

Investing in Knowledge:
Insights on the Funding Landscape
for Research on Inequality Among
Young People in the United States

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The findings in this report rely on publicly accessible materials from funder websites and philanthropic associations, conversations with staff at selected public and private funding organizations, and formal and informal interviews with social science researchers at university and government settings. Over 300 funding organizations were included in the materials. The organizations included have either an expressed interest in inequality and young people or youth-serving systems, or a reputation for funding inequality research that affects young people. Appendix A provides more information on data sources, and Appendix B provides a list of key informants.

Foreword by Adam Gamoran, William T. Grant Foundation

Hardly a day goes by without a new report about inequality in America. It has become increasingly clear that, whether in comparison to other nations at the present time, or compared to our own historical past, inequality in the U.S. is exceptionally high. At the same time, it's become clear that high inequality has damaging consequences—burdening our economic growth, squandering the potential of young people by restricting opportunity, and fraying the ties that bind us. What is less clear, however, is what we might do about it. What specific programs, policies, and practices might reduce inequality? How might we limit the effects of today's inequality on the youth of tomorrow?

We know that inequality is responsive to social policy. And we know that many of the challenges facing young people and families today are not inevitable. But we must know how to respond.

The William T. Grant Foundation has long supported research to improve the lives of young people, and in 2014, we began a new funding initiative focused solely on identifying and understanding approaches to reducing inequality. Our experience tells us that research has the potential to produce a body of knowledge that strengthens

the systems in which young people grow, the schools where they learn, and the communities in which they develop. It has the potential to challenge assumptions about what works and what doesn't, revealing new interventions and improving existing programs, policies, and practices so that every child and family has a fair shot at getting ahead. And so, amid the stark but surmountable challenge of inequality, the time is ripe for new research to pave the way the forward.

As we begin this work, we need to ask, What is already occurring in the landscape of funding for research on reducing inequality? To get a clearer picture, we invited Iowa sociologist Sarah Bruch, a noted inequality researcher, to review the field of funders, public and private, and identify both current opportunities and gaps in funding that may help us better understand how to pursue our work, as well as how to collaborate with others. Indeed, if we are to make progress in our collective efforts to answer the clarion call of reducing inequality by supporting research, we may first begin by learning more about each other and the ways that we approach this important endeavor.

Introduction

To build a strong foundation for our society's future and ensure that all young people are able to thrive, it is increasingly important that we not only understand but *respond* to the widespread inequalities confronting our nation. If our goal is to reduce the effects of today's inequality on tomorrow's society, then research on inequality among young people is essential. The knowledge yielded by research, however, must point towards strategies that will ultimately reduce inequality. The time is ripe for funders of research, both public and private, to take stock of whether and how this aim is being addressed. What efforts are currently under way to support and encourage the accumulation of knowledge about inequality among young people, and about strategies to address inequality?

This report maps the current funding environment for research on understanding and addressing social and economic inequality among young people in the U.S. To situate the existing funding landscape, I begin with a broad articulation of what is meant by inequality. Next, I characterize the structure of the funding landscape before turning to a description of three primary approaches of funders that support research on inequality among young people in the U.S. These characterizations emerged from a set of informant interviews with social science researchers and foundation and government funders and a document scan of funder's websites. The report concludes with a brief discussion of potential strategies funding organizations could use to improve efforts to understand and address inequality among young people in the U.S.

Broadening Our Thinking about Inequality

Amid growing economic disparity in the United States, the topic of inequality has garnered increased public attention. But while society-wide economic inequality receives the bulk of attention, it is only one piece of a larger, more complex problem.

Understanding what is meant by inequality is critically important. Articulating possible definitions and concepts of inequality broadens the scope of what we are concerned with and interested in addressing. For instance, despite increased attention to rising economic inequality, inequality based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation has persisted, even in the wake of legal protections against discrimination and a general liberalizing of social attitudes over generations. And while recent research on economic inequality has found a host of negative consequences, specifically for young people, ascribed qualities like race and ethnicity are also influential in whether young people get ahead or fall behind.

An expansive understanding of inequality helps us to avoid missing or misunderstanding important ways in which it is maintained, exacerbated, or ameliorated. As inequality scholars Prudence Carter and Sean Reardon explain, one of the biggest challenges to the study of inequality is “the creation of conceptual and empirical models that more holistically capture the cumulative and systemic factors that have created and continue to sustain inequality” (2014, p. 24). If one begins with a relatively narrow view of what inequality is and how it comes about, then the range of solutions for addressing it will be just as narrow and limited. If our goal is to reduce the problem of social and economic inequality among young people in the U.S., we must first grasp the complexity and depth of the issue.

Two distinctions are especially useful for clarifying what is meant by inequality. The most common distinction is between equality of outcomes (such as rates of educational attainment) and equality of opportunities (such as access to a college education). With regard to outcomes, not all inequality is considered problematic, and equalizing every outcome is not necessarily the desired solution. Differentiation between people in some instances is

not only expected, but desirable. The idea of equality of opportunity, by contrast, is based on normative belief that the process by which people get ahead in life should be fair and not related to ascribed characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. Thinking of inequality as primarily about opportunity focuses attention on policies, programs, and practices that organize and structure access (especially at early stages of children’s lives), and on resources individuals need to successfully gain access.

The second, and perhaps less familiar, distinction is between distributional and relational inequality. Distributional inequality concerns how resources, opportunities, and outcomes are divided among people. Relational inequality, on the other hand, has to do with how people are positioned in relation to one another and the nature of their interactions. For example, a distributional understanding of educational inequality might explain differences in educational outcomes in terms of the distribution of student resources (i.e., family income) or school resources (i.e., spending per student). In a relational account of educational inequality, differences in student outcomes result from relations of power and status that enable privileged people to establish and maintain advantages over their less well-off counterparts.

Describing these conceptual distinctions— between equality of outcomes and equality of opportunity; and between a distributional and relational conception of inequality— is not to suggest that one is more important than the other, but to highlight how each draws out different aspects of inequality that need to be better understood. By using both, we will ensure that we do not miss what may be fundamental ways that inequality among young people in the U.S. is produced, maintained, or exacerbated. Explicitly describing a fuller range of thinking about inequality also provides a good framework for identifying where the majority of research and funding is clustered and where there are gaps or limited attention.

The Funding Landscape: Three Findings

Finding 1: There is a relative scarcity of funding for research on youth inequality.

Inequality, and especially inequality among young people in the U.S., is one of the most substantial areas of social science inquiry. That said, there are surprisingly few funding organizations that provide support for research on inequality among young people on a national scale. I examined approximately 300 organizations that have either an explicitly expressed interest in inequality and young people or youth-serving systems, or a reputation for funding inequality research that affects young people as a population or in institutions, and found that only about 10 percent (33 foundations) support research on youth inequality on a national scale. (See the Methodological Appendix for information on how funding organizations were identified.) The funding landscape for research on youth inequality in the U.S., that is, is relatively small.

For the majority of the over 300 foundations examined, advocacy and direct service provision—often at the local or community level—is the foremost strategy for reducing youth inequality. Many funding organizations engage in a mix of these strategies, and the relative emphasis on advocacy, service delivery, and research varies. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation engages in advocacy-related campaigns (KIDSCOUNT), provides support for direct service provision (Casey Family Services), and funds research on evidence-based programs (FosterEd and Back on Track). However, the vast majority of foundations, especially those with explicit missions or large program areas focused on reducing inequality, support the provision of services to young people, their families, and their communities by providing funding to local non-profits, other service agencies, and occasionally through their own service division. This strategy is especially prevalent among foundations that

focus on a local geographic area. For example, the James Irvine Foundation supports a program (Linked Learning) which seeks to increase the number of low-income youth graduating from high school and earning a postsecondary degree in California. Another approach taken by some organizations is to partner directly with government agencies in providing services (Abramson, Soskis, & Toepler, 2012).

A number of foundations fund research activities with the explicit goal of influencing policy decisions and public opinion. Foundations' involvement in the policymaking process varies widely, as does the relative emphasis on advocacy as one of their strategies for addressing inequality among young people (Foundation Center, 2010). For example, the Foundation for Child Development uses strategic communications to promote research to inform the public and influence public policies that affect the lives of young children (Child Well-being Index and the New American Children Key Resources). In the realm of education, one area that has received significant media and scholarly attention is the increasingly active role of foundations in advocating for and funding specific types of school reforms (Reckhow, 2012; Scott & Jabbar, 2014). Another strategy used by foundations to influence public policy is to fund social policy pilot programs that align with their vision of how to address inequality among young people. For example, the Opportunity New York City Family Rewards Program (funded by a number of foundations over a multi-year period) aimed to assess the impact of conditional cash transfers on a number of child and family outcomes.

In contrast to most private foundations, government funding agencies such as National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), and Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) have stated missions to increase knowledge in specific areas (e.g., juvenile justice, education, health, etc.), and/or work toward

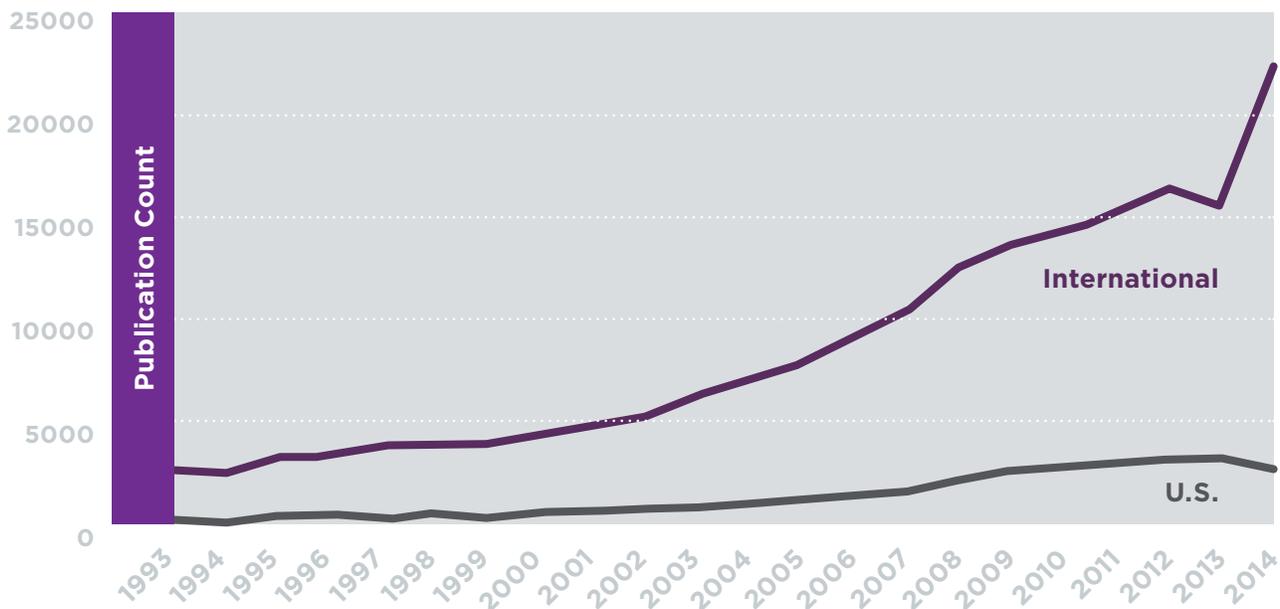
the improvement of outcomes for all. These funders support research as the primary strategy to achieve these missions, and have money allocated explicitly for this purpose. However, these government funding agencies do not have a primary emphasis on inequality among young people. Government funders with youth-related areas of focus support research that has much broader goals, such as fostering health and well-being (e.g., the Administration for Children and Families). Within these broader goals, these agencies occasionally have more specific, targeted calls for proposals, and initiatives that have explicit inequality, disparity, or equity considerations. For example, in 2011, the Department of Health and Human Services released an Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities. So, while government agencies seldom call explicitly for an agency priority on inequality or disparity, the majority fund research that addresses inequality among young people, through either a focus on improving the outcomes of all children, or, on rare occurrences, through specific initiatives that call attention to particular disparities.

Both key informant researchers and funders characterized the funding landscape as comprising a handful of consistent, relatively large public funders (i.e., NIH, NSF, IES, ACF), and a collection of smaller foundation funders. The limited number of funders and low level of

funding, compared to the relatively high level of research productivity on the topic of inequality in general, and among young people, specifically, was noted by several of the key informants. Some saw it as a reflection that most research is not supported through external grant funds, while others lamented the limited and/or declining avenues through which to solicit funds to support inquiry in this area. However, there was widespread agreement among most of the key informants that the study of inequality among young people does not have nearly the funding capacity that the importance of the issue warrants. Given the surging concerns regarding inequality, it is somewhat surprising that funding for research on this issue comes from a rather small set of government and foundation funders.

Though inequality has been a prominent area of inquiry for some time, funding scarcity may be contributing to stunted growth in research on the topic in the U.S., especially with regard to youth inequality. Despite increases in research publications on inequality from 1993 to 2014, the U.S. has dramatically trailed behind the international community (Figure 1). Even the limited growth in U.S. social science publications on inequality has focused on the general population, with less specific attention to youth (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Inequality-Related Social Science Research Published 1993-2014: US vs International

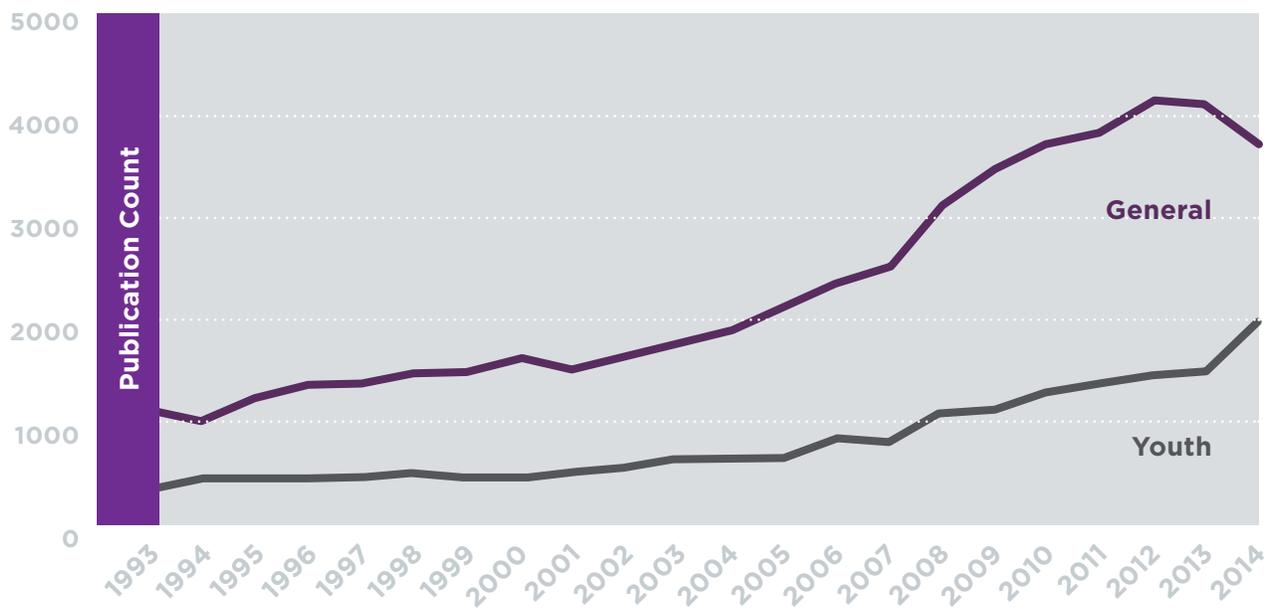


Source: Publication counts restricted to those within the social sciences. A topic search for terms related to inequality was used which identifies publications with this stem in the title, abstract, or keywords. For more information on specific search terms used in the analysis, see the methodological appendix.

This scarcity of funding may in fact work to replicate inequality among researchers. In an environment with few funding options, the most advantaged, senior, and accomplished according to traditional criteria are most likely to obtain funding, leading to a situation where funding favors established researchers over newer or less advantaged researchers. Concerns about insider or incumbency advantage are not new to the research community. In 2004, the National Academy of Sciences issued a report on the biomedical research community, concluding that there was a significant disadvantage for young and less established investigators leading to a host of recommendations for how to make the funding environment more democratic and inclusive. However, despite the recommendations of the NAS panel, a recent article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* described “a generation at risk” due to a continuing decline in the likelihood of young investigators receiving funding from NIH (Daniels, 2015). While no NAS panel has issued a report with similar concerns for social science research on inequalities among young people in the US, many researchers in the field perceive disadvantages not only for younger scholars, but for scholars from less advantaged backgrounds and institutions.

Indeed, it appears that funding for research on inequality among young people in the U.S. has been declining or stagnating. Available data are not precise enough to track funding specific to inequality among young people, but the data that do exist are suggestive. For example, in a recent report to the Consortium of Social Science Associations, the NIH Council of Councils showed that NIH funding peaked in 2002 and has decreased steadily since then (COSSA, 2014). And one of the biggest points of emphasis for many key informants was the level of funding for research on inequality among young people. Most described the decline in funding for research from government funders, which provide the bulk of the research funding for social sciences, and linked this decline to overall budget reductions and the recent sequestration, which cut federal funding for all domestic programs. While this depiction of government funding resources was common, a few informants did question whether this decline was a temporary situation or a matter of perception due to increased competition for scarce funding resources. For those who described a decline in public funding, many were concerned that private foundations, despite their interest in topics like inequality, would not be able to replace the declining public resources. The overwhelming concern was that this situation will create an even greater mismatch between the importance of research on inequality among young people and the availability of funding to support this work.

Figure 2. US Inequality Social Science Research Published 1993-2014: General Inequality vs. Youth-Related Inequality



Source: Publication counts gathered from topic search in Web of Science database, September 23, 2015. Publication counts restricted to those within the social sciences. A topic search for terms related to inequality was used which identifies publications with this stem in the title, abstract, or keywords. For more information on specific search terms used in the analysis, see the methodological appendix.

Finding 2: There are varying definitions of what constitutes research, and a variety of strategies used to support it.

Funding organizations support a wide-range of research-related activities, including original research and research syntheses. On one end of the spectrum is basic science research that does not have a direct connection to policy or a particular intervention, but contributes to the development of theory. On the other end of the spectrum is applied research and policy or program evaluation, which answer specific questions about particular interventions.

Research on both ends of the spectrum can inform policies and practices designed to address inequality, while varying in the degree to which they use rigorous methods that support causal inference and in the types of research designs and methods employed. While the largest government funders (e.g., NIH and NSF), use the majority of their resources to support basic research, they also fund a wide range of more applied research, including work on dissemination and implementation. Within some agencies, the vast majority of funding is directed toward program evaluations and intervention research that support the identification and development of “evidence-based” programming (e.g., IES and ACF). Evaluating the amount and quality of evidence in support of particular programs and practices has been systematized by some government agencies. For example, in 2002 the Institute of Education Sciences created the What Works Clearinghouse in order to create a centralized, uniform, scientific process for evaluating evidence for the effectiveness of educational interventions. And in 2013 the Institute of Education Sciences and the National Science Foundation created common guidelines for education research, which specified six types of research (ranging from early knowledge-generating projects to full-scale implementation of programs, policies, or practices) and detailed the theoretical and empirical basis needed to justify each type. Among foundation funders, there is less support for original research overall, and more support for research syntheses and evaluations of various types of existing services. This is not surprising, however, as it follows the greater relative emphasis on direct service provision, which is then evaluated, and on advocacy work, much of which utilizes research syntheses.

There is wide variety in the strategies that government and foundation funders use to support original research on inequality among young people. Some funders provide support for institutions, organizations, and research centers; others support individual investigators directly through research grants or fellowships; and some support only their in-house research capacity.

In terms of providing support to institutions, organizations, or research centers, one of the defining characteristics of this funding environment is the importance of research centers that are funded by a range of government and foundation sources. Many of these research centers are funded not only to do in-house research, but also to act as funders of research on inequality among children. Several foundations and government agencies use this strategy for supporting research. This type of indirect support for research—i.e., funding that is provided to an organization that then re-grants the funds to individual researchers for work on inequality among young people—is one of the important sources of funding identified by inequality scholars. Poverty centers funded by the Administration for Children and Families are prominent example of this funding strategy. Currently, there are three funded poverty centers located at large universities (University of California, Davis’s Center on Poverty Research; Stanford University’s Center on Poverty and Inequality; and the University of Wisconsin, Madison’s Institute for Research on Poverty). Each of the poverty centers re-grant some of their funds through calls for proposals on specific topics related to poverty and inequality, and for specific types of researchers, such as emerging scholars.

In terms of providing support to individual researchers, one somewhat surprising finding was the rarity of an open granting process to solicit applications. Many funding organizations use a combination of supporting a pre-selected group of researchers whom they have identified, inviting specific individuals to apply (i.e., funding on an invitation basis only); issuing targeted calls for proposals for specific initiatives; and openly soliciting applications for funding. Overall, there are relatively few funding agencies that openly solicit grant applications or use the strategy of an ongoing application process as their primary approach. The funding structure that results from this range of strategies creates an environment in which it is challenging for researchers to be aware of each funding opportunity available from the various organizations and centers—a situation even more daunting for younger and otherwise less advantaged scholars.

Finding 3. There are three dominant approaches to funding inequality research

Funding organizations that support research on inequality among young people in the U.S. have adopted an array of approaches that often reflect an organization-specific mission, program area, or funding initiative. These approaches can be broken up into three dominant focuses: institutions, specific groups, and macroeconomic inequality. The first two of these three can be understood as leverage points—where, when, and for whom to intervene. While the first approach identifies institutions as important places in which inequality is created and maintained, the second identifies specific populations on which to focus. The third dominant approach takes rising society-wide economic inequality as its starting point, and then focuses on the consequent implications for young people in the U.S. While some funding organizations use one of these approaches, others fund research that may fall within the various approaches.

The Institutional Approach

The institutional approach is concerned, first and foremost, with where to intervene. It begins with the idea that there are key social institutions where inequality is created and maintained, and, therefore, where it can be addressed and reduced. Such institutions fall into a number of important and sometimes overlapping categories, including educational, political, economic (labor market), regulatory (criminal justice), and redistributive (social welfare). The understanding that institutions are the place to intervene to address inequality was well articulated by David Grusky, who stated, “If poverty and inequality are still very much with us, it is not because they are any longer ‘puzzles’ or enigmas driven by forces we cannot fathom. It instead is because we have collectively decided not to undertake the well-known institutional reforms necessary to reduce them” (Grusky, 2014, p. 1).

Within the funding environment for inequality among young people in the U.S., educational institutions have received the most attention, although several funders with special initiatives or program areas have also focused on political, criminal justice, social welfare, and labor market institutions. That many organizations focus primarily on education and educational institutions reflects, in part, the role of education in providing the skills and resources

that young people need to be successful members of society—as citizens and workers, etc. It also reflects the perception of schools as a crucial institution for social mobility and the transmission of status across generations.

To the extent that schools are key sites of opportunity, so too have they been sites for reforms aimed at improving achievement and attainment, reducing unequal relations among groups, and promoting social and civic integration and cohesion. Many funders have programs or initiatives that target education. The Spencer Foundation, for example, has a primary focus on education that is not limited to educational institutions, but more broadly concerned with improving education and understanding how education is related to economic and social inequality. Educational institutions, as such, are not the only types of institutions targeted by funders concerned with inequality among young people. For instance, in addition to a focus on educational institutions, the Carnegie Corporation focuses on other key institutions that impact democracy and immigrant incorporation, funding work on populations that have historically been underserved by or are disconnected from these institutions.

The Target Group Approach

The second dominant approach is characterized by its focus on when and for whom to intervene. One of the key insights from the study of child and youth development is the understanding of childhood and young adulthood as distinct developmental periods and critical life transition points. Within the funding environment for inequality among young people in the U.S., there are a number of organizations that have a particular focus on either a specific developmental period (e.g., early childhood), or a specific life transition point (e.g., young adults transitioning to the labor market or out of foster care). This emphasis reflects not only these key insights from the study of child and youth development, but one of the biggest policy-related questions concerning approaches to youth inequality: when to intervene. For some time, this question—and the quest for “starting gate” equality—has been answered predominantly with calls to intervene at younger and younger ages. The Foundation for Child Development, for example, targets early learning experiences as a key way to support the development of young children and potentially mitigate the harmful consequences of inequality and exclusion.

The other prevailing way that funders use the targeted approach to support research on inequality among young people is to identify particular groups of young people. As

noted, one of the most disturbing aspects of inequality among young people in the U.S. today is the extent and persistence of a wide range of disparities by race, ethnicity, and gender. Concerns about this type of between-group inequality has led many organizations to focus on explaining how these disparities come about and persist, particularly among the specific groups that are most disadvantaged (Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity 2014; Quiroz-Martinez et al. 2007).

Within the funding environment for inequality among young people, the most common way to describe this type of group-targeted approach was to use general terms such as “vulnerable,” “disadvantaged,” and “underserved” children and young people. However, many funding organizations also use more specific language identifying particular groups—e.g., low-income or economic status, racial and/or ethnic minorities, immigrant status or nativity or legal status, language, or gender—although these more narrowly defined target groups were more common in funders’ special initiatives, as opposed to their primary mission. Although there are a number of funding organizations with specifically targeted missions, most of them do not primarily fund research on a national scale. The strategies used by various funders to target under-represented or disadvantaged populations is diverse, ranging from an organization having a sole focus on a particular group, to groups of organizations collectively funding initiatives that specifically address issues related to particular “disadvantaged” populations (Shah & Sato, 2012; Mukai & Lawrence, 2011; Shah et al., 2011; Brielle, 2008; Lindsey, 2006). A good example of a recent initiative in this regard is the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Forward Promise initiative, which promotes opportunities for the health and success of middle- and high-school-age boys and young men of color.

For many funding organizations, a focus on specific groups does not imply a focus on the characteristics of the group itself, but rather a more general interest in understanding how disadvantage arises and persists. This broad focus encompasses concerns about the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across groups, as well as concerns about unequal relations of power and influence. With this breadth of focus, this type of work builds our understanding of how inequality is produced and ameliorated, without narrowing the range of scholarly inquiry to a particular set of possible explanations or a particular perspective on inequality.

The Macroeconomic Inequality Approach

Within the funding environment for inequality among young people, there are a number of organizations that have called for attention to the effects and implications of macroeconomic inequality. This parallels a growing area of research, debate, and public conversation about the economic, social, and political consequences of inequality. Increasing research and programmatic attention has been devoted to understanding the link between inequality and a host of potentially negative consequences including social cohesion and trust, democratic representation, equal opportunity, and intergenerational processes that pass advantages and disadvantages from generation to generation. The Social Inequality program of the Russell Sage Foundation, for example, focuses on whether rising economic inequality has affected social, political, and economic institutions in the U.S., and the extent to which increased inequality has affected equality of opportunity, social mobility, and the intergenerational transmission of advantage.

Within this broader concern with the consequences of macroeconomic inequality, there are a number of funding organizations that focus on equitable growth. This approach emphasizes the importance of the relationship between processes occurring in the broader economy, particularly economic growth, and inequality, while also seeking to identify strategies to ensure that growth is shared equitably among people at different points in the income distribution. Importantly, this focus on equitable growth does not assume that a “rising tide will lift all boats” (i.e., that economic growth will improve the standard of living for everyone) in some automatic fashion. Instead, this approach seeks to understand how macroeconomic processes related to growth and productivity can impede or enhance the equitable distribution of resources. For example, a number of foundations, including the Sandler Foundation, have supported the creation of two research centers on equitable growth: the Center for Equitable Growth at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Washington Center for Equitable Growth (WCEG). The WCEG is not only a research organization, but a grantmaking organization that re-grants funds to support research on whether and how structural changes in the economy—particularly changes related to economic inequality—affect economic growth and related economic outcomes. The research that is funded under such initiatives includes work that seeks to understand how to build human capital including all levels of education and training and how to ensure economic mobility.

Given the concern with equitable distribution of resources, it makes sense that there is a strong focus on how resources are distributed within the labor market, as opposed to a focus on distribution through social welfare institutions (e.g., cash assistance programs such as welfare or unemployment insurance) or redistribution of income through taxes. For example, the Ford Foundation's Economic Opportunity and Assets area emphasizes economic fairness and shared economic prosperity, which it articulates as not only improving the lives of low-income families and communities, but as being good for business and the stability and growth of the global economy. The Rockefeller Foundation similarly emphasizes equitable growth and inclusive economies. One program within this broader area of interest is a youth employment program that focuses on equalizing opportunities and removing barriers to employment in order to advance the well-being of young people in the U.S. This approach is being adopted not only by funding organizations, but also by local, state and national governments (and supra-national bodies such as the OECD) as one of the key pillars of economic development and growth strategies.

Strategies for Advancing Efforts to Understand and Address Youth Inequality

Drawing on interviews with researchers and funders and publicly accessible documents on the web, I have examined the current funding landscape for research on inequalities among young people in the United States. I have three major findings: 1) there is a relative scarcity of funding for research on youth inequality, 2) what constitutes research and the strategies to support it are broad and varied, and 3) funding organizations have three main approaches to supporting inequality research.

Rising inequality has spurred efforts to understand and address these issues, but recognizing the problem is only a starting point. With an understanding of the structure and dominant approaches used in the current funding landscape, we now ask: What is needed to increase our understanding and ability to respond to inequality among young people? Three promising ways forward are to allocate more resources, recruit and support new voices, and broaden and integrate our approaches.

More Resources

Existing research on inequality among young people provides the backbone of what we know. Research not only describes the extent of existing inequality and helps to inform us as to the nature of the problem, but provides the theoretical and methodological tools with which to draw from in formulating explanations for inequality, as well as the understandings of the potential consequences of inequality. However, this work has been constrained by a relative lack of research funding support. In other words, this area of research does not have the capacity that the quality of research and importance of the problem would suggest that it have. Given the importance of the issue, it is surprising that the base of research funding

is so limited. While there are many ways to go about addressing inequality among young people in the U.S (including continuing to support direct service delivery and advocacy work), one of the most critical ways to reduce inequality is to support social science research focused on understanding and addressing existing inequality. Increasing funding of this work is critical to help us develop, implement, and evaluate better policies, programs, and practices to address inequality.

As a recent American Academy of Arts and Sciences report underscored, such research is important not just in its own right, but as an essential foundation for service provision and advocacy. “While the American Dream rests on more than research alone,” the authors conclude, “it is clear that the elements forming the foundation of the Dream—economic prosperity, improved quality of life through technology and medicine, opportunity for a quality education and a quality job, the hope of a better life for one’s children—would begin to crumble without the vital reinforcement provided by the research enterprise” (AAA&S, 2014, pp.15-16). This report speaks to the critical role of basic research, and the government’s role in funding this work, but it is clear that in order to address inequality among young people, we need to fund both basic and applied research: basic research to develop new insights and general theoretical understandings, and applied research to assess alternative ways of reducing inequality.

The importance of applied research that examines how policies, practices, and programs can enhance young people’s lives cannot be overstated. If we want to reduce inequality among young people, we need research that provides not only descriptions but explanations of the various mechanisms and pathways through which inequality is created, maintained, and ameliorated. This research not only specifies the mechanisms by which

inequality is generated, but provides us with the tools to assess the effectiveness of the programs, policies, and practices designed to address it. With this knowledge in hand, we can devote resources to advocate for changes in policies and institutions to implement these insights, or directly provide these programs and services in ways that are suggested by the research results.

In order to successfully address inequality among young people, we need to increase our knowledge of programs, policies, and practices that work. To do so, it is necessary to build research capacity. We may increase our understanding of inequality among young people and advance efforts to address it by leveraging additional resources, or redeploying existing resources, to fund research. This way forward could be implemented in a variety of ways, from building capacity of research institutions to investing in specific investigators or research projects (Gamoran & Bruch, 2010); leveraging collaborations among funding organizations to most effectively target promising research; or sustaining partnerships between government agencies that provide direct services, funding organizations, and researchers in order to coordinate intervention efforts.

New Voices

Funding that supports research on inequality among young people has the power to shape what we come to know, but it can also lead to inequality in whose voices are heard. One specific way to increase our understanding of inequality among young people is to recruit or support under-represented voices in the research community.

While there are a number of reasons why funders are more likely to provide support for more established researchers, there are also a number of reasons why supporting a broader set of researchers would be a fruitful strategy for enhancing the research capacity for the study of inequality among young people. Just as we know that providing equal opportunity for young children is a critical component of maximizing human capital potential, providing funding opportunities for less established and/or under-represented researchers would maximize the knowledge base brought to bear on addressing inequality among young people. Having a more inclusive set of researchers focused on examinations of inequality would also allow for a wider range of perspectives and prior experiences to be leveraged in this pursuit. For example, one concern raised recently about the scientific workforce in general has been whether there are fewer opportunities

for young scholars, and how this may limit the potential productive capacity of scientific research and discovery (AAA&S, 2014). Similar concerns were raised by key informant interviewees who noted that in addition to concerns about the range of opportunities for younger scholars, they are concerned about the representation of under-represented and structurally disadvantaged scholars due to factors such as race, class, and gender.

Therefore, expanding the population of scholars who are supported to do research on inequality among young people—in size and diversity—is a potentially promising way forward. Such strategies could include broadening the pool of scholars who research inequality among young people, or targeting support or outreach efforts to ensure that the full range of experiences and expertise are represented in all phases of the research process.

Broader and More Integrated Approaches

A third strategy to pursue in supporting work to address inequality among young people is to focus on expanding or integrating the methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives used by scholars in their research on inequality among young people. This could take the form of supporting new or varied approaches and perspectives, or could come about through an emphasis on cross-fertilization.

The importance of ensuring a broad range of methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives was raised by a number of key informants who recommended this approach out of an appreciation of the unique perspectives and tools that different disciplines bring to the study of inequality. Collaborative work between scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds has unique potential to increase our understanding of inequality among young people. This view of the value of interdisciplinary work parallels one of the key recommendations of the Rebuilding the MOSAIC Report of the National Science Foundation, which articulated the programmatic priorities for the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences (2010). The emphasis of this approach is not simply increasing the number of scholars, but encouraging scholars to draw more deeply from a wider range of existing knowledge and previous scholarship.

In addition to increasing the range of disciplinary perspectives or methodological approaches, broader approaches can focus the attention of researchers

toward overlooked or under-studied forms of inequality. Using multiple perspectives on inequality can move our understanding past what can be learned from one perspective. For example, most work on inequality remains within the confines of a distributional understanding of inequality. Relational accounts of inequality can be seen as necessary complements to the more typical distributional accounts of inequality. These different ways of thinking about inequality have implications for both descriptive and explanatory research, as well as for the solutions we propose to address inequalities.

Broader approaches can also be used to encourage researchers to understand and address inequality as opposed to focusing solely on poverty or disadvantage. As noted above in Finding 3, a strict focus on disadvantage or targeted attention toward specific groups is one of the dominant approaches currently taken by funders of inequality research. And while there are many advantages to the targeted or group-specific approach, there are also advantages to taking a more universal approach and including the experiences of diverse groups. It is clear that there are important trade-offs in determining when a more targeted, narrow focus is preferred over a more universal or broad approach to the study of inequality.

Conclusion

Inequality is a complex problem, present in young people's outcomes and opportunities, and in the ways that resources are distributed and interactions are experienced. Understanding different forms and distinctions of inequality, and the ways that they shape the way young people live, is the first step to conceptualizing how research might identify effective responses. And just as the problem of inequality is broad and multifaceted, so too are the approaches of those supporting research to mitigate it.

Though informants reported a scarcity of funding opportunities for research on inequality, especially youth inequality, there exist rich and diverse efforts to understand and address what may well be the defining

issue of our time. The three main primary approaches, focusing respectively on institutions, target groups, and macroeconomic considerations, represent vital strategies common among funders. In the future, the field may consider the lasting value of devoting additional resources, including new voices, and taking broader and more integrated steps, both individually and as a community.

As funders seek to build knowledge, foster opportunity, and reduce inequality through research, this brief overview of the funding landscape may help organizations understand the efforts of their peers and make decisions that will ultimately improve the lives of young people.

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Appendix A: Methodological Appendix

Data Sources

This report is based on information obtained from funding organizations through discussions with staff at these organizations, publicly accessible materials from funder websites and philanthropic associations, and both formal and informal interviews with social science researchers at university and government settings. See Appendix B for a list of key informant interviewees.

Two groups of researchers were targeted for key informant interviews – those whose primary scholarly focus is inequality but not necessarily young people, and those whose primary focus is on young people but not necessarily inequality. The interviews with researchers had three main topics: 1) where they look for funding for inequality and youth-related research projects; 2) their thoughts about funders and the funding landscape for inequality and youth-related research; and 3) promising future directions in the study of inequality and young people and/or promising directions for policies, programs, and practices aimed at addressing inequality among young people. Questions about these topics were meant to solicit a list of funders that are well-known in the field, identify how researchers characterize and classify funders, help determine if there are distinct or overlapping worlds of funding for inequality and youth people-related concerns, and identify promising future directions for scholarship and solutions addressing inequality among young people.

The interviews with public and private funders focused on obtaining a more in-depth understanding of their current funding programs and priorities related to research on inequality among young people in the US; their thoughts and perspective on the current funding landscape for this kind of work; and what they thought were promising future directions.

Information from over 300 funding organizations was examined for inclusion in this report. To be included, funding organizations had to have an explicitly expressed interest in inequality and young people or youth-serving systems, or have a reputation for funding inequality research that affects young people as a population or in institutions.

The identification of the subset of government agencies and foundation funders who fund research on youth inequality on a national scale was obtained from key informants as well as organization lists obtained from philanthropic associations including the Grantmakers for Education, Grantmakers for Children, Youth, and Families, the Foundation Center, and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. The sample of government funders is limited to include only the primary government agencies that fund social science research on inequality and young people (e.g., NIH, NSF, IES, and HHS). See Appendix C for list of organizations included in the funding landscape for research on inequality among young people in the United States.

Article Count Analysis & Validity Check

Publication counts gathered from topic search in Web of Science database, September 23, 2015. Publication counts restricted to those within the social sciences. A topic search for terms related to inequality was used which identifies publications with this stem in the title, abstract, or keywords.

Because scholars across disciplines and substantive domains use different words to describe the topic of their research (e.g., sociologists are more likely to discuss inequality whereas health researchers are more likely to use the term disparities), several terms were used to identify inequality-related research.

The search terms used were: *inequal** (inequality/ies); *disparit** (disparity/ies); *vulnerabl** (vulnerable/ity); *differenc** (difference/s); *disadvantage** (disadvantage/d); *underserve** (underserved); *discriminat** (discrimination/discriminated/discriminatory).

The additional criteria of also have a population focus on young people was included in Figure 2. The search terms used for the population focus were: *youth*; *child** (child/children); *adolesce** (adolescent/s, adolescence). The inequality-related term had to appear within 15 words of the population-related term.

The distinction of U.S. versus international research is based on the geographic location of the primary author's affiliation.

To assess the validity of this approach to tracking scholarly publications and these key search terms, a search was done in the last three years of *Sociology of Education* (one of the social science journals included in the Web of Science database). The result of this validity check was that the vast majority of articles examining some aspect of inequality were captured in the automated search term query, however there were articles that were not captured that used wording that is more implicitly related to inequality. For example, the SOE article “Who is Placed into Special Education?” by Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan (2010) that discusses the “frog-pond” effect was not included in the search results. Even though the abstract discusses the under-representation of non-white students, the title, abstract and keywords do not include the explicit search terms used in the automated search term query.

Appendix B: List of Key Informant Interviewees

Researchers

Lawrence (Lonnie) Berger

Incoming Director, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Doctoral Program Chair and Professor, School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison

David Bills

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Graduate Programs, University of Iowa
Professor, College of Education and Department of Sociology, University of Iowa

David Brady

Director of the Inequality and Social Policy Department, WZB Berlin Social Science Center
Adjunct Professor, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University

Jeanne (Brook) Brooks-Gunn

Professor of Child Development and Education, Teachers College and College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University
Co-director, National Center for Children and Families
Co-director, Columbia University Institute for Child and Family Policy

Maria Cancian

Assistant Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services (pending confirmation)
Associate Dean for Fiscal Initiatives and Social Sciences, College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Professor of Public Affairs and Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dalton Conley

Professor of Sociology, Medicine & Public Policy, New York University

Robert Crosnoe

Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

Janet Gornick

Professor of Political Science and Sociology, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
Director, LIS (formerly Luxembourg Income Study) | Cross-National Data Center in Luxembourg

David Grusky

Professor of Sociology, Stanford University
Director, Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality

David Johnson

Chief Economist, Bureau of Economic Analysis (formerly Chief of the Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division at U.S. Census Bureau)

Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson

Professor, Department of Sociology, Washington State University

Ann Meier

Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota

David Takeuchi

Associate Dean for Research, Graduate School of Social Work, Boston College
Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, Boston College

Kristin Turney

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Department of Criminology, Law, and Society, University of California, Irvine

Jane Waldfogel

Professor of Social Work and Public Affairs, School of Social Work, Columbia University

Chris Wildeman

Associate Professor of Sociology, Yale University

Funders

Mark Bogosian

Program Officer, Foundation for Child Development

Rebecca Clark (email)

Branch Chief, Population Dynamics Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Development, National Institutes of Health

Steven Lawrence

Director of Research, Foundation Center

Denise (Denny) Pintello

Director, Child and Adolescent Services Research Program, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health

Pat White

Sociology Program Director, Division of Social and Economic Sciences, National Science Foundation

James (Jim) Wilson

Program Director, Social Inequality, Russell Sage Foundation

Appendix C: List of Funders

Foundation Funders

William T. Grant Foundation
Russell Sage Foundation
Spencer Foundation
Foundation for Child Development
Annie E. Casey Foundation
Carnegie Corporation of New York
Ford Foundation
Rockefeller Foundation
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Noyce Foundation
Atlantic Philanthropies
Nathan Cummings Foundation
The Robert and Janice McNair Foundation
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Gerber Foundation
Raikes Foundation
Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation
David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Lumina Foundation
Wallace Foundation
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Michael and Susan Dell Foundation
Kresge Foundation
CITI Foundation
Public Welfare Foundation
Aurora Foundation
Chamberlin Family Foundation
Heising-Simons Foundation

Government Funding Agencies

Institute for Education Sciences
National Science Foundation
National Institutes of Health (including the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Mental Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and National Cancer Institute)
Department of Health and Human Services (including the Administration for Children and Families and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
National Institute of Justice



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