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ARTICLE

ANOTHER MEASURE OF SUCCESS: EXAMINING THE SUCCESS SEQUENCE AND ITS POSSIBLE UTILITY IN CRIME PREVENTION

Andrew T. Heath[†]

I. INTRODUCTION

This essay explores the Success Sequence and its potential utility as a path away from crime. Proponents of the Success Sequence contend that those who: (1) graduate from high school; (2) maintain full time employment; and (3) marry before having children, achieve a much lower likelihood of being in poverty and a much higher likelihood of reaching the middle or upper bands of income distribution. The primary sources upon which Success Sequence proponents¹ rely are Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill's 2009 book *Creating an Opportunity Society*² and Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox's 2017 report *The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids and the "Success Sequence."*³ Both sources recommend policies for improving access to and improving the quality of education, work, and marriage, as well as a national social marketing campaign promoting the Success Sequence.⁴ While

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¹ Some examples include *Washington Post* Columnist George F. Will and United States Senator and former Presidential candidate Marco Rubio. See George F. Hill, *Listen Up, Millennials. There's a Sequence to Success*, WASH. POST (July 5, 2017) https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/listen-up-millennials-theres-sequence-to-success/2017/07/05/5a4a8350-6011-11e7-a4f7-af34fc1d9d39_story.html?noredirect=on; See also MARCO RUBIO, *AMERICAN DREAMS* 27 (2015).

² See RON HASKINS & ISABEL V. SAWHILL, *CREATING AN OPPORTUNITY SOCIETY* (2009).

³ See Wendy Wang & W. Bradford Wilcox, *The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids, and the 'Success Sequence' Among Young Adults* (June 14, 2017) (working paper) (on file with Am. Enter. Inst.), <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/IFS-MillennialSuccessSequence-Final.pdf>.

⁴ See HASKINS & SAWHILL, *supra* note 2; Wang & Wilcox, *supra* note 3.

there does not appear to be genuine controversy over policies promoting the benefits of education, remunerative employment, or family stability, combining these policies together has drawn criticism.

From the outset, it is important to acknowledge a few points. First, “success” is a bit of a loaded term and its definition differs from person-to-person and culture-to-culture. This essay will not examine the wide-ranging definitions of success, nor will it address the intrinsic benefits of education, employment, or marriage. For purposes of this article, “success” simply means arriving in the middle or upper third of income distribution. Second, it is axiomatic that there will always be a bottom third of the income distribution, even if every person followed the Success Sequence and earned over \$1 million per year. This article does not seek to confront a 100% compliance scenario, but rather attempts to evaluate claims that those who follow the Success Sequence increase their likelihood of higher income and decrease their likelihood of poverty. Finally, the Success Sequence is not a silver bullet for the intractable problems of poverty or crime. The theory will not solve structural or systemic problems within the United States. Instead, its proponents merely identify the Success Sequence as a pathway that could provide a greater likelihood of “success” for those who follow the sequence—even within a flawed system.

Part II of this article will trace the brief history of the Success Sequence and will discuss its major points, as set forth by Haskins and Sawhill, in their book, and Wang and Wilcox, in their report. Part III will evaluate the Success Sequence in light of the main areas of criticism to identify opportunities for refinement and development. Part IV will explore whether there might be utility in extending the application of the Success Sequence from the poverty conversation into the crime conversation using experience in North Carolina as a backdrop. Part V will offer concluding thoughts and potential areas of further study.

II. THE SUCCESS SEQUENCE: BETTER ECONOMIC OUTCOMES THROUGH EDUCATION, WORK, AND DELAYING CHILDBIRTH UNTIL AFTER MARRIAGE

The term “Success Sequence” first appeared in a 2006 report published for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.⁵ The authors observed that young adults were straying from the traditional “sequence for the timing

⁵ BARBARA DAFOE WHITEHEAD & MARILINE PEARSON, MAKING A LOVE CONNECTION: TEEN RELATIONSHIPS, PREGNANCY, AND MARRIAGE 9 (2006), http://advocatesforadolescentmothers.com/wp-content/uploads/love_connection.pdf; Brian Alexander, *What Is the ‘Success Sequence’ and Why Do So Many Conservatives Like It?*, ATLANTIC (July 31, 2018) <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/07/get-out-of-poverty-success-sequence/566414/>.

of sex, marriage and parenthood,” and their report sought to “teach teens about a ‘success sequence’ that [would] best promote the achievement of their dreams and desires for their future family and work lives.”⁶

Three years later, Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill published their 2009 book *Creating an Opportunity Society*, which examined poverty and inequality in the United States. They promoted the position that the “government should endeavor to level the playing field for children from disadvantaged families and [should] provide extra help to those who play by the rules in their adolescent and adult years.”⁷ Haskins and Sawhill presented a “Three Norms Analysis,” wherein they used data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey to measure the performance of individuals who completed one, two, or all three of the norms in terms of income distribution.⁸ The “three norms” were: (1) complete high school (or attain high school diploma equivalent); (2) work full time (defined as thirty-five or more hours per week for forty or more weeks per year); and (3) wait until age 21 to marry and marry before having children.⁹ Their analysis showed that “[i]ndividuals in families headed by an able-bodied adult between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four have a 98[%] chance of escaping poverty if the family adhere[d] to all three social norms,” whereas 76% of individuals living in families who did not adhere to any of the three norms were living below poverty.¹⁰ Supported by these findings, one of Haskins and Sawhill’s key recommendations was for “Congress to appropriate \$500 million a year to plan and implement a [Success Sequence] social marketing campaign similar to the National Cancer Institute’s ‘5 A Day for Better Health’ to improve nutrition and the American Legacy Foundation’s ‘truth’ campaign to reduce smoking among youth.”¹¹ Their proposed campaign message was “great advantages accrue to individuals who follow the success sequence: finish school, get a job, marry, and have children—in that order.”¹²

To oversimplify Haskins and Sawhill’s 11-chapter book and comprehensive proposals by condensing them down to the aforementioned Success Sequence social marketing campaign would not do their work justice. Indeed, they offered three chapters worth of policy recommendations

⁶ WHITEHEAD & PEARSON, *supra* note 5, at 8, 9.

⁷ HASKINS & SAWHILL, *supra* note 2, at 18.

⁸ *Id.* at 70, 71.

⁹ *Id.* at 71.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 70.

¹¹ *Id.* at 230.

¹² *Id.*

designed to create a society with greater opportunity.¹³ Such proposals include “[p]roviding poor children and their families with the services of a visiting nurse followed by a high-quality preschool experience and better teachers using proven curricula during the elementary school years . . .” among other items.¹⁴ Placing Haskins and Sawhill’s proposed outlay for the Success Sequence campaign in context, such a social media and marketing campaign pales in comparison to the \$8.5 billion Haskins and Sawhill proposed for spending on preschool and postsecondary education, or the \$10.9 billion they proposed for spending on work and work supports.¹⁵ Still, all of their policy recommendations are aligned with the Success Sequence in that they are braided into a “three-front war” for “improving educational outcomes for children and young adults,” “encouraging and supporting work among adults,” and “reducing the number of children raised in single-parent families.”¹⁶ Although the Success Sequence campaign is not their biggest funding proposal, Haskins and Sawhill wrote that the Success Sequence “should be the guid[ing] star that society sets for each new generation.”¹⁷

Another major work relied upon by Success Sequence proponents is *The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids and the “Success Sequence” Among Young Adults*¹⁸ published in 2017, wherein Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox performed a focused analysis of the Success Sequence as it related to Millennials.¹⁹ Their report was based primarily on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The survey consisted of 7,141 respondents who had been surveyed sixteen times between 1997 and 2014, and at the time of the last survey, the individuals in the cohort were aged 28–34.²⁰ The report defined the Success Sequence as “three steps young adults took earlier in life that [were] generally associated with a better economic outcome when reaching adulthood.”²¹

¹³ See HASKINS & SAWHILL, *supra* note 2, at 167, 203, 232.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 9.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 236.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 4–5.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 15.

¹⁸ See Wang & Wilcox, *supra* note 3.

¹⁹ See *id.* Wang and Wilcox refer to respondents aged twenty-eight to thirty-four as “Millennials”. *Id.* at 3.

²⁰ *Id.* at 11.

²¹ *Id.* at 7.

These three steps include:

1. EDUCATION: Graduating from high school or getting a GED²² by their mid-twenties.
2. WORK: Working full time (35+ hours per week), year-around (50+ weeks) in their mid-twenties, or being married and taking care of children, or working towards a college or graduate degree (including an associate's degree) in their mid-twenties.
3. MARRIAGE FIRST: Marrying before having children (including those who are currently married but have no children). Young adults who have no children and are unmarried, the "on track" group, are either analyzed separately or combined with the "marriage first" group.²³

The report showed that "[h]alf of Millennials ha[d] either followed all three steps of the success sequence or [were] 'on track.'"²⁴ With respect to the Success Sequence and poverty, Wang and Wilcox reported: (1) that 31% of Millennials who followed only step one ended up poor by the time they were in the 28–34 age range; (2) that 8% of Millennials who followed only steps one and two ended up poor; and (3) that just 3% of those who followed all three steps ended up poor.²⁵ With respect to achieving higher income, they reported: (1) that 49% of Millennials who earned a high school degree or more made it to the middle or upper income group; (2) that 66% of Millennials who earned a high school degree and maintained full-time employment reached the middle or higher income group; and (3) that 89% of Millennials who completely followed the Success Sequence ended up in the middle or upper income group.²⁶ In light of these findings, Wang and Wilcox urged leaders to make the Success Sequence "more valued" and "more attainable," including "public and private efforts to strengthen career and technical education, expand the [earned income tax credit] or other wage subsidies, and publicize the value of the 'success sequence' to adolescents and young adults across America."²⁷

²² *Id.* at 19. GED signifies passage of General Educational Development tests, roughly the equivalent of earning a high school diploma in the United States.

²³ Wang & Wilcox, *supra* note 3, at 19.

²⁴ *Id.* at 6.

²⁵ *Id.* at 5.

²⁶ *Id.* at 21.

²⁷ *Id.* at 5.

III. ISSUES WITH THE SUCCESS SEQUENCE

Despite its bold claims of lifting people out of poverty and enabling them to achieve higher income, policymakers and academia have given relatively little attention to the Success Sequence. As one critic recently pointed out, there are relatively no academic studies “that seriously evaluate the claims of the Success Sequence.”²⁸ Consequently, debate over the Success Sequence has thus far been largely confined to scattered internet commentary. After surveying what little has been written on the subject, I have attempted to capture the essence of Success Sequence criticism by discussing three main recurring issues: the “sequential nature” issue, the “causation” issue, and the “structure versus agency” issue.

A. *The Sequential Nature Issue*

The Success Sequence is presented as a progression: graduate, then maintain full time work, and then have children only after marriage. As presented, it would appear that the more steps of the Success Sequence one follows, the less likely one is to be in poverty and the more likely one is to reach the middle or higher-income bands. One issue is whether the *ordering* of the steps has an impact on economic success.

Controversy does not appear to exist with respect to the ordering of step one (graduating from high school) before step two (working full time), perhaps because the link between education and higher income enjoys a strong relationship.²⁹ Additionally, both the human capital theory and the cumulative advantage theory appear to support the Success Sequence with respect to education and work. Human capital theory posits that investments in an individual, such as education, increases an individual’s productivity, which in turn increases earnings for that individual.³⁰ Human capital theory economists have not only documented the divergence of earning trajectories between individuals as their work lives progress, but also that education is a driving factor in this divergence.³¹ Cumulative advantage theorists have shown that attaining education earlier in life produces better outcomes than attaining education later in life, attributing this phenomenon to the

²⁸ Philip N. Cohen, *The Failure of The Success Sequence*, CATO UNBOUND (May 16, 2018), <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/05/16/philip-n-cohen/failure-success-sequence>.

²⁹ Orley Ashenfelter & Cecilia Rouse, *Schooling, Intelligence, and Income in America*, in MERITOCRACY AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY 89, 89 (Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles, & Steven Durlauf eds., 2000).

³⁰ Dale Dannefer, *Cumulative Advantage/Disadvantage and the Life Course: Cross-Fertilizing Age and Social Science Theory*, 58 J. GERONTOLOGY SERIES B: PSYCH. SCIS. SOC. SCIS. S327, S332 (2003).

³¹ *Id.*

“cumulative career advantages that early bloomers enjoy.”³² It is no great leap to hold that both human capital theory and cumulative advantage theory would share an expectation of income gap widening over the life course between those who graduate high school versus those who do not, or those who graduate high school and work full time versus those who do not.³³

There is more criticism of the sequential nature aspects of the Success Sequence with respect to the ordering of the remainder of the Success Sequence steps, centered mostly on marriage. One critic’s view is that simply working full time produces all of the “success” in the Success Sequence, and that Success Sequence proponents’ introduction of marriage into the equation is an effort to “smuggle their cultural views into the anti-poverty debate”³⁴ To the contrary, one could hypothesize that earning a degree coupled with full time work *before* marriage could increase an individual’s earning capacity and social standing, exposing them to a pool of potential marriage partners with similarly higher earning power. Both spouses together could then benefit from each other’s education and higher paying jobs. This hypothesis tracks neatly with the concepts of assortative marriage and resource pooling.³⁵

Randles, who is critical of the Success Sequence, nonetheless documents the prevalence of assortative marriage wherein people tend to choose spouses with similar social characteristics, with education level being chief among them.³⁶ She makes the case that education increases not only earning potential, but the economic benefits of “pooling resources with an equally advantaged spouse.”³⁷ Conversely, poor individuals marry similarly situated spouses and therefore have fewer assets to pool.³⁸ She writes that such resource-pooling is a hallmark of marriage, and when combined with assortative marrying “has become a primary mechanism of social and economic inequality in modern social life.”³⁹ Thus, it appears that Randles

³² Thomas A. DiPrete & Gregory M. Eirich, *Cumulative Advantage as a Mechanism for Inequality: A Review of Theoretical and Empirical Developments*, 32 ANN. REV. OF SOCIO. 271, 288 (2006).

³³ Dannefer, *supra* note 30, at 333.

³⁴ Matt Bruenig, *The Success Sequence Is About Cultural Beefs Not Poverty*, JACOBIN (July 2017), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/07/poverty-success-sequence-brookings-aei-marriage>.

³⁵ Christine R. Schwartz, *Trends and Variation in Assortative Mating: Causes and Consequences*, 39 ANN. REV. SOCIO. 451, 460–61 (2013).

³⁶ JENNIFER M. RANGLES, PROPOSING PROSPERITY?: MARRIAGE EDUCATION POLICY AND INEQUALITY IN AMERICA 90, 90 (2017).

³⁷ *Id.* at 89.

³⁸ *Id.* at 90.

³⁹ *Id.* at 89.

expresses concern for the development of such inequality and is critical of the placement of marriage in the Success Sequence. However, for the limited purpose of discussing the impact of marriage, as well as the *timing* of marriage in relation to steps one and two of the Success Sequence, her work on assortative mating and resource-pooling reinforces Success Sequence proponents' position that marriage serves as a boon to household finances for those who have completed their education and maintained full time employment before getting married.

There is also debate about the ordering of marriage and parenthood. Proponents of the Success Sequence hold that there is economic value in waiting to have children until after marriage.⁴⁰ Some critics disagree. Wang and Wilcox sought to address the issue of whether the ordering of marriage and parenthood contributes to "success" by conducting a regression analysis.⁴¹ After controlling for a variety of factors, including, but not limited to, employment history, educational attainment, race, and aptitude, the results of the regression analysis indicated a significant association between financial well-being and the order of marriage and parenthood.⁴² Wang and Wilcox reported that: (1) "Compared with the path of having a baby first, marrying before children more than doubles young adults' odds of being in the middle or top income tier," and (2) getting married before having children reduces young adults' odds of being in poverty by 60% versus having children before getting married, which suggests a positive correlation between waiting until after marriage to have children and higher income.⁴³

B. *The Causation Issue*

Another area of criticism is whether there is a causal relationship between following the Success Sequence and "success." Critics write that the Success Sequence "traces a path that people already likely to succeed usually walk,"⁴⁴ that it is a "chicken or the egg" problem,⁴⁵ and that "correlation does not . . . prove causation."⁴⁶ What are the implications if causation cannot be demonstrated? For example, is there merely a correlation between waiting until after marriage to have children and higher income or is this relationship

⁴⁰ Wang & Wilcox, *supra* note 3, at 14, 15.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.* at 15.

⁴⁴ Alexander, *supra* note 5.

⁴⁵ Michael D. Tanner, *The Success Sequence and What It Leaves Out*, CATO INST. (May 9, 2018), <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/05/09/michael-d-tanner/success-sequence-what-it-leaves-out>.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

causal? One perspective is that marriage is simply a marker of success rather than part of a path out of poverty.⁴⁷ The same question could be applied to completing education and obtaining full-time employment. For purposes of this article, I have grouped this type of criticism into the broad category of “causation.” Critics of the Success Sequence do not contest the correlation between adherence to the Success Sequence and higher income, but they appear reluctant to give the Success Sequence serious attention because correlation does not equate to causation and a causal relationship has not been conclusively demonstrated.⁴⁸

Although it is wise to avoid confusing correlation with causation,⁴⁹ social science does not disqualify a theory merely because causation cannot be demonstrated, and in the words of Edward Tufte, “[c]orrelation is not causation, but it sure is a hint.”⁵⁰ In the social sciences, tests for causality are nearly impossible to design.⁵¹ However, “[a]bsence of evidence of a given direction of causation is not evidence of its absence, and is certainly not evidence of causation in the reverse direction.”⁵² For example, even the link between education and higher income, “[o]ne of the best-documented relationships in economics,” is subject to the correlation versus causation debate.⁵³ This ongoing debate has not prevented support for policies promoting education, and learning more about the correlation has been useful in directing education policy. Perhaps the same could be true for the Success Sequence.

Correlation can offer valuable direction for further study and can point to causation when supplemented or refined. For example, Morck and Yeung urge evaluation of correlation through the lens of historical evidence to determine whether it is possible to “connect the dots.”⁵⁴ Echoing Tufte, Morck and Yeung wrote: “Though not proof of causation, correlation is a

⁴⁷ RANGLES, *supra* note 36, at 88.

⁴⁸ Tanner, *supra* note 45; Richard V. Reeves et al., *Following the Success Sequence? Success Is More Likely if You're White*, BROOKINGS (Aug. 6, 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/following-the-success-sequence-success-is-more-likely-if-youre-white/>.

⁴⁹ See Vali Chandrasekaran, *Correlation or Causation*, BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK (Dec. 1, 2011, 7:11 PM), <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-12-01/correlation-or-causation>.

⁵⁰ Randall Morck & Bernard Yeung, *Economics, History, and Causation*, 85 BUS. HIST. REV. 39, 61 (2011).

⁵¹ PETER H. SCHUCK, ONE NATION UNDECIDED: CLEAR THINKING ABOUT FIVE HARD ISSUES THAT DIVIDE US 43–44 (2017).

⁵² Morck & Yeung, *supra* note 50, at 53.

⁵³ Ashenfelter & Rouse, *supra* note 29, at 89.

⁵⁴ Morck & Yeung, *supra* note 50, at 61.

smoking gun; and history can often supply sufficient circumstantial evidence to convict.”⁵⁵ Neither Haskins and Sawhill nor Wilcox and Wang claim to have “proven” causation, but Sawhill’s position is that empirical research and the broader literature suggest the relationship between playing by the rules of the Success Sequence and economic success is predominantly causal.⁵⁶ Correlation being only a hint at causation, it is debatable whether the correlation identified by Sawhill, Haskins, Wilcox and Wang is a “smoking gun” that has been supplemented with enough evidence to “convict,” i.e., infer a causal relationship between adherence to the Success Sequence and economic success. Additional work could be valuable in clarifying and refining the nature of the relationship between the Success Sequence and economic success. While there appears to be opportunities for refinement, it may be unfair to disqualify the Success Sequence from the poverty conversation for lack of explicit causal relationship.

C. *The Structure Versus Agency Issue*

Some critics have written that the Success Sequence “frames structural inequalities as matters of individual choice”⁵⁷ and that it ignores “inequality of opportunity among Americans from different family backgrounds.”⁵⁸ I have grouped these and related issues into the broad category of “structure versus agency”. This issue has its origins in differing poverty theories, which is most prominently expressed by the tension between agency and structure. Structural theorists focus on systemic failures and macro-level labor market conditions that put people at risk of poverty⁵⁹ such as deindustrialization,⁶⁰ isolation, food deserts, institutional racism,⁶¹ and “missing” black men due to mass incarceration.⁶² Agency theorists focus on individual responsibility, choice and consequence, and look to moral decay, family disintegration, and

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 42.

⁵⁶ HASKINS & SAWHILL, *supra* note 2, at 72; Isabel Sawhill & Edward Rodrigue, *The Three Norms Analysis: Technical Background*, BROOKINGS 1, 6 (Aug. 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/sawhill-2018-revision-to-appendix.pdf> (last revised Mar. 2018).

⁵⁷ Alexander, *supra* note 5.

⁵⁸ Lane Kenworthy, *It's Hard to Make It in America: How the United States Stopped Being the Land of Opportunity*, 91 FOREIGN AFFS. 97, 99 (2012).

⁵⁹ DAVID BRADY, RICH DEMOCRACIES, POOR PEOPLE: HOW POLITICS EXPLAINS POVERTY 146 (2009).

⁶⁰ BARRY BLUESTONE & BENNETT HARRISON, DEINDUSTRIALIZATION OF AMERICA: PLANT CLOSINGS, COMMUNITY ABANDONMENT, AND THE DISMANTLING OF BASIC INDUSTRY (1982).

⁶¹ SCHUCK, *supra* note 51, at 42–43, 56.

⁶² Tanner, *supra* note 45.

disincentives for personal growth created by existing poverty-fighting policies as causes of poverty.⁶³

Many critics of the Success Sequence take the approach that structure trumps agency such that it is difficult for children raised in poorer communities to make the same life choices as children raised in wealthy communities with respect to education, work, and family formation because of the obstacles thrown up by structural inequality.⁶⁴ Some note that it is unfair to compare marriage rates from poorer communities to those in wealthier communities when poor communities suffer from drastic shortages of eligible men.⁶⁵ Randles' position is that "the absence or poor timing of marriage is not what tends to undermine the Success Sequence," but rather "the absence of educational and occupational opportunity."⁶⁶ Others have focused on the obstacles presented by racial discrimination.⁶⁷ Still others have questioned whether it is fair to expect as much from poor children because they are raised in environments with low graduation rates, high unemployment rates, high incarceration rates, and poor housing.⁶⁸

Some have extended the structure-trumps-agency view to the point of adopting a position that it is impossible for poor children to make the same life choices as their wealthier counterparts and that agency-based solutions (such as the Success Sequence) should not be pursued at all until structural issues are adequately addressed. According to one such author, "[u]ntil we deal with such issues as a biased criminal justice system, a failing public school system, and barriers to job creation, let alone systemic racism and gender bias, the success sequence seems more sideshow than main event."⁶⁹ Likewise, from a race based perspective, another wrote, "[u]ntil we break the structural barriers that keep Black Americans from reaping the benefits of their individual responsibility, arguments about why some don't follow norms risk being beside the point."⁷⁰ Are structure-based solutions and agency-based solutions mutually exclusive, as seemingly put forward by the aforementioned viewpoints? It appears that this is the policy approach that has been adopted when public spending is examined.

⁶³ SCHUCK, *supra* note 51, at 43.

⁶⁴ Brent Orrell, *Success Is not a Sequence*, AM. ENTER. INST. (Jan. 8, 2019), <https://www.aei.org/education/k-12-schooling/success-is-not-a-sequence>; Tanner, *supra* note 45.

⁶⁵ Cohen, *supra* note 28.

⁶⁶ RANGLES, *supra* note 36, at 92.

⁶⁷ Reeves et al., *supra* note 48.

⁶⁸ Orrell, *supra* note 64.

⁶⁹ Tanner, *supra* note 45.

⁷⁰ Reeves et al., *supra* note 48.

Although there is debate about exactly how much is spent, the United States spends hundreds of billions of dollars each year on welfare programs, many of which are designed to reduce systemic inequalities.⁷¹ Funding for agency-based programs is much less prevalent. For example, the Healthy Marriage Initiative, which proposed \$300 million for programs promoting the health and stability of marriage in the United States as part of the 2006 Welfare Reauthorization Act, represented “one penny spent to promote healthy marriage for every five dollars being spent to subsidize single parenthood.”⁷² The proposed \$300 million was reduced to \$150 million in the version signed into law.⁷³ While that is a large sum when viewed in isolation, it does not seem quite so large when compared to the nearly \$800 billion spent each year on federal means-tested programs, which provide cash and other aid to those with low incomes in the United States.⁷⁴ This is not meant to be a critique of means-tested programs, but it does beg the question of whether this disparity in government spending signals that the debate is closed, i.e., that we should not pursue agency-based solutions until virtually all structural obstacles have been eliminated. Or, is there room for consideration of an agency-based approach, such as the Success Sequence, in the poverty conversation?

When evaluating the structure-trumps-agency position in light of Wang and Wilcox’s 2017 study of Millennials, it does not appear to be fair to claim that structural issues make it *impossible* to follow the Success Sequence for a couple of reasons. First, many of the above-referenced obstacles were addressed directly by Wang and Wilcox. As their 2017 study demonstrated, “[t]he association between following the success sequence and avoiding poverty remains robust after controlling for various factors such as education, childhood family income, race/ethnicity, sex, [and aptitude].”⁷⁵ Second, Wang and Wilcox’s data presents an interesting subset of individuals

⁷¹ Mike Konczal, *No, We Don’t Spend \$1 Trillion on Welfare Each Year*, WASH. POST, (Jan. 12, 2014, 11:41 AM), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/01/12/no-we-dont-spend-1-trillion-on-welfare-each-year/>; Michael Tanner, *The American Welfare State: How We Spend Nearly \$1 Trillion a Year Fighting Poverty—and Fail*, CATO INST. POL’Y ANALYSIS 2 (Apr. 11, 2012), <https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/PA694.pdf>.

⁷² Robert Rector & Melissa Pardue, *Understanding the President’s Healthy Marriage Initiative*, 1741 HERITAGE FOUND. BACKGROUNDER 1, 7 (Mar. 26, 2004), <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/understanding-the-presidents-healthy-marriage-initiative>.

⁷³ Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, Pub. L. No. 109-171, 120 Stat. 4.

⁷⁴ See CONG. BUDGET OFF., FEDERAL MANDATORY SPENDING FOR MEANS-TESTED PROGRAMS, 2009 TO 2029, 1–2 (June 17, 2019), <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-06/55347-MeansTested.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Wang & Wilcox, *supra* note 3, at 5.

who demonstrate the possibility of overcoming systemic obstacles allowing them to follow the sequence to “success.” Young adults raised in the bottom third of the income distribution (the “poor”) are less likely than those raised in the upper third of the income distribution (the “wealthy”) to follow the Success Sequence. Specifically, only 31% of those who grew up poor completed all three steps in the sequence, compared to 65% of those who grew up wealthy.⁷⁶ This performance gap gives considerable weight to the argument that following the Success Sequence is more difficult for those who grow up poor. However, the subset of “formerly poor” (as defined below) cuts sharply against the position that structural barriers make following the Success Sequence impossible.

Re-examining Wang and Wilcox’s data by shifting the focus from the 68% of those who grew up poor and missed a step shows that a meaningful percentage (31%) of those who grew up poor were indeed able to overcome structural obstacles and follow all three steps of the Success Sequence.⁷⁷ Moreover, roughly 80% of that subset went on to achieve “success” in that they ended up in the middle or upper bands of income.⁷⁸ Thus, extrapolation of these figures shows that roughly 25% of those who grew up poor were able to both follow the Success Sequence and achieve “success” in terms of avoiding poverty and attaining higher income. I will call this subset the “formerly poor.” J.D. Vance is one such individual. Vance is a millennial who described his path from a disadvantaged background (including a heroin-addicted mother) to Yale Law School and beyond in his best-selling autobiography.⁷⁹ While Vance is not representative of the entire “formerly poor” subset, there are broader examples. For instance, children from lower income areas of Mormon Utah achieved higher rates of economic mobility, and children of poor Chinese immigrants from Brooklyn have been admitted to New York City’s elite public schools at a high rate.⁸⁰ Wilcox links these Mormon and immigrant achievements to those communities’ general pattern of life choices which are common to both the Success Sequence and those communities’ traditional parenting advice.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 20.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 21.

⁷⁹ See generally J.D. VANCE, *HILLBILLY ELEGY: A MEMOIR OF A FAMILY AND CULTURE IN CRISIS* (2016).

⁸⁰ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Straight Talk About the Success Sequence, Marriage and Poverty*, CATO UNBOUND (May 14, 2018), <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/05/14/w-bradford-wilcox/straight-talk-about-success-sequence-marriage-poverty>.

⁸¹ *Id.*

The fact that approximately one in four “formerly poor” individuals are able to overcome structural obstacles and follow the Success Sequence to “success” supports the conclusion that, in light of structural barriers, agency plays a role in individual outcome. Other scholars have recognized this blend of agency and structure. Cumulative advantage theorists recognize the importance of agency in accounting for trajectories of inequality.⁸² The same is true of life-course crime theorists. According to Sampson and Laub, a focus purely on structure is incomplete.⁸³ They “seek to reposition human agency as a central element in understanding crime and deviance over the life course” and to reconcile agency and structure through concepts of “turning points” and “situated choice” (i.e., individuals respond to specific situations, both opportunities and constraints).⁸⁴ They explained these concepts and the intersection of structure and agency through Andrew Abbott’s analogy of a lock and key: “A major turning point has the potential to open a system the way a key has the potential to open a lock . . . action is necessary to complete the turning.”⁸⁵ Sampson and Laub have offered a life-course theory of crime wherein they place great importance on “turning points” that can change an individual’s trajectory over time.⁸⁶ There are clear parallels between turning points and the components of the Success Sequence. For example, Sampson and Laub focused on the relationship between crime and school attachments in adolescence and the relationship between marital stability and employment in adulthood.⁸⁷ The “turning points” hypothesis has been tested by others, and the results were supportive.⁸⁸

In a similar vein, perhaps greater consideration can be given to agency as a part of the poverty equation. Innovative solutions such as the Success Sequence could be pursued right alongside with, and as a supplement to, structure-based solutions. Even if the full suite of policy changes recommended by Haskins and Sawhill were passed into law, the \$20 billion price tag (including their \$500 million for a Success Sequence campaign) would still be a “side show” in terms of government spending when

⁸² Dannefer, *supra* note 30, at S333.

⁸³ Robert J. Sampson & John H. Laub, *A Life-Course View of the Development of Crime*, 602 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 12, 37 (2005).

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 39–40, 43.

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 43; Andrew Abbott, *On the Concept of Turning Point*, in COMPAR. SOC. RSCH. 102 (Grete Brochmann et al. eds., 16th ed. 1997).

⁸⁶ Sampson & Laub, *supra* note 83, at 18.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 15.

⁸⁸ Hope Corman et al., *Life Shocks and Crime: A Test of the “Turning Point” Hypothesis*, 48 DEMOGRAPHY 1177, 1199 (2011).

compared to the structure-based spending on means-tested federal programs.

IV. THE SUCCESS SEQUENCE AS A PATH AWAY FROM CRIME

While the Success Sequence has thus far been measured in economic terms, could the Sequence offer another measure of “success” in that those who follow it might place themselves in a position where they are less likely to commit or be convicted of crime? Analysis here will be based on my experience in North Carolina, a state situated in the southeastern United States. Roughly the size of England geographically, Norway economically, and Austria in terms of population, North Carolina is a big state, and crime deterrence and prosecution within North Carolina are big costs.⁸⁹ I saw this firsthand as the North Carolina Governor’s Budget Director and head of the Office of State Budget and Management. The 2018–2019 fiscal year budget for the North Carolina Department of Public Safety was approximately \$2.3 billion.⁹⁰ Over a five-year period from January 1, 2014, to December 31, 2018, an average of 24,151 people entered prison and 51,821 entered probation each year after being convicted of—or pleading guilty to—state crimes in North Carolina.⁹¹ The average cost to house an inmate in a North Carolina prison is approximately \$100 per day,⁹² and the North Carolina Indigent Defense Services (court-appointed attorneys for criminal defendants who cannot afford to hire their own attorney) costs North Carolina taxpayers \$132 million per year.⁹³

In addition to the high-level view of the systemic costs of crime, I was also given a personal and intimate look at the ground-level human cost of crime during my service as a Superior Court Judge. The Superior Court is the highest state trial court in North Carolina and the court in which crimes

⁸⁹ Although the impetus for this article comes from experience in North Carolina state government, the ideas are likely applicable throughout the United States and beyond.

⁹⁰ N.C. OFF. OF STATE BUDGET & MGMT., CURRENT OPERATIONS APPROPRIATION 6 (Sept. 25, 2018, 11:38 AM), https://files.nc.gov/ncosbm/documents/files/2018-19_Certified_190_PublicSafety.pdf.

⁹¹ N.C. OFF. OF RSCH. & PLAN., N.C. DEP’T OF PUB. SAFETY, AUTOMATED SYSTEM QUERY: PRISON ENTRIES, <https://webapps.doc.state.nc.us/apps/asqExt/ASQ> (last visited March 17, 2021) (providing publicly searchable information on the North Carolina offender population) [hereinafter PRISON ENTRIES].

⁹² DIV. OF PROF. STAND., POL’Y & PLAN., N.C. DEP’T OF PUB. SAFETY, FISCAL YEAR 2016-2017 ANNUAL STATISTICAL REPORT 8 (2017), <https://randp.doc.state.nc.us/pubdocs/0007081.PDF> (last visited Mar. 17, 2021).

⁹³ N.C. INDIGENT DEF. SERVS. ADMIN., ANNUAL REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON INDIGENT DEFENSE SERVICES 10-11 (2019) https://www.ncleg.gov/documentsites/committees/JLOCJPS//Reports/FY%202018-19/IDS_2018_Annual_Report_2019_03_15.pdf.

ranging from possession of marijuana to capital murder are tried.⁹⁴ Success Sequence elements (education, employment, and marriage/family formation) are oftentimes discussed during key hearings in determining proper punishment for the criminal acts committed. If criminal defendants are found guilty at trial, plead guilty to a crime, or admit to a probation violation, they are given an opportunity to be heard by a Superior Court Judge who will determine the appropriate sentence or punishment. Because judges have discretion with respect to punishment, advocates often provide the judge with details of the life circumstances in which guilty defendants' crimes were committed in an effort to advocate for a more lenient punishment. The judge is typically informed of the defendant's education level,⁹⁵ employment,⁹⁶ and information about their spouse and dependents, if any.⁹⁷ After participating in a great many of these hearings in over half of North Carolina's 100 counties (both rural and urban), courtroom experience showed that a significant portion of criminal defendants did not graduate high school, had irregular employment or were unemployed, and often had at least one child out of wedlock. In short, it seemed that many criminal defendants were not following the Success Sequence.

Available information appears to corroborate my courtroom observations. Information is collected from offenders during intake interviews upon transition into probation or prison. Much of this information, including offender educational attainment and marital status for both prisoners and probationers, is stored by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety and is available online through a searchable database.⁹⁸ Additional information, including employment status and number of dependents upon entering prison over the same time period, was made available by the North Carolina Department of Public Safety Reentry, Programs & Services division through a statistics request,⁹⁹ but only for prisoners and not for probationers. This information corroborates courtroom experience with respect to offenders in the areas of education,

⁹⁴ See N.C. GEN. STAT. § 7A-270.

⁹⁵ N.C. ADMIN. OFF. OF THE COURTS, TRANSCRIPT OF PLEA, https://www.nccourts.gov/assets/documents/forms/cr300_0.pdf?OTu_kn3ypl3dZKJlJelgGR.2at2EKvdYt (last visited March 8, 2021).

⁹⁶ N.C. ADMIN. OFF. OF THE COURTS, AFFIDAVIT OF INDIGENCY, <https://www.nccourts.gov/assets/documents/forms/cr226-en.pdf?e1Vg5Goi1xRI3OAVkbpPBdXUyDuK.yrV> (last visited Mar. 8, 2021).

⁹⁷ *Id.*

⁹⁸ PRISON ENTRIES, *supra* note 91.

⁹⁹ N.C. DEP'T OF PUB. SAFETY, REENTRY, PROGRAMS & SERVS., STATISTICS REQUEST (2019) (providing demographic data regarding prisoners upon their entry to prison) (on file with author) [hereinafter STATISTICS REQUEST].

employment and marriage, showing a significant performance gap when comparing adults convicted of crimes in North Carolina with the overall adult population of North Carolina.

While 29.57% of prisoners¹⁰⁰ and 50.48% of probationers¹⁰¹ reported that they had completed the 12th grade or higher,¹⁰² the overall North Carolina high school graduation rate is now at 86% and has not been below 70% since the 2002–2003 cohort.¹⁰³ Although it is unclear from the data how long periods of unemployment persisted prior to incarceration, 50.47% of North Carolina offenders were unemployed upon entering prison¹⁰⁴ in a state where the unemployment rate had not been above 6% from 2014 until the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020.¹⁰⁵ Marriage rates are also significantly lower for prisoners (11.37%)¹⁰⁶ and probationers (13.66%)¹⁰⁷ versus all adult North Carolinians (approx. 50%).¹⁰⁸ No specific data is available with respect to the timing of marriage before having children. However, nearly 40% of prisoners reported having one or more dependents at the time they entered prison,¹⁰⁹ despite less than 12% of prisoners reporting that they were married at the time they entered prison.¹¹⁰

Does the underperformance of North Carolina's adult offenders' individual components of the Success Sequence suggest a relationship

¹⁰⁰ PRISON ENTRIES, *supra* note 91.

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

¹⁰² Completion of Grade 12 indicates graduation from high school in the United States.

¹⁰³ Kelly Hinchcliffe, *NC's Graduation Rate, School Grades Improve, but 'Stubborn Concerns' Remain*, WRAL (Sept. 7, 2017, 8:16 PM), <https://www.wral.com/nc-s-graduation-rate-school-grades-improve-but-stubborn-concerns-remain/16930955/>; T. Keung Hui & David Raynor, *NC Has Released 2018–2019 School Test Scores. See How Your Child's School Did.*, NEWS & OBSERVER (Sept. 6, 2019, 7:03 AM), <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article234660897.html>; *Cohort Graduation Rates*, N.C. DEP'T OF PUB. INSTRUCTION, <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/testing-and-school-accountability/school-accountability-and-reporting/cohort-graduation-rates#4-year-cohort-graduation-rates> (last visited Apr. 1, 2021).

¹⁰⁴ STATISTICS REQUEST, *supra* note 99.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATS., *ECONOMY AT A GLANCE: NORTH CAROLINA*, <https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.nc.htm> (last visited Apr. 1, 2021); U.S. DEP'T OF LABOR, *DATABASES, TABLES & CALCULATORS BY SUBJECT: NORTH CAROLINA*, https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST37000000000003?amp%253bdata_tool=XGtable&out_put_view=data&include_graphs=true (last visited Apr. 1, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ PRISON ENTRIES, *supra* note 91.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Tippett, *North Carolina: State of Our Unions*, CAROLINA DEMOGRAPHY (Feb. 2, 2014), <https://www.ncdemography.org/2014/02/10/north-carolina-state-of-our-unions/>.

¹⁰⁹ STATISTICS REQUEST, *supra* note 99.

¹¹⁰ PRISON ENTRIES, *supra* note 91.

between criminal conviction and lack of adherence to the Success Sequence? Could an individual's likelihood of committing crime be reduced if the Success Sequence were followed? First, consider a simple cost-benefit analysis. As an individual's lawful income goes up, so does that individual's cost for committing crime. The economic theory of crime assumes that an individual is more likely to commit a criminal offense if the expected benefit to that individual exceeds the expected costs, such as lost income from legal activity.¹¹¹ Not only does the "cost" of committing crime increase due to higher lawful income for the individual who has completed the Success Sequence—versus those in the bottom third of income distribution—but other "costs" also emerge, such as potential damage to a marital relationship. For those who are on track to complete the Success Sequence, the costs of a crime include potentially losing their place in school, foregoing higher future income, and incurring a criminal record, which would cause them to be a less-attractive mate when entering the marriage pool. All of these costs could outweigh the benefit of committing crime. Thus, the economic theory of crime could explain why those who follow the Success Sequence would be less likely to commit crime.

Second, research outside of theoretical economics provides strong support for a relationship between crime and the Success Sequence components of education, employment, and marriage. Lochner and Moretti concluded that education significantly reduces criminal activity such "that a one-year increase in average education levels is estimated to reduce arrest rates by 11[%]" with these impacts being unchanged "even when rich measures of individual ability and family background are controlled for . . ."¹¹² Sampson and Laub found that "job stability and marital attachment in adulthood were significantly related to *changes* in adult crime—the stronger the adult ties to work and family, the less crime and deviance among both delinquents and nondelinquent controls."¹¹³ A related 2006 study by Sampson, Laub, and Wimer inferred that marriage causally inhibits crime and found that "being married is associated with a significant reduction in the probability of crime, averaging approximately 35[%] across key models These basic findings were robust, and thus consistent with the notion that marriage causally

¹¹¹ Gary S. Becker, *Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach*, 76 J. POL. ECON. 169, 176–77 (1968). For an analysis on how education reduces criminal activity see Lance Lochner & Enrico Moretti, *The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence From Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self-Reports*, 94 AM. ECON. REV. 155, 183 (2004).

¹¹² *Id.* at 175, 183.

¹¹³ Sampson & Laub, *supra* note 83, at 15.

inhibits crime over the life course.”¹¹⁴ Together these studies indicate that the Success Sequence could be pursued as a path away from crime.

The next issue is how to deploy the Success Sequence most effectively as a crime deterrent. Given the negative downstream effects of having a criminal record, the greatest utility of the Success Sequence would be in primary crime prevention. Accordingly, “programs that intervene early in life to reduce risk factors for delinquent and criminal behaviors” should be examined, as they “not only effectively prevent crime but also are cost-effective solutions that save public resources.”¹¹⁵ For example, the Communities that Care program has documented a return of \$5.30 for every \$1.00 invested, with much of the savings coming in the form of juvenile delinquency avoidance.¹¹⁶ Program design is outside the scope of this article, but the Success Sequence message would seem to have a natural home within programs aimed at providing purpose and life skills to youth such as those found in Communities that Care. Other possible developmental or primary crime prevention programming could include devoting portions of formal elementary, middle school, and high school curricula to the Success Sequence, or incorporating the Success Sequence into parenting classes and mentor programs offered through organizations such as the YMCA or Big Brothers Big Sisters.¹¹⁷

Although the Success Sequence’s primary effectiveness may be as a preventative measure, components of the Success Sequence have also shown to be effective in secondary crime prevention programs designed to reduce juvenile recidivism. For example, Lipsey’s meta-analysis of the effectiveness of interventions on juvenile recidivism found that skill-building programs were effective,¹¹⁸ and among the main forms of skill-building programs were academic training, job training, and social skills training.¹¹⁹ Given the apparent effectiveness in employing the individual Success Sequence components to combat recidivism, there may be utility in pursuing the whole

¹¹⁴ Robert J. Sampson, John H. Laub & Christopher Wimer, *Does Marriage Reduce Crime? A Counterfactual Approach to Within-Individual Causal Effects*, 44 CRIMINOLOGY 465, 498 (2006).

¹¹⁵ Daniel Max Crowley, *Building Efficient Crime Prevention Strategies*, 12 CRIMINOLOGY & PUB. POL’Y 353, 353 (2013).

¹¹⁶ Margaret R. Kuklinski et al., *Cost-Benefit Analysis of Communities That Care Outcomes at Eighth Grade*, 13 PREVENTION SCI. 150 (2011).

¹¹⁷ The YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) and Big Brothers Big Sisters are non-profit organizations in the United States with missions of providing support to at-risk children. See BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS, <https://www.bbbs.org/about-us> (last visited Apr. 2, 2021); THE Y: YMCA, <https://www.ymca.net/about-us> (last visited Mar. 15, 2021).

¹¹⁸ Mark W. Lipsey, *The Primary Factors That Characterize Effective Interventions With Juvenile Offenders: A Meta-Analytic Overview*, 4 VICTIMS & OFFENDERS 127 (2009).

¹¹⁹ *Id.* at 135.

package of the Success Sequence as a restorative measure after an individual has already been convicted of a crime, at least in the juvenile context.

V. CONCLUSION

Given North Carolina offenders' underperformance in the Success Sequence components and the apparent relationship between adherence to the components of the Success Sequence and reduction in an individual's likelihood of being convicted of crime, there may be merit in extending the Success Sequence into the crime conversation. Rigorous statistical analysis of the relationship between the Success Sequence and criminal conviction is beyond the scope of this article, but it could be a fruitful endeavor for future work, and at least some of the data sets necessary to perform such analysis appear to exist. The National Youth Longitudinal Survey, which was the source for Wilcox and Wang's 2017 study, includes data for the variable "crime, delinquency, and arrest." While Wilcox and Wang analyzed the relationship between education/work/marriage and income in evaluating the Success Sequence in terms of economic success, it could be valuable to analyze the relationship between education/work/marriage and "crime, delinquency and arrest" to evaluate the Success Sequence in terms of "success" measured by a clean criminal record.

Existing criticism of the Success Sequence would certainly attach to any extension of it into the crime conversation. Thus, the criticisms discussed in this article and elsewhere should be an engine for further refinement and development of the Success Sequence from both the crime and poverty perspectives. Much could be gained by incorporating the theories advanced by other social science disciplines such as assortative marriage, human capital, cumulative advantage, turning points, and situated choice. Rigorous methodologies could be deployed to render more exacting examinations of causal relationships. Perhaps intrafamily comparisons such as father and son comparisons (using the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth and Older Men),¹²⁰ sibling comparisons (using the National Longitudinal Survey and Panel Study of Income Dynamics),¹²¹ or even identical twin comparisons¹²² could be performed, all of which have aided the study of the relationship between education and income. Likewise, applying sophisticated techniques utilized by Sampson, Laub, and Wimer, such as counterfactual methods of causal inference, could further assist in addressing selection effects and other

¹²⁰ Ashenfelter & Rouse, *supra* note 29, at 93.

¹²¹ *Id.* at 95–96.

¹²² *Id.* at 96–99.

causation issues.¹²³ Additionally, culture and gender surely play a role in the way that individuals view success and how they make life choices. Both should be explored more deeply in further Success Sequence development, whether in the context of poverty or crime.

The “formerly poor” identified above should be a focus of further study. Specifically, how do we expand that group? What allowed nearly one in four of those individuals who grew up poor to follow the Success Sequence *and* move into the middle or upper third of income distribution despite the structural obstacles they faced? What common factors led to their success? What can we learn from J.D. Vance, low income Utah Mormons, and Brooklyn’s poor Chinese immigrants such that we could expand the percentage of “formerly poor” and contract the percentage of those whose poverty persists into adulthood?

Surveys of the “formerly poor” and the persistent poor alike would surely be a worthwhile endeavor. Perhaps there are relatively small barriers that, if removed, could nudge individuals to follow the Success Sequence who might otherwise not. For example, research suggests that assisting students with the college application process, helping students complete financial aid forms, or even simply providing students with information about college improved college matriculation outcomes, especially for low-income students and students attending disadvantaged high schools.¹²⁴ Could there be similar practical assistance that could nudge low-income or disadvantaged students toward following the Success Sequence?

The knowledge and insight we gain from these questions about the “formerly poor” and persistent poor could be a major driver for shaping policy with respect to the Success Sequence as well as its uncontroversial individual components of promoting education, remunerative employment, and family stability. Finally, although there is work to be done in program design, extending the Success Sequence to the criminal justice system in preventative or even restorative applications could provide another measure of success.

¹²³ Sampson et al., *supra* note 114, at 471–72.

¹²⁴ Amanda Pallais, *Small Differences That Matter: Mistakes in Applying to College*, 33 J. LAB. ECON. 493, 494 (2015).