

Dear Students of Social Work,

By and large, we are fortunate that in a city-state with broadly speaking, good housing means that we do not have to grapple as intensely with distressed communities with intractable issues of poverty and worse still, persistent intergenerational poverty. Any and every country will have people who are poor but persistent intergenerational poverty is a complex and daunting problem that requires sustained effort at multiple levels. The irony is that despite the research being done, most countries still struggle for generations with public policy making and testing out of strategies to eradicate intergenerational poverty without clear success. What have these countries which are usually very large tried? Many have tried strategies that focus on the places where poor children live while others have tried moving children out of poor neighbourhoods and communities. So what have these countries learned about trying to eradicate intergenerational poverty?

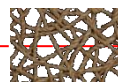
Expand employment opportunities and boost wages



Decades of experimentation and learning¹ have led to an evolving set of findings and principles for antipoverty efforts. These are aimed at a range of strategies. These strategies include revitalising neighbourhoods and moving families out of severely distressed urban neighbourhoods which undermine the families' capacities to meet their children's developmental needs and trap children especially of certain ethnicity in poverty. Research has also shown that nationwide efforts to expand employment opportunities, boost wages, strengthen systems of work support, and bolster the social safety net are necessary. But they are insufficient for children living in severely distressed neighbourhood environments. Dual-generation interventions aimed at neighbourhood conditions that are most damaging to children's healthy development were also thought to be critical to "moving the needle" on persistent, intergenerational poverty.

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Education, health, jobs and networks



The research has also shown that for poor children, some interventions are a priority. These include:

- (i) Increasing high-quality educational opportunities, from early childhood through to higher levels, and this would include after-school care, enrichment and holiday activities.
- (ii) Reducing crime and violence so that children and their parents feel physically safe and psychologically secure and are not subjected to repeated traumas.

Image courtesy of Boaz Yiftach at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

¹ The Urban Institute; the Stanford Center for Poverty and Inequality; UC Davis Center for Poverty Research; McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research; Institute for Research on Poverty (Wisconsin)

(iii) Providing health-promoting services and amenities, including affordable sources of healthy food; physical and mental health services for children and parents; safe places for children to play and exercise; and homes, schools, and safe community spaces.

(iv) Supporting social networks by strengthening the capacities of residents to work towards shared goals; mutually support one another and each other's children, and secure resources.

(v) Expanding access to opportunities for jobs, financial stability and economic advancement.

A quick reflection on these areas shows that we have given people here access to these areas. For example, we have equal access to high quality education for all our children, affordable and accessible good primary health care, social networks and access to family service centres and reskilling and life-long learning efforts by Workforce Development Authority to secure jobs. In many large countries, these are areas that can trap individuals in poverty as the mechanisms and structures for enabling and facilitating access to public services and amenities are stubbornly unresponsive or absent.

Meeting needs of children



In helping children in poor families, it is always important to remember that all children, regardless of where they live or how much their parents earn, share the same foundational needs. Children require responsive care giving, safe and secure environments, adequate and appropriate nutrition, and health-promoting behaviours and habits. To meet these needs, parents must have four clusters of capacities - financial resources, investment of time, psychological resources, and work capability. All these are facilitated by the family's income and assets. To supplement income, transfers from the state and philanthropic sources enhance the families' capacities.

Families also live and raise children in a neighbourhood and community. As a small city-state with state sponsored housing, most families are sheltered from the challenges that come with adjustments from having to move a lot and to quite different environments as would be the case in large countries. The research in the US has found that there are benefits of living in high-opportunity neighbourhoods. The project, Moving to Opportunity, and rightly named, tested the long term benefits of helping poor families move from severely distressed housing projects to lower poverty and higher education level neighbourhoods. The results show significant benefits to health and better outcomes in work and in school. This project is different from the typical programs designed to help low-income families in the States pay for housing which tends to be in distressed and dangerous neighbourhoods that continue to entrap them.

We can all appreciate that where we live, and especially where children grow up, matters. The evidence² is indisputable that living in severely distressed, high-poverty neighbourhoods seriously undermines children's well-being and long-term life chances. In the case of the States, programs which help families pay for private rental homes and apartments in neighbourhoods of their choice perform much better than programs that subsidize the construction and operation of low-income housing projects. Children in US whose parents grew up in high-poverty neighbourhoods score dramatically worse on reading and problem-solving tests than those whose parents grew up in non-poor neighbourhoods, all else equal³. We are fortunate that we do not have these extremes and relatively few stubborn intergenerational links. But we are not immune to the challenges of pockets of our communities that face disadvantages posed by being poor. We can do more to ensure access to good quality education starting from pre-school for these families. We can also do more to help these families to navigate to use any help extended and especially paid work.

Social work skills



To address issues of low-income and the poor, public policy and strategies at the systems level are key. At the individual family level however, the family-centred practice of social workers will help families to improve their capacities. The practice includes three key elements: (1) an emphasis on strengths, not deficits of these families; (2) promoting family choice and control over resources; and (3) the development of a collaborative relationship between parents and professionals that the families interface with.

Social work skills are needed to carry out good assessments, develop service plans and conduct purposeful interventions with children, youths, older persons and families. Effective family-centred practice is part of helping low-income families to improve their circumstances and it is characterised by sensitivity, diversity, and flexibility on the part of social workers. It is a systematic way of working with families and helping them to systematically access amenities and services to rebuild expectations and hope.

Image courtesy of Stuart Miles at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

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² Tackling Persistent Poverty in Distressed Urban Neighbourhoods by Margery Austin Turner, Peter Edelman, Erika Poethig, and Laudan Aron; and Urban Institute White Paper, June 2014

³ Stuck in Place - Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality by Patrick Sharkey, University of Chicago Press, 2013