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Policy Brief: Child Welfare Policy and the Impact of Poverty

Goal Statement

The goal of this policy brief is to highlight the importance of addressing poverty in the context of child welfare, and to propose solutions that can help mitigate the negative impact of poverty on children's well-being.

Scope of the Problem

Poverty is a major risk factor for poor child welfare outcomes. In America today, one fifth of children live in poverty because the family unit, the primary caregiver for children, is a different unit than it was before the Great Depression where the father works to sustain their families and mothers stay home to care for the children. But today, most families are headed by a single mother raising children with minimum wage income without social support to augment their income, healthcare, childcare or support from family. This disturbing reality is reflected in the current crisis facing children welfare policy.

Another major contributing factor is that the government has failed to establish a policy that ensures basic income, employment and social service support to parents. A child's condition is linked to the family status, parents therefore continue to fail in their duties to provide and care

for their children which in turn leads to an escalation in child welfare services because families then turn to child welfare for support.

According to a recent WHO, UNICEF and Lancet Commission report, the United States is ranked 31st out of 36 OECD countries for child well-being with approximately 14 million children living in poverty, representing over 18% of all children. America was a pioneer in strategizing for prevention of child abuse but is now one of the highest spending countries fighting poverty. Historically, the federal government's role in child welfare under the Constitution is limited, but their role in the modern child welfare system has increased as States cut back on their responsibilities on child welfare programs. Federal funding thus increased due to new rules and requirements emphasizing greater accountability on the part of states in achieving positive child outcomes.

Children who grow up in poverty experience stunted physical growth and development, lower educational achievement, shortening life expectancy, and greater exposure to violence and other forms of trauma. Living in poverty today means having limited access to health care, food, shelter, education and unemployment. Poverty has led to instability in many homes, leaving children to experience family disruption, parental divorce, separation, and incarceration.

Past Policy

The Children's Bureau Act of 1912 was established and charged with the responsibility of collecting information on all matters relating to children welfare among all classes of the population. The Child Labour Act of 1916 banned the sale of product made by children under the age of 14 and prohibited the interstate transportation of goods manufactured by children. The Maternity and Infant Act of 1921 was passed to reduce infant maternal mortality rate. All these

great family welfare initiatives were abolished by the constitution and therefore unsuccessful. However, years later in 1935, the Social Security Act was passed and in it child welfare was repealed to 1) provide Aid to dependent children under Title IV by providing public relief in the form of cash grants to families and 2) reestablish maternal and child welfare services “for the protection and care of the homeless, dependent and neglected children, and children in danger of being delinquent”. Since the passing of the SSA, federal government involvement and participation in child welfare has increased significantly over time.

Past policy efforts to address poverty and child welfare have focused primarily on providing financial assistance to low-income families through programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Low Income Energy Assistance program (LIHEAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) and Child Nutrition support programs. While these programs have provided some assistance to families in need, they have not been sufficient to fully address the underlying issues that contribute to poverty and its negative impact on children.

Current Policy

Several incidents of abuse against children arose after the Great Depression that led to the sudden collapse of the initial mandate of child welfare service to child protective service tasked with focusing on investigating and prosecuting abuse cases against children. The shift of focus from promoting the well-being, permanency, and safety of children and families by helping families care for their children successfully or, when that is not possible, helping children find permanency with kin or adoptive families to simply becoming investigating and prosecuting

abuse cases has produced a system that only functions as a last resort to protect children from physical and sexual abuse. Yet there has been no evidence to suggest child protective services have provided a safe environment for children.

Many high-quality programs were birthed to focus on providing financial assistance, improve access to education and healthcare for low-income families and targeted support for families experiencing instability or trauma. Such programs include

In the light of this, current policy efforts such as; The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 which seeks to prevent children from entering foster care, support kinship caregivers, and reduced reliance on group care, The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 that increased opportunities for children to be placed with relatives, expanded incentives to encourage adoptions from foster care, expanded federal support for adoption assistance, and increased options for supporting youth in foster care after age 18, The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014, Multiethnic Placement Act, Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (P.L. 95-608), Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 to mention a few, have all tried to make up for the shortfall facing child welfare reform but have been unsuccessful in their efforts.

This failure became glaring when Covid-19 struck. The pandemic illuminated how indispensable child care is for the well-being and economic security for the children, families and communities, while also revealing the system's many shortcomings. Child care has been underfunded for decades, leading to a disproportionate supply of high-quality programs and too many families emancipated by the system. Families are only able to afford food, which often translates to poverty and limited benefits. It is no secret that COVID-19 exacerbated both past and present challenges. This gave rise to new programs like The Child Welfare Information

Gateway, which provides resources and support for families dealing with issues like domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health concerns. Head Start and Early Head Start programs which support children's growth from birth to age 5 through services that support early learning and development, health, and family well-being, Child care financial assistance (also called vouchers, certificates, or subsidies) to provide child care financial assistance to help families with low-income pay for child care so they can work or attend school.

Proposed Solutions

The silver lining throughout the challenges of both past and present policy is the attention it finally received on the importance of child care to the families. As support arose from states and policymakers for continued investments in child care to better address poverty and its impact on child welfare, we propose the following solutions.

Expand access to affordable housing: Stable housing is a key factor in reducing the negative impact of poverty on children. Policy efforts should focus on expanding access to affordable housing for low-income families, including through the use of subsidies and tax incentives.

Increase support for early childhood education: Providing access to high-quality early childhood education can help mitigate the negative impact of poverty on children's development. Policy efforts should focus on increasing access to early childhood education for low-income families, including through the use of vouchers and subsidies.

Provide more targeted support for families experiencing trauma or instability: Families experiencing trauma or instability may need more targeted support to address their specific

needs. Policy efforts should focus on providing more comprehensive support for families dealing with issues like domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health concerns.

New or old policy reforms should focus first on children's safety, health, and happiness, therefore adopting programs that can help families and parents care for their children. This will reduce intrusion into the children's lives through welfare interventions.

Use observations and assessments to support comprehensive family policy that targets long term social and economic problems facing today's family unit to eliminate child poverty.

Create a culture of continuous quality improvement for every child's needs across all developmental domains.

Transfer the role of investigating and prosecuting child abuse to law enforcement and the judicial system, so that child welfare systems can focus on its original mandate of serving disadvantaged children.

And lastly, a reform of social welfare policy that is outdated to include today's family settings.

Involvement of faith communities

- Faith communities can play an important role in addressing poverty and its impact on child welfare by providing a range of services and support to low-income families, including financial assistance, food and clothing donations, and counseling services.
- Faith communities can also provide a sense of community and support for families dealing with trauma or instability.

- Local places of worship can hold collaborative recruitment events and activities for adoptive parents, combining the resources, relationships, and knowledge of both child welfare staff and faith communities to reach potential adoptive parents.
- Faith communities can partner with welfare organizations and leverage on their relationships and resources to educate their congregation on child welfare services
- Faith communities can provide spiritual support and guidance for members of their community needing support
- Local faith communities can provide daycare services to help meet the needs of the most vulnerable children, adults, and families within their community
- Faith communities can partner with health care providers to ensure access to important services for in-need members of the community e.g dental care, addiction treatment, or domestic violence services,

Involvement of Local Communities

- Communities can continue to work toward combating child abuse by supporting and encouraging each other in protecting our children.
- As a community, we can come together and talk about the organizations and resources available and the types of programs they have to offer.
- establishing links to community supports and services for food, clothing, shelter, mental health and/or substance abuse treatment and other services.
- Work with families to identify and mobilize natural support.
- Keep victims' names and other information private, and protect their confidentiality.

- Provide a comforting, accessible place where victims can report a rape or attack, and take care not to blame them for any violence they have suffered.

Conclusion

Child welfare policy has a huge impact on poverty reduction among children in America. It helps to provide support for disadvantaged children, including access to health care, nutrition, and educational resources. Child welfare policy also sets limits on how much money families can earn and puts restrictions on how parents can spend their income. These policies are designed to ensure that families have adequate financial resources to adequately provide for their children thereby reducing dependency on social services and the overwhelming caseload on social workers. Case worker can thus focus interventions on those who really need it.

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