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Child Poverty, Public Policy and Welfare Reform

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The twelve papers that comprise this special issue of *Children and Youth Services Review* should be both timely and enduring—timely because the problem is so important and enduring because they present the best social science research on the issues. Taken together, the papers document the extent of child poverty, examine its causes and consequences, and evaluate existing and proposed programs to remedy the problem.

Child poverty in America remains high relative to that in other industrialized countries with similar overall standards of living. Almost one quarter of all children live in families whose cash incomes fall below the poverty line. The child poverty rate in 1993, 22.7%, was about the same as the 1959 rate for all Americans, and the same as the 1964 rate for children.

This high rate of child poverty contradicts a major aspect of the American dream—that the standard of living of each generation will exceed that of the preceding one. Because of slow growth in living standards and rising inequality since the early-1970s, a substantial proportion of the current generation of children is worse off financially than the previous generation. Not only has the child poverty rate risen over the past two decades, but the gap between the living standard of the children of the poor and that of the children of the rich has also widened substantially.

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Today, many parents, especially younger ones, lack the economic security that was the norm in the quarter-century following World War II, when economic growth was rapid and the gains were widely shared by all segments of society. The (inflation-adjusted) wages earned by many, especially by workers without a college degree, were lower in the early-1990s than they were two decades ago. In many families, both parents must now work to achieve the level of resources that had previously been provided by one worker. While many children now avoid poverty because they have two working parents, increasing numbers of children remain poor because they live in mother-only families that receive little assistance from absent fathers or government programs.

The child poverty rate in the U.S. is higher than that in other industrialized countries because public policies in the U.S. do less to offset the adverse economic and demographic changes that have caused the increase in child poverty. At the same time that the economy grew slowly and yielded lower real wages for less-skilled workers and that changes in marriage and child-bearing patterns led to a smaller percentage of children living in two-parent families, government policies were also cut back. A smaller percentage of disadvantaged children are now removed from poverty than was the case in the early-1970s because eligibility for some government programs has been restricted and some benefits have failed to keep pace with inflation.

Our goal in preparing the articles in this special issue was to examine child poverty in the broadest context. Many economic and social policies, not traditionally considered by researchers and practitioners in the child welfare and social service arena, are relevant. Macroeconomic policies and technological changes, for example, have contributed to lowered real wages, increased joblessness, and increased single-parenthood and have thus constrained children's access to financial and familial resources. These economic changes, together with the failure to implement public policy changes to offset the rise in child poverty, have contributed to declines in community and institutional conditions. This results in lower quality schools, housing and public services, and reduced access to health care and other social services.

The processes through which poverty negatively affects children are complex. Several processes may account for the relationships between family poverty and many child development problems. Severe economic constraints can reduce the quality and quantity of parenting because of financial and psychological stresses. In addition to personal stresses, poor people often live in "stressful" communities, in which access to resources that can promote opportunity and mobility and support child development is limited. Although numerous government programs and policies are targeted on at-risk children and offer preventive or remedial services (e.g., the Women's Infant's and

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