

Childhood Environment and Gender Gaps in Adulthood

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It is well known that there are significant differences between men and women in earnings, employment rates, and other outcomes in adulthood. The most prominent explanations for these gender differences focus on factors affecting the labor market, such as occupational preferences, fertility patterns, and discrimination.

We show that differences in childhood environments play an important role in shaping gender gaps in adulthood by documenting three facts:

First, gender gaps in employment rates, earnings, and college attendance vary substantially across the parental income distribution. Notably, the traditional gender gap in employment rates is reversed for children growing up in poor families: boys in families in the bottom quintile of the income distribution are *less* likely to work than girls.

Second, these gender gaps vary substantially across counties and commuting zones in which children grow up. The degree of variation in outcomes across places is largest for boys growing up in poor, single-parent families.

Third, the spatial variation in gender gaps is highly correlated with proxies for neighborhood disadvantage. Low-income boys who grow up in high-poverty, high-minority areas work significantly less than girls. These areas also have higher rates of crime, suggesting that boys growing up in concentrated poverty substitute from formal employment to crime.

Together, our findings demonstrate that gender gaps in adulthood have roots in childhood, perhaps because childhood disadvantage is especially harmful for boys. More generally, our findings illustrate that gender gaps in adulthood can be better understood by starting one's analysis from childhood. For example, the secular decline in male labor force participation rates in the U.S. has been attributed to factors such as the aging of the population, changes in industrial structure, and globalization. Our findings suggest that part of the explanation may instead lie in the growth of residential segregation, income inequality, and the fraction of children raised in single-parent households – all factors associated with lower employment rates for boys relative to girls. To facilitate further analysis of this and other questions on gender differences, we have made statistics on employment rates and other outcomes by gender and parent income quintile publicly available by county and commuting zone on the Equality of Opportunity Project [website](#).