

## Moms and Mobility

The implicit pact that the United States makes with its workers is that, while inequality may be extreme, everyone will have a fair and equal shot at becoming well off. And indeed, most Americans are quite willing to tolerate sizeable inequality as long as they can be assured that everyone has an equal opportunity to get ahead.

This commitment has precipitated a long tradition of scholarship focusing on whether opportunities to get ahead are truly available to all. By convention, the scholars working within this tradition have asked whether children with privileged fathers (e.g., professionals, managers) do much better than children with less privileged fathers (e.g., factory workers, service workers).

Where are the mothers in such conventional analyses? Altogether ignored. That is, even though mothers are now much more likely to work and hence affect the opportunities of their children, mobility scholars have continued to simply compare the occupations of fathers with those of their children.

Has this father-focused approach biased our conclusions about how equal opportunities are? Using the General Social Survey, Emily Beller examines both paternal and maternal occupations, with the stunning finding that opportunities have become much more unequal for recent cohorts of U.S. men. This result, which conventional father-only research has obscured, suggests that the American pact may be breaking down as mobility becomes less common and opportunities become more unequally distributed.

Emily Beller. 2009. "Bringing Intergenerational Social Mobility Research into the Twenty-First Century: Why Mothers Matter." *American Sociological Review*, 74(4), 507-528.

## Do the Poor Really Pay More?

It is often argued that the poor pay more than their affluent counterparts for the same goods. Because low-income neighborhoods are thought to lack grocery stores and low-cost food retailers, it is argued that the poor are forced to shop at small shops and convenience stores where prices are much higher. Is this conventional wisdom on the mark? Do the poor really pay more?

In fact, the obverse conclusion is supported in new research by economists Christian Broda, Ephraim Leibtag, and David E. Weinstein. The poor, on average, pay less for the same food than do richer households. How can this be? Using scanner data, Broda and his colleagues find that the differences result from two sources. First, the poor are more likely to purchase food in supercenters (e.g., Walmart), where prices for identical goods are much lower. Second, even when the poor and rich are shopping in the same stores, the poor tend to pay less for identical items because they are more likely to buy goods on sale. Rather than being helpless consumers of higher-priced goods, the poor instead come out as savvy and resourceful, at least more so than their higher-income, overspending counterparts.



Christian Broda, Ephraim Leibtag, and David E. Weinstein. 2009. "The Role of Prices in Measuring the Poor's Living Standards." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 23(2), 77-97.

## It Pays to Break the Law (for Employers)

We typically understand low earnings and poverty to be the consequence of workers dropping out or otherwise failing to invest adequately in "human capital." But do low earnings also arise because the employers of low-wage workers violate employment and labor laws in ways that result in underpayment?

According to a new report released by the National Employment Law Project, the answer is a resounding "yes." Using a 2008 sample of low-wage workers in three cities, the study's authors found that employers routinely and consistently violated national employment and labor laws, with the result that two-thirds of workers experience at least one pay-related violation in the previous workweek. These violations cost the affected workers over \$2,500 annually (on average). The main

violations were (a) being paid less than the minimum wage, (b) not being paid for overtime, (c) illegal deductions, and (d) tip stealing.

This result underlines the importance of looking to employers as well as employees in addressing poverty. Although it is of course important to raise earnings by increasing the education and skills of workers, it is no less important to ensure that workers are duly paid what they in fact earn.

Annette Bernhardt, Ruth Milkman, Nik Theodore, Douglas Heckathorn, Mirabai Auer, James DeFilippis, Ana Luz Gonzalez, Victor Narro, Jason Perelshteyn, Diana Polson, and Michael Spiller. 2009. *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities*. New York, NY: National Employment Law Project.

## Mixed Reactions to Mixing Incomes

In the world of housing policy, it has become fashionable to attempt to create more mixed-income communities, the most prominent example of such policies being the federal HOPE VI program. The idea behind these policies is that by blending low-income and higher-income residents together, the low-income residents will become less isolated, will have better chances for economic mobility, and will live in neighborhoods in which parents are actively engaged in and committed to the community and community affairs.

The key question that such policies raise, and one that Laura M. Tach has now taken on, is whether these good things in-

deed come to pass in mixed-income communities. Are these communities truly as rich in cross-income social ties and networks as advertised? The evidence suggests that, just as one would want, the new low-income residents of these communities do create many social ties and are committed to their communities and community affairs. This commitment arises because, for residents coming from low-income communities, the new neighborhood is understood as an opportunity that should be cultivated and exploited.

The flip side, however, of this initiative is that high-income neighbors actively resist the creation of social ties with the low-income newcomers and appear

to withdraw their commitment to the neighborhood. These residents come to understand the neighborhood as a source of risk and threat and thus actively attempt to minimize contact with their new low-income neighbors.

The benefits of mixed-income housing are thus more mixed than one might ideally want. Understanding how these processes unfold over time will shed light on exactly how mixed-income communities work — and how they don't.

Laura M. Tach. "More Than Bricks and Mortar: Neighborhood Frames, Social Processes, and the Mixed-Income Redevelopment of a Public Housing Project." *City & Community*, 8(3), 269-299.

## Children of the Prison Boom

There has been a substantial increase over the last 30 years in the proportion of the U.S. population that has been in prison. Although this prison boom is well documented, we know less about how it has affected childhood in America, especially among vulnerable population groups. The children of black or less-educated parents are, for example, surely more likely to grow up with a parent in prison (simply because prison experiences are more common among blacks and the less educated), but we do not know the extent to which these children are at risk of having an imprisoned parent.

At least, not until now. According to new demographic analysis by Christopher Wildeman, the differential risks of parental imprisonment are astoundingly large. Whereas only one in 25 white children born in 1990 had a parent imprisoned, a full one in four black children born in 1990 had a parent imprisoned. If we further restrict attention to children of black parents who were high school dropouts, we find that 50.5 percent of those children experience childhood with an imprisoned father.

These results reveal that our decision to build a prison society not only profoundly affects the experience of adulthood but also the experience of childhood. For many children in poverty, the experience of parental imprisonment has sadly become the norm.

Christopher Wildeman. 2009. "Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage." *Demography*, 46(2), 265-280.



## Unenrolled and in the Shadows

When researchers calculate education statistics, they often use data collected from students who are attending school. But for some groups of youth, particularly foreign-born immigrant youth, it is not uncommon to remain outside the school system altogether and thus never appear in such data. The school-based samples on which we base so much of our understanding of intergroup differences in educational outcomes may therefore be biased.

What happens, then, when we include immigrants who never enroll in school in our analyses? According to census data marshaled by R.S. Oropesa and Nancy S. Lansdale, enrollment rates are much altered. Indeed, when immigrant youth who have never enrolled in school are included, the percentage of Mexican-born youths aged 16–17 in school drops from 86 to 70. And, conversely, the percentage of such youths who are idle (neither working nor in school) jumps from 8 to 14 percent. The unfortunate implication: The extent of disadvantage experienced by Mexican youth is more extreme than scholars have long thought.

R.S. Oropesa and Nancy S. Lansdale. 2009. "Why Do Immigrant Youths Who Never Enroll in U.S. Schools Matter? School Enrollment among Mexicans and Non-Hispanic Whites." *Sociology of Education*, 82(3), 240-266.