Obama Cites KU Research in Major Policy Address on the Economy

During a nationally televised December 4 speech on the topic of economic mobility, President Obama referenced pioneering research published in the 1990s by University of Kansas researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley. The President noted:

“Rising inequality and declining mobility are also bad for our families and social cohesion – not just because we tend to trust our institutions less, but studies show we actually tend to trust each other less when there’s greater inequality. And greater inequality is associated with less mobility between generations. That means it’s not just temporary; the effects last. It creates a vicious cycle.

“For example, by the time she turns three years old, a child born into a low-income home hears 30 million fewer words than a child from a well-off family, which means by the time she starts school she’s already behind, and that deficit can compound itself over time.”

Hart and Risley published Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children in 1995. It was based on their seminal study of early experience and language acquisition by children at home. Much of their work took place in inner-city Kansas City, Kansas at the Life Span Institute’s Juniper Gardens Children’s Project. It showed a stunning 30-million-word difference between the number of words children from the least and most affluent homes heard by age three.

At the time of her death in 2012, Hart was eulogized in the New York Times and remembered by KU Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little as someone whose “ground-breaking research changed the lives of countless children.”