



Income Security and Public Assistance for Woman and Children

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Income Security and Public Assistance for Women and Children

Keith M. Kilty, Virginia E. Richardson, and Elizabeth A. Segal, Editors. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1997.

Income Security and Public Assistance for Women and Children sounds an alarm for catastrophes in the near future for poor women and children. State and federal legislation and policies of recent origin and implementation, as the editors observe, are about "ending a relationship between government and people in need."

The AFDC program, the core of the economic safety net for women and children, is being assaulted under the pretense of national progressive action leading to increased self-reliance on the part of the recipients. Caseload reduction through eligibility requirements and time limitations will alter for the worst the survival struggles of four million women and ten million children. This mean-spirited approach further polarizes the nation and contradicts the historical rights implicit in the nature of citizenship in a democracy. The editors sum up the broad dimensions succinctly: "The inequity of this value contradiction becomes clear — at its base to racism, sexism, and classism."

Within such a context, the social ambivalence as to the poor is creatively and forcefully examined in the book's five articles, based in a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies for data gathering and analysis.

The first by Martha N. Ozawa, "Federal Role in Establishing National Income Security for Children," stresses the necessity for creating an income security program unrelated to welfare. She defines the social challenge as the need "to invest more public resources in the nation's children of the country is to have a future workforce with the skills necessary to compete in the global economy and to support the impending retirees." Reasons are provided for the inability of public income transfers to meet this challenge. The author holds

that too broad a shift from federal to state-developed programs of income security for children will result in unsuitable variations.

Sandra Sue Butler and Mary Katherine Nevin's research study, "Welfare Mothers Speak," the second article in the collection, is intended "to bring recipient voices to the welfare debate." Artfully combining empirical data with personal testimonies, the authors develop six conceptual themes: "struggling against odds; children are priority; catch-22; give us a chance; division of the oppressed; and thank you for listening." The study is based on data from the state of Maine. Should the study be replicated in other states, the result could aid significantly in consciousness raising, thus reducing the negative influence of the stereotypes and myths so infused in the welfare debate.

The third article reports on an important research study by Sue J. Steiner, in which she asked two questions: "Is there a relationship between family care giving responsibilities and the length of time a person remains on AFDC?" And, "Can the number of months a person remains on public assistance be predicted by whether or not there is a sick member in the family?" Steiner sought to clarify the reasons for public assistance eligibility and the causes of prolonged dependency. The finding that the continued poor health of the children, or of other family members, contributes significantly to keeping AFDC recipients out of the job market has implications for policy-makers and social work practitioners.

The fourth article, "Poverty and Child Placement," by Nora S. Gustavsson and Ann E. MacEachron, is focused upon the long existing debate about poverty as a reason for removal of children from their own homes. The child welfare

acts of the current decade reflect outworn public and legislative perceptions as to the nature of the best interest of the child. The authors highlight the discriminating social policy against the poor in general and the Native Americans in particular. Important for social work education and social work practice is the authors' urging: "Distortions about poor families... are harmful and can be countered with empirical data."

"Thoughts on Poverty and Inequity," a brief epilogue by Marcia Widmer, is a poignant autobiographical account of her being reduced from an upper middle-class housewife and mother to a single-parent welfare recipient, recalling the array of

social rejections and institutionalized humiliations, but ending with new directions for her personal and social achievement.

Within the 100 pages of this small volume, the editors' introduction and the five carefully focused articles read like one continuous essay. The essay sums up the facts and flaws concerning legislative efforts to provide, or withhold, income security for poor women and children. As a succinct statement, the book offers immediate understanding and a bold challenge simultaneously to lawmakers, human services professionals, and the public at large.

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