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The Welfare of Families

Educators can fight family poverty and inequality by helping to shape public perception of social and cultural problems.

The death of the family, like that of Mark Twain, has been greatly exaggerated. For most of this century, public opinion makers—journalists, professional social scientists, and politicians—have wrung their hands and beat their breasts over the impending doom of the family. While its obituary continues to be written, the family itself has held on and, some would say, actually flourished.

In recent years the controversy has focused on the status of the "traditional" family. Its self-proclaimed defenders on the political Right have feared that teenage sexuality, abortion, and welfare have undermined the authority of the father, while critics on the Left have taken aim at the oppressive character of the family and called for its replacement by more egalitarian forms of domestic association.

These garrulous experts on the family have largely ignored how un-"traditional" the American family is and how adaptable it has been to new social and economic circumstances. For example, the traditional family—consisting of a male wage-earner, a full-time female housekeeper, and children either at home or at school—was invented less than a century ago and did not become the dominant family form until the early twentieth century.



Without changes in welfare policy and the economy, little headway can be made in mitigating poverty's disastrous impact.

Photograph by Norm Blake



Photograph by Nani Blake

In 1970 11 percent of families were headed by women; between 1970 and 1984 the proportion of families with female heads increased among blacks by 52 percent and among whites by 40 percent.

Over this century the family has undergone major changes—the rise of the nuclear family, the extension of schooling, the democratization of family decision making, and the massive entry of women into the labor force. While these changes have created stresses and obstacles to individuals and families, they have testified more

to the vitality of the institution than to its waning influence. The family is “here to stay,” as Mary Jo Bane (1976) noted.

Late in the twentieth century, the American family is again facing challenges as our economic and cultural realities change. Yet, as in the past, we can expect the family to adapt rather

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than die. This time we are contending with shifts in the age distribution of the population, a decline in family size, and the impact of poverty on families.

The Changing Age Distribution

Fertility and mortality have profoundly affected the composition of the American population over the past several decades. Taken together, these shifts have an impact on the nature of social dependency in America. Since most of those who cannot support themselves are the responsibility of their families, dependency poses a significant problem for America's families.

The steady decline in fertility and mortality and the expectation that they will continue to fall has shifted the “dependency ratio”—the number of aged dependents per 100 persons aged 18–64. Since 1960 the number of aged has increased steadily, the ratio rising from 17 to 19. At the same time, the number of child dependents has fallen precipitously from 65 to 46. Thus, the total dependency ratio between 1960 and 1980 fell from 82 to 64. (Unless otherwise noted, all data are from U.S. Census Bureau 1986.)

This trend will not continue. The decline in the dependency ratio will

last out this century, but early in the twenty-first century, it will begin to rise and continue to do so for at least 40 years. By 2050 the number of aged dependents per 100 active persons will be 38, greater than the number of children.

These projections have already led to dire predictions, including the failure of the social security system and an all-out war of young versus old. While such predictions are out of proportion to the problem (remember, the total dependency ratio in 2050 will

be lower than it was in 1960), they do call for changes in the way we think about social support. Because most children are supported by their families and a large proportion of the aged's income comes from the government, by the middle of the next century there will be fewer demands on family resources by dependents and more put on the public purse. Of particular importance for educators, these demographic trends will divide public resources between the young and the old.

Smaller Families

Not only have the number and types of individuals changed, but the family forms in which people live have also altered. In 1950 married couples headed 78 percent of America's households; by 1985 the percentage had fallen to 58 percent. The "typical" American family—mom, dad, and the kids—was not so common a description anymore; it applied to less than 40 percent of American families. Indeed, while the number of married couples increased by almost 10 percent between 1970 and 1980, the number of nonfamily households grew by 78 percent.

The reasons for this shift are complex. Between 1970 and 1980 the number of elderly women living alone, for example, grew by 63 percent, while the number of young adults living alone nearly tripled, as did the number of unmarried couples. The two biggest causes of these shifts, however, were changes in marriage and divorce.

Over most of this century, the percentage of the population ever married rose and the age at marriage fell. After 1970, however, both of these trends reversed. For example, between 1970 and 1984, the percentage of 30- to 34-year-olds who had never married increased for men from 9 to 21 and for women from 6 to 13, while the average age at first marriage rose by about two years for both men and women (in 1982, 24 years of age for men and 22 years for women). More adults were either waiting longer to marry or not marrying at all.

At the same time, divorce became increasingly common. The divorce rate grew from 2.5 per thousand in 1965 to over 5 per thousand during the 1980s. While remarriage rates remained high (in 1982, 60 percent of ever-married women had remarried after a divorce or widowhood), this did not prevent the proportion of the population that was divorced from increasing. By 1984, 6 percent of men and 8 percent of women over 18 were divorced.

Finally, as the number of unmarried women increased, the number of children they had also rose. In 1970 fewer than 400,000 children were born to unmarried women (about one in 13 births); in 1982 there were 715,200 (one in five births). Interestingly, this



"As children become a dwindling share of the population, their neglect at the hands of policymakers is likely to increase." Their neglect at the hands of grandmothers, however, is not likely to increase.

was not simply a matter of teen pregnancies; the proportion of out-of-wedlock children born to women under 19 actually declined from 44 to 38 percent. While the raw number of teen pregnancies increased, it was part of a general trend among unmarried women of all ages to have children.

The result of fewer marriages, more unwed mothers, and more divorces was the growth of female-headed families. In 1970, 11 percent of families were headed by women; by 1984, 16 percent were. Between 1970 and 1984 the proportion of families that were female headed increased by 52 percent among blacks (from 28 to 43 percent), while the increase among whites was 40 percent (from 9 to 13 percent).

The growth in female-headed families has affected the family status of children. In 1984, 15 percent of white children and 40 percent of black children lived with only their mother. Yet, in all fairness, it must be noted that in the four previous years, the proportion of children living with both parents had hardly declined at all (from 83 to 81 percent for whites, 42 to 41 percent for blacks). Rather, the major shift in the family status of children was from living with foster parents or other relatives to living with only one parent.

The female-headed family has become the centerpiece of the "family crisis" of the 1980s. Twenty years ago Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1986) identified the female-headed family as the center of the "pathology" of the black family. While advocates of the "pathology" school still claim that the female-headed family is inherently bad (since the absence of a father impairs the moral and psychological development of the child), in the 1980s more attention has been paid to its economic impact, in particular to the frequency of poverty. Yet this issue can be fully explored only in the context of the poverty status of all families.

Poverty and the Family

The poverty rates of both individuals and families have increased sharply in the past decade. After reaching a low of 8.8 percent during 1973-74, the percentage of families in poverty increased to 10.3 percent in 1980 and 12.4 percent in 1983, before declining



Photograph by M. C. Velds



Photograph by Nery Blake

For some young children in New York, banging out means playing in Central Park while mother, a nanny, or a sitter keeps watch. For some older youths in Washington, D.C., banging out means freedom from the watch and care of family, school, or community agency.

to 11.6 in 1984. While white families have always had much lower poverty rates than black families (9 compared to 31 percent in 1984), the rate of increase among whites has been nearly three times as great as the rate among blacks. Of the 1.8 million new poor families added since 1979, 1.3 million have been white and 372,000 have been black.

Virtually no group has escaped the rise of poverty during the 1980s. The poverty rate among some groups is particularly appalling: 21 percent among children, 22 percent among unrelated individuals living together, 34 percent of families with seven or

more members, and 48 percent among black children. Even the aged—who it is widely reported have escaped from poverty—have been touched by its rise. While the aged poverty rate has declined from 15 to 12 percent since 1980, the rate of aged female householders has gone up from 13 to 16 percent.

The poverty of female-headed families must be assessed in this context. To be sure, it has reached terrible heights. Among all races, 40 percent of persons living in female-headed families were poor in 1983, including 36 percent of householders, 55 percent of children, and 22 percent of other

Teenage Pregnancy and Economic Self-Sufficiency for Girls: A Sex-Equity Challenge for Schools

Michele Cahill

The United States has the highest rate of teen childbearing in the Western industrialized world. Five hundred thousand babies are born to teenagers in America, with junior high school girls experiencing 125,000 pregnancies each year. Many of these girls never return to complete high school, and three-fourths of single mothers under 25 live in poverty.

Researchers offer several reasons for higher teenage pregnancy rates in the U.S. than in European countries. European educational policy more commonly favors sex education, and health facilities and clinics offering contraceptive information are more accessible to teenagers. Most U.S. schools, on the other hand, see teenage pregnancy prevention as a relatively untried area of responsibility and one in which norms and values of constituent groups are likely to clash.

Several researchers, prominently Joy Dryfoos (1984), argue that school involvement is critical if young girls are to develop responsibility for their own sexual behavior and the motivation to postpone childbearing. Karen Pittman (1986) of the Children's Defense Fund argues that girls need to learn that early pregnancy will block personal and career goals and decrease their income and status.

Pittman argues that the motivation to avoid pregnancy is weakened by academic failure in school. "Students with serious basic skills deficiencies often have encountered failure so frequently that their self-esteem development in nonacademic areas . . . generally lags behind that of their more fortunate peers." Pittman cites research data that document the "strong relationship between poor basic skills and limited life options."

Pregnancy is the most frequent reason girls cite for dropping out of school, and for unemployed adolescents who have left school, pregnancy and early motherhood are even more common. They quickly learn that diminished education leads to diminished economic status. Sixty percent of women heading households receiving welfare first received assistance as teenage mothers.

Most schools today do not actively discriminate against pregnant girls. These students are no longer expelled, denied further education, or segregated in special programs. The discrimination tends to be passive, rooted in the implicit acceptance that motherhood ends the need for employment preparation. As one junior high school principal observed, "A diploma will make no difference to these girls" (Dunkle 1985).

New programs and new collaborations are beginning to help redress this subtle problem. Prevention programs are involving more schools in curriculum development, life planning, decision making skills, and collaborations with health, social service, and youth-serving agencies. These are leading to comprehensive school-based clinics, day care centers, and programs offering service referral and academic assistance to teen mothers.

No less than boys, girls need encouragement to prepare for economically self-sufficient futures and to develop the academic competencies and social skills that success requires. If schools fall short in preparing girls for self-sufficiency, they will fail to provide an equitable education.

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family members. Among blacks, the data are even worse: 57 percent of all persons, 54 percent of householders, and 69 percent of children. Among those children in black female-headed families whose mothers did not work, 96 percent were poor.

While the increased number of female-headed families is a product of complex social and cultural changes, the reason for their increased poverty is quite simple: government neglect. Between 1971 and 1983, the number of persons in female-headed families who were below the poverty line increased by 47 percent (from 7.7 to 12 million), while the number of beneficiaries of Aid to Families with Dependent Children—the chief assistance program for this group—rose by only 5 percent; the average payment per family declined by 32 percent when controlled for inflation (from 461 to 313 constant [1983] dollars).

The changes in the age distribution, structure, and economic circumstances of American families pose important challenges that professionals in education and the human services must address both in their daily work and in influencing policy. We must not lose sight of the magnitude of these problems or their source and solution.

The Role of Educators

Social theorists have long debated whether social problems are objective conditions, or whether they exist simply in the eyes of the beholder. The changes occurring in the family pose a textbook case for this controversy. Not only is there little agreement about whether the family is in crisis, but even those who believe a crisis exists are divided about its nature.

For example, President Carter came to office with a commitment to formulate a pro-family policy that included expanded welfare entitlements and support for gender equality, while President Reagan—also ardently pro-family—has stressed school prayer and opposition to abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. The 1980 White House Conference on the Family was disrupted as feminists and anti-feminists, each attempted to grasp the pro-family mantle. Given the pluralism of American society and its degree of political polarization, the search for family policy is likely to remain futile.

The sharpened ideological splits will not leave the nation's schools undisturbed. A number of changes in the family have already been cast in the feet of public school administrators, and the list will continue to grow. While out-of-wedlock pregnancies have increased among women of all ages, teen pregnancies have attracted the most attention. Child abuse—particularly sexual abuse—has gained increased attention nationally, and again the schools have been asked to respond. Finally, shifts in public policy have reduced aid to poor children, again adding to pressure on schools.

Given the polarization of the political environment, school administrators are likely to view themselves as "firefighters," simply responding to crises. It is important, however, that educators and others in the human services realize the part they play in the public's consciousness and interpretation of social problems. Professionals can perform an important role in molding how problems are perceived and what steps are taken. If they abdicate this responsibility, others are likely to take the initiative.

Even in the most ideologically charged areas, educators still have some room to maneuver. For example, at the federal level concerns about teen pregnancies and sexuality have led to calls for continence centers, which would encourage teenagers to abstain from sex, and to restrictions on the availability of contraceptives. Yet creative administrators—like those of the Teen Choice program run by Inwood House in the New York public schools—have used the renewed public interest to increase services to teen mothers and to sponsor programs that allow adolescents to consider the role of responsibility and self-expression in their own behavior.

Yet not all problems can be addressed by schools. The number one problem of American families is their increasing poverty. Educators know that poverty is connected to a host of school problems—such as dropouts, truancy, and low motivation. They also know that without changes in welfare policy and the economy, little headway can be made in mitigating poverty's disastrous impact. The reality is that one of every five children—one of two black children—is poor.

“[By 1985] the ‘typical’ American family—mom, dad, and the kids—was not so common a description anymore. . . .”

The changing demography of the American population will not make solving this problem any easier. Even during periods when the vast majority of dependents were children, public

Suggested Readings

June Axinn and Mark J. Stern, "Children and the Aged in American Social Policy." *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly/Health and Society* (November 1985). Authors provide an historical account of the changing fortunes of the two groups and the prospects for change in the future.

Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger. *The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground*. New York: Anchor Press, 1983. Notwithstanding the book's title, Berger and Berger offer a conservative interpretation of current political battles over the family.

Sar Levitan and Richard S. Belous. *What's Happening to the American Family*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. The authors present an excellent introduction to the changing economic condition of American families and the role of social policy in responding to it.

Ruth Sidel. *Women and Children Last: The Plight of Poor Women in Affluent America*. New York: Viking, 1986. A well-written presentation of data on the family is tied to a passionate argument for the implementation of comprehensive family policy.

policy viewed the poor as other people's children and either ignored their needs or provided inadequate resources. As children become a dwindling share of the population, their neglect at the hands of policymakers is likely to increase.

Educators and other human service professionals need a dual strategy to address the problems of the family and their impact on education. On the one hand, administrators must be sure that their programs and initiatives grow not out of stereotypes but from a full understanding of the nature of family problems. At the same time, they must also make themselves heard on the public level through research, public forums, and political involvement to fight the crippling impact that poverty and lack of opportunity continue to have on the lives of America's families.

American families have, for over two centuries, adapted to the "crises" posed by social and cultural change. Nearsighted social observers have continually believed that the family itself was in crisis. While we cannot be complacent about the stresses that social changes place on families, we must focus on the sources of these strains. The realities of increasing poverty and inequality and the mockery they make of the American dream must hold center stage as we educate the parents of the twenty-first century. □

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