

## SENIOR EDITORS

David Grusky  
Christopher Wimer

## ART DIRECTOR

Robin Weiss

## COPY EDITOR

Liz Hogan-Stalnaker  
Adam Whitehurst

## PROOFREADER

Christine Sabooni

## WEBSITE MANAGER

Alice Chou

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Kenneth Arrow, Stanford University  
Peter Bearman, Columbia University  
David Card, University of California at Berkeley  
Joshua Cohen, Stanford University  
Dalton Conley, New York University  
Greg Duncan, Northwestern University  
Kathryn Edin, Harvard University  
Paula England, Stanford University  
Robert Frank, Cornell University  
Mark Granovetter, Stanford University  
Robert Hauser, University of Wisconsin at Madison  
Michael Hout, University of California at Berkeley  
Jon Krosnick, Stanford University  
Glenn Loury, Brown University  
Hazel Markus, Stanford University  
Douglas Massey, Princeton University  
Susan Mayer, University of Chicago  
Charles Murray, American Enterprise Institute  
for Public Policy Research  
Katherine Newman, Johns Hopkins University  
Thomas Piketty, Paris School of Economics  
Woody Powell, Stanford University  
Barbara Reskin, University of Washington  
Richard Saller, Stanford University  
William Julius Wilson, Harvard University

## CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY

Building 80, 450 Serra Mall  
Stanford University  
Stanford, CA 94305-2029  
Tel: 650-724-6912  
Fax: 650-736-9883  
Email: [inequality@stanford.edu](mailto:inequality@stanford.edu)  
Website: [www.inequality.com](http://www.inequality.com)

The Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality is a program of the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences. Funding from the Elfenworks Foundation gratefully acknowledged. For more information, go to [www.elfenworks.org](http://www.elfenworks.org).

## Editors' Note

**It's often argued** that children today are growing up in a hypercompetitive world with new pressures not just to get good grades and stellar test scores but also to make the varsity basketball team, play in the school orchestra, and form a new school club on the side. This frequently rehearsed version of the "overstressed childhood" narrative is, however, very much a middle-class lament that fails to appreciate that there's stress and then there's *stress*. As tough as the middle-class gauntlet may be, the available evidence suggests that growing up in contemporary poverty-stricken families takes stress to yet higher levels, entailing frequent exposure to such stress-generating events as neighborhood violence, divorce and family chaos, health and mental health problems, residential and job mobility, and much more.

It's not just that such poverty-induced stress is mentally taxing. If it's experienced early enough in childhood, it can in fact get "under the skin" and change the way in which the body copes with the environment and the way in which the brain develops. These deep, enduring, and sometimes irreversible physiological changes are the very human price of running a high-poverty society.

The purpose of this issue is to lay out the facts and myths behind the developing science of early childhood and stress. Do poverty-stricken children indeed grow up in stress-ridden environments? Does such stress, if experienced early enough, bring about permanent physiological changes? Do these changes in turn lead to poor academic achievement and other competitive disadvantages? And, finally, can social policy play any part in changing such dynamics? The articles presented here answer all of the foregoing questions with a resounding "yes."

We begin with a piece by Jack Shonkoff that describes how an overactivated stress-response system has toxic effects on brain architecture and the body's other organs. In the following article, Gary Evans, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Pamela Kato-Klebanov develop a comprehensive model of the life course of poverty-stricken children, a model in which the toxic stress described by Jack Shonkoff and others is one of the mediating variables accounting for poor academic outcomes. Lastly, Greg Duncan and Katherine Magnuson emphasize that, in light of this new science of early childhood development, we would do well to refashion income support in ways that better target the prenatal and early childhood environment.

It's rare indeed that the science of poverty and achievement speaks so clearly on the matter of how best to spend our antipoverty dollars. Although Republicans and Democrats may differ on how much to spend on antipoverty initiatives, there are seemingly no politics at stake when it comes to spending our scarce antipoverty dollars wisely.

—David Grusky & Christopher Wimer, Senior Editors