

# **DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES**

**Interviews with Past Presidents of the Population Association of America  
A Project of the PAA History Committee**

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**Interview with Greg Duncan  
PAA President in 2008**

**Interviewed by Dennis Hodgson, John Weeks, Karen Hardee, and Win Brown  
at the Sheraton Denver Downtown, 1550 Court Place, Denver, Colorado  
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Dr. Greg Duncan is Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine, and holds courtesy appointments there in the Department of Economics and the Department of Psychology and Social Behavior. He received his undergraduate degree at Grinnell College in 1970 and his Ph.D. in Economics in 1974 at the University of Michigan.

**HODGSON:** We're here today with Dr. Greg Duncan who was PAA president in 2008, and we'll be asking a number of questions. The first set is how you got into demography and training and mentorship and your ideas about how current graduate students should be trained, et cetera.

There's a second series of questions about how your career has changed over time and how you think demography changed over time. And then we have a third set of questions about the PAA specifically, and what are the big issues with it and how it might influence the course of demography.

We have an hour, and you might have a different set of priorities. Some of the questions you might really want to hit on. And if we're ignoring them or miss them, feel comfortable to bring them up and get a chance to talk about these things. Because in some ways I think it's going to be -- the questions are set for maybe an older kind of PAA president. Somebody who came up through population research centers had sort of a set of experiences in the context of being brought into contact with a demography that's different than yours.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** So in some ways, I think this is going to be fascinating for us, although sometimes the questions might look a little weird for someone coming from your particular background. But I think this is definitely where demography's going, so this is a fun potential interview.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** I'm thinking, in particular, the first question, so I understand, what led you to demography and will help lead others to demography? It's going to be interesting to hear your answer, because I don't know how much you self-identify as I'm a demographer as opposed to

something else. So you've got the question. All right. Tell us what you think about it.

**DUNCAN:** I call myself undisciplined. I'm not really a demographer. I'm not really an economist anymore. I'm not interested in what I've become in terms of the name. I received my PhD at Michigan, but I did not take any demography classes. I was an economist.

**HODGSON:** I was going to ask you that.

**DUNCAN:** Yeah. But I started working on the Panel Study of Income Dynamics at the Institute for Social Research, and that study forces you to become a demographer. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics was started in 1968. It has followed a representative sample of families since then. So merely keeping track of what happened brought me from this view of placid demography to a very active demography in terms of family life.

We had to account for all of the households ins and outs, all the residential moves, all the fertility and mortality events. That was tough to do. And there were many exotic kinds of demographic changes that no one had anticipated. It was really something that I was forced to confront.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**DUNCAN:** I learned it from scratch in watching it unfold in the course of the study itself. I joined the PSID study five years after it began and we began analyzing poverty dynamics in particular and income dynamics in general. That was the fundamental purpose of the study. With five years of data, we confined most of our analysis to families that had not changed very much – families where the head of the household--back then it was okay to say head of household--hadn't changed. But we were not even looking at 20 percent of the families! And all the action in terms of moving in and out of poverty, moving up and down the income scale, was happening in the 20 percent that we weren't even analyzing.

It soon became clear that it wasn't very useful to think about a family as the unit of analysis because it changed so much. It was much more useful for analytic purposes to think about individuals and the kind of family circumstances in which they were embedded at different times. Those circumstances change a lot and they account for a lot of the economic changes that are happening to these families.

**HODGSON:** You know what might be helpful to sort of a reader who's coming in to read your transcript would be if you could give us a very brief background to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. There's a history there. I think something started a little earlier. But what was the idea behind it in terms of the unique way of collecting data?

**DUNCAN:** Right. Well, it's 25 years of my life...

**HODGSON:** Right.

**DUNCAN:** Perhaps I should spend a little bit of time explaining it. It began in the midst of the War on Poverty. If you can believe it, the United States actually declared war on poverty in the 1960s and fought a hard battle by spending a lot of money on a crop of new programs like Head Start and food stamps. Up until that point, our knowledge of who was poor came from the cross-sectional CPS [Current Population Survey]. They give you a snapshot: a 20 percent poverty rate this year, 19 percent poverty next year, 21 percent poverty next year. But you never knew whether it was the same people. I think people assumed it was often the same people – that poverty was a persistent condition. But unless you followed the same people over time you really never knew.

This led to the creation of a longitudinal study. Its original conception was to start out with just low-income families and follow them. But Jim Morgan, my mentor, and who will be remembered tonight at the PAA memorial service -- he died this past year at age 99 --

successfully argued to the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which was the agency at that time, that it was important to begin not just with low-income families, but with everybody, because it was as useful to understand who became poor as who left poverty.

So that was the design. It drew a representative sample. It oversampled low income families, but it was basically a weighted representative sample. The idea was to follow those individuals and those families every year, originally for five years. In year five, that was 1972, the year that President Nixon put the OEO out of business unceremoniously overnight. And someone -- I don't know if this story's true or not, but it's a nice story--when responsibility for the PSID was transferred from OEO into the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, somebody wrote in the file: this is a ten-year study.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**DUNCAN:** It had never been talked about as a ten-year study before. So people in the Assistant Secretary's office assumed it was a ten-year study. So it continued for another five years and then the National Science Foundation starting funding most of it.

**HODGSON:** And it's still going on today?

**DUNCAN:** It's still going on today after 50 years and has revealed far more turbulence than people had expected. Poverty for many families was short-term, not long-term. Welfare receipt was often short-term, not long-term. If you continue to follow people over time, you become able to examine intergenerational issues. Are the kids coming from low income families or welfare recipient families highly likely to be poor or receive welfare? We found those chances to surprisingly modest. There was a persistent component, but there was also a substantial transitory component.

**HODGSON:** Now, if you can connect your entry into demography as you see it to the discipline itself it's kind of interesting, because you're at Michigan --

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** -- and you've got Ron Freedman at the Population Center

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** -- and it, too, has the history that begins about the same time. I think '61 or '62 Rockefeller gives some money. And pretty soon it's USAID, and it's internationally focused. And it's on rapid population growth and particularly understanding fertility in Asia.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** And if you think about what population meant at that time and what demography meant, it had this kind of focus --

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** In the early '70s.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** And you're at the same place, at the same time. No connection as far as you can see. Your agenda is more domestic, and it's PSID, and it's economics. So your graduate training is economics and labor economics?

**DUNCAN:** Right. My early analyses were what a labor economist would do. But then I became increasingly interested in family-based economic changes, which brought me into this demographic world -- not formally, but I was forced to confront what demography was all about.

**HODGSON:** If you think about what demography has become, you're sort of like a precursor to what's happening to demography by the late '80s and 1990s.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** Where you do have a much more domestic focus on family dynamics and these types of poverty questions?

**DUNCAN:** That's right.

**HODGSON:** So it's kind of interesting.

**DUNCAN:** And then by the late '80s and early '90s, I become interested in not just poverty dynamics, but in the effects of poverty on kids and the effects of neighborhood poverty on kids.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**DUNCAN:** So that got me into research networks of various kinds, collaborations with developmental psychologists. Beginning in the '90s, I started thinking about--I don't know if it was demography *per se*--but it was about family circumstances as it related to child development.

**HODGSON:** So this is in the context of your career associated with a move to Northwestern when you left?

**DUNCAN:** Yes. 1995 is when I left Michigan. I had started this transition maybe in the late '80s, so by 1995, it was fully underway. I loved Michigan and I still love Michigan. I just knew if I stayed at Michigan, I would still be working for the Panel Study of Income Dynamics today. Despite the fact that everyone agreed it would be good to take a break. But I just knew I couldn't. Also, my Institute for Social Research job was a soft money, nonteaching position, right. I wasn't working with graduate students, and I wanted to work with them. Occasionally I'd be on a committee, but my graduate student mentoring didn't really start until I got to Northwestern in its school of education.

**HODGSON:** And at Michigan you tended not to teach?

**DUNCAN:** I just taught a few courses here and there.

**HODGSON:** A few courses.

**DUNCAN:** Yes, it was kind of an overtime thing.

**HODGSON:** An overtime?

**DUNCAN:** Yes. It was during the '80s that the transition from Jim Morgan as being the director of the PSID, to me, took place.

**HODGSON:** And that in itself is a full-time job and then some?

**DUNCAN:** That was a full-time job, right.

**HODGSON:** And are you involved in the fundraising? NSF funded the study, but it only funded only two-thirds of the study.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** So you had to come up with the additional money somehow. And you did that by attracting outside sources of funding, and they got to tack on some extra questions.

**DUNCAN:** Exactly. You sell questions at average cost and not marginal cost so that you can try to cover some of the fixed cost.

**HODGSON:** And what did you think of those added questions? Did they tend to enhance?

**DUNCAN:** In the early days, we were pretty much able to make up the questions ourselves. We just had to agree on what the topics might be with staff from the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation office.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**DUNCAN:** But gradually, NSF took over through its Board of Advisers. But then they started to call themselves a Board of Overseers. Jim Heckman, who I'm sure everyone knows, wrote a letter to Jim Morgan, pointing out this overseer vs. adviser difference, and telling Jim that he

hoped Jim appreciated that the name change was not merely semantic. So setting the agenda became a much more NSF-directed process.

Not long after we started connecting with Richard Suzman at the National Institute on Aging (NIA) and Jeff Evans at NICHD. Some of the supplements were focused on the kinds of topics that NIA was interested in. We added wealth and intrafamily transfer kind of supplements. And then just after I left, the child development supplements started in 1997.

**HODGSON:** So a couple of observations. We had a set of questions about your experience and graduate training and the demography, and the training you give your graduate students. In your particular case, this really didn't happen at Michigan that much. You didn't have a set of graduate students and a set of courses that you took.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** In the context of your training, it was very much associated with these issues associated with the PSID. So by the time we get to Northwestern where you are teaching and having grad students, they weren't your normal population center grad students.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** So you had, I think, a program on policy and education.

**DUNCAN:** My appointment was in the education school, in the Human Development and Social Policy program. But, as I tried to argue in my presidential address, after attending PAA for a number of years, I had become inculcated with a population perspective.

I tried to impress upon my students how important a population perspective was. And they appreciated that, I think. They took jobs in sociology departments, policy schools, and social work schools. Sometimes to think tanks, like RAND and Mathematica and places like that. I hope they left with an appreciation for the power of a population perspective, even

though their particular interests were more motivated by policy concerns. But if you want to think about the impacts of some kind of policy on kids and families, you really do need a population perspective.

**HODGSON:** I did have a question about my recollection of them. Your presidential address was kind of interesting, because you have this population perspective, which I can fully appreciate. So it seemed to make demography very apropos for accurate descriptions. So if you want to describe what's happening, make sure you have either a census where everybody's asked or a real randomized sample where you get a representative sample. And that's the population perspective. The second part of the talk I thought was a more interesting one when you got into coming up --

**DUNCAN:** Avoiding a population perspective. That was the second half.

**HODGSON:** Right. The second half of the talk if you want to come up with a regression model focused on understanding causality, there you said, if I remember correctly, that oftentimes what demographers might do with something is kind of many times inappropriate. So if you want -- I think the example you had, if you wanted to understand education's impact on fertility. And you go out and develop this nice little model, you've got lots of potential problems there. Because you've got unidentified variables that might in fact really raise significant questions about causality or your ability to actually --

**DUNCAN:** Right. In the first half, I tried to point out that demographers should be talking with ethnographic researchers because they typically choose convenient samples when it's just as easy to choose a population sample. It's more powerful to choose a population sample.

**HODGSON:** Right.

**DUNCAN:** I've worked on a couple of committees for the National Academy of Sciences that wrote reports on the National Children's Study. There was a big battle in NIH about whether its 100,000 children should be recruited in a clinical setting or drawn to be a national population sample. There were wildly inaccurate perceptions that a population sample triples or quadruples the costs. But it hardly increases costs at all. When my good friend Sara McLanahan started Fragile Families, her original plan was recruit from a convenience sample of hospitals. I put her in touch with Steve Heeringa, who is a sampler at Michigan. He convinced her that, at virtually no extra cost, she could base her study on a national representative sample of births in cities of 200,000 or more. So there is a lot of power in a population perspective. Analytically for ethnographic studies, for example, it helps ensure that you're covering all the bases. You shouldn't be preselecting your people based on some set of factors that you can't control.

But in the second half of the talk, the idea was that a population perspective wasn't as useful for understanding causal impacts. Suppose you want to understand the impacts of some policy change that happened in one state, but didn't happen in neighboring states, or in particular year, but not other years. For that you want to draw a subset of data from your big sample in order to focus on some policy variation of interest or maybe some environmental change of interest. But to do that you might want to throw away almost all of your data, which is fine, because your goal is the estimation of causal impacts rather than population parameters.

**HODGSON:** Now, how successful has that message been in the context of having an impact on demographic research? I'm just thinking of all the sessions that are going on right now where they seem to be making the mistake you pointed out.

**DUNCAN:** Right. It's a lifelong battle. And there's much more of it now than there used to be. Economists get it, as do many authors of papers in policy meetings. Some epidemiologists and demographers appreciate this kind of perspective and look for those kinds of natural experiments. But it's not universal, and it's a continuing discussion that's --

**HODGSON:** Hasn't been totally resolved --

**DUNCAN:** It's an interesting debate to have. The search for causation drives you to focus on some particular slice of variation of interest based on a particular population, at a particular time. But that raises the issue of generalizability. Ultimately you really want some sort of convergence between a big population-based approach typically done by demographers and the kind of quasi-experimental approach done by economists or policy analysts. In my presidential address I tried to promote the idea of convergence of results. So I think there's room for both. But in doing research, I think it's often good to try both and see what sort of picture you get for both.

**HODGSON:** Now, in your transition -- and it seems like a significant transition from Michigan PSID research to first Northwestern and now UC Irvine. It seems like you've had to incorporate new areas of topical areas for yourself. Child development is a big area. And education is a big area. And taking a look at a set of issues that most economists aren't inclined to look at. So particularly that whole host of your research that takes a look at particular years of a child's life, being so much more important in terms of outcomes.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** Whether it's health or educational achievement alike. Now, how is that like

for you to have to become familiar with whole different sets of research and disciplines, as well? And then the groups you worked with, particularly in this new context, were definitely into disciplinary groups?

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** So if we think about demography changing in a similar type direction as you change yourself, it would be great to have that kind of description of someone who is open enough to begin to incorporate the works of others and other disciplines and try to make sense out of the whole thing in terms of a coherent research agenda.

**DUNCAN:** Right. And, again, Jim Morgan was my mentor along these lines. He was an economist who was interested in economic behavior. But he realized that economic models weren't sufficient to explain the kind of demographic outcomes and economic outcomes that he was interested in. He always searched for the eclectic solution. ISR was and is a very interdisciplinary place. It was wonderful. ISR was a soft money organization with an arrangement with the university that it kept all of the overhead from grants so they could use it to build buildings and fund sabbaticals and things like that. It created much more of an interdependence across staff and across disciplines within the institute. I guess I absorbed from Jim Morgan the idea that academics were supposed to be curious and ignore boundaries. If you need neuroscience to understand how a child develops then you better learn some neuroscience. If you believe that important biological systems translate early adversity into how a child turns out, then you better learn some of that.

I've never tried to be comfortable with what I know. I always try to go out and give my next talk with the 10 percent chance that I'll look silly because if I don't then I am not learning new things. That's what being in academics is all about. If what you need to know centers on

demography, then that's great. If it centers on developmental psychology or neuroscience, then that's just as good. Why let disciplinary boundaries constrain your thinking in any way? That doesn't make any sense.

**HODGSON:** I think you might be -- I wouldn't say "unique," but unusual in that context, because if you think about what tends to take place.

**DUNCAN:** Right. If people think I am strange then that's their problem.

**HODGSON:** Could you give a presentation at the American Economic Association meetings on your current research and have a receptive audience who would fully understand what you're doing or would you need another context? Would that audience not be in tune to appreciate the introduction of child development, literature and research, et cetera?

**DUNCAN:** Some of the things that I've looked at would interest economists. My current big project that is just starting now is a random assignment experiment involving a thousand low-income mothers with newborns at four sites around the country. We're randomly assigning half to receive \$4,000 a year as an income supplement, and the other half receive \$240 a year. So it's \$333 a month, month after month, for the first 40 months of their kids' lives--\$333 versus \$20.

**HODGSON:** Wow.

**DUNCAN:** We want to see to what extent the income supplements change economic behavior – for example labor force participation – but also how they change parenting and both parent and child stress. But mostly it's a neuroscience collaboration in which we will determine to what extent at 36 months of age kids' brains are wired up more efficiently if their families are in the high income condition. It's a very interdisciplinary project. But I think economists would appreciate the fact we have an experiment that is income based. They would be thinking about the kinds of ways that money could buy things to help kids.

**HODGSON:** You'd want that to go for at least ten years to get educational achievement consequences.

**DUNCAN:** Absolutely. But we're already spending \$16 million in three years. At the same time, we're thinking beyond those three years. The PSID was only supposed to last five years and now it's 50 years old. So never say "never" with a longitudinal study.

**WEEKS:** So he --

**HODGSON:** No. Go ahead.

**WEEKS:** It's a question before we get too far beyond this because one of the things that's really interesting about your interdisciplinarity is the very fact that, to my recollection, you are the only PAA president in a long time who's not come from a population center. So if I recall correctly, you were kind of transitioning actually from education at Northwestern to education UC Irvine when you became PAA president. And I'm wondering how do you see that having transpired. Because you're the outlier that says to somebody who's not at a population center: Hey, you know, I'm not constrained in my life just because I'm not in a population center.

**DUNCAN:** We are trying to get a population center going at Irvine. One of the attractions of coming to Irvine is its demographers. I remember my Presidential meeting in 2008. That meeting was in New Orleans, and I was in the airport. And I was heavily recruited by the demographers at UC Irvine. Judy Treas is at UCI, for example, and I've talked a lot with her. We're thinking about what a population center at Irvine might look like. It's some traditional demography, but it is also demography connecting with other fields--with biology, for example.

Doug Granger is now at Irvine and runs a big salivary cortisol stress lab. He would fit in well with a broad vision of a population center. David Neumark is there. He's a labor economist. And he really is the one who put together the data center at Irvine. He's a

demographer in some sense and has another agenda that he could bring to pop center. You don't want it to become too unfocused, but at the same time you want to have a lot of strands of research going on. For people, especially students, to be exposed to different kinds of perspectives and working on different kinds of problems, broader the better is my philosophy.

**HODGSON:** A quick follow-up question on that. Particularly because you're thinking of establishing a population center, what is your ideal training for grad students at such a center? Particularly with your focus on, we've got to have topical importance, and you have to come up with a set of research tools they give you sort of enough expertise to do good research and enough flexibility to easily cross disciplinary boundaries. How do you do that in a curriculum?

**DUNCAN:** That's a good question. One approach is to require some fundamental exposure to economics, sociology, developmental psychology, and, of course, to demography. And then having speakers come in touching on all these subjects. Having opportunities for students to work with more than one mentor, I think is also very good. The disciplines think in different ways. They have different vocabularies. Oftentimes, the vocabulary words are different, but they're really talking about the same kind of concepts.

So I think an important part of the training is to expose students to these very different ways of thinking about things, ways of talking about things, and to realize that in the end they are variations on the same theme rather than totally different Balkanized kinds of areas. At Northwestern we had an education training grant and we were fairly paternalistic in the kind of courses that we required of the pre-doctoral fellows. And in some cases it took people an extra year to finish their PhDs. So there was a sacrifice.

The bet of breadth is that you can combine ideas, very different ideas, in a way that's going to be better – that you will understand more with the combination than if you were just

operating within one discipline. And some students get excited by that. Some faculty get excited by that, and some want no part of it.

**HODGSON:** Now, we had a question about sort of your perception of how demography as a discipline has changed over time. And in some ways I see you as the ideal person to reflect on this topic because you were sort of external to a lot of the dynamics that fueled the change. Now, obviously as a discipline it becomes institutionalized academically with the inflow of funds about a particular problem, e.g., rapid population growth in a developing world. And there you are, you have Michigan where you have sort of what was happening in the demographic world, in terms of demography with the establishment of all these internationally oriented, fertility-specific population programs. And then again, almost from the outside, you saw how shifts take place in terms of what the big issues are. You've got a big concern with aging, and then you have a refocus again on funding. And population center focuses on aging. You have AIDS and HIV. You have migration, they seem to --

**DUNCAN:** Right --

**HODGSON:** Yes. And in some ways you're standing outside, except in 2008 you are a president of this association in which most of your fellow demographers have sort of, if they're old enough, experienced all these rather dramatic alterations and research focus on funding. So what do you as this ideal outsider make of this transformation of this discipline over time?

**DUNCAN:** That's a great question. I think demography is a nicely flexible kind of discipline. It's been able to adapt in very useful ways to these big social problems as they've come along. I think it speaks well for the integrity of its structure. That's what a discipline should be as these big problems come up, social problems of various kinds, either domestically or internationally. You want research to make progress in solving those problems. And sometimes a discipline just

can't be informative for solutions to problems. But demography has always had fundamental insights that have been useful for thinking about those kind of problems. So I think it's held up very well as a discipline in that sense.

**HODGSON:** Okay.

**DUNCAN:** And with PAA meetings, there's always been a basic demography component. But there's always been the satellite connections. Sometimes they've focused on AIDS, sometimes on aging. There's a lot of aging research these days. It comes and goes with the available funding. When aging got built up with Richard Suzman and his NIA funding empire, which in retrospect was really wonderful, it draws people in. Part of the PAA has always been about aging. Sometimes the Gerontological Society pulls people off. But if you think about it, as aging became a very big area of research, PAA captured a lot of that action. And I think it's to PAA's credit that it does. It provides a flexible kind of program structure. I think it's the right sized meeting. I don't know what it's up to now. But it was, what, probably 2- to 3,000 before, probably in that range.

**WEEKS:** It's around 3,000 [*Editor's note--last year in Chicago the attendance was 2,500; the final count at these meetings in Denver was 2,475*].

**DUNCAN:** Everybody comes to PAA. You meet your old friends and there are always some interesting sessions to go to. It has an accommodating structure for the very important kinds of social problems that come along.

**HODGSON:** Just one counterpoint. We've had a number of past presidents at PAA who were kind of all coming from '50s and '60s, where they had this kind of training at population centers in which they perceived demography to be not an interdiscipline, a real discipline.

**DUNCAN:** Right. Right.

**HODGSON:** And they had this core central concept of population, and then you had your demographic process variables, fertility, mortality, migration. And you had to understand how they interacted to change size and composition. And you had a set of unique methodologies, use of life tables, et cetera --

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** -- that gave you a distinctiveness. And they look at these changes, and they become concerned.

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** And they're not as flexible as you are in terms of focusing on, well, what's the best tools for dealing with a problem. They're saying, Well, where's demography?

**DUNCAN:** Right.

**HODGSON:** And I didn't get any of that in the context of your ability to move along.

**DUNCAN:** Right. Well, formal demography is vital, and I'm glad it's still a vital part of PAA. But as you say, it is a bit inflexible. I think any discipline holding on to some definition of its core without being open to connections with other disciplines, is wasting a potentially valuable source of energy there that demography can provide.

**HODGSON:** Now, I guess it's a PAA question, maybe a demography question, too. As a researcher, you have been really focused on better understanding particular areas that are problematic from the point of your society, particularly in the context of your interest in child development policy research that's based on empirical data that as research can perform a wonderful function of making your programs and policies more effective in solving the problem. What does someone like yourself, who has invested a career in doing that, do in this

larger environment that seems to be encompassing us now, which doesn't appreciate evidence-based research to formulate effective social policy--just doesn't do it.

**DUNCAN:** Right. Well, it did it two years ago. Things change. Things change.

**HODGSON:** I mean that's a very partisan perspective. But I'm not saying it's inaccurate.

**DUNCAN:** Right. But these come and go. And you can argue that the previous administration, the Obama Administration, was more evidence-based than almost any administration had been in the past. Ron Haskins has a nice book about this, called: *Show Me the Evidence* [Ron Haskins and Greg Margolis, *Show Me the Evidence: Obama's Fight for Rigor and Results in Social Policy*, Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015]. It's certainly gone downhill in that respect since then. But, you know, you keep fighting the good fight, and I've been connected with some of the National Academy of Sciences activity in this area.

Ken Prewitt, who is former director of the Census Bureau and now at Columbia University, is leading a fight on behalf of social behavioral sciences. He is trying to ensure that the value of not only demography, but also the more conventional disciplines within social and behavioral science is appreciated. People will be elected that don't appreciate it. But, we need to keep training our students to understand the value, and we need to keep plugging away and convincing the public that it's valuable.

**HODGSON:** Well, I was thinking particularly about students in the future. Now, in my mind it wouldn't be surprising if you were somewhat more pessimistic than you are. You seem to be optimistic, and I hope you're right. But from the point of view of attracting students right now, good students, and giving them this belief system that what they're doing is not only valuable, but it's going to be appreciated. And what they do will have a positive impact on the world

and society they live in. It might be somewhat more problematic to do that. It might be harder to attract students and convince them that this is important. And something to dedicate your life to. You're a wonderful image of a person who has done that and has really made a big impact in terms of how we understand a whole set of unbelievably significant issues about child development, impacting poverty, et cetera. But it seems like, as an institution, PAA right now is facing a significant challenge that might make this type of career less attractive, and might have an impact on who comes and the nature of our research. And it's hard to just pose it as a happier potential future as a way of getting around all these immediate difficulties.

**DUNCAN:** Well, I'm an optimist by nature. It's an interesting question whether there's been a fundamental change in the world, toward a more authoritarian kind of perspective and toward a more introverted national perspective. I can't bear to think that's going to be the case. There has been so much progress in our lifetimes. I want more data before becoming a pessimist. We'll see if ten years from now we'll be continuing on the positive kind of trajectory that we had up until a couple years ago.

**WEEKS** [to Karen Hardee]: No. You haven't asked a question. Jump in.

**HARDEE:** I keep thinking about the 50-year study. And I would love to hear your thoughts on what's been learned across all of those generations. But also what are the prospects for -- well, continued funding for this study, but also just funding for these longitudinal studies in general?

**DUNCAN:** Well, again, I'm an optimist. Look what happened in the last year. President Trump came in wanting to cut, cut, cut. Wanted to cut NIH funding, wanted to cut NSF funding a lot. Our experimental study was up for funding in 2017. It was make or break in the last five months of the fiscal year. Trump proposed a substantial cut in NIH funding. But Congress

ended up passing a very substantial increase. And the 2018 spending bill was a complete reversal of what Trump had initially wanted. So I think within Congress, obviously, there's just a lot of latent support for NIH research, and perhaps NSF research as well.

I served on the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education advisory committee for the National Academy of Sciences, and we were hearing endless stories of how behavioral and social science funding and NSF was on the chopping block. And about all of the Representatives who were trying to get rid of it. But the budget was increased this last year, right? So there's obviously a reservoir of support even in a very conservative Congress for the kind of research that gets funded. That makes me optimistic.

I also lived through the early Reagan years, when they did cut the National Science Foundation's Social and Behavioral funding, a lot. A rescue operation was mounted for the PSID by Jim Morgan and Tom Juster. They went to the Sloan Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation and the Ford Foundation and came up with three years of funding to tide the PSID over and by that time the NSF budget recovered. So there are these ups and downs. At a surface kind of political level there are dramatic anti-science positions, but I just don't know how deeply that runs. If disaster struck for more than a couple years, then I would be discouraged.

**WEEKS:** My question kind of related back, getting back to the real world of things that have been happening that you've have been studying over your entire career that have to do with income and equality and the negative effects for people at the bottom of that. And that seems to be getting worse not better. Your recent publications show that. How do you see that evolving over time?

**DUNCAN:** I'm more pessimistic about that than I am about funding for social behavioral

research. Welfare reform in the 1990s created inequality within the low income population. We built up and generously funded a set of supports like the Earned Income Tax Credit and childcare subsidies. So low-skilled, low-income families that have remained connected to the labor market have done relatively well. Families that haven't been able to be consistently connected with the labor market have done very poorly. Programs like TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families], which replaced the old AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] program are all but gone. Low income families are not thinking about TANF anymore. And if they put work requirements into the food stamp program as they're talking about, there's going to be another couple million people cut off from that.

So, there have been cycles in welfare reform debate and now we're trying to focus people's attention on policy impacts on kids. The whole debate on welfare reform, despite our efforts, was focused on work effort on the part of adults. And that's still the theme. There's no thought if we were to cut this program what impact it might have for kids. Part of the reason is that we just have ambiguous correlational evidence. We really need experimental evidence, and that's why we're doing this experiment. People are not sufficiently aware of the magnitude of the problem. I really do think we're kind of sitting on a time bomb here, where some of the kids growing up in very, very dire circumstances aren't going to turn out well as adults? And we really need healthy and productive kids entering the labor force to benefit the economy and pay our social security obligations.

So I do worry about this. And I just don't see any hope in the current debate, which in the last few months has focused more and more on work requirements. So now you do have me discouraged.

**WEEKS:** Sorry. You brought it up with your research!

**HODGSON:** You think about your research. It seems to be so apropos to this particular moment in time. We do have these attempts to really have negative impacts on kids. And you can empirically document what's likely to happen. We already know what the consequences are.

**DUNCAN:** Well, do we?

**HODGSON:** Yes. I believe your research. It's very persuasive.

**DUNCAN:** Well, you know, you've got to be skeptical --

**HODGSON:** -- ages, 3, 4, 5, it's unbelievably persuasive. And a willingness to put money into education. As a society we've been extracting money from education.

**DUNCAN:** Right. Right.

**HODGSON:** And we seem to be a hundred percent happy with it. And we see it in terms of taxes. And, again, your research shows this is a misplaced policy to extract money from education. Don't do it.

**DUNCAN:** Right. But I'm not just a researcher. I'm a grumpy researcher. With correlational evidence, someone else can come along and say: Well, it's not poverty, it's family structure. It's neighborhood welfare dependence. Unless you have experimental data you can't refute that income may not be the active ingredient in the relationship between low socioeconomic status and bad child outcomes. That's what we're going to test with a random assignment test of whether giving monthly cash payment to mothers with newborn will improve children's cognitive functioning by age 3. We're also hoping to discover the pathways by which those improvements come about.

Even with evidence from an experiment, you still might not have any impact on the political discussion, but I believe that experimental evidence is a necessary but perhaps not

sufficient condition to having impact. After five years of planning, we're finally launching the experiment three weeks from now. We're very excited about that.

**HODGSON:** We're about at the end of our hour. Are there questions that we should have asked you that you wanted to answer that we haven't -- some point you want to make.

**DUNCAN:** I'm very glad that demography is in NIH and not an NSF-supported discipline. Getting crumbs from NIH as opposed to getting a bigger slice from a much smaller pie from NSF has been a godsend, for demographic research. I think demographers have done well with the money that they've received. I think our program officers at NIH have done an incredible job of defending population research within NIH, because there have been many directors who haven't appreciated the value of population research. We were very, very fortunate that Richard Suzman was able to be as entrepreneurial as he was over the years. We have a lot to be grateful for in that regard. The PAA is, I think, very effective as a lobbying organization on behalf of the budgets for NIH and NSF. It's always a struggle for an academic to become involved in the kind of politics of making sure that the budgets are maintained.

But demographers are wonderful people. When I was president of PAA, and I asked anyone to do anything, they always said yes. That never happens with other people from other disciplines. The economist asks what am I going to get for it. So this kind of role, being able to, against your kind of normal academic instincts, make the rounds in Washington and pitch population research; demographers have embraced that and been very effective with it. We're lucky that the funding has been there, but we're also partly responsible for making sure that that funding is there.

**HODGSON:** And we should be happy we're not climate scientists.

**DUNCAN:** Right. Right.

**HODGSON:** Any other questions?

**BROWN:** I'm not saying your career is over yet. There's a lot more to be done. But I wonder, as you look back on your long career, what are you most proud of?

**HODGSON:** Good question.

**DUNCAN:** I'm most proud of my graduate students. I like to tell people that an academic's best hope for immortality is not with the next article but is with the next PhD student they graduate. Some people take graduate student training more seriously than others. I've always enjoyed it a lot, and enjoy connecting up again with my graduate students. You always want to send them off armed with the kind of skills that will enable them to adapt to the new things that come along, but stay grounded in basic skills. I've been very proud of what my graduate students have been able to do. They are my legacy.

**HODGSON:** Well, thanks very much. This was a wonderful interview.

**WEEKS:** Yes. We very much appreciate it.

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