

Conversations on Economic Inclusion with Ruby Mendenhall

Dionissi Aliprantis

This is Conversations on Economic Inclusion. I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, the director of the Program on Economic Inclusion here at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. In our program, we aim to bring together researchers and practitioners to learn about what it takes for more people to participate more fully in the economy.

In recent conversations I learned how toxic stress can hold kids back from developing the skills they need, and that having safe, stable, nurturing relationships can help them through the stress. To learn more, I spoke with Professor Ruby Mendenhall. Professor Mendenhall has an incredible range of life experiences; she holds appointments in several departments at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she is an associate professor of Sociology, African American Studies, Urban and Regional Planning, and Social Work. The common thread in Professor Mendenhall's research is a focus on human development, and toxic stress came up frequently in her experiences working with families. She told me about how those experiences have shaped her thinking on toxic stress and its effects on children and families.

Before we get started, I should mention that the views expressed here are those of the participants, and not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland or the Federal Reserve System.

And now, here's my conversation with Professor Mendenhall.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and what kind of influences have shaped you personally and professionally to get to where you are today?

Ruby Mendenhall

Sure. I'd love to. I guess I'll start with my family. Both of my parents are from the South. My mother's from Mississippi. My father is from Alabama and they migrated to Chicago. The stories that we hear from my father's side is that my grandmother's grandmother was enslaved. Then my grandmother's sister used to take care of her as a young person, and so she told me some of the stories that she told her. When I do presentations, I have a picture of my grandmother and my great-aunt and I talk about how recent slavery is in US history. That it was only one person between my enslaved great-great-grandmother and myself to tell the story. I really point to that because a lot of the inequality that we see, a lot of the health disparities are rooted in that foundation of deep structural inequality.

In terms of my professional life, I started out as an occupational therapist. I loved it. I worked at Cook County Hospital. I was also on the protective service team and so I worked with children who were failing to thrive. That was really transformative and what I do today, is that when the mothers came in, usually mothers, usually Black and Latinx mothers, we would ask, as the protective team, "What's wrong? Do we need to take the child? The baby isn't growing like it should." The mothers said over and over again that they couldn't afford to feed the babies, and so they were watering the formula down. After I heard the story over and over, I remember saying like, "Wow, so this isn't an issue with the mothers or if they're able to take care of the kids, if they love their children. It's an issue of: As a country, will we provide enough resources for mothers to take care of their children?"

Then I became interested in public policy, went to the University of Chicago Harris School. When I was there, I was looking at the structural issues and the role of race, and how sometimes race wasn't mentioned but it was clearly in the center of it. Then after that I went to work for the Ounce of Prevention Fund, which is a public-private organization. That's what it was called then. We worked on the early Head Start grant and then I remember we received the grant, and it was to work in Robert Taylor Homes. I told everyone, I was like, "I would love to go and work in Robert Taylor Homes and work with the grant." Many of the people was like, "Well, why would you do that? Who leaves downtown to go to Robert Taylor?"

I wanted to do that because I wanted to understand those mothers and what they needed in terms of their children. During that time, I was also in the policy world. I remember sitting around the policy table. It was mostly white males. Often I was the only Black person or the only woman and they were committed, they were really thinking hard about equality. But I remember thinking like, "Where are the mothers who are struggling? Where are the individuals who are deeply in the problems? Why aren't they around the table kind of coming up with some of the solutions?" That was why I was interested in going to Robert Taylor Homes. I went there, saw a lot from gun violence, to poverty, to a lot of things. We worked with young teen moms and we let them know, you can influence public policy, you can put forth your ideas.

Some of them would be like, "Okay, thank you. Thank you. But I need to meet Mr. so-and-so at the end of this to get some money to feed my children." I remember thinking, "Man, here we go again." Lack of money, not able to take care of children. Part of that was why I then went to Northwestern University and kind of merged the two. I studied human development and social policy. Then that led to my work with the Gautreaux Program. That's kind of my story as I put it together over many years and kind of telling it to people.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Could you describe Gautreaux Housing Mobility Program? Maybe the legal origins and then the program itself?

Ruby Mendenhall

Sure. Gautreaux started during the Civil Rights era when Dr. King came up to Chicago and he worked with local organizations. There were a group of Black organizations that came together and they filed a lawsuit against HUD and the Chicago Housing Authority, arguing that they were violating the recently passed Civil Rights Act when they continued to build high rise public housing in already Black segregated neighborhoods. Hal Barron at the Urban League was very instrumental in kind of thinking about that and seeing if you could test it. I had the wonderful pleasure of getting to know him before he passed away. It took 10 years for the lawsuit to go through the courts, and it also took what we often call a whistleblower. Someone who was in Chicago Housing Authority, who testified that yes, they were indeed steering Blacks to certain public housing developments.

According to what I've read, they would tell Black families if they wanted housing fairly quickly, these public housing projects were available. But if they wanted in other areas, that they'd have to wait. With that information from the person who worked with CHA and other information, the Supreme court in 1976 ordered one of the largest desegregation programs in US history where those African Americans who were either in public housing or on the public housing waiting list, were allowed to apply for Housing Choice Vouchers. Families moved to different types of neighborhoods. Some of them moved to predominantly white suburbs. I mean, predominantly white. Often they were the pioneers and the first Blacks to come to those neighborhoods. We can kind of talk about that experience. Then some moved to more integrated areas. Jim Rosenbaum, Greg Duncan, Stefanie DeLuca, Micere Keels, and others, we

looked to see the impact of moving from heavily Black segregated areas to integrated and more white areas to see how they did in terms of income, welfare receipt, and other things.

Dionissi Aliprantis

I would be interested to hear, what were some of the major effects of the program on the participants?

Ruby Mendenhall

Yeah. I did both the qualitative and quantitative assessments. I had the wonderful, wonderful pleasure of talking to about 25 of the mothers who actually moved as a part of the Gautreaux Program. For those who moved to predominantly white areas, this isn't everyone's story, but for the most part, it really was challenging. In that, I talk about it as "they had the burden of integration" and that they had to kind of prove that they were safe, they had to prove that they were trustworthy. Then also some of the wonderful things to see were that they had more employment; they spent less time on welfare. Then when you talk to them, it was that the predominantly white and more integrated areas, that they had more educational opportunities, they had more chances for them to work at different jobs.

That was one of the really key outcomes... Robert Wood Johnson talks about this a lot: where you live, learn, work and play has an impact on your health. Then later, similar research with Moving to Opportunity and others, found that physical health and mental health improved. For children, it helped in terms of their schooling and in other areas. There's been a lot of conversation about neighborhoods and if they matter, and I would strongly say that they do matter, both for health and for other outcomes. It really is one of the key kinds of critical grounds when you think about equality and where people live? How much they pay for housing? Is the housing safe? Are there jobs near that? What schools are the kids going to? All of that plays a role in terms of equality.

Dionissi Aliprantis

I would definitely like to hear about the experiences of those people who moved when you talked about this kind of "burden of integration", because I think of this experience in Gautreaux and I think of Moving to Opportunity and I think so much of that could still be with us today. I'm curious if you could speak about that because it sounds like there's maybe a little bit of a tradeoff there that I can talk about some of my own research that I feel like it's been hitting me in the face. This trade off where it's maybe kind of a sense of belonging or kind of comfort. It almost feels like there's a trade off with economic opportunity or educational opportunities. I'm wondering if you could describe that in Gautreaux and then kind of maybe even broader how you think about that.

Ruby Mendenhall

Yeah. With Gautreaux, for their children, for instance, again, their children were the first Black children in many of the schools. Children were picked on, called names, and then when they would respond to the name calling, they would get to suspended. They would be kicked out of school. The parents actually came together and went to the newspapers and other things to try to ensure that their children had the same access. There was one story.

Dionissi Aliprantis

Their kids that were the troublemakers, right? They were getting labeled the troublemaker and they're-

Ruby Mendenhall

Yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis

...being picked on.

Ruby Mendenhall

You talked about, what do we see today? We still see today with even Black girls in grammar school getting kicked out and higher levels of suspension. You still see that, where “they're the problem” and the result is that you punish in ways that other groups may not be receiving. Then also the mothers talked about, sometimes even when they did find jobs, there was discrimination on the jobs and that they would lose them. One of the mothers who moved talked about that in the new neighborhood they were having a gathering. One of the mothers needed a ride and she was like, "I'll take you. I'm driving. I'm going that way."

The mother's like, "That's okay. I don't need to go." Then eventually, she was persistent, again, this “burden of integration”, and so they went together. Then they eventually became very good friends, but the mother told her, she said, "You know what? I was told that Black people had tails." I mean, just all of this stuff. The person, she was looking and so-

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Just comical, right?

Ruby Mendenhall

Right. They had this exchange, but it just shows how then Blacks and whites and other racial groups often live in very different neighborhoods, have very different lived experiences. We saw that kind of with George Floyd. African Americans can tell you stories about police and what's happening. But then when it was kind of played out on TV, many was like, "Wow. I had no idea." But many people do have an idea because that's, unfortunately, our racial trauma, our lived experience, it's the racial socialization messages that we have to give our boys and our girls. Even for myself, when I was stopped by police, I said, "I just want to let you know that we are recording this." To go to that level because of a fear. All that to say that, they really did put a lot of time, a lot of energy into saying that, "We are here. We want a safe neighborhood. The same as others, we want our children to be educated the same as others."

In fact, one of the mothers again, was just kind of telling me some of the stories and I was like, "Wow. Tell me a little bit why you kind of made the choice to leave and to come to this context." She said, "Well, in the public housing, it was shooting and it was killing, so this is the choice that I'm making." Then she also said, "But I also found that my neighbors do kind of come around once they get to know you and stuff." It is that trade off. But I will say that other ways that there was a natural relationship that was built was when often the children were together at the park and they would just like, "What do you like?" "I like this." There were also conversations about just kind of traditional ways that people meet and create these relationships.

Dionissi Aliprantis

The other topic that I was very interested in talking about with you was this issue of trauma, mental health, exposure to violence. You've done some really important work on this, some of your older work, some of your newer work, and I would be curious if you could speak about just generally, if you could expand on your motivation for studying these topics, these questions.

Ruby Mendenhall

Yeah. Actually, it really does go back to the Gautreaux. Again, when I had the wonderful pleasure of talking with the women in the Gautreaux, a lot of them were sick. A lot of them had diseases. I remember there was one woman, I think she had cancer. She was in her 20s, and just others. Then I was also amazed that they were sick, but then they were also going to work, taking care of their children and doing things. In my head, I was like, "Okay, I see this, I see some patterns, but I can't give it my

attention." With your dissertation, you're like, "I have to do this, get this, get this, and wrap this up." But I think listening to those women and thinking like, "Wow, why are they so sick?"

Not all of them, but again, some of them. Just kind of storing that in the back of my mind. Then, like I said, my original research was looking at how segregated neighborhoods affected economic outcomes. But it turned to looking at health and gun violence when ... I was here in Champaign, but I'm from Chicago. I love Chicago and was hearing family and friends talk about the violence young people were being involved, young people were affected by it. I was like, "Wow. It seemed different." With Robert Taylor, it almost was an order. The gangs, they had their wars, they had their shootings, but one thing they would say as a community, "Look at 3:30, it's about to be on, so get your kids in the house. Get them off the streets because it's about to go down."

Word was passed around, everybody, for the most part, had a sense. Not to say it played out like that all the time, but in general there was conversation about making sure that the children are safe. As I started to listen and to feel, because I had two kids too, and I turned my research agenda to looking at gun violence. We initially did focus groups. We talked to mothers, children, fathers, and wanted to make sure this was an issue, this was something that they were having struggles with. I mean the stories were just something. After that, we received funding to do a really innovative study where we talked to close to 100 Black mothers in low-income segregated neighborhoods. But we also did some genomic analysis because we wanted to see how the stress of living in neighborhoods with high levels of violence affected their health and wellbeing.

I remember when we did the focus groups, we were like, "Okay, now we want to do interviews in the future. How do you think we should talk to the women asking them for their blood to do the analysis?" They kind of gave us some language because even in our research team we were like, "Can we get Black women to give blood because of the racism, because of the exploitation, because of the abuse?"

Dionissi Aliprantis

The history.

Ruby Mendenhall

Yes. "Would they do it?" We put together a script and part of that script was to talk about Tuskegee and other things, and to say, "We recognize the abuses. This is now what we are trying to do. We are trying to understand how living in neighborhoods with high levels of violence affect your health and wellness." I'll say that the women were really interested in learning about that because they were having experiences in their bodies. Sometimes they connected it to stress and sometimes they didn't. They talked about having headaches, backaches, stomach aches, hair falling out, a loss of sexual desire. I mean, just a whole range of things. We did the study and it was just ... You know how you have certain experiences in your life that changed you?

One was working on the protective service team and hearing the stories. When I talked to the women, that was another life-changing event and in ways that I didn't even recognize myself. Family members were like, "Are you okay?" I was like, "What do you mean?" "You're kind of different. Something's going on." It was hearing all of the trauma. Even sometimes, it was mostly Black women, it was one Latinx graduate student, and we would kind of talk about the study at the end of the day and sometimes be crying, in tears from what we've heard. I kind of took on that and I didn't recognize how much, but there was a voice in my head that was like, "You need to get some more coping mechanisms." I say all that to say that I'm African American, I'm a Black woman, so I share their experiences on some level. But on the level of the fear, the stress, the anxiety, the panic of not knowing if your child will be okay - for some of the women, their children were not okay, they were killed - It's really hard think about.

I really appreciated them telling their stories, being very open. One woman, again, told me something that was really life changing. I went in thinking about social structures, like oppression, like, "Let's talk about some of the issues, how you're working with them. Let's work together." One of the mothers said, "Thank you for coming to see how we're doing. The little things matter and people don't understand that." I was like, "Hmm." as I thought about it, I was like, "Okay, I think she was saying by us coming and saying, how are you? How you doing? How are your children? What do you need to be well? Let's try to work together to put some of those things in place." That that's really powerful, looking at her humanity, recognizing her dignity. That was transformative.

Dionissi Aliprantis

That's a starting place. Just starting with giving people some love and just in some basic sense saying that we care about you. I care about you as a human being. Right?

Do you have any thoughts or comments about how this actually affects kids growing up in these kinds of conditions?

Ruby Mendenhall

Yeah. We did ask the mothers about how their children were doing it. I will say, the mothers really tried to shield their children from what was happening. But one of the mothers was like, "Kids ask questions. Kids, they see it." One of the mothers, after the kids repeatedly had to kind of get in the bathroom, get in the bathtub. I said, "Well, how do they cope?" She's like, "They're afraid. They don't want to go to school." She talked about how she tells them that they'll be okay. Then I said, "Do you feel that way?" She's like, "No, but I tell them that, so that they'll feel okay, that they'll feel safer." She has panic attacks.

Again, it's just a toll. The kids again, they see it. Some of them, one child, he was somewhere with his friends. He stepped away, the friend was shot and killed by a bullet. The same child was somewhere else, stepped away and the friend was killed by a bullet. So just so much trauma. Then the parents talked about ... I said, "Did the school get services like Sandy Hook?" Because that happened near that time. She put in quotes, like, "We were supposed to have services, but we don't. I called the school once. They told me to call back. I called back again. They said they were busy." I think she may have tried to a third time and then she stopped. A lot of times you have these children who are traumatized and they don't get the care that they need.

Sometimes kids are traumatized and the parents don't even know. The mothers, they talked about some of the stuff that they witnessed and that they didn't even tell their parents. Now I always say I, and not just me, others, "When you see kids flipping over tables, yelling, cursing, even shooting ..." And Bruce Perry and others are saying, "the question isn't, what's wrong with you? The question is, what happened to you?" I think as a society, that's the question that we have to unpack and we have to look at our role as adults, as policymakers, as universities, as healthcare systems, other things. How are the lack of opportunities? How is systemic racism over 400 years and for other groups? How does that affect how children are developing, how they're growing? And we can change it.

Dionissi Aliprantis

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