

## Who Is Really Left Behind?

Under the No Child Left Behind law of 2003, schools are held accountable for improving children's academic achievement, a formula that places a premium on developing accurate measures of "improving children's academic achievement." Currently, schools are assessed as succeeding or failing based on whether their students meet (a) absolute levels of academic achievement, and (b) standards for growth in achievement over time.

As Douglas B. Downey, Paul T. von Hippel, and Melanie Hughes point out, these measures could lead to substantial errors, as each captures the influence of both school and nonschool factors in contributing to student achievement. Using national data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Cohort), the authors derive a new measure of pure school effects, defined as the difference between learning rates in the summer (when school is not in session) and learning rates during the school year. This difference separates out the effects of school and nonschool environments and may accordingly be understood as capturing the true school effect on learning. The authors find that, among schools that were previously classified as failing, less than half are in fact failing in terms of true effects. The bottom line: We can't establish meaningful systems of accountability without first identifying which schools truly are in need of improvement.

Douglas B. Downey, Paul T. von Hippel, and Melanie Hughes. 2008. "Are 'Failing' Schools Really Failing? Removing the Influence of Non-school Factors from Measures of School Quality." *Sociology of Education*, 81(3), 242-270.

## Still Dreaming

The current recession has rocked nearly every corner of the American economy, creating rapidly rising unemployment and public furor over the extent of economic inequality. But have these trends also rocked our beliefs that economic mobility is still feasible for ourselves and our children? If so, this could spell trouble for the long-term viability of the American dream.

According to new findings from the Economic Mobility Project (run by the Pew Charitable Trusts), the answer to this question is a decided "no." The project shows, to the contrary, that Americans continue to have much faith in their prospects for economic mobility. Indeed, approximately 80 percent of the population still believes that Americans can get ahead. Moreover, fully 62 percent believe that their own children will achieve a better standard of living than they have, while only 10 percent think their children will fare worse. At the same time, most Americans also favor policies that support economic mobility, policies such as job training, early childhood education, and college loans or tuition support.

Despite the continuous glut of gloom and doom news, Americans thus remain a sunny lot, with downright Obamian hopefulness about the future.

The full survey and analysis is available at <http://economicmobility.org/poll2009>.



## The Dusk of the Dowagers

The 1960s is typically thought of as the dawn of women's long march toward economic equality with men. After all, ever more women began entering the workplace then, and wage and earnings inequality have declined markedly in the decades since, especially in the 1970s and 1980s (see Pamela Stone's article in this issue). Is, however, the 1960s likewise a benchmark decade when one considers the gender gap in wealth?

The surprising answer, according to a new paper by Lena Edlund and Wojciech Kopczuk, is a rather counterintuitive inversion of the "march toward equality" narra-

tive. Using data from IRS estate tax returns, Edlund and Kopczuk show that the share of women among the very wealthy peaked in the late 1960s at around one-half and has declined since (to about one-third).

Why this reversal in the trend despite women's recent advances in the workplace? The simple answer is increased wealth mobility and the rise of employment-based wealth. Since the late 1960s, the composition of the very wealthy has changed, with a decline in dynastic wealth and an increase in wealth mobility. The very wealthy are now more likely to be high-powered CEOs and top managers rather than the "old

money" of the past. As incomes at the very top took off in the United States, it became increasingly possible to achieve wealth via employment alone, and the older road of direct inheritance has accordingly been superseded. Until women crack the uppermost echelons of the labor market, we can therefore expect gender inequality in wealth to persist.

Lena Edlund and Wojciech Kopczuk. 2009. "Women, Wealth, and Mobility." *American Economic Review*, 99(1): 146-78.

## Peer Pressure in Black and White

The most sensitive barometer of racial or ethnic equality may well be the frequency of inter-group romantic partnerships. That is, when such barriers to inter-group romances fall altogether, a minority group might be considered fully assimilated. Although legal barriers to interracial romances have of course disappeared, the available evidence suggests that unions between members of different racial and ethnic groups nonetheless remain fairly infrequent (if increasing). This begs the question: Are such unions infrequent because of informal sanctions against them?

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Derek A. Kreager indeed finds much evidence of informal sanctions. By examining school dating histories over time, Kreager shows that students who begin an interracial relationship are at greater risk of encountering peer difficulties at school, defined as feeling unsafe, unhappy, and unconnected to peers at school. These peer difficulties are, moreover, strongest when intergroup romances involve black students.

It follows that easing legal barriers is just a step. Despite the decline in anti-miscegenation laws and other formal barriers to interracial romances, informal sanctions are unfortunately alive and well.

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Derek A. Kreager. 2008. "Guarded Borders: Adolescent Interracial Romance and Peer Trouble at School." *Social Forces*, 87(2), 887–910.

## The Intergenerational Ripples of Job Displacement

Losing a job typically leads to at least a short-term loss in earnings. We tend to assume, however, that the costs of losing a job are borne principally while the displaced person is out of work. Do the effects of job displacement diffuse more widely in some cases? Is it possible, for example, that job displacement harms not only those who are displaced, but also their family members years down the road?

This is precisely the possibility addressed by Philip Oreopoulos, Marianne Page, and Ann Huff Stevens in a recent paper that examines the long-term effects of firm closures in Canada. The authors find that, when the children of displaced workers reach adulthood, they wind up earning 9 percent less, on average, than the children of non-displaced workers. They are also more likely to receive unemployment insurance and other social assistance. Moreover, and perhaps unsurprisingly, these long-lasting negative intergenerational effects occur mainly among families at the bottom of the income distribution. The unfortunate implication is that ongoing job losses in the current recession will likely have effects that play out long after any recovery takes place.

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Philip Oreopoulos, Marianne Page, and Ann Huff Stevens. 2008. "The Intergenerational Effects of Worker Displacement." *Journal of Labor Economics*, 26(3), 455–483.

## Stressed Out

It has long been known that children born into low-income households perform relatively poorly on academic achievement tests. But what are the mechanisms underlying this relationship? The competing accounts are legion: Some scholars suggest that low-income children suffer from inadequate parenting or poor cognitive stimulation, others emphasize the poor quality of teachers and schools in low-income neighborhoods, while yet others argue that poor children suffer from real biological deficits that impede learning and achievement.

The latest research suggests that, insofar as biology does matter, it is not so much an independent cause as an interaction with poor environmental conditions. In a new article by Gary W. Evans and Michelle A. Schamberg, it was found that young adults who grew up in poverty have a relatively poor working memory, which in turn hampers their performance on academic achievement tests. The main mechanism, moreover, through which poverty causes poor memory is elevated chronic stress, as marked by allostatic load (which refers to wear and tear on various organs and tissues in the body in response to stressful situations and stimuli).

The implied causal chain: Growing up in a poor neighborhood leads to chronic stress (as indexed by allostatic load), chronic stress in turn damages memory, and poor memory lowers performance on academic achievement tests. Although biology thus matters, it turns out that biology (in the form of a working memory) is itself a function of poverty and stress. It follows that the environment may loom even larger than thought in understanding why poor children continue to lag.

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Gary W. Evans and Michelle A. Schamberg. 2009. "Childhood Poverty, Chronic Stress, and Adult Working Memory." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106(13), 6545–6549.