

Research-Based Strategies for Multi-Generational Family Stability and Mobility from Poverty

The topic of mobility from poverty and multi-generational family stability can be overwhelming, but countless scholars, community leaders, and individuals in poverty have proposed evidence-informed solutions based on research and lived experience both nationally and locally. This document is a short introduction to the proposed strategies and some of the voices on the forefront on these issues.

National Research

A. *Mobility from Poverty: Restoring the American Dream*

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty¹ (2016) brought together a diverse group of individuals to learn from research and practice, including people who had experienced poverty to answer the question: what would it take to dramatically increase mobility from poverty. Funded by the Gates Foundation and staffed by the Urban Institute, this group spent time in urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities across the US. They define mobility from poverty as including the following components: (1) Economic success; (2) Power and autonomy; and (3) Being valued in community. They identified five major strategies to create the largest impact on mobility from poverty:

1. **Change the narrative:** Damaging narratives about poverty and mobility ensue, such as “people in poverty have no one to blame but themselves”, “people in poverty are helpless victims”, or “rags-to-riches stories that prove the American Dream”. Thus, changing the narrative to humanize people living in poverty, expose the structural forces that shape poverty, and partner with allies who can help reshape the narrative.
2. **Create access to good jobs:** Today’s workers are less likely to work for one employer long-term, belong to unions, or have jobs that provide good wages and benefits. Additionally, 90% of children born in 1940 earned more money than their parents did, but only 50% of children born in 1980 earn more than their parents. Creating access to good jobs can combat these forces.
3. **Ensure zip code is not destiny:** Children who move by age 6 from a low-opportunity to a high-opportunity area fare better than older siblings who move later in life. Increasing access to communities by focusing on revitalization, affordable housing, and moves to higher-opportunity areas can also provide mobility from poverty.
4. **Provide support that empowers:** service delivery systems should take ‘whole person’ and ‘whole family’ approaches rather than services that stigmatize and isolate families and individuals.
5. **Transform data use:** in many communities, data are unused and inaccessible to low-income families, programs, and researchers. This group proposes an initiative to engage a small group of willing and committed communities to generate initial reforms and successes.

B. *Dual-Generation Strategies: Supporting Parents and Children Together*

After examining data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Hernandez and Napierala (2014) analyzed 13 economic, education, and health indicators for children whose mothers did not graduate from high school compared to mothers with higher education, and this shows enormous disparities in child well-being.² The authors conclude that based on the data, there is a need to coordinate dual-generation strategies to increase economic and educational opportunities for parents and children:

The enormous disparities in well-being identified here point toward the value and need for **comprehensive dual-generation strategies that offer high-quality PreK-3rd education for children, effective job training for parents** that leads directly to well-paid work, and additional public services—such as **health, nutrition, food, and housing**—which enable low-income families to overcome barriers to success. There already exist a wide range of **policies and programs that could be coordinated and integrated** to create dual-generation strategies. (p.1)

¹ Bogle, M., Acs, G., Loprest, P. J., Mikelson, K., Papkin, S. J. (2016). Building Block and Strategies for Helping Americans Move Out of Poverty. US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty.

² Hernandez, D. J. and Napierala, J. S. (2014). Mother’s Education and Children’s Outcomes: How Dual-Generation Programs Offer Increased Opportunities for America’s Families.

State Research in Wisconsin

A. Wisconsin Poverty Project: Recovering from the Great Recession

The Wisconsin Poverty Project was created in 2008 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) in order to gain more accurate and timely information on poverty across the state. The most recent report³ (2017) indicates that employment rose by 70,000 jobs across the state, and that the Wisconsin Poverty Measure (WPM) fell to the lowest rate in nine years—9.7%. They note that increased jobs, food support from SNAP, and refundable tax credits all helped to lower the poverty rate, but warn that rising child care costs, work-related expenses, and increasing out-of-pocket medical expenses could minimize or reverse the trends in decreasing poverty across the state. The authors highlight long-term poverty solutions:

Long-term poverty solutions for working families should include **better employment opportunities** and higher-quality jobs with wages and employer benefits that can meet family needs and increase economic self-sufficiency. Long-term solutions also need to include a continuation of **work supports such as BadgerCare (Medicaid) and food support (SNAP), as well as childcare** and other policies to reduce work-related expenses for families with children. An expansion of **housing subsidies** would also reduce the WPM rate. (p. 18)

Local County Research in Dane County

A. United Way of Dane County Strong Roots Delegation: Building Economically Stable Families

In 2014, United Way of Dane County convened a group of 40 community leaders and formed the Delegation to Create Economic Stability for Young Families. The charge of this Delegation was to research and determine local approaches and strategies that we can deploy to decrease the number of young families with children who are living in poverty in Dane County and to specifically address barriers for children and families of color in our community. They created a Mobilization Plan, launched in 2016⁴, with four key strategies for how to build economically stable young families corresponding with national and state research as well as significant community engagement:

1. In collaboration with partners, stakeholders, and the community, **develop holistic, two-generation, coordinated supports** that empower young families living in poverty to increase their economic stability.
2. Increase the number of young families living in poverty who gain **family sustaining employment**.
3. Increase the amount of and remove the barriers to **affordable housing** available to young families living in poverty.
4. Increase the number of **children in poverty who are developmentally ready to be successful** in school.

The delegation proposed the following challenge:

We challenge the community to engage in this process and build upon systems that are multi-generational in scope. This work requires us to come together in new ways, to empower young families in poverty with the tools to connect to services that address all the barriers that each family has to success. In order to do this, together, we will need to create a fundamental shift in how the community views solutions that are family centered, coordinated, culturally relevant and holistic.” (p. 21).

Summary

Scholars and community leaders consistently point to similar strategies for family stability and mobility from poverty: coordinated holistic programs and policies that support and empower a multi-generational family to focus on high-quality employment, early childhood education, and housing, among other strategies including public policies that support benefits and thoughtful data use and tracking. We need to invest in these strategies in a more substantial level if we are going to focus on family stability and mobility from poverty.

³ Smeeding, T. M. and Thornton, K. A. (2017). Wisconsin Poverty Report: The Recovery from the Great Recession Lowers Poverty Rates in 2015.

⁴ Strong Roots: Building Economically Stable Families Mobilization Plan (2016-2021). United Way of Dane County.