

Tackling Intergenerational Poverty: How Governors Can Advance Coordinated Services for Low-Income Parents and Children

Summary

Poverty and long-term unemployment plague many communities across the United States and affect residents of all ages. Families facing economic hardship often have other challenges, including depression, substance abuse, and substandard housing. Rural communities may have limited capacity to meet those needs. Any social unrest, as seen recently in metropolitan areas like Baltimore and St. Louis, exacerbates existing challenges. The complexity of the issues requires coordinated support for low-income families that goes beyond temporary relief from economic stress and includes mechanisms that help children and adults move out of poverty altogether. Key anti-poverty strategies include helping low-income parents find work that provides family-sustaining wages, fostering children's school educational success, and providing the necessary family support services.

Because they oversee most of the state and federal programs for low-income families, governors are in a unique position to align programs and policies for children and their parents through “two-generation” strategies. Experience suggests that two-generation strategies for low-income families hold promise when services—not just referrals—are provided to both generations, and when the services are intensive enough and of sufficient quality to produce positive outcomes. In addition, research suggests that increasing family income, not solely helping low-income parents find jobs, can lead to improved outcomes for children.

Two-generation efforts at the state level are also gaining attention as governors recognize the need for more effective and efficient government programs. By providing leadership and fostering collaboration across all state agencies that “touch” low-income children and families, governors can streamline practices and develop innovative solutions for promoting the well-being of children and improving family economic stability.

The history of two-generation programs in the United States offers lessons that leaders are applying at both the state and local levels. Those lessons suggest ways governors who choose to can create a policy infrastructure that supports and encourages the development of effective programs and policies for low-income children and their families.¹ The lessons include:

- Experiment but evaluate;
- Clearly define the goals;
- Ensure the strategies are backed by solid research;
- Explore policies and strategies that enhance coordination between effective adult- and child-serving programs or services, such as “no wrong door” approaches; and
- Be both creative and practical—and have stamina.

The Rationale: Addressing the Needs of Low-Income Families

Children who experience poverty have poorer outcomes on average than their wealthier peers. Research shows poor children fare worse on a range of outcomes, includ-

¹ Two-generation strategies may be suitable for other populations, as well—for example, adults caring for their aging parents, families experiencing abuse or neglect, and other non-low-income families. This brief focuses on two-generation approaches aimed at parents and children in low-income families.

ing physical and mental health, school readiness, and academic achievement in childhood as well as workforce participation and economic security in adulthood.² Yet, nearly one in five children lives in a family that is at or below the federal poverty level, and about twice as many live in low-income families (at 200 percent of the poverty level or less).³ In many cases, those families represent the working poor: Among families living at or below the federal poverty level, nearly seven in 10 have at least one parent in the workforce.⁴

The gap in outcomes for poor and non-poor children reflects more than income differences. Economically challenged families experience a variety of stressors associated with living in poverty. Parents in low-income families are more likely to have low educational attainment and to suffer from depression, domestic violence, and chronic health conditions than the general population.⁵ Poor children are more likely to be exposed to violence in their neighborhoods, which is associated with lower levels of academic achievement.⁶ And although child maltreatment occurs in families at all economic levels, abuse and neglect are more common in poor families than in families that have higher incomes.⁷ Poverty appears to have the greatest consequences for the youngest children, a finding that may relate to the period of rapid brain development in the first three years of

life.⁸ Poverty and its consequences in childhood can have long-term effects on individuals and increase the likelihood that poor children will experience poverty as adults.⁹

Research on the detrimental effects of poverty continues to stimulate discussion among policymakers on how to improve the social and economic well-being of low-income children and families. Historically, programs for low-income children and adults have been disjointed. For example, workforce programs focus on the skills adults need to get and keep a job, but because those programs do not as a matter of practice ascertain whether the adult is a parent, the opportunity to simultaneously plan for the adequate care for his or her children is lost. Yet without quality, reliable child care, worker productivity and job retention can be jeopardized.

What Are Two-Generation Approaches?

The terms two-generation, dual-generation, and multigeneration are defined in many different ways. This brief uses the term two-generation, but the concept is more important than the terminology.

Some view two-generation strategies fairly narrowly, thinking that child-focused programs need to begin offering adult-focused services or that adult-serving

² Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, eds., *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*. Russell Sage Foundation, 1995.

³ Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, *Income and Poverty in the United States: 2013* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2014).

⁴ Child Trends Data Bank, *Children in Working Poor Families: Indicators on Children and Youth*, http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/74_Working_Poor.pdf (accessed July 24, 2015).

⁵ T. Gabe, "Poverty in the United States: 2015," Congressional Research Service Report RL33069; L. Pratt and D. J. Brody, "Depression in the United States Household Population, 2005–2006," *NCHS Data Brief* no. 7 (September 2008); M. J. Breiding, J. Chen, and M. C. Black, "Intimate Partner Violence in the United States—2010" (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, 2014); and National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Health, United States, 2014: With Special Feature on Adults Aged 55–64* (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2015), [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/14.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/14.pdf) (accessed July 26, 2015).

⁶ D. Schwartz and A. H. Gorman, "Community Violence Exposure and Children's Academic Functioning," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95 no. 1 (2003): 163–173.

⁷ Maria Cancian, Kristen Shook Slack, and Mi Yang, "The Effect of Family Income on Risk of Child Maltreatment," Institute for Research on Poverty, *Discussion Paper*, <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/dps/pdfs/dp138510.pdf> (accessed July 26, 2015).

⁸ Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, eds., *Consequences of Growing up Poor* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995).

⁹ Robert L. Wagmiller and Robert M. Adelman, "Childhood and Intergenerational Poverty: The Long-Term Consequences of Growing Up Poor," http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_909.html (accessed July 26, 2015).

What Do Two-Generation Approaches Look Like in Practice?

Two-generation approaches at the program and practice levels can take many forms. Here are a few examples of local entities that are implementing two-generation strategies:

- **Community Action Project in Tulsa, Oklahoma (CAP Tulsa).** CAP Tulsa employs multiple programs that aim to prepare young children for educational success and increase the employability, earning potential, and parenting skills of their parents. CAP Tulsa coordinates and co-locates high-quality early childhood education with family financial, career-training, and health services. CAP Tulsa's Career Advance program provides Head Start and other low-income parents with training in the health care sector, with the goal of helping them secure a good job with a family-supporting wage while filling a critical workforce gap in the local economy.
- **Avance.** A two-generation program model originating in **Texas** and currently being implemented in 13 communities across the United States, Avance seeks to empower parents to become advocates for their children and families by providing home visiting services, parenting classes, English as a Second Language and General English preparation, postsecondary education for adults, and early childhood education services.
- **The Atlanta Partnership.** The Atlanta Partnership comprises multiple community organizations serving low-income families that work together to coordinate early childhood education providers; elementary schools; and organizations that provide workforce development, asset building, and entrepreneurship programs to adults.

organizations need to begin providing early childhood services. Others take a broader view, considering poverty-reduction policies (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit) and human service programs that provide basic needs (such as food, housing, and cash assistance) two-generation because they address the needs of all household members. Although such whole-family policies and programs can touch multiple generations, this brief adopts a slightly different definition.¹⁰

For the purpose of this brief, two-generation is defined as an approach that creates opportunities for achieving better outcomes for both generations by intentionally and strategically developing and linking policies, programs, and services aimed at low-income children and their parents. Rather than enrolling and serving adults and children in silos, two-generation approaches seek to understand the needs of the family as a whole and connect families with services that can address the needs

¹⁰ Several organizations have published frameworks that describe two-generation strategies. Gruendel (2014) published a recent review of five current two-generation frameworks currently being advanced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Ascend at the Aspen Institute; the National Human Services Assembly; the Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas at Austin; and the MOMS Partnership in New Haven, Connecticut, with Yale University. See Janice M. Gruendel, *Two (or More) Generation Frameworks: A Look Across and Within* (Hartford, CT: Connecticut General Assembly, 2014), http://www.cga.ct.gov/coc/PDFs/two-gen/report_gruendel.pdf (accessed July 26, 2015).

of the child and the needs of the adults who care for them.

What do two-generation strategies look like? At the program level, two-generation strategies offer child- and parent-focused services in the same program, often under the same roof. At the policy level, two-generation strategies involve strategic collaborations across public programs that serve adults (such as employment and training programs) and those that serve children (such as early childhood education). For instance, such collaborations might involve coordinated eligibility or enrollment, coordinated needs assessments, or employing staff to foster links between programs.

What Is Known About Two-Generation Strategies: Learning from Past Programmatic Efforts

The idea of delivering services simultaneously to low-income children and their parents is not new. Launching the War on Poverty in 1965, federal policymakers believed that efforts to remediate poverty must address the needs of vulnerable children and their parents together. Perhaps the best-known example of a federal two-generation approach is Head Start, which federal policymakers established as part of the War on Poverty. The intention of the Head Start program was to help prepare children for school while also assessing family needs and referring families to broader supports to address those needs. The federal government has initiated many other two-generation programs over the past few decades, including the Even Start Family Literacy Program and the Comprehensive Child Development Center demonstration.

Several evaluations of two-generation programs have

been published over the past few decades. In 1996, social scientist Robert St. Pierre and his colleagues published a review of research on the federal Comprehensive Child Development Center Program, Even Start Family Literacy programs, Head Start Family Service Centers, and the Child and Family Resources Program.¹¹ In addition, the authors included two other programs: Avance, which is still operational in several states, and New Chance, a research and demonstration program operating between 1989 and 1992.¹² St. Pierre's review revealed a great deal of variation in the design of two-generation programs along with recurrent challenges in their capacity to implement the models well. Although programs were generally successful in increasing the number of services participants used, they had few effects on adult employment or income and "small or no short-term effects on a wide set of measures of child development."¹³

Although two-generation programs of the past had disappointing results, another body of evidence offers reason to be optimistic. Several studies of welfare-to-work programs and income support programs in the 1990s found that although employment programs by themselves had little or no effect on the children of participants, programs that were able to increase both employment and family income did have significant benefits for children's development, particularly for the younger children in the studies.¹⁴ Those studies provide evidence that reducing family poverty in and of itself can benefit children. Moreover, decades of research has shown that quality early childhood education programs can improve children's academic learning, socio-emotional development and health.¹⁵ Taken together, those strands of research suggest that

¹¹ Robert St. Pierre, Jean I. Layzer, and Helen V. Barnes, *Regenerating Two-Generation Programs* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 1996).

¹² Janet Quint, Johannes Bos, and Denise Polit, "Final Report on a Comprehensive Program for Young Mothers in Poverty and Their Children" (New York, NY: MDRC, January 1997), <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/new-chance> (accessed November 4, 2014).

¹³ R. St. Pierre et al., *Regenerating Two-Generation Programs*.

¹⁴ Greg J. Duncan, Lisa Gennetian, and Pamela Morris, "Effects of Welfare and Antipoverty Programs on Participants' Children," *Focus* 25 no. 2 (2007): 3–12.

¹⁵ Hiro Yoshikawa, Christina Weiland, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Margaret R. Burchinal, Linda M. Espinosa, William T. Gormley, Jens Ludwig, Katherine A. Magnuson, Deborah Phillips, Martha J. Zaslow, "Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base for Preschool Education," *Policy Brief, Society for Research in Child Development and the Foundation for Child Development*. (2013), [http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Evidence Base on Preschool Education FINAL.pdf](http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Evidence%20Base%20on%20Preschool%20Education%20FINAL.pdf) (accessed August 24, 2015).

programs and policies that are able to increase family income and address children’s developmental needs—that is, adopt a two-generation approach—could hold the greatest hope for improving outcomes for both generations.

Two-Generation 2.0: Leveraging Lessons Learned to Improve Two-Generation Approaches

State leaders interested in promoting two-generation approaches should heed the lessons from those bodies of research, which found that prior attempts at two-generation efforts typically involved connecting weak adult-focused programs with weak child-serving programs and did not affect family income.¹⁶ The programs had poor or ineffective workforce strategies or child care or early childhood education of low or unknown quality.

The weak results of prior two-generation efforts suggest that programs that serve families must be sufficiently intensive to drive the outcomes of interest; that is true regardless of whether the goal of a program is to increase adult employment, enhance child well-being, or both. There is reason for optimism regarding the promise of two-generation strategies that can both increase family income and support the well-being of children and families, but there is also caution that programs and policies must be well designed to achieve those goals.

The Bottom Line: What Can Governors Do to Promote Two-Generation Approaches at the State Level?

Governors and their staff are in a unique position to help bring disjointed programs for parents and children together to more fully meet the needs of both generations. The promise is great, but the lessons from

the past are sobering. Governors who are interested in applying a two-generation lens to meeting the needs of low-income families can play an important role in encouraging the implementation of practices that will effectively improve outcomes for children and their parents. Experience suggests the following lessons:

- **Experiment but Evaluate.** Two-generation strategies are worth further exploration, but governors should not assume that every strategy will be effective, no matter how well thought out. Measure outcomes for parents and children, and track progress. Consider starting on a smaller scale, with a pilot or other test to determine effectiveness, before investing substantial resources.
- **Clearly Define the Goals.** Research suggests that loosely focusing on multiple goals is unlikely to produce the outcomes of interest. Most social programs can do only so many things well. Prioritize a small set of goals, and make it clear to everyone involved that those are the priorities. As strategies are developed and proposed, ask senior staff how those strategies relate to that small set of priority goals.
- **When Possible, Ensure That the Strategies Are Backed by Solid Research.** Using prioritized goals as a starting point, develop strategies that have the greatest potential to achieve those goals. Begin by identifying strategies that have a solid body of evidence to suggest that they may also work in your state, with your population. For example, the U.S. Government Accountability Office cites a set of documented workforce strategies that are more effective in promoting adult employment for families receiving cash assistance: subsidized employment opportunities; modified work-first

¹⁶ P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, “Two-Generation Programs in the Twenty-First Century,” *The Future of Children* 24 no. 1 (2014): 13–39.

What Are States Doing to Promote Two-Generation Approaches?

A handful of states have launched efforts to promote two-generational strategies across state agencies:

- **Colorado.** Under the leadership of Governor John Hickenlooper’s Executive Director of Human Services, the Colorado Department of Human Services has implemented multiple efforts to move toward more whole family-focused efforts. The department hired a two-generation manager to coordinate those efforts across the multiple child- and adult-serving programs in the agency and is currently working on developing two-generation performance measures, which will allow programs to track both parent and child outcomes. The department continues to work with the state legislature to ensure that families are supported in efforts to improve their economic well-being; for instance, legislation passed in the 2014 session with regard to Colorado’s child care subsidy program now allows low-income parents to receive child care assistance while attending adult and postsecondary education activities.
- **Washington.** Washington State has launched a program that uses Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to provide home visiting services supported by strong evidence of effectiveness to families receiving TANF cash assistance. The program will track child and family well-being outcomes as well as parental employability.
- **Utah.** Governor Gary Herbert signed legislation in 2012 requiring the Department of Workforce Services to collect data on intergenerational poverty. That law was expanded in 2013, requiring annual reporting of those data and creating a commission and advisory committee—comprising leaders of five different state agencies and community stakeholders—to recommend statewide strategies for reducing intergenerational poverty. Although not explicitly titled ‘two-generation,’ that law aims to connect agencies serving adults and children as a means of reducing intergenerational poverty.
- **Connecticut.** In 2015, Connecticut created a two-generational pilot program focused on children’s school readiness and their parents’ job readiness. Outcomes sought include improvements in young children’s literacy and increases in their parents’ use of job training, attainment of education certificates or degrees, and employment. Core service components include early learning programs, child care, adult education, housing, job training, transportation, financial literacy and other support services. Services will be coordinated by an interagency committee comprised of the three branches of government as well as selected non-profits, scholars and philanthropy. A workforce liaison from Connecticut’s Department of Labor will assist with local workforce needs and family supports. TANF funds will be used to support the two-generational programming, and Connecticut’s Commission on Children will oversee the pilot’s implementation and evaluation. The six pilot sites will partner with philanthropy for technical assistance on best practices, program design and evaluation. The pilot will serve as a blueprint for a state-wide, two-generational model for meeting the needs of low-income children and their parents.

strategies; career pathways; and treatment for mental, physical, and behavioral health issues.¹⁷ There is also a substantial body of evidence documenting more effective strategies for promoting early childhood development—for instance, through home visiting strategies or high-quality early care and education programs. Two-generation approaches should focus on bringing together *effective* strategies for children and their caregivers. A positive result can best be achieved by attending to the existing research.

- **Implement “No Wrong Door” Approaches Through Enhanced Coordination of Effective Adult- and Child-Serving Programs or Services.** When effective strategies for addressing both adult and child outcomes are identified, the next question is how best to coordinate them. With “no wrong door” strategies, the needs of both adults and children are considered regardless of whether their initial contact with public agencies is through a traditionally child-focused agency or a traditionally adult-focused agency. For example, caseworkers who engage with parents in employment and training programs should inquire about caregivers’ access to reliable, quality early education for young children. Early childhood education providers should be attuned to the family context of the child. Ideally, there are direct mechanisms for linking families to services that address those needs, regardless of their point of entry. For example, workforce and TANF agencies could coordinate with child care agencies to give priority for subsidies to parents in employment and training programs. Early education providers can assess family needs and link parents to services for housing instability, employment, mental health, or other issues. Guided by the set of priority goals developed

for the state, each relevant state agency should inquire how the organizations implementing its programs assess family needs and connect families to resources to address those needs.

- **The Design and Implementation of Two-Generation Strategies Will Require Both Creativity and Practicality—as Well as Stamina.** Although family members’ needs are often intertwined, programs and funding streams at both the federal and state levels are typically siloed across different agencies. The unique sets of budgets, regulations, and policy and reporting requirements for individual programs pose challenges to providing appropriate, coordinated, and seamless services to low-income children and their families. By providing leadership and fostering collaboration across all state agencies that “touch” low-income children and families, governors can streamline practices and develop innovative solutions for meeting the developmental needs of low-income children and the self-sufficiency needs of their parents.

Conclusion

Adopting a two-generation lens to serving low-income children does not necessarily require new programs and policies; rather, governors can focus on strengthening links among existing programs toward a common set of goals for low-income children and families. Governors should be wary about assuming that two-generation strategies will work without significant attention to the quality of the services each generation receives and to the likelihood that those services will lead to improvements in families’ economic well-being. Governors can help guide that work in the right direction by setting clear and limited goals; selecting strategies that are based on evidence that they can achieve those goals; and coordinating services so that no matter which program serves as the entry point,

¹⁷ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families: Action Is Needed to Better Promote Employment-Focused Approaches. (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2014), GAO Publication No. 15-31, <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-31> (accessed July 26, 2015).

the whole family is served to support and improve children’s well-being (a “no wrong door” approach). By working closely with agency staff, governors can champion changes to state policy and implementation that allow programs and communities to better coordinate their funding, information, and services. That coordination will, in turn, provide communities with the flexibility to design programs that better

attend to the interconnected needs of parents and their children. Because research on families in poverty suggests that the well-being of low-income children is inextricably linked to their families’ economic stress and overall economic well-being, two-generation strategies that seek to improve family income may hold the greatest promise for addressing the needs of low-income children and families.¹⁸

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¹⁸ See, for example, G. H. Elder et al., “Families Under Economic Pressure,” *Journal of Family Issues* 13 no. 1 (1992): 5–37.