

Preface

In a provocative article published a decade ago, Sara McLanahan (2004) described the diverging destinies of American families and children. She noted that women were following two trajectories, one involving delays in childrearing and increases in employment, and the other involving high levels of divorce and non-marital childbearing. Women with the most economic opportunities were following the first trajectory, whereas women with the fewest opportunities were following the second. Because of these dynamics, changes in family demographics were exacerbating social class disparities in children's access to economic and social resources.

The diverging destinies of children have been unfolding within the context of three decades of growing economic inequality in the United States. Moreover, the Great Recession, which began in December 2007, increased economic hardship for millions of families. Although it ended officially in June 2009, rates of child poverty and unemployment, particularly among young adults, remain higher today (in 2014) than they had been a decade earlier. Parallel economic recessions in European countries have created similar problems for families and children.

These social trends provided the impetus for the 21st Annual Penn State Symposium on Family Issues held in October 2013. The Symposium focused on families and inequality, and the chapters in the current volume are based on papers presented at that meeting. The symposium was organized around four central topics: (1) Children's diverging destinies, (2) Social inequality, parenting, and child development, (3) Social inequality and the transition to adulthood, and (4) Program and policy responses to growing family inequality. Each session included a lead paper and commentary by several discussants. As in previous symposia, the paper presenters and discussants represented a range of social science disciplines.

In the lead chapter in Part I, Sara McLanahan, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, and her colleague Wade Jacobsen update the diverging destinies thesis. They extend McLanahan's (2004) paper by including more recent data from the United States, Japan, Australia, and the European Union. Trends in these countries are generally consistent with the notion that changes in family behavior are increasing parental resources for children with well-educated mothers and reducing parental resources for children with less educated mothers. In his

comments on the McLanahan and Jacobsen chapter, Philip Cohen, Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, focuses on policy implications. He argues that much of the deprivation associated with single motherhood in the United States could be ameliorated through increasing educational levels and providing more public resources to single mothers and their children. Lynne Vernon-Feagans, Professor of Early Childhood, Intervention, and Literacy at the University of North Carolina, and her fellow authors focus on how the 24 h economy has transformed the lives of less educated mothers in rural America. As they note, the decline of manufacturing and the rise of the service economy have increased the percentage of parents working nonstandard hours, with problematic consequences for children and family life. Tim Smeeding, Professor of Public Affairs and Economics and Director of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin, focuses his comments on the key steps children and youth must achieve to reach the American dream of middle class life. He argues that recent changes in the economy and family behavior are resulting in less upward mobility, equality of opportunity, and social progress in American society.

Part II begins with a chapter by Ariel Kalil, a developmental psychologist and Professor in the Harris School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. She argues that inequality can be traced to the differences in how advantaged and disadvantaged parents interact with their children. From this perspective, helping parents to prepare their children for educational success is likely to be the most effective way of reducing inequality in the long run. In his comments on Kalil's chapter, Flávio Cunha, Assistant Professor of Economics at Rice University, develops a model in which the behavior of low- and high-income parents is "subjectively rational." According to this model, parents employ parenting styles that are optimal given their subjective assessments of the constraints under which they operate. Martha Wadsworth, Associate Professor of Psychology at Penn State University, and her colleague, Jarl Ahlqvist, argue similarly that parenting is a mediating variable rather than the root cause of the achievement gap between children from low-income and affluent families. In their alternative model, income, wealth, and inequality are the basic causes of parenting behavior and other family and environmental conditions that affect children's cognitive and academic performance. Narayan Sastry, a Research Professor with the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, also focuses on factors that affect parenting. His review emphasizes the debilitating effects of the psychological stress that frequently accompanies poverty and residence in impoverished neighborhoods.

In the lead chapter in Part III, Ingrid Schoon, Professor of Human Development and Social Policy at the University of London, shifts the focus to the transition to adulthood. She points out that most discussions of this topic are based on a simple distinction between late (optimal) or early (suboptimal) adoption of adult roles. Contrary to this view, her chapter emphasizes the complex, multiple pathways that contemporary youth follow to reach adulthood. Comments from Jeremy Staff, Associate Professor of Sociology and Criminology at Penn State University, and his colleagues focus on multilevel latent class models as a method for analyzing adult role trajectories. As they demonstrate, these models can be useful in showing how

socioeconomic factors in the family of origin set the stage for diversity in the pathways that young people follow. Bradford Wilcox, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia and his colleague, Charles Stokes, examine the role of family structure in shaping aspects of the transition to adulthood. Their analysis presents evidence that family structure during adolescence is related to young adults' odds of experiencing two outcomes, graduating from college and having a nonmarital birth, net of income and other family-of-origin variables. The final commentary in this section is from Matthew Diemer, Associate Professor of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Special Education at Michigan State University. He argues that distinct domains of social class (such as parental income, wealth, education, and occupational status) affect the transition to adulthood differently. He points out, for example, that parental income is more closely related to the ability of youth to achieve residential independence and home ownership than is parental education.

In Part IV, Ron Haskins, Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, provides an informative overview of trends during the last several decades in family structure, economic inequality, and government support for single mothers. As he argues, the growth of single parent families has placed an increasing proportion of children at risk for poor academic outcomes, with problematic consequences for upward mobility. Because programs to reduce the growth of single-mother families have not been effective, future policy efforts should focus more strongly on direct efforts to improve the financial status of single mothers and their children. Cybele Raver, Professor of Applied Psychology at New York University, and her colleagues, Amanda Leigh Roy and Emily Pressler, supplement Haskins' paper by focusing on poverty-related risks for children. Their approach emphasizes the dynamic aspect of poverty and how multiple risk factors can accumulate over time for children in disadvantaged families. Kathryn Edin, Bloomberg Distinguished Professor in the Department of Sociology and the Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health at Johns Hopkins University, and her colleagues focus on the diverging destinies of fathers. As they point out, low-income men tend to have children early in relationships and often find it difficult to form stable relationships with their new families. They argue for interventions that (a) reduce early and unplanned childrearing among young men and (b) help these men to remain connected with their children, including enforced visitation agreements for nonresident fathers who pay child support.

A tradition of the Penn State Family Symposium series is to conclude each volume with a chapter written by two early stage family scholars. The concluding chapter of this volume was written by two senior graduate students at Penn State University, Maggie L. Thorsen (Sociology) and Bo-Ram Kim (Human Development and Family Studies). Their charge was to bring their disciplinary backgrounds to bear on the ideas and themes that emerged from the four sessions of the conference. The authors use their chapter to discuss the reciprocal links between income inequality and family structure and to discuss the different types of policies

and programs that might follow from the insights and evidence discussed during the symposium.

The growth in income inequality, and the corresponding diverging destinies of families in the US and other western countries, are some of the most distinctive features of contemporary society and create pressing challenges for family policy. We believe this volume of outstanding papers will help to define the issues, spark alternative ways of thinking about recent trends, and suggest strategies for improving the lives of children and parents in this time of social change.

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