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### A Silver Lining: The Role of Optimism in Overcoming Poverty in Early Life

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Running Head = A SILVER LINING

**A Silver Lining: The Role of Optimism in Overcoming Poverty in Early Life\***

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Word Count = 9,354

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## **A Silver Lining: The Role of Optimism in Overcoming Early Life Poverty**

### **ABSTRACT**

Who is able to overcome adversity and experience upward mobility? Using cumulative inequality theory, which posits that the disadvantage or advantage associated with one's social location impacts life trajectory and perceptions of such, I propose that level of optimistic outlook in individuals from low-income backgrounds increases their chances of financial success in adulthood. Analyzing data from the 2016 General Social Survey, a nationally representative survey administered to randomly sampled adults in the U.S., I examine a subset of 1,269 individuals from backgrounds of far below average or below average family income levels. In doing so, I determine how optimistic attitudes, regarding matters such as personal agency and success, influence whether the individual may obtain a higher degree of financial success in adulthood compared to those of their families. Findings indicate that higher levels of optimism are associated with greater family income levels, with level of education and marital status as the biggest predictors of adult financial standing. With higher educational attainment, optimistic outlook increases, perhaps due to an increase in career opportunities and pathways to success. These findings show how influential education may be on intergenerational income mobility, however, they also provide insight on how disadvantage, including being a person of color; being divorced, separated or a single-parent; as well as how many children one has, may create limitations on educational attainment and effects on outlook. Such findings call attention to the need for greater financial and educational assistance programs, due to their impact on outlook and subsequent life course.

Many people consider themselves to have been dealt a bad hand in life, a lesser amount find themselves capable of changing it. A great deal of life course scholars have focused specifically on the impact of early life adversity, including childhood poverty, on adult outcomes and most significantly, on mental and physical health (Shaefer et al. 2018). Only some studies, however, have taken into account the agency of the individual as well as their control over their thoughts and actions. Researchers have delved little into how adversity and its association with resilient, optimistic attitudes may influence other aspects of adulthood. For example, studies (Bloome 2017; Breyerton 2016; Homan et al. 2017; Johnson and Hitlin 2017) have examined how early life adversity influence outlooks or perceptions on adult life, but have not looked further into how specific adverse events, like low levels of family income or poverty, shape perceptions which in turn, affect life successes. This study examines only how the outlooks of respondents from disadvantaged family income backgrounds, specifically of far below average or below average levels, influence income in adulthood. Furthermore, it looks into how other aspects of early life, advantageous and disadvantageous, interact with outlook to contribute to adult income.

By investigating particular instances of adversity and their effects, we can gain insight into the nature of social mobility and begin to pinpoint what factors may foster successful outcomes or lack thereof. Among these factors may include certain perceptions or attitudes, such as optimism or hope. As individuals are socialized and experience adversity differently, their perceptions of their family's income or socioeconomic status at age 16, as well as their coping mechanisms or adjustment techniques for dealing with such, may contribute to their notions of and strides towards success in later life. For example, some respondents who come from a lower socioeconomic background may be more likely to have hope and work hard pursue a better

lifestyle in the future than others or they may be swept up by the difficulties of adversity, with less accessibility to resources or an unclear vision of a path to success.

I derive my arguments from cumulative inequality theory which posits that individuals are born into a specific social location, placing them at an advantage or disadvantage early in life, shaping their sense of potential, and determining their resulting failure or success. Influenced by various socioeconomic aspects, including familial or residential characteristics, children are provided with varying amounts of the resources necessary to excel (Bloome 2017; Loopoo and DeLeire 2014). These differences in developmental or demographic resources contribute to variance in social capital, inequality, social stratification and mobility over time (Lerman et al. 2017; Alvarado 2018). They shape the individual's outlook on their past, present and future; their attributions for their financial standing, and their perceptions of success (Schafer et al. 2011; Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Homan et al. 2017). I utilize the same cumulative inequality framework Schafer et al. (2011) argue in their study on early life adversity and life expectations to argue for the influential role of optimistic outlook in possibly disrupting some of the ongoing effects of inequality through the empowerment of the agentic self.

Similarly, I argue that perception plays an essential role in moderating the relationship between childhood poverty and adult income, influencing the amount of social mobility experienced. Based on one's lived experience, each person is likely to have a different understanding of who is poor and why. Additionally, they may have differing ideas on why they may be poor themselves and how best to overcome poverty or achieve success. Pulling from previous research on life course and social mobility, I argue that respondents who come from low economic background, of below average or far below average levels, will be more likely to have higher incomes as adults if they have greater levels of optimism. I argue that respondents

with more optimistic and hopeful outlooks towards a “better future” will have greater likelihood of experiencing upward mobility. This may be a result of an increased sense of self-efficacy or due to the formation of resilient mindsets. Therefore, I hypothesize that the higher the level of optimism of respondents, whose families’ income was far below average or below average at age 16, the higher their current family income.

## BACKGROUND

### *Cumulative Inequality Theory*

Over time, the process of social stratification contributes significantly to the inequality of a society, producing divides between the advantaged and disadvantaged. In his 1968 principle of cumulative advantage, Robert Merton argued that advantage breeds further advantage. Speaking specifically to recognition within the scientific community, Merton theorized that scientists with greater reputations within the group tend to receive greater credit, despite an equal distribution of work and consequently, increasing inequality over time (Merton 1968; DiPrete and Eirich 2006). Cumulative advantage “is capable of magnifying small differences over time and makes it difficult for an individual or group that is behind at a point in time in educational development, income, or other measures to catch up” (DiPrete and Eirich 2006:227). The principle of cumulative advantage, also known as the Matthew Effect, has been adapted to examine inequality and stratification within a variety of contexts.

Schafer et al. (2011) use Merton’s principle to look at both the accumulation of advantage and disadvantage as well as its effects on perception. In their 2011 study on the role of agency in influencing the perceived life trajectories of individuals from adverse backgrounds, Schafer et al. use the cumulative advantage/disadvantage framework and decide to label it simply

as “cumulative inequality.” They explain how cumulative inequality theory “formally articulates five key axioms for hypothesis testing: (1) social systems generate inequality, which is manifested over the life course through demographic and developmental processes; (2) disadvantage increases exposure to risk, but advantage increases exposure to opportunity; (3) life-course trajectories are shaped by the accumulation of risk, available resources, and human agency; (4) the perception of lived trajectories influences subsequent trajectories; and (5) cumulative inequality may lead to premature mortality” (Schafer et al. 2011:4). The five axioms outline how the circumstances which an individual is placed into are often the conditions created for them by the context of their social location, i.e. where they are born and the characteristics of their family, including family structure, parental education and income. Based upon the conditions of their past and how their social and economic standing changes over time, individuals form perceptions of their life trajectories which in turn influence their proceeding thoughts and actions.

Based on differences in demographic and developmental factors, often determined at birth, individuals are provided with a certain amount of resources in early life. While early life context does not predetermine one’s life trajectory, it plays a crucial and formative role of childhood and adolescence in shaping attitudes, outlooks and thus, informing life decisions. Based on advantage or disadvantage, youth have greater or lesser access to needs, support, resources and opportunities, which in turn impacts whether they feel a sense of agency or control over their life and are able to foresee resolutions or success in the future (axiom 3). Likewise, if an individual has been met with challenges or successes in the past pertaining to their status, they will be more likely to expect the same in the future, perhaps even taking action or forming attitudes to reinforce these experiences (see axiom 4). For example, although a person may be

struggling financially, their optimistic or pessimistic outlook on the future as well as their confidence in their abilities may impact their proceeding actions, depending on whether they feel a sense of agency, the resources available to them and what their attributions for their position are. Although not particularly relevant to this study, the fifth axiom, which argues that cumulative inequality may lead to premature mortality, emphasizes the lasting effects and temporal nature of advantage and disadvantage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature discusses early life adversity, inequality and outlook in very different contexts. This study seeks to intertwine these topics to look at optimism sociologically rather than psychologically. Through consideration of sociological literature on socialization, income inequality, as well as attributions for poverty and perceptions of agency, the literature review aims to highlight some of the characteristics and outcomes of a low-income background.

### *Socialization*

Individuals are socialized or educated on societal roles and customs in an ongoing fashion from the time they are born and begin interacting with their environment and those within it. Through the unique set of circumstances available comes the acquisition of knowledge about the self, their relation to others and how to navigate through social experiences. As stated in cumulative inequality theory, individuals are placed on a broad spectrum of advantage and disadvantage (Schafer et al. 2011). Studies have focused greatly on how different aspects of this social location or placement impact the self at any given point or over time, with many focusing on early life adversity or hardship specifically (Bloome 2017; Lopoo and DeLeire 2014; Lerman et al. 2017; Johnson and Hitlin 2017). Family structure and composition have been among the



most studied as family members tend to be the primary social influence on a child prior to their socialization in school or their neighborhood community. Characteristics such as parental marital and employment status, number of siblings (Bloome 2017) as well as income, socioeconomic status and education level (Wightman et al. 2013; Augustine 2007) have been found to have significant effects on child and adolescent development. These effects often extend into adulthood. For example, children raised outside of stable two-parent homes have been found to be more susceptible to downward mobility and difficulty overcoming poverty in the future as well as being more likely to be in the lowest income quartile as adults (Bloome 2017). Theorists have argued for the limitations single-parent homes may place on the resources available to a child during their formative years, whether they be educational or basic necessities. Additionally, children raised in single-parent or low-income homes may face consequences of a reduced household income, possibly causing their parent to spend more hours working outside the home or calling upon them to care for siblings or contribute to family needs through their own employment. The more siblings, the greater income needed. With their family as a priority, some youth may even dropout or miss a great deal of school to support their household. The more hours a parent or parents spend working, sick or engaging in risky or unhealthy behavior, the less quality time spent helping, teaching and caring for their children. The demands and responsibilities placed on the child can cause them to take on an adult role or transition to adulthood sooner, shaping their behavior as well as their mental and physical health (Machell et al. 2016; Shaefer et al. 2018; Kendig et al. 2014).

Outside of the home, neighborhood or community context and educational setting are of importance during the sensitive, impressionable and formative early years. Alvarado argues that "youth who are exposed to disadvantaged neighborhoods may experience fewer educational

resources embedded within the community (e.g., high-quality curricula in schools, tutoring center, libraries) that could impact their educational attainment, which in turn may impact their labor market outcomes" (2018:2). Disadvantaged areas might also have less funding available for afterschool programs, extra-curricular activities, volunteering opportunities or career guidance as well as less jobs or internships available for older students to gain beneficial skills and experience. Although not discussed in the reviewed literature, the safety of a neighborhood may also determine how much a child spends outside of their home and engaging with others in their area and forming valuable friendships and connections.

The educational resources available to an individual can also have lasting impressions on one's life trajectory. Studies have found that parental education and increases in parental education contribute to the level of educational attainment their children will obtain (Wightman et al. 2013; Augustine 2017). For example, mothers who obtained a higher level of education while raising their child were found to generate higher expectations for their children to obtain a Bachelor's degree, or what used to be considered "the threshold for entry into the middle class" (Augustine 2007:16). Comparatively, parents from disadvantaged backgrounds and with lower levels of education will be less likely to have completed high school (Wightman et al. 2013). As such, parents with higher levels of education are more likely to persuade their children to finish high school and attend college. Additionally, they may play a role in connecting their children to educational resources, including tutoring as well as job, internship and volunteering opportunities, due to their possible higher level of income and more prestigious occupational status.

Perhaps more important to one's adult outcomes is the pursuit of advances in personal education, both obtaining a high school diploma and moving on to undergraduate and potentially

graduate school. Due to societal changes, such as those within the job market, a higher level of education is needed to open up more career options. As the transition to adulthood is delayed for all youth, those from disadvantaged backgrounds have a more difficult time pursuing higher education and may have more responsibility in supporting their families. Youth from affluent homes, however, tend to receive more financial transfers and other forms of assistance from their parents, making their transition to adulthood smoother (Kendig et al. 2014). Strikingly, education has also been found to have an impact on health and mortality as “adults from disadvantaged childhoods who achieved high education levels often had total life expectancies [(amount of lived years)] and active life expectancies [(based upon functional impairments and mortality risks)] that were similar to or better than those of adults from advantaged childhoods who achieved low education levels” (Montez and Hayward 2013:413).

Some scholars have revealed how the quantity of adverse events in early life contributes to individual outcomes (Shaefer et al. 2018, Montez and Hayward 2013). Arguing that many aspects of childhood and adolescence are intertwined, cumulative studies of adversity group together events rather than accounting for their individual nature, severity and influence over time. For example, Shaefer et al.’s longitudinal study using family-level and individual-level data from the PSID, or Panel Study of Income Dynamics–Childhood Retrospective Circumstances Study (2018), found that each additional adversity experienced is associated with an increased likelihood of being arrested, living in poverty, being uninsured, and failing to graduate from high school. Additionally, they found a significant, positive relationship between ACEs and the presence of health problems in adulthood as each additional ACE increases the probability of heart disease, lung disease, obesity, and smoking. (Shaefer et al. 2018:81-86). As suggested, as individuals form narratives about their life trajectories and a sense of self, they may

form an overall view. However, they may also be more affected by specific instances that resonate more deeply. As such, this study looks specifically at the influential and permeating role of total family income, looking specifically at a group of individuals from low-income backgrounds.

### *Agency and Outlook*

Although the extent of early adverse life events are oftentimes situations out of the individual's control, beliefs around agency and self-efficacy may influence the perpetuation of their effects. During socialization in childhood and adolescence, youth form perceptions of their life circumstances based on interactions with family and peers as well as through their personal experience navigating the social world. For example, as discovered in Homan et al.'s study (2017), people form schemas to differentiate between who is poor and why they are poor as to whether their poverty is intergenerational (born poor) or downward mobility (became poor) with individualism, interactionism and structuralism as possible causes. They also found that people believe Blacks, Latinos, immigrants, teens and adults to be more likely to experience downward mobility and whites, non-immigrants, elderly and children are more likely to be intergenerationally poor (Homan et al. 2017). Schemas around poverty, educational attainment and success may form impressions on individuals and their attributions for their own background or adult outcomes. Consequently, the attributions may generate the framework with which individuals perceive their life trajectories, as found in the case of Mickelson and Hazlett's interviews (2014) with low-income women. These interviews conveyed how their attributions about their own poverty influenced their depression and anxiety levels as well as whether they perceived their social class to improve. While respondents believed their social class to be lower than that during their childhood, they felt they would achieve a higher social class (5-point

increase out of 13) in the next 5 to 10 years (Mickelson and Hazlett 2014). Although many did not conceptualize pathways to success, they perceived the future to be better.

Commonly held societal and cultural notions around success also infiltrate the ways in which the individual perceives their future, including the ethos of the American Dream. As Breyerton writes “The American Dream ethos can be encapsulated in the tenet that if you work hard and play by the rules, you will succeed as far as your abilities will allow” (2016:105). He argues that this ethos connot[ates] values of industriousness, honesty, adherence to law, and just rewards for noble and pragmatic efforts” (2016:105). In those from low economic backgrounds, such as those in Breyerton’s ethnographic study of Houston, Texas’ highly impoverished section called the Fifth Ward (2016), this meritocratic individualism continues to remain heavily believed despite increasing levels of inequality. The perseverance of the American Dream ethos enables individuals to maintain a sense of hope for upward mobility, at the risk of appearing without knowledge of their constraints. Opposition to the ethos, in turn, may be associated with feelings of defeatism and fatalism, feeling the constraints of poverty too strongly. Yet, Breyerton nods to the possibility for meritocratic individualism to foster a sense of resiliency in individuals that can form as a protective barrier against hardship and obstacles through acknowledgment of the constraints but a continuing fight for more successful future (2016:116). In the face of threat, individuals from low income backgrounds and current economic standings may prove more optimistic about the future compared to those who must work harder to maintain their higher standing through their cultural capital and knowledge (Tevington 2018).

Yet, the factors that make individuals more prone to experience upward mobility have been examined in literature on wealth inequality, calling attention to areas in which policies could assist those less apt to experience growth in wealth (Meschede et al. 2016). Among the

predictors of wealth mobility are increasing family income, greater amounts of family transfers, long-term home ownership, and white-collar occupations. Less wealth growth came from negative or adverse life events, including death, unemployment or disability; neighborhood poverty and occurred mainly for black respondents (Meschede et al.2016). Perceptions of upward mobility and the actuality of the income level needed to achieve and sustain levels considered “rich” differ greatly, with downward mobility being far more likely to occur over time. Research has shown how the overall optimistic attitudes many Americans have regarding their chances at upward mobility are overestimates of their chances at becoming rich (DiPrete 2007). Instead, it is found that “only when one restricts attention to those who are already in the top 10 [percent] of the distribution does the probability of passing yet higher elite milestones become likely” (DiPrete 2007:94). It is suggested that belief in one’s chances for success may be more deeply rooted in reality than actual hopes of doing so.

The aforementioned schemas or perceptions form in great part as a result of the ways in which individuals are socialized, including the values and beliefs passed within familial and social contexts (Johnson and Hitlin 2017). Expectations may differ depending on family structure, amount of bonding time, educational resources and opportunities as well as parental educational background. Another portrayal of the role of family comes from Johnson and Hitlin (2017) who found that those from more advantaged backgrounds tend to have higher generalized life expectations but are not particularly likely to have high expectations of comparison to their parents. Low socioeconomic status youth had a mix of expectations with some having more optimistic generalized outlooks or intergenerational comparative expectations. However, a great deal of low SES youth had low general life expectations and high intergenerational comparative expectations, believing life to improve at least beyond the familial circumstances they grew up

in. A similar study conducted by Hitlin and Johnson (2015), found a link between pessimistic attitudes or below average life expectations and worse outcomes regarding finances, earnings growth and health. Differences in expectations may in part be due to the influence of childhood socioeconomic status on fostering a sense of agency as middle class families tend to enforce their children to develop dreams and aspirations, placing greater importance on educational attainment (Silva and Corse 2018). Middle class respondents were also found to have had more conversations about the future with their parents during early life. Their “responses exemplify the efficacious, agentic self moving confidently through a future structured by social institutions that will acknowledge and reward their efforts. A number of continuing working-class respondents, in contrast, try not to even think about the future. Even those who do think about and plan for the future are much more likely to demonstrate a sense of bewilderment about social institutions and doubts about their own efficacy” (Silva and Corse 2018: 243). Thus, by studying whether an individual from a low-income background has a greater sense of self-efficacy and optimism, we can gain insight into whether fostering these aspects in early life (despite the possible difficulty in maintaining them) can lessen the potential influence of early life poverty on adulthood.

Previous studies highlight the lasting and multifaceted impact of adversity in early life. They examine how demographic and developmental characteristics determine one’s exposure to risk and influence their perceptions of themselves, their financial circumstances and their life trajectory. Only some of these studies, however, leave room for positive intergenerational change in the future, financially and otherwise. Given these findings, the current study seeks to identify how various elements of the individual’s background impact outlook and result in changes in income in adulthood.

## METHODS

### *Data*

The hypothesis will be tested using the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS) which examines individuals as its unit of analysis. This data collection is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) and includes information from the proportional sampling of households, resulting in biannual in-person interviews with English and/or Spanish speaking residents of the United States, ages 18 or older and who are not institutionalized or living in group quarters. The response rate for the GSS is 61.3 percent for their original sample for the year 2016 of 2,867 respondents. For further information on how the GSS 2016 data were collected, please visit <http://gss.norc.org>.

Using data from the 2016 General Social Survey, I examine a specific subset of individuals who reported their total family income at 16 as being far below average or below average, leaving a sample of 1,269 respondents. By doing so, I focus specifically on the adverse experience of low income in childhood and adolescence. Total family income at 16 is asked to respondents as “Thinking about the time when you were 16 years old, compared with American families, in general, then would you say your family income was far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average?” I conduct a secondary data analysis of this subset to study the relationship between respondents’ levels of optimism and their total family income in adulthood to determine how outlook may influence success in adulthood. Although success in adulthood and overcoming childhood adversity and/or poverty may come in a variety of forms, success in this study is considered solely in terms of respondent’s total family income in 2015. Income is one of the most significant indicators of the resources available to a family and can give insight into the conditions in which they reside.



*Variables*

Taking data from the 2016 GSS's Hope and Optimism Module in which respondents were asked to share their levels of agreement or disagreement with 6 different optimistic statements, I construct my independent variable by computing an index measuring optimism, i.e. the more statements a respondent agrees with, the greater level of optimism they have. The module was created using a split ballot design, collecting a sample of respondents in the U.S. The statements from the module can be found below. The respondent's answers to the six statements are added together and divided by six to determine their overall level of agreement. For example, a respondent who scores a six finds the statements to be "Somewhat True." Among the following categories, 'No Answer' and 'Not Applicable' were coded as missing values and removed from the sample, leaving seven answer categories of: Definitely False, Mostly False, Somewhat False, Slightly False, Slightly True, Somewhat True, Mostly True and Definitely True. For this set of variables, respondents were prompted "Using the scale on the showcard, please select the response that best describes how you think about yourself right now. Please focus on yourself and what is going on in your life at this moment" and then were told each of the following statements:

1. If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it.
2. At the present time, I am energetically pursuing my goals.
3. There are lots of ways around any problem that I am facing now.
4. Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful.
5. I can think of many ways to reach my current goals.
6. At this time, I am meeting the goals I have set for myself.

The respondent's income as an adult is conveyed as a continuous dependent variable. It asks respondents, "In which of these groups did your total family income, from all sources, fall last year before taxes, that is?" and places them at numerical income values of "Under \$1,000"

up to “\$170,000 and over.” For the statistical analyses, the income variable is recoded based upon each category’s midpoint (See Appendix A).

Lastly, I code for the respondent’s race, sex, age, total years of education, marital status and number of children. Race, sex and marital status have been recoded into dummy variables with People of Color (poc=1) compared to the referent group of white (white=0), women (women=1) compared to the referent group of men (men =0) and married respondents (married=1) compared to the referent group of non-married (not married=0). The dummy variables were chosen based upon which category had the smaller number of respondents and which groups tends to face the greatest disadvantage in regards to income. The race and sex of the respondent provide insight into what stereotypes and societal expectations may be attached to the individual, particularly those regarding who is successful and why. The age of the respondent, which ranges from 18 to 89 and over, is controlled for due to income generally being higher at the middle of a career rather than at its beginning or end. The respondent’s total years of education ranges on a scale of 0 to 20 years, revealing their answer to: “What is the highest grade in elementary school or high school that you finished and got credit for?” Education may serve as a very influential factor in determining one’s success in adulthood, opening up avenues for better careers and further educational opportunities. Additionally, the respondent’s educational attainment is likely to influence that of their children. Marital status is also a dummy variable and is based upon the question, “Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?” Marital status was reverse coded with ‘Never Married’ as the lowest value and ‘Married’ as the highest and was then constructed into a dummy variable with married respondents coded as 1 and non-married respondents coded as 0. Marital status can provide information on how the total family income of a respondent is divided

and how many resources are available to the respondent's children if they have any. The more children a respondent has, the greater economic resources needed to provide children with basic needs as well as to support them in their own education. As such, single parent or divided families often face greater financial strain. Finally, the number of children a respondent has is based upon the question of "How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born alive at any time (including any you had from a previous marriage)" and is on a scale of 0 to 7 and with a final category of "8 or more."

All variables with possible answer categories of "Don't Know," "No Answer" or "Non-Applicable" were coded as system missing. After removal of all missing values, the final subset includes 1,269 respondents from far below average or below average family income backgrounds.

## FINDINGS

### *Univariate Results*

Table 1 reports the mean, median and standard deviations for all variables. It reveals a widespread distribution of respondents' total family income with a mean of \$62,745, but a standard deviation of \$49,269. As shown in Figure 1, respondents with high incomes may positively skew the data to the right and increasing the mean. Due to the highest category's inclusion of respondents who made \$170,000 and over, how large their income actually is cannot be determined.

**\*\*Insert Table 1 here\*\***

**\*\*Insert Figure 1 here\*\***

Figure 2 shows the level of optimism of respondents. According to Table 1, respondents tend to have mid-to-high levels of optimism with a mean of 6 out of an 8-point scale, or an overall response to all the statements of "Somewhat True." However, the standard deviation is

1.234 above or below the mean. More than half of respondents have optimism levels in the range of 5 out of 8 (Slightly True) to 7 out of 8 (Mostly True). However, rough one-fifth of respondents, or twenty percent, have low levels of optimism, responding that the statements are “somewhat,” “mostly” or “definitely” false.

**\*\*Insert Figure 2 here\*\***

The control variable for total years of education is displayed in Figure 3. The univariate results in Table 1 show that the average respondent has an education level of at least 14 years, with a high school diploma and two years of college, but respondents in the sample have anywhere from 10 years of education to 16 years, indicating less than a high school diploma or up to a Bachelor’s degree.

**\*\*Insert Figure 3 here\*\***

Figure 4 shows the frequency distribution for control variable for the age of the respondent. As shown in Table 1, respondents average at 47 years but range 17 years above or below the mean. With an average of 47, the sample may be primarily composed of middle aged individuals at the height of their careers, possibly receiving the higher levels of income prior to reaching retirement age.

**\*\*Insert Figure 4 here\*\***

Figure 5 shows marital status after being dummied, with married respondents being compared to unmarried, while Figure 6 portrays the frequency distribution for the total number of children respondents have. Figure 5 shows that, when dummied, unmarried individuals who are not married, separated, divorced or widowed, outnumber the frequency of respondents who are married. Non-married respondents total at fifty-seven percent of respondents. Figure 6 reveals that the majority of respondents have 0 (28.4 percent), 1 (17.7 percent), 2 (26.6 percent)

or 3 children (15 percent). Comparatively, a small number of respondents have four children or above, at a total of 12.4 percent of respondents.

**\*\*Insert Figure 5 here\*\***

**\*\*Insert Figure 6 here\*\***

Figure 7 shows the racial composition of the after being dummied. While respondents from the sample are predominantly white at 75 percent, they are the reference group for this study compared to a group that controls for People of Color, which combines black respondents and other respondents for a total of 25 percent.

**\*\*Insert Figure 7\*\***

Lastly, Figure 8 shows the ratio of male-to-female respondents for the dummy variable for gender. Roughly 57 percent of respondents identify as women compared to 43 percent of men in the referent group.

**\*\*Insert Figure 8\*\***

### *Bivariate Analyses*

Correlation coefficients have been used to analyze the bivariate relationship between the independent, dependent and control variables. Table 2 shows the correlation matrix for all variables and does not indicate a problem with multicollinearity. There is a weak to moderate, positive and statistically significant relationship between level of optimism and total family income in 2015. With each increase in agreement with the optimistic statements, the respondent's total family income increases. There is no relationship between age and income. The relationship between education and income is positive, moderate and statistically significant. With each additional year of education, the respondent's total family income in 2015 increases. There is no relationship between the number of children a respondent has and their total family

income in 2015. Being a person of color is negatively and weakly correlated with income. This relationship is statistically significant and indicates that respondents who identify as a person of color have lower income. There is no relationship between being a woman and income. Findings show a moderate, positive and statistically significant relationship between being married and total family income. Respondents who are married are more likely to have higher levels of income.

**\*\*Insert Table 2 about here\*\***

There is no relationship between age and optimism. Education and level of optimism are weakly, but positively correlated with a statistically significant relationship between them. With each additional year of education, level of optimism increases. There is no relationship between the number of children a respondent has and their level of optimism. Additionally, there is no relationship between being a person of color and level of optimism as well as being a woman and level of optimism. Marriage and level of optimism have a weak, positive and statistically significant relationship. Respondents who are married are more likely to have higher levels of optimism.

There is no relationship between level of education and age. Age is weakly and positively correlated with number of children. This relationship is statistically significant and indicates that the older a respondent is, the greater number of children they will have. Age and being a person of color have a negative, weak and statistically significant relationship. This indicates that respondents in the sample who identify as a person of color tend to be younger. There is no relationship between being a woman and age. There is a positive, weak statistically significant relationship between age and marriage, with respondents who are married being more likely to be older.

The number of children a respondent has and their level of education are negatively and weakly correlated in a statistically significant relationship. The more years of education the respondent has, the less children they have. There is a very weak, negative and statistically significant relationship between being a person of color and level of education. Respondents who identify as POC are more likely to have lower levels of education. There is no relationship between being female and level of education. However, being married is positively and weakly correlated with level of education. This statistically significant relationship indicates that married respondents are more likely to have higher levels of education or vice versa.

Identifying as a POC is positively and weakly correlated with the number of children a respondent has. This correlation is statistically significant and shows that respondents who are POC are more likely to have more children. Being a woman is also correlated with number of children in a weak, positive and statistically significant relationship. Respondents who identify as women are more likely to have more children. Lastly, there is a positive, weak and statistically significant relationship between being married and number of children. Married respondents are more likely to have a greater number of children.

There is no relationship between being a person of color and being female. However, identifying as POC was weakly and negatively correlated with being married. This significant relationship indicates that respondents of color are less likely to be married. No relationship was found between being a woman and being married.

### *Multivariate Analyses*

According to Table 3, the regression equation is significant at the .01 level with 36.1 percent of the variation in total family income explained by all other variables ( $R^2 = .361$ ). With a high  $F$ -value of 101.86, the regression model is statistically significant with only a one-percent

chance that the results are due to sampling error. Controlling for all other variables for each analysis, marital status ( $\beta = .379$ ) followed by level of education ( $\beta = .334$ ), and optimism ( $\beta = .123$ ) are the biggest predictors of income for respondents from family income backgrounds of far below average or below average. The regression analysis finds a statistically significant relationship between optimism and income. With each additional point on a 7-point agreement scale of optimism, respondents have an increase in income of \$4907.95, on average. There is no relationship between age and income. Being a woman has a statistically significant and negative effect on income with women making, on average, \$7015.70 less than men. Race also has a statistically significant and negative impact on income. Respondents who identify as People of Color, on average, earn \$12,190.73 less than white respondents. There is a positive and statistically significant relationship between level of education and income. With each additional year of education, respondents make \$5348.65 more. Being married has a statistically significant relationship with income. Married respondents, on average, have family incomes of \$37,703.01 more. Lastly, there is no relationship between number of children and total family income.

**\*\*Insert Table 3 about here\*\***

The multivariate analysis predominantly confirms the results of the bivariate findings. However, the control variable for women is suppressed in the bivariate results and becomes significant in the multivariate analysis. Overall, the statistical analysis supports the hypothesis that respondents from far below average or below average income backgrounds with higher levels of optimism have higher total family income levels as adults.



## DISCUSSION

The findings from the bivariate and multivariate analyses support the hypothesis that respondents from far below average or below average income backgrounds with greater levels of optimistic outlook are more likely to have higher incomes in adulthood. In both the bivariate correlation and regression analysis, there is a positive, weak to moderate and statistically significant relationship between level of optimism and total family income in 2015. However, this study does not emphasize that optimistic outlook alone leads to greater income in individuals from low-income backgrounds. Instead, it posits that the exposure to advantage or disadvantage in the individual's life impacts their outlook and vice versa. It is through the nature of this exposure that the individual is granted access to avenues for greater income. As such, education, marital status and optimism were the biggest predictors of income in adulthood. The analyses reveal that the relationship between education and optimism as well as optimism and income may be intertwined. Furthermore, education and marital status may play more of a mediating role in the relationship.

These findings are consistent with previous literature, highlighting the effects of education and marital status on both income and optimism. Additionally, they reflect the gender and racial inequalities found in many studies of income, revealing that women and people of color earn less than men or white respondents. While most of the reviewed literature examines how poverty often negatively impacts outlook, this study builds upon this by analyzing whether outlook also influences income, specifically for those from low income backgrounds. Due to the study's limitations, however, a causal order between optimism and income cannot be confirmed. Nonetheless, the findings still point to significant implications for the U.S. education system and for future research on income inequality and mobility.

Overall, the findings align with cumulative inequality theory (CIT) by showing how disadvantageous circumstances in early life influence outcomes in adulthood, in part, by influencing outlook. According to CIT, developmental and demographic characteristics place individuals at an advantage or disadvantage in childhood and adolescence. These factors include traits one is born with, such as race or gender, as well as elements of familial and neighborhood context, such as living in a two-parent or split household, number of siblings, and the quality of the school system and community where one resides (Schafer et al. 2011). The unique combination of early life aspects is examined in this study to determine what factors may interact, impact outlook and alter levels of income in adulthood. The theory posits that the accumulation of disadvantage in the past makes one more susceptible to disadvantage in the future. Due to its impact on resources and greater exposure to risk, one might postulate that, based on the theory, disadvantage in early life would negatively influence one's outlook, hindering how much agency they feel over their circumstances. A negative outlook, in turn, would place further detriment on their life trajectory. The current study explores the potential for positive outlook to play a part in disrupting the perpetuation of disadvantage by fostering agency in the individual. Findings indicate that respondents with higher levels of optimistic outlook have greater incomes in adulthood. An optimistic outlook may cause the individual to place themselves in more opportunistic or advantageous contexts, seeking out resources and avenues towards future success.

Associated with optimism and one of the biggest predictors in the relationship between optimism and income, access to quality education is an example of an advantageous context. Level of education was found to increase the level of optimism of the respondent in a moderate and statistically significant relationship. This may in part come from the ability of education to

instill a sense of purpose and agency in the individual over goal attainment and career possibilities, with higher levels of education creating more pathways to success. Educational resources and attainment influence how capable one feels at disrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty or adversity. Level of education was also found to have a positive effect on income, with each year increasing the respondent's reported total family income by \$5348.65. Respondents with higher levels of educational attainment have greater access to further educational opportunities or higher paying careers. Educated respondents are more likely to be white and married, however, respondents with more children are less likely to have high levels of education, potentially due to early pregnancy, separation or divorce; both of which may influence income as well as a respondent's educational attainment before or after the child's birth. Consistent with prior research, the study also finds significant differences in income across gender and race.

As discussed with the fourth axiom of cumulative inequality theory, it is through the conscious and unconscious interpretation of the advantages and disadvantages in one's life that individuals form schemas about their abilities and agency. Looking to the past for comparison, they evaluate how well off they are in the present and project how they can improve in the future. Aspects in which one is advantaged, i.e. greater educational attainment or marital status, may influence life satisfaction and how much control one feels over their life and its trajectory.

## CONCLUSION

Using a subset of 1,269 respondents from low-income backgrounds in the 2016 General Social Survey, I was able to determine the effect of optimistic outlook on adult income levels. Controlling for education, marital status, number of children, race, age, and sex, the relationship provided insight into the circumstances that foster optimistic outlook and higher income in

adulthood. The bivariate correlations find a positive, weak and statistically significant relationship between optimism and total family income in 2015. Consistent with the bivariate correlation, the regression analysis reveals a relationship between optimism and income as well ( $R^2 = .361, p < .01$ ). Income increases, on average, by \$4907.95 with each additional level of agreement with the optimistic statements ( $\beta = .123, p = .01$ ). Yet, education and marital status were found to be the biggest predictors of adult income and may indicate that the relationship between optimism and income is actually explained by these factors, as they both have their own independent effects on the independent and dependent variables. Overall, the findings support both the hypothesis and cumulative inequality theory, suggesting a relationship between optimistic outlook and income.

Although a causal order between the studied variables cannot be determined, the significance of the findings points to how imperative access to high quality education is, as well as the presence of mentors, inside or outside of the home. The relationship between optimism and education illuminates the potential for education to generate feelings of agency by providing knowledge, skillsets and a supportive learning environment. It is in part through interactions with peers, teachers and faculty members within the school system that the individual develops a sense of themselves, who they would like to be and what they aspire their life to be like. With a focus on testing and, in part, because of financial and resource limitations, education has lacked the individualized approach needed for students to excel and learn in a way that suits their particular needs. Through community building, improved communication and funding, as well as the implementation of educational policies, schools may shift their attention to student needs to foster in them a greater desire to learn, to push through challenges and to pursue their interests. A well-rounded and inclusive education can open pathways and relationships for the student that may not be found within their familial or neighborhood context. Among many things, schools may provide

students with personal and career counseling, assistance with coursework, as well as meals and care before or after the school day. As such, the school setting can provide the student with stability and resources unavailable due to their family's low income level; consequently, impacting their perception of themselves and their future.

### *Limitations*

Although the relationship between optimism and income was found to be significant, a causal relationship cannot be claimed due to the study's measurement of optimism. The current study only examines the respondent's optimism at the time of the report. As optimism is reported for one year (2016), the study cannot reveal the change in optimism over time. Respondents from low-income families who are more optimistic have higher incomes as adults, but optimism may have fluctuated since the respondent was age 16. Additionally, optimism was measured as a scale, combining six statements and measuring the respondents' overall agreement with such statements. In doing so, the range in agreement with each statement is eliminated and cannot be examined, as would be the case with using each of the statements as individual variables.

Although the statements are used to measure the concept of optimism, each is different on its own, particularly as some examine attitudes towards goal-attainment while others reflect ability to problem solve. In addition, the statements are leading in that they are all optimistic statements, perhaps causing respondents to answer similarly for each of them. Most significantly, the causal order of the relationship cannot be confirmed because income might influence optimistic outlook.

The measure of income and the findings' suggestions about income mobility are also limited in this study. As respondents' total family income at age 16 were reported in terms of being "far below average, below average, average," etc., the present study could not place a

number value to such income levels. Although it would be difficult for the General Social Survey to have respondents report their exact income, using income categories rather than measures such as “below average, average,” etc., would enable researchers to study mobility more easily after a consideration of inflation. In the current study, only the respondents’ reports of their total family income from the year of 2015 were categorical and could be interpreted using national income averages from the year of 2015 and rate of inflation to examine where averages lie. Lastly, this study only considers those from disadvantaged backgrounds and thus, cannot compare the role of outlook for those from advantaged backgrounds.

#### *Future Research*

Future research should study how outlook and income levels change throughout the life course and how they influence one another. By conducting longitudinal studies, researchers can more closely examine the disadvantage and advantage of the respondent’s early life, including additional variables to account for other aspects, including neighborhood context, region and parental health. Lastly, the current efforts in place aimed at providing assistance to low-income families, improving the education system in poor communities and advocating for income mobility, should be studied to evaluate their effectiveness and seek methods of improvement.

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## Appendix A:

Respondent's Total Family Income in 2015: "In

which of these groups did your total family income,

from all sources, fall last year, before taxes, that is?"

Midpoints for Total Family Income in 2015

1) Under \$1,000	1) \$500
2) \$1,000 to \$2,999	2) \$2,000
3) \$3,000 to \$3,999	3) \$3,500
4) \$4,000 to \$4,999	4) \$4,500
5) \$5,000 to \$5,999	5) \$5,500
6) \$6,000 to \$6,999	6) \$6,500
7) \$7,000 to \$7,999	7) \$7,500
8) \$8,000 to \$9,999	8) \$9,000
9) \$10,000 to \$12,499	9) \$11,250
10) \$12,500 to \$14,999	10) \$13,750
11) \$15,000 to \$17,499	11) \$16,250
12) \$17,500 to \$19,999	12) \$18,750
13) \$20,000 to \$22,499	13) \$21,250
14) \$22,500 to \$24,999	14) \$23,750
15) \$25,000 to \$29,999	15) \$27,500
16) \$30,000 to \$34,999	16) \$32,500
17) \$35,000 to \$39,999	17) \$37,500
18) \$40,000 to \$49,999	18) \$42,500
19) \$50,000 to \$59,999	19) \$55,000
20) \$60,000 to \$74,999	20) \$67,500
21) \$75,000 to \$89,999	21) \$82,500
22) \$90,000 to \$109,999	22) \$100,000
23) \$110,000 to \$129,999	23) \$120,000
24) \$130,000 to \$149,999	24) \$140,000
25) \$150,000 to \$169,999	25) \$160,000
26) \$170,000 or over	26) \$180,000

Table 1. Means, Median and S.D. for All Variables ( $N=1,269$ )

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
<b>Family Income</b>	62,745.07	55,000.00	49,269.39
<b>Optimism</b>	6.12	6.33	1.234
<b>Age</b>	47.78	48.00	17.000
<b>Women</b>	0.57	1.00	0.496
<b>People of Color</b>	0.25	0.00	0.435
<b>Education</b>	13.86	14.00	3.077
<b>Married</b>	0.43	0.00	0.495
<b>Children</b>	1.75	2.00	1.601

Table 2. Correlations (*r*) between Total Family Income in 2016 and Seven Variables

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Optimism</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>POC</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Married</b>
<b>Income</b>	.228**	.036	.414**	-.035	-.200**	-.042	.452**
<b>Optimism</b>		-.054	.204**	-.058	.004	.053	.108**
<b>Age</b>			.013	.311**	-.167**	.048	.076**
<b>Education</b>				-.210**	-.096**	.031	.131**
<b>Children</b>					.109**	.085**	.138**
<b>POC</b>						.011	-.166*
<b>Women</b>							.032

\*\*  $p < .01$  (listwise deletion, two-tailed test,  $N = 1,269$ )

Table 3. Regression of Total Family Income in 2016 on All Variables ( $N = 1269$ )

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>b</i></b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>
<b>Optimism</b>	4907.95	.123**
<b>Age</b>	-24.26	-.008
<b>Women</b>	-7015.70	-.071**
<b>People of Color</b>	-12190.73	-.108**
<b>Education</b>	5348.65	.334**
<b>Married</b>	37703.01	.379**
<b>Children</b>	334.84	.011
<b>Constant</b>	-49918.68	

$R^2 = .361$ ;  $F(7, 1261) = 101.86$ ;  $p < .01$

$p < .01$ \*\*

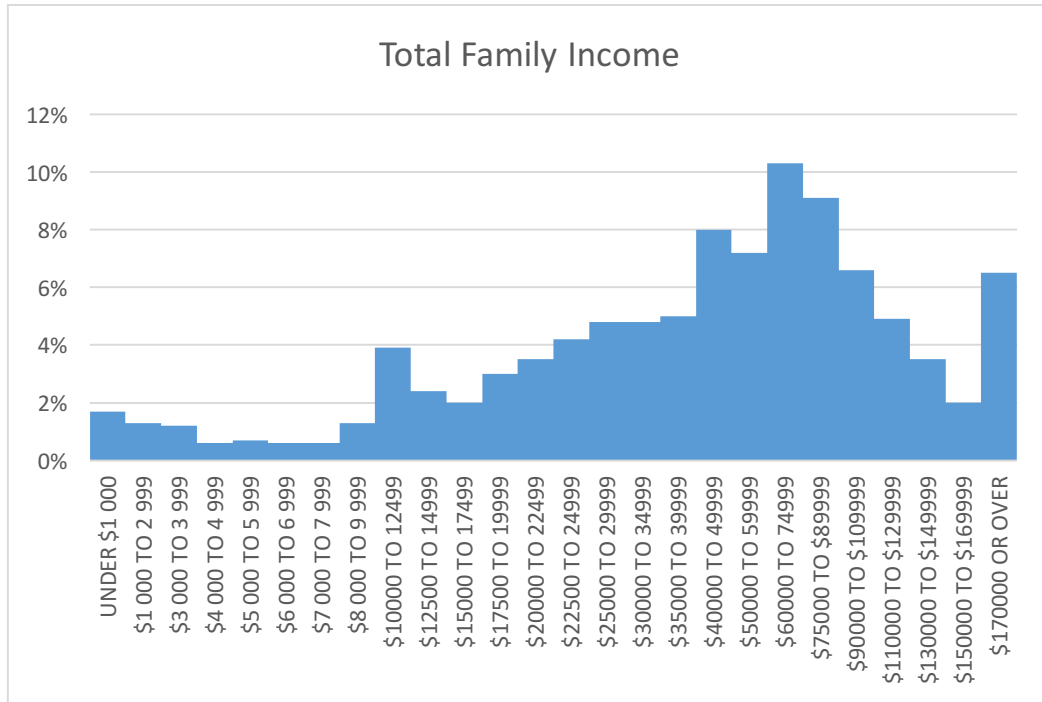


Figure 1. Histogram for Total Family Income in 2015.

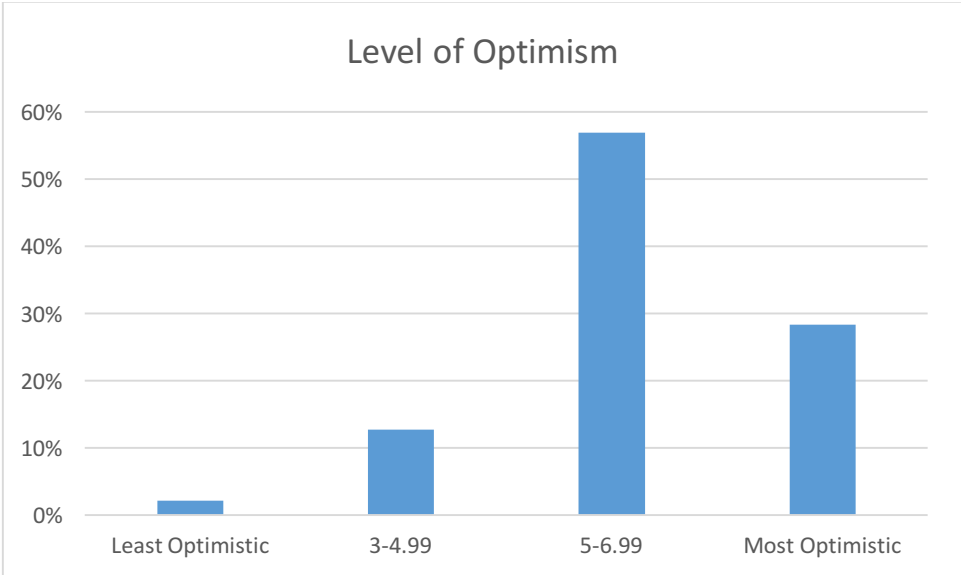


Figure 2. Frequency Distribution for Level of Agreement with Optimistic Statements.

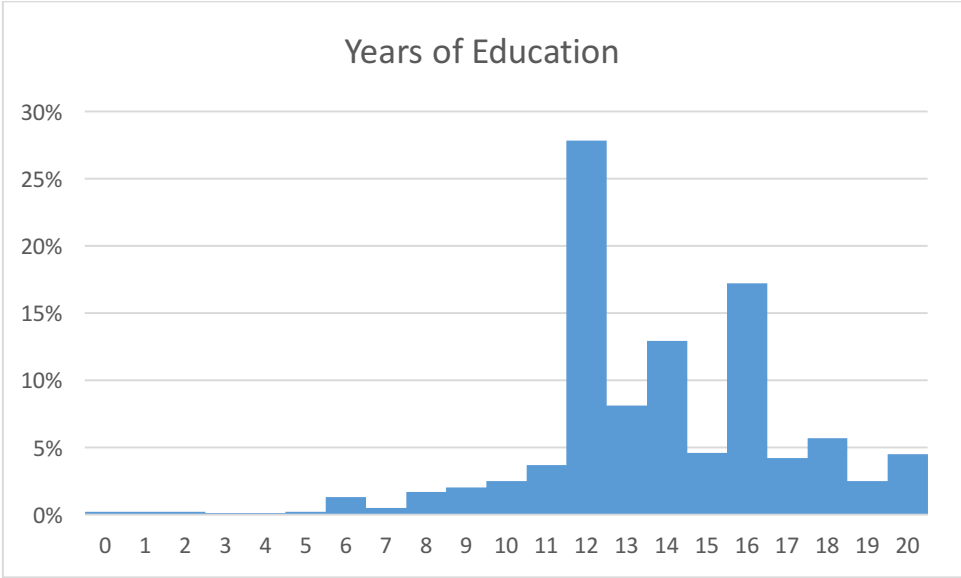


Figure 3. Histogram for Years of Education.



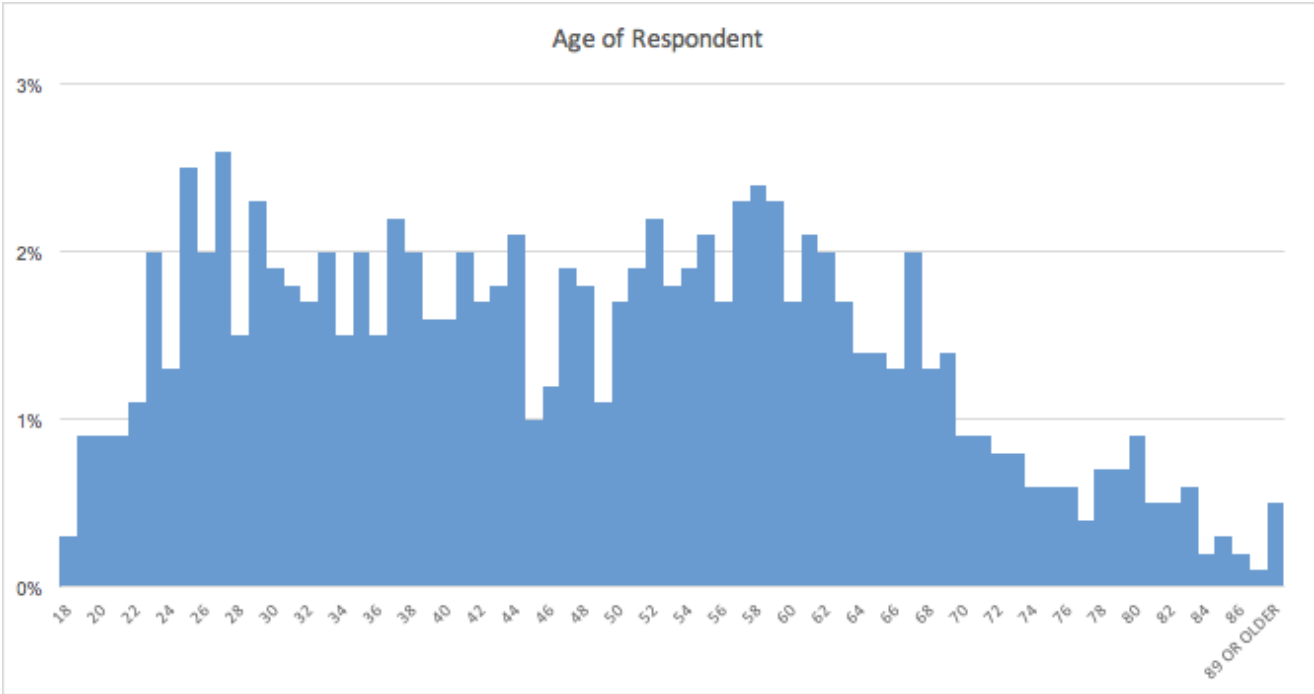


Figure 4. Histogram for Age.

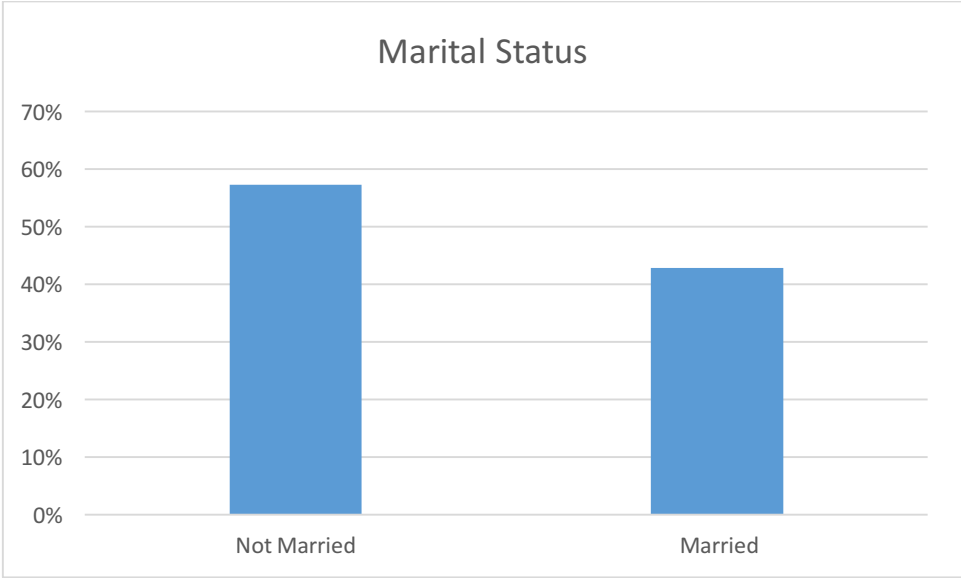


Figure 5. Frequency Distribution for Marital Status

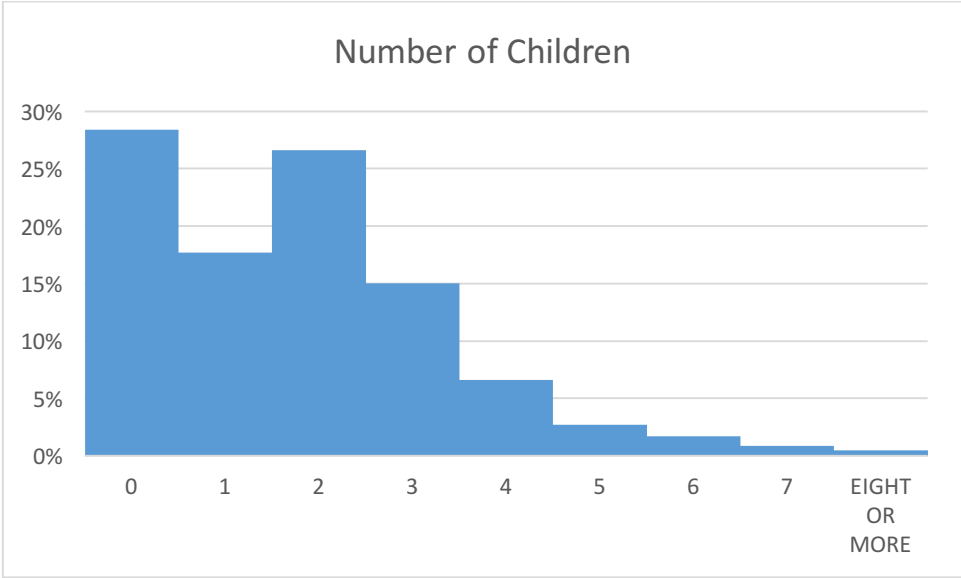


Figure 6. Histogram for Number of Children.

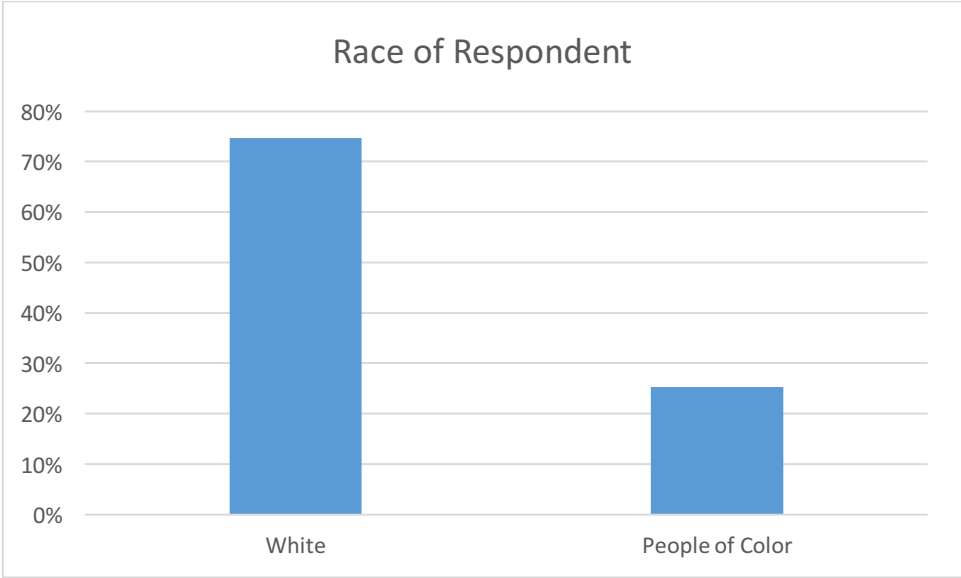


Figure 7. Histogram for Race

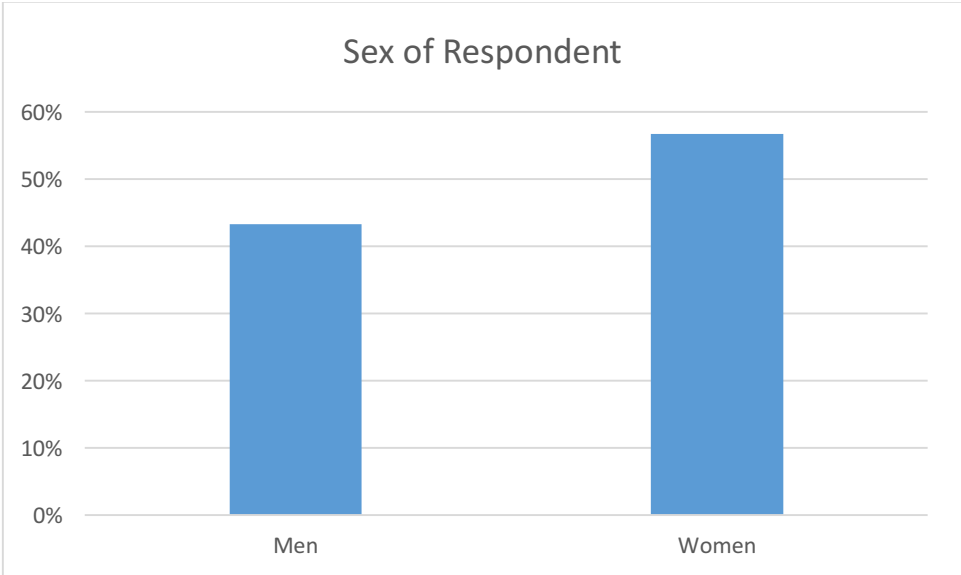


Figure 8. Frequency Distribution for Sex of Respondent