

ACCUMULATION OF OPPORTUNITIES

AUTHORS Eric Dearing, Boston College; Andres S. Bustamante, University of California - Irvine ; Henrik D. Zachrisson, University of Oslo; Deborah Lowe Vandell, University of California - Irvine

OVERVIEW In a 26-year longitudinal study of children from low- and higher-income families in the United States, large gaps in life opportunities at home, childcare, school, afterschool, and in the neighborhood accrued for children born into low- versus higher-income households. These opportunity gaps were, in turn, strongly linked with educational attainment and earnings in early adulthood. This study offers novel evidence that the accumulation of opportunities across contexts and developmental periods is key to understanding the long-term consequences of low family income during early life.

Key Findings: Based on a 12-point index of children's access to opportunities for thriving at home, childcare, school, afterschool, and in the neighborhood, the majority of children born into low-income households experienced one or none of these opportunities at any point between birth and the end of high school. On the other hand, nearly all children born into higher-income households repeatedly gained access to opportunities such as high-quality child care, excellent classroom instruction and supportive emotional climates in elementary school, and repeated chances to be involved in structured after-school programs, to name a few. By the end of high school, more than 90% of higher-income children had experienced four or more opportunities, but fewer than 20% of lower-income children had. In turn, this disparity in access to life opportunities was a powerful predictor of educational attainment and earnings at age 26, with these gaps in opportunity largely explaining why children who grew up in low-income households had low educational attainment and earnings. However, underscoring the importance of improving opportunity for disadvantaged children, each additional opportunity was most strongly and positively associated with education and earnings in adulthood for those children born into low-income households. For example, for children from low-income backgrounds, an increase from none to four opportunities was associated with increasing the likelihood of graduating from a four-year college from about 10% to about 50%.

WHY WAS IT STUDIED?

Poverty in early childhood is robustly linked with low educational attainment and low earnings in adulthood (e.g., National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023a). In efforts to understand how these lasting consequences unfold in children's lives, education researchers have increasingly rejected explanations focused on deficits within poor families and narratives that ignore the larger systemic and environmental context in which children develop. Instead, scholars have theorized that "opportunity gaps" – systemic, pervasive, and compounding disparities in access to resources that support learning and development across childhood and adolescence – are to blame (Carter & Welner, 2013; Gorski, 2017; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2023b). Evidence for the opportunity gap perspective is sizable but largely based on empirical snapshots of children's lives in one type of setting (e.g., at home or in the classroom or in their neighborhoods) at a single stage of life (e.g., during early childhood or middle childhood or adolescence). The present study is the first to directly measure the longitudinal accumulation of opportunities across settings and across children's lives, from birth through the end of high school, using assessments of five key settings: the home, early education and care, elementary school classrooms, organized after school activities, and neighborhoods.

HOW WAS IT STUDIED?

This study uses data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, a prospective longitudinal study in which children from lower-, middle-, and higher-income families were followed from birth through age 26 with frequent, gold standard measurements of their developmental contexts and experiences from early childhood through adolescence. Children's exposure to opportunities were repeatedly documented in five key settings (home, early care and education, school, afterschool, and neighborhood) across three developmental periods (early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence) as well as opportunities of upward economic mobility during this time. Opportunities were measured using a variety of measurement tools including researcher observations of homes, childcare settings, and school classrooms.

This 26-year longitudinal study provides novel and robust evidence of the differential accumulation of opportunities in the United States for children in lower- and higher-income households. While correlational, the study also points to the potential for serious consequences of differences in cumulative opportunities for educational attainment and earnings in adulthood. These findings are consistent with the "opportunity gap" hypothesis that systemic inequity in access to opportunities drives disparities in life outcomes for children from lower- and higher-income households.

Carter, P.L., & Welner, K.G. (2013). *Quality of Opportunity: A New Measure of Early Childhood Experiences*. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 34*, 1-11.

Gorski, P.C. (2017). *Rethinking Opportunity: Early Childhood Experiences, Cumulative Disadvantage, and the Role of Schools*. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 58*, 1-11.

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National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2023b). *Quality of Opportunity: A New Measure of Early Childhood Experiences*. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 58*, 1-11.

