DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 080 RC 020 964

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TITLE Poor Kids in a Rich Nation: Eating the Seed Corn.
PUB DATE Dec 96
NOTE 7p.; In: Pathways from Poverty Educational Network; see RC 020 963.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Children; *Child Welfare; Demography; *Family Life; Family Needs; Ideology; Low Income Groups; *Poverty; *Public Policy; *Rural Population; Rural Urban Differences; Social Responsibility; Welfare Services

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the problem of having many poor children in the wealthy United States and the need to find answers to this problem. Despite much recent talk about "family values," the dominant U.S. ideology holds that family welfare is a private rather than a public responsibility. Poor children are seen as a special population that diverts resources from "the rest of us." An alternative vision recognizes mutual responsibility and emphasizes support for families, especially their efforts to raise children. A comprehensive anti-poverty policy would employ three basic strategies: risk minimization (prenatal and postnatal care to improve child outcomes and wellness programs to prevent disabilities); career development (with consideration for the integration of work and family roles); and asset development (protection against sudden unemployment). A brief overview of childhood poverty demonstrates decreases in poverty between 1960 and 1970, especially in rural areas; increases between 1980 and 1990; consistently higher rates of child poverty and deep poverty in nonmetro areas and among African Americans; and the extent of poverty among two-parent families. Poverty is not good for children. In particular, family poverty may lead to poor birth outcomes, malnutrition, parental stress and punitive parenting, low child self-esteem, and poor academic performance and subsequent limited employment opportunities. Specific rural poverty-related problems include discouragement of eligible families from applying for welfare, reluctance of rural residents to apply, inadequate social services, and inadequate infrastructure to administer programs or compete for funds. (SV)

POOR KIDS IN A RICH NATION: EATING THE SEED CORN

By: Dr. Patricia Garrett

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide you with questions and answers about the status of children in this country. We are plagued with the problem of having so many poor children in our wealthy country, and need to find the answers to this problem. I'd like to discuss some issues that may help to provide some of these answers. The principle issues I will discuss are:

Who is responsible for children's welfare?

What are reasonable objectives and viable strategies for anti-poverty initiatives?

Which children are poor?

Poverty, like war, is bad for children and other living things. Why is that?

How is rural childhood poverty special?

Ideological Issues Concerning Responsibility and Family Values

We have heard a great deal recently about "family values." It is useful to put this dialogue into a comparative perspective. The dominant ideology in the United States holds that family welfare is a private rather than a public responsibility. Public intervention is appropriate only when family support breaks down.

An alternative vision holds that we are jointly responsible for each other's welfare. Families have special responsibilities for their members, but we all have a responsibility to each other. From this perspective, public policy should support families, especially their efforts to raise children. This means that a comprehensive set of programs needs to be offered, among them paid parental leave, child allowances, accessible medical care, and subsidized education, including that at the pre-kindergarten level.

These programs are conspicuous by their absence in the current political debate regarding family values. This is extremely important from the point of view of childhood poverty because such programs tend to benefit poor families more than rich families. That is, they redistribute resources from the top towards the bottom. In the former Czechoslovakia, for example, kindergarten programs for children 3-6 years old were the single most effective way to benefit low income families. It is young families, with new workers at the bottom of their earning curve, who experience the greatest benefit from universalistic programs.

"Family-friendly" policies are universalistic—all families benefit, but low income families benefit proportionately more than others. Even so, they are fair and do not stigmatize their beneficiaries. They enjoy popular support.

In the relative absence of pro-family policies, poor children in the US are seen as a population requiring special services. Poverty is seen as a problem of competing interest groups, competitive with the general interest; resources that support special interests are diverted from the "rest of us." This is a mind-set that is utterly foreign to most industrialized nations where the assumption is that children are the joint responsibility of community and family. Whether we act on it or not, it takes an entire village to raise a child.

Anti-Poverty Objectives and Strategies

Understanding that US policy is out of synch with all industrialized countries and most of the world, how can we conceptualize anti-poverty initiatives? A comprehensive policy to overcome poverty would have several complementary objectives. These include an effort to reduce the prevalence of poverty, to limit its duration and depth, to ameliorate its consequences, and to prevent its intergenerational transmission.

Three basic strategies are consistent with these objectives:

a.) **risk minimization**—to avoid spells of poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty by preventing employment-relevant disabilities and asset depletion;

b.) **career development**—to increase earned income by enhancing coping skills important in both the workplace and the family; and

c.) **asset development**—to increase wealth and expand alternatives by supporting capital accumulation.

These three strategies redefine traditional conceptualizations because they can cross sectors such as education, health, economy, etc. This, in turn, may suggest new ways of designing anti-poverty programs so that benefits are complementary. I'd like to provide a few health-related examples.

In the area of **risk minimization**, there is a policy support-

ing good pre- and post-natal care for mother and child which improves child outcomes, and age-appropriate wellness programs minimize processes whereby problems become disabilities and subsequently handicaps. Work-related disabilities are the single strongest determinant of poverty status. A less obvious example is an employment/retraining policy that guarantees all who want to work at a decent job. Because of the centrality of work to self-concept and social regard, there are important and positive mental health consequences of productive and satisfying jobs.

In the area of **career development**, it is necessary to conceptualize career broadly to include the integration of work and family roles and the way that this integration changes over a life course. From this broad perspective, one would consider formal education and human capital formation jointly with issues concerning family planning, such as the timing and number of children and parenting skills and responsibilities.

In discussing **asset development**, there is the problem of people who live from one paycheck to another. These people experience crises if the checks stop. Those who are poor or near poor have few assets, so the spiral into acute poverty can be dramatic and rapid. Health insurance is a protection because families' assets are not depleted by major illness. In a less obvious fashion, child allowances that disproportionately benefit lower than higher income families can foster some accumulation of assets by young families.

The basic thesis of this talk is that a child-centered analysis of poverty policy would emphasize risk minimization. This would be one aspect of a generalized preventive strategy, consistent with a public health orientation. Risk minimization provides a good basis for career development and asset development strategies as children grow into adults. Some of my research based on a large national data set suggests that improvements in family income are most beneficial to the most disadvantaged youngsters. This means that the most "at-risk" kids are the most likely to benefit when family income increases.

The policy relevance of this approach is transparent. Such an approach is both humane and cost effective. Moreover, it allows individuals to express their interests and talents. Such an orientation is not paternalistic; rather, it is supportive of human development.

Childhood Poverty

The Task Force on Persistent Poverty of the Rural Sociological Society presented its findings in an anthology entitled Persistent Poverty in Rural America (Westview Press, 1993). The first chapter by Bill Hoppe provides a demographic overview of trends in rural poverty and the eighth chapter by Garrett and Lennox focuses on families and children.

Before proceeding, I want to make a simple point. Female employment is an anti-poverty program, organized by families, especially in reaction to the economic crisis of the 1980's. Many more families would be in poverty today were it not for the fact that women entered, reentered, or remained in the labor force. The biggest increases occurred among mothers with very young children. The latest data suggest that more than half the mothers of infants are economically active.

In this context, I want to show you a few graphs that may focus your attention on the specifics of rural childhood poverty. Figure one illustrates childhood poverty in the period of 1960-1990. The bars on the left illustrate metropolitan regions, while those on the right illustrate non-metropolitan regions. In both regions, there is a dramatic drop in childhood poverty rates between 1960 and 1970. This demonstrates that the War on Poverty worked, especially in rural areas. Between 1980 and 1990, by contrast, the trend was towards increased poverty rates, in both metro and non-metro areas.

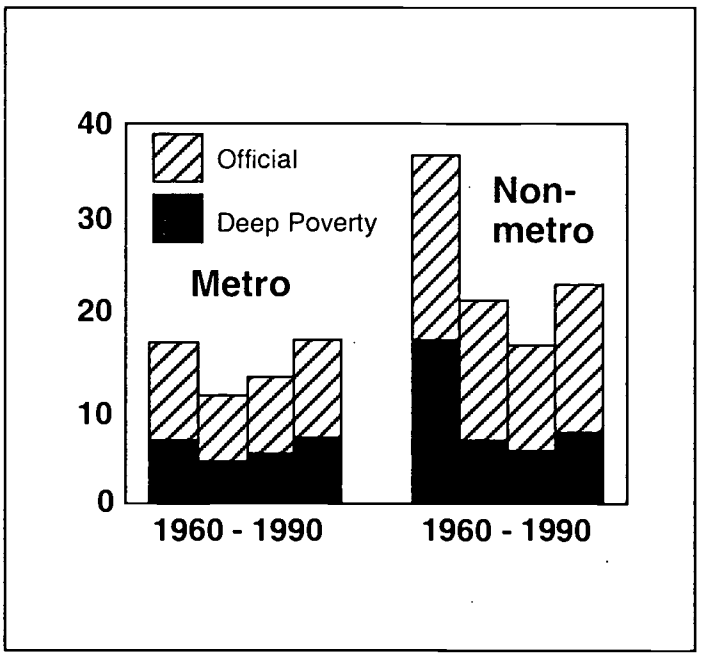

Figure 1: Children in Poverty: 1960-1990 (from Lichter, D. and Eggebeen, D., 1992, Child Poverty and the Changing Rural Family, *Rural Sociology*, **57**, 151-172.

Race and ethnicity are also strongly associated with childhood poverty status. Figure two illustrates what we all know, namely that poverty is more prevalent among blacks than whites. The magnitude of this difference, however, may not be widely appreciated. What is certainly not appreciated is that the rate of poverty among non-metropolitan children is nearly as high as that of children living in central city ghettos.

Deep poverty remains problematic throughout the period. Deep poverty is defined as 50% of the official poverty level, which itself has declined in buying power over the years. Deep poverty is a very serious issue, especially for children.

Childhood poverty is strongly associated with family structure. Children born into single-parent, typically female-

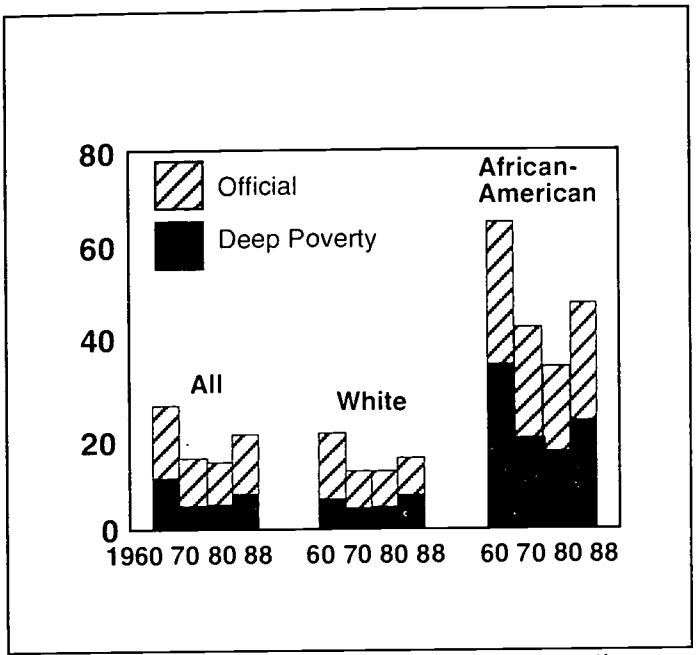

Figure 2: Children in Poverty by Race: 1960-1990 (from Eggebeen, D. and Lichter, D., 1991, Race, Family Structure, and Changing Poverty among American Children, *American Sociological Review*, 56, 801-817.

headed, households are much more likely to be poor than those who live in dual parent families. Figure three shows that proportionately more non-metropolitan children live in intact families, but childhood poverty is still higher for non-metropolitan than metropolitan children with two parents.

What this graph does not show is what other studies demonstrate. Low wages, underemployment, and unemployment all influence the poverty status of families with children. Young adults with young children have suffered the most in today's negative economic climate. Many poor children have parents who both work. Because the wages that they command are low, employment alone does not necessarily lift children out of poverty. This reality is extremely relevant for the contemporary debate on welfare reform. Although the work emphasis of many of the current proposals is a needed change, employment alone in the absence of supportive services and notable medical and child care will leave many children poor.

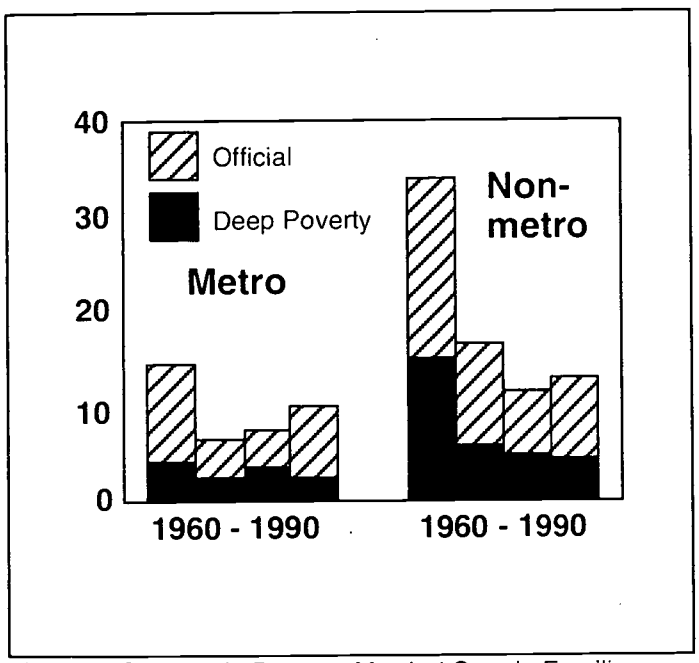

Figure 3: Children in Poverty, Married Couple Families: 1960-1990 (from Lichter, D., and Eggebeen, D., 1992, Child Poverty and the Changing Rural Family, *Rural Sociology*, 57, 151-172.

Why Poverty is Bad for Kids

It seems intuitively obvious that poverty, like war, is not good for children or other living things. From a potentially endless list of awfuls, certain issues seem particularly important.

Parental poverty may lead to poor birth outcomes, notably prematurity, low birth weight, and chemical dependence. Such outcomes are related to complex interactions among available services and maternal behavior. The inadequate availability utilization of prenatal care may reflect negatively on the characteristics of the service delivery program, such as physical distance, cultural characteristics, cleanliness, etc. Patient characteristics, including mothers' youth or other conditions, may render birth outcomes problematic under the best of circumstances. The simple rule of thumb is that the later a problem is recognized, the more serious it will become, and the more likely it is to become debilitating.

Family poverty may lead to child undernutrition. Young children face developmental milestones in rapid succession. Chronic poverty has captured the imagination of policy makers and scholars, but episodic poverty is a serious issue for children who need food when they are hungry, warmth when they are cold, and comfort when they are disoriented. This has some immediate implications for program development. If parents are unwilling or unable to access essentials like food via food stamps or food cupboards, children can suffer.

Undernutrition places children at a disadvantage relative to their well-nourished peers. Undernutrition must be very severe to result in brain damage. Irritability and distractibility with school failure are far more common.

Poverty is not the only source of inadequate diets for kids, but hunger remains a serious, if ignored, problem. Hunger is more difficult to address in rural than urban communities, especially during the summer when schools are not in session and distances make food service virtually impossible.

Attempts to cut the food lunch program have recently gone down to a well-publicized defeat. Meanwhile, the child care food program remains very much in jeopardy. It needs to be recognized also that there are ethnic biases built into those

menus.

Family poverty may lead to parental stress and punitive parenting. Poverty is at the top of the list of stressors, right up there with the death of a spouse. Poverty is also likely to be a chronic stressor, and therefore a constant source of distress.

The literature suggests that economic distress rather than low income is problematic. People in the same objective circumstances may interpret their positions differently, and therefore may or may not experience economic distress. Economic distress is related to punitive parenting.

Punitive parenting has many overtones, but it suggests several ways by which parents may fail to provide a nurturing environment for children's development. Parents may withdraw emotionally from their children, remain inattentive to children's emotional needs, which vary according to developmental status, and/or hold inappropriate expectations for children, especially if they do not concur with parents' rather than children's needs.

This literature rings true, but its empirical basis is actually very weak. More than anything else, it reflects theoretical notions of what proper parenting looks like, such as the middle class WASP styles of relating to children. There are important cultural differences in expectations that adults have for children. Bangladeshi infants, for example, are potty-trained by six months of age—scandalously early by US standards, but it seems to do the infants no harm. Japanese children are trained to be much less individualistic and much more group-oriented than we are. The point is that there are legitimate cultural differences in child-rearing expectations and practices that are not reflected in the literature on punitive parenting. No doubt that the young mother in the supermarket pulling a child around by the ear and beating up on him is not doing a good job of parenting, but other behaviors which reflect legitimate cultural differences are not reflected in the literature on punitive parenting.

Strong and dense social support networks buffer parents and protect them somewhat from stressors. Anthropological and sociological research suggests that families and children must be considered in their natural social environments that typically encompass more than the nuclear family. In practical terms, this means that both individual and family-focused analysis should be incorporated within a larger social context that includes kith and kin.

The research on ethnic minorities is particularly weak. Consequently, it is not clear whether particular social policies that target the husband/wife nuclear family are particularly counterproductive in certain ethnic communities. What is the family? That is the underlying question here. Social policy is clearly biased against matri-focal or multi-generational families, not to mention single-sex families. This issue deserves more attention than it receives.

Female-headed households are important because they are more vulnerable to poverty than dual-parent families. A spouse can make an economic contribution to family welfare, provide emotional support, and assist with home maintenance tasks such as child care and housekeeping.

Current research suggests that single parent households are problematic not because the male role model is absent or inaccessible, but because mothers are simply overworked, tired, and lacking the energy to deal constructively with children. An interesting, but relatively unexplored question, is the extent to which two-job couples experience a time overload when it comes to family maintenance activities. The fact remains, however, that women on the average earn less than men. They are more likely to be poor. Poverty itself is a stressor that is exacerbated by overwork.

Extended families and relatives can provide many kinds of support including financial assistance, crisis management, child care, and, very importantly, role modeling. The latter is especially important for young mothers who need to learn how to parent even as they prepare themselves for their adult roles.

The literature emphasizes the positive role of kin, especially grandmothers; but kin relations are characterized by reciprocity. Kinship is a double-edged sword on which one balances rights and obligations. Relationships are both emotional and contradictory. Extended families are likely to be important, especially in stable, rural communities and among ethnic minorities.

African-Americans are estimated to have a 30% higher incidence of extended families than other ethnic groups. Certainly, research among Latinos would come up with a similarly high number.

Family poverty may lead to a child feeling that she is less worthy than her more affluent peers. Kids know that it is not cool to be poor, and they easily come to believe that they are less worthy than their peers born into more comfortable circumstances. Consumerism has its consequences.

Kids know that it is not cool to be poor, and they easily come to believe that they are less worthy than their peers born into more comfortable circumstances. Consumerism has its consequences. - Patricia Garrett

In the not-so-distant past, people felt pride because they were poor but honest. Indeed, many, especially those raised in rural areas, never felt themselves deprived because everyone enjoyed modest circumstances. Surnames were important, because they suggested an honorable/dishonorable parentage. The work of Janet Fitchen demonstrated that discrimination happens even in ethnically homogeneous communities.

The interpersonal dimension of conflict has been minimized in most idealized discussions of rural communities. Many rural communities are characterized by inter-family animosities of long duration that take forms other than that of the Hatfields and the McCoys. In stratified societies, such as those that are found across most of the rural South, it is simply naive to assume mutually respectful relations across class, ethnic, religious, and gender lines. Bigotry is alive and well. It is part of the reality that children live every day.

Family poverty may lead to children's poor academic performance and subsequently limited employment opportunities. Most discussions of childhood poverty have embraced the notion that formal education equals human capital development, which equals escape from poverty. This assumes that children need to get through the existing system and that parents need to prepare children to succeed.

This orientation has obvious merits, but also severe limitations. Principal among the limitations is an uncritical stand towards the current educational system that has manifest failures, especially with regard to ethnic and cultural minorities. The situation is inherently contradictory; education is obviously an important pathway from poverty, but the current system favors a narrow set of learning styles. Schools are generally not pluralistic nor multi-cultural, and only innovative programs emphasize cooperative learning or call-and-response activities.

There is ample evidence that teachers actively discriminate against girls, ethnic minorities, poor children, and those from non-traditional families. Academic performance, therefore, reflects a subtle interaction between a child's interests and capacities and the teacher's prejudices. This has real consequences for children's academic attainment and their subsequent occupational placements.

The Specificity of Rural Poverty for Children

Communities may actively discourage eligible families from applying for benefits. The "nastiness factor" may be a serious issue, especially in highly stratified rural communities in the South. Where the local elite and/or the populace oppose public expenditures, especially if they originate with the federal government, it will be difficult to get transfer payments to their intended beneficiaries.

Commitment to self-reliance makes some rural residents reluctant to apply for welfare services. When parents fail to file for benefits that would enhance the health and nutritional status of children, especially young children, the long-term consequences for children are negative. Policy-makers must recognize that there is a contradiction between trying to minimize the economic dependency of adults and serving the immediate needs of children. In the current policy debate, children's needs have been relatively ignored.

The social service network in rural communities is less dense than in urban areas, and the quality of available services may be inadequate due to problems in recruiting staff and funding programs. Low population density places objective limits on what services can be provided in a cost-effective fashion. Nevertheless, the absence of subsidies to preventive programs, be they in education or health, creates a demand for more expensive interventions. Children with special needs provide an important illustration of the general problem. Effective early intervention can prevent some conditions from becoming disabilities, enhancing the lives of the child and his or her family and minimizing the cost to the public. All programs must be tailored to the reality of the community, a reality that includes population density as well as ethnicity, religion, and social class.

Poor rural communities do not have the administrative infrastructure to administer programs and compete effectively for funds with affluent, urban districts. Although such communities frequently tax at a higher rate, the absolute income from property taxes is low. Infrastructure costs, such as that for roads and hospitals, are high. Regional inequality is a reality, even if states engage in programs to redistribute resources to poor areas, such as an education improvement program. In poor, rural counties, staffing of county government is minimal. That means that capacity to administer block grants is minimal.

My research in North Carolina, for example, demonstrates that counties with a high need for subsidized child care slots revert their money to the state because they cannot administer the paperwork. The monies are then redistributed to affluent counties who have an active child care support program and can spend more funds. There is no reason to think that this applies only to subsidized child care or only to North Carolina.

I am very concerned about the emphasis placed on block grants in current discussions of budgetary and welfare reform. Our current policies have allowed enormous regional equalities to persist. Block granting them will, in my judgment, be a disaster for citizens in poor, rural communities. That includes our youngest citizens.

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