

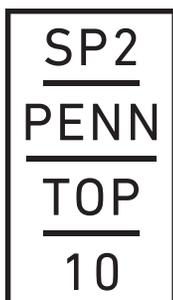
CHILD WELFARE AND POVERTY: THE AMERICAN PARADOX

KARA FINCK, ESQ.

DEBRA SCHILLING WOLFE, MED

CINDY W. CHRISTIAN, MD

CYNTHIA A. CONNOLLY, PHD, RN, PNP, FAAN



In the United States, poverty is the most important predictor of child maltreatment. Since the U.S. currently ranks at the bottom of all developed nations in child poverty rate, it is no surprise that almost 700,000 children a year are victims of maltreatment. Children currently are the poorest segment of our society. Children who endure maltreatment such as abuse and neglect face life-long physical and mental health challenges that limit their chance to lead a stable and productive adult life. Our future depends on raising generations of healthy, nurtured, resilient and educated children. Given the current prevalence of childhood poverty, our future is in jeopardy.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

There are strong associations between poverty and child maltreatment, impacting child and adult health outcomes, educational attainment, and leading to numerous life-long consequences. All of this comes at a great economic cost to society.

Child poverty has profound implications for children's physical, intellectual and emotional health. Infant mortality rates and low birth-weight rates are higher in poor families. Poor children, on average, have lower educational achievement. They enter kindergarten less prepared, they have lower reading and math skill levels, they complete less schooling, and they ultimately work and earn less than their peers.

Evidence suggests that early childhood trauma has great impact on neurologic, hormonal and immunologic systems. Children who are maltreated receive less health care, have higher rates of growth abnormalities, experience more developmental delay, have higher rates of early pregnancy and endure a range of chronic medical diseases.

If we want to ensure healthy and productive future generations, we must introduce more effective policies and programs that address child poverty so we can reduce maltreatment of children.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT?

- About 22% of American children live in poverty.
- Another 22% live in low-income families.
- Children living in homes with annual incomes of \$15,000 or less are five times more likely to experience maltreatment than children in homes with incomes of \$30,000 or more.
- About 44% of African-American children under the age of 5 live in poverty.
- The lifetime cost for one year of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports in the United States is estimated at \$124 billion.

PURSUING MORE PROMISING PROGRAMS

The United States has traditionally addressed child and family social welfare issues, such as child poverty, differently than most of the world's industrialized nations. Our decisions have resulted in a fragmented approach. Currently, social policies for child maltreatment focus on incidences after they have occurred. They are aimed at finding care and safe environments for the child. Funding has not been invested in prevention efforts that might ultimately reduce the risk for child maltreatment, such as those that mitigate family poverty.

Our ability to impact child maltreatment in a significant way depends on our fostering policies and legislation that reduces poverty for both children and adults. Since having an impoverished parent puts a child at increased risk, providing health care, educational support, child care, nutritional support and other assistance to all members of a family will ultimately benefit the next generation of Americans and be most cost effective in the long run.

AMERICA'S CARE FOR POOR CHILDREN

How the United States cares for its at-risk children has always been a contentious issue. The debate has centered on whether caring for poor children is the responsibility of government, or private and charitable institutions. When discussing government's role, the question raised is whether money should be spent to help parents who are viewed as "irresponsible" or "undeserving." While answers to these questions continue to be debatable, a consensus that children are "innocent" and deserving of assistance has long stood in America.

For most of the 19th and early 20th centuries, children whose parents were too poor to care for them ended up in orphanages. Considering how stigmatizing and harsh life could be in orphanages, a conference was held in 1909 to discuss the problem of "dependent" children. The conference determined orphanages were the wrong approach; the conference attendees suggested that poor children would be better off living at home, even with indigent parents.

The funding to enact this policy reform was known as "mother's pensions," or stipends that were offered in states across the nation to poor mothers so they could keep their children at home. These became the foundation for the 1935 legislation known as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), which provided assistance

to poor families as long as they passed through screening that ensured mothers were “deserving” of the funds. The 1960s brought about more programs to help the poor, such as Medicaid and Food Stamps, and Project Head Start brought services directly to the support of poor children.

During the more conservative 1980s and 1990s, there was renewed debate about government’s role in solving poverty. There was even a suggestion in the early 1990s that perhaps orphanages should be reintroduced for children of “bad” and “irresponsible” parents to break the cycle of poverty. President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 ending the entitlement that provided a the stipend for severely poor families that had existed since the 1930s.

During the boom times of the early 2000s, child poverty actually declined. However, since the downturn of 2008, the child poverty rate has risen to almost the same level that inspired President Johnson’s War on Poverty in 1964. With the rate rising, the question of how America cares for its poor children has once again become one of our nation’s most important social policy discussions.