rates than they actually do. And the actual data show they're more likely to stay in these bottom lower income levels than the estimates.

Interestingly, there's also other research that's asked people about their estimates of economic mobility that's found slightly different patterns. Some have shown that instead, people are underestimating the amount of mobility that happens. And their estimates for people's likelihood of moving out of the bottom third of the income distribution are lower than what is seen in some actual data.

So this is somewhat contrasting and suggests that there's really a wide variety and people aren't really sure how much mobility exists in society. This may be a particularly malleable belief and that there's a lot of rhetoric about the American Dream, but there's also a lot of real experiences that people have in their life and their families of barriers to reaching that. So there may be some uncertainty.

And so we wanted to show there's some research showing a different variation on how these beliefs may affect young people in both positive and somewhat negative ways as well.

So on the side that you might see as more positive, with research with college students and with high school students, it's quite continuously we're seeing that the more young people believe mobility occurs in society, the more they feel motivated to pursue academic goals if there's purpose to pursuing that academic goals if they will pay off, and they're earning higher grades. And this is in both correlations and in experiments when you randomly assign students to receive some information that believe there's more mobility in society, you see these higher rates of what you see on the Y axis on this scale of academic motivation going up in the highly mobility experimental condition.

On the other hand there's also some other potential consequences of mobility that may be seen as more negative. The more the people believe mobility can happen in society, they're also more likely to be satisfied with current rates of mobility that exist in society and be more tolerant for the high levels of inequality of society if they think mobility is possible.

And finally, you may be more likely to develop these biased attributions about peoples' lives. So if you believe there's lots of mobility you're more likely to explain people's life outcomes as solely a result of their individual achievements or failings and ignore some of the structural barriers that may be a strong factor.

So there are lots of variation what can lead to these beliefs and lots of the consequences

for young people. What actually leads to the beliefs in society as a whole could be a range of factors in peoples' lives. You might think of the current pandemic as shifting people to leave, so about mobility being more or less likely.

In the research, the strongest factor is the amount of economic inequality in society. And the larger the distances between those who have the highest amounts of income and wealth and those who have the lowest amounts of income and wealth, the lower peoples' beliefs are about mobility. And so you see this sort of pattern where more economic equality reduces beliefs about mobility, but some of these consequences for individuals' behaviors and outcomes for young people that I discussed early.

And all of this suggests I think as a whole, not necessarily that beliefs are the only thing to target, but although programs that enhance and support young people as they're pursuing goals to believe that they are possible, mobility is possible, do show positive effects. It also suggests the importance of policies and programs that actually increase opportunities for mobility and reduce inequality in tangible ways that can have these multiple positive effects for young people.

Thank you.

MS. KEARNEY: All right. Thanks so much, Mesmin. And I think that leads nicely to our fourth presentation from Phil Levine on factors like role models, mentors, and media that help shape these beliefs and perceptions. So, Phil, turning it over to you.

MR. LEVINE: Thanks, Melissa, I'm glad to be here today.

So I actually want to start off by reading the first line of our paper, which was written a year or so ago. The first line says "Children and young adults spend a great deal of time away from their parents and family members." And a year ago that was a very interesting fact, today perhaps not quite so much. So we want to think about this paper in the context of children in a traditional world, and not the one we currently live in right now.

MS. KEARNEY: Sorry, Phil, can you go full screen?

MR. LEVINE: What happened to my screen here? Hang on. I'm sorry, I'm the one that's blowing it. There it goes. Okay. Better?

MS. KEARNEY: That one's better but we still need full screen. There you go.

MR. LEVINE: Okay. So I want to get started off by documenting the fact that in Rebecca's talk she talked a lot about how kids spend a lot of time with their parents. They do, but when they're not with their parents they're with other people, and they spend a lot of time with other people as well. So I'd like to document that for a minute.

There's a lot of evidence in the paper that does that. I'm going to focus for now, at least on younger kids, two to five. One thing that we see in the data is that for these young children, the amount of time that little kids spend in school, pre-school, has increased a lot over the last few decades. Almost doubling, a couple hours extra a day than they used to. And that comes away from time that they would have spent with their family otherwise.

There's SES differences that exist there as well. So across the SES distribution, lower SES kids spend a lot more time with media, and higher SES kids spend a lot more time in school. And so those are important differences in the external influences that these kids face.

For school age children we see a lot of data show things like young kids spend a lot of time in school, which isn't really all that surprising. But in terms of SES differences, again we see very significant differences across the characteristics of members of their community in which they live. So higher SES kids, for example, would be exposed to a lot more college graduates than the less SES kids.

So, you know, we see a lot of evidence that there's important differences in when kids aren't with their parents, who are they with and what are they doing, and those things have the potential to matter.

So what we wanted to do in this paper is to think about a few different elements of these external influences and try to get a sense of, you know, what role they play in children's development and improving kids' outcomes. So the role models, mentors, and media influences.

So a role model we define as, you know, someone who sets an example for another to imitate. A mentor is a person who acts as an advisor. Those are obviously similar concepts, but it's important you make the distinction, so you can usually imagine somebody who's acting as a role model

who doesn't really have an active role. You can imagine a teacher just standing in the front of the classroom can act as a great role model, and may or may not be a mentor. So they're not necessarily the same things.

In terms of media influences, we want to focus in this analysis on positive media influences so, you know, to the extent that people are worried about things like, you know, movie violence and things like that, that's not really what we're focused on in this paper. We're going to focus on the positive influences.

And in each case we reviewed the evidence of the effectiveness of each of these different interventions or external influences on children's well-being. And we find that they definitely have a significant effect.

So, you know, role models, being either same sex or same race teacher for instance, has an important impact on kids' well-being. Mentors, you know, think like a traditional intervention of a mentor is like a Big Brother/Big Sister type of program. Those seem to have positive impacts on children's outcomes. And media influences that are specifically designed to help, and I'll use the example of Sesame Street, in work that Melissa and I have done, also has the potential to improve children's outcomes.

And the great thing about these interventions is that, you know, at the end of the day they help, but they're not super expensive. These are the sorts of things that we can think about doing that, you know, have the ability to have a positive impact and not really cost a lot of money.

And I think I'll stop at that point. I'm going to stop sharing my screen.

MS. KEARNEY: Terrific. Thank you, all four of you. Okay. So there's clearly a lot to unpack from all four of these chapters, and it's also quite obvious that an hour isn't going to be enough time. But I'm going to try and tease out some of the important details and implications that you all have alluded to. So I'll ask each of you a question or two and hopefully you can answer succinctly just because we don't have that much time.

One of the things that I think is really important about this volume, and I hope our viewers

will have time and engage with the written product, is that all of these chapters, including these four, are based on a lot of really rigorous, careful research, and the authors have done the hard work of going through all the technical research and synthesizing it and pulling out the take aways and key points.

So I think what I'd like for each of you to do, if you could take a minute, is to sort of unpack some of the research. So I'll start with Mesmin and I'll share with viewers because they've got your final slide you saved of our joint work.

I first came across Mesmin's work a few years ago when Phil and I were writing papers in a model we were calling the Economics of Despair, showing that low income kids in more unequal places were less likely to engage in sort of productive future behaviors like staying in school or avoiding becoming a teen mom. And using our economic techniques and data we couldn't really get inside the mechanism of that, and then we came across this evidence from social psychology that Mesmin and his colleagues were producing that really got inside the mechanism of how aggregate level inequality affected individual level behavior.

And so in my mind it was one of these really great examples of how interdisciplinary work compliments each other and comes to the same conclusions using different methods.

So, Mesmin, because I'm so enamored with the type of work you're doing in the lab, and I think many of the people who have joined us perhaps don't know how social psychology research is created. Could you take a couple minutes to talk about maybe one or two of your experiments that has really sort of made an impression on your thinking about this issue?

MR. DESTIN: Yeah, sure, I'll go a little bit deeper. And thanks for that setup.

You know, we're really, as you sort of mentioned, sort of laser focused on trying to pin down causality between how these big social factors are influencing individual young people.

And so for this factor of economic mobility that I talked about and wrote about in the chapter, we've run a series of experiments. A lot of this work has been led by Alex Groman (phonetic), a colleague. And where we are shifting these beliefs that young people have, at least for the moment, in economic mobility. So we'll have kids who are in a high school or college students randomly assigned. A

group of them will get no information, they'll just do some surveys to assess their motivation and maybe their assessment of academic tasks.

Another group will be randomly assigned to believe that there's not a lot of mobility in society. They'll see some real evidence that people face real barriers and that when you start in the lower income part of the distribution you're very likely to end up there. If you start in the high part of the distribution you're likely to end up there. And we'll just show that information, you know, make sure that people understand it for the moment.

And then there's this sort of high mobility condition where we draw out data showing that actually there are people who experience mobility, and that people may start on a lower income distribution and move up. And drawing out those sort of different examples and evidence of that pattern to people's attention.

And then we see in the moment, once that has been activated, that belief has been shifted, if we measure the shift in that belief. And then we see that they complete some measures of motivations. So how important is it for you to complete really difficult academic tasks, how do you respond when you actually have to do a difficult academic task? And we see a connection with grades.

So these are sort of in the moment process oriented tests which tell us about the causation between this factor, like you believe mobility in an academic orientation. And I think that abstracts up to consequences for larger scale initiatives that illustrate these pathways to mobility in stable ways for young people and support them through those pathways.

MS. KEARNEY: Great, thanks. And, Phil, you know, our chapter picks up on some of this in the ways you talk about. We know these influences matter. Can you just unpack a little bit, how do we know that kids who have access to positive role models or mentors, how do we know that their outcomes change? You're on mute.

MR. LEVINE: Struggling today. So the exact method that Mesmin described and the evidence that we're citing, you know, it's not exactly the same but the goal is identical, right, the goal is you want to find a causal effect.

And so, you know, these are sort of broader social experiments and not in a lab, but in the real world. That we see a lot of these things providing evidence to support the conclusions they drew.

So for instance in terms of role models, there was a *Tennessee Star* experiment that was conducted in the state of Tennessee in the schools where children were randomly assigned to classrooms. And so in some of those random assignments you would get a same race teacher. And so, you know, black student, would just randomly get assigned to a black teacher. And then you can see, did they do better in that situation than if they got assigned to a white teacher? And the answer was they did. And so in a true experimental setting, everything else is automatically controlled for. So basically you can sort of draw causal conclusion from that.

You know the Big Brothers/Big Sisters, so in terms of a mentoring program. Again, Big Brothers/Big Sisters is a prototypical example that's been evaluated using an experimental design, you know, treatment of group control, group random assignment into the two groups. The kids who got assigned into the treatment group did better in school. It's important to note in that context that specifically Big Brothers/Big Sisters community based mentoring, which is sort of the more traditional outside of school, you know, an hour and a half or whatever, on a weekend day, you know, getting to know the kid. That seems to work better than school based mentoring which, you know, is helping the kid with their homework. So, you know, sort of the adult presence in the kid's life seems like it matters in a controlled experimental setting.

You know I mentioned Sesame Street a little bit earlier, the Sesame Street work that Melissa and I did. You know, isn't based on a true experiment, but it's based on something virtually identical to a true experiment. It was when Sesame Street was first introduced in 1969. Two-thirds of the country had the technical capability of seeing it and a third of the country didn't. For those of you who are old enough to remember, this is about the difference between VHF television and UHF television. And the kids who were exposed at the right ages did better in school when they got there.

And so in all these instances we have, you know, very strong evidence, causal or experimental or seemingly experimental context that supports these conclusions. It just seems like these

things work.

MS. KEARNEY: Great. Thanks. So I think the policy implications or program design implications from what Mesmin and Phillip have described are a bit more clear than perhaps what was immediately obvious from Rebecca and Melanie, your presentations.

And one of our viewers sent in a question in advance saying please make sure you talk about things that we can actually do as, you know, people who run a community program. So I am going to ask you to describe the evidence you've focused on explicitly with that goal.

So, Rebecca, maybe I'll start with you. So, you know, one of the things that I thought was really fascinating and important in the evidence that you and Ariel describe is that it seems like a big part of the reason why we see different groups parent differently is not about values or preferences as much as the role of stress or cognitive barriers. And I think optimistically maybe that makes it easier for us to think about positive parenting interventions that perhaps don't feel so intrusive on peoples' value systems. So can you sort of expand on how you all think of that evidence and where it leads you to in terms of what would a successful intervention look like?

MS. RYAN: Sure. That's a great question. Because we focus in the chapter on the idea of stress as well as cognitive biases as being important in informing parenting behaviors, we focus on sort of two groups of interventions that have been demonstrated to move the dial on parenting behaviors.

One are targeted short-term clinically informed interventions that we know help to reduce daily stress, as well as reduce instances of clinical anxiety and clinical depression. There's lots of different programs out there. The one example that I, two examples that I used in the chapter.

One was a program called Mothers and Babies. And it's a short-term succession intervention, a session intervention, that can actually be woven into a home visiting program like an early Head Start or a nurse/family partnership for mothers during the perinatal period. And it uses cognitive behavioral therapy which has lots of very large RCT research base behind it to help moms in particular, manage the stresses and strains of transition to parenthood. And it's been shown to reduce parenting stress, reduce daily emotional stress outside of parenting, and significantly reduce the incidents of post-

partum depression. All of which then contributes to more sensitive contingent and responsive interactions with infants.

Another program that's clinically informed that targets stress in particular is called Family Foundations, which has the advantage of including mothers and fathers. And it again is a perinatal program for new parents. And through lots of different kinds of, it's only eight sessions through communication strategies, helps parents both support each other and emphasize positive parenting behaviors. And an RTC of that program has been shown to reduce instances of parent stress, reduce instances of maternal depression, and increase parent sensitivity and positivity, particularly among dads, with children. And amazingly has been shown to reduce children's behavior problems up to three to four years after the RTC, and this is only after eight sessions.

So I think the idea that we need to intervene for three years, four years, five years. I think the research suggests that's not the case.

Another bucket of interventions that we talk about in the paper that are really promising are those that use kind of this behavioral lance, right, to try to target cognitive biases, and particularly an great example is one done by my co-author, Ariel Kalil and her colleague at the University of Chicago. Something called the PAK Program.

And what it did was specifically target parents' present bias through a series of very specific text messages. And the text messages were designed using reminders, goal setting, and social rewards, to encourage parents to read more to their children each day. These were parents of preschool age kids. And it was found just through this text message intervention that those randomly assigned to receive these sort of social rewards and present bias targeted text messages increased daily reading with children up to a standard deviation on average and even more for parents who are more present biased.

So the advantage of these kinds of short-term and particularly something like a PAK, which is a purely kind of text messaged based intervention, the advantage of these programs is not only have they been shown to work, but they're much less expensive and much more light touch and much less intrusive to families who already have very hectic schedules and already are facing lots of competing

demands, particularly now. It's much more feasible to scale that up than it might be even for a longer term home visiting program that is a pretty standard way right now to impact parenting behaviors.

MS. KEARNEY: I find that all very encouraging too, and your emphasis that it doesn't have to be necessarily a three to five year intervention dovetails with what Phil said about some of these interventions that can really matter are not necessarily all that expensive.

But also as I listen to you, you know, I think I'm not the only one to think that parenting during the Covid pandemic is particularly stressful. And as you mentioned, an intervention trying to get parents to read more to the kids, they don't think anybody was envisioning full-time home schooling while working full time or dealing with the economic stress of losing one's job.

So can you, I know I'm asking you now to speculate outside your chapter, but given how much you emphasize stress in affecting parenting and ability to parent, how are you thinking about the current crisis and parents and kids?

MS. RYAN: Well I think two things. I just wanted to say at the outset that there are many, many structural problems that are going to be facing all parents who's now experiencing the shift from formal schooling in school to home. And those structural problems are going to be disproportionately impact low income parents. And I don't think cognitively, behaviorally informed intervention or behaviorally in center intervention is going to tackle those structural problems. Like the technological divide, like lower resources in the home, for home learning.

That said, so I do think there's a lot of work to do outside of the context of the kinds of interventions that I'm describing.

That said, I think it's more important than ever that parents receive both the cognitive and emotional support that they need to manage this radical shift of learning from schooling into the home and all of the anxieties that that brings.

One of the things that I'm doing with a colleague, if I could just talk about my own work for a second. One of the things I'm doing with a colleague here in D.C., we have an intervention for mothers and fathers with new babies. And what we're doing right now is working with early Head Start to

try to institute, to try to pilot that program remotely, using a Telehealth framework. And so parents would either do it on their Smartphones or we would give them tablets in order to be able to Telehealth the sessions of the program. And that would enable the program to be much more responsive to parents' daily stressful needs and also it would obviously obviate parents having to come in person anywhere and risk their own health.

And that kind of a Telehealth format for parenting interventions, which has been used for health more broadly but not so much for parenting intervention, could really be something that we use even after the pandemic to provide much more responsive ready and much easier and lighter touch but high quality interventions for parents as they navigate the stresses of parenting, which have only grown more acute for us all in the current pandemic.

MS. KEARNEY: Great. Thank you. Okay. Melanie, similarly, you know, talking about family structure and thinking about what policy or programs can do about it is, you know, a long-standing vexing question and issue. What I find so fascinating about the newer body of research that you highlight in your chapter and you talked a little bit about is that the research has moved beyond documenting just sort of average differences in outcomes for kids from one-parent and two-parent homes, and trying to do more getting inside of what economists call the production function, what most people would refer to as like what's going on in the house.

And so, you know, given some of the new insight we're getting into what's going on in the home, what are the mechanisms by which boys in particular seem to be disadvantaged. How do you think about what, you know, what is it that's translating into relatively worse outcomes for boys in particular? And then what does that suggest that programs and policies can potentially do to help mitigate those deficiencies?

MS. WASSERMAN: Yeah. So that's a really good question, and I hope, you know, to tackle some of it here.

So, you know, in my chapter and in my initial remarks I wasn't able to get to this, but during the chapter I talk about the I would say more limited research that tries to shed light on the

mechanisms that can generate these disparate effects of family structure on boys versus girls. And I distinguish between mechanisms that are within the family and that are external to the family but could also be determined by family structure, family type.

And so mechanisms within the family are things that, you know, really piggyback nicely on Rebecca's discussion, things that pertain to the economic resources of the family, including, you know, income, wealth, financial volatility, as well as parental resources such as the kind of quantity and quality of parental time spent with children. And in a single parent household, single parent family as relative to two-parent families, tend to have I would say on average, less of all these resources.

When I think about mechanisms external to the family I'm thinking about the neighborhoods in which families reside and the schools that children attend. Some neighborhood attributes can be things like job opportunities, safety, social and professional networks, the availability of role models outside of the family, how punitive policing policies are. With school quality it could be things like teachers, peers, the disciplinary practices of schools. And so single parent families, in contrast to two-parent families, tend to reside in lower SES neighborhoods, and their children tend to attend lower quality schools.

And so, you know, when we're thinking of carrying this over to like the disparate effects of family structure on boys versus girls, when we're thinking about how these mechanisms can generate disparate effects, I think, you know, it's helpful to actually think about a family with just, you know, a son and a daughter. So we're thinking within the same family. And, you know, ostensibly these children are growing up in the same family, attending the same schools, living in the same neighborhood. So, you know, what can generate the divergent outcomes of boys and girls in response to kind of family structure.

And so then I think we have to kind of delve into actually what's going on in each of these settings. And so, you know, in each of these environments or within the families, within neighborhoods, within the schools, is there a kind of differential treatment of boys and girls? Are they having kind of divergent experiences that vary with their family type that could, you know, potentially explain the divergent outcomes of boys and girls in response to their family structure?

And so here's where I'll bring in, you know, some of the kind of evidence. So in terms of what's going on within the family, these within the family mechanisms, we can think about kind of parental time allocation within the family across boys and girls. I'd say there is some evidence that in single parent families, so primarily single mother families, mothers tend to spend a bit more time with their daughters relative to their sons. So there is kind of a gender gap that favors girls in terms of parental resource allocation that isn't present in two-parent families.

Okay. What's interesting, however, is that when we try to use this kind of gender gap in time allocation, parental time allocation, to explain what's going on in terms of the divergent outcomes of boys and girls in response to family types, we find that it doesn't have kind of much of an effect on these divergent outcomes.

In contrast, when we look at kind of mechanisms external to the family, so things like the neighborhoods in which families reside, schools that children attend, I think that here we see that these mechanisms external to the family are more likely to explain I'd say at least some of the divergent effects of family structure on boys and girls.

So in particular there's research showing that the residential location of children, so where you grow up, has a larger effect on the adult outcomes of boys relative to girls. And these gender specific neighborhood effects can explain I would say a small amount of the disparate effect of family structure on boys.

And then the last thing I want to say is, you know, in addition to kind of the, well I guess the second to last thing I want to say. In addition to kind of the differential treatment of boys and girls within each of these settings, we can also think about, you know, what happens if, you know, boys and girls are being treated identically in each of these settings, each of these neighborhoods, schools, and parents. And yet we still see these divergent, you know, effects of family structure on boys' outcomes.

Then, you know, we can think about perhaps some notion of differential sensitivity. So maybe boys are more sensitive to the resources that they are receiving in each of these environments. And this could be because of, you know, some lack of gender specific role models, this could be because

boys are more at risk for behavioral issues relative to girls, and so they could be more responsive to the resources that are available to them.

And I would say the research is I would say not particularly conclusive on this issue. And empirically it's a very hard mechanism to isolate. But I think that this carries over nicely to, you know, some perhaps programs and policies that could help with these disparate effects of family structure.

And here I'll point to kind of one policy, you know, I would say a mentoring program called Becoming a Man, that mentors boys, particularly at risk boys, using, you know, as Rebecca was saying from cognitive behavioral therapy techniques, and has shown that, you know, a relatively short intervention does seem to have some long lasting effects on delinquent behavior as well as in the high school graduation ring.

MS. KEARNEY: Okay. Thanks. See all of these chapters are related because at the end of the day you're like part of what we could do to make up for deficiencies in the home is have positive role models for these families.

So I want to bring two things that some of our viewers submitted actually in advance.

One person asked how what we're talking about relates to the work from the Raj Chetty Opportunity Insights Team showing differences across places. And another viewer asked, or at least participant, asked are we going to talk about race.

So let me take the first one on the differences across places and rates of social mobility that has been documented by this team that has access to millions of tax records. And in fact it was that work that really inspired to me to bring together this body of evidence into this interdisciplinary volume because one of the first papers that came out of that lab showed that the factors in places, the correlate of places with social mobility outcomes, in my reading of their results, were more about these cultural factors in fact than our usual economic policy factors.

So for example, some of the things that their work has revealed to be particularly highly correlated with the place's rate of social mobility are share of two-parent families in an area, religiosity measures in an area, social capital measures in an area. And so actually those are the factors really that

we looked at in this chapter because, you know, the aggregate correlations that their work shows really correspond to decades of research from social scientists showing that these kinds of things matter for kids.

One additional thing I'll say about that is a lot of the evidence that our authors have talked about today is really about the impact of these factors like parenting and family structure and beliefs on an own child's outcome. But it seems that there's an impact in the neighborhood sense too.

And that actually links to the question about race because one of the new papers coming out of that lab shows that for black boys in particular, one of the most strong predictors of upward mobility are the number of black dads in the neighborhood. Not, you know, that's conditioning on the child's own family structures. So that speaks to sort of the neighborhood characteristics or the types of families in the neighborhood. And also a measure of discrimination, racial animus in a place.

So I want to pick up on that finding and turn to Mesmin. Your chapter isn't specifically about race, but I'm just going to read one sentence from your chapter that strikes me, which is "Beliefs matter because an optimistic belief in mobility can have a positive effect on young people's outlook toward life." And surely it's the case that if one experiences a world of racial injustice and specifically anti-black racism, that has to effect the belief and the level of optimism for young black people, perhaps young black men in particular.

So can you comment on what the social psychological evidence on that is or how you think of racial inequities and raising them in the framework that you've described?

MR. DESTIN: Sure. You know, I think when thinking about peoples' beliefs about mobility or the messages that they encounter and start to internalize about the possibility of mobility in society, there is a sort of intuitive notion that if you encounter more barriers based on racial discrimination for example, your group will systematically have a less optimistic outlook. And that's not necessarily something that the data tend to show.

You know, there's various ways and reasons that black groups in particular have different sources of resilience and community strength that sort of overcome some of those systematic barriers.

What I think is particularly interesting though as we're talking about differences in race and this issue of economic mobility, goes deeper into what the experience of mobility actually is like. The sort of outcome that many of these papers are talking about. And what more and more work is showing is the idea evidence that as people move up the economic ladder, obviously their experiences differ dramatically based on racial background and in very systematic ways.

And that for black people in particular, the experience of mobility can often be associated with experiencing even more forms, definitely new forms of racial discrimination and structural barriers to continue to achieve goals as they're moving into different environments. And finding that this type of barrier is associated even with negative effects on physical health through processes called skin deep resilience and John Henryism on cardiovascular strength and long-term disease development.

So there's this really difficult pattern where positive mobility can have this negative effect for groups that are facing more and more structural discrimination. Which indicates that there needs to be more than just opportunities for mobility but actual supports that enhance the experience of all people within those communities, which I think will take much more work to get to.

MS. KEARNEY: Thank you. Okay. One more from the crowd. Phil, you talked about children's time use, and Rebecca brought up parental time use right now during the covid crisis. In your research on media, how do you think about what is surely a large increase in kids' screen time at the moment?

MR. LEVINE: That's an excellent question. I've seen statistics recently saying something like screen time, children's screen time has increased 500 percent since March. And going with that's a big number. So what's interesting about it though is, you know, it's a very difficult question to answer because in some sense like, you know, we don't really have counterfactuals to think about, like what would have happened otherwise.

So for instance, you know, if this is a six month or one year, what's the impact of a one-year massive increase in screen use over a child's lifetime? That's a question that's never been asked before because we've never had the sorts of circumstances that would require us to ask that question.

So I don't think we know the answer to that.

I think the other thing that we don't know is what is it that the people are watching, the kids are watching. I think both you and I would agree that if they're watching Sesame Street, that's a good thing. To the extent that they're watching other things, you know, it's so far out of sample from anything we've ever seen before, what's going on right now, that I think it's essentially impossible to answer that question. Certainly, you know, I think over the course of the next 10 or 15 years as researchers have the opportunity to track those kids who were the kids today, who were going through this experience right now, as they age and are able to sort of identify what they were exposed to and what they weren't, looking at the differences across those kids' outcomes, you know, that's good research.

We aren't anywhere near that right now. So I think that that's an incredibly relevant question that we absolutely have no idea what the answer is.

MS. KEARNEY: Well, Mesmin used the word "resilience" when he was speaking. So let's hope that kids are pretty resilient through all this and we come out on the other side without too much long-term harm to their emotional, social, human capital development.

This is really hard to bring to a close. I feel like we scratched the surface on a lot of really complex important issues. But I do want to thank our four authors for their excellent chapters and for being with us today to talk about the evidence and the policy implications.

And I hope that this can serve as a way for us to continue talking about these issues and ways that we can build on this evidence to improve kids' lives in this country.

So thanks to our panelists, thanks to Brookings for hosting us, and thanks to all of you who joined us.

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