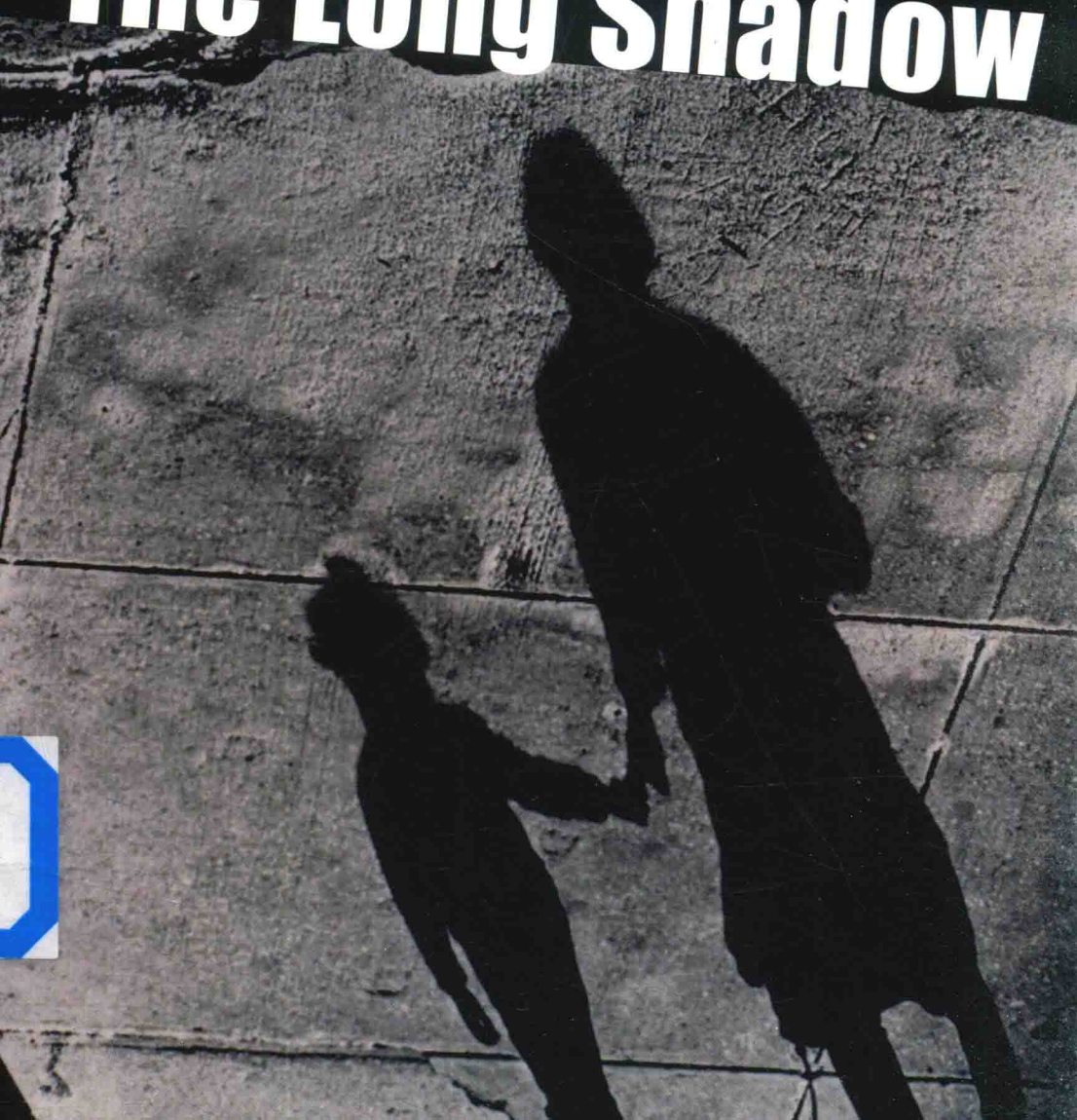


**Family Background,
Disadvantaged Urban Youth,
and the Transition to Adulthood**

**Karl Alexander
Doris Entwisle
Linda Olson**

**THE AMERICAN
SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION'S
ROSE SERIES IN SOCIOLOGY**

The Long Shadow



THE LONG SHADOW

FAMILY BACKGROUND, DISADVANTAGED URBAN YOUTH, AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

KARL ALEXANDER, DORIS ENTWISLE,
AND LINDA OLSON

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THE LONG SHADOW

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EDITORS

In Memoriam

Our dear friend and collaborator of more than thirty years, Doris Entwisle, passed away while *The Long Shadow* was in final production. Doris inspired us with her intellect and drew us to her with her warmth and compassion. She was not one to dwell on misfortune, at least not her own—Doris was remarkably strong. For that reason, we use this dedication to celebrate her life, not mourn her passing. Doris left us knowing the volume was complete; it brought a smile to her face.

== About the Authors ==

Karl Alexander is John Dewey Professor and chair of the Department of Sociology at the Johns Hopkins University.

Doris Entwisle was Research Professor of Sociology at the Johns Hopkins University.

Linda Olson is an associate research scientist with the Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC) and the Center for Social Organization of Schools at the Johns Hopkins University.

== Preface ==

THE PURPOSE of this book is to improve our understanding of how social contexts—especially those of family, neighborhood, and school—bear on the long-term well-being of disadvantaged urban youth. Well-being, for our purposes, is captured not only in objective measures such as educational level, occupation, earnings, family formation, and avoidance of problem behaviors (substance use, brushes with the law), but also in self-perceptions of well-being and life satisfaction. In counterpoint to the more typical view of urban disadvantage that dwells on misfortune and failure, we give equal attention to the means by which urban youth advance their status and improve their life experience.

To accomplish this goal we draw heavily on the life experience of the Baltimore Beginning School Study Youth Panel (BSSYP, or Youth Panel), a probability sample of just under eight hundred urban youth who began school in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1982 and came into maturity during the latter decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Through repeated surveys of them, their parents, and their teachers, we monitored the group's progress beginning in first grade and continuing through age twenty-eight or twenty-nine, watching on as they forged lives for themselves during a time and in a place that promised to pose great challenge for many. *The Long Shadow* is about the Youth Panel's social mobility, from origins to destinations, and focuses on those who began life in families of low socioeconomic standing—half the panel.

The Back Story

In 1982, when we launched this project, few sociological studies addressed the experience of children below high school age or linked early experience to later life outcomes. However, we were mindful of Glen Elder's (1974) research on children of the Great Depression and Sheppard Kellam and colleagues' (1975) Chicago-based Woodlawn project with first

graders. These established the life-long importance of children's formative experience in the social contexts that frame their development.

What motivated the study initially was our desire to understand the repercussions of children's adjustment to formal schooling—the first grade transition from home child to school child. At the time, the period of early schooling had been virtually unexplored from a sociological perspective and though developmental psychologists were studying young children, they had little to say about social context beyond that provided by mothers. Socioeconomic status (SES) as a construct in developmental models was still over a decade away. Additionally, the search for continuities in attitudes and behaviors, or from childhood to adulthood, proved frustrating because the technology for penetrating large data sets was not up to the task.

Sociologists were attentive to social context, but among older youth. Most research on stratification processes across generations took high schoolers as the starting point, mainly males, as in the line of research on status attainment introduced by William Sewell and his colleagues (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970). As for data sources, national longitudinal studies focused on children's early schooling were still a decade or more off, for example, the ECLS-K:1999 and ECLS-K:2011 projects (National Center for Education Statistics 1999, 2011).

It was in this general climate that the Youth Panel was launched with what was, in those days, a large probability sample. The intent was to look closely at the course of development among a mostly disadvantaged panel of children, black and white, at the point of school entry. The purpose was to observe many outcomes—not just failures and problem behaviors, but evidence of satisfactory school performance and personal well-being. The family's economic status and parents' SES as well as parents' expectations and attitudes toward their children from early in first grade were included. Children's status was mapped repeatedly over short intervals. Schools were conceptualized as complex social structures that could contribute to children's development in many ways besides cognitive growth. Retention and other administrative groupings of children were analyzed as potential causes of disorderly or delayed development.

The project continued almost a quarter century, monitoring the sample's life progress up to a decade after high school. *The Long Shadow* takes advantage of the long duration and broad sweep of the project's fieldwork to examine the unfolding script of the children's lives starting at age six, through elementary school, middle school, and high school, and continuing far into their third decade. It identifies resources that matter for adult well-being, as well as how they overlap and cumulate

across the life course. We see both consistency and change. Some patterns evident early in life persist, but others are replaced or modified, always against the changing backdrop of conditions in Baltimore—deindustrialization, population loss, and, for many, impoverishment.

Some of the findings reported in this volume will be familiar, but novel details also appear. Some of the latter involve the situation of poor whites in the sample, and by implication in other places like Baltimore. They are a group seldom visible in research on the urban disadvantaged, but the contrast between their life experience and that of African Americans is striking. Status attainment through school (which we probe in detail) helps perpetuate the advantage of higher-SES youth over lower, but it is access to good paying work that perpetuates the privilege of working-class white men over working-class black men. By partnering with these men, white working-class women share in that privilege. African Americans who begin life in similar circumstances as their white counterparts realize neither advantage—they lack access to well-paid jobs and, as young adults, black women are much more likely to be without husbands and partners, which sets them back financially.

== Acknowledgments ==

IN THE FALL of 1982, we set out with graduate students and a small staff recruited for a project intended to last three years but that stretched over many. Children and their parents were interviewed individually, teachers responded to self-administered questionnaires, and school record data were transcribed by hand on-site until we purchased a portable photocopier to carry from school to school (when school system records later were centralized and computerized, we began receiving school record data electronically).

Over the history of the study, project staffing expanded and contracted on an as-needed basis in what amounted to an in-house survey research center. We are grateful to the many students, employees, interns, and core staff who helped with interviewing, coding, data entry, tracking, project management, and IT. The tally includes forty-two graduate students, eighty-eight Johns Hopkins University undergraduates, and a dozen student interns from other schools. It is impractical to acknowledge each personally; instead, as a gesture of our gratitude, a sampling of their names appear as pseudonyms throughout this volume.

Some names do require mention though. Very special thanks are due to Sona Armenian (data research assistant), Pat Gucer (project manager), Gail Fennessey (data manager), Heidi Slagle (administrative secretary), Anna Stoll (research project coordinator), Jane Sundius (data analyst), Mary Ann Zeller (project secretary), and Gloria Zepp (project secretary), also Binnie Bailey, Mary Ann Zeller (in a different capacity), and Terri Thomas, administrative managers for the Department of Sociology. Joanne Fennessey deserves special mention. Jo was with the project almost two decades, providing service in a variety of capacities. She maintained the project's network of computers, managed our ever expanding database, prepared data and documentation for deposit with Harvard University's Murray Research Center (where all Youth Panel data are available for secondary analysis), helped program the computerized administration of our age twenty-eight Mature Adult Survey, and, for the *The Long Shadow* specifically, interrogated a set of qualitative interviews for the quotes and

biographical sketches sprinkled throughout this volume. Tami Hildebrant, administrative secretary and Jo's daughter, also deserves special mention. Tami did the heavy lifting involved in preparing this manuscript.

We also are indebted to many in the Baltimore City schools for their enthusiastic cooperation, including the superintendent of research, the 130 or so principals who welcomed us into their schools, and every teacher with a student in the study (at least five hundred). They tolerated our innumerable interruptions and welcomed our presence. The BSSYP could not have been done without their help.

The same holds for the children of the Youth Panel and their parents. Working with them has been a great privilege. They reaped no great personal rewards from their participation, yet were extraordinarily generous in revealing themselves to us, and we are indebted to them. In first grade, we sat on little chairs at little tables to solicit the children's thinking about school; twenty-five years later, many had little ones of their own. Sadly, some who were with us at the journey's start are with us no longer, victims of urban disadvantage at its worst. *The Long Shadow* looms large.

Many struggled in ways documented in these pages, while others overcame obstacles to achieve a fulfilling quality of life—to be happy, to be alive, to establish solid families, and to attain a comfortable standard of living even without the benefit of a college degree. We applaud their successes and are saddened by their setbacks. The BSSYP is not an intervention project—we have done little to help those who have struggled. Our responsibility, rather, is to make good use of the opportunity they have afforded us. We hope *The Long Shadow*, which we dedicate to them, lives up to that obligation.

Awards from the National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD) and the Foundation for Child Development launched the BSSYP and were followed by a succession of overlapping three- to five-year grants from the Department of Education's Office for Educational Research and Improvement, continuing support from the NICHD, the National Institute for Mental Health, and three funders who stood with us for a decade or more, an uncommon public-private partnership: the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation (Pat White), the Spencer Foundation (John Rury and Lauren Young), and the William T. Grant Foundation (Bob Granger and Ed Seidman). The names in parentheses are not anonymous program officers. We count ourselves fortunate to have found our way to such strong advocates who shared our sense of the value of the enterprise and trusted in us to see it through at a high level.

Thanks are also due to our many collaborators and colleagues for their contributions to the project over the years and to this volume. Within the BSSYP, they include Aaron Pallas, Doris (Cadigan) Lefkowitz, Karen Ross, Robert Bozick, Jane Sundius, Jennifer Johnson, Susan Dauber,

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Last, but hardly least, we thank Suzanne Nichols, director of Publications at the Russell Sage Foundation, and the editorial committees of the American Sociological Association's Rose Series in Sociology—first at Stony Brook and more recently at Rutgers—for their patience and support over the years it took to see this project through to completion. A special word of appreciation is due to Pat Roos of the Rutgers team for her close reading of what we thought was our final submission. She turned it around quickly and identified numerous problems, mostly small but all useful and several quite important.

== Contents ==

	List of Illustrations	xii
	About the Authors	xiv
	Preface	xv
	Acknowledgments	xix
CHAPTER 1	<i>The Long Shadow</i> and Urban Disadvantage	1
CHAPTER 2	The Baltimore Backdrop	21
CHAPTER 3	Family Disadvantage	32
CHAPTER 4	Neighborhood and School	50
CHAPTER 5	Transitioning to Adulthood	75
CHAPTER 6	Socioeconomic Destinations	91
CHAPTER 7	Origins to Destinations Across Generations	121
CHAPTER 8	Stratification by Race and Gender	157
CHAPTER 9	Life-Course Perspective of Urban Disadvantage	173
	Appendix A	189
	Appendix B	195
	Notes	213
	References	233
	Index	257