

OBSTACLES TO CHILDREN DEVELOPING AS MATURE PERSONS

By

Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.

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Questions and comments should be directed to:

Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.

Mayo Research Institute

www.mayoresearch.org

1217 Dean Chapel Road, West Monroe, Louisiana 71291 USA

Tel: 318/396-5779 E-mail: edoboyle@earthlink.net

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 (see Table 1). 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.

1. HOME AND HEALTH

A. Home

Table 2 indicates that 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 -- live 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 (see Table 3).

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 (see Table 4). 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 others. 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.

Table 5 displays information from 2004 regarding the reading and TV viewing habits of all children excluding those who had not reached their first birthday. There were 1.9 million children between 1 and 5 who were never read to in a typical week. Children in nonpoor families outnumbered 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 (see Table 6). 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.

B. 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 (see Table 7). 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. 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. 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. Table 8 shows that 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. 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 with a mental disability than poor children with that type of 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.

2. SCHOOL AND NEIGHBORHOOD

A. 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 (see Table 9).

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.

Table 10 presents information on participation in three types of extracurricular activities: sports, clubs, and lessons including music and language. In all three instances, whether we refer to poor children or nonpoor children, nonparticipation was above 50 percent. Nonpoor children greatly outnumbered 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.

B. Neighborhood

The same 2004 Census Bureau survey reported information on the neighborhoods where these children live which 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 (see Table 11).

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 were safe places in their neighborhood to play.

3. CONCLUSIONS

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 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 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. Nonparticipating children in families above the poverty line greatly 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, 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.

References

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Table 1. Poverty Status and Depth of Poverty of Children Under 18 by Age, 2006
(numbers in thousands)

<u>Age</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Poverty Rate</u>	<u>Depth of Poverty</u>		
				<u>< 50%</u>	<u>50-74%</u>	<u>75-99%</u>
All children	73727	12827	17.3%	5508	3642	3677
Under 6	24423	4956	20.2	2298	1310	1347
0-1	8232	1756	21.3	897	420	438
2-3	8152	1668	20.4	707	472	488
4-5	8039	1532	19.0	694	418	421
6-11	23626	4023	17.0	1674	1184	1166
6-7	7928	1406	17.7	567	452	388
8-9	7773	1349	17.3	578	377	394
10-11	7925	1268	16.0	529	355	384
12-17	25677	3847	14.9	1536	1147	1165
12-13	8165	1312	16.2	497	432	384
14-15	8435	1272	15.0	480	388	404
16-17	9077	1263	13.9	559	327	377

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2007.

Table 2. Presence of Parents of Children Under 18 by Poverty Status, 2006
(numbers in thousands)

	Under Age 18
All Children *	73664
poor	13525
not poor	60139
Number of Children Who ...	
Live w/ Both Parents	
poor	4104
not poor	45558
Live w/ Neither Parent	
poor	1700
not poor	1683
Live w/ Mother Only	
poor	7076
not poor	10084
Live w/ Father Only	
poor	645
not poor	2813

* Excludes children in group quarters and those who are family reference persons or spouses.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, released online on May 24, 2007.

Table 3. Children Under 18 Living Apart From Parents by Poverty Status and Age, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

	<u>Under 6</u>	<u>6 to 11</u>	<u>12 to 17</u>
All Children	23901	24007	25262

Number of Children Who Lived Apart from Parents ...

At Least One Month

poor	142	307	466
not poor	387	810	1567

Unable to Keep Them

poor	34	111	132
not poor	111	193	318

In Last 12 Months

poor	24	17	26
not poor	37	58	64

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Fertility and Family Statistics Branch
<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/2004_detailed_tables.html>
February 15, 2008.

Table 4. Parental Feelings Toward Own Children Under 18 by Poverty Status, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

All Children	73170
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Number of Children Who ...

Are Harder To Deal w/ Than Others

poor	787
not poor	2944

Do Things That Bother Parents

poor	955
not poor	2826

Require More Time Than Expected

poor	2762
not poor	10363

Make Parents Angry

poor	413
not poor	1295

Source: See Table 3.

Table 5. Weekly Reading and TV Limits for Children Under 18 by Poverty Status and Age, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

	1 to 2	3 to 5	6 to 11	12 to 17
All Children *	8016	12054	24007	25262
Never Read to				
poor	267	306	**	**
not poor	589	728	**	**
No TV Limits				
poor	**	299	499	985
not poor	**	889	1388	5018

* Does not include 3,831,000 children below age one. ** Not applicable.

Source: see Table 3.

Table 6. Assistance Program Participation of Children Under 18 by Age, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

		Under 6	6 to 11	12 to 17
All Children	73170	23901	24007	25262
poor *	12908	4885	4264	3759
not poor	58879	18426	19281	21172
Got Some Aid	46165	11116	17664	17385
TANF	2415	865	740	810
Food Stamps	10041	3907	3293	2841
WIC	5026	4977	**	49
Medicaid	21430	8140	7037	6253
School Lunch	34446	2057	16468	15921

TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, Children.

* Includes only children in households for which poverty status was determined; subtotals do not sum to total. ** Program does not serve 6 to 11 year old children.

Source: See Table 3.

Table 7. Health Status and Health Services Utilization Rates of Children Under 18, 2001

All Children (numbers in thousands)	Health Status				
	Excellent	V. Good	Good	Fair	Poor
72659	41029	19787	10036	1554	253
Percent Who in Last 12 Months Reported ...					
No doctor visit	35.3	33.5	35.3	19.2	13.0
No dentist visit	42.8	47.4	51.9	51.2	37.4
No hospital stay	95.4	95.3	93.5	83.2	70.8
No prescription	69.5	62.6	55.6	28.6	19.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, *Health Status, Health Insurance, and Health Services Utilization*, 2001, released February 2006.

Table 8. Disability Status of Children by Poverty Status, 2006
(numbers in thousands)

	Children Under Age 18*	Disability Type: Disabled Children Ages 5 to 15				
		Any	Sensory	Physical	Mental	Self-Care
All Children	72066*	2737	508	494	2207	375
poor	12911	779	156	160	623	114
not poor	59155	1955	351	335	1585	261

* Does not include unrelated children who are defined as householders (household heads) living alone or with nonrelatives only, household members who are not related to the householder or children living in group quarters.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey.

Table 9. Academic Performance, Attitude Toward School, and Choice of School by Age and Poverty Status, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

All Children	Under 6	6 to 11	12 to 17
	23,901	24007	25262

Number of Children Who ...

Changed Schools			
poor	*	1306	1804
not poor	*	4545	8547
Ever Repeated a Grade			
poor	*	486	709
not poor	*	1146	1995
Ever Suspended			
poor	*	*	676
not poor	*	*	2110

Number of Children 6 to 17 Years Old Who ...

Do Not Like School		
poor		441
not poor		1780
Are Not Interested in School		
poor		489
not poor		1982
Do Not Work Hard in School		
poor		337
not poor		1456

Number of Children in Public School for Whom ...

Assigned School Not School of Choice	
poor	6098
not Poor	30015

* Information not applicable or not available.

A student who changed school is one who changed for reasons other than the normal grade-to-grade progression or graduation from elementary or middle school.

Source: See Table 3.

Table 10. Extracurricular Activities of Children Under 18 by Poverty Status and Age, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

	Under 6	6 to 11	12 to 17
All Children	23901	24007	25262
Number of Children Who ...			
Did Not Play Sports			
poor	*	3360	2943
not poor	*	11704	11602
Were Not in Clubs			
poor	*	3364	3003
not poor	*	12668	12830
Did Not Take Lessons			
poor	*	3347	3176
not poor	*	12398	14228
Had No Outings			
Last Month			
poor	357	277	*
not poor	682	617	*

Clubs include Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, religious groups, Girls and Boys Clubs, or 4-H groups. Lessons refer to after school activities and include music, dance, language, computers, or religion.

*** not applicable**

Source: See Table 3.

Table 11. Neighborhood Characteristics for Children Under 18 by Poverty Status, 2004
(numbers in thousands)

All Children	73170
Number of Children Who <i>Disagreed</i> That ...	
People Help One Another	
poor	3692
not poor	9597
People Watch Other Children	
poor	3085
not poor	8537
There Are People on Whom They Can Count	
poor	3162
not poor	7713
There Are Adults Who Would Help	
poor	2569
not poor	6182
There Are Safe Places to Play	
poor	3033
not poor	7360
Number of Children Who <i>Agreed</i> That ...	
There Are People Who Might Be a Bad Influence	
poor	7035
not poor	26848
Children Kept Inside Due to Danger	
poor	4324
not poor	10657

Source: See Table 3.