



Statement of
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Urban Institute

Before the
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
District of Columbia

The Importance of Adult Educational Attainment for Parents and Children

Thursday, September 24, 2015

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Public Hearing of the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole and Committee on Education**

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Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Grosso, and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Caroline Ratcliffe, and I am an economist and senior fellow at the Urban Institute. The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy research. We believe in the power of evidence to improve lives. The Urban Institute does not take policy positions. The views I present today will be my own.

I am here to provide findings from my research on childhood poverty, how it relates to adult success, and the importance of parents' educational attainment. My research presents a national picture and is based on data that follow families over 40 years. The data show children from birth, throughout their childhood, and into adulthood. I will focus my comments on two topics.

- First, how parents' educational attainment relates to persistent childhood poverty. A child is persistently poor if he or she spends at least half of his or her childhood living in poverty.
- Second, how parents' educational attainment is linked to their children's educational achievement.

Both of these points relate to the issue of economic mobility and how poverty and limited parental education cycle through to the next generation.

Focusing on the first point, Urban Institute research shows that children born to less educated parents are substantially more likely to be persistently poor; that is, they are more likely to be poor for at least half of their childhood. This is particularly true for children of poor parents. For example, among children born to poor parents, children whose parents did not complete high school are 30 to 45 percentage points more likely to be persistently poor than children whose parents have some education beyond high school.

Linking persistent childhood poverty to educational achievement, we find that these persistently poor children are less academically successful. Over a third (37 percent) of persistently poor children do not complete high school.

Focusing on the second point, Urban research shows that parents' educational attainment is linked to children's academic achievement, even when we take account of the length of time children spend in poverty and other family and neighborhood characteristics. That is, limited education in one generation can ripple through to the next generation.

More specifically, children whose parents did not complete high school are twice as likely to drop out of high school as children whose parents graduated from high school. It's not just poverty. Parents' educational attainment matters above and beyond poverty.

In analyses that focuses on the subset of children who are poor anytime as a child, we again see the importance of parents' educational attainment.

- Having a parent who has completed high school increases the likelihood that the child will complete high school.
- Having a parent who has more than a high school degree increases the likelihood that the child will go to and complete college.

Children tend to follow in their parents' footsteps with regard to educational attainment. The limited education of today's parents can create a vicious cycle that affects future generations.

To summarize, this research shows that, right out of the starting gate, children born to parents with no high school degree are less likely to complete high school, enroll in college, and complete college than those whose parents have a high school education or more. Children born to poor, less educated parents are particularly disadvantaged. As these children become adults with limited education, there are implications for their long-term economic well-being, as lower-educated groups have lower wages and higher unemployment rates.

As a step forward, education and training programs, bundled with work supports such as child care subsidies, can help provide financial stability for these less educated parents and their children. Investments in today's parents can yield substantial returns for their children a generation later.

Additional Information

Ratcliffe, Caroline. 2015. "Child Poverty and Adult Success." Low-Income Working Families Brief. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/child-poverty-and-adult-success>.

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