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This qualitative study hears and clarifies some of the voices of children concerning how they feel their lives are circumscribed by living in poverty, by public messages about the poor, and by their views of their socioeconomic status. Twenty-four children between the ages of 5–12 years were interviewed using snapshots of different economic level homes in order to capture their uncensored responses. Findings reveal that the children view poverty as a deprivation, perceive societal messages as disparaging of the poor, and have some difficulty holding on to positive views of themselves. These children's thoughts about the realities of their lives helped to shape suggestions for social work practice.

Nine-year-old Stuart* and I bent over a dentist's chair, which I used as a makeshift table to conduct my research in a school-based health center. We were examining two pictures of houses. Stuart said that he would like to befriend both the boy who lives in the dilapidated home and the boy who lives in the middle-class home. When asked why he chose both children to be his friends, he stated simply, " 'cus they both have feelings."

This paper reports on how Stuart and other poor children perceive their own socioeconomic status, the status of other children, and public messages about being poor. This qualitative study was conducted because an extensive review of the literature carried out by the researcher found no articles in the last 25 years about how poor children subjectively view their world. Although Jonathan Kozol in his books (*Amazing Grace, Savage Inequalities,*

*The child's name was changed to protect confidentiality.

and *Death at an Early Age*) poignantly captures the views of some of the poorest urban children, professional social science journals have not included any systematic, qualitative research investigating what poverty of the 1990's looks like through the eyes of poor children. Although our literature is replete with facts and statistics showing the devastation of poverty, these alone fail to communicate the emotions and feelings of those who live in poverty. This study highlights the importance of listening to the voices of children articulating how they understand their experiences. Seeing the world through poor children's eyes places social workers in a position to support and empower them. In addition, based on the emergent themes from the children's responses, the paper suggests intervention strategies.

The Impact of Poverty on Children's Well-Being

Research reveals poverty's pervasive negative impacts on children's health, educational achievement, emotional well-being, behavioral functioning, and family interactions. Poverty compromises the health of children by increasing the frequency of low birth-weight and undernutrition, leading to disabilities such as mental retardation and to serious illnesses (Echavarria, Restrepo, & Meza, 1986; Halfon & Newacheck, 1993; Montgomery & Carter, 1993; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Starfield, Shapiro, Weiss, Liang, Ra, Paige, & Wang, 1991). Poor children have a higher mortality rate from sudden infant death syndrome, birth defects, suicide, and homicide (Neresian, Petit, Shaper, Lemieux, & Naor, 1985; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Spurlock, 1987; Starfield, 1991).

Compared to their more privileged peers, poor children experience more socioemotional and behavioral problems. These problems include depression, social withdrawal, peer relationship difficulties, low self-esteem, and severe behavior disorders (Cicerelli, 1977; Leadbeater & Bishop, 1994; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; McLoyd, 1990; Meers, 1992; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1992; Raadal, Milgrom, Cauce, & Manel, 1994; Sarri, 1985). The stresses of economic hardship may precipitate these difficulties by straining family relationships and consuming parents' emotional resources. Depressed and depleted, they are more prone to use punitive discipline or provide erratic supervision, and less likely

to nurture strong parent-child ties (Dail, 1990; Halpern, 1990; McLoyd, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1994; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994). The probability is higher that poor children will be neglected and abused, and more severely injured by the abuse, than their more advantaged peers (DiLeonardi, 1993; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994; Wolfner & Gelles, 1993; Wolock & Horowitz, 1984). Growing up in poverty appears to be linked with delinquency and a greater likelihood of committing violent crimes (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1994; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994). Poverty's compounded, overlapping stressors feed into an ongoing stream of debilitating, relentless hazards that have cumulative impacts on children (Edelman, 1983).

Poor children who attend a substandard school and who are hungry, tense, and distracted by stressful familial interactions may frequently be absent due to illness (Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994). Thus, their educational experiences may be jeopardized by the combined effects of poverty. Poverty is associated with lower IQ and achievement test scores, higher rates of special education, and higher rates of dropping out of high school (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; Duncan et al., 1994; Korenman, Miller & Sjaastad, 1995; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994).

The poor children who were research subjects in this study with their soft faces, clear eyes and obvious desire to cooperate, speak in language that infuses these impacts of poverty with the reality of their personal pain and an understanding of their losses.

Research Design and Methodology Participants

The convenience sample for this study consisted of twenty-four (24) children between the ages of 5–13 (8 children in each of three age categories: 5–7, 8–10, 11–13), providing a fairly balanced spread of children across the age range. The total sample, as well as each of the age groupings, was equally divided between Caucasian and African-Americans, and between females and males. Half of the children lived in houses, the other half in apartments. Fifteen (63%) lived in single-parent households: twelve (50%) with their mothers and three (13%) with their fathers. Eight

youths (33%) lived in two-parent homes, and one child (4%) lived with relatives.

All the children lived in a low-income neighborhood of a small midwestern city (population 125,000). They attended an elementary school in which 90% of the student body qualified for free school lunches. Housed within this school is a new federal program providing health and mental health services to financially disadvantaged children. Almost all of the school children (96%) are eligible to participate in this program.

The school playground is bordered by a transportation company with a parking lot corral of school buses. Around the corner from the school is a waste management plant. Some of the homes flanking the school have junk in the yard, chained dogs, smashed fences, unsafe steps, torn screens, boarded-up windows, sheets for curtains, peeling paint, and litter that blows across yards into the streets. The neighborhood is one of five low-income areas in this city. The remainder of the city is made up of middle- and upper middle-class neighborhoods.

Sample Acquisition

The researcher asked personnel of the school-based health center to request participation from parents of children who were eligible to use their services (based on financial need). After personnel read a script describing the research particulars, they asked parents to sign a detailed consent form. Because of the prior trust established between the health center personnel and the parents, all of those contacted granted permission for their children to participate.

Preceding all interviews, the researcher explained the process to each child, asked for her/his assent, and clarified her/his option to terminate the interview at any point. Only one child chose to do so, identifying himself as poor midway through the interview ("That's like me, this is too hard"). Another child took his place. In all other cases when the parent consented, the child subsequently gave verbal assent and completed the interview.

Interview Questionnaire

Each interview began with showing two 9 x 11 photographs, one of a run-down home that looks comparable to houses in

the neighborhood where the students live, and the other of a suburban-style ranch with a well-manicured lawn. A realtor described the former house as a "fixer upper" that would list in the teens. The children thought the ranch house would be occupied by "rich people." The realtor estimated this house to be in the $90,000–$110,000 range, suitable for a middle-income buyer with a $40,000–$50,000 annual salary.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 items, ten of which referred to the pictures. The items were constructed and grouped according to three major areas: The child's (1) awareness and perceptions of socioeconomic status, (2) conception of societal messages concerning being poor, and (3) personal feelings about people who are poor. This instrument was piloted with a graduate student's two children (ages six and nine) to insure that the questions were clear and encouraged thoughtful responses. As a result of this pilot the instrument was shortened so that it would not tire the youngest participants.

Interview Process

The research subjects were accompanied to the "interview room" in the health center by a familiar staff member who introduced the child to the researcher. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The children were informed that the questions were to find out what children think about people who have more or less money than others. They were encouraged to express themselves freely and assured that there were no right or wrong answers.

When questions pertained to a child living in the houses, that child was given the same gender as the respondent's to allow identification with the imaginary child. Using pictures of houses let the researcher pose concrete questions. At the same time, it allowed the children to project inner feelings more freely because it seemingly wasn't about them but rather had an external focus. In the tradition of qualitative research the questions were predominantly open-ended, which is particularly suitable for children, providing for flexibility and making it more likely that their uncensored responses would be captured. Probes and follow-up questions helped children clarify or expand their responses. For example, when children were asked to tell about the

people in the houses, if their responses concentrated exclusively on the living situation of the family the researcher asked "What would the people be like?" " Would you like them or not?" "How come?"

Data Analysis

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, with the transcripts then being analyzed question by question across interviews for dominant themes. As a check for biased selections, three questions were independently analyzed by a social work practitioner for comparison with the themes identified by the researcher. The analysis of responses included a search for any differentiation based on the variables of age, race, and gender. However, no differences were found according to any of these characteristics. The major themes emerging from the group as a whole are the focus of this article, and the children have been quoted extensively to faithfully illustrate these themes.

Findings

The Experience of Poverty

Basic needs. The notion that poor children are not bothered because they live among other poor people and are therefore not aware of their common losses and distresses is inaccurate. These young respondents are acutely aware of the disparity of income and wealth in our society, and one can infer from their comments that they are aware of their own poverty. They perceive a life of poverty in the '90s as a crater of misfortune in the landscape of the more privileged. *All* the children identified persons living in the low-income home as poor and in the middle-income home as rich.

In response to questions about the lives of persons who live in the poor home, the children presented word pictures of deprivation and lives of crisis and hardship:

> They have no money. No beds either. They have to sleep on the floor.

> They might not have a lot of food because they gotta pay for the house payments and stuff.

Adults need to worry about how they will get their children clothes and send them to college.

Just as they could describe the adversity and pressures in the life of the envisioned poor family, the respondents were specific in their depictions of the living conditions within the more expensive house: "They have beds. And sheets," "They can feed their children," "dress nice, they have nice shoes, and they have lots of friends." In this manner, children describe a bird's-eye view of a life that is gentler and more abundant:

> (They could ask their friends) to come over and if they want a popsicle—they would just go in their refrigerator and get a popsicle, and the poor people wouldn't be able to because they have to spend money on food . . . you can make your own popsicles out of water.

Worries about survival.   Children who live in poverty carry a burden of worry. After being told that a child living in each of the houses stares out of the window worrying, the research subjects were asked what the child worries about. They had no difficulty conceiving what might trouble the poor child. Survival issues pertaining to having necessities, now and in the future, and the dreaded possibility of violence were predominant concerns. The imagined child worried about having to live "in a dirty house" and "want(s) the family to get out of the house" but wondered if "he is ever going to have a good house." Several children thought the gazing child worried "that somebody might just take their house away because they didn't pay rent" and consequently the parents would "have to go to jail" or they would be living "on the street." Some suggested that the child worried about having enough food and clothing in order to live or be able to attend school or feed pets. Alternatively, the child might be vigilantly "looking outside to see what's happening because she might live in a bad part of somewhere and she's just worrying . . . about everything." The invented child might also be troubled whether "people be doing drugs around the street" and "about gangs and stuff coming . . . or going outside and (he) might get beat up." Safety of the parents and siblings was another fear: "They might get killed" or be "getting beat up somewhere" or "maybe their parents are in the hospital and they don't know about it."

Worries about lacking toys, friends, and a future. Some young respondents also thought the child grieved and longed for some enjoyable possessions and friends: "Will she ever get to play Barbies?" or " . . . he would never be able to have other things like other people have." The children also worried about the social costs of having so little: "He might never feel that he has any friends or anybody likes him." Not only is the imagined child pained by these unsatisfied longings, but also s/he feels anxious that such shortages will result in loneliness and isolation. A few children worried about future troubles besetting a poor child: "(He's worried about) his life, how he lives," "What will happen to me when I grow up? Will I have any friends? Will I graduate and who will I be when I grow up?" Being so worried about survival and identity provides contrast to the notion that childhood is a playful, carefree, protected time of life. These children are telling us that the threats to their well-being and the excessive frustration of simple desires force them to worry about matters that children who are not in poverty may take for granted. Poor children may have periods of happy feelings, but these feelings appear to be intermingled with concerns about ridicule, isolation, and unmet needs for subsistence, security, and ordinary tangible pleasures.

Non-poor children are seen as worry-free. All the children without exception described worries that the poor child had, apparently articulating the realities that they themselves live with daily. They were harder pressed, however, to come up with worries for the child who was not poor. Eight children (33%) either said that the child wouldn't worry or would worry about the poor children who had a lot to worry about. Four children (17%) stretched to come up with possible worries for this child: "His parents won't let him buy a Jeep," "She wishes it could be summer." The remaining half (50%) attributed fears and concerns to this child that reflect the normal painful vulnerability of being a child: "They (the parents) could crash (in a car) and get hurt," " . . . if they're going to get out of fourth grade," "maybe her friend just moved or her dad and mom are getting divorced, or some other things like she's getting picked on at school."

It appears that the participants did not have friends who were not poor. This may explain why many of them seemed to perceive

better-off children as being entirely problem free, as if money obliterates all personal problems.

Children's Interpretation of Public Perceptions of Poor People

Messages that demean.   The children seem to feel that public messages judge persons living in poverty as inferior moral beings. In response to the question, "What do other people think of the people in this house?", indicating the "poor house," twenty-two children (92%) said that "people" or at least "some people" strongly disapprove of persons living in this house. These children believed that other people equated the appearance of the house with presumed deficiencies of the people who live in it. The children expected others to describe members of the poor household as:

> "messy," "dirty," "stupid or something because they ain't got a lot of money," "crazy cause they are poor," "ugly, nasty, disgusting, digging in their nose," "put knees on chairs, never tell people thank you," "not good people," "do drugs and just go around and steal trucks and steal cars," "don't take care of their family," "mean—could slap or punch somebody," "that they are gonna be troublemakers or something like that when they grow up," "mean, cruel, and unkind."

These children appear to sense that society devalues them in the present and expects them to be antisocial misfits in the future.

Messages that isolate and segregate.   The participants perceived that the poor are condemned because of their poverty, ("because they don't have any money") or because of how they look and act due to poverty. One child who insisted that others would not like the people with "dingy clothes," explained:

> Because . . . they might come out with no-name shoes or something, and those people, rich people wear Nikes or Filas or something like that. They might smell different than them . . . or look different.

These children believe that the poor are not welcome in a more affluent society and perceive themselves as potential outcasts.

Messages expressing a more balanced view.   However, eleven children (46%) thought that a portion of the public would be able

to recognize that the shabbily-housed family are "nice people" beset by pressing struggles: "Some will probably just think they're normal people, it's just they don't have nicer stuff and everything and some will just be rude and say nasty stuff about them and be really mean." In the children's minds it was usually the poor or the once poor who could see the humanity beyond the broken fence and peeling paint: "They might have grown up in a place just like that and they might kinda just understand what it's like living there."

Messages that condemn and withhold.   Some subjects consider the scorn and rejection of the poor as so extensive that the more fortunate do not even deem them worthy of any assistance. A third of the children (33%) spontaneously proclaimed that better-off people were in a position to help, but were unwilling to do so. These children suspected the comfortable to be vehemently unrelenting in their condemnation:

> . . . rich people think they should spend their money on whatever they need, and they shouldn't spend it on other people because if the poor don't got money, they (just) don't have it!

The children seem to have come to realize that one reason the nonpoor do not like the poor is because they need help; the destitution of the poor is a potential burden to the more well-off.

> " . . . nobody cares about nobody but themselves anymore,"

> "They think that they have everything in the world . . . while poor people are living in the snow, they are sleeping in the snow and they have nowhere to go."

Thus the children voice their perception of an unfair and indifferent world.

Teasing messages.   Through teasing, children not only reveal their personal insecurities but also their awareness of what traits are loathed or depreciated in society. When asked "What would the child in each house be teased about?" all the youths but one (96%) readily proposed vehement taunts that would be directed toward the financially deprived child: "You little black something, or you little white something, you should die. Somebody should burn your house up because you poor, if you poor you shouldn't be

alive," "you don't really have what it takes to get through life." When the question pertained to the child living in the wealthier house, most subjects (17/24, 71%) were completely stumped and finally exclaimed that the child would not be teased at all "because they're rich and they've got stuff." Seeking an answer, three children (13%) offered that the child would be teased for having "rich clothes" and "doing good in school," rather than for any class-connoted deficit. Well-off children might be teased, explained four respondents (17%), if they riled other children by acting like "a bully" or "stuck-up." While poor children were expected to be put down by at least a portion of their peers due to the stigma of their socioeconomic status, nonpoor children were only ridiculed if they behaved badly or unacceptably.

Children's Interpretations of Public Perceptions of People Who are Not Poor

The youthful subjects reflected that just as poverty is linked to character failings, those who are better off are seen by society as being morally superior. Every one of the children predicted that "others" would consider "having a rich house" either reflective of the positive character of its owners or of their privileged status. Overwhelmingly the children believed that "others" assumed these residents to be knowledgeable, effective, clean, worthy, and superior:

> "They're good people," "nice," "kind, caring, and clean," "help them (their children) and punish them when they need to be punished," "keep their house clean," "not stupid," "smart because they have good jobs," "know how to do things," "they don't need any help," "well-dressed and go to school," "do manners."

However, some of the children did not expect everyone to give complete approval to those residing in the well-groomed house. Nine respondents (38%) volunteered that though the "rich" might immediately favor residents of the middle-class house, the "poor" might impute exclusiveness, self-centeredness, and a level of deceit to them:

> (Others think) they're rich, . . . they're nice, they have money, they treat you with respect—but really they don't . . . they say they re-

spect you but when you go in their house and do something bad they start disrespecting you. You get a little bit of dirt on the carpet and they get mad at you and kick you out.

Children's Comparative Perceptions

Personal feelings about the affluent.   Approximately half the children's opinions about the dwellers in the more affluent house dovetailed with their conceptions of how the public views these occupants:

> "Probably nice people," "don't get in trouble," "be nice parents," "say their prayers," "clean," "mannered," "go to school every day"

The other half, or eleven elementary students (46%), voiced their suspicion that the more well-to-do are insincere, unsympathetic, even antagonistic toward the poor:

> These people in this house might be rude 'cus they just think that they got the beautiful house so that they can do anything to people.

> The rich people might think that poor people are crappy people, (and say to them) get off my property, we don't want people's footprints on our grass.

The elementary students were often struck by the power and influence of a more privileged class: "They can just go places and be treated nicer than some other people by giving them money." Clearly these children conclude that the nonpoor scorn the poor, while enjoying the pride, sanction, freedom, approbation, and affirmation attached to their high-status position.

Friendships limited by socioeconomic class.   Participants' beliefs in the superiority of well-off children and feelings of being shunned by the rich also showed in their responses to being asked who would be their first choice as a friend—the child living in the dilapidated house or in the manicured ranch. Only four children (17%) thought the criterion irrelevant: "a friend is a friend." Half (50%) of the children selected the child in the low-income house because they assumed that the rich child would disparage them and the poor child would relate with greater genuineness and respectfulness: " . . . because I really don't want a rich friend that

thinks he's better than me," "the poor kid they wouldn't judge you on how you look, you talk, and the way you were." Eight (33%) of the children preferred to befriend the rich child since s/he had a "nicer house," "more toys," and would be a nicer person, "knows not to hit too much," "they listen to their parents."

Children's feelings about those who are poor. The children's own feelings towards the low-income family were more positive and understanding than their estimation of society's attitudes. Only three children (13%) communicated solely negative images: "They are lazy and unfortunate. (The kids) probably would be very bad, like busting windows and stuff." Nearly all the children, to some extent, saw beyond the impoverished front door:

> They're probably good (people). Just because they're poor don't mean that they don't have a rich feeling. They might care about people and they might try helping out with people as much as they can.

Perhaps some children living amidst poverty tend not to devalue persons of limited means because they know the harshness of their own lives. They described poor people straightforwardly as in need of resources: "They need money, they need paint, maybe a job." The young respondents avoided, deflated, and contradicted stereotypes as they described persons living in the poor house as industrious, generous, and good parents: "They're hard working and try to keep themselves alive, and their kids if they have kids."

Poor children's feelings about self. In most of their descriptions they attach positive qualities to the poor, yet they may not be personally convinced enough to protect their sense of self from damage by public images. When asked how a poor child feels about him/herself only three children (13%) believed that such a child had positive self-feelings such as "he's nice" or "he's smart." Nine others (38%) chose to answer in terms of sad feelings because s/he doesn't have "things," "is teased," and holds little hope for the future. The respondents' feelings about an imaginary poor child seemed to blend with their own experiences. Twelve children (50%) portrayed the child as having negative self-valuations, regarding him/herself as intrinsically "bad," "dumb," "unequal":

"Man I'm bad, and I want to become rich but I can't because I'm raised up like that."

The possible force of public criticism is highlighted by how much more positively respondents estimated that children who were free from a life of poverty would regard themselves. Twenty-two subjects (92%) surmised that their well-off peers would like themselves, boosted by feelings of power and effectiveness as well as by expectations of the future. "He says, I'm the greatest one in the world, can't nobody do nothing to me," "Yeah I'm rich (now), when I grow up I'm going to be the same exact way (continue to be rich)."

Converting Children's Voices into Practice Strategies, Interventions, and Tasks

These voices of poor children may enhance our professional awareness of how children derive meaning from their experience in the world. Knowing that children are impacted by their social and societal environments requires social workers to learn and practice ways to empower them. The following practice suggestions build on what the children have told us:

1. *Explain the reasons for poverty.* By familiarizing children with the causes of poverty (in accord with their developmental capacity) social workers may help take inappropriate blame away from their parents, and themselves. Affirmation from each other as well as from professionals may help them internalize that being poor is not equivalent to being bad.

In addition to discussion about the fallacies of the societal messages underlying teasing about being poor, we can coach children how to deal with these bullying remarks. Arming children with responses for when they confront such teasing may counteract this verbal destruction.

2. *Help children understand their feelings about being poor.* Social workers can establish small groups that provide both emotional support and task projects to reaffirm caring and competence. Talking in a peer support group about the circumstances of their lives and the feelings they engender may especially help them feel that they are not alone in this struggle. Allowing poverty and difference to be "the elephant in the room that no one addresses"

leaves children unassisted. Alone they may wrestle with unmanageable feelings of anger, fear, frustration, sadness, or depression. Some will find inner resources and social support that will enable them to cope, but others will not. Small groups could help those who are struggling most.

However, solely dwelling on their negative feelings arising from poverty without a problem-solving approach to help children effect some actions in their own lives may be debilitating, as Nolens-Hoeksema (1992) cautions,

> Helping a child living in poverty to express her anger that she cannot have things other children have will not get her out of poverty. If adults cannot respond to a child's expression of emotion in ways that satisfy the child, the child may feel betrayed and helpless. (p. 184)

3. *Direct children to focus on their strengths.* Children may be helped to appreciate the strengths they have developed. The respondent children were bright, analytical, and compassionate. They displayed heightened sensitivity to equity and value issues, as well as a savvy awareness of the world outside of themselves. Guiding the children to develop and routinely use positive self-talk would equip them with a tool for reminding themselves that though living in poverty, each is an important person. Frequent, meaningful external and internal reinforcement of their self-worth may help them maintain optimism about their lives.

4. *Promote powerful feelings through goal attainment.* Children should be supported in developing and reaching their own short-term goals. For example, children may want to earn money to buy toys and clothes, or to fund a play activity. They may be able to do so by holding a bake sale in the lobby of a local firm, making Christmas ornaments to sell at local bazaars, or holding a fun-fair, etc. Such activities can provide important learning about the possibility of controlling their own lives. Children need to experience getting what they want for themselves in spite of the barriers. By setting and reaching individual and group goals, poor children can reinforce their self-confidence and learn that through their careful planning and persistent hard work they can reap benefits.

5. *Lead parent groups.* Social workers should convene parent groups to talk about things that matter to them and to convey caring about them and support of their goals. These parents have likely gone through the same kinds of disparagement as their children and deserve to be recognized for their own worth, not just as helpers for their children.

While affirming parents' personal value, hopes, and competencies, social workers can encourage them to share their suggestions on how to help their children recognize that their value is not less because they are poor. Such discussions can assist parents in further understanding how poverty might impact children's (and their own) self-esteem and how to address related issues with their child in a constructive way that is healing and empowering to them both.

6. *Build connection to the larger society.* Social workers can develop activities that help children feel connected to the larger society. For example, one might pair a classroom, club, or group in a disadvantaged neighborhood with one in a more upscale area. The two classes could have separate experiential instruction addressing issues of class prejudice, preparing them to be receptive pen pals for each other. Through writing, they could share their perspectives about their worlds and affirm each other.

The results of this study suggest that poor children have bewildering and negative perceptions about rich children that begin early in life. Though not all their conceptions may be inaccurate, these attitudes may be self-defeating. Polarizing feelings potentially drain energy, reinforce their sense of being victims, and undermine their conviction that they can become responsible for their own lives. Affective exchange with more affluent children may lessen the isolation of poor children, making it more comfortable for them in the future to work and function within mainstream society.

7. *Tasks within the environment.* Social workers can help precipitate change through tasks aimed at the elimination of poverty. The views of these children make it incumbent on us to be more active advocates for the poor. This may include accessing the media. Social workers could submit their stories of work experiences to the press to give the public a more accurate picture of persons living in poverty. Other efforts, such as lobbying local congress-

members, developing new policies, running for office, promoting voter registration, and becoming involved in community development projects, are all part of a rich social-work history and are needed in the present.

If social workers would engage teachers in such projects, even very young children could be taught advocacy skills to empower themselves. For example, children could also write their own stories as "letters to the editor" and could prepare comments and questions to present before governmental representatives whom they invite to their classrooms.

Conclusion

Although these findings may be limited in their generalizability, critical, clear themes emerged. Systematically asking each child the same questions using pictures of houses definitely stimulated their thoughts and encouraged their spontaneous expressions. Their responses suggest that they know being poor makes them a belittled and disparaged population who are blamed for their plight. More importantly, they are beginning to turn demeaning perceptions against themselves. This internalization may occur simultaneously with a growing realization that their opportunities are limited and their identities compromised.

Unlike the children with whom Jonathan Kozol spoke, these respondents are not among the poorest of the poor. Finding that responses did not vary across gender, race, or age emphasizes the pervasive power of poverty. These children tell us that poverty, with its accompanying negative public and self-messages, profoundly impacts how they view their world.

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