

# Chapter 1 | “Different Privileges That Different People Inherit”: Social Reproduction and the Transition to Adulthood

ONE IMPORTANT, LONG-HELD American belief is that the family a child is born into does not determine her destiny. Yet increasingly, social science has called that core belief into question. Economists show that the rate of intergenerational mobility in the United States is surprisingly low compared to other wealthy countries.<sup>1</sup> Parents’ socioeconomic status is not the only thing holding children back—race matters too. If a child is born black and poor, for example, her chances of ending up in poverty as an adult are one and a half times higher than they are for her white counterpart from a poor family.<sup>2</sup> Figuring out why the American Dream is so far out of reach for some has been social science’s focus for decades.

In 1982, Karl Alexander and Doris Entwisle set out to explore how children adjusted to their first years of schooling. What began as a modest study of early elementary school students ended up as a groundbreaking twenty-five-year look at the relative importance of family background and schooling in the lives of urban children. The Beginning School Study enrolled about eight hundred young black and white children and their parents from twenty elementary schools in Baltimore and followed them through age thirty, surveying them repeatedly and collecting data on their schools, teachers, test scores, and grades. Three decades later, their 2014 book (with Linda Olson), *The Long Shadow*, offered an answer to the question that scholars have long posed: who gets ahead?<sup>3</sup> Although variation in some aspects of their schooling did contribute to children’s outcomes at age thirty, parents’ income and race yielded a much more dramatic effect.

As Alexander put it, “The implication is where you start out in life is where you end up.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Long Shadow* shows that while 45 percent of children with higher-income parents ended up with college degrees, only 4 percent of those with poor parents did. At age twenty-two, 89 percent of white high school dropouts were employed, compared to fewer than half that figure—40 percent—of blacks without a high school degree. White men from poor backgrounds had the lowest rate of college attendance and completion of any group, yet they fared better than their black counterparts because more had access to lucrative blue-collar jobs through their social networks. The industrial and construction sectors employed 45 percent of white men in the study, but only 15 percent of black males. Even among those in these working-class jobs, white men’s earnings were nearly twice those of African American men.<sup>5</sup>

This isn’t just a Baltimore story. Other scholars have shown that Alexander and Entwisle’s results, while stark, have been reflected nationwide over the last thirty years. Family background and a history of racially discriminatory housing policies have continued to yield a strong influence on where children end up in life, and being born poor and black suppresses life chances to a frightening degree.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these sobering findings, we argue that social reproduction—children ending up “stuck” in the same place as their parents—is far from inevitable. We show that social policy has the power to interrupt the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, and that when it does, children’s trajectories can change dramatically. Young people’s agency matters too. Even those coming from some of the most challenging situations can reach toward a brighter future if they manage to take hold of key resources that confer meaning and identity—a strong sense of what they are “about” and not about. Yet this book also shows that, despite their resilience and hard work, the strong undertow of the social origins of disadvantaged youth—the long shadow—can claw at their ambitions “like crabs in a bucket,” as one youth said. When combined with the institutional traps that youth encounter in the pursuit of postsecondary education, these forces can shortchange the dreams of even the grittiest and most determined.

Twenty years after Alexander began enrolling first-graders in the Beginning School Study, we initiated a decade-long study of a cohort of Baltimore parents and youth who had hailed from public housing in the mid-1990s, most of them from four notorious high-rise developments in Baltimore City: Flag House Courts, Lexington Terrace, Lafayette Courts, and the Murphy Homes. Others came from highly distressed low-rises across the city. The study was an attempt to understand the transition to

adulthood for poor minority young people, a group who had largely been left out of the literature on that topic. And while we did indeed accomplish that aim, our research also provided a unique opportunity to look under the hood of studies like *The Long Shadow* to understand, in rich detail, the processes and mechanisms underlying the disturbing immobility and high rate of social reproduction that Alexander and others have documented. Perhaps more importantly, we were also able to explore how to interrupt that cycle.

The youth in our study shared unique origins. As young children, all lived in highly distressed public housing projects that were some of the most physically and socially degraded spaces in our nation. Their parents' characteristics could hardly have been more disadvantaged. Only about one-quarter of these youth had a parent with a high school education, much less a college degree (only 13 percent ever attempted college).<sup>7</sup> Just under half had a parent who had been incarcerated while growing up, while just as many told us that their mother or father had struggled with alcohol or drugs. More than two-thirds had a parent or primary caregiver who was employed in 2010, but many of them worked at low-wage jobs and struggled to maintain steady work. As a consequence, nearly all of the youth in our study had spent the majority of their childhood years in poverty.

Yet in the mid-1990s, when these children were zero to ten, their parents had signed up for a program called Moving To Opportunity (MTO) that would enable them to escape the projects via a voucher with a special stipulation—they would have to find an apartment in a low-poverty neighborhood and remain there for at least a year. Because the program was part of a federal experiment, some of these parents won the coin flip and got the voucher while others—who landed in the control group—did not. Of the winners, roughly 60 percent managed to move with the program. Although our study sampled families across these groups, our book does not concentrate on MTO.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we consider more broadly how young people from deeply disadvantaged origins navigate the transition to adulthood.

This book centers mostly on the 2010 wave of our study. In that wave we focused on young people who were between fifteen and twenty-four, and because of our interest in observing youth in the transition to adulthood, we oversampled those who were nineteen or older. From a sample of 200 youth—stratified by gender, program group (experimental or control), and age—who had participated in a 2009 survey wave as part of the mobility experiment, we interviewed 150 young women and men between June and November 2010. We spent several hours with each of these young people—sitting at kitchen tables, on front stoops, at booths in

McDonald's, in basement bedrooms, in cars, or at the park. In 2012, we identified twenty youth who we felt represented the range of outcomes—positive and negative—that we had observed in 2010. After an initial lengthy conversation to catch up, we arranged an informal interaction with each youth at a place and time of his or her choosing. We hung out with these youth at home, at the mall, at a restaurant, or the park; on a drive around the neighborhood; during a trip to an ice cream shop; or, in one case, a visit to a doctor's office for a sonogram. We also accompanied these youth to important events in their lives: a child custody hearing, an eviction, a move into an apartment, and so on. The frequency and length of these interactions varied according to the willingness and availability of each young adult.

One particularly rich feature of the study is that there is significant overlap in the interviews and observations among family members. By luck of random draw, one-third (fifty-one) of the youth we interviewed in 2010 were children of parents we had interviewed in 2003–2004. Thirteen of the youth had also been interviewed in that round. Another fifteen had been observed in school, where we had also interviewed their teachers. And in eighteen cases we had conducted interviews with one of their siblings in the earlier wave. (We provide a more detailed description of our study in appendix A.)

How were these young people faring in early adulthood? At first glance, the experiences of these youth would seem to support the social reproduction narrative, much like that told by Alexander and his colleagues. After following these youth over a decade's time, we observed that around 20 percent had dropped out before completing high school. And while most graduates tried some form of postsecondary education, the rate of completion was abysmally low. Only fifteen of the eighty-six who had graduated from high school matriculated to a four-year college, and of those, two had already dropped out by the study's end. Most of the rest were attending community college or a for-profit trade school, often in fits and starts. By the end of our study, thirty-eight were still enrolled in some form of postsecondary education. Forty had gone directly into the labor market after graduation, but at the time of our last interview none had a job that could lift a family of four above the poverty line. Twenty-seven were neither in school nor employed when we last spoke with them. And nearly one in five, by their own admission, had gotten involved in the drug trade or committed a serious crime—crimes for which most of them could have been charged as felons—at some point during adolescence or early adulthood.

But that is only one way to tell the story. In-depth conversations and

informal interactions with these youth and their parents over that decade revealed that at the cusp of adulthood they were not as different from their more affluent peers as one might expect. Most were, in fact, doing exactly what young people their age are supposed to be doing—discovering what they were “about,” cultivating dreams, and engaging in a quest to “become somebody.” Most—more than eight out of ten—had not become caught up in delinquent behavior or crime. Instead, the large majority had bought into the dream of college, a career, homeownership, marriage, and family.

Another way to understand the lives of these youth is in comparison to their parents’ lives. Here we see that more than seven in ten of our youth completed high school (or a GED) compared to only about one-quarter in the parents’ generation. Just over half of the youth not enrolled in high school had entered college or trade school, as compared to only 13 percent of their parents. More than 80 percent of the young people not in school either held a job when we last spoke with them or had done so recently. In contrast, only about one in four had parents who had been employed in the mid-1990s (when they were in their late twenties or early thirties on average). In sum, as shown in greater detail in chapter 2, we see large intergenerational gains in the domains of educational attainment, employment, and risk behavior.

At the heart of this book is the complex reality that both ways of reading these numbers are true. Our story is one of a glass half full and a glass half empty. These youth achieved far more than their parents. Most showed remarkable perseverance and optimism in reaching for mainstream goals while resisting the street as they moved through adolescence and into young adulthood. Many aspired to be nurses, electricians, police officers, social workers, restaurateurs, military officers, or teachers. Yet when we left them in 2012, too few had become all that they hoped to be—and were probably capable of becoming.

This book considers what inspired those intergenerational gains before going on to describe what made the gains possible—the rich and vital inner lives that sustained these young people as they fought against the riptide of family background and ongoing neighborhood risk while reaching for a better future. Finally, these youths’ unfolding lives cast a bright light on the exploitative traps in the labor and postsecondary educational markets, often explicitly aimed at young people pushed by tough economic circumstances to take an expedited path to adulthood. We find that these traps cut dreams short and kept even some of the hardest-working, most ambitious youth from achieving their potential, relegating them instead to low-wage, unstable jobs at or near the bottom of the economy.

## THE OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Given that these young people were living in or near Baltimore—one of America's toughest cities by most measures—and they were reaching adulthood right as the Great Recession hit, how did so many complete high school, enroll in some kind of postsecondary training, stay clear of trouble, and find work? Our questions only grew when we contrasted what we gleaned from the youth with the narratives we had gathered from the cohort of 124 parents we interviewed in 2003–2004. These kids' lives were nothing like their parents' lives. As indicated earlier, when we talked with the parent cohort, many admitted that they had been or were currently addicted to alcohol or drugs, quite a few had been to prison and jail, few had finished high school, and only a handful had even tried college.

Looking deeper into these young people's residential trajectories, we noticed something we had not considered before. Granted, those who moved by using the special voucher from the housing mobility program saw a huge reduction in neighborhood poverty. *But virtually everyone else also ended up in less-poor neighborhoods over time.* How was this possible? As it turned out, a number of policy initiatives on the federal and state levels, such as HOPE VI, led to a huge drop in the supply of public housing units in the city of Baltimore, virtually all of which had been clustered within the city's highest-poverty neighborhoods. Nearly all of the complexes our families had been living in when the study began were either partially or totally destroyed, often within a few years after the housing mobility experiment began. So many of those who had been relegated to the control group moved too—usually with a voucher—and almost always to neighborhoods that were far less poor. Citywide, with that wave of demolition, the number of Baltimoreans living in areas of highly concentrated poverty fell dramatically, as did the number of neighborhoods that remained extremely poor. In a city where segregation runs deep, racial segregation measures hardly moved, but those for income segregation did.

We interviewed parents and youth for the first time in 2003–2004, and while some remained in public housing developments, many had left—through the MTO program, because their unit had been lost in the wave of demolition that swept the city in the 1990s and early 2000s, or for other reasons. By the time we returned in 2010, only 15 of the 150 youth we would interview that summer remained in public housing. As we discuss in chapter 2, MTO and HOPEVI were very distinct policy approaches. Each had considerable shortcomings, and neither policy helped many families enter what we would consider high opportunity neighborhoods with significantly higher performing schools. As a result, most still spent

the majority of their childhoods in communities that contained considerable risk—the average rate of neighborhood poverty over the fifteen or so years since their parents had been randomly assigned through MTO was about 30 percent. Even so, this was a large improvement from where they had come from: in those neighborhoods poverty had averaged over 50 percent but could reach 60 or even 70 percent.

Thus, the question we consider in chapter 2 is whether there is at least speculative evidence for what the social science literature calls a “neighborhood effect.” In short, we consider what happened to a group of children with highly disadvantaged origins who were offered access to a much broader range of imagined futures than had been available to their parents—many of whom had spent much of their lives in public housing or other very poor neighborhoods. Did these youth benefit not only from living in less-poor neighborhoods but also from a greater exposure to neighbors who worked, held college degrees, and lived in two-parent families? Were these young people’s behaviors and aspirations in fact a profound testament to the power of neighborhoods to transform lives?

Despite the large intergenerational gains observed across a wide array of outcomes—from risky behavior to educational attainment to employment—we observed significant heterogeneity in the paths of these youth as they approached adulthood. We saw youth who enrolled in college and those who tried to find stability in the labor market, but we also saw disconnected youth—those who were floundering and a few who turned to the street, hustling drugs. What separates young people who stay on track from those who do not? For every two and a half young people in our study who were on track in 2010, there was one young adult who had fallen through the cracks. In chapter 3, we try to identify the key ingredient that distinguished who ended up where.

As we began to explore this question we looked at all of the usual suspects. Were the winners the kids who landed in the best neighborhoods? Did they have the least-troubled home lives or go to the best schools? Though we saw some associations when we considered these possibilities, particularly for the handful of youth who had been lucky enough to gain entrance to one of the top Baltimore magnet high schools (as we show in chapter 5), there was no clear story to be told. About as many kids in the experimental group succeeded in staying on track as the controls; even many with troubled home lives or parents addicted to drugs managed to stay away from trouble and adhere to mainstream norms and aspirations, while some kids from strong families strayed.

Another candidate from the literature on youth achievement remained to be explored. James Heckman, an economist from the University of Chicago, and Angela Duckworth, a psychologist from the University of Penn-

sylvania, along with others, have introduced pioneering new research showing the importance of personality traits like delayed gratification and self-control, which can be measured at an early age through novel experiments such as the famed marshmallow test (give a kid a marshmallow, tell her if she resists eating it that she will get two, and then see how long she holds out). Over time the most consequential of these personality traits—grit, the persistence toward long-term goals—proved to be a better predictor of adult outcomes than traditional indicators of cognitive ability, as measured by test scores. This research has encouraged a wave of efforts to boost noncognitive skills and character traits in young people.

Intrigued by these findings, we began to comb the narratives for instances where kids showed evidence of grit—which was where we ran into trouble. Given these young people’s origins, examples of grit abounded. Almost all had had to endure—and *persist in the face of*—any number of almost unbelievable hardships: the death of multiple loved ones, sometimes as a result of violence; homelessness; hunger; older siblings in prison or jail; removal from the parental home on allegations of child abuse and neglect; spells in foster care; and directly witnessing murder or coming across a dead body in an alley. More generally, even given the high prevalence of on-track behaviors and goals, the street was a force that many of them had to reckon with each and every day. It pulled at them, tempted them, and polluted public spaces in such a way that a simple trip home from school could be an exercise in deft navigation that bore some semblance to a military operation.<sup>9</sup> In short, it required remarkable grit just to get through the day—the kind of grit that most people from middle-class origins cannot even imagine being able to muster as a child.

Over time, among the families we were lucky enough to follow, we began to see a wearing down of sorts during adolescence. Despite the decrease in neighborhood poverty and the increase in exposure to neighbors with characteristics that reflected mainstream norms, many of the youth still had to deal with more than their share of crime, low-performing schools, and family trauma. A pall often set in. Some youth were becoming listless, sleeping long hours, failing to turn in homework assignments, procrastinating about college or trade school applications. It seemed as if some were beginning to lose hope. In the face of these challenges, youth needed not only aspiration but inspiration—something to keep them motivated enough to do the gritty things it took to achieve dreams. And during this time about half of our youth did in fact discover a “life raft,” an “outlet,” a “passion in life” that seemed to spark renewed effort. Adolescents who found a consuming, defining passion—what we call an “identity project”—were much more likely to remain on track than those who did not. In telling their stories, young people often explicitly credited their



passion as the source of the fortitude they needed to beat the streets and work toward a brighter future. Therefore, one question this book addresses is whether these narratives do indeed provide evidence that grit, which is thought to be a skill carefully cultivated through years of socialization and possibly a feature of inborn temperament, can also be inspired by acquiring a passion during adolescence.

In keeping with this notion, we show that the youth who best managed to persevere found a passion through an identity project, which can serve as a virtual bridge between challenging present circumstances and an uncertain, but hoped-for, future. Through identity projects, youth often distanced themselves from family and neighborhood influences that threatened to bring them down, while connecting with others, like teachers, programs, clergy, and coaches, who helped them thrive. Identity projects could spring from activities at places like school, work, or other institutional sites, or interests picked up from friends or family. Some youth were set apart from the pack by a unique interest—such as writing poetry, listening to punk rock or country music (these interests traditionally seen as the choice of white youth are seen as unique when chosen by a black youth), customizing cars, building pigeon coops, attending anime festivals, pursuing modern dance, or writing “beats” and selling them online. These activities protected and distinguished these youth, providing them with a sense of pride and accomplishment instead of the “drama” they saw around them. Others adopted identity projects that were more directly tied to school and a career. These aspirations transformed everyday activities into kindling for careers and sparked the grit that helped them beat the streets and persevere in school.

While these outlets helped some complete a training program or pursue a four-year degree, for others, identity projects helped them remain hopeful even in the face of a dead-end job—for instance, reconceptualizing a job at Chick-fil-A as an entrée into a career in the hospitality industry (Jackson told us, “It’s in hospitality, but it’s not the part of hospitality that I [ultimately] wanna do”) or envisioning a CNA degree as the first critical step on the road to becoming a doctor. Still others hung on by creating a potent sense of identity—a rapper, an author, a committed father—that had little to do with a career. These self-conceptions and the concrete day-to-day activities they entailed kept these young people going and gave them dignity when they had little else to prop them up.

Not all youth in our study found an outlet that allowed them to beat the street, as we show in chapter 4. For a few, the street itself created a sense of meaning and identity. But most youth lacking an identity project were just stuck. They had no map, no foothold on their future. Often, they could not shake loose the dark and traumatic experiences of their childhood and fell through the cracks when schools and other institutions did

not catch them. Some ended up homeless, alcoholic, socially isolated, suicidal, or completely disconnected from school and work. In many ways, it was the experiences of these youth that highlighted the importance of following a passion.

We don't argue that the search for meaning or identity is unique to these disadvantaged African American youth. Erik Erikson noted more than half a century ago that the adolescent and early adult years are a time of independence and identity formation, a period when youth explore the boundaries and possibilities of who they might be.<sup>10</sup> But we contend that the stakes are arguably much higher during the transition to adulthood for youth such as ours: their identity work was not just about discovery, it was about survival. They had to move emotional and psychological mountains not often encountered by their middle-class peers. As Antonio, twenty-three, put it, "This city can kill you . . . but if you can survive it, you can survive anywhere. . . . If you can weather the storm, and make it through that, and not get into any trouble, it's a blessing."<sup>11</sup>

In chapter 5, we begin to consider what happened as these youth transitioned to adulthood and why their launches, despite such promising prospects, did not yield bigger payoffs. This research was originally conceived with the goal of incorporating the experiences of a cohort of disadvantaged youth into the scholarly narrative surrounding the transition to adulthood. Drawing on mostly middle-class youth—or at least those who were more advantaged than the youth we followed—a number of scholars, including the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood*, have produced a portrait of America's young adults that, in its popularized form, looks a lot like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys in Never-Never Land: twentysomethings transitioning at such a glacial pace that it seems that they might never grow up.<sup>12</sup> Arnett coined the term "emerging adulthood" to describe this new reality in which, rather than moving in a relatively quick and orderly fashion through life stages—high school, college, career, marriage, children—middle-class young adults are stretching the process out (as indicated by the subtitle: *The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*). This body of literature has proved useful for understanding this critical life stage—at least for the middle class.

But our question was whether this characterization fit the young adults in our story, and if not, whether we could draw on the life experiences of our youth to describe how their pathway from adolescence to adulthood was different, and why. Our 2003–2004 study had included several dozen high school students when they were not quite old enough to be fully engaged in that transition but were moving along the path. If anything, these youth seemed to be in a hurry to transition into adult roles. Thus, we had strong reasons to suspect that the story of the young adults we were set to

interview in 2010 would diverge from Arnett's account. And it did: unlike their middle-class peers, most were on an expedited path to adulthood.

Yet we saw something else as well. One after another, those who had been the most promising as children—those we had seen as having the greatest potential when we interviewed them, their parents, their siblings, and their teachers in 2003–2004—seemed to be falling short of what they could have achieved, at least in our view.<sup>13</sup> For many of these youth, there had been clear validation of their academic skills beyond their own self-report: parents' and teachers' reports of aptitude, top grades, admission to highly competitive magnet schools, or high scores on achievement tests or the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT). Yet kids who had aspired to be nurses were ending up as nurse's aides. Bridget, a girl of exceptional promise who had aspired to attend an Ivy League school and pursue a career in law or medicine, ended up enlisting in the U.S. Army at eighteen and abandoning plans for her higher education. Bob, who had dreamed of attending Johns Hopkins University and becoming an engineer, ended up working three low-wage jobs so that he could move out of a West Baltimore rooming house and into a two-bedroom apartment with his fiancée. Most of these young people still merited the designation "on track"—they were still working or in school, and they remained committed to mainstream goals. Yet certainly there was a profound degree of what the economists Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery have termed "under matching."<sup>14</sup> And it seemed to us that even that term—which has often been used to characterize youth who could get into Ivies but end up at nonselective schools—could not begin to describe what we saw.

Thus, perhaps the most critical theme this volume explores is how the process occurred. In chapter 5, we find that the legacy of deep racial subjugation, intergenerational poverty, and resource-depleted neighborhoods often pulled these youth down, as one said, like "crabs in a bucket." And these struggles within family and neighborhood echoed throughout their launch to adulthood, even after they were well on their way to finishing high school or entering college and work.

As we have said, few of our youth seemed to fit the pattern of "emerging adulthood." Rather, they were in a hurry to travel what we call an "expedited" path to adulthood, with little scaffolding from parents or school counselors and plenty of financial struggles. The urgency of their desire to launch led to real consequences in the schools they attended and the occupations they ended up holding. This book explores in depth the factors that put youth on an expedited path to adulthood and why it is so problematic.

In chapter 6, we turn away from our analysis at the individual, family, and neighborhood levels and consider the institutional level, following

the sociologist Mario Small, who has redirected the attention of poverty scholars to the role played by institutions in the perpetuation of disadvantage. In this chapter, we pose our final question in this volume: do the institutional structures that envelope these young people—namely, the postsecondary educational institutions that serve many black youth and a stunted labor market—serve as traps or as on-ramps? Here we consider the unique needs and vulnerabilities of African American young adults who were on an expedited path to adulthood. These youth launched with fewer resources and encountered blind alleys and traps in the higher education marketplace that prevented their efforts from *adding up*. We found considerable evidence that these vulnerabilities provided an unusually ripe opportunity for exploitation, particularly on the part of the for-profit trade schools. These schools, which paired poor graduation prospects with large student loan debts, provided especially egregious examples of exploitation. But other nonselective postsecondary schools in which our young people enrolled performed poorly as well: among these community and four-year colleges, the percentage who graduated within six years sank as low as 4 percent. Their experiences in these institutions often quashed the hopes and dreams of even the most able and ambitious young adults we studied.

In exploring this theme, we focus on the following questions: How did a group of highly disadvantaged African American young people on an expedited path to adulthood engage with these institutions? Why did they choose them over other options of higher quality? We also consider the experiences of young adults who decided to go directly into the labor market, hoping to craft what one called “a real working man’s career.” How did they look for a career while lacking a postsecondary degree? How did they traverse a world of low-wage, often part-time work as they attempted to navigate other key stages in the transition to adulthood, particularly as they began to form families of their own?

Given these young adults’ perception that they had limited time to launch, we show that they did so haphazardly. The institutions they encountered often exploited their need to launch quickly, and their dreams were downsized in the process. Some community and four-year colleges they attended were underresourced and sometimes woefully inadequate, trade schools often promised much but delivered little, and employers in the low-wage sector seldom showed loyalty to their workers or offered chances for advancement. Any real social safety net for them was all but missing during this period. Meanwhile, many recreation centers and local library branches remained closed or offered limited hours as city funding was scarce. Perhaps as a result, few of our youth aspired to raise their children in Baltimore. As twenty-two-year-old Rhiannon said, “We see ourselves outside of the city.”

## SOCIAL REPRODUCTION INTERRUPTED

The mechanisms underlying social reproduction have been largely a black box for studies like *The Long Shadow*. Yet there has been no shortage of theoretical or empirically informed ideas about how the process works. Generally, explanations invoke economic resources or educational institutions and culture, while much recent work in urban sociology has centered on the role of neighborhood effects in reproducing inequality.

Resource theory (originally formulated by Gary Becker) holds that if parents have fewer resources, they have less to invest in things that bolster child development, such as books, cognitively stimulating toys, high-quality preschool, good after-school care, and the like.<sup>15</sup> Although the correlation between parental income and educational attainment is high, scholars have long debated whether money matters more than other aspects of parenting. For example, Susan Mayer finds that money alone does not buy the material or psychological resources that ensure a child's success.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, recent work by Sean Reardon and others has shown that increasing income inequality has large effects on educational inequality, and some scholars attribute these effects to wealthier parents' increased spending on items for their children's educational enrichment.<sup>17</sup>

Parental resources also get translated into neighborhood location, and poor families rarely end up living in middle- and high-income neighborhoods. The neighborhood itself can be a site of social reproduction, not only because of its physical and social conditions (crime, housing quality, job growth) but also because in most places around the country schools are linked to residential addresses. Countless studies have shown stark disparities in school quality by neighborhood income and racial composition, as well as the implications of these disparities for children's learning.<sup>18</sup> Poor children growing up in contexts of concentrated poverty suffer not only because they are poor and their schools are lower quality, but also because their neighborhoods offer them fewer adult role models who work and have successful careers, fewer institutional resources, and greater exposure to deviant peers. The landmark work of William Julius Wilson is the best-known explication of this view.<sup>19</sup> Recently the work of Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, and their colleagues has lent powerful evidence to support this argument.<sup>20</sup>

Neighborhood effects, in Wilson's formulation, have both structural and cultural components, but some sociologists and linguistic anthropologists have made more distinctively cultural arguments that are either purely theoretical (like Pierre Bourdieu) or drawn from in-depth field work like ours.<sup>21</sup>

For Bourdieu, cultural capital—knowledge, disposition and skills

passed on from one generation to the next—is the vehicle through which social reproduction occurs.<sup>22</sup> Upper-class children imbibe significantly different cultural capital from their parents than working-class or lower-income children do. Basil Bernstein and Shirley Brice-Heath expand on this theme, highlighting the importance of linguistic patterns passed on from one generation to the next.<sup>23</sup> Each of these scholars argues that the school sets up working-class children for academic failure by valorizing one set of skills (those of the upper class) and not others, thus relegating them to a lower position in the economic hierarchy while hiding the process of social reproduction under the guise of meritocracy.

For Paul Willis, up-close field work among working-class youth in a British secondary school reveals a somewhat different mechanism. Though most youth in the school conform, the “lads” adopt a counter-school culture out of an unconscious realization that there is little ahead but menial, meaningless work. In addition, they adopt a narrow outlook on their aspirations, where manual labor is equated with masculinity while mental labor is equated with femininity. Thus, the lads often freely elect to follow their fathers onto the shop floor.<sup>24</sup>

Annette Lareau draws on intensive observations of the parenting practices of poor, working-class, and middle-class black and white parents to argue for yet another mechanism: deep cultural logics that guide parenting. While working-class parents adopt a hands-off parenting style, following the logic of “the accomplishment of natural growth,” middle-class parents are guided by “concerted cultivation,” a logic that compels them to foster their children’s interests and talents in ways that promote high school and college success.<sup>25</sup>

All of these arguments have merit, and we see hints of each in our data—resource constraints hindering parental investments in children, poor-performing schools, limited mainstream (or “dominant”) cultural capital,<sup>26</sup> and some live-and-let-live parenting.<sup>27</sup> Yet one of these explanations—neighborhood effects—seems to capture the story our decade of research has revealed better than the others. For these youth, something seems to have propelled them far beyond what their parents have achieved (the glass half full). Many of these youth not only have remained “on track” for most of their young lives but have high aspirations and optimism.

We find that transforming a youth’s neighborhood context can interrupt the intergenerational transmission of neighborhood disadvantage. As several decades of social science research have shown, neighborhood context has a profound influence on children’s unfolding lives. One especially deleterious neighborhood characteristic—concentrated poverty—is too often passed on from one generation to the next, particularly among black children. As the sociologist Patrick Sharkey points out, “The unique ecological location of African Americans in the most disadvantaged urban

neighborhoods, over long periods of time, has played a central role in reproducing racial inequality across multiple dimensions."<sup>28</sup>

Whether examining the generation born between 1955 and 1970 or the one born between 1985 and 2000, Sharkey finds that the average African American experiences levels of neighborhood poverty unheard of among whites. A tiny 1 percent of whites in both cohorts were raised in neighborhoods where at least 30 percent of their neighbors were poor, compared to almost one-third of blacks. The few white families who do spend any time in such a neighborhood usually do so just for a generation, yet the experience is typically a multigenerational one for black families: two-thirds of black families who start off in the poorest-quartile neighborhoods remain in such a neighborhood a generation later, compared to only 40 percent of whites, according to Sharkey. Sharkey and his colleagues also show that this legacy of neighborhood disadvantage has both direct and indirect effects on these youths' educational prospects, including measures of their academic ability and chances of dropping out of high school.<sup>29</sup>

The surprise here (which will come as no surprise to students of neighborhood effects) is that a set of social policies—in our case, a mobility program, plus the large-scale demolition of mostly high-rise and highly distressed public housing in Baltimore—managed to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of *neighborhood* disadvantage. We see a corresponding disruption in the intergenerational transmission of *social* disadvantage. Along with the changes in the physical and social conditions of the neighborhoods themselves—felt keenly by parents and children alike—another mechanism we identify is changes in parenting behavior, as we show in chapter 2. This suggests that social reproduction is far from certain, but rather is a legacy of policies and practices that have mired poor and minority children in highly segregated contexts where their life chances are badly diminished. When their contexts improve—even if only modestly—their trajectories can be transformed.

In addition to understanding how changing neighborhood contexts disrupts the process of social reproduction, we explored the heterogeneity we observed in outcomes *among* these youth. We did not find strong differences in parents' economic status (most were poor and had little discretionary income to invest), in cultural outlook, or in cultural capital. Instead, what emerged from inductive examination of youths' narratives was a key social-psychological resource that helped many young people mitigate against the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage—the aforementioned identity project. Importantly, as chapter 3 shows, identity projects that are sparked by or linked to institutions offered the strongest bridges to later success.

But even youth with strong identity projects struggled to launch. Persistent poverty, the ongoing undertow of their neighborhoods (which did

not improve nearly as much as they might have), and their families (through the intergenerational transmission of trauma) still exacted a price from our young people (the glass half empty part of the story). We argue that these factors steered them away from the leisurely emergent path of their middle-class peers and put them on an expedited path to adulthood. This led many youth to downshift their dreams—to aim, for example, for a trade that was more tractable and, importantly, attainable sooner instead of a four-year degree and a professional career. Thus, the majority ended up trading college dreams for the shorter programs at trade schools, a corner of the educational marketplace rife with exploitation. When expedited adulthood meets institutional traps such as these, potential is stunted via the very pathway that is supposed to build the vital human capital that is needed for youth to achieve their full potential.

#### WHAT CAN WE DO BETTER?

The cracks in these young people's stories show us where the light can come in, what we can do better, and how we can leverage the grit these youth already possess so that they can become the adults they strive to be, and maybe more. The book concludes by addressing the question that each chapter in this volume introduces: how can we do better? Most of these youth are not future "murderers, thieves, and muggers," as Baltimore resident Tracy Halvorsen wrote in her incendiary blogpost "Baltimore City, You're Breaking My Heart." Rather, they are hopeful, ambitious, resilient kids, and as such, our stance toward them must be vastly different than the containment strategies, such as zero-tolerance policing and strict youth curfews, that have dominated the approach to black youth in Baltimore in recent years. Instead, we must capitalize on the goodwill and high hopes of a generation of young African Americans who are trying so hard to follow their dreams.

These youth include seventeen-year-old Mia. Neither of her parents graduated from high school, but she has set her sights higher. "I want to become something that nobody in their family, let alone mine, has ever thought about doing," she says. "Like [becoming a] management accountant." To Mia, success is "finishing college and reaching that goal that you have been itching for since day one." We must undergird such aspirations with opportunities based on the American ethos that one can get ahead by playing by the rules. Right now, we are failing to do so, at a huge cost of human potential.