

Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science

Volume 16

Article 10


1962

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Recommended Citation

Lisenby, Foy (1962) "National Trends in the Public Care of Dependent Children 1900-1935," *Journal of the Arkansas Academy of Science*: Vol. 16 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.uark.edu/jaas/vol16/iss1/10>

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NATIONAL TRENDS IN THE PUBLIC CARE OF
DEPENDENT CHILDREN, 1900—1935Foy Lisenby
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In the period 1900-1935, American attitudes toward child dependency underwent considerable revisions, and by the 1930's most of the nation's child welfare leaders had adopted new approaches to the problem. During the same period new views on dependency in general were emerging. In the nineteenth century, a prevailing view of poverty linked it to laziness or immorality, and those who gave to the poor often regarded their beneficiaries as the "lower class." Public charity, which was provided primarily by the counties, seldom furnished adequate relief, but a bare minimum of care. In the twentieth century, more positive approaches have been widely adopted. Condescending charity gave way to the new principle of social service, designed to prevent poverty in addition to applying palliative measures.¹

Although the older views connecting dependency with sin and laziness seldom applied to children, there was often a tendency to regard children as miniature adults. The presence of child paupers in almshouses and of juvenile delinquents in jails illustrates a failure to recognize the special needs of children. The separation of children from adult dependents, delinquents, and defectives was an important goal of certain child welfare movements originating in the nineteenth century and gaining momentum in the twentieth.

Reaction against placing children in almshouses, along with a wide variety of defective, diseased, and immoral adult paupers, was demonstrated by the increase in private orphanages and by the practice of state boards of charities of removing the children from the almshouses and finding other methods of care for them.

The first juvenile court opened in Chicago in 1899. During the next two decades, other states provided for juvenile court systems, some of them statewide, others established only in the larger cities. The juvenile court movement was based on the principle that juvenile delinquents should not be treated as adult criminals. The courts were given jurisdiction over dependent as well as delinquent children. Definitions of de-

¹Amos Griswold Warner, Stuart Alfred Queen, and Ernest Bouldin Harper, *American Charities and Social Work* (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1930), pp. 25, 34; President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), p. 1.238.

pendency differed from state to state, but most of the juvenile court laws described as dependent, and perhaps neglected, any child who was below a certain age and destitute, homeless, abandoned, without proper guardianship, in association with disreputable persons, begging, or in an environment dangerous to morals or health. In many states, the courts acquired broad jurisdiction not only over children but also over adults contributing to the dependency, delinquency, or neglect of children.²

By 1920, most state legislatures had enacted progressive juvenile court laws, but the local governments were often very slow in making the laws effective. The rural sections were especially lagging in the development of juvenile court work. Few rural communities were capable of providing the special detention quarters which the United States Children's Bureau regarded as essential to an effective juvenile court system.³

In addition to the principle of separate, special treatment for youthful dependents and delinquents, another significant concept in child care gained wide acceptance in the twentieth century—the importance of home life for every child. In 1906, the Children's Committee of the National Conference of Charities and Correction called for a greater emphasis on the value of home life in the care of dependent children.⁴ Both public and private care for dependent children had been based largely on transferring children from unwholesome environments to institutions such as orphan asylums. Poverty alone, rather than cruelty or neglect by parents, frequently was the reason for commitment to orphanages. In the first decade of the twentieth century, many social welfare leaders accepted the principle that no child should be removed from his home because of poverty alone. This idea received great impetus from the first White House Conference on the care of dependent children, a meeting called by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909. The Conference stressed the importance of a mother's care and declared that needy mothers should be assisted in keeping their children

²National Conference of Charities and Correction, *Proceedings*, 1899, p. 54; Herbert H. Lou, *Juvenile Courts in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927), pp. 15, 32, 54, 68.

³John A. Fairlie and Charles M. Kneier, *County Government and Administration* (New York: The Century Company, 1930), p. 26; George B. Mangold, *Problems of Child Welfare* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 389.

⁴Hastings H. Hart, "Report of Committee on Children," in National Conference of Charities and Correction, *Proceedings*, 1906, p. 88.

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with them at home. The Conference recognized the fact that homeless children, and those whose parents were cruel or neglectful, would have to be given a substitute for normal home life. Foster-home care was endorsed as the best substitute for home life in such cases, and institutional care labeled as the last resort. When institutional care was necessary, the institution should try to approximate family life as closely as possible.⁵

The most significant result of the new emphasis on home life was a movement for providing public pensions for mothers with dependent children. The first mothers' pensions (or mothers' aid) laws were enacted in Missouri and Illinois in 1911. In the next two years, sixteen other states followed their example. By 1934, forty-six states had passed mothers' aid laws.⁶ The laws varied considerably from state to state. In some states, the juvenile court was made the administrative agency; in others, administration was assigned to regular poor relief boards or to some local board created especially for the new program.⁷ Most of the mothers' aid laws were permissive; they authorized, but did not compel, local governments to grant allowances to mothers with dependent children. The counties, especially in the rural districts, were slow to inaugurate the new relief program. The addition of state funds to supplement local financing in some states stimulated the counties to participate to a greater extent. A few states (from 1917 to 1935) revised their laws to make mothers' aid mandatory for all counties. Despite the inertia of the counties, the number of children benefiting from mothers' aid increased from 121,000 to 250,000 in the period 1922-1931.⁸ Most of the financial support came from local governments, but after 1931 several states began to assume some of the financial responsibility.

At first the mothers' aid laws were designed primarily to assist widows with dependent children, but by 1919 a movement was underway to liberalize the laws by extending eligibility to other needy mothers. By 1934, thirty-six states au-

⁵George B. Mangold, *Organization for Social Welfare* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), p. 76; Hazel Frederickson, *The Child and His Welfare* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1948), p. 21; Arthur E. Fink, Everett E. Wilson, and Merrill B. Conover, *The Field of Social Work* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955) p. 48.

⁶Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 77; United States Children's Bureau, *Standards of Child Welfare* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919) p. 440; President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *op. cit.*, p. 1,243.

⁷Mangold, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁸United States Children's Bureau, *Twentieth Annual Report* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), pp. 15-16; President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *op. cit.*, p. 770.

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thorized aid for mothers whose husbands had deserted, and twenty-one states permitted aid to divorced mothers. The trend toward more liberal terms of eligibility continued, and a number of states added unmarried mothers to the list. Although the states thus broadened the scope of their mothers' aid programs, the death of the father continued to be the primary reason for dependency.⁹

For homeless children, and for those who were neglected and mistreated, foster-home care became accepted as the best substitute for the home. During the nineteenth century children were placed out by numerous child welfare agencies and institutions and by county poor relief officers. Placing out gained in favor to the extent that in the 1890's there was a marked decline in institutional care for dependent children. Child placement often took place without effective investigation and supervision of the foster homes. To prevent exploitation of children who were placed out, a number of states enacted laws providing for considerable regulation of child-placing activities. In the twentieth century, both public and private welfare agencies made progress in correcting many of the deficiencies which often had characterized foster-home care.¹⁰

While new views in child care were gaining acceptance, the states increased their activities in behalf of dependent children. Until the last third of the nineteenth century, the states had been very inactive in child welfare, except for providing institutional care for defective children. Relief for paupers, both adults and children, had come from private charitable agencies and from county and city poor relief officials. One of the first methods by which state governments began to aid dependent children was subsidizing private children's institutions and agencies. Under this plan, orphanages and child-placing societies received appropriations for the partial support of their wards. A few states actually owned institutions for dependent children, but on the whole subsidization was preferred because it was easier and cheaper and afforded an indirect way of pro-

⁹United States Children's Bureau, *Mother's Aid, 1931* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1933), p. 3; United States Social Security Board, *Social Security in America* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1937), p. 234; President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *op. cit.*, p. 771.

¹⁰Homer Folks, *The Care of Destitute, Neglected, and Delinquent Children* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), pp. 82, 182, 187; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Benevolent Institutions, 1910* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), p. 65.

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viding for unfortunate children. The subsidy system received many criticisms from social workers who maintained the funds spent to support private institutions could be used more effectively in state-directed child-placing programs.¹¹ However, the policy of granting subsidies generally was retained.

From 1863 to 1935 many states increased their welfare activities by establishing boards of charities and corrections, whose duties included supervising state-controlled and state-subsidized institutions and visiting and inspecting local jails and poorhouses.¹² State boards were given additional powers and eventually most of the boards acquired responsibilities in the care of dependent children. Typical activities of a state board in behalf of dependent children were supervising and licensing private children's institutions, as well as public and semi-public institutions for children; conducting "placing-out" programs; and making studies of dependency, neglect, and other conditions among the children of the state. Some states developed programs in which the central board would act as the co-ordinator of state-wide child welfare programs. The state officials would work with local public welfare officers, juvenile court judges, and probation officers, public and private eleemosynary institutions, and child-placing agencies. Centralization of authority was generally avoided; there was a tendency to temper growing state responsibility with local control of administration.¹³

In the period 1900-1935 social welfare leaders became increasingly aware of child dependency among Negroes, whose economic status remained inadequate in both North and South. The lag was evident in both public and private care for dependent children. Dependency among Negro families remained most pressing in the South, where there were six states

¹¹Mary Stevenson Callcott, *Principles of Social Legislation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), p. 71; John Lewis Gillin, *Poverty and Dependency: Their Relief and Prevention* (New York: The Century Company, 1922), pp. 189-190, 205.

¹²Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, "Summary of the Present State Systems for the Organization and Administration of Public Welfare," in *American Academy of Political and Social Science, Annals*, CV (1923), pp. 94-95; F. H. Gavisk, "State Supervision," in *National Conference of Charities and Correction, Proceedings*, 1911, p. 10.

¹³President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *op. cit.*, pp. 770, 1,240; Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, *Public Welfare Administration in the United States: Select Documents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938) p. 13; Howard W. Odum, *American Social Problems: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Dilemmas* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1939), pp. 425-426.

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containing 71 per cent of the nation's Negro population.¹⁴ In the South, the alleviation of child dependency was generally neglected.

During the depression years of the 1930's, both private and public welfare agencies, being deprived of a large portion of their resources, were not only incapable of providing for the additional child dependency caused by the depression, but were forced to reduce their services and economic assistance. Local and state governments appropriated less money for such programs as mothers' aid, and progress in case work for neglected children was curtailed. Many public welfare leaders were convinced that the resources of the federal government were needed to combat dependency.¹⁵ The Social Security Act of 1935 contained provisions for federal assistance in the care of dependent children. The child welfare services section of the act provided federal assistance to the state welfare agencies in case work, primarily in rural areas. The "aid to dependent children" section made federal funds available, on a matching basis, to states which complied with certain regulations set by the Federal Social Security Board.¹⁶

In some respects, the new federal-state programs were a continuation of activities begun by the states in the preceding generation, but federal aid made the earlier programs seem small in comparison.

¹⁴White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, *Organization for the Care of Handicapped Children* (New York: The Century Company, 1932), p. 26; Howard W. Odum, *An Approach to Public Welfare and Social Work* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), p. 52; White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, *Addresses and Abstracts of Committee Reports* (New York: The Century Company, 1931), p. 326.

¹⁵United States Social Security Board, *op. cit.*, p. 251; Arthur P. Miles, *An Introduction to Public Welfare* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1949) p. 205.

¹⁶U. S., *Statutes at Large*, XLIX, Part I, pp. 629, 633.