

**Social and Economic Mobility:
Its Linkages to Health Disparities, Educational Outcomes, and Well-Being**

Participating Disciplines: Anthropology, Geography and Earth Sciences, Psychological Science, Sociology, Political Science and Public Administration, Public Policy

Lead Individuals: **Dr. Ryan P. Kilmer**, Department of Psychological Sciences, Director of the Social Aspects of Health Initiative, and Senior Fellow for Faculty Engagement, Office of Urban Research and Community Engagement and **Dr. Elizabeth Stearns**, Department of Sociology and Core Faculty in Public Policy

Target Category: Existing and Emerging Excellence

Keywords: social and economic mobility; social determinants of health; health disparities; educational disparities, health equity, community engagement, community-university partnerships

Executive Summary

Social and economic mobility and income disparities are major national issues with profound impacts for health, education, housing, and other domains. Indeed, the neighborhood in which one is born and raised (and in which one lives) predicts disparities in developmental and educational outcomes, health care access, and employment (e.g., McEwen & McEwen, 2017; National Academies of Science, Engineering, & Math, 2019a; 2019b). Multiple community factors and conditions constrain individuals' and families' efforts to improve their economic and social status, contributing to disparities in health care, behavioral health services, educational opportunities, food security and, more broadly, inequities in health and well-being.

Notably, the Charlotte area was found to rank 50th out of the largest 50 U.S. cities in providing opportunities for upward mobility for children born into poverty (Chetty et al. 2014). The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force (2017) crystallized the local response, highlighting key influences on children's prospects for upward mobility, including (1) early childcare and education, (2) career and college readiness, and (3) family and child stability. It also identified "cross-cutting factors" that influence the quality of children's lives: their exposure to segregation by wealth, poverty, and race and their access to social capital, or personal relationships and the resources that can be mobilized through those relationships. Since that report's release, considerable civic energy has gone into developing and enhancing pathways for upward mobility, spurring action in nonprofit, public, and corporate sectors, with the goals of reducing disparities and improving economic, health, educational, and employment outcomes. To date, limited research has informed and examined these efforts.

The researchers on this proposal represent several disciplines (psychology, sociology, public policy, geography, anthropology) and are all engaged in research focusing on these three main factors (and the complex interrelationships among them). They include faculty with: a shared commitment to conducting meaningful research on issues of social equity and the social and contextual factors that impact health, education, and well-being; complementary perspectives and a wide-ranging methodological skill set used in both primary and applied research, including community-engaged and partnership-oriented research; and extensive collective histories of funding from governmental and non- governmental sources to support their work. Two scholars with extensive external funding histories (Kilmer: \$3.5 million, Stearns: \$5.1 million) and experience with managing interdisciplinary teams to address real-world issues co-lead this proposal. Thus, the proposed group draws on both its existing excellence and identifies the potential for future excellence in research through new collaborations. This group of faculty will continue to build on their research regarding children and families' prospects for upward social mobility, including its linkages with social and policy factors, as well as health and education-related outcomes.

Evidence of Strength and Excellence

Researchers on this proposal have established scholarly records regarding factors relevant to social and economic mobility, social determinants of health, and disparities in health and education. More recently, faculty teams have come together via the **Social Aspects of Health Initiative (SAHI)**, established in 2018. SAHI focuses on social, institutional, and environmental contexts “to identify and address health inequities in urban regions.” Its objectives include (abridged listing): connecting scholars with shared interests; facilitating interdisciplinary research; securing external research funding; and utilizing university resources to address community issues. Kilmer has been SAHI Director since 8/19. Under the auspices of SAHI, faculty have applied for 3 external and 2 internal grants, with other proposals in development. The proposed team members would build upon and expand the SAHI efforts to date to include work focused on education and family stability.

Early Care and Education (ECE). Quality ECE is a key early pathway to mobility. Several team members have conducted research in this area, largely focused on the Charlotte region. For instance, subsequent to a funded evaluation (\$185k, to Kilmer and Jim Cook), Kilmer and Armstrong (along with Cook) completed an Institute of Education Sciences-funded study (\$398k) that increased the school system’s Early Childhood Education Program’s capacity to use data to strengthen their program. The project included the development and evaluation of two data-guided interventions. The evaluation and the IES-funded work yielded: multiple joint manuscripts (3, all with doctoral student lead authors), a book chapter, 6 graduate assistantships, 17 presentations, and data relevant to 5 Ph.D. milestone projects.

Recently, interdisciplinary teams of scholars have responded to community needs with proposals focused on Mecklenburg County’s ECE system of care, including: (1) factors that influence Latino families’ access to and enrollment in ECE (Potochnick & Kilmer; funded Gambrell Fellowship Award); (2) a landscape analysis of prenatal to age 3 services and supports for children, expectant mothers, and parents of young children (Armstrong, Kangmennaang, Delmelle, Kilmer, Potochnick; funded by Smart Start of Mecklenburg County); and (3) a multi-year project to inform policy decisions that strengthen our prenatal to age 5 system of care and promote health and well-being for Black and Latino families (Armstrong, Potochnick, Delmelle, Kangmennaang, Kilmer; under review, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation).

College and Career Readiness. Members of the research team have also studied aspects of student success in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education with upwards of \$5 million in external funding from the National Science Foundation and the Institute of Education Sciences. In general, these projects have examined the experiences of underrepresented students across the educational life course and highlighted the key roles that institutions play in ameliorating or exacerbating existing inequalities. NSF-funded studies from Bottia, Mickelson, and Stearns used NC’s public school system to investigate the interplay between different stages of the educational life course and K-16 school organization characteristics and cultures in influencing gender and racial/ethnic gaps in student achievement and degree attainment. Funding from two other NSF grants provides scholarship funds for low-income UNC Charlotte students, enhancing their upward mobility prospects, and providing for substantial curricular reform that will help other students succeed. In the last 5 years, these team members collaborated on 14 manuscripts, did more than 30 conference presentations, and supported 6

graduate students who wrote 3 dissertations and master's theses with the data. Other collaborations with Potochnick and Giersch examine student success in high school and college.

Child and Family Stability. This area includes access to mental health, family support programming, and financial security. Kilmer et al. have received funding for research and evaluation to inform mental health system change efforts, family support, and child welfare programming (nearly \$2 million in funding; 16 articles, 7 with student first-authors; 61 conference presentations; several years of multiple GA lines). Fitzgerald's work focuses on family's financial security and the long-term consequences of college debt. Langhinrichsen-Rohling examines the role family violence plays in influencing risky health behaviors.

Other Relevant Topic Areas and Areas of Strength

Team members have worked in the areas of **social capital and segregation**, particularly with respect to its impact on education. Schmutz is leading a Charlotte-based effort to assess how cultural organizations can provide opportunities for the growth of social capital and economic opportunity. Mickelson has studied the effects of racial segregation in Charlotte-area schools for decades, and Bottia, Giersch, and Stearns have published on segregation and education.

Work with **place-based initiatives (PBIs)** is an emerging area of research. PBIs have been said to show promise for mitigating intergenerational poverty, facilitating mobility, and advancing health equity (Chetty et al., 2014; Hopkins & Ferris, 2015). Through SAHI, Kilmer heads a multi-disciplinary group that received an Ignite Planning Grant last year to support their work with 3 local PBIs and efforts to seek funding regarding these PBIs and their impact on indicators relevant to mobility. The team has developed a first research effort and is currently preparing a grant proposal for a 4/21 submission.

This work with PBIs grows out of a significant history of **community-engaged research and evaluation**. Community engagement has been a clear strength for individuals and programs on campus, and **connections with local partners** are and have been critical to the success of many research projects. Members of this team have engaged with public sector systems (mental health, education, child welfare, public housing, early childhood) and nonprofit organizations. In turn, many research efforts yield meaningful benefits for the local community.

Graduate training. Team members have worked with graduate students in several interdisciplinary programs, including Public Policy, Educational Leadership, and Health Psychology (i.e., community psychology and clinical psychology concentrations), helping to build their records, supporting their professional trajectories, and, in many cases, benefiting the region. As one example, the community psychology training program, 1 of 5 programs nationally to have received the Society for Community Research and Action's Award for Excellence in Education Programs, has trained a number of students who benefited diverse community partners via their training experiences and also are employed locally, benefiting the Charlotte region (e.g., Communities in Schools, Renaissance West Community Initiative).

Priority Resources. Support for additional doctoral students (i.e., graduate assistantship lines) is most critical to the work of the faculty in this area. These resources would allow us to support more doctoral students, thereby increasing the number of PhDs granted in non-STEM disciplines. Work in this area would also benefit from additional faculty lines/researchers and supportive research infrastructure on campus.

Alignment with Regional and National Priorities

The proposed area is directly and explicitly aligned with the university's mission and its priorities to address the "educational...health, and social needs of the greater Charlotte region." The evidence of excellence described above includes projects members of the proposed team directed or conducted with circumscribed project teams; fewer efforts have included teams of interdisciplinary faculty and their complementary perspectives. Recognition would allow new partnerships to grow and existing collaborations to continue, building on the interdisciplinary model provided by the Social Aspects of Health Initiative.

Beyond the university and the region, mobility and its linkages to health disparities, health equity, and educational outcomes are priorities for several national funding organizations. The National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHHD) delineates multiple "health disparity populations", including diverse Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) groups and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. Their site states that one of the United States' "greatest challenges is reducing the profound disparities in health status of its racial and ethnic minority, rural, low-income, and other underserved populations." Research to address structural and systemic factors that contribute to social/economic immobility, understand conditions that contribute to health and educational disparities, and inform strategies for promoting well-being and facilitating positive educational trajectories is surely consistent with NIMHHD's mission.

Efforts to address social determinants of health and mobility are also priorities in the federal government's prevention agenda, HealthyPeople2020. Moreover, publications by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) underscore that social/economic mobility and its implications for equity and health, are priority areas. They describe strategies for using science to guide practice and policy, highlight the importance of two-generation approaches to reducing poverty and achieving health equity, and underscore the salience of state and local policy for advancing health and behavioral health equity.

Research described here also addresses NSF's "10 Big Ideas," which focus on ways in which the data revolution can advance science. Use of Big Data to study educational outcomes can be complemented by smaller-scale investigation: the research team's skillset is well-grounded in both these approaches. The National Center for Education Research funds work across the educational life span, including early learning, career education, and postsecondary education.

Efforts to increase mobility, address social determinants of health, and facilitate equity have been prioritized by major foundations as well. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supports health and equity-focused work, consistent with their efforts to build a "culture of health" and their "healthy communities" and "healthy children and families" focus areas. In addition, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation includes economic mobility and opportunity among its core U.S. program challenges and has committed \$158 million over four years to the area. As another example, the William T. Grant Foundation has identified reducing inequality as one of its two priority areas and has a robust history of funding education-related work.

Supporting Documents

Faculty Member	Department	Expertise
Ryan Kilmer (co-Lead)	Psychological Science	Dr. Ryan Kilmer focuses on child adaptation in the face of adversity and evaluation to guide system change, program refinement, organizational development, and policy. With expertise in applied research/evaluation partnerships, he has worked with diverse stakeholders to improve services and supports for children and families, particularly those who have been marginalized, faced socioeconomic disadvantage, or experienced adversity.
Elizabeth Stearns (co-Lead)	Sociology	Dr. Elizabeth Stearns studies education and focuses on the institutional barriers and supports to student achievement and attainment that they experience throughout their educational trajectories. She has extensive experience leading multi-disciplinary research teams on externally funded research projects and working across institutional contexts to do so.
Proposal Team Members -- Presented Alphabetically		
Laura Armstrong	Psychological Science	Dr. Laura Marie Armstrong is a child clinical psychologist, who examines how positive aspects of family and educational contexts can protect children from the potentially harmful effects of risk factors and conditions (e.g., parent mental health challenges, economic disadvantage, trauma/adversity, COVID-19) that might undermine child well-being.
Zinobia Bennefield	Sociology *Ignite Planning Grant	Dr. Zinobia Bennefield is a health disparities researcher whose most recent work examines the social and economic factors that create differences in youth mental health outcomes. Her focus on the school setting's impact on mental health of youth

		has led to publications, presentations, and community partnerships.
Martha Bottia	Sociology	Dr. Martha Bottia specializes in economics of education, with recent work on the academic and social transitions between high school, community colleges, and four-year universities that students make in the NC public education system.
Eric Delmelle	Geography and Earth Sciences	Dr. Eric Delmelle (health geographer) focuses on the development of spatial modeling (quantitative modeling and GIS) techniques to the field of public health, with recent research funded by the March of Dimes and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
Scott Fitzgerald	Sociology	Dr. Scott T. Fitzgerald studies the causes and consequences of economic inequality and social change and is currently collecting data for a new book examining student loans, debt and career choices.
Jason Giersch	Political Science and Public Administration	Dr. Jason Giersch studies education through the lenses of policy and politics and focuses on questions of segregation, school choice, and teacher quality using a combination of analysis of administrative records and survey experiments.
Joseph Kangmennaang	Geography and Earth Sciences *SAHI cluster hire *Ignite Planning Grant	Dr. Joseph Kangmennaang, a health geographer with expertise in participatory action research, focuses on relationships between environment and (re)emerging health challenges, including what makes communities healthy, access to maternal and child health, mental health, household food access and food insecurity, as well as immigrant health and well-being.
Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling	Psychological Science *Ignite Planning Grant	Dr. Jennifer Langhinrichsen-Rohling is a Clinical Psychologist whose current research is primarily community-based, focusing on under-served and disadvantaged populations, their experiences with intimate partner and family violence (e.g., stalking, sexual assault, physical abuse, and the intergenerational transmission of relationship

		behaviors), and young adult engagement in risky, unhealthy, suicidal, and/or life-diminishing behaviors.
Roslyn Mickelson	Sociology	Dr. Roslyn Arlin Mickelson is an expert in the effects of segregation on educational outcomes, including student achievement, choice of major, and degree attainment, as well as how educational opportunities are allocated across institutions and how students experience them.
Stephanie Potochnick	Sociology *SAHI cluster hire *Ignite Planning Grant	Dr. Stephanie Potochnick examines the health and educational needs and resources of immigrant families and children and how immigrant-related policies impact their well-being.
Vaughn Schmutz	Sociology	Dr. Vaughn Schmutz studies cultural dimensions of social inequality, including how processes of classification and evaluation create advantages for some and disadvantages for others.
Victoria Scott	Psychological Science *Ignite Planning Grant	Dr. Victoria Scott research focuses on advancing the health and well-being of individuals and their communities through systems-level (organizational and community) interventions.
Sharon Watson	Anthropology *SAHI cluster hire *Ignite Planning Grant	Dr. Sharon Watson's areas of expertise include ethnographic qualitative methods, inequity, development, HIV, health systems, social networks, ethics, community-based research, evaluation, translation and dissemination of research.

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