

YOUTH AT RISK — POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

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I bring you greetings from both Washingtons — the one that lives in people's fantasies and the one that is all too real. The all too real Washington is the state I live in, where a crumbling infrastructure of family supports has led to a series of out-of-control crises for the youth on whom we will soon depend. The Washington of your fantasies should be the District that still believes that moral lectures provide answers to the complexities of our times. A wag once said, "There is no problem so complex for which a simple, yet wrong, solution cannot be devised."

My purpose today is to describe the dilemmas facing youth in our country, briefly overview how we got to that point, detail two particular problems that have developed (substance abuse and homelessness), review the special problems for rural areas, and suggest policy implications.

A famous American recently said: "America is in danger of creating a permanent underclass."

Who said that? Saul Alinsky? Jerry Rubin? Alan Ginsberg? Former California Governor Jerry Brown? The Chairman of General Motors?

Yes, that old social activist Roger Smith. And another 239 on the Committee for Economic Development (CED), a national business/educational forum composed of top CEO's and educational leaders who are concerned about the 25 percent drop-out rate from our nation's schools and other signs of youth in crisis that will cost us \$260 billion per year in lost taxes and gross national product. This figure does not include any of the social costs, such as imprisonment, drug abuse, casework, hospitalization, or policing increases. The report issued by the CED was seconded in different forms by both the Carnegie and Ford foundations. They are worried about losing their markets, their work force, their excellence — and about the costs of providing human services on the job in order to remain in a competitive market.

Senator John D. Rockefeller, chairman of the National Commission on Children, in the commission's Interim Report entitled "Opening Doors for America's Children," stated, "The health and vitality of our economy and our democracy are in danger. Too many of our children

and adolescents are reaching adulthood unhealthy, illiterate, unemployable and lacking both moral direction and a vision of a secure future. They are unwilling or unable to carry out the responsibilities or enjoy the privileges of citizenship, employment, or parenthood.

“This is a personal tragedy for the young people involved — and a staggering loss for the nation as a whole.

“Our goal is to place children at the top of the national agenda; children must become our number one priority. Children are our economy, our national defense, our future.”

This country is turning out youth with emotional, educational, motivational, economic and family problems at rates that overwhelm and will progressively overwhelm programs, schools, caseworkers and counselors. Client-by-client work will not dent these trends. The answer, as will be explored, involves an expression of national resolve on the same order that has enabled us to place almost 200,000 equipped troops and support personnel in the Persian Gulf in under two months.

If we do not intervene on that level, the uneducated will become the uncaring, the abused children will become abusive adults, and the poor and dispossessed will become the angry.

The concept of infrastructure is important here. I’ve learned that infrastructure is that physical underpinning of the society: those things that carry us, warm us, power us, wash us and nurture us (such as roads, bridges, sewers, water systems, power systems and so forth). We’ve spent outrageous sums on the concrete and related lobbies to keep us moving, comfortable and communicating. I would suggest the real infrastructure, the one that truly carries us, warms us, nurtures us, and powers us, is the family. This infrastructure is falling apart and we simply are not willing to put the same level of effort into repairing it that we have put into the physical infrastructure.

One facet of the alienation our children feel in this country (and a sign of the deteriorating infrastructure of the family) is evident in the area of homelessness: a problem that in any magnitude is less than two decades old and which has seen runaway and street youth populations grow to 1,300,000 annually. Homeless children, still living with parents, are estimated to number between 275,000 and 750,000 at any one time. Hard-to-place youth, those who have failed alternative residential placements (foster care, state facilities) and who are without permanent homes, number perhaps another half million a year. While these numbers have been ballooning, we have chosen to commit our human service funds to the secure facilities of this nation. In Washington state, treatment facilities for youth have been reduced from 1,600 beds to less than 300 beds in a little over a decade. In that same time, four new prisons were acquired or built. Five more are planned for the next decade; the first biennium construction cost carries a \$392,000,000 price tag — for many of the same kids who were in the homeless youth population a few years earlier. We know that early intervention programs work

with children; yet we choose to delay intervention until the problems are virtually unsolvable.

Homeless children, whether children with their parents, runaways, street youth, teen moms, or systems failures, have their whole lifetimes to cost us for a generation of indifference. They are the most at risk — both to themselves and to you. Public policy initiatives, rather than addressing this, have focused narrowly on (1) defined categorical solutions and (2) simplistic answers. In the former instance, each of the problems of at-risk youth (they are often delinquent and dependent, abused and abusive, and multi-symptomatic) are used to disclaim responsibility by the different governmental levels, leaving them in a services limbo. In the latter instance, expensive and long-term treatment alternatives are minimized (“Just Say No”).

The categories of homelessness mentioned above are parts of a continuum, a continuum that grows more ineffective and more costly as the earlier intervention possibilities are ignored. Homeless children (those still with their parents), half of whom are under six years of age, can be very responsive to simple interventions focusing on remediating the consequences of poverty. Those remedies include decent housing, nutrition and health services, elimination of barriers to school enrollment and progress (supplies, clothes and transportation) and Head Start (which saves \$4 of later expenditures for every \$1 invested). If the child has witnessed domestic violence, early therapeutic day care can reduce the chances that that child will become an abuser. Providing parents with an opportunity to gain employment skills and providing the day care that enables them to break the public support dependency are all key interventions.

If intervention doesn't occur at the earliest level, that child may well become a runaway youth (one who is gone from home one or more nights). Although these youth are typically adolescent with serious family, personal and community problems, early outreach, crisis intervention and family reconciliation services can keep 75 percent or 90 percent at home with their parents at a cost ranging from under \$100 to about \$2,000.

Street youth are runaway youth who have been away from home more than two weeks. At this level, about 20 percent can be reconciled with their families. The interventions now focus less on family reconciliation and more on survival (health services, living skills, independent living options, food and shelter). These youth have chosen parent substitutes among their peers and the pimps. The success rate is far less and, where it does exist, requires living subsidies in many instances (specialized foster care, residential treatment, independent living).

The country is presently served by over 300 basic runaway shelters with a common funding base of monies provided by Title III of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act), administered through the Department of Health and Human Services. The average grant is less than \$90,000; as a con-

sequence, only about one in ten such youth are served.

In the basic centers, 39 percent of the youth served are runaways, 8 percent are throwaways (directed to leave by their parents or leaving by mutual consent), and 48 percent are abused or neglected youth (often systems youth). These categories are extremely fluid; youth frequently fit all three and it's simply a question of emphasis or whether there was a state caseworker at admission. Of the entire population of runaway and street youth, 7 percent are HIV-positive, 12 percent are thinking of or have attempted suicide, 35 percent are physically abused, 21 percent are sexually abused, and a majority are both chemically dependent and clinically depressed.

Other signs of the deteriorating infrastructure include a soaring youth suicide rate, drug and alcohol abuse beginning in primary grades (with about one-third of high school students regularly using drugs or alcohol), and child physical and sexual abuse reports greatly increasing in the last decade (one of ten boys has reportedly been sexually abused, while one in four girls has been traumatized in this fashion).

Recent trends have included a dramatic rise in the number of teenage mothers (of the 16- to 19-year-old homeless female cohort, 31 percent were found, in a recent study, to be pregnant), and an awareness of the plight of rural homeless youth. These youth have the same problems as their urban and suburban counterparts, but suffer even more from the lack of resources, from the consequences of poverty, the lack of transportation and easy services access, and from the stigma more often encountered in small communities. Most effective youth intervention agencies require a broad funding base, including charitable sources and government contracts. Rural agencies do not have the concentration of population and capital to generate donations and their governments do not have the ability to meet funding matches required by many sources. Faced with these dilemmas, such youth mask the symptoms by self medication (alcohol and drug abuse) and frequently migrate to large urban centers. As noted previously, once they are enmeshed in those subcultures, it is difficult to return home.

In terms of public policy responses, there have been several trends in the last two decades:

- Removal of status offenders from the juvenile justice system. Status offenders, or those youth who were prosecuted and sometimes locked up for behaviors that are not illegal for the adult population (e.g., running away, out of parental control), have been largely removed from the juvenile justice system. Services, however, have not been funded to provide alternatives for this population.
- Enactment of Public Law 96-272 (The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980). This law, in brief, attempts to secure permanent placements for youth by mandating frequent court reviews of foster home placements, by declaring that efforts should be made to keep families intact, and by providing support to find

permanent placements for youth that must be removed from their parents. This law has been interpreted by state officials as a mandate to severely reduce foster and group care placements, and to lean toward keeping families together even if some risk to the child accompanies that decision. An unintended consequence has been to greatly increase the paperwork requirements of both placement agencies and providers, resulting in a large diminution of time available for casework services.

- An increase in class action suits and consent decrees. Perhaps as a result of fewer resources, more children in at-risk situations, and a general tendency of the society to litigate more (a variety of suits have been filed against public entities to ensure that youth receive due process and that the states respond to severe abuse and neglect), Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies (covering abuse, abandonment and neglect investigation and assessments and further action) have increased greatly in size. In fact, they are the predominant organization serving children and families. In some places, there is no other child welfare system. Either as a consequence of their number or social trends, child maltreatment reports have jumped 60 percent since 1980. The system now is organized around investigation (and protection from court suits), and not placement or other forms of aftercare. The response system employed by the CPS's are shaped around the worst five percent of the cases; early intervention cases and efforts are simply prioritized out.

Sheila Kamerman and Alfred Kahn of Columbia University have pointed out the following social services phenomena in the last decade (p. 113):

- An increase in child and family pathologies
- A rise in multi-problem kids and families
- A preference for keeping youth and families together
- A focus on the protection of children
- The fragmentation of the delivery system
- The constraining of funding resources
- The inadequacy of services

In addition, the American Public Welfare Association (Kamerman and Kahn, p. 174) noted that in 1985, expenditures in the nation for child welfare issues were largely concentrated around the CPS function — protective services and substitute care accounted for 78 percent of the total. Preventive services, pregnancy and parenting services accounted for only 16 percent. (The total expenditure was \$4.5 billion.) Caseworkers have been transformed into investigators and paralegals.

These are the ingredients in the stew that will result in the creation of the CED's "permanent underclass."

Kahn and Kamerman go on to suggest that case management, fund blending and structural reorganization of agencies are required to integrate the variety of approaches used, while a focus on home-based

services and the creation of neighborhood-based children and family services within a community development context would result in new, holistic and effective treatment options.

Any analysis of youth-at-risk issues must also consider the children-at-risk issue. The earlier illustration of the movement of homeless children to runaway or street youth is but one example of how the difficulties and costs progress over time. In the 80s, several major themes developed concerning children:

Poverty. Children now head the nation in the incidence of poverty. One in five is poor. In urban areas, the number is one in three and in rural areas, the ratio is one in four. However, there are more poor children in rural areas than in any other area. Poverty is clearly associated with problems that are not easily solved and appear, not only throughout adolescence, but throughout life (such as dropping out of school). Children under six are the poorest group.

Prevention. Services are oriented to the most difficult cases and to providing substitute care in cases of abuse and neglect. Those youth who are at risk and not in trouble are ignored.

Drugs. The spectre of drug addicted children, crack babies, children born with fetal alcohol syndrome and children who live with chemically addicted parents has risen to crisis proportions; abuse begins at that point and continues until it reaches the crescendo of legal intervention.

Ethnic discrimination. All of the problems mentioned above are severely exacerbated for children of color. They are poorer, have more severe health problems, less early childhood education and fewer service options.

A few comments should be made concerning the special problems of rural areas. They include:

Health needs. The *New York Times* reported in February, 1990, that health care in rural areas is expected to worsen with the dismantling of a government program to provide doctors for the nation's neediest areas. In poor rural areas, especially the South, infant mortality can run as high as three times the national average, with most women receiving little if any prenatal care.

Housing needs. A 1985 study by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Census Bureau indicated the shortage of affordable housing is more acute in rural than urban areas, while housing assistance is usually unavailable to the rural poor (*Community Congress Bulletin*).

Poverty rates. In 1986, for the first time since 1975, nonmetro poverty rates were higher than poverty rates in U.S. central city areas. Between 1979-1986, poverty among young adults and children increased twice as fast in nonmetro areas as it did in metro areas (almost one third of all farm households fell below poverty in 1986).

Homelessness. One of four of the nation's homeless (including children) are found in nonurban areas. This is even more startling when contrasted with the fact that net rural outmigration was nearly one million in 1986-1987.

Family stress. Rural states are showing increased family stress as a result of economic distress. Between 1979-1986, child abuse referrals to Colorado mental health centers increased from 12.2 to 18.3 percent of total referrals while childhood depression rose from 35.6 percent to 54.8 percent. In Minnesota, a study of 3,600 rural adolescents found that a change in parents' finances was commonly associated with the onset of depression, stress and attempted suicide. In Iowa, confirmed cases of child abuse increased by 43.6 percent from 1982-1986; spousal abuse reports increased from 1,620 in 1985 to more than 4,500 in 1987.

Public policy implications for the above problems include the following:

- Prioritize children and youth as a target for funding and service increases, particularly at the early intervention level. The Young Americans Act (S. 1911), introduced by Senator Dodd, (R.-Conn.), would declare children and youth to be a national priority; states would be urged to formulate plans that would bring such a goal to reality, and a White House Conference on Youth would be held to both inspire efforts in this direction as well as develop other specific policy initiatives.
- A coordinated continuum of care, in which funding follows young people in need and not the other way around, must be provided.
 - Prevention and services that strengthen families must be emphasized.
 - Outreach efforts to get young people off the streets must be supported.
 - Specialized-care research and demonstration programs for homeless youth should be provided — e.g., programs for young mothers and their children.
- The federal government needs to support efforts to identify youth at risk, what works, and ensure they receive quality services.
- Affordable housing must be a national priority. It should include rent subsidies for older, homeless youth.
- Universal access to maternal and child health and nutrition services and day care must be provided.
- Protections for low-income and/or out-of-work parents should be put in place (extended unemployment benefits, health insurance, reasonable child support assurance).
- Programs must be better coordinated. For example, unemployment benefits programs should be coordinated with job-retraining and education programs. Income support programs should be coordinated with social service programs. Interagency coordinating

councils should be created on a multi-jurisdictional level and charged with finding ways to blend funds (education, housing, employment, substance abuse).

- Prepare young people for adulthood by focusing on prevention of pregnancy and creating educational and vocational opportunities that are high in quality and lead to promising careers. Sixty-two percent of parents without a high school education had children living in poverty in 1987.
- Include young people in the planning and implementation of policies and programs that affect them.

REFERENCES

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