

Proposed Research

2008-2011 Persistent Poverty and Upward Mobility Theme Project
Institute for the Social Sciences, Cornell University

Race, Family Change, and the Dynamics of Poverty

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Poverty in the United States is on the public policy agenda – perhaps more than any other time in recent memory. This project examines changing linkages between family dynamics—unwed childbearing, divorce, and cohabitation—and poverty in the United States. It focuses on the behavioral mechanisms that link the economic well-being of parental to filial generations. That is, how are marriage and family-related transitions among America’s racial minority and low-income populations associated (or not) with upward economic mobility? Why are some low-income couples able to sustain healthy relationships that are mutually satisfying, economically productive (i.e., the so-called “marriage premium” in education and earnings), and have long-term positive psychosocial and economic benefits for their growing children? A reading of the literature provides surprisingly little information about the basic parameters of marriage, marital transitions, and marital quality among America’s low-income populations, or about the specific behavioral mechanisms (e.g., school dropout or good jobs) that link intergenerational family patterns (e.g., out-of-wedlock childbearing, cohabitation, and divorce) to intergenerational poverty and welfare dependence.

The proposed project has two general objectives. The first objective is to identify and develop benchmark measures of alternative family arrangements (during childhood and early adulthood) and economic trajectories (e.g., education, work, employment, welfare receipt) in the low-income population, as well as document heterogeneity in marriage and marital quality across “at risk” low-income couples (e.g., by race and ethnicity, and relationship histories, such the number of previous partners, out-of-wedlock childbearing, relationships with partners’ custodial and non-custodial minor children). A working assumption is that unstable family patterns both reflect and reinforce persistent poverty and economic inequality, and limit upward social mobility.

The second objective is to develop more refined causal models of union transitions (dating, cohabitation, and marriage) and of relationship quality. The goal is to identify the economic causes and consequences of different marriage and family trajectories. Are disrupted family patterns (i.e., being born outside of marriage, living in high-conflict families, etc.) during childhood reproduced in adulthood? Does marriage provide a route out of poverty among low-income women and their families? The goal will be to use alternative statistical estimation strategies for this purpose (e.g., individual and fixed effects models; instrumental variables; and propensity score matching and other counterfactual approaches).

The proposed analyses will draw primarily on secondary data from two nationally representative surveys. First, the proposed analyses of intergenerational family and poverty patterns are based on longitudinal reports from over 1,500 children from waves 1 (1987-1988) and 2 (1992-1994) of the *National Survey of Families and Households*, who were ages 18 to 34 at wave 3 (in 2001-2002). These child records can be linked to both their parents’ experiences of family disruption and economic change – including the experiences of poverty – during childhood and to their own experiences in the labor and marriage markets as young adults (in 2001-2002). A second dataset is the new *Marital and Relationship Survey (MARS)*, a web-based survey of 433 low-income married couples. Unlike other surveys of this sort, information is collected independently from each partner rather than relying on proxy reports of family background, marital histories, marital quality, and their antecedents from a single partner. The design addresses questions of whether key individual and couple characteristics (e.g., maternal and paternal employment, income and wealth, and indicators of material hardship) account for husbands’ and wives’ divergent views of relationship quality and family functioning.