

Kelly Brownell:

Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke university. Today we welcome Candice Odgers back to the program. Candice is on the faculty of the Sanford School and is associate director of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University, where she looks for solutions to important problems facing children and families. Candice, thank you for joining us.

Candice Odgers:

Thanks.

Kelly Brownell:

I wanted to talk with you about one of your studies, which I find particularly intriguing. And judging from the news stories from the past year, others have found this intriguing as well. Many studies have looked at the effect on children, of living in poverty, but your work shows the surprising cost of growing up poor in a wealthy community. Would you please describe your work on this?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah, so I think we and others have been interested in a long time on the toxic effects of poverty on children's development, and with the increasing attention to income inequality and what it might mean to grow up what we called in the shadow of wealth. We were interested in understanding how children who grew up in different types of communities, the communities that range from the poorest in a country, to the wealthiest in a country, how those children do kind of comparatively, depending on the mix and background of their peers.

Kelly Brownell:

So what have you found in that research?

Candice Odgers:

Well, actually our initial findings went against what we expected originally from the study. So we went in assuming that low-income children, when they lived in economically-mixed communities, would benefit from the better quality of schools, better resources, lower violence in the area. And what we found was that low-income kids who grew up in more affluent neighborhoods actually did worse on a number of indicators than their low-income peers who grew up in concentrated poverty. So this was very puzzling. We spend a lot of time kind of probing to see why this might be the case, if it held across different measures and different reporters, but ultimately came away with the idea that there certainly is something here, that something is happening in these communities and these interactions with these children were growing up in economically mixed or more affluent communities is actually a risk factor for their development.

Kelly Brownell:

So do you have, I'm sure you do, ideas about what might be happening to create this effect?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So sociologists have studied relative deprivation for a long time in terms of what social comparisons might mean in children's lives and performance. Sociologists have also looked at something

called the frog-pond effect within schools. And in the US, the Adolescent Health study, which is representative of all kids growing up in the United States based on a number of schools across the country, they had a similar set of findings where they looked at low-income kids who went to school with peers from middle and upper-class families. And those kids actually doing worse on a range of things, ranging from educational performance to social and emotional development. And the effects were actually strongest among ethnic minority kids. So the idea here was attributed to a type and evaluation that happens with a kid when they go to school with kids who essentially have more resources, who are further ahead than them, and what type of disengagement or comparison might happen in that mix.

Kelly Brownell:

So by relative social comparison, you're meaning that whoever you're around, you tend to compare yourself to, and if you're well-off compared to people near you or the same, you're going to view yourself more positively than if the people around you have more than you do, is that the way you're thinking about it?

Candice Odgers:

Right. So that's certainly one of the interpretations that these kids, when they grow up alongside individuals who have kind of more resources than them see this economic distance and that has a negative effect in terms of disengagement versus a positive effect. Now we're going in and we're probing this a bit more. We've used the Subjective Social Status measure developed by Nancy Adler to kind of try and understand if it's how kids view themselves relative to others that might be driving some of this effect. And we have some pretty strong evidence that where kids place themselves on this ladder predicts a whole range of outcomes, even after you account for their actual poverty level or SES.

Kelly Brownell:

You mentioned the frog-pond effect. What is that all about?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So this is the idea of whether it would be best to be kind of a small fish in a big pond. And so low-income kids are growing up in poor neighborhoods, do they actually realize the disparities that exist in the larger community, and what age does that come online? And I think this has been very interesting to us in the sense that it's very hard to combat child poverty. So we've been trying in this country and other countries for a number of years, and every year, the number of children and families living below the poverty line will increase or remain stable. And so these structural factors are pretty hard to change. And one of the solutions, one of the policy solutions has been to create or mandate kind of economically mixed schools, communities, and people like this idea. They like it a lot. I liked the idea a lot. I think it's socially just, but we have very little data on whether or not that actually benefits kids from kids in low-income backgrounds to kids in higher income backgrounds. So this study was an attempt to look at some of that.

Kelly Brownell:

Is there any argument to be made that for a child who is around people in better circumstances that that provides an incentive or a driving factor to succeed and to raise your position in life and things like that?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah, so there's certainly a lot of variability in our findings and in our findings, and in our findings we describe kind of on average what's happening. And after we published results, I received a lot of personal stories from people that had exactly that kind of life history. So there's a ton of variability and opportunity I think, for that to happen. But what we're seeing across kind of this study and others is that it's not enough to just create this types of mixture of kids of different income. You would have to actually institute changes to the physical environment and the social environment that would allow them to access the types of resources that are available in those communities.

Kelly Brownell:

You found differences between boys and girls in some of this work?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah, we did. And especially with the antisocial behavior, so kind of the rule violation behavior that low-income boys that grew up in higher income neighborhoods, they actually had the highest levels of antisocial behavior. The Moving to Opportunity study in the United States where they randomly assigned housing vouchers to move children out of poverty found similar effects. And there's been a lot of discussion about why that's the case. So why the effect holds for boys and not for girls. I think one of the best clues to why this might be happening were some qualitative interviews that happen after the Moving to Opportunity study, where they went in and they talked to the girls and the boys who moved about their experiences in the new neighborhoods. And what you found is the girls were more able to assimilate across the gradient, whereas the boys, and in this case, especially the African-American boys were perceived as more threatening and not as readily accepted in their new communities.

Kelly Brownell:

So you've done some of this work in the UK, why have chosen to work there?

Candice Odgers:

So one of the reasons is we had a large scale longitudinal study where we've been following children from birth to now age 18. So we have kind of this wonderful longitudinal data on children, their families, and their communities. So we could see how these effects played out over time. The other reason is that the UK offers a pretty unique place to study these effects and that you actually have economically mixed communities. And so in the US we tend to be very highly segregated in terms of income, in terms of who we live beside, but in the United Kingdom, there's a lot more mixture, some of that mandated. And in our study, for example, among the low-income kids, only 18% of them lived in concentrated poverty. And the remaining over 80% lived in a whole range of different types of neighborhoods.

Kelly Brownell:

So what implications do you think this has for that idea that it's good to have people in economically mixed neighborhoods?

Candice Odgers:

Yeah. So we've tried very hard to be careful in discussing these findings of what it doesn't mean. So these findings don't mean that we should stop our efforts to create these types of communities. They don't mean that the low-income kids should not have the opportunities to go to great schools to live in

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Good neighborhoods. So that's not what we're saying. What we are saying is that there is this need to kind of pause and figure out if these policies are actually working for the kids that they're directed at. So are these low-income children who have these opportunities through voucher programs, through residential zoning programs, are they able to thrive and access the resources in these communities. And are there things that we would need to do in terms of the built environment and the social environment to make it more likely that they would succeed.

Kelly Brownell:

Fascinating work. Thank you for sharing that with us today. I appreciate that.

So our guest was Candice Odgers, faculty member in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Thank you very much for joining us and for the important work that you're doing. And to the listeners, thank you for joining us, and until next time, I am Kelly Brownell.