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Children and Poverty—The Connection

A former U.S. President said "children are the world's most valuable resource and its best hope for the future." In the United States, however, of the 33.7 million poor, 40 percent are children (CESW, 1987). A recent analysis of data from the U.S. and five other western countries shows the poverty rates among U.S. children higher by at least 60 percent than those in any other country studied (IRP, 1986). A 1984 U.S. Census Bureau report indicates if all food, housing, and medical benefits are counted at market value, 17.7 percent of pre-school children were still in poverty, compared with 3.0 percent of the elderly. The poverty rate for children has been estimated elsewhere to be 21.3 percent (Minneapolis Star and Tribune, 1985).

The high poverty rates for children have been attributed to three causes: the increasing number of families with female heads; the decrease in the real value of government transfer payments to the non-elderly poor (Aid to Families with Dependent Children or AFDC); and the declining earnings of heads of families with children (IRP, 1986).

How does growing up in poverty affect children's futures? How does the poverty status of children reflect society's values?

The number of female-headed families with children has increased dramatically in the past few decades. Approximately half of all children in female-headed families are poor (Garfinkel, 1985). Because the average working woman earns about two-thirds as much as the average working man (Tippet, 1984), female-headed households are at high risk of poverty. Additionally, child care costs are often high enough so that single parents cannot afford to work.

How can work be made more equitable for women and for single parents?

For poor children, especially those in female-headed families, AFDC is an important source of poverty relief. Benefit levels are determined by individual states; in Minnesota, an AFDC grant provides approximately 72 percent of the U.S. poverty level income. About three-fourths of AFDC recipients also receive food stamps; the combination of food stamps and AFDC benefits brings the total benefit to about 82 percent of the poverty level. Minnesota's benefits are among the nation's highest (Levitan, 1985).

Do program benefit levels adequately reflect our concern for the well-being of children? What is an appropriate level of subsidy?

A second important source of poverty relief for children in female-headed households is child support payments from absent fathers. Due to the system's inadequacies in awarding child support and enforcing child support payments, child support often fails to reach its potential for reducing poverty among children. State guidelines for establishing the amount of child support payments are often very general, allowing considerable judicial discretion. In 1979, only 59 percent of those mothers potentially eligible for child support were awarded payments. Only 49 percent of those who were awarded child support ever received the full amount, and 28 percent received nothing (Garfinkel, 1985).

What changes in the child support system would improve the poverty status of children in female-headed households?

The solutions are complex and must involve more than the persons affected by poverty. This is a public policy issue. What role are you willing to take?

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Further information on this topic, please call 625-7272



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