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Deirdre Mageean

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Identifying childhood hunger in Maine

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by Deirdre Mageean
Margaret Chase Smith Center for Public Policy
University of Maine

Recent political campaigns at the national and state levels have been filled with much rhetoric about the present and future of families and children. But effective public policy developed in response to many pressing financial and social needs of families and children has not followed from the rhetoric. The lack of adequate quantitative research on the needs of children is often cited as a reason to move cautiously in responding to "perceived needs."

In the following article, Deirdre Mageean, a research associate at the Margaret Chase Smith Center for Public Policy, discusses this nation's public policy responses to poverty that have been attempted since the mid-1960s. The University of Maine assistant professor of Public Administration, who served as co-director of a year-long childhood hunger study, examines these poverty policies in the context of the findings of that study, the Maine Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP). The Maine CCHIP study, along with 20 others that have been conducted under the auspices of the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) in recent years, have begun to fill some of the data needs of state and federal policymakers as they struggle to craft responsive and responsible poverty policies.

In the last thirty years, a combination of demographic, economic and social changes have greatly affected family life and the status of children in this country. While politicians universally praise "the family," there is considerable disagreement over domestic policies that impact families and children. In particular, in the last ten years there has been much debate on when and how government should intervene to help families.

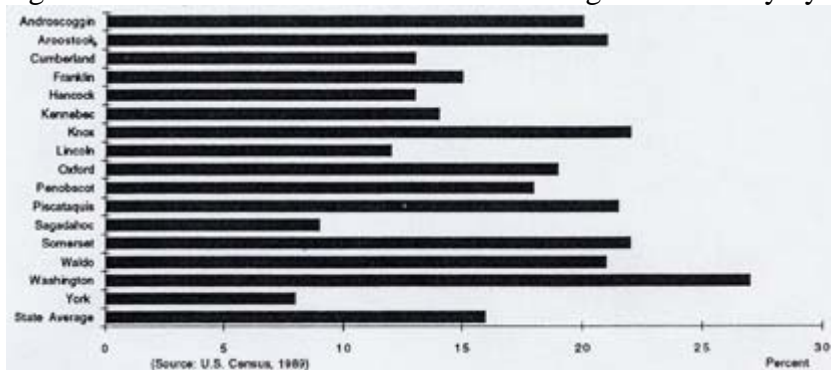
Perhaps of greatest concern is the impact of recent changes on the lives of children. A myriad of reports and papers on issues such as academic achievement, children's health, parental leave, child support enforcement, and welfare reform reflect this concern. Of the many threats to the welfare of America's children, the most urgent seems to be the pervasive and growing problem of child poverty. Among the wealthy, industrialized, free market economies of the world, the United States has one of the highest child poverty rates. In a study of eight western democracies, the United States had the highest child poverty rate - two to three times higher than most of the other seven countries studied (Smeeding, *et al.* 1988).

The extent of poverty in this country has varied since its eradication became a goal of public policy in the "War on Poverty." Danziger and Weinberg (forthcoming) note that prior to 1973 family income grew rapidly, income inequality declined modestly and poverty declined rapidly, from 19 percent of the population in 1964 to 11.1 percent in 1973. Between 1973 and 1979 mean income stagnated. Poverty rose rapidly between 1979 and 1983 as a result of successive

recessions and falling average incomes. The period since 1983 is something of an anomaly. Mean income grew rapidly but so did inequality. Consequently, the poverty rate and the severity of poverty remained above their 1973 levels. In any year during that period, children had higher poverty rates than prime age (persons aged 18-55) adults.

In the 1960s, child poverty rates were dramatically reduced (from 27 percent in 1960 to 14 percent in 1969) by expanding federal entitlement programs. But periods of recessions in the 1970s and 1980s brought about increases in the rate. Children have been affected particularly by growing income inequality, the large decline in wages for young workers, the declining effectiveness of government cash payments in lifting families with young children out of poverty, and cuts in social programs. Demographic trends, particularly the growth in female headed families, have also contributed to the problem. In 1989, 12.6 million children, one in five children, lived in poverty. The figure for Maine for 1989 was 40,000, or one in every seven-and-one-half children. A child in 1991 was twice as likely to be poor as a prime-age adult and almost twice as likely to be poor as an elderly person. In Maine, as throughout the country, children are more likely than adults to be poor. Children under the age of five show the highest percentage of poverty. Child poverty rates by county in Maine range from a high of 27.1 percent in Washington County to a low of 9.1 percent in York county (See Figure 1). Statewide, 15.7 percent of all Maine children under five are poor. However, the 1990 census data was collected in 1989, before the full brunt of the latest recession hit the state. Since 1989, when the poverty rate for the state was 10.8 percent, the overall poverty figure climbed to 14.1 in 1991. In the same period, real (after adjusting for price increases) median family income in Maine declined from \$30,998 to \$27,868. Of particular concern is not just the increase in poverty, but the particularly strong effect that the more recent recessions have had on the welfare of children.

Figure 1: Percent of Maine Children Under Age 5 in Poverty by County



Source: U.S. Census, 1989

As a recent report of the Children's Defense Fund (Sherman, 1992) pointed out, children have been hurt the most by recessions, and children's fortunes have become less and less likely to bounce back during periods of recovery. Economic recoveries have lost virtually all of their ability to rescue children from poverty. Young families, in which most young children live, have been particularly hard hit by the downturns in the economy. Especially worrying for rural states has been the disproportionate rise of child poverty as compared to metropolitan states, due in part to the declining wages of younger rural workers. Although the stereotype of poor children is that of the "ghetto child," such cases account for less than one-tenth of all poor children in the nation (O'Hare and Pauti, 1990). Further, rural children are more likely to suffer long spells of poverty

than their urban counterparts. Based on data collected by the University of Michigan's Panel Study of Income Dynamics [PSID], children who become poor are more likely to remain poor for at least three years.

In this country, family income determines whether children live in economic well-being or in deprivation. Children who grow up in low income families are likely to experience deprivation in such areas as nutrition, clothing, housing and health care. Young children are particularly vulnerable to developmental delay and damage caused by inadequate nutrition, inadequate health care, or poor living conditions. During the 1980s, a combination of economic recessions and cuts in federal food assistance programs increased the demand for emergency food. Local feeding programs, state networks and regional food coalitions reported an increasing incidence of hunger, especially among families with young children. However, these reports were often discounted as anecdotal and the reliability of the information was questioned. An adequate measure was required in order to properly document the incidence and extent of hunger. With the assistance of a panel of child health researchers, the Connecticut Association of Human Services developed a comprehensive study of hunger among low income children. The study, called the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project or "CCHIP," has since been replicated by 20 states. CCHIP projects in all sites are coordinated by the Washington, D.C.- based Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). In 1992, the Maine CCHIP study was jointly sponsored by the Maine Nutrition Council and the Margaret Chase Smith Center for Public Policy. This statewide study was conducted in 31 Maine communities scientifically selected to be representative of the state's low-income households with children under age 12. Results were obtained from in-depth interviews with 385 families who had at least one child under the age of 12 and household income at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty line. (This sample was randomly selected from a sampling frame of 2,305 eligible households. Using 1990 census data, a stratified random sample of 514 households were selected in 31 communities. Interviews were completed in 385 households. For more on the methodology of the survey see *Maine CCHIP Report*, 1993). The survey measured both the incidence of hunger and the sociodemographic factors associated with it.

Hunger is an emotive word that, for most people, conjures up images of children with distended stomachs living in countries such as Somalia. Hunger in the United States differs from hunger in less developed countries. It is less visible and seldom appears as severe malnutrition that results in easily visible physical and mental deficiencies. Rather, hunger in the United States appears as a chronic, mild malnutrition with more subtle physical or mental impairments. Examples of such impairments include frequent headaches, fatigue, irritability, inability to concentrate and increased susceptibility to ill health. CCHIP defines hunger as "the mental and physical condition that comes from not eating enough food due to insufficient economic, family or community resources." This definition of hunger encompasses several components, including insecurity about having the resources to procure foods of choice (*e.g.*, not having the money to buy more nutritious food such as fresh fruit or having to rely on a limited number of foods because of lack of money), perceived insufficiency of food intake, actual food shortages and alterations of eating habits (*e.g.*, having to cut the size of meals or to skip meals) due to constrained or inadequate resources.

Eight key questions in the survey provide a hunger index. "Yes" answers to these questions were followed up with additional questions about how long and how often the hunger condition was experienced. For instance, respondents were asked whether and how often, *i.e.*, number of days, in the month prior to the interview did they cut the size of their children's meals. Similar questions were asked about the duration of hunger problems, in the month, six months and year prior to the interview. To be counted as hungry, a household had to experience at least five of the eight hunger conditions during the course of a year. Households that experienced from one to four of the hunger conditions were considered to be at *risk of hunger*. Households that did not experience any of the hunger conditions were considered to be *not hungry*. A number of key findings emerged from the study:

- One out of eight (12.5 percent) of Maine's low income households with children under 12 experienced hunger.
- An additional three-fifths (62.9 percent) of Maine's low-income households with children were at risk of hunger.

On a statewide scale this means that :

- 7,500 Maine children under 12 live in households experiencing hunger.
- An additional 31,000 Maine children under 12 live in households at risk of hunger.
- One out of every five (38,500) Maine children under 12 live in households that are hungry or at risk of hunger.

Hunger and the risk of hunger were experienced throughout the year by low-income families with children. Parents frequently shielded their children from the impact of hunger by restricting their own intake, thus providing adequate food for their children. Consequently, children were less likely to experience hunger than were their parents. Hunger problems occurred regularly and persisted for substantial periods throughout the year for Maine's hungry and at-risk families. Hungry families experienced one or more hunger problems an average of 4.7 days per month.

Children living in households that experienced hunger or the risk of hunger were significantly more likely to experience health- and school-related problems than were children from non-hungry households. For instance, 22.9 percent of hungry households reported children suffering from fatigue as compared to 7.4 percent of non-hungry households. Among hungry households, 25.0 percent reported children suffering from an inability to concentrate as compared to 4.4 percent of non-hungry households.

What are the causes of these problems? Clearly, the likelihood of experiencing hunger is directly related to income. As family income goes down, the likelihood of being hungry or at risk of hunger goes up. Nearly half (187) of the families in the survey had family income at or below the 1992 federal poverty line (\$13,950 for a family of four). For these poorest families, hunger and the risk of hunger were more prevalent during the year prior to the interview than was the case for CCHIP families (total sampled families) as a whole. One-sixth (16.6 percent) of Maine CCHIP families with incomes at or below the federal poverty line experienced hunger. An additional three-fifths (64.7 percent) of the families with incomes at or below the poverty level were at risk of hunger. Maine does differ from some of the other CCHIP sites in the large

percentage of families at risk of hunger -- 62.9 percent compared to an overall rate of 40 percent for seven other CCHIP sites. These figures fit with what is known of the nature of poverty in Maine. Fewer instances of abject poverty are found as compared, for instance, to a number of southern states. However, a large number of Maine people hover around the poverty level, and are vulnerable to any changes in the economy or cuts in social programs. These are the families who, with job losses or small wage reductions, are likely to slide into the "hungry" category. Many belong to the category of "working poor," a segment of the nation's poor that has grown significantly in the last ten years.

Table 1 (p. 70) gives the employment profile of the CCHIP households while Table 2 (p. 72) provides an over-all comparison of the hungry, at-risk, and not hungry families. While similar in many respects, there are a number of noteworthy differences among the three groups. Hungry families are less likely to have two parents present and are more likely to be headed by a woman. (Some 73 percent of the CCHIP female-headed households were below the poverty level, as compared to 37 percent of non-female-headed households.) More importantly, hungry families had the highest percentage of households (50 percent) with no one employed. These factors make hungry families the most economically vulnerable of the three groups. Very simply, the CCHIP households differ from other households in Maine, most notably in their lack of income with which to feed their children.

Table 1: Employment Status of Maine CCHIP Respondents and Contributing Adults*		
Status	Respondent N=385	CA N=242
Employed full-time	15.6%	58.3%
Employed part-time	21.8%	13.6%
Full-time homemaker	45.7%	4.5%
Student	5.5%	0.8%
Disabled	6.0%	10.3%
Unemployed	5.2%	12.0%
Works more than one job	11.8%	10.9%
Mean hourly wage	\$6.38 (N=128)	\$8.20 (N=137)
Mean hours worked/week	27.2 (N=140)	38.4 (N=163)
Job classification	N=144	N=174
Service worker	34.7%	6.3%
Professional/technical	19.4%	7.5%
Unskilled blue collar	15.3%	54.6%
Retail	11.1%	1.7%
Clerical	8.3%	0.6%
Manager	5.6%	5.2%
Skilled blue collar	4.2%	22.4%

* Respondent: the person answering the CCHIP survey questions.
 Contributing Adult (CA): another adult in the household who contributes to the support of the child(ren). Reading the table: 15.6 percent of CCHIP respondents were employed full-time, etc.

Table 2: Characteristics of Maine CCHIP Families				
Characteristic	All CCHIP Families	Hungry Families	At Risk Families	Not Hungry Families
Household size	3.8 persons	4.0 persons	3.8 persons	3.9 persons
Avg. number of children under 18	2.1 children	2.4 children	2.2 children	2.2 children
Households with school-aged children	71.2%	85.4%	70.7%	65.3%
Female-headed households	34.0%	50.0%	32.6%	29.5%
Two-parent households	58.2%	43.7%	58.7%	64.2%
Race: White	91.1%	81.2%	92.5%	92.6%
Race: Black	0.8%	6.2%	0%	0%
Race: Another, mixed descent	8.1%	12.5%	7.5%	7.4%
Contributing adult present	62.9%	45.8%	65.3%	64.6%
Mean school grade completed by respondent*	11.2 years	11.2 years	11.2 years	11.0 years
Mean school grade completed by CA*	11.4 years	11.3 years	11.4 years	11.5 years
At least one adult high school graduate	86.0%	85.4%	88.0%	81.0%
At least one full-time employee	47.8%	31.2%	45.4%	62.1%
No one employed	36.4%	50.0%	35.9%	30.5%

* Respondent: the person answering CCHIP survey questions. Contributing Adult (CA): another adult in the household who contributes to the support of the child(ren).

For these poor and vulnerable households, major food programs such as Food Stamps, WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Program, School Lunch, School Breakfast, and Summer Food Service are of crucial importance. Similarly, the federally and state-funded program AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) is of crucial importance. Some 42 percent of the Maine CCHIP households received income from AFDC, with an average payment of \$427 per month. While many hungry families participated in these programs, many who were eligible did not participate. The reasons for non-participation in these programs were many and varied. Some respondents simply had not heard of the less well-known programs such as the Summer Food Services. Some areas did not offer School Breakfast and some of the youngest children who were in kindergarten were not in school when lunch was served. Of particular significance are the differences in participation rates between the rural and urban areas. The percentage of households that were estimated to be eligible for, but not participating in, the public food programs is significantly higher in rural than urban areas. For instance, the rates of Food Stamp non-participation by probably-eligible households was 21 percent in rural CCHIP sites as compared to 13 percent in urban sites. There are several possible explanations for these rural/urban differences in participation. The combination of inconvenient hours of operation and lack of transportation is one possibility. In smaller communities, increased visibility and a related lack of confidentiality may interact with more stigmatized rural attitudes toward welfare to contribute to non-participation rates. Whatever the reason for non-participation, the

consequences for children were the same. Families that were probably eligible but not participating were more likely to buy and serve less expensive foods, to serve less nutritious foods and to resort to serving both adults and children meals that were not nutritionally balanced.

What policy makers can do

Hunger in a modern democratic and industrial society is alarming and perhaps even surprising to some. Yet hunger is but one problem, albeit a particularly striking and worrisome one, among a host of problems that beset the country's children. Even a cursory glance at the array of policy issues that relate to families and children reveals the complexity of the scene. Issues such as parental leave, child support enforcement, and reforms to welfare programs are all on the agenda of lawmakers. The biggest underlying contributor to hunger -- childhood poverty -- is a growing problem in the country as a whole. Childhood poverty challenges states that must grapple with a stubbornly resistant recession and continuing budget woes. In the face of such problems, what can government do?

First, policy makers must distinguish between what they *can* and what they *cannot* do. No government policies that would be acceptable in the American political context will change or reverse the trends that we have experienced in American family structure in the last twenty years. Further, strategies for social engineering to improve family behavior, such as the Wisconsin Parental and Family Responsibility Initiative, are very uncertain, particularly for families with severe problems. (The emphasis of the Wisconsin Initiative, announced in April 1992, is on active intervention in the lives of teenage parents and teenage recipients of welfare. It explicitly attempts to encourage marriage among young recipients, a feature that has led the initiative to be labeled "bridefare" or "wedfare." (See Greenberg, 1992). What policy makers *can* do is to tackle directly the problem of childhood poverty. To do so effectively, there must be a proper appreciation of the economic, demographic and social factors involved.

Comparisons are frequently drawn between the situations of the elderly three decades ago and the plight of America's children today. The success in lifting older Americans out of poverty through improvements in Social Security and the Supplemental Security Income program is cited as an instructive and heartening example. Often, however, comparisons are made between the political clout of the well-organized lobby of this country's senior citizens and the non-franchised population of its children. In a state such as Maine, which has an above average proportion of elderly, it would be unfortunate if the political struggle over scarce resources were to be cast in terms of generational conflict and trade-offs. Although children have experienced increasing poverty and reductions in public programs while the elderly have experienced dramatically lower rates of poverty, this is not a necessary outcome for a population with a large and influential elderly population.

Many European countries and Japan have sizable older populations, yet they spend more on public programs for children. Family allowance programs in many European countries have actually increased (over the period 1959 to 1980) rather than declined. [Family allowance provides regular cash payments at monthly or weekly intervals to families with children. Usually, the benefits are paid without regard to parental income or employment status and they are paid directly to mothers. In many countries, they replaced tax allowance schemes, which

were found to benefit families in higher tax brackets, which went to men instead of women, and which were much less effective in helping poor women and children] As recent work has shown, "The availability of family benefits to nearly all parents in European nations contrasts sharply with the array of means-tested programs for children including Aid to Families with Dependent Children" (Pampllel and Adams, 1992). Irrespective of demographic trends, the political environment and level of public support in the U.S. for means-tested programs seem to be the most important determinants in how programs for children are ranked relative to those for the elderly.

In the U.S., competitive, pluralistic, political institutions lead to competition among groups that are defined by characteristics such as industry, geography, income, age and gender. In many European countries with more corporatist structures and less individualistic political ideologies, the political environment contributes to government intervention to modify market forces, maintenance of social solidarity and wide support for generational equality. Citizens of these countries recognize that those who rear children contribute in the long run to the old age security of those who do not. Hence, by helping families bear the burden of raising the future generation, society can better ensure the future ability to support the public retirement system. Interestingly, this is a point not lost on the American Association of Retired Persons. They have joined forces with the Coalition for America's Children to raise issues affecting the future of children and families.

The success and popularity of European family allowance programs, compared to the targeted welfare programs of the U.S., highlights the problems with the support programs for families and children in this country. Criticism of welfare comes from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. AFDC, for instance, is criticized for creating dependency and for discouraging work because of limited earnings that are allowed before payments are substantially reduced. There are particular problems for rural states with little or no public transportation because a recipient's car may not be worth more than \$1,500. Reform will come largely at the federal level. The Clinton Administration is expected to establish new working relationships among the federal and state governments. These new relationships may from the CCHIP survey suggests that much can still be done at the state level to increase knowledge about the assistance programs and to remove some of the impediments in the way of those who are entitled to receive benefits. This would strengthen the ability of existing programs to respond to the ongoing, daily needs of hungry families.

Public programs such as WIC, AFDC and Food Stamps are defenses against hunger, safety nets to offset the worst of the consequences of poverty. They do not, nor were they designed to, eradicate the root causes of poverty. Further, the effectiveness of many programs such as AFDC has declined as the real value of AFDC has fallen relative to inflation. In only two states -- Maine and California -- did benefits keep pace with inflation during the period 1970-1990. The inflation adjustment in Maine may help explain why the childhood hunger levels found in the state were not as severe as some other states where similar surveys were conducted. Since 1990 the situation in Maine has deteriorated. Since the mid-1970s most states have allowed AFDC benefits to erode and have imposed additional barriers to obtaining benefits. While this reduces welfare dependency (a goal of many welfare reformers), it leads to an increase or persistence of child poverty. As Thomas Corbett (1993, p. 7) has pointed out recently:

Child poverty persists in large part because we have not honestly confronted the basic conflict between the two putative goals of welfare reform: to enhance the well-being of children and to discourage dependency on government handouts result in better design, implementation and evaluation of support programs. In the meantime, the data targeted primarily at poor women with children....The real reform challenge is, and always has been, to reduce welfare dependency and child poverty at the same time.

One of the most important goals for state policy is to reduce poverty among single parent households. Female headed households in Maine grew from 8.9 percent of families in 1960 to 13.5 percent in 1990. Over half (57 percent) of Maine's poor children live in households headed by single, widowed, divorced or deserted women. The poverty rate of children under five in such households was more than 60 percent in 1990, a figure which highlights the vulnerability of these households. These statewide data are mirrored within the CCHIP sample of households. Seventy-three percent of the CCHIP female-headed households were below the poverty level, as compared to 37 percent of non-female-headed households. Further, female-headed households were twice as likely to be hungry as other households. The main reason that assistance programs fail to meet needs of female-headed households is that the program most often received by such households is AFDC, and even AFDC's maximum benefit is below the poverty level. More attention must be paid to developing opportunities for recipients to combine work and welfare. [The state cannot change federal mandates, but it can examine such things as earned income tax credits.] This means examining the effectiveness of job training programs both in enrolling women and in placing them in jobs that will lift them out of poverty and addressing the barriers that prevent women from obtaining self-sufficiency through employment. Finally, systems of effective payment of child support need to be enforced. In Wisconsin, the state experimented with a child support assurance system in which all parents who lived apart from their children were obligated to share their income with the children. [See Ann Nichols-Casebolt et al., 1988.]

The single best defense against poverty and hunger is adequate employment, that is, employment at wage levels that make it possible to provide for a family. When the CCHIP respondents were asked to identify what would help them feed their family better, higher wages were their top choice and employment was second. Respondents, who were overwhelmingly female, were most likely to be employed as service workers, while contributing adults, other adults, usually husbands and boyfriends, who earned and contributed to the support of the children, were most often working in unskilled blue collar jobs.

Rural poverty is particularly affected by unemployment. Almost two-thirds of the changes in the poverty rate that occurred between 1973 and 1989 in the country's non-metropolitan counties were due to changes in the employment rate (Dudenhefer 1993, p. 39). Another significant cause of growing child poverty has been the large decline in wages among young workers. Further, the gap in income between the nation's poorest and richest families and, hence, children has widened over the last ten years. In 1989, the real (inflation adjusted) income of a family at the 20th percentile was five percent below the 1969 level, while that of a family at the 80th percentile was 19 percent higher (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1993).

Service sector jobs have replaced manufacturing jobs and constitute the fastest growing job sector. Many of these jobs pay minimum wage rates with few, if any, benefits (the minimum

wage in 1989 was worth less than 80 percent of its real 1979 value). Such jobs, even when full time and year-round, are not sufficient to put a three person family above the poverty line. Maine, like the country as a whole, must respond and adapt to the realities of the global economy of the 1990s if it is to be successful in keeping its young people out of poverty. That translates into investing in education and training, reinforcing the social message that education is important, and helping to attract skilled and well-paying jobs. Workers without post secondary education have suffered the sharpest losses in earnings in recent years and the outlook for those without a high school diploma is dismal. Better paying jobs in all sectors, including the service sector, require advanced education and strong basic academic skills. Those without these skills, even if they work very hard, will be less and less able to provide for their children and will join the increasing ranks of the working poor.

Investment in human capital, however, is only one half of the equation. The recent report of the Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty reveals that about two-thirds of the earnings gap between rural and urban men is because education and experience are less rewarded in rural areas than in metropolitan areas (McLaughlin and Perman 1993, p. 48). Rural workers are more likely to be poor than are urban workers with the same amount of schooling (Shapiro 1989, p. 48). These discrepancies in wages exist for all education levels, so raising educational levels alone will not be sufficient to alleviate poverty. Policymakers need to address the fundamental problems of low wages and inadequate employment opportunities among the working poor.

The designing of programs that will enhance the well being of poor families is complex, but the principles are not beyond reach (Bane and Jargowsky, 1988). The changing structure of the American family presents challenges to formulating policies that will be fair to all. Government policies are unlikely to have any direct impact on family structure but they can indirectly by providing a supportive environment for having and raising children. Fighting poverty among children is a long-term investment.

There is no single or unidimensional approach for reducing poverty that will solve the problem. As much depends on the pace of growth in the economy, opportunities for economic mobility and wage levels as on spending for social programs. At a time of a massive federal deficit and skepticism about government spending, we may be doubtful about the success of federal programs. However, polls continue to show that the majority of the population supports spending on poverty programs, especially in the areas of education, training and job creation. The continuing growth in the number of working poor families and the plight of America's children is likely to increase political pressure to maintain effective programs and to develop new solutions.

What is needed is an integrative approach by policymakers. Unlike seductive "quick fixes" and "magic bullets," the forging of policies that send appropriate signals about society's concern for children will not be easy or cheap or without controversy. The alternative, however, is a daunting array of costly social and economic problems. As such, it is probably one of the most important public policy tasks of the 1990s.

Deirdre Mageean is a research associate in the Smith Policy Center, University of Maine. She also holds a joint appointment as an assistant professor of Public Administration at the university. Much of her work in the Smith Center focuses on social and health policy issues.

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