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978-0-521-44521-4 - *Escape from Poverty: What Makes a Difference for Children?*

Edited by P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn

Excerpt

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Introduction

P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn

Although childhood poverty has long been a societal concern, the issue has recently entered the spotlight as a top policy priority (e.g., Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994; National Commission on Children, 1991). The poverty rate for children in the United States exceeds that of all other Western industrialized nations except Australia (Smeeding, Torrey, & Rein, 1988; Smeeding & Rainwater, 1995). In contrast to the declining rates during the 1950s and 1960s, poverty among children has increased substantially since 1970, and high rates prevail (Bane & Ellwood, 1989). In 1991, 21% of all children under 18 years of age were poor, up from 15% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Although white children comprise the majority of the poor in absolute numbers, children from Hispanic and African-American families are overrepresented: 46% of African-American children and 40% of Hispanic children live below the poverty line, compared to 16% of white children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). The percentage of young children (under age 3) living in poverty is higher: 24% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

When one takes a life-course perspective, asking what is the probability of children being exposed to poverty during childhood, the statistics are even more alarming. Duncan and Rodgers (1988) report that approximately 50% of all children hover near the federal poverty line at some point during their childhood, and that nearly one-third drop below the poverty line by age 15. Again, racial differences are striking. Among African-American children, 24% are likely to spend over 10 to 14 years in poverty on average, compared to less than 1 year for white children (Duncan & Rodgers, 1988). Chronic poverty for African-American children but not for white children is dramatically evident at the neighborhood level as well (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Sampson, 1992; Wilson, 1991). Persistent poverty poses even greater risks to child development than do short, intermittent spells (Duncan et al., 1994; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Parker, Greer, & Zuckerman, 1988).

A number of factors have contributed to the rise in child poverty. Chief among them has been slow growth in earnings (Gould & Palmer, 1988), leaving families less financially equipped to provide for their children. In addition, federal programs

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to combat poverty have favored the elderly over children, resulting in significant improvements in economic standing for the aged, while children became more concentrated at the lower end of the income distribution (Palmer, Smeeding, & Torrey, 1988). In certain regions of the United States (the Northeast and North Central regions), the concentration of poor families in inner cities has risen (McGeary & Lynn, 1988; Wilson, 1987, 1991, 1994). Other reasons include a decrease in the cash value per family of certain government programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and changes in the distribution of income across all families. Specifically, families in the middle and top levels of income have experienced increases in economic standing, whereas those at the lowest levels of family income did not improve at the same rates, resulting in greater income inequality in the United States today (Duncan, 1991).

Single motherhood due to divorce and nonmarital childbearing has increased significantly during the past several decades (Cherlin, 1992). Moreover, children in single-mother families are more likely to be poor than those in two-parent households (Bane, 1986; Cherlin, 1992; Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Gould & Palmer, 1988; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). For example, among single-mother families, poverty rates for white, African-American, and Hispanic families in 1991 were 40%, 61%, and 60% respectively. The corresponding proportions for children in two-parent families were 8%, 12%, and 24% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

These single mothers and their young children – the families most likely to experience long-term welfare dependency, and those whose children are at greatest risk for a lifetime of impoverishment (Bane & Ellwood, 1986) – are the focus of this volume. The overarching goal of this volume is to consider the potential for change in poor children's lives. This is a challenge of utmost importance to our society and requires renewed efforts in both research and policy domains.

A sizable body of research documents the deleterious consequences of growing up poor: impaired cognitive development, problems in socioemotional adjustment, and poor physical health (Danziger & Danziger, 1995; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; McLoyd, 1990; Huston, 1991a; Huston, Garcia Coll, & McLoyd, 1994; Parker et al., 1988). Such difficulties early in life heighten the risks of problematic development later. Delays in cognitive development in the preschool years increase the likelihood of lower achievement in school, grade retention, and school dropout (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Patterson, Kupersmidt, & Vaden, 1990). Similarly, early behavior problems are associated with subsequent emotional problems, such as poor peer relations, conduct disorder, depression, and delinquency (e.g., Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1994). Poverty also means that children have little access to adequate health care and education services, leading to higher rates of morbidity and a compounding of developmental problems (Egbonu & Starfield, 1982; McCormick & Brooks-Gunn, 1989). Thus, this probabilistic life-course pattern, with its origins in childhood poverty, portends higher rates of poor health, low productivity, and dysfunction in

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early adulthood, all of which increase the likelihood that the next generation will be poor (McLanahan, Astone, & Marks, 1991).

As used here so far, *poverty* is defined as a needs-adjusted income line, that is, \$13,924 of income for a family of four in 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Poverty can also be used as a broad term covering a range of conditions associated with deleterious child outcomes. These conditions, sometimes called “poverty cofactors” (McCormick & Brooks-Gunn, 1989), include poor living situations, crowdedness, few material resources, depleted and often dangerous neighborhoods, inadequate schools, limited access to health care, child care, and other community services and resources, lack of stimulation at home, parental psychological distress, harsh and restrictive parenting, and low levels of social support (e.g., Entwisle & Alexander, 1992; Garrett, Ng’andu, & Ferron, 1994; Hashima & Amato, 1994; Liaw & Brooks-Gunn, 1994; McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994). What we do not know is the relative importance of each poverty cofactor vis-à-vis its effects on children. For example, Chase-Lansdale and Gordon (1995) and Duncan et al. (1994) have demonstrated that both family poverty and neighborhood-level poverty are significantly related to developmental problems in children, although family poverty is a more powerful predictor. Smith, in her chapter in this volume, argues that two-generation approaches are needed, whereby children’s daily experiences can be enriched in the short term by early childhood education programs, and education and training programs for parents may improve economic standing over the long term. To date, studies that test the relative efficacy of economic versus child-oriented interventions have not been conducted.

Most of the literature involving child outcomes portrays poverty as if it were static (but see Duncan et al., 1994, and Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987). What is needed are dynamic models that can conceptualize changes in poverty status and related changes in children’s development. This is particularly important, given that so many families move in and out of poverty over time (Duncan & Rodgers, 1988; Duncan, 1991; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, in press). Even more compelling, however, is the need to design effective interventions that promote and sustain change. Disentangling the distinct influences of individual poverty cofactors on children can provide essential knowledge for designing and targeting interventions (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Paikoff, 1991; Huston, 1991b).

What changes in poor families’ lives would offset the deleterious developmental outcomes in children? Four arenas of possible change are addressed in this volume: (1) maternal employment; (2) child care; (3) father involvement; and (4) access to health care. These four types of change have all been brought under the umbrella of the Family Support Act, passed in 1988 after several years of debate over welfare reform. The goal of this landmark legislation is to bring about positive changes in the lives of poor families by promoting economic self-sufficiency through education and employment training for single mothers, and by strengthening economic support given by noncustodial fathers to families. Important support services and

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benefits, such as child care and health care, are provided to mothers as they undergo training, secure a job, and work.

More extensive and far-reaching reforms are being considered by the 104th Congress. Proposed changes include the diminution of the federal role in supporting poor children, which involves block grants to the states. Other proposals focus on the elimination of benefits to teenage mothers and to mothers who bear additional children as well as the specification of time limits for financial assistance. Under the Family Support Act of 1988, over one-half of the states have received waivers from the federal government, allowing states to experiment with the implementation of welfare programs along these lines.

This volume examines the implications for *children* of these new policy-driven changes in adult lives. An interdisciplinary approach, involving demographers, developmental psychologists, economists, historians, and sociologists is essential for addressing the complexities inherent in the links between the lives of poor adults and poor children in our society. Section I of the volume begins with an historical overview by Chase-Lansdale and Vinovskis on the role of families and society in assuming responsibility for poor children, dating back to colonial America. This chapter elucidates the events leading up to the Family Support Act of 1988 and highlights the competing currents in U.S. society vis-à-vis responsibilities of the state versus responsibilities of families for children, and the rights of the state to require mothers and fathers to meet economic as well as psychological standards in child rearing. In chapter 2, Zill, Moore, Smith, Stief, and Coiro present the dimensions of the problem currently facing the United States. Their chapter provides a demographic overview of children in poverty, in particular those in the welfare system.

Section II considers the first arena of potential for change: maternal employment. In chapter 3, Wilson, Ellwood, and Brooks-Gunn examine the changes experienced by mothers on AFDC as they enter and stay in the labor force, as well as the implications of these changes for children's adjustment. Emphasis is placed on a range of psychological dimensions, including mothers' self-esteem, stress, and parenting. In chapter 4, Brooks-Gunn addresses programmatic opportunities for change, for both mothers and children, reviewing the extensive literatures on early intervention, parent education, and programs for adolescent mothers.

Section III is focused on child care for poor children. Cherlin, in chapter 5, analyzes the availability of child care to poor families. He reviews what is known about the supply of child care, the current choices that poor families are making about types and cost of care, and how the demand for and supply of child care may alter as women leave AFDC for employment. In chapter 6, Spencer, Blumenthal, and Richards examine the quality of child care in poor communities and the potential for enhancing poor children's development. Spencer and her colleagues draw attention to the high proportion of minority children among the poor, and the significance of child care settings that acknowledge cultural diversity and incorporate a multicultural approach in their curricula.

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Section IV targets the third potential arena for change: access to health care for poor families. In chapter 7, Lobach analyzes the quality of health care services for impoverished children and elucidates barriers to access as well as opportunities for improvement. Wolfe, in chapter 8, examines the links among health insurance (in particular, Medicaid), utilization of health services, and poor children's health status. She reviews the determinants of utilization of health care by poor families, the extent to which the Family Support Act of 1988 expands health care coverage, and alternative strategies for providing health services to poor children.

Section V focuses on fathers. Furstenberg's chapter documents the declining role of fathers in the lives of children, especially those who are poor, and the high rates of failure to provide child support. He also assesses changes in the rates and meaning of marriage, nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and remarriage. He then offers a series of explanations for these developments and considers how public policies such as the Family Support Act of 1988 may elicit new behavior by fathers. In chapter 10, Garfinkel and McLanahan examine the impact of current child support reform on the economic and psychological well-being of children. They explore whether the child support provisions of the Family Support Act result in gains for children in female-headed households in addition to possible increased contact with fathers.

The final section of this volume is oriented toward future policy developments and research initiatives that hold the promise of changing poor children's lives over the next decade. In chapter 11, Haskins discusses important related federal policy decisions before and after the passage of the Family Support Act in 1988. He then provides a political and research analysis of our nation's potential to succeed in welfare reform. From a research perspective, Zill's chapter is highly relevant to current policy changes, as it describes the existing data resources for evaluating the effects of public policies on children. Smeeding follows with a proposal for new interdisciplinary databases that would improve our understanding of the lives of poor children. In keeping with the goal of this volume, Smeeding's proposals argue strongly for the infusion of measures of child development and family functioning into data sets that follow families' economic progress and vulnerability.

The final chapter in this volume, by Smith, highlights the current movement toward two-generation strategies for intervention programs. Until recently, large-scale welfare-to-work programs for adults (e.g., Gueron & Pauly, 1991) and cognitive and social interventions program for children (e.g., Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce, & Snipper, 1982) were targeted separately. Smith provides an overview of four new programs that combine these approaches, followed by a review of ongoing research programs that evaluate the effect of these multifaceted interventions on families' economic status and child development.

We believe that our nation is at a crossroads in coming to terms with the tenacity of child poverty and its devastating consequences. Public policies for the poor too often emphasize adults and lose sight of families. The ideas developed here regarding policy and research initiatives offer promising future avenues, especially keep-

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ing a spotlight on children. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to our society's renewed efforts to assist children in escaping poverty.

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I. Current and historical overview of children in poverty

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1 **Whose responsibility? An historical analysis of the changing roles of mothers, fathers, and society**

P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and Maris A. Vinovskis

Americans have always been concerned about dependent and destitute children, but societal efforts to help these youngsters have varied greatly over time. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the treatment of dependent and poor children in the past, emphasizing the historical analogues to current themes, specifically, the nature and causes of poverty, the responsibility assumed by individuals versus society for its alleviation, the evolving roles of mothers and fathers, and changing perceptions concerning child development. We review how colonial America first dealt with dependent children, consider developments that occurred in the nineteenth century, and then discuss attitudinal and institutional changes in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, we summarize the recent efforts to reform the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, discuss events leading to the passage of the Family Support Act of 1988, and outline its implications for the well-being of children. The passage of the Family Support Act in 1988 involved potentially significant changes in the lives of adults in the welfare system. This wave of reform, signaling renewed efforts to move away from a system of income maintenance for poor families, has a long history in the United States. However, historical emphases on income maintenance are being replaced with systems of transitional assistance from economic distress to financial self-sufficiency. Although the system being reformed has the word *children* in its title – Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – and indeed represents our society’s continued efforts to protect children from the ravages of poverty when their parents cannot, a substantive focus on the lives of children has been lost in the debate over the provisions of the welfare system and its attendant regulations. This is particularly ironic, because the proportion of American children living in poverty was 21% in 1991, reaching a higher level than that of the previous 15 years (Bane & Ellwood, 1989). For minority children, the proportions of poverty are significantly higher: 46% of African-American children and 40% of Hispanic children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Concern over the enormous numbers of poor children in our country (approximately 12.5 million) contributed to the rhetoric of recent welfare reform culminat-