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ABSTRACT

To discuss ways to help strengthen family systems was the purpose of a Wingspread Conference held in Racine, Wisconsin. The conference was sponsored by the Coalition for the White House Conference on Families, in cooperation with the Johnson Foundation. There are ten sections to the report, including a brief introduction which provides background information on the conference. Section two, "The State of the Family," presents statistics to show how the family is changing. Section three, "What Sort of Help Does the Family Need?" discusses the danger of having a family policy and the role of service professionals. "The Difficulty of Being Specific about Family Policy" is dealt with in the fourth section. As soon as deliberations become specific, a variety of constituencies with a variety of agendas soon discover that they may agree only in the general concern for the family. Sections five through eight describe various support systems to the family, including self-help, neighborhoods, religion, and ethnicity. Families do not live and function as isolated units, but have informal and complex relations with several networks that provide support and sustenance. Section nine deals with family policy considerations. Whether or not federal policy is too crude and clumsy an instrument for dealing with the diversity of families and their variety of needs is discussed. The concluding section provides an overview of what was accomplished at the conference. A list of conference participants is provided. (RM)

A Wingspread Report

Strengthening Families Through Informal Support Systems

Families do not live and function as isolated units, but have informal and complex relations with several networks that provide support and sustenance. These support systems — kin networks, voluntary associations, neighborhoods, self-help groups, ethnic and religious affiliations — were the subject of this Wingspread conference sponsored by the Coalition for the White House Conference on Families, in cooperation with The Johnson Foundation. The conference also discussed informal support systems as structures that mediate between individuals and "institutions of power," celebrated the diversity of American families and American culture, anticipated the White House Conference on Families, and debated the role of social service programs, the limits of government policies, and the relation of families to the state and to the helping professions.

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Report of a Wingspread Conference • The Johnson Foundation • Racine, Wisconsin

I. INTRODUCTION

The family has recently become an object of extensive interest, examination, and concern Thoughtful observers, noting the statistical evidence, studying the history of the family, and projecting its future, are writing books with titles like *Here to Stay* and *Haven in a Heartless World* Study groups are attempting to measure the impact of taxation, welfare, and other public policies on American families Universities, foundations, and government agencies are sponsoring research that may help us decide whether to feel discouraged or hopeful about the state of the family Certainly the subject is in the air, and nearly everyone is interested in it

"It is clear that the national government should have a strong pro-family policy, but the fact is that our government has no family policy, and that is the same as an anti-family policy."

The President of the United States is interested As a presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter said, "It is clear that the national government should have a strong pro-family policy, but the fact is that our government has no family policy, and that is the same as an anti-family policy"

In January 1978, President Carter, carrying through on his earlier statement, announced a first step on the part of the national government. "In order to help stimulate a national discussion of the state of American families, I will convene a White House Conference on Families The main purpose of the White House Conference will be to examine the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies."

Thus the federal government, at its highest levels, has decided to encourage and to participate in the national dialogue, now well underway, regarding the family, how poorly or how well it is doing, and what can be done to help.

This is no easy subject, however; it is complex, has many parts, includes snares and pitfalls Who, for example, can define "family" in a way everyone would accept? Who would make up the agenda for the White House Conference on Families? What items would be on that agenda? Individuals and organizations interested in the family — and these are many — took note of the coming White House Conference, and saw it as an opportunity of great potential usefulness

Several national organizations concerned with families recognized the opportunity and determined not to let it pass These included the Family Service Association of America, American Jewish Committee, National Council of Catholic Charities, National Council of Churches, National Council on Family Relations, Parents Without Partners, the YWCA, and the National Urban League. These and several others formed a loose-knit Coalition for the White House Conference on Families Because the federal government, at its highest levels, is taking an interest in the family, the Coalition wishes to have an impact on the quality and effectiveness of that interest In forming, the Coalition adopted four basic principles

- That the White House Conference planners should devise a framework for the participation of various interest groups, professionals, and families themselves in defining the common needs of families,
- That the conference itself should focus on the impact of federal policy on the family,
- That the conference should recognize the impact the other major institutions of society have on the family;
- And finally, that the conference should also consider the informal networks of support that aid families, and how those informal support systems could be strengthened by government policy.

Meeting at Wingspread, the conference center of The Johnson Foundation, in Racine, Wisconsin, representatives of the Coalition's member organizations discussed further what they meant by the fourth principle.

Briefly, "informal networks of support" are the means by which families meet day to day needs and crises. They provide both emotional and material support, and include kin networks, extended families, lodges, clubs, fraternal organizations and other natural communities, neighborhoods, churches and other religious affiliations, self-help groups, and ethnic associations. They are cooperative, reciprocal, natural, and informal. These are often the roots that give life

"Informal networks of support" are the means by which families meet day to day needs and crises . . . They are cooperative, reciprocal, natural, and informal. They are often the roots that give life.

In part, the Wingspread conference was called to document the importance of these informal support systems, it was also an attempt to initiate a national dialogue on just what informal support systems are, how they work, and how public policy could support them

"We recognize their significance," said Joseph Giordano, one of the conference planners, as the meeting began, "but we are still learning what should be included as informal supports Out of the conference will come a conceptual approach that strongly makes the case that it is important to consider informal supports After all, they are the means by which families cope"

Irving M Levine, also a conference organizer, added, "We think that the informal support systems are neglected and ignored"

Running throughout the conference, however, was a tone of somewhat cautious probing, this being new territory, almost unbroken ground. There was confusion, and often a lack of agreement, even on terms as basic as what constitutes a family, or a support system

Overlying the conference, however, were several key issues, which were not part of the informal-support agenda, but which nevertheless often elbowed their way onto center stage.

There was agreement, however, on the importance of finding answers to basic questions, answers that could be used to guide public policy. Several speakers suggested that the family would be a crucial, perhaps *the* crucial issue of the next decade

No easy answers came out of the Wingspread conference, and none were expected. Information, knowledge, and experience on a variety of informal support systems — ethnicity, religion, neighborhood, self-help groups — were shared Dialogue on the issues was started.

Overlying the conference, however, were several key issues, which were not part of the informal-support agenda, but which nevertheless often elbowed their way onto center stage. These issues, about which few conferees felt indifferent, included one's view of the nature of families, what its structure and functions are and should be, and the relation of the family to society's "institutions of power." Another issue not to be denied nor

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overlooked was the relation of families to human service professionals, which side public policy should be on, and whether programs and professionals encouraged dependence in the families and individuals being served Still another issue was the White House Conference on Families and concern about the character of that conference and of the growing government interest in families. That is, the conferees gathered at Wingspread to examine informal support systems, and did talk about these, and other questions, but with an eye always on the coming White House Conference The Wingspread conference contained some lessons for the later, bigger meeting.

We will look first at these overlying issues, because they determined the shape of the Wingspread meeting, and could well do the same in Washington in 1981

II. THE STATE OF THE FAMILY

When you get past the headlines, the professional studies and reports, and the cries of concern, what is the "crisis" that besets the American family? It seems to have leapt full-blown into the national consciousness, almost as though the family had suddenly been put on an endangered species list, and people were searching for the rules and regulations — the sanctuaries — that would protect and preserve this vanishing "species."

THE FAMILY IN PERIL?

Problems arise at the beginning of any discussion of families It is difficult to talk about families simply because everybody is part of one Our own family experiences inevitably shade our view of "the family." One person's family is another's commune.

The family — whether nuclear, extended, traditional, non-traditional, communal, whatever — is as close as our own skin. In his story, "The Purloined Letter," Edgar Allan Poe presented the notion that if you want to hide something, you should put in plain sight There is some truth to that, things closest to us are often the hardest to see clearly

Recognizing the difficulty of defining what a family is, and what it means to us, it is still possible to point out areas of concern Without a doubt, statistics indicate that things are not as they used to be. Consider the following:

- Divorce is up by 700 percent since 1900. For children born in the 1970's, four out of ten will live in a single parent household for part of their childhood.
- In 1950, in 56% of husband-wife homes the man was the sole bread winner, in 1975 the figure had dropped to 34 percent.
- In slightly over a decade, first births to unmarried couples have doubled.

The issues go on and on juvenile delinquency rates, reported cases of spouse and child abuse, the changing role expectations of family members. But what do the figures mean?

That we, as a society, cannot go back to the world of the "Little House on the Prairie" or "Walton's Mountain" is a reality. Does that constitute a crisis?

Other statistics indicate that while families may be changing, they are not dissolving. Divorces are common, but so is remarriage. Even if the family has experienced difficulty in fulfilling traditional roles, like the socialization of young children, there is little evidence that any other institution has stepped in to replace the family.

"But I also believe that one thing they are not asking for is the negative approach that emphasizes pathology, or illness. They want confirmation of their own ability to care for their own."

THE FAMILY IN CHANGE

If the family is in disarray, in turmoil, or in conflict — does this necessarily mean that it is in dissolution?

The answer that clearly came out of the Wingspread meeting was no. Mr. Giordano echoed a common theme when he said, "Many of us have found a wide variety of groups and individuals asking for a recommitment to family life on the part of institutions in our society.

"I think these groups and individuals are asking for help. But I also believe that one thing they are not asking for is the negative approach that emphasizes pathology, or illness They want confirmation of their own ability to care for their own."

Added another conferee, "What is family? It may just be that we are in a period of redefining or broadening, or are moving towards something that is even better than what we had before. By accepting 'weakening' and 'deterioration' [as terms describing families] we are taking a very regressive position."

Robert Hill, Director of the National Urban League's Department of Research, said that many studies of black families adopt "the assumption of pathology, weakness, absence of strengths, the absence of self-help, the absence of coping mechanisms among those groups. We feel that this negative approach is the source of a fundamental weakness and deficiency in most policies and programs directed toward low-income people."

The specific focus of the Wingspread conference was on coping strengths of families, not pathology. Because of this focus, however, several participants voiced fears that the real problems families are having would be slighted or passed over. No one denied that families are under pressure, but most did not want to throw up their hands in despair.

After all, others noted, families still exist, despite the formidable pressures that promote disintegration and perplexity Families have skills to cope, and identifying those skills, particularly the informal coping systems, will assist us in proposing means to strengthen families.

III. WHAT SORT OF HELP DOES THE FAMILY NEED?

There was a word of caution sounded early in the conference and repeated often. "We are as likely as not to be forging chains in these days," John McKnight told the family service professionals and policy planners at Wingspread.

Mr. McKnight, who is Associate Director of Northwestern University's Center for Urban Affairs, noted, by way of warning, that the concept of childhood was a relatively recent one, developed in the 1800's. And once developed, that concept became the basis for a variety of rules, regulations,

controls, and "policies" regarding children.

THE DANGER OF FAMILY POLICY

"Are we going to be answering the question What is a family? in such a way that we will formalize, officialize, create a status around which a set of definitions, standards, and controls can be developed . . . a new basis established for the control of human beings?"

"There is nothing magic about the perseverance of families," Mr McKnight maintained. "I think families have persevered because they performed vital functions. Family is finally . . . a set of functional relationships If you take from the family, in the name of benefit to the family, its caring, doing, making, training, learning, resolving — whoever does that is the enemy of the family."

The problem in Mr. McKnight's view is not a lack of family policy There are in fact a host of government programs, over 250 at last count, that have direct or indirect impact on the family. One problem is too many institutions, agencies of government, family professionals all trying to do things for the family.

"If you take from the family, in the name of benefit to the family, its caring, doing, making, training, learning, resolving — whoever does that is the enemy of the family."

"I think the question is what is *not* to be done," he offered

That question leads straight to public policy, or what should not be policy "The policy implications of one who thinks a family is like a cauldron [of personality disorders], as opposed to a haven, are very, very significant," Mr McKnight said If families are viewed as schools, perhaps policy will deal with programs, he suggested; if families are like organizations, perhaps what they need is a grant or leadership skills; if the family is an economic entity, then a subsidy or a workshop in management by objectives may be called for; if families are like people, what they need are services and therapy.

In Mr. McKnight's own analogy, families "are the vital center of the society, the reality from which all the rest comes, and for which all the rest exists."

From that perspective, policy should think, *from* the family, out to society; not from society, onto the family. In the former view, policy is created to support and nurture families; in the latter, it is created to impose on families

Families "are the vital center of the society, the reality from which all the rest comes, and for which all the rest exists."

THE FAMILY AS HAVEN

Mr McKnight called the family the center of "the other America," pitted against the institutions of power While it is in the character of institutions of power to disallow individuals from doing more than part of a task, or seeing the results of their efforts, families empower and support. The institutions of power depersonalize, and dehumanize, families encourage and enfranchise.

> The family is still the context where it is possible to make something and see that it works It is the place where the world is still understandable . it is the place where you can be competent and whole. The institutions of power provide you with the chance to be fragmented and impotent.
>
> The family is the center of those informal networks — to that world it is the vital center It is the other America. The real, the possible, the reasonable America, the informal America of which it is king and queen

Family policy should transfer power from agencies already "doing" for the family back to the family itself. Speaking to the conference, he said, "We must take the power away from you. Don't give us more therapy, give us a decent income. Don't give us your treatment; give us your tools.

"Put this way, the issue is not a question that can be put in terms of another policy. The issue is a question of transfer of power in our society. The thing that is liable to come from the White House Conference, I think, is the sort of medical model that will see policy as a way of injecting into the family [more] programs."

Mr McKnight's comments did not go unchallenged. They sparked a debate over the role of the family service professionals, and highlighted the tension between professionals and self-help groups, between formal and informal systems.

The comments about professionals hit a vital nerve. While many conferees did not disagree with the spirit of Mr. McKnight's remarks, they were not sure just how far he would like to go in empowering families and disempowering professionals. The discussion turned on two points. first, the changing role of the family service professional from doctor-teacher to counselor-facilitator, and secondly, the importance of informal support systems in empowering families

John Spiegel, M.D., Director of the Ethnicity and Mental Health Training Program at Brandeis University, called Mr McKnight's remarks, "irrational and unrealistic essentially an anti-professional position

"I think we have to be concerned with the problems that families have in dealing with their culture, in dealing with the continuity of the culture . . and the preparation of the child for a changing society Can that be done by wiping out the professionals?" Dr Spiegel asked.

While it is in the character of institutions of power to disallow individuals from doing more than part of a task, or seeing the results of their efforts, families empower and support

THE ROLE OF SERVICE PROFESSIONALS

Do the professionals treat pathology rather than teach coping skills? There was rather widespread agreement with Mr McKnight on this point

An informal debate started when one conferee said, "I hope we don't as a group establish a paper tiger and beat the hell out of it — the paper tiger being one description of a counseling process as it existed, as I knew it, in 1954-1960. We can end up fighting against something that no longer exists."

Others took issue with that statement. Irving Levine agreed that professional attitudes might have changed, but "the funding sources and the power sources are still not only heavily into pathology, but are moving more into pathology. The insight from the grassroots has got to be brought to the [centers] of policy."

Even when family service professionals recognize the importance of families, their approach may still be one of teaching and imposing upon families. Said one participant.

> I talked to a good many social workers and therapists who have an enormous appreciation of the importance of the family and therefore are all the more eager to find the techniques whereby they can intervene and impose their goals and agenda. That's exactly the opposite of what we want to get at, which is the real transference of authority to the family or to families in all their diversity, in which the professional sees his or her role

as being ancillary and supportive of that family's agenda.

Other speakers said the tendency to label behavior pathological related particularly to blacks and low-income families and other groups whose family structure or individual behavior do not fit standard norms When behavior is seen as pathological, coping strengths that might already exist are ignored The label also may very well have a harmful effect on the person or group so labeled

Ronald Gold, Staff Assistant with the National Gay Task Force, argued, "If I think of what I have as pathological, then I must go to you and say, 'You must help me with this, I don't know anything about it' A *problem*, however, is something I can deal with within my family I can't trust anyone else to decide for me what my pathologies are, or where my mental health lies"

Professionals can offer instrumental, technical support to families, but only families can provide a crucial, more intimate level of support, Mr Gold said

"Human inter-relationships are unknown territory for everybody, including the professionals," he said "Individual human beings and individual human families have to work at these in experimental ways just as everyone of us in this room has got to, whatever our professional credentials If we pretend to them that we have some information about human beings that they do not have access to, we are destroying their capacity to help themselves"

Dr. Spiegel, on the other hand, cautioned against the loose use of clinical terms Referring to his experience working with ethnic groups in the Boston area, he maintained

> We obtained a very good line on the differences between what was normal and what was pathological, and I must say I have a great deal of discomfort with the way this particular contrast and issue has been skirted at this conference, almost as if there were a slogan being sent out that what is pathological is from today on to be considered normal

What *is* the role of the service professional? As a definition of that role emerged from the discussions, increasing importance was put on the function of informal support systems, both as mediating structures between the family and formal institutions, and as networks through which professionals could work with families, with a better understanding of families' inherent strengths.

Robert Rice, chairperson of the Coalition, commented, "We are now entering another stage, where we're talking about family empowerment, about how to support the power of the family in new and not yet understood ways — in other words, the role of the future therapist . And part of our problem is that we don't know quite what the role is going to be"

Before examining informal support systems, we will look at another broad theme of this Wingspread conference, implicit in the conference itself and alluded to by several speakers In effect, it was a warning to the planners of the White House Conference

IV. THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING SPECIFIC ABOUT FAMILY POLICY

Reflecting on the course of the Wingspread conference, William McCready, Senior Study Director of the National Opinion Research Center, said, "It's a hell of a complex issue The more you get down to concrete issues the more you are going to disagree"

As a possible foretaste of the White House Conference, this meeting offered several object lessons on what is likely to happen at a national conference on the American family. In a word, fragmentation perhaps to the point where any real progress is prevented.

One person noted that any coalition that includes both the Catholic Bishops and the National Gay Task Force is bound to disagree as soon as the coalition gets down to specifics.

The problem then becomes twofold family policy is such a new and complex issue that attention is easily distracted to other topics (the roles of women, child welfare, minor rights, non-traditional families, etc), on the other hand, as soon as deliberations become specific, a variety of constituencies with a variety of agendas soon discover that they may agree only in their general concern for the family — whatever we mean by "family" The woods become obscured by the trees The interest in the family is like a great noise rising in the land — loud, but unclear and incoherent.

As soon as deliberations become specific, a variety of constituencies with a variety of agendas soon discover that they may agree only in their general concern for the family — whatever we mean by "family."

Voicing this concern, Dr Rice said, "If the White House Conference proves to be a turmoil, a demonstration of fragmentation in our society, we might lose our whole purpose — strengthening families — and the subject of family policy will become poison for many years to come."

But, he added, if the conference doesn't get down to specifics about family and family policy, "an unthinking family policy will develop that will do more harm than good."

Fragmentation, lack of definition of terms, different agendas — these were all elements of the Wingspread meeting. Remarked one conferee, "If this is what is going to happen at the White House Conference, now I understand why we have the problems we have in the United States with people who are setting [family] policy."

There is not much that can be done to avoid these problems, unfortunately

Mr. McCready suggested that the White House Conference could be very specific about its agenda, to try to focus the direction of discussion

Dr. Rice, however, saw the White House Conference as only the beginning of an evolution, not revolution, in public policy attitudes towards the family He suggested:

> Those of us who are concerned about families and strengthening families, those of us who are service professionals, are going to have to learn new things, if we wish to make a difference in policy towards the family. We will have to live with the anxiety of entering the cauldron of conflicting interests — politics, nasty stuff. We will have to live with the idea of incremental change We will have to practice the art of the possible.

V. SELF-HELP AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM

The recent proliferation of a whole variety of groups loosely called "self-help" reflects both a malaise in society and, at the same time, the coping strengths of individual families. The best known and one of the oldest and most effective self-help groups is of course Alcoholics Anonymous.

How important are informal support systems? One way to begin the discussion is to note that several conferees were able to attend only because of such support networks For example, Dr Rice, whose father was suffering from a back injury, said, "The only reason I'm able to be here is because of a helping network of friends who are taking care of him."

Informal support systems surround us In dozens of ways big and small they help us to cope, to solve problems, to remain whole Sometimes these supports are so much a part of our lives that we don't think of them as anything special the friend, the neighbor, the club, the church — whoever is there to give us a hand when we need it

How important are these supports? In a series of panel discussions, conference participants looked at some of the informal networks of support.

YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF

The recent proliferation of a whole variety of groups loosely called "self-help" reflects both a malaise in society and, at the same time, the coping strengths of individual families. The best known and one of the oldest and most effective self-help groups is of course Alcoholics Anonymous

Said Frank Reissman, Co-Director of the New Human Services Institute:

> The self-help movement arises because there are two simultaneous things occuring. One is a tremendous feeling of alienation regarding what can be done about big structures [And] not only do we feel powerless,
>
> to do about the problems that exist at that level. We turn to some areas of life where we can do something, in our small groups, in our self-help groups, in our local institutions, in our families.

These groups are an indication of a "tremendous amount of local ferment decentralized action attempting to achieve some kind of empowerment," Mr. Reissman said.

"These new groups are much more than support They're survival systems," added Leonard Borman, Director of the Self-Help Institute of Northwestern University

The self-help movement is also an indication of the limits of, and a growing distrust for, professionalism. Where professional or formal institutions are under attack for being (or seeming to be) too expensive, too distant, uncaring, and inefficient, self-help groups are seen as inexpensive, caring, concerned, and personal.

Mr Borman worked with a mental health hospital near Chicago He said he was struck by a common factor among the variety of patient self-help groups he encountered

> The commonality of many of these [patient] populations is that they have not been able to get the kind of help they needed, either from their traditional support system, or from existing human service agencies and professionals Although they are a part of families, the family doesn't understand what they are going through

To some extent, the focus of many self-help groups is the individual, not the family But to the extent that such groups help an individual deal with stress or cope with a problem, stress within a family is relieved also

"These might be a new form of extended families, or support systems, that are possibly replacing the tribe, the village, the neighborhood, that don't exist for these people anymore," Mr. Borman suggested "Small support systems are vital in terms of basic purposes of our society. Many of these groups seem to represent the kind of value system that has slowly been bleached out of our society. They're concerned with commitment."

INDIVIDUAL VS. FAMILY?

This does not mean that self-help groups always bolster the traditional family structure. Where traditional family or social roles are being recast, family members look for support from these outside groups, against the family.

In the area of women's family roles this is particularly true. Jacqueline Gilbert, Assistant Director of Parents Without Partners, said, "People have been forcing their families, their institutions, their religions, their neighborhoods ... to accept [role changes] because there have been enough of us who were so uncomfortable with what we had to do to gain support that we found a support group that could work with us. We were all kind of a collection of outcasts who could at least speak to the fact that other groups were not bolstering us."

For women who divorced and suddenly found they had no financial status in the community, for abused spouses who were told to go back home, for women questioning their sexual identity, women's groups offer a "safe harbor" that the traditional family and social structure cannot. And while these groups might be disruptive of traditional family structures, one conferee suggested that that might not be "bad if it seems that one member of that family has been subjected or oppressed, or denied the full expression of her humanness."

At the same time, the changing roles of women may in fact make families stronger in the long run, another speaker suggested

Felicia George, Coordinator of the Non-Sexist Child Development Project of the Women's Action Alliance, reminded the conference that the women's movement was not a new phenomenon, dating back as it does to the early 1800's. Equal sharing of family roles is not a revolutionary idea. Historically, women and men shared equal roles in the family. It was only after the industrial revolution that the role of women within the family diminished, Ms George maintained.

The women's movement, "has spurred men to also reexamine their role and become more involved with the family," she added "It has redefined women and the meaning of traditional women's roles to give them the kind of status and value that women feel they should have." There is more sharing of parental responsibilities, and a breakdown of sexual stereotypes

In the long run, while "this has brought about new forms of families that I don't think we can ignore," the family unit will probably be stronger because it recognizes the expectations of all its members, Ms. George said

Informal support networks discussed at Wingspread cut across all variety of social stratification and classification. They exist to empower people. If self-help groups succeed in doing that, Mr. Reissman noted, then the "de-alienation" of people towards their society might carry over to larger institutions. If that is the case, empowering people at a local level would have far reaching impact on the major institutions of society.

VI. NEIGHBORHOODS AS SUPPORT SYSTEMS

We all had one, and many of us still do that place where you played stick ball or kick-the-can as a child, went chasing through empty lots or open fields Its boundaries might have been a few city blocks, or the mile you walked down a country road to your best friend's house

For many people their definition of themselves is still tied up with the neighborhood they live in What do we mean by neighborhood? "I like to think of it as one of the levels of systems in this society that I turn to for help, one of the primary sources of help for me and my family," said David Roth, Midwest Director of the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity

WE LIKE IT HERE

There was an immediacy to Mr Roth's comments He said he was able to attend the conference only because of neighbors who were taking care of his nine-year-old daughter while both he and his wife were out of town

Certainly that arrangement is not an unusual one But for the Roths it is part of a system within the neighborhood that allows the family to function in ways it otherwise could not Because both parents work at some distance from the house, neighbors look after the Roth's daughter, sending her to school, and taking her into their home after school, on a daily basis

"What has happened in a residential development that has turned into a neighborhood is for us an interesting sort of bartering system with people who are rather different from us In short, this neighborhood has given us a number of options, which are vital to the central maintenance of our family," Mr Roth said

Interestingly, Mr Roth does not live in an older established neighborhood, but in a suburb with a high percentage of young families It has become almost a fad for families to get street signs from their old Chicago neighborhoods and put the signs in the front lawns of their new homes

"That says something probably of the view they have of the neighborhood they came from and to some extent also what they hope will happen in the community in which they're living," he added

Other examples of such evolving neighborhoods were mentioned In one area where there were mostly elderly and young couples, the young families would provide transportation for the elderly, who in return offered baby sitting services and advice on child rearing.

Columbia University Professor of Sociology and Social Work Eugene Litwak offered a functional definition of neighborhood "We're talking about lay people," he said "We are not talking about technical experts or large scale organizations There is a form of lay knowledge, and activities that occur in every area of life, and these seem to be essential "

THE LADY NEXT DOOR

Examples of lay activity would be elementary first aid, calling the police to report a neighbor's house being robbed, or pulling a neighbor's child out of the street

"The thing that characterizes a neighborhood is that their lay activities are closely tied to geographic area. In talking about neighborhoods as a support system we [must] first recognize that we are talking about lay knowledge . . , that it requires the resources of more than two persons, but not large numbers, that it is tied to geographical proximity," he said

Mr. Litwak identified four types of neighborhoods.

- *Traditional*, where people have long-term commitments to the neighborhood, and support for each other In such neighborhoods strangers are distrusted Because of their distrust for outside groups, such neighborhoods are vulnerable when they have to deal with large-scale bureaucracy.
- Then there is the *mobile neighborhood* where, although there is a large amount of support and sharing, there is no permanent commitment to the neighborhood These neighborhoods welcome strangers, and can make better use of formal institutions
- The third type of neighborhood he called *mass neighborhoods*, where there is little exchange of support or commitment to the area, where families have relationships only to larger scale, formal institutions (social services, etc)
- Finally, Mr Litwak mentioned what he called *volatile neighborhoods*, areas where two traditional neighborhoods come into conflict because they overlap

Mr Roth suggested that neighborhoods have an ability not only to cope, but to define what is, or is not, a problem within the context of that community Referring to his work with the American Jewish Committee's Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity, Mr Roth mentioned several Chicago areas with large Appalachian populations. In these communities, he said, individuals who from a professional standpoint should be in an institution were cared for in the community. "That neighborhood has a tremendous capacity to cope," Mr Roth said.

He also mentioned an Institute project that uses the ethnic community as just such a helping network A coalition of professionals and community and neighborhood people has been put together to focus on informal support systems.

The goal, he said, was to "make the mental health care system [service providers] more responsive to and responsible to a community-based, or neighborhood-based, or family-based way of looking at mental health care It doesn't devalue the importance of professionals at all. It simply makes a bold statement that some of these informal support systems function very well "

VII. RELIGION AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Several key issues and trends were raised in the discussion of religion as a support system Speakers said two trends in society were coming together the end of two centuries of secularism, and a resurgence of religion.

Rev Richard Neuhaus, Senior Editor of *Worldview Magazine*, maintained, "We are in the midst of a religious resurgence . . What we're witnessing is the end of two hundred years of what could fairly be called the hegemony of the secular enlightenment."

"The role of religion has thrown into question, if not completely debunked, most of the theories of secularization that social scientists have been operating with "

That religious institutions have been in a period of turmoil, even crisis, was not denied. And when religious institutions lost the confidence or ability

to state moral values firmly, other social institutions suffered, it was said

"The result of all of this is a loss of value, loss of confidence, loss of, simply standards," said Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Director of The National Jewish Conference The secular principle of pleasure "is in serious contradiction to most of the fundamental civilized and cultural activities of society"

What is happening today is that religion is reasserting values and reestablishing its role in society What this means in terms of religion as a support system can be seen on several levels

Brother Joseph Berg, Associate Director of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, said that at the local level, churches are mobilizing to help, to empower people

"They are not afraid of being involved in the political process," he said "We are not afraid to be involved in advocacy and advocacy seems to imply a corporate responsibility"

On a broader policy level, this religious resurgence has profound implications for public policy, Pastor Neuhaus said "We are no longer going to assume that the public arena and the discourse appropriate to the public arena must be value free We will no longer have to sweep our values under the carpet"

These groups provide refuge and support to the individual, and can be powerful themselves. Called "mediating structures," they include "those institutions standing between the individual and the larger institutions of public life" the family, neighborhood, religious affiliations, voluntary associations, and groups whose membership is based on ethnicity or other sources of identity

Here ensued a discussion of the informal groups that mediate between the individual and the larger, often indifferent or hostile, social environment These groups provide refuge and support to the individual, and can be powerful themselves Called "mediating structures," they include "those institutions standing between the individual and the larger institutions of public life" the family, neighborhood, religious affiliations, voluntary associations, and groups whose membership is based on ethnicity or other sources of identity

The mediating structures, because they are informal, natural, and personal, are easily seen as nearer the interests of the individual than the institutions of power are The bias of many participants at the Wingspread conference was, not unexpectedly, cordial towards mediating structures, and their functions were sometimes seen as under threat from the big official institutions

Thus Pastor Neuhaus said that at a minimum, where public policy ignores mediating structures (including religion), that policy should be corrected At the maximum, public policy should be devised to support mediating structures (including religion)

Does this mean a rethinking of the concept of separation of church and state? Politically, a burning coal, this issue was handled very carefully by the speakers However, Pastor Neuhaus noted that by not allowing credits for children attending parochial schools, the state was not allowing families a choice in how their children would be socialized

Rabbi Greenberg cited Alexis de Tocqueville, who called religion the cement that holds a pluralistic America together "Values make a difference The inability of society to make value statements cripples support systems and the family," Rabbi Greenberg said

VIII. ETHNICITY AND FAMILY AS SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Ethnicity is a term almost as hard to pin down as *family*. William McCready defined it as "a latent, subjective identity that answers the question, where did you come from It's a subjective story, a key element for many people in determining who they are It's not necessary that they know the details of the story."

That is a broad definition, which Mr McCready used to make several points One was that, to whatever extent people value their background or their heritage, to that extent it becomes a support system for them — not necessarily a support system into which they were born "Many of us have several ethnic heritages represented in our backgrounds," Mr McCready said, "and we select one or another to emphasize. How else could someone like me, coming from Dutch, German, English, Scottish, and Irish stock, consider himself 'American-Irish?' I think many people are the same in this respect"

Secondly, people want the identity they select to be respected "It's somehow important that we begin to listen to the stories as they emerge One of the key elements that frequently gets lost at the social policy level, and frequently gets lost at the support system level, is the fact that people want their story to be respected They want to feel as though other people accept it," he said

But the question of ethnicity as a support system is really two-pronged For many people it is a part of the fabric of their identity, a part of where they came from and who they are

But with immigrant populations, ethnic support systems can mean something more concrete John Spiegel sees informal ethnic support networks as bridges to a new society that play vital roles in acculturation. Dr Spiegel identified two such support networks from his own professional experience. One he called host receptor sites, or culture brokers These are community based institutions that serve as interpreters of the new culture for immigrants The other he called gate keepers. These are individuals who come from the community and who work with formal and informal organizations to find out what services are available. They represent the ethnic group to formal institutions.

"Even ordinarily 'strong and healthy families cannot always resist the force of external pressures."

Around these kinds of quasi-formal support organizations, ethnic self-help groups often form, Dr Spiegel said

As for families as support systems, Marion Levine, Executive Director of the North Shore Child Guidance Center, emphasized,

> Families are truly support systems and not the enemy. Families have the capacity to problem solve and to cope They do it every single day The family as a support system must negotiate with many other systems in this society, and a therapist or service professional must consider the impact of

In fact, behavior that was seen as pathological in low-income families — women working, the interchangeability of family roles, with children often assuming some parental responsibilities — is now seen as a source of strength and coping when it appears in middle-income families.

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these other external systems as well as problems within the family. Perhaps a family dysfunction has its origin, not in the weakness of the family or in an inability to cope, but in the intrusion or intervention of another system. Even ordinarily strong and healthy families cannot always resist the force of external pressures.

Robert Hill talked about the particular internal strengths of black and low-income families. He maintained that professionals generally ignore the strong coping mechanisms of such families and adopt a "missionary complex." Further, their assumptions of pathology don't fit with the facts.

"They define them as groups that are completely dependency-prone and therefore [policy] is not directed towards helping those who are helping themselves," he said.

In fact, behaviour that was seen as pathological in low-income families — women working, the interchangeability of family roles, with children often assuming some parental responsibilities — is now seen as a source of strength and coping when it appears in middle-income families.

Mr Hill said studies have identified five areas of strength in low-income families: strong kinship bonds, work orientation, flexible family roles, strong achievement orientation, and strong religious orientation.

"We contend that those five factors have been functional for the survival, the advancement, and stability of black families," Mr. Hill said.

IX, FAMILY POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Turning again to public policy what should be the focus of policy, and what should be its limits? Do we already have an implicit family policy, as John McKnight and others suggested? Throughout the discussion of informal support systems, questions such as these, concerning how public policy could be shaped, were heard.

NO READY ANSWER

Although there were no ready answers, several themes emerged. One was put forth by Joseph Giordano. "I think we have to look at new mechanisms that make the linkage between the primary group and the bureaucracy. And we may need new groups that make the linkage," he said. Those linkages, many of them informal support systems, should be nurtured by policy. But how?

Mr. McKnight had suggested that the question would be better framed in the negative: "The question is what is *not* to be done. The principle around which policy is formulated . . is best understood as a set of limits."

Families should be empowered to do for themselves, which means federal policy towards families should be one of options, he suggested. Citing one example of how that is not the case, Mr. McKnight talked about policy towards the elderly, which he said constituted "a national family-breaking policy in regards to helping children take care of their parents. The government wants to care for old people, but will only do that if children will separate from them."

If federal money is used to help support elderly in institutions, it should also be used — perhaps in the form of tax credits or other incentives — to help families who want to keep the elderly in the home and care for them.

Government pays for public education, but gives no aid, and even harasses families who choose to educate children in the home, or within kinship or community networks outside the formal institutions.

"What we need is a policy of options. What we have now is a straight family separation policy," Mr McKnight said.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICES

Another question was whether federal policy is too crude and clumsy an instrument for dealing with the diversity of families and their variety of needs.

"We've had a tradition of universal programs for universal needs," Irving Levine said. "Even within the context of universal needs, there is significant diversity, especially in the manner in which different individuals and groups prefer services to be delivered."

Could federal policy be formulated to allow for this variety — universal policy with built in choice? "It's quite possible that you can have a more sensitive, culturally compatible kind of policy framework that gives lots of people [choices]. It's not easy, but it's a way of thinking about how you handle problems," Mr. Levine said.

Another question was whether federal policy is too crude and clumsy an instrument for dealing with the diversity of families and their variety of needs.

Mr. Levine would encourage a "social conservation" approach which would represent the pluralistic nature of our society. It would respect professionalism, but it would also deliver services through the natural and informal systems of help that can be discovered through a deeper understanding of how human ecology works.

A "social conservation" approach would not work if it emerged as anti-professional. The role of the professional as a provider of services should be expanded to include the functions of trainer and "broker." Professionals should help clients make choices of appropriate support systems and evaluate the progress that individuals and families are making.

This approach would operate best if national policy were sympathetic. To achieve "social conservation," we would need national support for the family, national attention to neighborhoods, national full employment, and national health insurance.

Other conferees were less confident that could be done. "I can't think of anything universal as applied to the family," said John Spiegel.

Like Mr. McKnight, Robert Rice suggested that the limits of what federal policy could accomplish might be quite narrow. "Being a practicing administrator taught me that I had to pay attention to what was possible," Dr. Rice said. "In shaping policy, one practices the art of the possible."

Change is possible, but it will come slowly. In the last few decades family service agencies have gone from a position of trying to standardize their services to trying to tailor services to the community (although, according to Marion Levine, agencies still receive more financial aid for working with individuals than with families).

Still, Dr. Rice added, "we're entering a new age, where there has never been such explicit, broad, policy-level attention to the subject of family."

"Think of policy formation as something that will evolve. We're still in the process of learning to think about family policy," he added.

What sorts of questions should policy planners be asking?

ENABLE, DON'T DISABLE

"The trick is to get in and then get

out," said Dr. Rice, describing the role of service professionals in their work with families. The worker offers a service, perhaps even an authoritarian service, such as protection, he serves as a resource to that family when the family fails, intervenes when the need requires it, but withdraws before the family becomes dependent. The trick is to get in and then get out, to respect what is natural and support it."

Mr. Giordano pointed out that there might be areas of inconsistency, or conflict, between government policies, accepted standards of society, the law — and what individual families or communities want to do.

An example of that would be a community that resisted integration. "Maybe we have to be inconsistent," he said. "There are real fundamental conflicts here."

The issue "is not just allowing the community to tell you what isn't a problem, which may be unfair to somebody else's community. It is, I think, for policy makers to listen a little more precisely, to the level at which something is a problem for a community, how big a problem it is, and when it ceases being a problem," he said.

The whole question of policy, Dr. Spiegel suggested, is finally one of ecology:

> You can't really help an individual without helping his family; but you can't help the family without looking at the networks that support the family. It is very difficult to do anything about the networks or the effort to mobilize such networks without considering the neighborhood in which the family exists. It is difficult to be concerned about the neighborhood without being concerned with the larger political and economic structures of that particular community. And you can't be concerned about that without being concerned about the nation as a whole. If you are going to be concerned with strengthening the family, you have to look at this ecology as a whole. One doesn't exist without the other.

X. CONCLUSION

What was accomplished at this conference?

Chairperson of the Coalition for the White House Conference on Families Robert Rice said:

> I think some of those present were surprised by the content of much of the conference. There were ideas and views expressed that were new and unexpected. Some of the speakers were saying, "You service professionals have been taking the action away from the family, away from the natural supports. Now we don't think you're needed anymore, and what we want is smaller government, less intrusive programs, fewer resources going to the professionals." This was a real broadside.
>
> I think the cautions that John McKnight presented will receive much support from within the Coalition, once those cautions are understood. It won't happen immediately, but eventually Coalition members who are unfriendly to John McKnight's position will see that they still have a role, even with his cautious approach to family policy.

Mr. Giordano stressed the power of informal "support networks as mediating structures "both between the family and the larger society . . . in advocating on both ends: for the family, to help the family deal with whatever it's going through as a result of internal changes or pressures on it from the outside; and on the other hand, represent the family against the assaults from things they can't control — like government policies . . . ."

The professionals ought to be stimulating self-help — and then pulling out, Mr. Giordano said. "Mediating and advocating, and making the linkage with what people need but don't have the resources or organization to do."

The conference produced another strong caution: federal policy should not be rushed into. The idea that government can save the family is both misleading and dangerous: misleading in that it focuses on what is done for the family, not what the family can do, and dangerous because it could potentially rob the family of natural functions and so give it one less reason for continuing.

The diversity of families was recognized, and Mr. Levine found in that diversity cause for celebration. "I'm less concerned about fragmentation. Frankly, I call it identity. What you have is a lot of group identities out there forming, in a way that is very exciting," he said. "We ought to celebrate it."

The fact that the conference was held was also cause for hope. One conferee pointed out, "We wouldn't be here under the banner of the American family unless we felt something dangerous was going on; something falling apart that we don't want to fall apart quite the way it is . . . . But with recognition of the problem, there is the chance for finding some answers."

A WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON FAMILIES

During the 1976 presidential campaign, candidate Jimmy Carter spoke about the pressures on the American family and raised the issue of national family policy. "The American family is in trouble," he said in August, and urged that government actions be "designed to honor and support and strengthen" it. He argued for a pro-family policy, while noting that no family policy is the equivalent of an anti-family policy.

During the campaign Joseph Califano, who would become the new President's Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, served as a special advisor to the candidate "on how federal programs can aid and support the American family." One of the earliest documents setting forth the administration's thinking on family policy is a report by advisor Califano for candidate Carter, "American Families Trends, Pressures and Recommendations." In it, Mr. Califano noted that "families are America's most precious resource and most important institution." He argued for the recognition of limits to what government can do to meet human needs, that government programs should not encroach upon the functions of the family, and that a Carter administration should attempt to "restore trust and confidence in American families." He especially called for careful examination of the ways that the variety of government programs and policies affect family life. "We must," he concluded, "expand considerably the dialogue about families and children."

Later in the campaign, when speaking before a meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, Jimmy Carter declared: "One thing I intend to do as President is to make sure that every action our government takes helps our families rather than hurts them." This would be a national administration concerned for the welfare and the strengths of families, and the first Carter budget included a recommendation, which was approved by Congress, for funding a White House Conference on Families.

In January 1978 President Carter announced a White House Conference, "in order to help stimulate a national discussion on the state of American families." In his statement the President said he was "confident that the American family is basically sound, and that we can and will adjust to the challenges of changing times."

The main purpose of this White House Conference will be to examine the strengths of American families, the difficulties they face, and the ways in which family life is affected by public policies. The Conference will examine the important effects that the world of work, the mass media, the court system, private institutions, and other major facets of our society have on American families.

This Conference will clearly recognize the pluralism of family life in America. The widely differing regional, religious, cultural and ethnic heritages of our country affect family life and contribute to its diversity and strength. Families also differ in age and composition. There are families in which several generations live together, families with two parents or one, and families with or without children. The Conference will respect this diversity.

The work of this Conference, in conjunction with our current efforts to implement family-oriented government policies, can help strengthen and support this most vital and enduring social resource. I look forward to participating in the work of the Conference and receiving its report.

A White House Conference on Families is both cause and effect of a wide variety of activities, in government, in universities, and in the private sector, that have the status of the American family as their subject. The White House Conference, scheduled for spring 1981, will provide a focal point for at least one phase of a wide and intense national dialogue on the American family and public policy towards families.

THE JOHNSON FOUNDATION

Wingspread, the last of Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie houses, was built in 1938 for the H.F. Johnson family. One of the largest of Wright's homes, it rises from the margin of a broad ravine and overlooks a series of ponds, open fields, and wooded slopes, a half mile from Lake Michigan, just north of Racine, Wisconsin.

In 1959, through the generous gift of Mr. and Mrs. H.F. Johnson, Wingspread became the headquarters of The Johnson Foundation. Since then it has served as an educational conference center for meetings of a regional, national, and international character. Wingspread is an ideal facility for symposia of fifty or fewer participants. Its pastoral setting and unique architecture encourage productive dialogue. Wingspread thus provides opportunities for face-to-face exchange among small groups of leaders and specialists on issues of significance to the United States and nations overseas.

The Johnson Foundation works with many other organizations in convening about one hundred Wingspread conferences a year, usually two or three days in duration, on topics dealing with areas selected by the Board of Trustees as major concerns: International Understanding, Educational Excellence, Improvement of the Human Environment, and Intellectual and Cultural Growth. Examples of recent Wingspread meetings include:

- The Exchange Experience with China — Past, Present, and Future
- The Law of International Human Rights
- Developing Competence in Reading, Writing, and Computing Basic Skills and American Education
- New Directions in American Intellectual History

THE COALITION FOR THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON FAMILIES

The possibility — the announcement — of a White House Conference on Families has been the occasion of wide and various activity, activity that expands and intensifies as the conference draws nearer. There have of course been other White House conferences — for example, on Aging, on Children, on Children and Youth, on Balanced National Growth and Economic Development. Some of these are decennial conferences White House Conferences on Aging and on Children and Youth are scheduled for 1981, the year of the Conference on Families.

This, however, will be the first White House Conference on Families, and it has attracted perhaps unprecedented attention It is certainly timed to encourage and contribute to an expanding national dialogue This national discussion and debate include such studies as those of the National Academy of Sciences (*Toward a National Policy for Children and Families*, 1976) and the Carnegie Council on Children (*All Our Children*, 1977) Robert M Rice's book, *American Family Policy*, was published while he was chairperson of the Coalition for the White House Conference on Families. George Washington University's Family Impact Seminar is developing methods for identifying and measuring the impact of various government programs on families and family life. Major centers for the study of families are sponsored by Vanderbilt University, Duke University, the University of Minnesota, and Cornell University. Projects have been undertaken by the National PTA, the National Council of Churches, and the American Association of University Women Conferences have been convened by General Mills, Inc., the National Urban League, several national associations, and several states. *Newsweek* gave a cover article and NBC three hours on a week night to the subject of the family. The United Nations devoted 1979 to the International Year of the Child Several private foundations have identified the family as a program interest.

One of the most extensive initiatives relating to the subject of families is the Coalition for the White House Conference on Families. If you can think of a national organization concerned with families or with family policy, it is probably a member of the Coalition. The list of member organizations includes the American Home Economics Association, American Red Cross, Americans for Indian Opportunity, Child Welfare League, Family Service Association of America, the Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity of the American Jewish Committee, National Association of Social Workers, National Conference of Catholic Charities, the National PTA, National Council of Churches, National Council on Family Relations, National Urban League, Parents Without Partners, Planned Parenthood, Synagogue Council of America, and the National Board of the YWCA

The Coalition for the White House Conference on Families started, and continues, with these principles as its foundation.

- That the White House Conference planners should devise a framework for the participation of various interest groups, professionals, and families themselves in defining the common needs of families;
- That the conference itself should focus on the impact of federal policy on the family;
- That the conference should recognize the impact the other major institutions of society have on the family;
- And finally, that the conference should also consider the informal networks of support that aid families, and how those informal support systems could be strengthened by government policy

From the beginning, the Coalition has sought to participate in the planning for the White House Conference. Its membership views the conference as a major opportunity to contribute to the scope and the quality of the national dialogue on families and family policy.

- Collaboration on Meeting the Needs of Linguistically Different Children in the Midwest
- National Forum for Women in Higher Education Administration
- Long-Term Care and the Aging of America
- Research in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect
- Residential Programs for Young Single Mothers
- Amici at Wingspread Implications of the Bakke Decision
- World Conference on Innovative Higher Education
- Urban Youth Unemployment
- Industrial Social Work
- Wingspread Conference on Youth Work
- The Formation of a National Coalition for Jail Reform

The Johnson Foundation's efforts at program extension, beyond the immediate experience of Wingspread conference participants, include the publication in several forms of Wingspread reports, which are distributed in the United States and abroad. Program extension also includes "Conversations from Wingspread," a weekly public affairs radio program. These half-hour educational programs are recorded at Wingspread and broadcast nationally each week over approximately 150 stations.

Financial support for the programs of The Johnson Foundation is made available through the generosity of S.C, Johnson & Son, Inc. (Johnson's Wax), and members of the Johnson family.

The Johnson Foundation invites inquiries from organizations and individuals about convening Wingspread conferences Inquiries should be addressed to The Johnson Foundation, Racine, Wisconsin 53401

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WINGSPREAD

The building Frank Lloyd Wright called Wingspread, situated on a rolling prairie site just north of Racine, Wisconsin, was designed in 1938 as a residence for the Johnson family. In 1960, through the gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. F. Johnson, it became the headquarters of The Johnson Foundation and began its career as an educational conference center.

In the years since, it has been the setting for many conferences and meetings dealing with subjects of regional, national, and international interest. It is the hope of the Foundation's trustees that Wingspread will take its place increasingly as a national institution devoted to the free exchange of ideas among people.

The rolling expanse of the Midwestern prairies was considered a natural setting for Wingspread. In the limitless earth the architect envisioned a freedom and movement. The name Wingspread was an expression of the nature of the house, reflecting aspiration through spread wings — a symbol of soaring inspiration.

The Johnson Foundation encourages the examination of a variety of problems facing the Midwest, the Nation, and mankind. In the belief that responsible analyses and proposals should reach a substantial audience, The Johnson Foundation assists in the publication of various papers and reports. Publication, of course, does not imply approval.

Additional copies of this report may be obtained from The Johnson Foundation, Racine, Wisconsin 53401.

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