THE CONDITION OF AMERICAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH: THE NEED FOR A BALANCED APPRAISAL

by

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(Revised and extended)

It is quite common nowadays to read gloomy appraisals of the condition of children and youth in the United States. In a recent article entitled "In Defense of the Young," for example, public broadcasting producer John Merrow proclaims that: "children are now, as a class, worse off than at any time in the past half century."[1] He goes on to list a series of "depressing statistics" on child abuse, teenage pregnancy, runaways, adolescent alcohol abuse, teenage suicide, health care inadequacies, and apartment houses that refuse to rent to families with children. Mr. Merrow is by no means alone in his dire depiction of the nation's young folk. A wide range of commentators seems to take it for granted that the health, education, welfare, and certainly the behavior of American children are bad now and rapidly getting worse.

Many conservatives believe that young people have been corrupted by an era of left-liberal excesses. They feel we have gone too far with moral relativism, permissiveness, and the blurring of traditional sex-roles; with welfare programs that encourage family breakups and subsidize parenthood outside of marriage; with tax policies and government regulations that stifle individual initiative; with affirmative action programs that undermine equality of opportunity by insisting on equality of result; with educational policies that disrupt neighborhood schools, interfere with parental prerogatives, and promote pupils who can't read or write; and too far with legal procedures that protect the rights of hoodlums, drug pushers, and pornographers while treating the victims of crime and delinquency with callous disregard.

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[1] Merrow, John. "In Defense of the Young," re:act (Action for Children's Television News Magazine) Volume 11, Nos. 3 & 4, pp. 6-7, Spring/Summer 1982.

On the other hand, many liberals feel that the problems of children and youth stem from persistent inequities and discrimination in our society, from social programs that have not gone far enough, and from the exploitation of the young by unfettered capitalism. They point to the fact that the percentage of children living in officially-defined poverty remained constant at about 15-16 percent throughout the 1970's and has recently increased to nearly 20 percent. They note that payment levels under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program vary widely from state to state and have generally not kept pace with inflation; that there are still many significant racial and ethnic differences in child health, learning, and behavior problems; and that youthful unemployment is at record levels, especially for black teenagers. What do we expect these young people to do, they say, when our economy tells them in effect: we have no need for you.

As for relying on the free enterprise system to solve the problems of the young, liberals observe that the record of business has not been particularly admirable with respect to, say, providing children with wholesome and uplifting programs on commercial television and radio. On the contrary, children and youth are now treated as a "market segment," to be pandered to when their numbers warrant it, and to be ignored when "the demographics" shift toward older audiences.

Finally, liberal child advocates point out that current efforts to reduce federal spending have tended to slash programs for children and youth, especially poor children and youth, while barely trimming programs for the elderly, for veterans, and for business groups that have more

electoral or financial power. A number of organizations around the country, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Foundation for Child Development, have set up programs to monitor the impact of budget cuts on children and to watch for the development of child health or other problems that may result from these cuts.

Having given you all these reasons for gloom, let me give you some cause for hope. The widespread belief that things have never been worse for children is not really correct. The condition of children in the U.S. today is more complex and multifaceted than it is usually portrayed. Yes, there have been deplorable developments, but there have also been some good ones. And there are reasons for being optimistic about the future, in spite of budget cuts, in spite of the depressed state of the economy, and in spite of the confused state of adult morality.

In the area of physical health, for example, most of the indicators show that the health and medical care of U.S. children are not worse than ever; they are better than ever. Infant mortality rates have been dropping steadily and dramatically since the mid-1960's. (And, so far at least, they have continued to drop since the election of Ronald Reagan.) Many people look back to the 1950's as if they were a golden era for families with children. Yet the overall death rate among grammar-school aged children is now only half of what it was in 1950. Rates of many childhood diseases are lower than they have ever been as well.

Federal and state health programs have played a definite part in bringing about these improvements. Medicaid has made it possible for poor children to see doctors more readily than was true in the past.

Immunization programs have helped to wipe out or drastically reduce the incidence of infectious diseases. Food stamps have played a major role in eliminating childhood hunger and malnutrition. And government-sponsored biomedical research has made it possible to keep tiny infants alive that were formerly given up for lost.

The public education of U.S. children is clearly a problem area. Yet here too there are signs that things are getting better, not worse. The long decline in College Board scores seems to have levelled off. Standardized reading and math scores in big-city school systems are going up, at least at the elementary level. And the National Assessment of Educational Progress has found that black and Hispanic pupils have made definite gains over the last decade, although they are still significantly below the achievement levels of middle-class, non-minority pupils.

It is also important to recognize that we are now at least *trying* to educate pupils who were formerly written off as unteachable. It is easy to romanticize the schools of the past and to forget how many children from immigrant, minority, and lower-class backgrounds were held back repeatedly without receiving suitable help, and were allowed — if not actively encouraged -- to drop out of school as soon as they could. As recently as 1950, only two-thirds of all U.S. children were still enrolled in school by age 17 and only 59 percent graduated high school on schedule.

The social behavior of American young people is another obvious problem area. There is more juvenile crime and drug use now than there was in the 1950's or the early 1960's -- certainly much more than there

ought to be. Yet here again, the trends seem to be turning in a positive direction. Marijuana use among high school students has been declining in recent years, and teenage cigarette smoking has dropped markedly. Juvenile crime rates are still high, but they are not going up any more. They are starting to come down.

Of course, many people fear that continued economic stagnation and the cuts in federal social programs will reverse these positive developments and make matters much worse for families with children. At this point, no one can say for certain what the results of the Reagan social experiment will be. However, even if the federal government does reduce its commitment to programs for young people, there are some larger social forces at work for the good.

There are two developments which seem to me to be especially important. First, because parents want fewer children nowadays and because various family planning methods are widely available, families with children are, in fact, smaller than they have been. Families are not only smaller in the affluent suburbs; they are smaller in the inner-city ghettoes as well. For example, the size of the average family receiving welfare payments (i.e., Aid to Families with Dependent Children) in the U.S. shrank from just over four persons (counting both the mother and the children) in 1970 to exactly three persons in 1979.

On the negative side, this development means that there is less political support for programs benefitting children, because children make up a smaller fraction of the overall population of the U.S. But on the positive side, it means that children growing up today are more

likely to receive individual attention, supervision, and emotional support from their parents. And it means that a larger proportion of today's children are the result of wanted pregnancies than was the case in the past.

A second beneficial development for children is that parents now have more education than they did formerly. While real family income levels have been relatively stagnant for more than a decade, the average educational attainment of young adults in the U.S. has continued to rise. The educational gains of black and Hispanic women over the last decade have been particularly striking. So even though the inner-city black child of today is more apt to be living in a single-parent family than was the comparable child of 10 or 20 years ago, today the child's mother is more apt to have finished high school or even to have gotten some college training than was the case with the comparable mother in 1972, 1962, or earlier years.

Does the level of the mother's education make a difference as far as the child is concerned? The available research evidence suggests that it does. A number of large-scale surveys of children have found that the parents' educational attainment is one of the strongest of all family background factors in predicting children's school performance, health, or behavior — stronger even than the family's income level, with which it is, of course, correlated.

Both the increase in the educational attainment of parents and the decrease in family size are long-term trends that are not likely to be reversed by the vagaries of federal funding. However, federal programs

have certainly contributed to the progress that has been made in recent years among minority and low-income families in the U.S. For example, equal opportunity efforts have helped to expand the educational horizons of minority youth. Financial assistance for the education of children from low-income families has helped local school districts to furnish the remedial instruction that these children often need to make it through school. And government-subsidized family planning services have provided low-income women with the same range of birth-control options that middle-class women have had. As you well know, much remains to be accomplished in learning how to educate young people from disadvantaged backgrounds effectively and in helping them to regulate their own fertility. Cut-backs in federal programs are likely to slow further progress in these areas considerably.

Even if we learn how to do a better job in teaching children from disadvantaged family backgrounds, I do not think that we can expect our schools to prepare all young people for white-collar or professional employment in word processing, computer programming, or other high-skill, high-technology jobs. Yet these are the fields in which employment opportunities have been expanding, while the pool of jobs in heavy industry and agriculture has been steadily contracting, and is likely to go on shrinking for the foreseeable future. As a society, we have to ask ourselves: Where are the jobs going to be for those young people who cannot finish high school, who do not have the skills or the inclination for high-technology employment? How are they going to support themselves and their children? Are we destined to have a permanent, dependent

"underclass," as some have suggested? I believe that these economic and technological trends are likely to create some vexing public policy issues in the years to come.

In order to address these and other issues concerning our descendants, we need a balanced appraisal of the status and prospects of young people in the U.S. This means that we need more child-based data on a regular basis: data on the conditions in which various groups of children are being raised; systematic measures of their health, achievement, and behavior; as well as measures of their developing attitudes and values. We need links between different kinds of information; and we need the ability to correlate data at the level of the individual child and family.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this last point: A lot of us have assumed that it is primarily the lack of money and the things that money can buy that make poverty bad for children. But impoverished families are also likely to be families with low parent education levels and a history of marital conflict or family disruption. Suppose we survey families with children and collect data not only about income, but also data on how far the parents have gone in school, and how much they fight and argue with each other, etc. If we then put these several factors into an equation that relates family background to the child's school performance or behavior, we find that marital conflict and parental ignorance are more closely linked to child behavior and learning problems than is low family income.

For instance, children who have gone through a divorce and who now live with their mother and a stepfather are rarely living in impoverished circumstances. Because there is a man in the house and male

wage-earners still earn more, on the average, than female wage-earners do, the income levels of mother-stepfather families are comparable to those of intact mother-father families. Yet the children in mother-stepfather families show at least as high an incidence of emotional and behavior problems as children in single-parent divorced families, which, as you know, tend to have much lower income levels. What this suggests from a policy standpoint is that the problems that many poor children experience will not be eliminated by programs aimed solely at improving the material circumstances of their lives. Money can certainly help a low-income family, but it is not a cure for all the ills that family conflict, parental neglect, and emotional turmoil can produce in a child.

Note that this kind of policy-relevant analysis cannot be carried out without a data set that allows us to correlate various family background measures with child outcome measures for the same or at least similar types of families. Also needed is information which makes it possible to follow the same families over time. It is not necessary to track families for decades, but having data on family transitions and children's development over a period of several years helps in sorting out causes and effects and in controlling for indirect or spurious sources of association between variables. The University of Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and Mavis Hetherington's longitudinal study of families going through divorce are good examples of the kinds of studies that are needed.

Finally, in order to have a better basis for evaluating the condition of our nation's young people, we need more coordination between the

various agencies of the federal government that have some involvement in the collection or analysis of data on children and youth. At present, there is surprisingly little communication among or between these agencies. One agency often does not know what the other agencies are doing and they rarely coordinate their data collection or analysis efforts. We have no central statistical agency in this country and the one federal entity that was supposed to perform some very limited coordination of statistical functions -- the Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards in the Department of Commerce -- has recently been eliminated.

Perhaps the proposed new Select Committee on Children and Families in the House of Representatives can prod the relevant agencies to communicate and cooperate more extensively. I certainly hope so, because such cooperation is very much needed. Thank you.