

# Two-Generation Approaches to Reduce Poverty

## Oregon Family Impact Seminar 2015

Hallie E. Ford Center for Healthy Children and Families  
OSU Extension Service — Family and Community Health

College of Public Health and Human Sciences  
Oregon State University

**Oregon State**  
UNIVERSITY



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## **Purpose of the Oregon Family Impact Seminar**

The Oregon Family Impact Seminar is a formal way to connect state policymakers with the best scientific evidence to inform decisions that affect the well-being of children and families in Oregon. The goal is to facilitate learning among policymakers and national experts in a nonpartisan, solution-oriented way and to promote awareness of the impact of programs and policies on families.

The seminar is a neutral forum for policymakers to foster dialogue and develop shared knowledge on issues important to Oregonians. Each two-hour seminar includes two or three presentations by premier researchers and policy analysts, followed by discussion. The seminar is presented to state policymakers, including legislators, legislative aides and state agency representatives.

### **Each Oregon Family Impact Seminar includes the following key elements:**

#### **Family impact perspective**

Seminars provide policymakers the opportunity to understand the impact policies can have on families.

#### **Objective information**

Seminars feature national researchers and policy analysts to present nonpartisan, state-of-the-art information on a range of policy options and avoid advocacy for particular policies.

#### **Neutral, nonpartisan setting**

Seminars provide a neutral setting and atmosphere for policymakers to discuss issues and seek common ground.

## **“Two-Generation Approaches to Reduce Poverty” Oregon Family Impact Seminar 2015**

The Oregon Family Impact Seminar is a member of the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars. Additional information about this national organization, including seminars held in other states, can be found at <http://familyimpactseminars.org>.

For more information about the Oregon Family Impact Seminar, including a video of this year’s speakers, please visit <http://health.oregonstate.edu/hallie-ford/family-impact-seminar-series> or contact [familyimpact@oregonstate.edu](mailto:familyimpact@oregonstate.edu).



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## Presenters

The 2015 Oregon Family Impact Seminar featured the following speakers:



**Greg Duncan, Ph.D.**

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Dr. Duncan studies the economic mobility of the U.S. population, both within and across generations, with a particular focus on low-income families. His research has highlighted the importance of early childhood as a sensitive period for the damaging influences of economic deprivation as well as for the beneficial impacts of policy-induced income increases for working families. More recently, his research has shifted to understand the relative importance of early academic skills, cognitive and emotional self-regulation, and health in promoting children's eventual success in school and the labor market.



**C. Cybele Raver, Ph.D.**

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Dr. Raver's research has focused on examining the mechanisms that support children's self-regulation in the contexts of poverty and social policy. She leads the Chicago School Readiness Project, a federally-funded Randomized Control Trial of a classroom-based intervention in Head Start. Dr. Raver's research has identified that initial gains made by children in high quality preschool programs are eroded by chronic exposure to poverty-related adversity, suggesting that two-generation approaches offer more potential to strengthen families and support sustained childhood learning. She regularly advises local and federal government agencies and foundations on promoting healthy development and learning from birth to 3rd grade.



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- Tasha Galardi
- Kelly Scholl
- Rob Duncan

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# Two-Generation Approaches to Reduce Poverty

## What is a two-generation approach?

A two-generation approach to reducing poverty is based on policies and programs that simultaneously address both the parents and children of low-income families. Two-generation approaches aim to improve individual and family wellbeing by:

- Increasing parent employment, family income, and family economic independence
- Reducing parental stress and increase parenting skills
- Facilitating the health and development of children

Programs and policies can, for example, help parents establish stable housing, engage in workforce development training, improve earnings or access child care subsidies. Children can be enrolled in programs to promote early childhood development through education and health services. Two-generation approaches focus on high-quality interventions that serve parents and children simultaneously and have the potential to be more effective than serving them individually.<sup>1</sup>

## Poverty in Oregon

In Oregon, many families are struggling with poverty-related hardship. More than 18 percent of Oregon families with children under the age of 18 currently live in poverty<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, among Oregon families below the poverty level, 29 percent have a head of household with less than a high school education and in 22 percent of families there is no wage earner.<sup>3</sup>

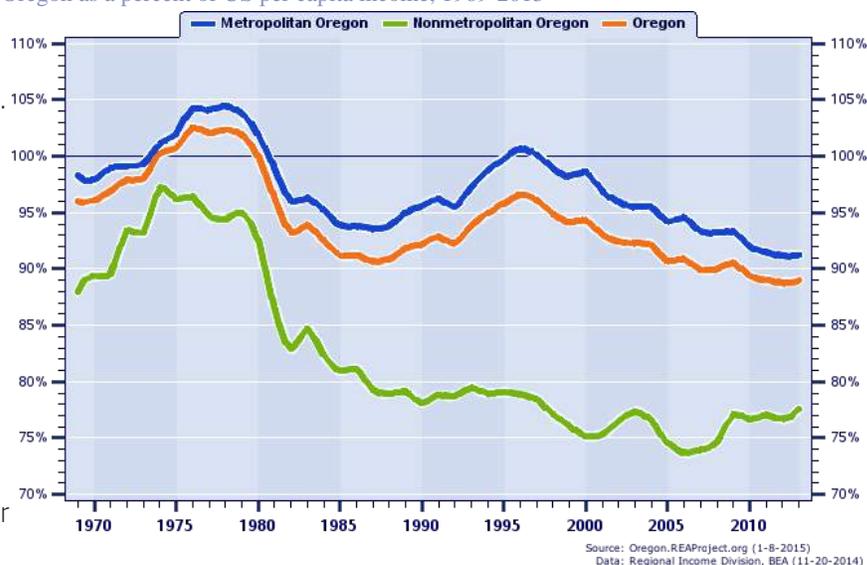
Overall poverty rates are higher in Oregon's rural areas than in urban centers.<sup>4</sup> In addition, rural Oregonians have less educational attainment, lower incomes, and higher unemployment rates than their urban counterparts.<sup>5</sup> As shown in Figure 1,

that gap has grown in recent decades — per capita income in rural areas of Oregon was close to the national average in the mid-1970s, but dropped to 78 percent by 2013.

Poverty is defined as having an income less than 100 percent of the federal poverty level. The federal poverty level in 2012 for a family of four was \$23,283.<sup>6</sup>

- Nearly 1 in 4 children live in poverty, an increase of 30% since 2008.<sup>7</sup>
- Over half (53%) of children whose parents do not have a high school degree live in poor families.<sup>8</sup>
- Over a quarter (27%) of children in poor families do not have an employed parent.<sup>9</sup>
- Over half (53%) of children whose parents do not have a high school degree live in poor families.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1: Per capita income in Oregon, Metropolitan Oregon, and Nonmetropolitan Oregon as a percent of US per capita income, 1969-2013



## Impact of Poverty on Children and Parents

There are large gaps in school achievement and engagement by family income. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, a national study of children entering kindergarten, compared reading and math achievement of children from families in the bottom 20 percent of family income to those in the top 20 percent. At the start of kindergarten, the high-income group scored more than a standard deviation (106 points on an SAT-type scale) higher than the low-income group on a standardized measure of math and reading achievement.<sup>11</sup> Teacher reports also showed a gap between the groups about half that size on children's ability to engage in school, pay attention, and show interest in the material.

### Why is this a concern?

- This income-based gap in math and reading achievement is about what children normally gain in reading and math during kindergarten, meaning that children in the low-income group are already starting out a full year behind their higher income peers. Interestingly, the achievement levels of low-income children have been growing over the last 40 years, but not nearly as much as the achievement levels of high-income kids.<sup>12</sup>
- The achievement gap has grown substantially over the last 40 years. In the early 1970s, the gap was about 85 units, compared with 106 units today.
- The gap only grows as children progress through school. In 5th grade, the gap between low- and high-income children in reading and math is 121 units and the school engagement gap is 59 units.<sup>13</sup>

### Why has family income inequality increased over the last 40 years?

- A major reason is the increasing wage gap of low- and high-skill jobs because of advances in technology and globalization, which has made it much more difficult for people with modest skills to make a middle-class wage.
- The kinds of jobs that are available for people with modest levels of job skills pay less than in previous decades—one solution is to increase job skills.

### What are the consequences of the growing inequality in income?

- High-income families spend far more than they used to on enrichment experiences for their children – things like music and sports lessons, summer camps, computers, and family vacations. These experiences amount to nearly \$10,000 per child per year, on average, for families with incomes above \$135,000.<sup>14</sup>

*“Low-income kids are starting out kindergarten a full year behind higher income kids. What’s especially worrisome is that this gap has grown substantially over the last 40 years or so.”*  
Greg Duncan

## Chronic adversity affects brain development and learning in children

Recent neuroscience research has highlighted that children’s brain development and learning are disrupted by adversity. Adversity is characterized by a lack of security, whether in terms of exposure to crime or violence, instability in the home, or parents’ preoccupation with trying to make ends meet. For academic learning, children need to be able to focus their attention and control their emotions and impulses. Recent research has focused on the pre-frontal cortex of the brain because it helps to organize behavior and sets the stage for learning. The combination of attention, inhibitory control, and working memory is referred to as “executive function.” The development of executive function is supported by responsive care from parents and other care-providers—parents who can read their child’s cues and be attentive to the child’s needs and respond accordingly. Researchers are continuing to learn what this process means for the neuroendocrine system and brain development.<sup>15</sup>

## Early gaps in cognitive development and learning persist in the face of adversity

- Researchers have found family income gaps in infant attention, recognition, and time spent looking at new stimuli.<sup>16</sup>
- At 18 months of age, toddlers from low-income families can be several months behind those from higher-income families in language processing and vocabulary.<sup>17</sup>
- High-quality preschool programs can help low-income children become less impulsive and more attentive, but those gains are lost by 5th grade if their families continue to experience chronic adversity.<sup>18</sup>
- Longer periods of family poverty are associated with lower executive function skills.
- Mothers in poverty report extremely high levels of income-related stress, which also affects their own behavior. In Raver’s recent research in New York City, low-income families experienced high levels of financial worry, over-crowding, and domestic violence. These stressors were linked to poorer decision-making and less responsive parenting behavior. Highly stressed mothers were more sensitive to negative features of their environments, including negative aspects of their child’s behavior.

This led them to be more critical of their infants, to view their infants as more temperamentally difficult, and to rate parenting as more of a hassle. This study suggests that there may be a neurobiological basis for harsh or negative parenting that might be connected to or mediated by the family environment.

*“The bottom line is that the neurocognitive cost of adversity is significant, not just for kids but it also has an effect on the decision making and responsiveness of the parent.”*  
Cybele Raver



## Effective One-Generation Poverty Interventions

### Child-based programs

Research shows that educational gains are often strongest when high-quality services are provided directly to the children.<sup>19, 20</sup> Evidence-based programs can and do substantially close the “achievement gap” and maximize children’s chances of school success. The maintenance of gains is affected by the quality of home and school environments.

The Boston universal pre-Kindergarten is an example of an effective program that has been implemented throughout the city of Boston.<sup>21</sup> Its program components are:

- High-quality curricula focused on both academic skills (math and literacy) and behavioral skills.
- Systematic play-based learning for children aged 4.
- Strong professional development and teacher coaching in the classroom.
- Part-day program lasting from 2 ½ to 4 hours each day.

### Costs

- \$12,000 per child per year. Full-day Head Start programs generally cost \$10,000 per child per year.
- Paid for by the state of Massachusetts and the city of Boston, with support from Boston’s mayor.

### Outcomes

- Children coming out of this Pre-K program close the initial achievement gap by one-half for school-entry reading and math skills.
- We do not yet know whether these gains persist over the long haul. Investments in high-quality universal pre-Kindergarten may not be sufficiently strong to sustain children’s educational chances in later childhood if their families continue to experience persistent stress.

### Parent-based programs

The Milwaukee New Hope work support project is a parent-based program that ultimately proved to be beneficial for children as well.<sup>22</sup>

### Components:

- Parents who worked 30 hours or more per week were entitled to a set of benefits that included (1) an earning supplement to raise their income above the poverty line, (2) subsidized child care, and (3) subsidized health insurance.
- If needed, temporary community service jobs were available to bring people above 30 hours of work per week.
- Participants could choose which benefits they needed that week.
- The program ran for 3 years.

### Outcomes

- Children of families in the program showed substantial advantages in school achievement and behavior compared to similar children whose families were not enrolled.



The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership is a shorter-term parent employment training program that partnered with local industry.<sup>23</sup>

- Needed industry work-skills were identified, and courses were then developed to meet these needs.
- Participants enrolled in intensive courses lasting 1 to 4 weeks on life skills and technical skills.
- Participation in the course led to more employment at higher incomes.
- Program funded through several streams that were primarily private industry.

## **Effective Two-Generation Approaches to Poverty**

Two-generation programs offer more potential for strengthening the family system to weather major hardships and to provide greater security and support for learning. Families need help to bolster their “human capital,” strengthen their own cognitive and emotional skills, and maximize their earning potential. A key goal for policy leaders and researchers is to find cost-effective ways to help families and communities reduce poverty-related stressors. Programs that aid parents in managing stress, gaining education, entering higher-wage jobs and finding more stable housing in safer neighborhoods are likely to yield major payoffs for children and parents alike.

Cities and states can bring together policy leaders across service delivery silos (e.g. Oregon’s Departments of Human Services, Education, Housing and Community Services; community colleges; and Workforce Development) to coordinate universal services as well as services that target families who are “deep in the system” and have complex needs.

### **Examples of effective programs**

Many existing interventions for children are successful and could become components of two-generation programs. Adult components should be strengthened to promote parenting and employment skills. For more information about the programs listed below, please see the Resources section on page 12.

- Nurse-home-visiting programs have been shown to be effective in increasing adults’ earning potential while also benefiting infants’ health and development. Nurse Family Partnership is one such model, implemented through public health departments at the city and state levels. It demonstrated robust positive impacts over 37 years of evidence-based research trials. Successful models are marked by sound theory, strong evidence, and scalability within existing funding mechanisms.
- Play and Learning Strategies (PALS)<sup>24, 25</sup> — This program in New York City asked home visitors to film parents as they learned and practiced parenting skills. The program requires participants to see a behavior, demonstrate the behavior and then teach it to someone else— the “See 1, do 1, teach 1” approach. This 12 to 14 week intervention, which is based on a standardized curriculum, costs about \$5,000 to train 15 home visitors plus purchase of video/laptop equipment. Each team served about 15 families. The curriculum can also be used in parent groups.
- Crittendon Women’s Union, Boston—This program, for families with multiple challenges, including unstable housing and income, provides stable housing and intensive one-on-one coaching with a focus on increasing income over a 2 year period. It uses cash incentives and a matching plan for savings to improve assets and savings.



What doesn't work is to combine two mediocre programs and hope for success. Two-generation approaches must be built on quality programs. Similarly, the best programs will not yield benefits if they are delivered only partially or with low or uneven quality. Past research on program implementation highlights the importance of aligning new services with the skills of frontline workers, agency priorities, and systems of accountability.

Duncan and Raver point to a number of excellent examples where programs that were initially targeted at one generation ended up yielding benefits for the other generation as well. For example, education and training programs for parents have been shown to boost school achievement of children. Early childhood education programs have been shown to improve parent responsiveness and boost labor market attachment and earnings for mothers. These two-generation “spillovers” make it valuable to be able to track both child and parent outcomes associated with programs.

### **Tracking Success**

- Programs need to **clarify their goals and measure their outcomes**.
- States need systems that provide **integrated information** from administrative records for the targets or outcomes that are identified as the program's goals.
- States and cities should capitalize on “**big data**” to capture key indicators of success in reaching families and children at highest need, in delivering services with high levels of program quality, in meeting targeted outcomes at the population level. It will also allow the calculation of “return on investment” (ROI) across the “cradle-to-school” pipeline.



## Summary

With more than 18% of Oregon families (25% of children under age 5) living in poverty, the risks to child and family health and development is critical. The experience of poverty can disrupt healthy brain development and reduce school readiness in children, and it can impair adults' cognitive and emotional functioning and harm their parenting practices.

Two-generation approaches to reducing poverty are based on policies and programs that simultaneously address both the parents and children of low-income families by focusing on parents' employment skills and earnings, reducing family stress and increasing parenting skills, and promoting children's health and development.

Two national experts, Drs. Greg Duncan and Cybele Raver presented current models and scientific evidence on strategies to improve child outcomes and lift families out of poverty.

### **Key findings included:**

- Two-generation approaches can be achieved by combining effective one-generation programs to address family needs of both generations.
- Interventions need to capitalize on key transitions and processes within families' lives.
- Early gains from child development programs can be lost if families continue to experience the chronic stresses of economic instability.
- Intensive programs for families with multiple challenges need to target a few specific outcomes that can be addressed well—parent employment skills, parent responsiveness to children, child language development—and brand the program's objective to get everyone on board (e.g., the single goal of having every child graduate from high school).
- Agencies all have a part to play— graphics (e.g., map or logic model) can illustrate the roles and interconnections across agencies and programs.
- Integrated information systems are needed to harvest “big data” to document return on investment of publicly funded programs.



## Selected Resources

For further information, we suggest selected resources below.

### **New Hope program**

<http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid=269#programinfo>

### **Boston Pre-K**

<http://bostonpublicschools.org/Page/279>

### **Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership**

<http://wrtp.org>

### **Crittendon Women's Union**

<http://liveworkthrive.org>

### **BELLE Project**

<http://med.nyu.edu/pediatrics/developmental/research/the-belle-project>

### **PALS curriculum**

<http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/pals/about.html>

### **Harlem Children's Zone**

<http://hcz.org/our-programs>

### ***Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education***

This book includes chapters describing the Boston Pre-K program and the Milwaukee New Hope Project.

### **The Family Life Project**

<http://flp.fpg.unc.edu>

### **Stress Neurobiology and Prevention (SNAP) research laboratory**

<http://pages.uoregon.edu/snablabs/SNAP/Welcome.html>

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2009–2013 5-Year American Community Survey <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2009–2013 5-Year American Community Survey <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-fact-sheets/state-data.aspx?StateFIPS=41&StateName=Oregon#.VPX1W\\_nF9yw](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-fact-sheets/state-data.aspx?StateFIPS=41&StateName=Oregon#.VPX1W_nF9yw)

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<sup>6</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty. Oregon: Demographics of Poor Children. [http://nccp.org/profiles/OR\\_profile\\_7.html](http://nccp.org/profiles/OR_profile_7.html)

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