

Cultivating Child Resilience Through Parental and Community Support in the Face of Poverty

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The Social Problem

Poverty in the United States is a pervasive social crisis that extends far beyond income levels. It affects housing, health, education, and opportunity, creating systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality across generations.



How Poverty Impacts Society:

- Mental Health:** People in poverty are 2x more likely to have depression
- Substance Abuse:** Higher risk of substance use and opioid overdoses
- Housing:** 90% of households below the poverty line are cost-burdened; 26% move each year
- Education:** Limited access to educational opportunities perpetuates poverty across generations
- Racial Disparity:** 19.3% of American Indian/Alaska Native and 25.4% of Black children live in poverty vs. 8.2% of white children

Children in Poverty

Children are the most vulnerable population in poverty. Children who live below the poverty line face devastating consequences for their development, health, and future opportunities.

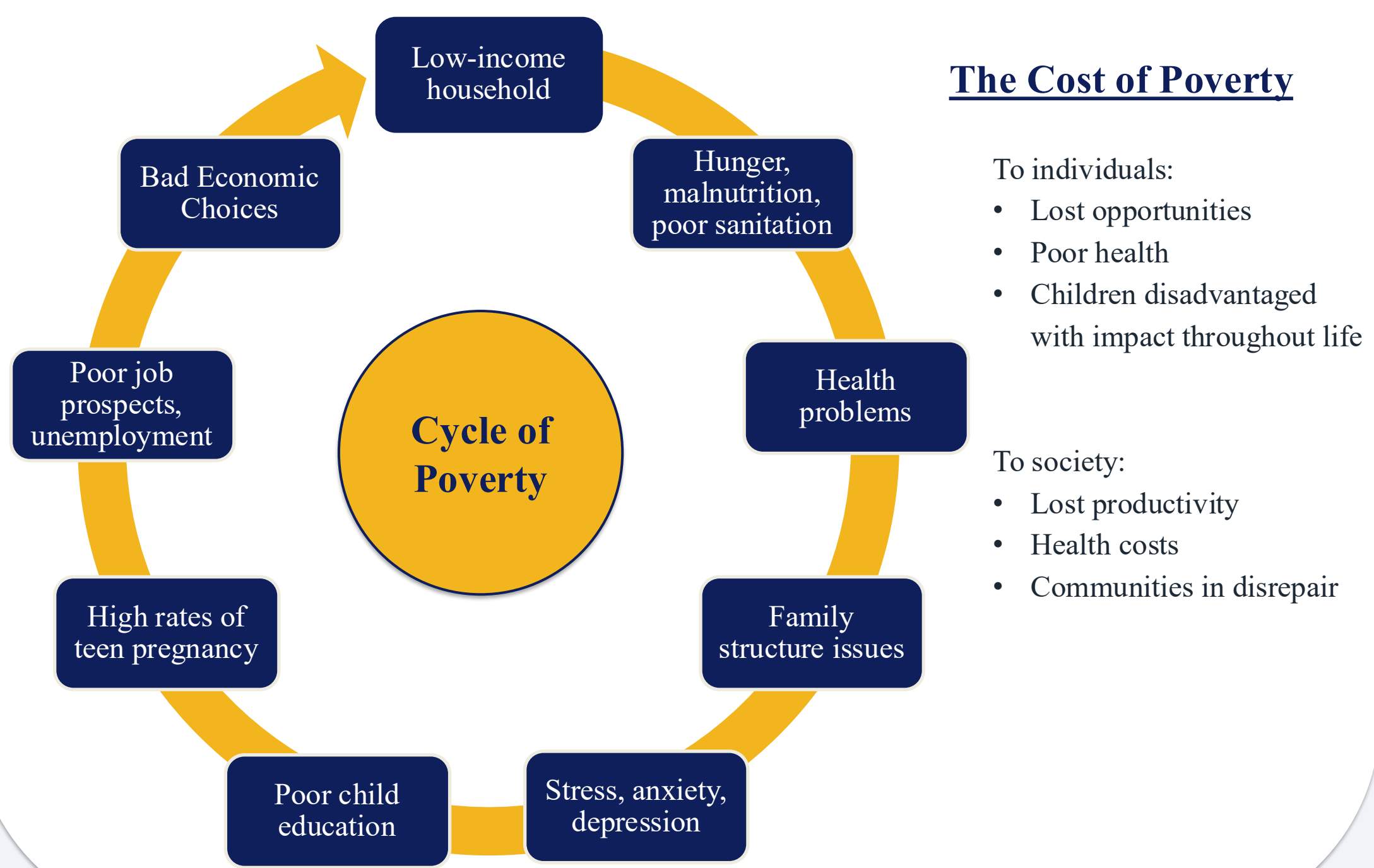


How Poverty Impacts Children:

- Mental Health:** Children are 2-3x more likely to develop mental health difficulties, increased emotional/behavioral problems, higher risk of depression, toxic stress, and developmental delays
- Racial disparities:** Black children (25.4%), Hispanic (20.2%), American Indian (25.7%)
- Working families affected:** 61% of children in poverty live with at least one employed parent
- Long-term effects:** Lower educational attainment, reduced lifetime earnings, and poorer health outcomes into adulthood

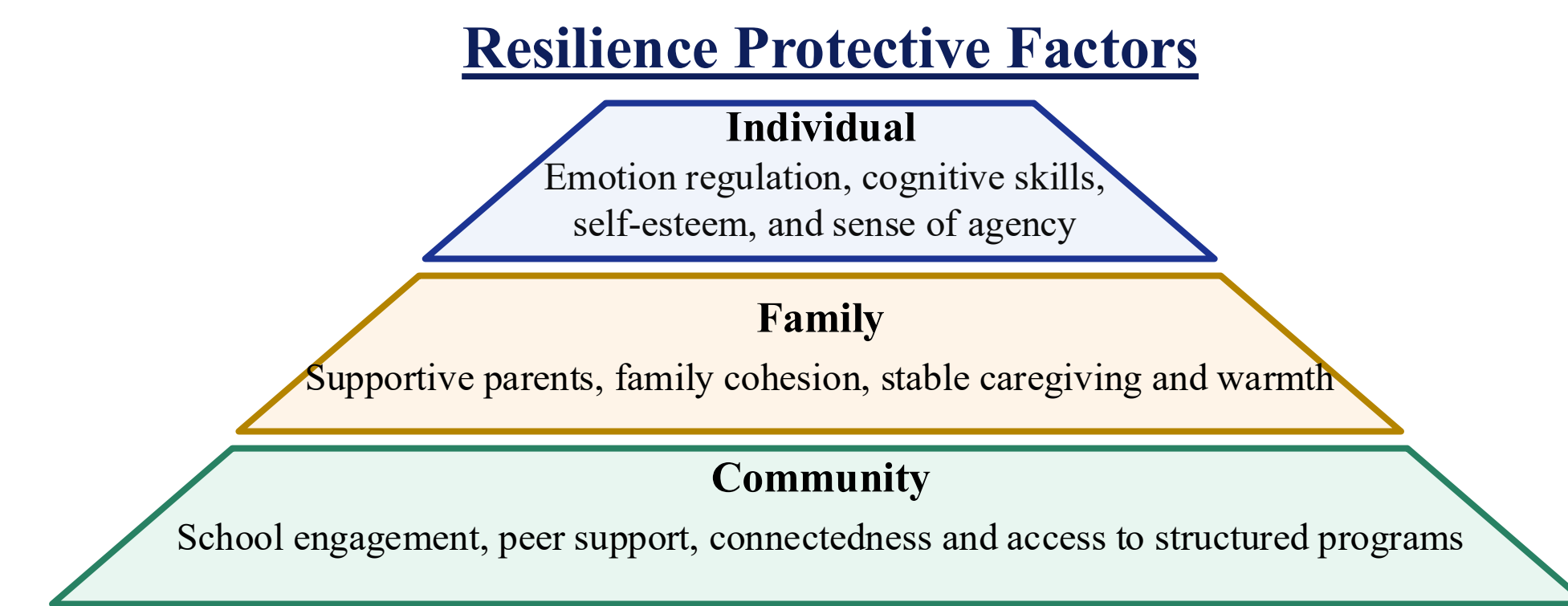
The Cycle of Poverty

The cycle of poverty is a self-reinforcing pattern in which poverty, once begun, persists across generations unless deliberate intervention breaks the chain. Roughly one-third of children who grow up poor will also experience poverty as adults (Brookings, 2023). Children born into poverty face systemic barriers that limit opportunities and perpetuate disadvantage.



Resilience Science Framework

Resilience can be understood as the capacity of individuals, families, or communities to rebound from adversity, maintain or regain functioning, and even experience growth in the face of persistent stress. Resilience reflects the brain's remarkable capacity for positive neuroplasticity.



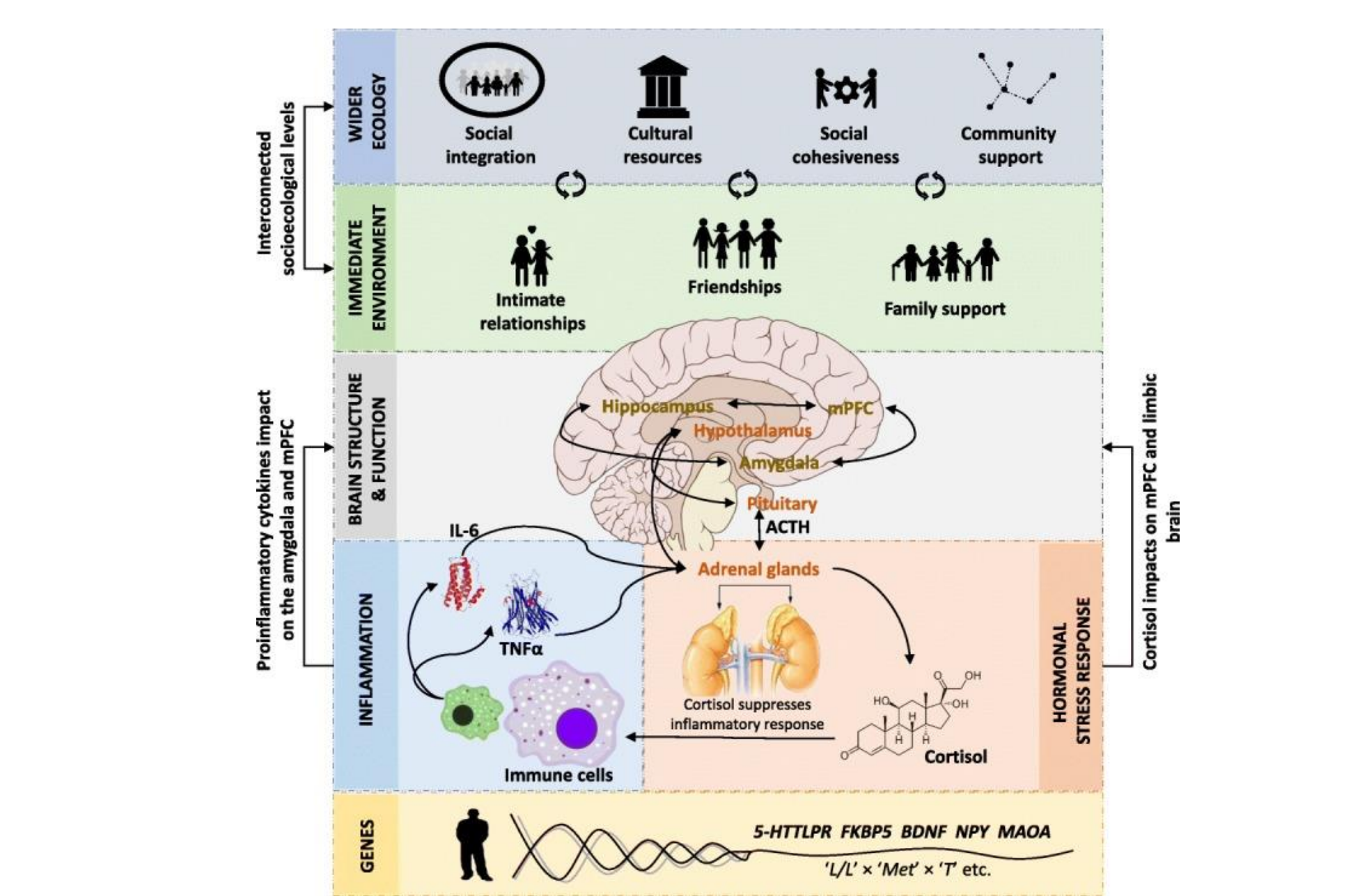
The Neurobiology of Resilience

The Biological Effects of Stress:

- The brain manages stress through the **prefrontal cortex** (planning) and **hippocampus** (memory)
- Chronic stress changes **cortisol** levels and **inflammation**, which can harm brain development
- The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis controls **cortisol** release under stress. Chronic adversity without support can cause this system to become dysregulated

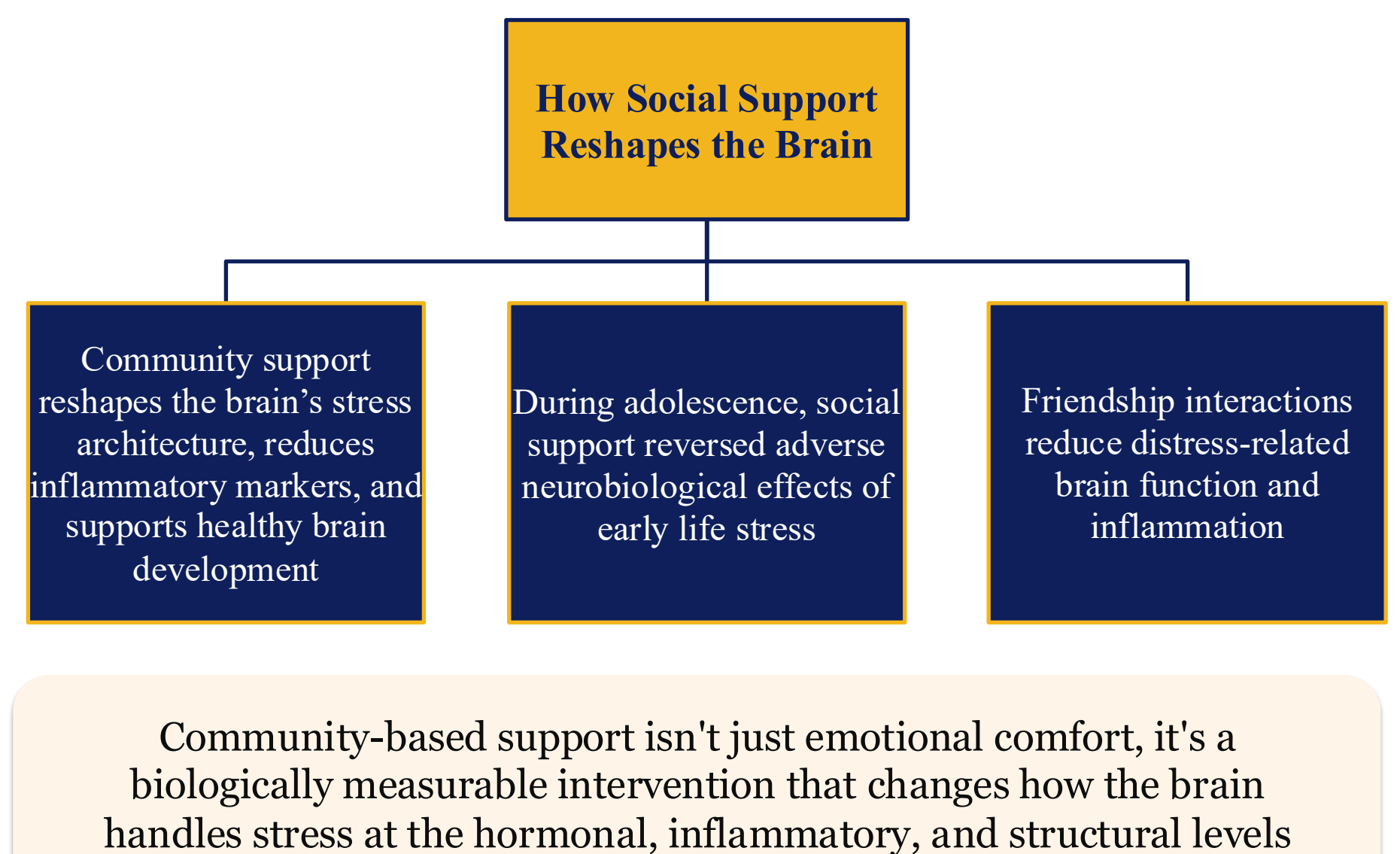
The Effects of Resiliency:

- Supportive relationships** help regulate cortisol patterns, keeping the stress response system in a healthier range
- The ability to **regulate emotions** is a key factor in bouncing back from adversity
- Social support can **reshape the brain** and reduce stress responses, even after early adversity
- Bottom Up:** how the body's physiology handles adversity, with consistent stress, children may become anxious
- Top Down:** how external networks, relationships, and cultural resources facilitate healing and growth



Resilient individuals show a larger prefrontal cortex (PFC), the ability to regulate emotions, decrease stress reactivity and cortisol levels. Resiliency increases with social support from the immediate environment and the wider ecology. Adapted from Ioannidis et al.

Resiliency and Social Support



The Power of Resiliency

Two main contributing factors to resiliency are social and community support, as well as parenting. Many studies have researched the effects of these on children facing adversity or poverty.

Social & Community Support

- Study shows, 8-week support intervention increased hope levels in children ages 8-12
- Emotion regulation scores improved significantly with support
- 72% of urban youth in poverty received adult social support for coping
- Youth with support used more effective strategies (self-soothing, seeking help)
- Faith-based community support function as natural resilience infrastructure, addressing poverty through culturally affirming, multi-level support

Parenting as Protective Buffer

- Parental studies show, maternal warmth moderates financial difficulty's impact on child mental health
- Warm parenting helps children build core internal strengths, emotional security, self-belief, problem-solving ability, and social competence, which are the same skills that research identifies as key resilience factors
- Youth with support used more effective strategies (self-soothing, seeking help)
- Supportive parenting and family cohesion were among the most robust family-level protective factors across 53 longitudinal studies of children exposed to social adversity

Children in poverty who received consistent social support from caring adults — whether parents, family members, or community figures — showed improved **emotion regulation** and **higher hope** for the future, two critical ingredients for **breaking the cycle** of intergenerational poverty.

Proposed Intervention: Community-Based Resilience Hubs

This project proposes Community-Based Resilience Hubs in low-income Allegheny County neighborhoods, partnering with faith-based organizations to provide integrated support for both children and parents facing poverty and adversity.

Micro-Level: Child & Family

- Emotion regulation and coping skills groups for children ages 6-14
- After-school tutoring, mentorship, and homework help to close the achievement gap
- Parenting workshops on warmth, responsive caregiving, and stress management
- Therapeutic services: individual counseling, stress management, trauma-informed support

Mezzo-Level: Community

- Parent peer support groups that reduce isolation and build social networks among families in poverty
- Youth mentorship and leadership programs that build agency, hope, and future orientation
- Culturally affirming programming that strengthens identity, belonging, and community cohesion

Macro-Level: Structural Advocacy

- Advocate for public funding of community-based family resilience programs in high-poverty neighborhoods
- Mandate trauma-informed training in schools and integrate parent support into school-based services
- Use community-level outcome data to demonstrate that resilience hubs reduce poverty's impact on families

Poverty may be powerful, but it is not undefeatable. When families, communities, and organized support systems come together, they can push back against adversity and create conditions for children not just to survive, but to thrive.



Resiliency of Palestinian Children in Cumulative Trauma

A study of Bedouin children (ages 9-16) in the Jordan Valley found that resilience factors like agency and life satisfaction helped protect them from the psychological toll of cumulative trauma. The Bedouin children in this study showed remarkable resilience despite facing military violence, home demolitions, and displacement.

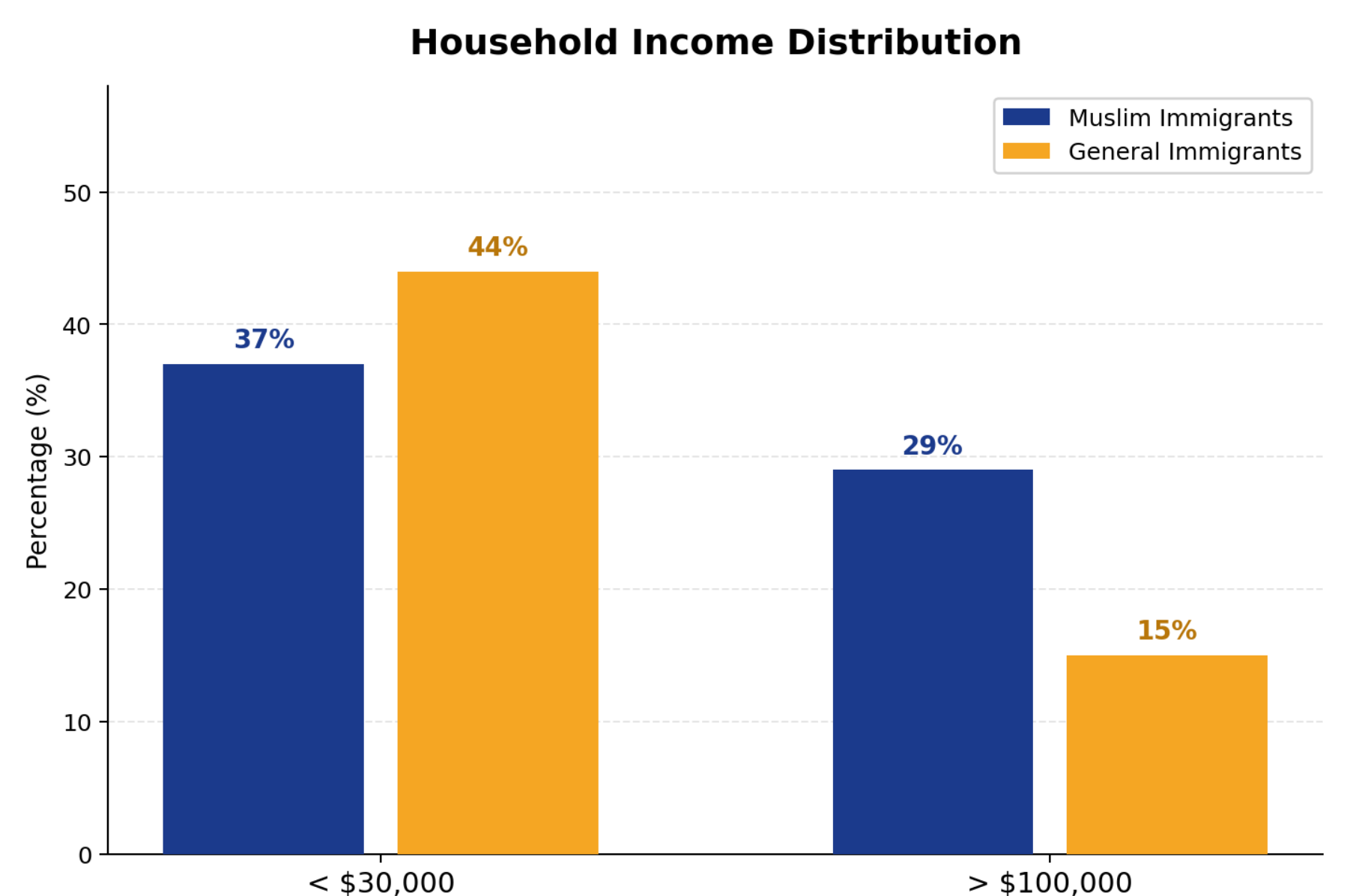
- 286** Bedouin children from four villages in the Jordan valley were studied
- 32.5%** reported military violence (home demolitions, army incursions, shootings) as their most frightening experience
- 44%** of Bedouin children in a related study had been diagnosed with psychiatric disorders linked to cumulative trauma



- Based on Bandura's theory, **agency** comes from **self-efficacy** beliefs — a person's belief in their own ability to manage their functioning and exercise control over events in their lives
- Children who believed in their ability to act and pursue goals felt more satisfied with life, which **reduced trauma** symptoms
- Children with high agency reported significantly **less avoidance**, **lower negative emotions** and greater satisfaction with friends and school than low-agency peers
- When children saw their peers, family, and school as safe, it **reduced arousal and intrusive symptoms**

Resilience in the Muslim Community

Based on Pew Research Center estimates, ~3.45 million Muslims live in the U.S. (1.1% of population). Muslim immigrants come from 75 different countries. They are the youngest faith group, with 1/3 under 30.



- In comparison to general immigrants, Muslim American immigrants tend to:
- Have better household incomes
 - Lower rates of poverty
 - Attain higher levels of education (college and beyond)

Resilience Factors of Muslims:

- Muslims report a strong sense of community supporting general mental health
- Studies found that observing daily prayers is associated with reduced depression
- Youth participation in organized religious activities helped to lower acculturative stress

Can the Cycle be Broken?

Head Start Program

Free early childhood education, nutrition, parent involvement services to low-income children.

- Positives**
- Higher education for the next generation
 - 8% reduction in teen pregnancies
 - 13% reduction in criminal engagement
 - 6-11% increase in the projected lifetime wages in the next generation
- Shortcomings & Limitations**
- Early improvements in cognitive test scores often disappeared by first and third grade
 - Benefits applied mainly to children from the 1960s, less evidence of the program's impact on children in more recent decades

Parent Management Training

Behavioral intervention program for parents with children exhibiting disruptive behavior in Oregon.

- Positives**
- Direct effects on family economic security
 - 9-year follow-up showed higher income, occupational prestige, and educational levels
 - Delivers an estimated \$5,108 in lifetime benefits per family
- Shortcomings & Limitations**
- The economic benefits were studied in families going through divorce, limiting how broadly results can be applied
 - No effects shown on intergenerational poverty

Case Study: Attawheed Islamic Community Center, Carnegie, PA

A Model Community Hub Reducing Poverty & Bio-Psycho-Social Challenges

The Attawheed Islamic Community Center (AIC) in Carnegie, PA, exemplifies how Muslim community centers function as resilience hubs that address poverty and bio-psycho-social challenges. Established in 1995 and serving over 1,000 patrons from West Pittsburgh and surrounding suburbs, AIC demonstrates how faith-based organizations can be powerful vehicles for community resilience.

Addressing Biological Stressors

- Safe communal spaces for daily prayer reduce chronic stress through mindfulness and routine
- Ramadan programming provides structured community meals, addressing food insecurity
- After school programs serving 200+ students provides structured environment promoting healthy development
- Consistent youth mentorship

1,000+

Patrons Served

Addressing Psychological Challenges

- Imam counseling (95% of imams engage in counseling)
- Multicultural education builds identity and self-esteem in Muslim youth
- Arabic language and cultural classes strengthen cultural identity against discrimination
- Community belonging reduces isolation and marginalization

200+

After-school Students Supported

25+

Countries Represented

Addressing Social Inequities

- Zakat (annual mandatory charity) directly addresses poverty amongst the Muslim community
- Multi-ethnic congregation from 25+ countries builds intercultural social capital
- Youth leadership through STEM education and community engagement
- Volunteer coordination connects families to support networks

Est. 1995

Serving Pittsburgh for 30+ Years