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# Coming Of Age In The Other America



## Synopsis

Recent research on inequality and poverty has shown that those born into low-income families, especially African Americans, still have difficulty entering the middle class, in part because of the disadvantages they experience living in more dangerous neighborhoods, going to inferior public schools, and persistent racial inequality. *Coming of Age in the Other America* shows that despite overwhelming odds, some disadvantaged urban youth do achieve upward mobility. Drawing from ten years of fieldwork with parents and children who resided in Baltimore public housing, sociologists Stefanie DeLuca, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, and Kathryn Edin highlight the remarkable resiliency of some of the youth who hailed from the nation's poorest neighborhoods and show how the right public policies might help break the cycle of disadvantage. *Coming of Age in the Other America* illuminates the profound effects of neighborhoods on impoverished families. The authors conducted in-depth interviews and fieldwork with 150 young adults, and found that those who had been able to move to better neighborhoods—either as part of the Moving to Opportunity program or by other means—achieved much higher rates of high school completion and college enrollment than their parents. About half the youth surveyed reported being motivated by an “identity project” or a strong passion such as music, art, or a dream job to finish school and build a career. Yet the authors also found troubling evidence that some of the most promising young adults often fell short of their goals and remained mired in poverty. Factors such as neighborhood violence and family trauma put these youth on expedited paths to adulthood, forcing them to shorten or end their schooling and find jobs much earlier than their middle-class counterparts. Weak labor markets and subpar postsecondary educational institutions, including exploitative for-profit trade schools and under-funded community colleges, saddle some young adults with debt and trap them in low-wage jobs. A third of the youth surveyed—particularly those who had not developed identity projects—were neither employed nor in school. To address these barriers to success, the authors recommend initiatives that help transform poor neighborhoods and provide institutional support for the identity projects that motivate youth to stay in school. They propose increased regulation of for-profit schools and increased college resources for low-income high school students. *Coming of Age in the Other America* presents a sensitive, nuanced account of how a generation of ambitious but underprivileged young Baltimoreans has struggled to succeed. It both challenges long-held myths about inner-city youth and shows how the process of “social reproduction”—where children end up stuck in the same place as their parents—is far from inevitable.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Stefanie DeLuca is associate professor of sociology at Johns Hopkins University. Susan

Clampet-Lundquist is associate professor of sociology at Saint Joseph's University. Kathryn

Edin is Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

It has become an article of faith among many that inner-city youth (read: black youth) in cities like Baltimore are unmotivated, shiftless, and dangerous. In "Coming of Age," Stefanie DeLuca, Susan Clampet-Lundquist and Kathryn Edin (hereinafter "DCE") demolish that stereotype by relating the experiences and perspectives of Baltimore youth who were the subject of intensive interviews and case histories in 2010 and 2012. The most important takeaway from DCE's work is that these impoverished young people already have many of the values that their middle-class and upper-class counterparts have: a desire to make money legitimately, a willingness to work hard, a desire to improve their skills through education, and aspirations of having a real career. Less than 20% of the youth surveyed ever engaged in serious delinquency, and only about 13% were "in the street" for a lengthy period of time. The youth were three times as likely to graduate high school as their parents, and four times as likely to attempt some sort of post-secondary education. In fact, half of the youth had entered college or a trade school at some point. The problems these young people face, however, are legion. They must deal with bad schools, impoverished neighborhoods (DCE find that prolonged exposure to very poor neighborhoods is a very good predictor of which kids will end

up "in the street"), dead-end jobs that fail to pay a living wage, and for-profit trade schools which overpromise and underdeliver on career credentials while saddling their students with significant amounts of debt. The youth lack critical social connections that could help them obtain better information about educational options and find better jobs (connections that many middle-class Americans take for granted). Over time, even the brightest and most promising young people end up "downshifting" their goals because of financial and personal pressures. This book focuses more on the stories of the youth and certain thematic themes instead of policy solutions. There is certainly room for more discussion and exploration of the topic, but this book has already done a tremendous service in 200 pages by giving voice to a group of people who have been relentlessly stereotyped and dismissed. Furthermore, DCE do point to the importance of things like housing reform and integration (to prevent kids from being trapped in high-poverty neighborhoods), better educational counseling about post-secondary opportunities, better regulation of for-profit colleges and trade schools, and support for personal "identity projects" that can give young kids a sense of meaning and purpose to guide them through the transition into adulthood. These solutions are not tremendously detailed or exhaustive, but they provide an important starting point for a conversation about future investment or reform. Our underprivileged youth are far tougher, more resilient, and more eager to be productive citizens than most Americans believe. They deserve far more support than they currently receive, and DCE have done those youth a great service by publishing their life stories for a larger audience. If you have any sort of opinion on education, housing policy, or underprivileged youth, you should read this book.

This book answers a lot of questions I have had about the kids growing up in my city. I have often wondered if the gangster life is seen as the only viable life course, especially for kids growing up under highly challenging circumstances. This book answers that question with a resounding NO! The results of the interviews were more interesting than I could have imagined. The book begs a question that I have been asking my more progressive friends (I'm more of a DLC type.) The question is: how can we help ambitious young people who are already productive but need opportunities to get the skills needed for middle class jobs and lifestyles. My friends continue to be way more interested in people that are at the ends of the spectrum - high flying potential leaders and people that have gotten themselves into hopeless situations. The problem with concentrating on the ends of the spectrum is that the average kids profiled in this book probably have the best potential for societal value added (along with personal fulfillment) if given even a little bit of opportunity.

If you work in education, you need this book. After you read the chapter on Identity Projects and the three kinds, bring it to your principal, and if you can't convince her/him to make a real effort at your school to implement and strengthen such projects on your campus, then the principal is either an idiot, or too restrained by her/his district to do really important work. If you work in inner city schools, or schools with high poverty, then you REALLY NEED THIS BOOK. Buy it now, and get to work!

Baltimore City breaks the hearts of those that care about its citizens every single day. Its deep, thoughtful examinations like those provided here that provide small little openings to a way out...not necessarily out of neighborhoods, but out of the idea that there should be hood with no neighbors...at all.

Anecdotes that give life to statistics that continue to worry me.

This is an important book. A study of poor, African American young people in Baltimore, it shows that most of them have strong middle-class values and goals, work incredibly hard and are loyal, faithful, compassionate, good human beings. It also shows how our housing, education, and labor systems oppress and exploit these young people, cheating them of opportunity. The book shatters stereotypes and should shame every reader into insisting on effective reforms of housing, education, and labor policies.

Arrived on time and as described! Thank you!

The authors' evidence of the importance of "identity projects" could provide ammunition for educators who face pressure to double down on academic subjects at the expense of co-curriculars. Students need dance and theater and art, debate, mock trial, Model UN, band to emerge from school with a firm idea of who they are and what path they should pursue.

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