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SETTING THE CONTEXT

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1 Comparative Perspectives of Urban Youth

Challenges for Normative Development

Marta Tienda and William Julius Wilson

The share of youth residing in urban areas surpassed 50% by the turn of the 21st century and is projected to rise further because of high fertility and continued rural–urban migration (United Nations, 1993:5). Urban living can alleviate many of the hardships associated with rural poverty and underdevelopment, but in the context of rapid social transformation, it can also increase the challenges of normative youth development.

The consequences of extreme material deprivation are especially harsh for the very young, whose neurological development, physical health, and emotional capacity are permanently compromised by poor nutrition, limited emotional and intellectual stimulation, and inadequate satisfaction of basic human needs, such as safe shelter, clean drinking water, and predictability of social environment. Whether in the inner-city ghettos of the United States, the homelands of South Africa, or the favelas of Brazil, growing numbers of urban youth find themselves at the periphery of city life, facing the familiar problems of poverty: fragile families, inadequate nutrition, limited or no access to education, premature entry into the world of work, and involvement in illegal activities.

Despite bewildering differences in the social and cultural contexts experienced by urban youth worldwide, the developmental challenges confronted by those reared in materially disadvantaged circumstances are strikingly similar. A child born at the beginning of the 21st century has a 4 in 10 chance of living in extreme poverty (UN Children's Fund, 2000:1). About 24% of the world's population lives on less than $1 per day, but in poor countries, the share is close to 35% – the majority of these are women and children (UN Children's Fund, 2001: Appendix).

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Among industrialized countries, the highest child poverty rate prevails in the Russian Federation, where more than one in four children was poor during the 1990s, but the United States is not far behind, as one in six young people lived below the official poverty threshold in 1999 (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2000). In Canada, Australia, Israel, and Poland, child poverty rates hover around 15–16% and are just under 10% for France and the Netherlands (Bradbury and Jantti, 1999). These averages conceal appreciable variation within countries. For example, in 1999 child poverty rates in the United States hovered around 30% for minority groups, although they were considerably higher in 1990, before the prolonged period of economic prosperity. Residential segregation further accentuates the pernicious consequences of poverty by limiting interaction between lower and middle classes, thereby perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion that stymies the life chances of even the most industrious youth.

As global economic restructuring alters the sociopolitical and cultural landscape of nation states, governments encounter formidable challenges in satisfying the social and developmental needs of their youth. This is especially difficult for income-strapped countries of the Southern Hemisphere, where the intense pace of urbanization taxes the ability of weak institutional frameworks to meet the changing needs of rapidly growing youth populations (Brockerhoff, 2000). Global economic restructuring also has contributed to the marginalization and social isolation of low-income families in the Northern Hemisphere, thereby restricting opportunities for normative youth development. Moreover, the low-fertility regimes that characterize most industrialized countries do not necessarily translate to higher resources for youth, who frequently find themselves in competition for resources in a rapidly aging population (Preston, 1984).

In both developed and developing societies, poverty takes a devastating toll on young people and rests at the core of human rights violations against them (UN Children's Fund, 2001). The intertwined fate of nations in the global economy has fostered greater awareness of their shared circumstances. The plight of youth reared in material disadvantage throughout the world was the focus of a decade-long international effort to develop guidelines for protecting the rights of children and youth around the world. The product of this effort – the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – is the first legally binding international instrument to make explicit the full range of rights to which every child is entitled. This holistic treaty, which recognizes every child's right to a standard of living conducive to physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development, stands as a unified global commitment

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to redress the root causes of child poverty and to assuage its deleterious consequences within the resources available to national governments.

The Convention is predicated on the notion that tackling poverty requires a strategic and integrated approach that combines human rights and civil rights law with economic, social, political, and cultural rights. The document also identifies several strategies to promote normative development, including prevention of risky behaviors, protection from physical and emotional harm, as well as enlistment of youth participation in decisions and activities that affect their own destinies.[1]

Partly as a response to the Convention, in recent years policymakers, researchers, and practitioners working in highly diverse urban contexts have been making more concerted attempts to document, understand, and address the worsening condition of the world's growing youth population. However, apart from commissioned studies and annual reports prepared by international monitoring agencies, there has been relatively little exchange among scholars and practitioners – either within or among nations – regarding the status of youth growing up in cities.[2] This is so despite the intense urbanization processes under way in many countries classified as "least developed" by the United Nations.

Accordingly, as a response to the paucity of scholarly and practitioner exchanges, the chapters in this volume synthesize existing knowledge about the status and experiences of youth reared in precarious urban environments from an interdisciplinary and cross-national perspective. In addition to addressing a relatively ignored, rapidly growing, and highly vulnerable population throughout the world, several features of the essays that follow are noteworthy.

First, the chapters build on the experiences and insights of *both* practitioners and researchers, an unusual approach to youth. This twin strategy yields a firmer foundation for drawing practical lessons than either a research or an applied approach alone because it forces an intermediate ground between theory and application. Second, several chapters combine case studies with extensive cross-national comparisons, which are essential

[1] The Convention has been ratified by every country in the world except the United States and Somalia. However, by signing the Convention, the United States has signaled its intention to ratify.

[2] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are two prominent international agencies that have added to their ongoing assessment of the "State of Children" a dedicated study of the condition of youth.

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to identify circumstances that are common to most settings and those unique to particular sociocultural contexts. Third, several chapters attempt to identify both successful and unsuccessful interventions to draw policy lessons with wide appeal that can be practically implemented both to improve the life circumstances of youth and to enhance their opportunities to lead productive and stable lives. Finally, although collectively the chapters cover a broad substantive terrain and many draw extensively on international comparisons, they are unified thematically by their focus on normative development and a limited range of possible mediators. These include physical and emotional well-being, exposure to risky environments and violence, and creative community-level strategies to engage youth in prosocial change.

Volume Overview

Selected sociodemographic indicators of the countries included in the volume as case studies, as well as the corresponding regional development averages for these indicators, are provided in Table 1.1. By most measures, Uganda is the most impoverished setting for urban youth among the countries considered. However, as the regional indicators for the least developed nations reveal, some youth reside in even more precarious environments. More than one in three Ugandan residents lives on less than $1 per day, compared to only 2% of Jordanians, 11% of South Africans, and 26% of Brazilians.

Youth in developing countries are 15 times more likely to die before age 5 when compared to their counterparts in industrialized countries, and those in the least developed countries 27 times more likely to do so. However, there is considerable variation in child life expectancy among developing countries. South Africa's child mortality rate is twice that of Jordan's. In part these differentials can be traced directly to the varying contours of societal underdevelopment, but national differences in income inequality are also responsible. Moreover, boys and girls do not experience similar opportunities to become productive citizens, as is evident in the differentials in school enrollment rates. Gender disparities in educational attainment are especially pronounced in South Africa and Uganda.

Developing nations also differ appreciably in their urban structures: Whereas more than three in four youth in Jordan and Brazil reside in urban areas, only about half of South African youth do so. Fewer than one in five of Uganda's youth resides in an urban area, compared to about half of youth in other developing nations. By contrast, about 80% of youth in industrialized

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Table 1.1 Selected Sociodemographic Indicators of Child and Adolescent Well-Being for Regions and Selected Countries Circa 2000

Countries and Regions	Under-5 Mortality Rate 1999	Primary School Enrollment Ratio 1995–99[a] (Net)		Secondary School Enrollment Ratio 1995–97[a] (Gross)		Percentage of Population Urban 1999	Percentage of Population below $1 a Day 1990–99[a]	Percentage of Urban Population Using	
		Male	Female	Male	Female			Improved Drinking Water Sources	Adequate Sanitation Facilities
Industrialized countries	6	96	96	105	107	79	–[b]	100	100
Germany	5	86	87	105	103	87	–	–	–
United States	8	94	95	98	97	77	–	100	100
United Kingdom	6	97	98	120	139	89	–	100	100
Developing countries	90	84	77	55	46	48	26	91	81
Brazil	40	–	–	31×[c]	36×	81	5	89	81
Jordan	35	86	86	52×	54×	74	2	100	100
South Africa	69	88	86	76	91	50	11	92	99
Least developed countries	164	63	54	23	14	28	35	80	73
Uganda	131	92	83	15	9	14	37	72	96
World	82	85	79	61	54	57	24	93	84

[a] Data that refer to the most recent year available during the period specified in the column heading.
[b] – Data not available.
[c] Data that refer to years or periods, other than those specified in the column heading, differ from the standard definition, or refer to only part of a country.
Source: United Nations Children's Fund (2001). *State of the World's Children, 2001*, tables 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6; http://www.unicef.org/sowc01/tables/

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nations live in cities and towns. Of course, urban residence implies different opportunities and obstacles for youth residing in industrialized, developing, and least developed countries. In the industrialized world, virtually all urban dwellers have access to adequate sanitation and safe drinking water, but in Uganda, less than three quarters of city dwellers can avail themselves of these urban amenities, and in South Africa, only 92% enjoy safe water. Approximately 20% to 25% of urban Brazilian youth lack access to adequate sanitation facilities.

Against this thumbnail sketch of the social and economic conditions in which youth are reared around the world, one might expect equally diverse developmental needs. Yet, although the specific social and cultural conditions in which youth are reared do differ appreciably, one of the main themes developed in the chapters that follow is the similarity of young people's needs for healthy psychosocial development. All the chapters identify the value of harnessing the creative energy of youth, and the numerous social, community, and familial advantages to treating young people as an asset rather than a societal burden.

Youth as a Force for Social Change

Throughout the world youth represent a source of cultural innovation and dynamism that is seldom acknowledged in countries around the world, much less nurtured. Although several authors stress the importance of tapping the creative potential of youth, the three chapters included in this section emphasize the myriad ways that youth are powerful agents directing the course of social change. Ramphele reminds us that youth are often the harbingers of cultural, social, or economic transitions within and across countries.

Unfortunately, once transformed, society often ignores the condition of its youth and confines them to a marginalized status that undervalues them. One reason is that much of the current literature on youth focuses on an assessment of the negative consequences of maladaptive behavior and the tremendous costs incurred by society in regulating deviant behavior, rather than on the potential of youth for creative change. As Ramphele so clearly shows in her analysis of the positive effects of the South African Black Consciousness Movement on youths, creating high self-esteem among young people increases their empowerment. Inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement, young people set about helping adults in their communities overcome feelings of inferiority generated by years of racism and thereby break the cycle of fatalism.

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Developmental psychologists emphasize that successful normative youth development requires intact nuclear and extended families, supportive communities, realistic perceptions of opportunities, and predictable behavior and experiences. However, in many societies, past legacies and the drastic socioeconomic changes accompanying globalization have eroded these resources. Greater numbers of children are growing up in poor, parent-absent households without the support of their extended families in areas where the growth of social capital is hindered by the lack of material resources. Moreover, in rapidly changing social and local worlds, behavior and experiences are exceedingly more random – that is, far less predictable – and therefore youth are greatly more disoriented from their developmental tasks.

Under conditions of greater uncertainty, the answer to normative development lies in risk management – on the level of both the individual and the community. In order to succeed, young people must accept the risks in their environment and develop creative ways to manage them. Ramphele argues that societal institutions not only have to build effective risk-management strategies, but must require leaders able to design appropriate interventions as well. Only confident youth who dare to imagine a better future are able to focus their energy on reaching it. Accordingly, Ramphele concludes that successful interventions in places with low human capital must include steps to raise the young people's self-esteem. Young, confident people will be better equipped to negotiate successfully the risks in the future, to become valuable members of society, and to reach their full potential.

Building on the basic idea that the creativity and energy of youth can be channeled to produce positive social change, Swart-Kruger and Chawla examine the success of participatory programs for children of South African streets and squatter camps. Like several authors in this volume (see especially Earls and Carlson, this volume), they call for a more inclusive approach to solving child-related social problems. A focus on deviance and normlessness, the authors argue, diverts us from attending to the lack of adequate programs that deal with the whole child. To develop their argument, Swart-Kruger and Chawla discuss two concrete programs funded by the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, Street-Wise and Growing Up in Cities, which are inspired philosophically by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Both programs illustrate outstanding and successful approaches to help children achieve autonomy and self-esteem. Also, both programs require local governments to create social conditions that enable communities to meet the basic needs of youth.

Street-Wise is a comprehensive services intervention program for street boys, and Growing Up in Cities is a long-term community development

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program for 10- to 14-year-old children living in a Johannesburg squatter camp. Street-Wise, which began as a street school, has become a national program designed to integrate boys into the mainstream society, further attesting to its acclaimed success. A drop-in shelter program, a nutrition program, and a reconciliation program to reconnect boys with their families supplement Street-Wise's basic education program, which emphasizes literacy and job-training skills.

Although different in their details, Street-Wise and Growing Up in Cities share many similarities that are crucial for understanding their success. An important feature of the programs is their strategy to give voice to the views of youth both in shaping and in operating the program. Both programs sought a compromise between the Western individualistic perspective and the collectivistic approach of South African communities in developing strategies to service youth. An important strength of both programs is their ability to provide individualized attention to each child.

Also, both programs recognize that negative perceptions of youth often preclude investments of scarce social resources for their benefit. Therefore, during the start-up phases, both programs sought to change adults' and the general public's perception of street children. Both programs share the goal of creating physically and socially safe environments that nurture children's positive identities. In short, both programs illustrate the need for multifaceted approaches that crystallize over time as program developers learn more about their clientele and consider the most effective means to promote the individual and collective well-being of youth.

Although the idea of well-being is central to the concept of normative development, measuring it poses thorny methodological challenges. After summarizing existing studies about well-being, Earls and Carlson conclude that few satisfactory operational measures exist. Drawing on the work of Sen and Habermaus, Earls and Carlson argue that a deliberative process – one that involves children as major stakeholders in the framing and implementation of research initiatives that explore well-being – has both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. Intrinsically, children can develop competence and confidence by involvement in the research process, and extrinsically, children's direct involvement in research can help the development of more precise measures of this multifaceted construct. These ideas, which allow children to be collaborators rather than just *subjects*, are inspired by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which acknowledges that children are able to make deliberate decisions and exercise their rights.

After describing the epistemology of their approach, Earls and Carlson discuss a practical application of their theory of adolescent well-being, namely, a project in Chicago that investigates how young people characterize

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their own well-being. As paid interns, youth took part in conversations about children's rights. In conversations about well-being, they identified their parents, teachers, and police officers as crucial ingredients. Moreover, the child-initiated discourse revealed that adults must provide structure and motivation for youth development and must maintain a presence to help channel the creative contributions of youth. The process of working with the adolescents draws into sharp focus the importance of civic engagement as a crucial factor in transition to adulthood. This, according to Earls and Carlson, is the highest form of well-being.

Urban Youth Experiences in Cross-Cultural Perspective

As young people grow up, their integration into society is a prerequisite for their normative development and well-being. Imparting a sense of acceptance and belonging is crucial to accomplish integration. Using German cities as illustrations, Heitmeyer investigates how the changing conditions of cities impact on young people's behavior and need to belong. Important mechanisms to integrate youth socially include access to functional social systems (such as education and labor markets), compensatory social policies to combat economic polarization, shared values and norms, stable social memberships, and wide participation in social life. These requirements are even more important for integrating immigrant youth and the economically disadvantaged into the social mainstream.

Heitmeyer contends that conventional socialization mechanisms are failing to integrate a growing number of young people, especially immigrants and impoverished youth. Changed social and economic opportunities and higher levels of cultural pluralism foster greater uncertainty, more responsibility in decision making, more pressure to compete, and less social support – circumstances that individually and collectively undermine healthy, normative youth development.

Rising residential segregation, which often acts as a mobility trap, produces social isolation, resignation from required and optional activities, rejection of mainstream norms, unemployment, and violence. These circumstances accentuate interethnic social distances and further complicate the developmental challenges confronted by urban youth. Heitmeyer warns that unless social policies are implemented to reverse these trends, Germany will witness the creation of an "urban underclass" comparable to that characterizing American segregated cities (Wilson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993).

Heitmeyer recommends that municipal governments play an active role in urban migration policy to ensure social integration and to prevent ethnoracial divisions from expanding among urban youth. Unfortunately, just

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