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Effects of Childhood Poverty on Productivity Later in Life: Implications for Public Policy

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This paper presents a conceptual model for better understanding how poverty jeopardizes a host of childhood and adulthood abilities. An explicit link is made between this conceptual model and various policy initiatives which attempt to curb poverty or its detrimental effects. To better flesh out the model—and illustrate the myriad ways poverty exerts its effects on children's lives—this paper reviews related social science research. This review reveals that low family income compromises children's physical growth, cognitive development and socio-emotional functioning. It decreases the achievement of children when they are in school and puts them at heightened risk of dropping out of school early. Studies also reveal that low childhood income impairs productivity later in life. While productivity is partly compromised through limited educational attainment, there are other important causal pathways not adequately explored in existing social science research.

Although we are now more than three decades beyond the declaration of the 'War on Poverty,' little progress has been made toward understanding the consequences of poverty (Danziger & Danziger, 1993; Danziger & Stern, 1990; Sawhill, 1988). Because public and political support for the "war" has waxed and waned over these decades, research has largely concentrated on documenting a need to fight the "war," rather than identifying the most effective strategies for battle or the consequences of inaction. Much poverty research has concentrated on measuring the existence of poverty and its patterns through time and over the life course (see, for example, Ashworth, Hill & Walker, forthcoming; Danziger & Gottschalk, 1992; Duncan & Rodgers,

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1988; Duncan et al., 1984; Hill, 1983, 1985; Ruggles, 1990; Sawhill, 1988; Smeeding & Torrey, 1988). While this research has been important, it does not tell us much about the causes and consequences of poverty. Yet, such information is critical for designing policies to improve the lives of our most needy citizens.

Because children become adults and are future producers, taxpayers, citizens, and voters, as a society we need to be concerned that childhood poverty can be an severe impediment to growth and development. To the extent that childhood poverty reduces an individual's subsequent capacity for serving important adulthood roles, it can mean a handicapped work force, an ill-prepared electorate, and possibly substantial public expenditures. According to a sizeable body of research reviewed in this paper, effects of childhood poverty follow children into their adulthood years. People who are poor in childhood are unable to achieve their full potential as economically productive adults. And to the degree poverty operates by impairing general skills, poor children may grow up to be hindered in managing social challenges as well as being economically productive.

Until we can better identify what it is about childhood poverty that is harmful to children both immediately and later in life, it will be difficult to develop the best mix of public programs to address the ill effects of childhood poverty. This paper reviews existing social science research to see what we do know about the consequences of childhood poverty and explores how that knowledge can be used by policy makers.

The paper begins by developing a conceptual model of how poverty affects children's development across the life span. In this simplified model, there are several steps in the causal pathway linking childhood poverty to subsequent capabilities and performance. Some steps are potentially of greater importance than others and, because different policies intervene in different steps, policies vary in the degree to which they address the more damaging effects of poverty. To better identify the public policies that target these more damaging effects, we examine research from across the social sciences to help characterize the nature of the causal linkages, the size of the component pathways, and the magnitude of the overall effects of poverty on subsequent adulthood abilities and achievements. A picture, hazy in parts and sharper in others, develops about what is known—and what is not known. We conclude with a discussion of the implications this research has for the development of effective policies to combat the effects of poverty.

This paper focuses on the consequences, rather than the causes, of childhood poverty. Because the consequences of poverty seem to be extensive, we take a life-cycle perspective, identifying both immediate and long-term outcomes.

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