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Breaking Free of Generational Poverty: Empowered Single Mothers Who Overcome the Odds

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Overcome the Odds

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University-University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. The project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand what differentiates single mothers and their children who are able to break the cycles of generational poverty from the millions of resilient, capable single mother-headed households who remain stuck living in poverty. The research was studied through the lens of ecosystems and empowerment theories. It looked at what helped and hindered single mothers to develop the belief in their abilities, and access necessary resources, to leave poverty within the context of individual, familial, community and broader societal benefits and constraints. This study was a systematic review which included an exhaustive review of the literature that met certain criteria to answer the research topic. The studies included in the review were peer-reviewed, empirical studies of qualitative and quantitative types of research representing single mothers living in North America with children ages 18 years old and younger. Exclusionary factors included studies conducted outside of North America and studies that focused more on households headed by married couples. Common themes included the importance of personal characteristics, social support, good parenting skills, education, employment and access to quality resources. Future research is needed on the effect of generational poverty on single mothers and their children to better understand the complexities of poverty and the multifaceted obstacles they face.

Keywords: generational poverty, single mothers, resilience, empowerment

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Before I began graduate school to pursue my Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, I had the opportunity to volunteer at a local direct-service, social service agency that serves community members facing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or needing assistance with employment or transportation to access living-wage jobs. It was there that I saw the struggle of many single mothers working hard to overcome financial challenges and other barriers to provide a different future for their children. I want to thank Wendy Geving, Courtney Flug, and Lenore Franzen, all of whom have made a difference in this community for many years, for encouraging me to attain my MSW so that I, too, could make a difference with a deeper foundation in social work practice.

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Their mothers lived in poverty. Their grandmothers did too. Single mothers whose own mothers received assistance from federal safety net programs such as welfare, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known as food stamps), housing vouchers, Medicare and Medicaid are more likely to receive assistance themselves compared with single mothers who did not grow up on federal assistance (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2016; Martin, 2003). Inadequate financial resources are not the only factors of poverty. People who were raised in low-income communities with limited access to resources, quality education, and networks outside of their neighborhoods have additional barriers to overcoming poverty and often find that the governmental assistance programs and policies that were designed to help fall short.

Certainly not everyone is destined to repeat a family cycle of poverty. Most people who encounter job loss or difficult financial circumstances might use the safety net of governmental financial assistance programs for the short time it takes them to regain employment (CSPAN, 2016). However, for people on public assistance for three or more years, and for those who grew up in households receiving it, poverty can become a trap that is difficult to overcome (CSPAN, 2016; Martin, 2003).

Despite the obstacles that many single mothers living in poverty face, some women are able to change their circumstances and therefore, change the trajectory of their children's futures. This study intends to address what it is about these single mothers who grew up in low-income, at-risk neighborhoods that they are able to create increased self-efficacy and more stable lives for themselves and their children despite the odds.

An Alarming Rate of Single Mothers Living in Poverty

In the United States, 36% of families - or 3.6 million families - headed by a single mother lived in poverty in 2015 compared with less than 8% of two parent families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In 2015, the poverty threshold for a family of four (two children) was $24,036 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) with poverty defined as "the inability to afford minimum standards of food, clothing, shelter, and health care" (Vandsburger, Harrigan & Biggerstaff, 2008, p. 18). Single mothers have greater obstacles to overcome compared with married mothers. They typically have less education, lower incomes, fewer social supports, more chronic stress, and more early childhood adversities than married mothers (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003).

Furthermore, because single mothers often face more obstacles and higher stress levels compared with married mothers, they have a higher rate of mental health symptoms, such as depression (Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman & Cutrona , 2010). The stress of inadequate resources, demands of children and work, ongoing discrimination and stigma of poverty, and exposure to violence in adverse neighborhoods can increase the likelihood of negative impacts on single mothers' well-being and parenting (Brodsky, 1999; Broussard, Joseph & Thompson, 2012).

The Impact of Poverty on Children

Living in poverty can have profound implications for children. About 4.7 million children, which is 20% of children in the U.S. who are 18 years old or younger, are living in families with incomes below the federal poverty threshold (Odgers, Nov. 2015). Children living in lower-income neighborhoods are more likely to be exposed to harsh environments such as more violence in the community, less parental involvement, more peers exhibiting risk-taking

behavior, and more racial discrimination (Hampson, Gerrard, & Gibbons, 2016). Studies report

that children who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences - such as food insecurity,

parental separation or divorce, parental abuse or neglect, or substance abuse or mental illness in

the household - are more likely to lag in typical physical and mental health and have an increased

likelihood of developing genetically-based vulnerabilities and psychiatric disorders (Center for

Disease and Prevention, 2016; Costello, Compton, Keeler & Angold, 2003; Taylor et al., 2010;

Vandsburger et al., 2008).

The Cycle of Poverty

Researchers discovered when parents are on federal assistance programs for five years,

their children's increased likelihood of also receiving assistance as they become adults rises by

six percentage points and by 12 percentage points after 10 years on assistance (Dahl, Kostl, &

Mogstad, 2014). Referred to as "the poverty trap," people can become stuck when poverty is

"(i) persistent, (ii) perpetuated across an individual's life or across generations, and (iii)

perpetuated by socioeconomic features outside of the individual's control" (Ziliak, 2015, p. 36).

In other words, external factors outside of one's control such as living in unsafe neighborhoods,

inadequate resources and infrastructure, lower quality education systems, and ongoing exposure

to racial and class-system inequities can contribute to remaining stuck in the cycle of poverty.

Barriers to Breaking Free

Getting off public assistance is not easy for everyone. Recipients report feeling stuck;

when they work and their incomes rise, their government financial assistance or benefits are

reduced or cut completely keeping them in a similar financial position. This "benefits cliff" can

be a disincentive for people to work (CSPAN, 2016). Unless the recipient's income increases

enough to overcome the loss in benefits, the family continues to struggle.

In some cases, family or friends discourage single mothers from seeking more education or looking for better opportunities because they feel that the single mother's change in status negatively affects them (Cook, 2012). The perception of rejection can influence a person's behavior if he or she believes it may lead to being excluded from his or her support system. It is human nature to want to belong (Brown, 2012) and it takes a great deal of perseverance and dedication to push forward at the risk of losing the support of those one cares about.

Without a good support system, single mothers face even more challenges. In order to provide financially for their families, they may need to work several low paying jobs with obstacles of lack of benefits, child care and transportation. They may continue to have food insecurity, inadequate housing, and difficulty paying bills until they can qualify for and obtain living-wage jobs.

Other external factors outside of one's control that contribute to the cycle of poverty include gaps in public policy and systemic problems. Long waits for affordable or public housing, discrimination, racial profiling, living in at-risk neighborhoods with low performing schools, families torn apart by the criminal justice system, and lack of adequate access to quality jobs and healthy and affordable food create seemingly overwhelming barriers.

Protective Factors

There are circumstances that contribute to helping people achieve goals or protect them somewhat from added difficulties. These are called "protective factors" and examples include family support, a safe living environment, access to a variety of resources, mental and physical health, intellectual capabilities, and favorable laws and public policy.

One of the key protective factors single mothers need to improve their circumstances is social support, even if the support is just from one person. Single mothers look to relatives,

friends and ex-partners with whom they trust for emotional support and to assist with transportation and child care which enables them to attend work shifts, school or meetings with their case manager (Cook, 2012; Vandsburger et al., 2008). Mentors and social networks also serve important roles by providing information necessary to navigate systems and opportunities (Mason, 2016).

Employers who are family friendly provide critical support when they can allow their employees enough flexibility in their schedules to juggle the demands of sick children or emergencies. Furthermore, finding employment that pays living wages is also paramount to helping women leave public assistance programs.

Personality traits such as optimism and hopefulness, along with protective factors in faith, family and the community contribute to resiliency in children and adults (Taylor et al., 2010; Vandsburger et al., 2008). People are able to more effectively overcome barriers when access to information and resources, and the support of families, communities and broader public policies are considered (Mason, 2016; Vandsburger et al., 2008).

What is it About Some Single Mothers That Motivates Them to Push for Change?

Few people want to remain in poverty, however the obstacles to change circumstances can seem daunting. What are the factors that some single mothers possess that gives them the strength, determination, and resiliency to persevere?

Studies show that critical internal factors in overcoming adversity are the ability to use healthy coping skills to deal with the effects of trauma or significant stress, exhibit resilience by learning from past mistakes or experiences, and most importantly, to hope (Lyons, Fletcher, & Bariola, 2016). Cultivating hope helps adults and their children overcome adversity through clear boundary setting, consistent expectations, and ongoing support (Brown, 2012). Hopeful people

are more likely to regain their equilibrium even after dealing with conflict and disappointment; they believe that they have the ability to achieve their goals (Brown, 2012). Furthermore, hopeful people are "psychologically healthier with lower levels of depression, higher self-esteem and (a) greater ability to cope with stress; they are more motivated to deal with problems… (and) have more adaptive coping skills… than pessimists do" (Macaskill & Denovan, 2014, pp. 321-322).

While hopefulness cannot be understated, even the most hopeful, intrinsically motivated, hard-working person may have difficulty overcoming poverty alone. External factors that contribute to helping single mothers and their children break the cycle of poverty include positive role models and mentors, opportunities to develop self-confidence in one's abilities, an emphasis in education as a foundation for achieving higher paying jobs, exposure to social environments outside of the community that exhibit the possibilities and benefits of a life without poverty, and changes to public policies and programs that provide positive incentives rather than more obstacles to acquiring resources and living wage employment (Mason, 2016).

How Social Workers can Help

Social workers often work with families living in poverty and many may be accustomed to hearing difficult stories of ongoing emergency needs while they help link people to services and available resources. Living in poverty can trigger feelings of shame and inadequacy which may lead people to distrust social workers and others they perceive as having positions of power. As a result, some clients may choose to withhold information. Broussard et al. (2012) suggest that social workers need to do more than study the causes of poverty and oppression or policy and programs designed to help; it is important to understand the depth of pain and isolation people living in poverty feel every single day.

When social workers collect data from families about their lack of financial resources, housing, food support or difficulties in living with disabilities or addictions for example, the focus is often on problems and deficits. Researchers learned the value of identifying families' strengths and support systems and to promote single mothers' abilities for autonomy and self-determination (Vandsburger et al., 2008). Social workers can use strengths-perspective modalities in helping families set achievable goals and to build on the strengths their families already have.

So, how does single mothers' self-efficacy help them end the cycle of generational poverty? This study reviews the research on the single mothers and their children who are trapped in this cycle and the range of factors they need to get out of it.

Theoretical perspective

Contrary to some societal perceptions that hard work, determination and perseverance are all that are necessary to "pull oneself up by one's bootstraps," breaking free of generational poverty is multifaceted and complex. It is not just an individual's efforts but a combination of individual, family, community and governmental resources and support, and broader public policy that offer people a chance to improve their circumstances.

Ecosystems theory and empowerment theories provide a framework from which to view this interconnected, interdependent system. Together, they combine the ecosystems perspective that humans grow and change in response to internal and external factors with empowerment theories that recognize people have the right to access resources and the responsibility to control the choices that are right for them (Miley, O'Melia & DuBois, 2013). Empowerment theories focus on the barriers individuals and groups encounter when trying to access resources due to race, gender, and socioeconomic inequities (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2012). When people

feel, and experience evidence of being, marginalized and oppressed, it can be challenging to see

potential for different outcomes. Empowered people direct their own lives within the context of

collaborating with others to utilize resources and navigating options, challenges and solutions in

a way that reinforces their sense of power and self-worth.

Methods

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to systematically explore what differentiates the single

mothers and their children who are able to break free from generational poverty from the

millions of smart, resilient, capable women and their children who remain stuck living in it. This

study looked at empowerment factors in single mothers to better understand why some women

are able to overcome personal and societal obstacles and barriers as well as family-of-origin

dynamics to change the course of their lives and those of their children. Since a component of the

research is on generational poverty, literature on protective factors that empower and barriers

that limit children's futures was also included.

Types of Studies

This study is a systematic review. Systematic reviews are an exhaustive analysis of

literature, within identified parameters designed to control for quality and relevance, to answer

the research topic.

Search Strategy

To be considered for this study, the literature was published in at least one of the

databases described next. The keywords or search terms needed to be included in the title of the

article, abstract, key words index, or in the finding sections of the literature.

Databases. The following electronic databases were used to obtain research for this study: Criminal Justice Abstracts, Family Studies Abstracts, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX with Full Text. The databases were accessed through APA PsycNET, Ebsco and Summon.

Search Terms. There are several phrases used throughout this study. The terms "generational poverty" and "cycle of poverty" refer to at least three generations within families that have had difficulty accessing resources for basic needs such as affordable housing, food, clothing, and medical care due to insufficient earnings. The three generations include a grandparent, parent, and dependent child(ren) ages 18 or younger who have all experienced living in poverty. "Single mothers" include women with (a) child(ren) ages 18 years or younger who are divorced, separated, widowed, never married, or not living with a partner.

To acquire the literature reviewed in this study, the keywords or search terms included a combination of the following:

- "single mothers" or "single parents" or "unwed mothers" or "unmarried mothers" or "teenage mothers" or "adolescent mothers" or "African-American single mothers"

- "poverty" or "lower income level" or "cycle of poverty" or "culture of poverty" or "generational poverty" or "poverty reduction" or "women in poverty" or "poverty areas"

- "intergenerational" or "transgenerational patterns"

- "resilience" or "resilience (Psychological)" or "coping behavior" or "protective factors" or "psychological endurance" or "life skills" or "self-help techniques" or "empowerment" or "interpersonal control" or "self-determination" or "adaptability" or "post-traumatic growth"

- "trauma" or "emotional trauma" or "posttraumatic growth" or "post-traumatic stress" or "post-traumatic stress disorder" or "complex PTSD" or "DESNOS"

Inclusion Criteria. In addition to the databases and key words or search terms already described, all literature in this study included empirically based, peer reviewed research of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (a combination of qualitative and quantitative) studies conducted from 1990 to the present. This timeframe was selected to include studies on welfare to work programs and initiatives developed in the mid-1990s.

The studies focused on single mothers and their children 18 years old or younger living in their households and experiencing low-income or poverty. Sample sizes were unlimited. All literature considered for this study was published in English. Only studies from the United States and Canada were included. All research included in this study were accessed and analyzed from October to December 2016.

Exclusion Criteria. Literature excluded from the review was as follows: duplicates found in other databases included in this study; literature that did not address empowerment protective factors or barriers that single mothers or their children faced in overcoming poverty; literature that was not qualitative, quantitative, or mixed studies; studies whose participants were mostly men or married women; and studies conducted in countries other than North America. Also, dissertations were not included in this study.

Abstraction and Analysis

Using the criteria identified in the inclusion and exclusion factors, 35 articles were selected from the databases. Of these, 19 were discarded for the following reasons: nine articles were literature reviews and not studies; one study was conducted outside of North America; and nine studies focused on a broader population such as married women and/or married men or fathers, or topics beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, 16 articles met the inclusion criteria

of this study and were organized for analysis into three major themes and several sub-themes

combining ecosystems and empowerment theories.

Ecosystems theory divides the complex relationship of individuals' interactions with

families and society as follows:

- Microsystem – The primary focus is on the individual and/or the immediate family system.

  This includes protective factors such as the individual's or family's abilities, expertise and

  intelligence, spirituality and personal beliefs, and sense of control as well as obstacles in

  achieving financial independence, efficacy, and accessing resources. Research on personal

  attributes, mental health and effects of trauma, parenting factors, and personal financial

  circumstances are discussed.

- Mezzosystem – This system connects an individual to the broader family-of-origin and

  extended family systems and community systems. Studies include findings on the effects of

  neighborhoods, schools/education, and employment opportunities as well as connection to

  and support from others.

- Macrosystem – This contains an expansive range of subsystems that provide an individual

  with meaning and resources between all levels of the social system. Findings are described

  from literature on private and public programs, minimum wage impacts, and societal

  perceptions of people living in poverty.

Within the preceding three systems, empowerment theories indicating protective factors and

barriers were integrated to categorize the literature. Table 1 details each of these themes for the

research included in this study.

Table 1: **A theoretical perspective of the research**

Author(s) & year	Focus of study	Microsystem factors	Mezzosystem factors	Macrosystem factors
Brodsky, A. (1999)	Resilience	Parenting, financial, personal attributes	Social support, neighborhoods	
Brooks, M. & Buckner, J. (1996)	Employment feasibility	Mental health/trauma, parenting	Education, employment, social support	Programs
Broussard, C., Joseph, A. & Thompson, M. (2012)	Stress and coping skills in poverty	Mental health, personal attributes	Social support	Programs, stigma
Dunifon, R., Kalil, A., & Bajracharya, A. (2005)	Employment and well-being; intergenerational poverty	Mental health, parenting, personal attributes	Employment	
Freeman, A. & Dodson, L. (2014)	Social networks to help mothers manage work and family	Mental health, personal attributes	Social support, neighborhoods, education	Programs, stigma
Hao, L. (1995)	Effects of intergenerational poverty and family structure on child development	Personal attributes, financial, parenting	Education	Programs
Jackson, A. (2000)	Links between social support, parenting, and children's behavior	Personal attributes, parenting	Education, social support	
Kiser, L., Nurse, W., Lucksted, A. & Collins, K. (2008)	Children and families in poor neighborhoods at risk for trauma	Personal attributes, parenting, mental health/trauma	Education, social support	
Lee, J., Hill, K. & Hawkins, J. (2012)	Intergenerational poverty and children's education	Personal attributes	Education	Programs
Martin, M. (2003)	Likelihood of daughters receiving financial assistance; intergenerational poverty	Personal attributes, parenting, financial	Education	Programs
McIntyre, L., Officer, S. & Robinson, L. (2003)	What it means to feel poor for low-income mothers	Personal attributes, parenting	Employment	Stigma, programs
Sabia, J. (2008)	Minimum wage and single mothers' economic well-being		Employment, education	Minimum wage
Scaramella, L., Neppl, T., Ontai, L. & Conger, R.(2008)	Intergenerational poverty effects on adolescents	Personal attributes, parenting, financial, mental health	Education	Programs
Scheuler, L., Diouf, K., Nevels, E. & Hughes, N. (2014)	Program designed to help low-income women achieve stability	Personal attributes, mental health, financial	Education, employment, social support	Programs
Sparks, A., Peterson, N. & Tangenberg, (2005)	Low-income single mothers and their belief in personal control	Personal attributes, financial	Education, employment	Programs
Taylor, Z., Larsen-Rife, D., Conger, R., Widaman, K. & Cutrona, C. (2010).	The effects of maternal optimism on parenting and children's outcomes	Personal attributes, parenting, mental health	Education	

Limitations

One of the limitations of this systematic review is low quantity of literature. Although poverty affects millions of people, particularly single mothers and their children, little research was found on the factors needed to break free from the cycle of poverty. The 16 articles included in this study are compromised of separate factors contributing to protective factors and barriers to leaving poverty. There was not one study found that focused exclusively on what intrinsically and extrinsically differentiates single mothers who successfully end their families' cycles of generational poverty. This leads to another related limitation of the study.

Clearly, more research is needed on generational poverty so that we can better understand what helps and limits single mothers and their children from breaking the cycles of prolonged poverty. Then we can investigate the strengths of programs and policies to determine how to design them to maximize successful outcomes.

Finally, the research touched on many of the barriers that people living in poverty face. However, none of the studies included in this review delved deeply into the devastating consequences of substance abuse, drug dealing, street gangs, violence, the criminal justice system, or racial and ethnic inequities and discrimination that are rampant in our society and disproportionally effect people of color living in impoverished neighborhoods.

Findings

All 16 studies included in this systematic review focused on what helped or hindered single mothers and/or children from leaving poverty. Protective factors (factors that help empower people to achieve their goals or reduce negative effects of circumstances) and barriers for individuals and their immediate families from an ecosystem's microsystem, mezzosystem and macrosystem perspective are discussed.

Microsystems

  Personal attributes. The literature identified characteristics that many single mothers shared as protective factors in making meaningful strides towards leaving poverty. Women reported their own personal characteristics of having self-efficacy, positive self-esteem, persistence, determination, independence, hope, humor, creative endeavors, and motivation to strive for goals (Brodsky, 1999; Broussard & Thompson, 2012). Intellectual ability was important in enhancing their children's cognitive levels and emotional home environment (Hao, 1995).

  Research found that women felt more empowered as they increased their coping skills, ability to manage their daily lives more effectively and motivation to change. Healthy coping skills and behavior positively contributed to women's sense of well-being (Scheuler, Diouf, Nevels, & Hughes, 2014). Single mothers used strategies to lessen stress and to be mindful of how they viewed their circumstances such as positive reframing, exercise, finding solace in activities such as taking baths, reading, listening to music, playing video games, and even crying and screaming (Brodsky, 1999; Broussard & Thompson, 2012).

  In addition, several studies revealed how spirituality and religious beliefs contributed to some single mothers' sense of personal control, strength and gratitude. Women with these beliefs reported feeling more comfortable using services that were sponsored by faith organizations and the women had greater expectations for successful outcomes (Brodsky, 1999; Kiser, Nurse, Lucksted & Collins, 2008; Sparks, Peterson & Tanenberg, 2005). Faith was integral to their feelings of self-efficacy (Spark et al., 2005).

  Women reported the importance of viewing their own poverty and difficult circumstances with perspective. They told their children to be proud of who they are and that their families were better off than other families (McIntyre, Officer & Robinson, 2003).

Further, single mothers viewed themselves as mentors and role models, not only to their children but also to others in the community. They modeled for their children the difference between choosing needs over wants (Brodsky, 1999). They served as role models and volunteers which served to help others and increased their own sense of value and fulfillment (Broussard et al., 2012; Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

It would be difficult to overcome generational poverty without the resilience, determination, and other personal attributes that many of the single mothers reported having. The research showed that how they viewed themselves, and their abilities to change their circumstances, was integral to how they approached parenting, working, and overcoming obstacles.

Mental health and effects of trauma. It was no surprise that much of the literature described the effects of stress on single mothers and their children whether from living in poverty itself, having mental health conditions, as a result of experiencing early childhood adversity and/or trauma, or the cumulative effect of many stressors. Stressful life events, prolonged stress and substance abuse were reported as prevalent for many women experiencing poverty (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Broussard et al., 2012; Dunifon et al., 2005). McIntyre et al. (2003) researched 141 single mothers and identified that some women saw themselves as responsible for their negative experiences; this led them to isolating from mainstream activities such as recreation, education and social activities and it compromised their connection with others.

Several studies presented research on the effects of childhood adversarial events and experiencing or witnessing domestic violence, physical abuse or sexual abuse. Both the mothers – whether they experienced trauma as adults or when they were children – and their children

were at elevated risks for acquiring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which influenced their

coping abilities and behavior (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Dunifon et al., 2005; Kiser et al., 2008).

Brooks and Buckner (1996) found that 85% of the 436 single, low-income mothers in their study

reported having been victims of severe physical violence, sexual assault or sexual molestation as

children. The research suggested that mothers who experienced childhood adversity had an

associated risk and vulnerability in adulthood; it negatively influenced their coping abilities and

their parenting behavior with their children so their children's sense of self and safety was also

impacted (Taylor et al., 2010).

Children placed additional stress on their caregivers. Kiser et al. (2008) examined the

lives of 16 mothers and caregivers who expressed a sense of frustration and added stress of

parenting children with PTSD and other trauma-related symptoms in addition to the daily hassles

associated with living in urban communities with low income, violence, crime, and drugs. Even

when a child had not been exposed to a traumatic event, their negative behavior created extra

stress for parents (Dunifon et al., 2005; Jackson, 2000; Kiser et al., 2008).

Lack of financial and emotional support from their children's fathers was a major issue

for both mothers and their children. Mothers struggled to provide for their families without

financial assistance from these fathers and children had unmet emotional needs for their absentee

fathers' support and attention (Brodsky, 1999).

There were protective factors in the research findings related to mental health. Women

found benefits to seeking mental health therapy (Broussard et al., 2012) and women made

positive changes in their parenting to children affected by trauma. Kiser et al. (2008) found that

women who provided traumatized children with structure, a daily routine that included

homework, and improved their family relationship through better protection, communication,

warmth and attention were ways that they stabilized their family and responded to their

children's anguish.

Overall, the prevalent message of the research was that stress takes a toll on single

mothers and their children. Living in poverty, with all of the factors that go along with it, creates

a tremendous daily burden on families that makes it difficult to see the potential for anything

good beyond it. For those exposed to traumatic events, stress levels grow exponentially and alter

the lens through which victims see their worlds.

Parenting – from adults' and children's perspectives. The role of parenting

contributed to a sense of pride and additional stress for single mothers. Two studies reported

parenting can bring positivity and joy and motivated mothers to teach children gratitude and

appreciation (Brodsky, 1999; Brooks & Buckner, 1996). Mothers who were optimistic offered

better parenting skills and behavior; their optimism motivated them to strive for more, created

greater resilience, and lessened stress from economic pressure (Brodsky, 1999; Taylor et al.,

2010). While the extra demands of parenting contributed to more stress and burden for many

people living in poverty (Kiser et al., 2008), other single mothers reported that single parenting

can be a positive decision (Brodsky, 1999).

Some single mothers viewed self-depravation and self-sacrifice as admirable parenting

traits. In one study, mothers stated they would deprive themselves of food, clothing and small

luxuries as a coping strategy to provide for their children; they felt this made them good mothers

and that self-sacrifice was important (McIntyre et al., 2003).

Several studies discussed the correlation between teen pregnancy and financial resource

potential. Not becoming a teen parent was a protective factor for resilience and increased the

likelihood of working (Brodsky, 1999; Brooks & Buckner, 1996). However, exposure to poverty

as an adolescent predicted a higher rate of teenage pregnancy (Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai & Conger, 2008). Family income was inversely related to daughters having a baby; a daughter was less likely to have a child if she had parents with higher resources including family income and if the mother had a higher education level (Martin, 2003).

Low income was not the only contributing factor to the potential of teen pregnancy. In a study of 154 three-generation families, teenage pregnancy was also associated with a multitude of family-of-origin disadvantages including marital and family conflict, harsh and inconsistent parenting, and mental health problems (Scaramella et al., 2008). The authors also found that teen parents were likely to be harsher with their own children which increased the children's undesirable behavior which led to a cycle of additional harsh parenting and unruly behavior; the study found this dynamic contributed to the continuation of generational poverty (Scaramella et al., 2008). Conversely, teenage parents from the second generation who exhibited more warmth, constraint, and more involvement in their own children protected the third generation from internalizing and externalizing problems (Scaramella et al., 2008).

Last, teenage pregnancy may impede teens' educational accomplishments. Studies found pregnant teens had lower high school graduation rates and more difficulty finding higher paying employment than childless teens (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Martin, 2003). Findings also showed a correlation of teenage pregnancy with continued generational poverty and an increased need for government safety net programs (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Martin, 2003).

While having children offers parents a source of joy and hope for the future, research findings also revealed the emotional and financial stress that comes from raising children, especially in neighborhoods and communities that do not offer much in terms of support and resources. When teens become parents, research suggests their lives can become complicated by

the enormous financial and emotional responsibilities that are required while they are still

physically, emotionally and cognitively developing. Further, the futures of teen and adult parents

may be compromised unless they have the ability to continue their education and find higher-

wage employment.

   Financial factors. Many single mothers relied on financial support from external

sources. Two studies found mothers looked to their children's fathers for income, and they and

their children were adversely affected with increased stress and fewer resources when the fathers

did not contribute financially (Brodsky, 1999; Brooks & Buckner, 1996). Other research found

children felt less financial and emotional support from both of their parents after their parents

divorced (Hao, 1995).

   Children had a different view of governmental safety net programs than their views of

living in poverty. Hao (1995) discovered that school-aged children saw governmental programs

favorably because their families had access to more financial resources. He suggests that children

were developmentally more negatively affected by living in prolonged poverty and impoverished

neighborhoods than they were by dependence of government assistance itself (Hao, 1995).

   Living in low-income families and communities affected children in other ways. Children

of low-income families who moved often were at a greater risk of growing up to be

disadvantaged and needing government safety net programs (Martin, 2003). In addition, in a 20-

year longitudinal study of 808 Seattle children (ages 10-18 at the start of the study), findings

indicate that children from low-income families were less likely to aspire for academic success

as they entered middle-school and high school; when children completed high school, it was a

significant indicator of a higher earnings potential by the time they were 30 years old (Lee, Hill

& Hawkins, 2012). Higher levels of education and having parents who could navigate accessing more resources were protective factors against continuing the cycle of generational poverty (Lee et al., 2012; Martin, 2003), and as mothers' income levels increased, it reduced the likelihood of their daughters also receiving government financial assistance (Martin, 2003).

The research indicates that single mothers need, and rely on, the financial support of family, their children's fathers, and government assistance to make ends meet. Children may be adversely affected by living in a household with insufficient earnings in many ways including housing instability, food insecurity, lower educational attainment, and increased risk for teen pregnancy. Hao (1995) found that the longer children live in poverty, the greater the likelihood they will continue the generational cycle of poverty as they become adults.

Mezzosystems

Social support. In all of the studies included in this review, social support from friends, family, church, neighbors and mentors in the community was mentioned most often as a protective factor to helping single mothers and their children break the cycles of poverty. Social support was found to increase self-efficacy and improve self-confidence in children and their mothers (Brodsky, 1999; Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Broussard et al., 2012; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Scheuler et al., 2014).

Social supports provided practical help as well. Two studies found single mothers relied on help from others such as financial assistance, emotional support, and favors including childcare and help with transportation so they could get to work or school (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). In addition, they provided important roles as mentors. Freeman and Dodson (2014) studied 37 single mothers living in public housing in Boston who participated in a program designed to help them leave poverty. The participants worked with mentors and their co-

participants who modeled how to advocate for oneself and how to navigate systems to obtain

resources such as charter school lotteries and city-assisted mortgage programs. In addition, the

mentors and co-participants shared information resources which helped the women straddle the

low-income communities in which they lived with the communities that offered more resources

and educational and employment opportunities. In other words, they exposed each other to new

ways of thinking about their own potential to leave poverty and generated hope for a different

future which was particularly impactful for the women experiencing generational poverty. The

women had a shared goal of leaving poverty and they used each other to branch out and work

towards that goal while simultaneously giving each other confidence (Freeman & Dodson,

2014).

Conversely, not all women sought the help of others. Five of 37 participants were hesitant

to form alliances with the rest of the group due to trust issues or the belief that they were too

busy to engage; this resulted in creating a barrier to leaving poverty (Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

Some women reported feeling stress from their relationships with their family-of-origin and

friends and said that others "brought them down" (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). When women

lacked social support or healthy relationships, whether from family, neighbors, or friends,

women felt more stress as a result of a gap in, and a yearning for, support to discuss personal and

professional struggles or to receive help in caring for their children (Brodsky, 1999; Freeman &

Dodson, 2014; Jackson, 2000).

The research was consistent in its findings that having a strong social support system is a

key indicator of potential success in leaving poverty. Social support provides advantages to

individuals and their families through emotional support which helps improve self-confidence

and feelings of connection, financial support, and practical support such as information to access resources, child care assistance, and bridges to networks outside of impoverished communities.

Neighborhoods. Research indicated that living in low-income and higher-income neighborhoods both presented challenges for low-income single mothers. Living in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty, violence, crime and drugs created obstacles for single mothers in leaving poverty (Brodsky, 1999; Freeman & Dodson, 2014). It was stressful for single mothers to raise their children in this environment. However, when mothers escaped those neighborhoods and moved into the suburbs seeking less crime and more opportunities, they found their experiences to be isolating as they had few visitors and no connection with neighbors (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). One woman said she was harassed by her suburban neighbors at her children's bus stop (Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

Some single mothers living in risky communities were able to use coping skills as a protective factor. They were intentional about distancing themselves and their children from the neighbors they viewed as having undesirable values and behavior (Brodsky, 1999; Freeman & Dodson, 2014). As a result, they perceived this contributed to positive outcomes and success (Brodsky, 1999).

Employment. Studies indicated that employment provided protective factors and frustrations for single mothers. Jackson (2000) found that, for 188 employed and unemployed single mothers of preschoolers, even low-wage employment provided beneficial effects by providing at least some income for the family and improved self-confidence for the mothers. In addition, having a mother who worked increased the likelihood of grown daughters working (Brooks & Buckner, 1996).

Several studies addressed the complexities of working long distances from home, unpredictable schedules and odd hour shifts. In a study of 372 children and their mothers, long commute times were found to have increased the mothers' stress levels which also negatively affected children's behavior (Dunifon et al., 2005). Interestingly, the study also found that working erratic work schedules and odd hours did not adversely affect their children (Dunifon et al., 2005). Brooks and Buckner (1996) discovered that working odd shift hours made child care difficult and more expensive to obtain; the study reported that family responsibilities and child care were the most cited reasons for not looking for work. Furthermore, not having a job increased single mothers' stress when raising children (Jackson, 2000). Having the ability to access affordable, quality child care was the most needed resource in order for mothers to obtain work (Brooks & Buckner, 1996).

Single mothers wanted decision-making authority in choosing their preferred career paths. They sought to increase their control in choosing their occupations and resented their perceived lack of choice (McIntrye et al., 2003). Two studies found the most common entry-level jobs were in the typically lower paying sectors of food service, human service and medical fields (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Broussard et al., 2012). Higher levels of education, having positive parental role models, delaying childbirth, and receiving regular child care payments from their children's fathers increased the likelihood of single mothers obtaining employment (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Sabia, 2008).

One of the strongest factors in successfully leaving poverty is single mothers' wherewithal to acquire living-wage employment. Research shows that this is more complex than job availability, although that is important. It is also necessary for single mothers to be able to

access quality, affordable child care, transportation, continued income support until they become more financially stable, and the training to qualify for higher paying jobs.

Education. Education has long been touted as a way out of poverty and much of the research support this assertion. Sabia (2008) found that those who had at least a high school degree or its equivalent worked almost double the number of hours (an average of 38 hours per week) with greater earnings than mothers without a high school degree (an average of 20 hours per week). Good grades in school led to acceptance into higher education programs; one woman stated her good grades enabled her to receive a scholarship to a nursing program, and another woman received her associate's degree (Freeman & Dodson, 2014). They served as mentors and role models for other women in their community and they stated that it was gratifying to see others succeed by graduating and moving out of public housing (Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

In addition to the increased financial earnings, higher levels of education positively affected women's sense of worth and empowerment. Three studies indicated that the more education a single mother attained, the greater her sense of control and expectations of success for herself which led to greater optimism, self-confidence and self-efficacy (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Jackson, 2000; Lee et al., 2012).

When the mothers increased their levels of education, they instilled the value of education on their children and this had wide ranging effects. Several studies described their findings that mothers with higher levels of education helped increase children's reading levels, reduce children's behavior problems, and the children were less likely to use government safety net programs as they became adults (Hao, 1995; Martin, 2003). As children developed their own educational aspirations and expectations for achieving at least a high school diploma, predictions for higher household income rates by age 30 also improved (Lee et al., 2012.)

There were mixed findings about the correlation of poverty and educational outcomes. Scaramella et al. (2008) reported surprising findings that education attainment was not correlated to poverty. However, other research found children's reading abilities, and cognitive and emotional development, were adversely affected by long durations of living in poverty (Hao, 1995). Research pointed to the importance of education and job training because when these are lacking, study participants and their children did not fare as well financially or emotionally (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Lee et al., 2012).

Like social support systems and employment, attaining quality education is one of the key factors in helping single mothers and their children break the cycles of generational poverty. The research clearly suggested that the way to access higher paying employment was to develop the skills and knowledge required to attain it. Education had lasting positive affects for parents and their children by providing a path out of poverty. Therefore, parents help their children when they instill messages of valuing education and the importance of doing well in school.

Macrosystems

Minimum wage. One of the 16 studies focused exclusively on the effects of minimum wage increases on the economic well-being of single mothers. This longitudinal study of 62,781 single mothers found that increases in minimum wage were ineffective at reducing poverty (Sabia, 2008). For the women who had less education and fewer skills, a 10 percent increase in minimum wage was offset by an 8.8 percent reduction in employment and an 11.8 percent reduction in annual hours worked. Therefore, Sabia (2008) suggests that increases in minimum wage create unintended consequences for the population they are trying to help. Furthermore, women with higher education were unaffected by minimum wage increases because they were already earning more than state and federal minimum wage levels.

Public and private programs. Studies showed that programs providing assistance, mentoring, and safety nets for single mothers offered both protective factors and additional barriers for women seeking to improve their lives and those of their children. Programs that focused on a range of services and support suggest the potential for better outcomes. Scheuler et al. (2014) examined the lives of 11 St. Louis mothers who all had a high school diploma or general education diploma (GED); they participated in a program that provided financial assistance towards child care, transportation and housing, case management and life coaching, and vocational training/education. The study found that single mothers were able to improve their financial circumstances by attaining higher paying employment with higher income potential, reducing their debt while increasing their savings, and more stability in housing, child care and transportation (Scheuler et al., 2014).

Research found that some women may be more receptive to a faith-based approach to education and job training programs. Sparks et al. (2005) reported that African-American and Puerto Rican research participants felt a greater sense of control, motivation and self-efficacy through their belief that God was a significant dimension in their own personal control. Faith-based programs designed to help qualifying women get financial assistance, through loans and/or scholarships, for more training and education helped single mothers attain higher paying jobs and some women said they resonated with the connection to faith (Broussard et al., 2012; Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

Participants were able to become more financially stable when they were allowed to continue to receive government financial assistance while they were transitioning out of poverty. Stress levels were already high from prolonged poverty and these single mothers felt they needed the safety net of government programs until they felt their financial circumstances were more

reliable (Brooks & Buckner, 1996). In a study of 12 single mothers and grandmothers raising children, findings indicated that a lack of health insurance and poor medical care contributed to their feelings of poor emotional and physical health; one participant described assistance programs, like supplemental security income, as designed to keep people living in poverty (Broussard et al., 2012).

Further, research found single mothers frustrated by program requirements. Brooks and Buckner (1996) found that mandating people on federal assistance to find employment only works if they have access to jobs that pay living wages, adequate health care, and quality child care. Martin's (2003) study of 2,070 women from low-income families revealed that changes in welfare policy will not affect the underlying social processes influencing one's need for government assistance.

Another study found the multifaceted obstacles to leaving poverty were not just financial. Poverty also affected the cohesiveness of family dynamics and participants wanted programs to help strengthen their families and improve potential outcomes for their children (Scaramella et al., 2008). Some women felt they had become dependent on government assistance programs and charities which made it difficult to leave poverty; these mothers expressed shame at going to food banks and recognized their personal cost of this dependence (McIntyre et al., 2003).

Programs are a much needed resource and they can provide many benefits for their recipients. However, they can also provide obstacles to the populations they are intending to help. Research indicates that programs may be more effective when they provide a range of services depending on the needs of the people they serve; for some people, this may mean creating intensive education or skills training, and others may need services for the time it takes them to bridge from poverty to financial independence.

Stigma. Many people living in poverty feel judged and degraded by others. This can exacerbate their feelings of isolation and depression and two studies' groups of participants described the taunting and bullying that they and their children felt from others (Freeman & Dodson, 2014; McIntyre et al., 2003). Other women felt the need to manage the appearance of their low-income status to cope with the personal shame they felt. They strived to maintain a sense of their own empowerment and to manage their self-worth (McIntyre et al., 2003). Freeman and Dodson (2014) found that single mothers in their study thought there was a stereotype that women from low-income communities were competitive with each other for resources and they believed this to be false; they described that their bonds with other women empowered them to help each other and applaud each others' successes. Nonetheless, the stigma of living in poverty is oppressive and does nothing to help empower people; it only contributes to keeping them down.

Discussion

The focus of the research was to understand what factors contribute to the success of single mothers and their children leaving the cycle of generational poverty while so many other capable, motivated families remain stuck. As history tells us, and the research supports, there are no simple, clear solutions. If there were, we would not have millions of people living in poverty in our society today. The research indicates that some factors are related to personal characteristics and many more factors are related to circumstances outside of individuals' control. In other words, even the most resilient, determined and hardworking people can encounter so many obstacles that leaving poverty is difficult without the support of caring individuals, thoughtful, effective programs and resources, and policies that help empower them.

Poverty can contribute to chaos and unpredictability

Even with the best practices of evidence-based programs and policies in place, individuals need to be at a readiness level to utilize those resources. Let us look at what this means for children, for example. In order to leverage their capabilities to become financially stable as adults, the research suggests they need to stay in school and perform to the best of their abilities so they can graduate and qualify for post-secondary education or job training programs. This is easier said than done. How can we expect children to be able to focus in school and perform at satisfactory academic levels if their classrooms are disruptive, the curriculum is not designed for children with wide ranging abilities, and teachers in their schools are not trained to work with children with multiple barriers to success and do not have adequate resources with which to teach them? How can we expect children to be ready to strive for success if they have food insecurity, if they have housing instability, if they are exposed to adverse childhood experiences, or if they walk through dangerous neighborhoods to get to school? How can parents give their children the attention and encouragement they need when the parents are distracted by the turmoil in their own lives and communities? How can single mothers balance the demands of raising children with the challenges of working – often with inconsistent child care, erratic financial support, and unreliable support systems? How can communities thrive if its residents are collectively struggling? It is hard to focus on building a different future when daily living is chaotic and unpredictable. It is hard to sustain the energy to seek out and utilize potential resources to change life circumstances when faced with hassles and obstacles at every turn. These questions point to the importance of a solid foundation. In order to increase children's likelihood for success and improve single mothers' abilities to leave poverty, they need access to

a quality infrastructure of schools, employment, services and support systems; and, just as importantly, their daily lives need to be stable.

Generational poverty

Living in generational poverty is anything but stable. When parents are raising children in prolonged poverty and with insufficient resources, surrounded by others living in poverty, the research showed that children were less likely to achieve appropriate literacy levels, less likely to graduate from high school, more likely to become teen parents, and more likely to continue the cycle of generational poverty and dependence on governmental safety net programs as they became adults (Hao, 1995; Lee et al., 2012; Martin, 2003).

Single mothers who grew up living in prolonged poverty face far more obstacles than their peers living with low income for shorter durations. The research showed generational poverty contributed to higher stress levels, more mental health issues, and an increased risk for having experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse as children (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Scaramella et al., 2008). This affects single mothers' ability to parent their children with warmth, patience, fair and consistent rules, and attention (Taylor et al., 2010).

A major issue for single mothers is the lack of social support. Many women reported having difficult relationships with their families-of-origin and unable to rely on their children's fathers for emotional or financial support (Brodsky, 1999; Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Freeman & Dodson, 2014). Further, they intentionally isolated themselves from neighbors they deemed as having behavior and values that contradicted their own (Brodsky, 1999). Although this showed their strength in protecting their children from potentially unsavory role models, the burden of having no real support contributed to increased stress, depression and anxiety (Dunifon et al., 2005).

Compounding their difficulties, many of the women reported a history of childhood physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or assault. This, along with a lack of education or access to living wage employment, contributed to their isolation and lack of exposure to communities outside of their impoverished neighborhoods that offer residents more resources and an inherent expectation for social justice and opportunities. With these barriers firmly in place, the cycle continues.

The importance of effective programs and policy

The research stressed the importance of programs to help stabilize families and their communities and to help individuals gain independence. The needs varied from access to programs aimed at mitigating financial hardship, to education and skills training, to strengthening family support systems and community-based networking support, to programs improving graduation rates, to affordable, quality child care services (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Broussard et al., 2012; Freeman & Dodson, 2014; Lee et al., 2012; Scaramella et al., 2008).

There is a range of services and programs offered through government, government-supported, private, and faith-based agencies in North America. Many of these agencies have hard-working, dedicated professionals and volunteers who provide compassion, resources, and services to millions of low-income individuals and families every day. These agencies need to be held accountable to the public, their donors, and their benefactors to help ensure they are meeting the needs of their clients while minimizing the administrative costs to do so. Effective organizations routinely monitor their service delivery; public, corporate, and private funding sources and foundations require this accountability as they evaluate programs they wish to support. Governmental programs and policies also need regular review to help ensure they are providing the support to empower, not impede, individuals and families in achieving their goals.

Mental health issues and exposure to trauma were found to be common barriers to ending the cycle of poverty. Expecting individuals to overcome persistent levels of elevated stress, depression, anxiety, or substance abuse by themselves appears impractical and unkind. The research indicates that single mothers and their families would benefit from help to process their stress, trauma and grief as they work toward gaining healthy coping skills (Dunifon et al., 2005; Kiser et al., 2008). Therefore, single mothers and their families would benefit from low-cost individual and family (dual diagnosis) mental health therapy, respite care for children, and outlets for safe family activities in their urban and rural communities.

It would be shortsighted to focus exclusively on programs for individuals and families. Nicole Mason (2016) suggests that in order to move significant numbers of people out of poverty, policies and programs need to improve outcomes across community, state and federal levels. For example, families are being torn apart, and poverty is worsened, as a result of laws and policies in the U.S. criminal justice system that affects a disproportionate number of poor Latinos and blacks. In another example, Mason (2016) stresses the need for early childhood literacy programs to be delivered through the health care system, like breast cancer or sudden infant death prevention programs. Research indicates that literacy levels are lower in low-income families, and children are exposed to 30 million fewer words by the time they are three years old than children in affluent families; many children and their parents across the continent would benefit from literacy programs (Hao, 1995; Mason, 2016). They would be more qualified for post-secondary education or job training and higher-wage employment opportunities. Whole communities would benefit as its residents become mentally healthier, attain higher educational levels, utilize the support and resources of programs, and collaborate to support each other.

Support systems contribute to successful outcomes

The research found that support systems were integral in helping single mothers and their children gain self-confidence, a sense of empowerment, and access to emotional and practical help as they navigated through systems and acquired resources. Family and friends provided emotional connection and assisted with transportation, child care, and financial support to help make ends meet in some cases. Communities provided practical and emotional support and opportunities to work with, and serve as, mentors and leaders. Volunteers in the communities talked about the strength they gained from helping others and acting as role models (Brooks & Buckner, 1996; Freeman & Dodson, 2014).

One of the most effective ways to help single mothers and their children overcome poverty would be to help them learn about opportunities outside of their impoverished communities. For those who belong to the middle class, for example, it is often taken for granted that people know the importance of taking more challenging classes in high school, participating in extracurricular activities, taking college-entrance exams and excelling in all of them in order to improve their chances of getting into the universities they want. It is often taken for granted that people know how to conduct themselves in a job interview and that reliable attendance, good interpersonal skills and hard work may result in a promotion and better pay increases. Good support becomes essential in helping people identify and attain access to unfamiliar resources more readily available to people in higher class systems. Adults and children need these opportunities to succeed – we all benefit when there are bridges to networks that we all can access.

Individuals empowered to envision and create a better future

It would be challenging for individuals to break the cycles of poverty completely on their own. Even with effective programs and services in place and mentors at hand, many people living in poverty feel the weight of social injustice, class, racial and ethnic inequities, and lack of all kinds of resources. Nonetheless, many have an internal determination and resiliency that propels them to carry on.

The research showed that a key to developing a feeling of empowerment and self-efficacy was to engage in activities that helped mothers and children feel good about themselves and the contributions they made to others. Most importantly, they found the ability to hope: to hope for a better future for themselves and their families. Through hope, the research showed they believed in the possibility of something different. Whether through their faith in something larger than themselves, or by seeing positive results from their efforts, this increased their motivation and determination to connect with others, develop their networks, learn new skills and how to identify potential resources and solutions to achieving their goals.

Conclusion

While the focus of the research was to learn what it was about the single mothers who were able to break the cycles of generational poverty, it quickly became clear that there was not a sole factor that differentiated them from the single mothers who continued living in poverty. Certainly, a person's commitment to improving her circumstances and her own feelings of empowerment were important in her quest for self-efficacy, material prosperity and increased stability for her children. And there was so much more. This is not just about an individual's characteristics. This is a much bigger systemic issue of policy, access to information and resources, quality education, and networks of contacts to help people bridge the worlds of

poverty and middle class possibilities. It appears that the people who are able to break the cycle of poverty most effectively use a combination of individual determination, support from mentors and effective programs and policy, resourcefulness, and maybe even a little luck.

Social workers have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to create change and break down barriers at the microsystem, mezzosystem and macrosystem levels. With the ultimate goal of helping people in our communities thrive, we can influence governmental and private policy, program development and outcomes, contest the stigma and shame of poverty, and help empower leaders and citizens see the possibilities for a better future.

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