

# ***PERSONALLY SPEAKING***

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## **OBSTACLES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AS MATURE PERSONS: HOME, HEALTH, SCHOOL, NEIGHBORHOOD**

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It is no secret that parents, teachers and school administrators, pediatricians, and public officials including the police for many years have been gravely concerned that being born and raised in poverty are serious obstacles to the growth and development of the child and make the process of becoming a mature, responsible adult more difficult and hazardous. Statistics on poverty among children only heighten this concern. In 2006, the most recent year for which these data are available, the poverty rate among all children under age 18 was 17.3 percent. Among pre-school age children, the rate hovered around 20 percent. Further, there were 5.5 million children living in families with annual income below one-half of the official poverty threshold. For a family of four with two children under 18 the fifty-percent threshold means living on \$200 a week.

Our primary interest in the following is not to re-examine the financial conditions of children growing up poor in the United States as commendable as that enterprise is on its own merits. Rather our attention focuses on certain obstacles to the development of children into mature, responsible persons whether those children are classified as poor or not. In the main we concentrate on four obstacles: home, health, school, and neighborhood. Our analysis is based on the dual proposition that in the United States (a) there are large numbers of children – millions in some instances – whose development is not assured and (b) their numbers include many children in families with incomes *above* the poverty threshold.

### **HOME AND HEALTH**

#### **Home.**

In 2006 there were approximately 49.7 million children, representing 67 percent of all children under age 18, who were living with both parents. What is troubling in terms of child development is that 3.4 million children were living with neither parent and another 8.7 million were living with a never-married parent. We were not taken aback to learn that an estimated 7.7 million children belonged to single-parent families with incomes below poverty. However, we were surprised to note that many more children – a total of 12.9 million -- lived in single-parent families with incomes *above* the poverty threshold. An estimated 3.7 million children, disproportionately from nonpoor families, at one time or another have lived at least one month apart from their parents.

The problem for the single-parent, whether the family is poor or not, is how to be a provider and a parent at the same time. Without a spouse, that burden no doubt is greater for many though in fairness some single parents can afford child care and housekeeping services, have extended family members who lend a hand, and take better care of their

children than families where both parents are present. Even so, the sheer numbers of children in single-parent families – 20.6 million -- suggest that some children are held back in their growth and development even in families with incomes above poverty.

Information gathered in 2004 – the latest such data available – show that many parents spend more time than they anticipated in caring for their children. Specifically, parents stated that 10.4 million children in families above the poverty threshold required more time than they expected. Adding in the number of such children in poor families boosted the total to 13.1 million children. When asked about how hard their children were to deal with, parents in nonpoor families stated that they had 2.9 million children who were harder to deal with than other children. Asked about whether their children do things that bother them, parents in families above the poverty line said that they had 2.8 million such children. Parents in nonpoor families also stated that they have 1.3 million children who make them angry. These data on the feelings of parents toward their children are consistent with the very serious problem of child abuse and neglect in the United States.

In 2004 there were 1.9 million children between 1 and 5 who were never read to in a typical week, with children in nonpoor families outnumbering their counterparts in poor families. Among children ages 3 to 17 there were 9.1 million who had no limits set on their weekly TV viewing. Here too most of the children with no such limits were from families above the poverty level. Indeed more than half were 12-17 year olds in nonpoor families.

Nearly two-thirds of all children under 18 (46.2 million) received benefits from a public entitlement program in 2004. By far the largest entitlement program was the school lunch program which reached 34.4 million. The second largest was Medicaid which paid benefits for 21.4 million children. Though these entitlement program data are not readily available by poverty status, it is clear that the school lunch and Medicaid programs provide benefits to many more than the 12.9 million poor children in the United States.

### Health.

Data gleaned from a 2001 Census Bureau survey – the most recent data available – provide some insight into the health status and health services utilization of children under age 18. In terms of health status, more than 95 percent of these children were reported in excellent, very good, or good health. An estimated 1.8 million children were reported in fair or poor health. It is important to note that these data are based on answers supplied by the household respondent to questions raised by the Census enumerator and not on the judgment of a health-care professional.

Other data on health services utilization tend to confirm that children by and large are not experiencing unmet health care needs. For instance, roughly 95 percent of the children whose health was excellent, very good, or good were not hospitalized in the preceding 12 months. These data are especially instructive because only a physician can admit a child to a hospital. For the same reason, so too are the data on prescription drug utilization. As expected, children in poor or fair health were more likely to use prescribed medications than those in better health.

These data alone do not indicate the efficacy of prescription medications for two main reasons. First, some children in poor health with for example a chronic asthma condition or diabetes need prescribed drugs simply to assure that their health does not deteriorate further. The drugs they need and use *cannot transform them into healthy children*. Second,

prescribed drugs are administered to some children who momentarily are sick perhaps with an ear infection or diarrhea and as with children in poor health those drugs help assure that their health does not deteriorate further. Nonetheless, unlike children in poor health the prescribed medications administered to these children along with the body's normal healing processes *help transform them back to healthy children.*

A 2006 Census Bureau study provides information on the extent of disabilities among children 5 to 15 years of age. There were an estimated 2.7 million children with a sensory, physical, mental, or self-care disability. More children by far were beset by a mental disability than any other type. This finding applies to poor and nonpoor children alike. Even so, given the much larger population of children in families above the poverty threshold, there are 2.5 times as many nonpoor children as poor children with a mental disability. We note once more that these data are based on answers supplied by the household respondent to questions raised by the Census enumerator and not on the professional judgment of a health-care specialist.

## SCHOOL AND NEIGHBORHOOD

### School.

In terms of sheer numbers, what is most striking about the 2004 Census Bureau on the academic performance of school-age children is that 16.2 million changed school at least once in their school years with nonpoor children greatly outnumbering poor children by more than 4:1. A total of 4.3 million 6-17 year olds were grade repeaters and 2.8 million 12-17 years olds had been suspended from school. Here as well children from families above the poverty threshold outnumbered children from families below that threshold. These data for 2004 are the most recent available.

Among the entire school-age population, 2.2 million children were said to not like school, 2.5 million were not interested in school, and 1.8 million did not work hard in school. In all three cases, nonpoor children outnumbered poor children by at least 4:1. Overwhelmingly, public-school children, respondents said, were assigned to a school that was not their school of choice.

Concerning extracurricular activities -- sports, clubs, and lessons including music and language -- nonparticipation was above 50 percent, with nonpoor children greatly outnumbering poor children. To illustrate, among the 49.3 million 6-17 year old youngsters, 26.9 million did not participate in sports, 31.9 million took no part in clubs, and 33.2 million children did not take lessons. More than half of these children were from families with incomes above the poverty line. In terms of outings taken in the last month, the record is much better. A total of 1.9 million children of the 47.9 million children ages 6 and 11 did not have any outings.

### Neighborhood.

The same 2004 Census Bureau survey reported information on the neighborhoods where these children live that points to serious obstacles to their growth and development. For example, a total of 33.9 million of the 73.1 million children under age 18 *agreed* that there are people in their neighborhood who might be a bad influence; 15.0 million *agreed* that children are kept indoors due to dangers lurking outdoors.

Whether one refers to neighbors helping neighbors, people watching other children, people one could count on, or adults who would help, the number of children expressing *disagreement* ranged from 8.8 million to 13.3 million, with nonpoor children outnumbering poor children in every instance. Finally, 10.3 million *disagreed* that there are safe places in their neighborhood to play.

### SUMMING UP

The data reported herein from Census Bureau sources – in every instance the most recent data available – confirm the second part of the dual proposition stated at the outset: there are millions of children in families with incomes above the poverty threshold whose growth and development are not assured. In the following, we draw attention to the following four conclusions organized along lines of the four obstacles identified in our introductory comments: home, health, school, and neighborhood.

First, the 20.6 million children in single-parent families suggest that some children are held back in their growth and development even in families with incomes above the poverty threshold. Further, regarding obstacles in the home, parents of families with incomes above the poverty line stated that 10.4 million of their children required more time than they anticipated and that 1.3 million children made them angry. An estimated 6.0 million children had no limits imposed on their TV viewing, with nonpoor children outnumbering poor children by 5:1.

Second, with regard to health obstacles to growth and development, the Census data suggest with few exceptions that American children are generally in good health. Specifically, the general health status of more than 95 percent of all children was reported as excellent, very good, or good. The data on health have to be handled with great care because they are based on information provided by the household respondent and not by a health-care specialist. For children ages 5 to 15, there were 2.7 million who were said to have a sensory, physical, mental, or self-care disability. The most common disability by far was mental disability which beset 2.5 times as many children in nonpoor families than in poor families.

Third, with respect to school, there were 1.8 to 2.5 million school-age children who did not like school, were not interested in school, or did not work hard in school. Nonpoor children outnumbered poor children by 4:1. Further, 26.9 million 6-to-17 year olds did not participate in sports, 31.9 million did not take part in clubs, and 33.2 million did not take lessons such as music or dance. Overwhelming, nonparticipating children in families above the poverty line outnumbered nonparticipants from families below that line.

Fourth, regarding the neighborhoods in which they live, 33.9 million of all children under age 18, according to the household respondent, *agreed* that there were neighboring people who might be a bad influence and 15 million who agreed that children are kept indoors to protect their personal safety. Smaller numbers, but still as many as 10.3 million were said to *disagree* that neighbors help neighbors, people watch other children, that there are people one can count on, adults who would help, or safe places to play.

Perhaps more than any other findings, these data on the neighborhood coupled with the data on extracurricular activities indicate that for many children, whether poor or not, there is little support in their growth and development outside their own family.

Detailed tables are available upon request.

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