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Social capital and two defensive backs

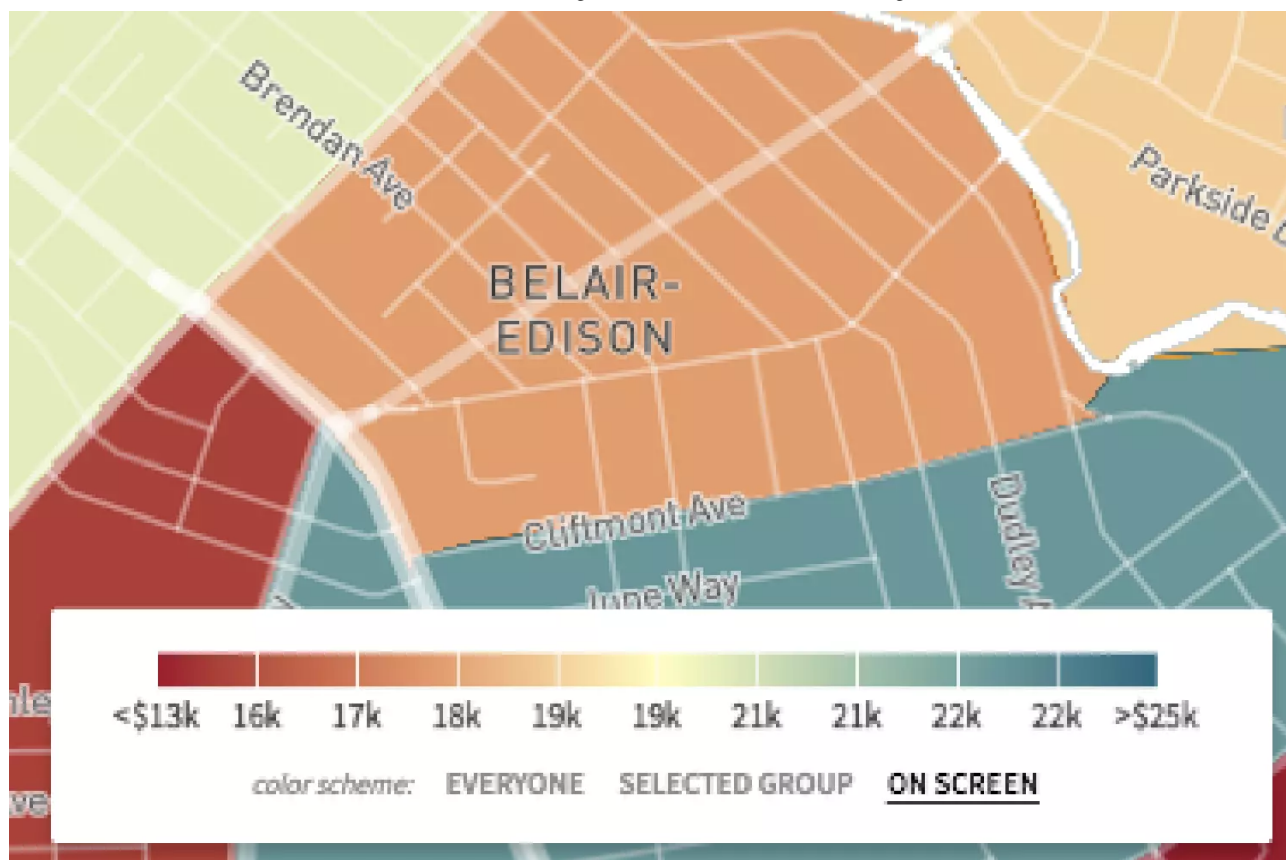
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OCTOBER 5, 2018 1:24 PM

By: **Brendan Greeley**

In the early 2000s, Kendall Jamison played cornerback for Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Baltimore. He looks now like he still could. The Dunbar Poets are feared among schools in the state, and regularly send athletes to both the NBA and the NFL. After high school, Mr Jamison played football for Morgan State, Maryland's largest historically black university. Morgan State wasn't fore-ordained, though. It wasn't even likely, until as a teenager Mr Jamison acquired social capital: a group of people who'd been to college and could help him get there.

Last week the Census Bureau released the results of a massive project it calls the “[Opportunity Atlas \(https://www.census.gov/ces/dataproducts/opportunityatlas.html\)](https://www.census.gov/ces/dataproducts/opportunityatlas.html).” Building on work from Raj Chetty and Nathan Hendren at Harvard and John Friedman at Brown, the bureau looked at administrative data on 20 million children born between 1978 and 1983, and compared where they grew up to how much they earned in their 30s. The best way to look at this data is through an engrossing [map \(https://www.opportunityatlas.org/\)](https://www.opportunityatlas.org/) that shows, essentially, which neighborhoods produce better outcomes for poor children. The whole [summary paper \(https://www.census.gov/ces/pdf/opportunity_atlas_summary.pdf\)](https://www.census.gov/ces/pdf/opportunity_atlas_summary.pdf) (pdf) is worth a read, but the basic message is that, born to a poor family, a child's immediate surroundings — a few square blocks — are incredibly important.



As a child, Kendall Jamison moved between Belair-Edison, where his mother lived, and Northwood, where his grandparents owned a house. These neighborhoods do not tend to produce good outcomes for poor children. According to the Opportunity Atlas, a black man who grew up in Belair-Edison is statistically likely to have a household income of \$18k a year as an adult; in Northwood, \$23k. Mr Jamison had uncles around, but not a father. His mother had problems of her own. By the time he turned 14, he had lost two close friends; his god-brother had been stabbed, and his cousin had been shot.

This is a familiar story in Baltimore. And it's one the city has tried to fix, through massive urban renewal projects and, more recently, investments in a neglected part of the port by Kevin Plank, founder of Under Armour. But none of this may have ever mattered to Belair-Edison and Northwood: the Opportunity Atlas found no relationship between job and wage growth in an entire city, and good outcomes for poor children in bad areas of that city.

This is a stunning result. It shatters a half-century of policy. You can't help families escape poverty from one generation to the next by bringing in jobs. The answer is more complex, and it requires as much sociology as economics. The Census Bureau offers a short list of things in the child's immediate area that can help: mean incomes, test scores, the share of two-parent families, and social capital. According to the bureau, "what matters for upward mobility is not proximity to jobs, but growing up around people who have jobs."

Alphaville met Mr Jamison this week at a conference in Baltimore. He describes social capital this way: “relationships are opportunity.” Relationships, and opportunity, came in the form of a group of medical students from Johns Hopkins who showed up every day at Dunbar with tutoring and free pizza, part of a nonprofit called [Thread \(https://www.thread.org/\)](https://www.thread.org/). A “bribe,” Mr Jamison calls the pizza. He took it, but also knew he needed the tutoring. He wanted to stay academically eligible to play football, and he wanted a scholarship to college — the first in his family — so he could play in the NFL.

Talking to Kendall Jamison made us think about the judicial nominee Brett Kavanaugh. (We do not wish to re-litigate the nomination; there is much to be said about it, and Alphaville is not the right place to say most of it.) In high school, Mr Kavanaugh, too, played defensive back on his school's football team. He went on to Yale, and during his nomination explained “I got there by busting my tail.” By all accounts he did bust his tail, but where and how you grow up makes a difference in the lifetime returns to hard work. In Bethesda, Maryland, where Mr Kavanaugh grew up, white men from poor families are likely to grow up to make \$35k a year — and in some neighborhoods, as high as \$63k.

There's a profound divide in America over tail-busting. Successful people look back, see their own hard work, and get defensive over the idea that they may have received any special favours. But there are favours we can't see. Simply growing up in an environment where all the adults you know go to college is already in itself a massive favour. It's hard to see basic privileges like good neighborhoods when they're just the grass beneath your feet.

*Kendall Jamison*

You don't play Dunbar football without busting your tail, but Kendall Jamison and his family literally didn't know how to apply to college. The volunteers from Thread walked him through the process and, just as important, showed him that it was possible to graduate. His mentor at the time, Sarah Hemminger, was finishing her PhD in biomedical engineering. (She's now the CEO of Thread.) Ms Hemminger took Mr Jamison to her lab, introduced him to professors. He saw her degrees on her desk. "If Sarah can do it, we can do it," he thought. "We hang with her every day."

He says he didn't really understand what Ms Hemminger had done for him until college, when some of his friends from high school started getting locked up. "My uncle would always tell me about a split in the road," he says. He began to see the value, simply, of what he calls "positive people, doing positive things." Mr Jamison studied business at Morgan State, then worked in sales — again, his friends from Hopkins made introductions, and helped him practice interviews. Now he's back at Thread as a community growth coordinator. He's creating capital.

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Grumpy Dog

4 hours ago

Scientific validation of the 200-year-old idiom "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree".

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Terra_Desolata

6 hours ago

Two responses to this. First: Baltimore is, if not unique, at least very different from most other large American cities. Baltimore looked a lot like the other major cities of the U.S. thirty years ago: crime-ridden, blighted, corrupt from top to bottom. Fast forward to the present, and nearly all of the major urban areas of the U.S. have improved dramatically, with far lower crime rates, rebuilt city centers, and major turnovers in leadership and direction. Except Baltimore (and St. Louis, and Detroit). Why is that?

Second: these studies should be the death-knell of government housing. Over and over, studies have shown that people who grow up in neighborhoods with highly concentrated poverty have terrible outcomes. That problem has been made much worse by government housing programs, which concentrate poverty and trap impoverished people in neighborhoods that are social dead-ends.

But call for a movement away from government housing and toward more flexible housing assistance, and you will face a determined opponent: politicians, who long have favored government housing since it provides a reliable bloc of voters for the local political machine. Give someone a place to live and then tell them that the other party wants to take it away, and they will show up and vote for you every single election. The way you fight that kind of corruption is by pointing out that it is in fact corruption: it benefits politicians at the expense of the long-term well-being of the people they represent. The best form of assistance will be one that gives people the option to move to where the jobs - and the social capital - are the most readily available.

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Footsteps

2 days ago

American writers often have an ahistorical and therefore flawed understanding of social capital, one which strongly comes across in this piece and which, sadly, shows the influence of (Chicago) economists rather than sociologists and social psychologists.

This article deals with the ecology of neighbourhoods, brilliantly surveyed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a social psychologist, from the 1960s. His ideas were deeply influential since they dealt with the entire living framework (ecology) surrounding the child. The alternative perspective, by Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, examined the private Vs communal character of these relations and opportunities.

Those families with money (ie capital), power and influence, think Fred Trump, had social capital in abundance. Those without it were denied opportunities. Bourdieu offered many more complexities, but these were the essentials. Basically social capital - or cultural capital capital generally - is infused with power and ownership. Just like economic capital. And of course in a capitalist society how would you expect anything different? The idea of creating equality through local 'social capital building' fanciful, to say the least.

What the author has unwittingly done is transpose one category into another. A categorical error (as Kant would have it!)

If you want to understand by the ecology of the Baltimore setting or the deployment of social capital in Bourdieu's (more accurate) sense then watch David Simon's series *The Wire*. He was fully aware of the difference. Sadly, despite all the years of 'social capital building' there the place has not fundamentally changed.

Both Bronfenbrenner and Bourdieu perspectives are insightful but stimulating change doesn't come easy. The failure to do so explains the dynamic inequalities of capitalism and how the political framework has been subverted by those with capital.

But don't expect to read anything analytical about this in the FT. The most you will get is broadside against 'populism' which say little and only expose the fears of those who write this.

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Parce Sepulto (FKA Mala tempora)

2 days ago

@Footsteps Cliff's notes of this chap's lengthy rant: "this piece undermines some tenets of the left wing orthodoxy, please discard. Capitalism is BAD!".

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Footsteps

2 days ago

Capitalism is capitalism. But it appears in multiple forms. Instead of sneering at people trying to understand these forms suggest to you another approach: Grow Up!

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Parce Sepulto (FKA Mala tempora)

1 day ago

Yeah you keep "trying to understand these forms", looks like you have a long way to go.

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2 replies

UK Taxpayer

2 days ago

There is a 'no sh!t Sherlock' quality to the discovery that test scores account for a great deal of the variation in adult incomes. Are people surprised by this, or pretending to be?

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Brutto

2 days ago

A really important study, which is relevant to today's political debates going on in many countries, including the UK.

Arguably, the Labour Party's championing of Comprehensive Schools was an experiment which tried to address the very problem identified in Baltimore. And arguably the experiment has gone spectacularly pear-shaped.

Clearly multiple factors need to be in place to achieve a social/educationa/cultural mix that lifts up rather than drags down. Sadly the issues around this are so ideologically loaded that evidence-based policies look well-nigh unattainable.

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