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An Unconditional War on Poverty: Action and Reaction

Robert Sanborn

Christopher Greeley
Baylor College of Medicine, greeley@bcm.edu

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Fifty years ago, under the leadership of President Lyndon Johnson, the United States embarked on a wildly ambitious and profoundly novel policy expedition by declaring an “unconditional war” on poverty. In this issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children* (JARC) we examine the aftermath of this war, celebrate the victories won, and consider the battles left still to be fought.

The War on Poverty was a multi-fronted affray that created Medicare and Medicaid by amending the Social Security Act, addressed food and nutrition by making food stamps permanent, implemented educational reforms through Title I, and ushered in a host of initiatives under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Some of these initiatives, such as Vista and Head Start are still in existence today, while other programs have been discontinued.

The battle against poverty has clearly not been won, but it is also clear is that enormous benefit emerged from the “War.” Poverty amongst the elderly clearly has been improved with significantly lower poverty levels. Ambitious programs like Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and Head Start have seen significant victory. However child poverty is remains a real challenge, and the correlation between poverty and a wide variety of social ills ranging from lower academic achievement to exponentially higher incarceration rates. Children, especially those who grow up in impoverished conditions, are at far greater risk for negative outcomes such as poor academic achievement, dropping out of school altogether, health issues, abuse, neglect, behavioral and emotional problems, and developmental delays.

In this issue, we confront many of these persisting problems in the light of 50 years of intervening experience, scholarship, and vast social change. In “Task Persistence: A Potential Mediator of the Income-Achievement Gap” the authors examine the “achievement gap” in educational outcomes created by poverty and study task persistence as a means of mediating the gap between poverty and achievement. Another article also examines means of increasing low-income mothers’ educational attainment, and the results of increasing such attainment. Early Kindergarten Transition programs are also evaluated in “Leveraging University-School District Research Partnerships: Exploring the Longitudinal Effects of an Early Kindergarten Transition Program” which demonstrates how university-district collaborations can provide timely and rigorous research deliverables.

Also included are broader measures of the War’s success. The authors of “Trends in Child Poverty by Race/Ethnicity: New Evidence Using an Anchored Historical Supplemental Poverty Measure” use an

improved method to provide the first estimates of racial/ethnic trends in child poverty from 1970 to the present. In “Head Start since the War on Poverty: Taking on New Challenges to Address Persistent School Readiness Gaps” the authors explore Head Start’s (a program expressly created as part of the War on Poverty) effectiveness in improving school outcomes. And in “50 Years after the War on Poverty: Successes Should Inspire the Next Bold Steps for Poor Children,” author Olivia Golden examines the important progress engendered by the safety net programs that emerged from the War on poverty.

At JARC, we celebrate the vision, commitment and courage that it took to enact such broad and sweeping policy changes, because we know the detrimental effects of poverty on children can last a lifetime. We urge a renewal of this commitment and courage and sincerely hope that the articles herein inspire new leaders to come forth with the same spirit and vision to effect lasting change to ensure that all of our children have an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of their family income.