



## Deservingness, children in poverty, and collective well being



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### ABSTRACT

Rising numbers of children and families have been thrust into poverty. However, debates about poverty policies and aid are in fact debates about ourselves—our logic of life and our humanity—as a nation, a culture, a people; and social welfare programs will always be underfunded and of limited effectiveness if people don't believe in them due to their ambivalence and confusion about poverty. Because poor children are innocent and indisputably dependent on adult caretakers, they may be our route out of this malaise. Their circumstance and our aspirations as a nation to be just, fair, and progressive, force us to resolve the confusion, conflict and ambivalence that fuel ineffective and inhumane social welfare policies and practices.

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### 1. Introduction

Pronouncements of the number of people in poverty, especially children, were ubiquitous during the first term of President Barack Obama (2009–2012) and through the recent presidential election that ended in November 2012. The Children's Defense Fund, the National Urban League and the Urban Institute, the Casey Foundation's Kids Count, think tanks, and poverty institutes and centers used major news outlets and the Internet to report increasing numbers of children in poverty and increasing knowledge on the consequences of these numbers. Yet, there has been almost no policy response to this news and no real movement aimed at addressing childhood poverty. Why no national, populist upheaval about poverty and the state of children? Are the majority of Americans not concerned about the harmful effects of poverty on children? Do we not understand or accept how the well-being of children is connected to the well-being of their families (i.e., parents and caretakers), their communities, and society at large?

When considering children, especially those in low-income and poor families, the answers to these questions have historically involved defining whether parents and caretakers warrant or deserve aid and how much of it. However, the act and privilege of determining "deservingness" involves power—power to frame and define the problem, power to decide policies to address it, and power to decide the degree to which the parents and caretakers of children are of critical value to children's welfare and therefore part of the equation for the distribution of social welfare support.

To be sure, my colleagues who are the editors and catalyst for this special edition, reminded me of the absence of discussions of poverty during the recent presidential election that ended in November 2012. The election has been a sort of power play in terms of the absence of the voices of the poor and their advocates (Shane, 2012). Their

nudging touched my own struggle with understanding both political parties' political strategy and principles that would lead them to avoid such an important topic during the monumental opportunity presidential elections provide to bring issues before the entire nation, if not the world. It also reminded me that I had in fact been hearing activist scholars, journalists, and the like lament the absence of a poverty discussion and policy solution at a time in the nation in which so many children and families faced poverty and so many working people in general faced an anemic economy. Thus, it seems plausible that the poor and their advocates have been rendered powerless in our national elections and policy making process, seemingly without powerful allies to advance the broad significance of the interconnectedness we all share.

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to discuss the ways in which "deservingness," as an underlying guiding principle for the distribution of public welfare aid to children and their families, negatively impacts children. Deservingness in this sense, which will be discussed in detail later, is about more than economic or income guidelines. It is about the ways in which social and moral judgments are made about the "fitness" of adult family caretakers of children to determine their qualifications for public assistance. TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) will be discussed as an example of how notions of deservingness are framed and embedded in social policies and programs for children in ways that impact, for better or worse, families and, ultimately, children.

I will also discuss how it is not only "poor" children and their families who are affected by our social welfare policy and program choices. Throughout the Great Recession (2008–2012) working- and middle-class families have seen their economic futures compromised due to an unstable and recessed economy. This may appear to be a new circumstance; however, since the great Depression the nation has faced intermittent cycles of unstable economic outcomes. As a result relatively successful working- and middle-class families have become increasingly vulnerable to economic and income shortfalls and have increasingly

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turned to public assistance generally associated with the poor (e.g., food stamps, TANF, SCHIP—State Children's Health insurance Program).

Thus, I suggest that our increasing collective economic vulnerability compels a policy response that improves our decision making regarding assistance for children in the context of their families. Poor, working- and middle-class families matter to the social and economic well-being of children, our economy, and our society. It is in our collective interests to critically rethink the punitive nature of social welfare policies affecting children and the families they depend on. Such policies are not reflective of the humane principles that should guide social welfare support for individuals and families in our democracy. I move beyond critique to highlight a local community program that aspires to the policy and program ideals I propose in this article. I conclude with implications for social work practice.

In the end, debates about poverty are in fact debates about ourselves—our logic of life and our humanity—as a nation, a culture, a people; and social welfare programs will always be underfunded and of limited effectiveness if people do not believe in them due to their ambivalence and confusion about poverty. Because poor children are innocent and indisputably dependent on adult caretakers and families, children may be our route out of this malaise. Their circumstance and our aspirations as a nation to be just, fair, and progressive, force us to resolve the confusion, conflict, and ambivalence that fuel ineffective and inhumane social welfare policies and practices.

## 2. Children in need

When families and adults do not do well economically, children suffer, and so does the overall quality of life in America. Using data from the U.S. Census, organizations such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its Kids Count data, the Children's Defense Fund, The Urban Institute, and others report around 22% of children living in poverty. Such reports are ubiquitous in this historical moment of social media and electronic communication proliferation. We do not know, however, if this ubiquity is for the better. At times, hearing such reports and statistics seems numbing rather than alarming about the issues: "If things are so bad, why hasn't someone done something?" might be a common response. And because these reports keep coming—sometimes weekly, but at least monthly—one may simply stop noticing. We must not. Indeed, coexisting with and factoring into the reported rate of children in poverty are fundamental structural changes in the economy, income inequality, and the economic well-being of families.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports, for example, historical trends in income inequality, noting that the economy over the last 40 years has seen economic growth rise and fall, with income gaps widening (Stone, Shaw, Trisi, & Sherman, 2012). A generation ago in 1967, women were a third of the workforce; by 2010, women made "up half our nation's workforce and the primary or co-equal breadwinners in nearly two-thirds of American families" (Carlson & England, 2011; Woolsey, 2010, p. 221). From the late 1940s to the early 1970s, income roughly doubled for families in the highest to the lowest income categories. But by the 1970s, the income gap began to widen with faster growth at the top than the middle or bottom. For example, between 1979 and 2007, income for the top 1% rose 277% or quadrupled, compared to roughly a 40–60% increase for those in the middle of the income ladder, and 18% for the bottom fifth of earners (Stone et al., 2012). Over the last decade, the median income has actually decreased due, in large part, to the Great Recession but also reflecting a longer period of decreasing wages and living standards for most Americans (Mishel & Shierholz, 2011).

Current data documents the particular vulnerability of children. The Children's Defense Fund reports that two-thirds of poor children live in families where at least one family member works. The Urban Institute reports that 46.3 million people were poor in 2009, with a 20.7% child poverty rate. At the same time, fewer poor families

receive assistance today than when TANF began in 1996. Using 2010 Census data, the Children's Defense Fund (September 2011) reports a child poverty rate of 22% meaning that more than 16 million young people were living in poverty. In other words, more than 1 in 5 children live in poverty. Black children are three times as likely to be poor (39.1%) as White children (12.4%). Black children are nearly four times as likely as White children to live in extreme poverty (i.e., half of the poverty level or less than \$11,570 for a family of four). Similarly, 35.0% (approximately 6.1 million) of Hispanic children under eighteen years old and 37.6% (approximately 2 million) of Hispanic children under five years old live in poverty. Many immigrant children are excluded from state health care programs, and immigrant children are twice as likely to be poor as native born children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2012).

These data demonstrate the plight of children and families. They represent realities that are too often detached from discussions of policies for support of families who are responsible for children, and instead are bound up in moral and philosophical questions of "deservingness" that are disconnected from the on the ground realities not only of poor children and families, but also of the contemporary relationship between work and family. Woolsey describes the family-work scene over the last few decades as one in which we are no longer a nation of predominantly nuclear families, but one in which three-quarters of all mothers work (Woolsey, 2010, p. 221). Many of these single parents face rising costs of living, shrinking job opportunities, and longer periods of unemployment, meaning an increased probability of depleted income and a weak safety net (Looney & Greenstone, 2012).

Consider the case of Zenobia Bechtol, an 18-year-old high school graduate and single parent from Austin, Texas who has a 7 month-old baby (The Huffington Post, 2011, p. 2). She earned minimum wage as a part-time pizza delivery driver. She was evicted from her bedbug-infested apartment where she lived with her unemployed boyfriend. Trained as an electrician, after an 18 month search her boyfriend found work as a waiter, but the family still had to move in with Zenobia's mother. Even with food stamps and other government support, this family struggled to survive. These circumstances and this discussion lead to the questions: Who among the parents and caretakers of poor children deserves aid? Who gets to decide?

## 3. Deservingness

Debates on deservingness, which are without consensus among researchers and policy analysts (Guetzkow, 2010; Hymowitz, 2009; Somers & Block, 2005), expose and conceal larger questions regarding the moral and social justification for public aid. Debates about qualification for public aid are as old as the Bible and equally if not more complex. To paraphrase Paul in the New Testament, "if you don't work you should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). But another writer in the Bible says "Give to him who asks you, and do not turn away from him who would borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42).

Picking up where the Bible leaves off, the Poor Laws of 1601 in England and the Colonial period in the U.S. as early as 1647 raised issues of "local responsibility, family responsibility and the residency requirement" (Axinn & Levin, 1997, p. 13). These laws specifically focused on "the sick, the disabled, the elderly, widows with young children—all essentially unemployable—and the seasonally unemployed" (p. 15). Finally, important yet set aside for another time, are social welfare discourses about deservingness within contemporary and historical race relations—particularly regarding African Americans—which are embedded in much of the history in this article. In their own particular way, such discourses also expose power relations in biased determinations of moral and social fitness in the unequal distribution of social welfare resources (Katznelson, 2005; Kelley, 1998). They also speak to the ways that perceived threats to the racial order that have shaped responses to poverty.

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