

# YOUTH IN CITIES

A Cross-National  
Perspective

The Jacobs  
Foundation  
Series on  
Adolescence

Edited by  
MARTA TIENDA and  
WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON

# YOUTH IN CITIES

## A Cross-National Perspective

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521005814](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521005814)

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First published 2002

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-80908-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-00581-4 Paperback

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## YOUTH IN CITIES

### A Cross-National Perspective

Whether in the inner-city ghettos of the United States, the barrios of Brazil, or the ethnic neighborhoods of Germany and Lebanon, a growing number of urban youth find themselves marginalized from the social mainstream, facing the familiar problems of fragile families, residential segregation, limited or no access to education, premature entry into the world of work, and involvement in illegal activities. Both rich and poor countries are failing to meet the social and developmental needs of their urban youth as a result of weak institutional frameworks coupled with global economic restructuring that undermines traditional ways of earning a living. This volume compares the circumstances of urban youth from a cross-national perspective, illustrating the formidable challenges faced by young people trying to define their place in a rapidly changing world. Using both comparative evidence and case studies, this volume illustrates the common needs of youth throughout the world, despite the highly varied sociocultural circumstances in which they develop, and makes a case for the role of youth as creative social assets and positive forces for social change.

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## THE JACOBS FOUNDATION SERIES ON ADOLESCENCE

*Series Editor:* Michael Rutter

The Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence addresses the question of what can be done to promote healthy development around the world. It views this important question from different disciplines in the social sciences. Economists and sociologists may consider how we can promote human capital over time, specifically an individual's ability to become educated and to develop earning power; demographers and sociologists may analyze development patterns over generations; psychiatrists and psychologists may tackle the problem of how much change is possible in psychological health during the life course and over generations.

Drawing from these different domains of inquiry into human development, the Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence examines the potential for change across generations and during the life course in three areas: (1) human capital, (2) partnership behavior, and (3) psychological health and the rearing of children. The purpose of the series is to further the goals of the Jacobs Foundation – to contribute to the welfare and social productivity of the current and future generations of young people.

*Youth in Cities: A Cross-National Perspective*, edited by Marta Tienda and William Julius Wilson

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## Foreword

Whether in the ghettos of the United States, the barrios of Brazil or other South American countries, or the ethnic neighborhoods of Germany, France, or other European countries, a growing number of urban youth find themselves marginalized from the social mainstream, facing the familiar problems of fragile families, residential segregation, limited or no access to education, premature entry into the world of work, and involvement in illegal activities. As the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child testifies, both rich and poor countries are failing to meet the changing social and developmental needs of their urban youth as a result of weak institutional frameworks coupled with global economic restructuring that undermines traditional ways of earning a living.

For this reason I am pleased to present the volume *Youth in Cities: A Cross-National Perspective*, which is the first in the new Jacobs Foundation Series on Adolescence, to be published by Cambridge University Press. The volume is based on a conference, "Youth in Cities: Successful Mediators of Normative Development," sponsored by the Jacobs Foundation of Switzerland at their Communication Center, Marbach Castle (Germany), on October 22–24, 1998. More than 40 international scholars and practitioners of youth programs assembled to portray the circumstances of urban youth throughout the world and to illustrate the formidable challenges young people face as they try to define their place in a rapidly changing world. Documenting the condition of youth living in cities and identifying interventions that are most successful in ameliorating the pernicious effects of urban poverty are the first steps to improving the life circumstances and opportunities of the vast majority of the world population.



In addition to addressing a relatively ignored, rapidly growing, and highly vulnerable population throughout the world, several features of the chapters in the volume are noteworthy. First, assessing youth from both the standpoint of the researcher and the practitioner yields a grounded base from which to draw policy lessons. Stronger than either approach alone, this hybrid tack strikes a balance between theory and application. Second, the use of cross-national comparisons and case studies allows for an analysis of differences and similarities among strategies devised to improve the state of youth the world over. Third, by evaluating the efficacy of an array of interventions, important policy lessons can be culled. Finally, the conviction that the views of young people must be integral to the formulation of policies aimed at improving their life chances is a common thread apparent throughout this volume.

It is my hope that the volume will have the wide acceptance it deserves. Academics from developmental psychology, sociology, political science, and legal scholarship will find novel insights from case studies that either support their prior conceptions or modify them in new ways with concrete evidence from practitioners. Lay audiences, including policymakers and attorneys and practitioners who develop and operate programs to promote healthy youth development, will also find creative ideas to bolster their successful interventions on behalf of youth.

Klaus J. Jacobs, Chairman  
Jacobs Foundation

# **YOUTH IN CITIES**

A Cross-National Perspective

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# I

## SETTING THE CONTEXT



# **I 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).

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



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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.