Values Underpinning Poverty Programs for Children

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Abstract

Values create a framework through which the American public gives meaning to particular concepts and events. To better understand the values underlying public support for poverty programs for children, this article examines public attitudes toward children, poverty, and government. Although Americans continue to view helping children as a top policy priority, there is ambivalence with regard to poor children because of their inevitable connection to poor adults and the public’s expectation that adults be self-sufficient. Rather than choosing between extreme ideological views of the causes of poverty and the ideal role of government in curbing poverty, the American public takes an integrative perspective that both values individual initiative and supports opportunities for all Americans. Favored are government programs fitted to the practical needs of everyday life. Such programs should support personal efforts but not assume responsibility for individual or particular group outcomes.

Value underpinnings are the normative standards that are brought to bear on public policies for impoverished children. As defined in this article, they are not abstract matters of philosophical debate, but rather framing perspectives through which Americans assign worth and meaning to public policy events and conditions.

In recent decades, attacks on national antipoverty policies have shown that value underpinnings are of immense practical importance. Commitments of tax dollars that are not seen to express and enforce values shared by most Americans are highly vulnerable to political attack and public rejection—regardless of what policy analysts might have to say about program effectiveness, costs, and benefits. In fact, empirical policy analysis has frequently been reinterpreted to serve value-based political rhetoric. In this sense, antipoverty policies that are not value-based will not work. They will lack the durable, mainstream support from the American public that makes for sustainable policy.
Value underpinnings demand especially serious attention in an era when debates over social policies often serve as metaphors for cultural anxieties. The evidence from opinion surveys and the tenor of public discourse demonstrates that, despite conditions of relative peace and material prosperity, Americans have grown deeply troubled by a sense that much of life is spinning out of control—not only public and household budgets but youth and schools, jobs, family life, crime, popular culture, and political processes.² Such growing uncertainties carry a compensating insistence that public policies affirm enduring values, however difficult it is for policymakers to implement that sentiment. To the American public, the terms “children,” “poverty,” and “government” are value-charged.³ Combined into the one rubric of government-sponsored child poverty programs, these terms present an arena where intensely felt values can be deployed without directly judging the behavior of the majority of citizens. They are also an arena where the people in question—children and poor adults—are often not politically present to speak for themselves.

This article examines American values concerning each point of the conceptual triad—children, poverty, and government, in turn—and concludes with implications for program design.

**Valuing Children**

Americans in general place a very high value on children. Despite its sad statistics on child poverty, American society has long been noted for doting on its children. Historically, children have been seen variously as the hope for preserving the republic and its mission for the world, and as a means of increasing the supply of consumers and future workers.⁴ Hence, it is not surprising that “child-saving” became the creed of many progressive era reformers more than 100 years ago.⁵ They, as well as later social reformers, understood that by maintaining a focus on the issue of valuing children, large reservoirs of public sympathy could be tapped.

The public still feels this way about children. Even in the immediate aftermath of the 1994 Republican victory in Congress, Americans continued to assign very high policy priority to children. By one survey, three-fourths of voters agreed that political leaders were not doing enough to help solve the problems facing children; in December 1994, five times more Americans wanted to see government spending on programs for poor children increased (47%) rather than decreased (9%).⁶ So ingrained is the public’s presumption of valuing children that Democratic pollsters probing attitudes about program cutbacks found that in 1995 Americans were unwilling to believe that anyone would knowingly do something to harm children; harmful policy consequences for children were seen by focus groups as the unintended results of bureaucratic and political bumbling.⁷ The inherent neediness of children resonates strongly with that strand of American values that endorses the idea of meeting basic human needs for those who are in no position to help themselves.⁸

While public sympathy for children’s causes is obvious, some of the costs of exploiting that sympathy have not been recognized. Child-focused strategies have sometimes taken the place of thinking seriously about and mobilizing support for adult needs. In a policy sense, child-focused reform has turned parents into dependents of their children, with parents’ access to certain benefits dependent on the presence of their children. This tendency has prevailed since the transition early this century from institutionalized care and outplacing of children to mothers’ pensions (through the Aid for Dependent Children program of the 1930s) and the gradual transformation of that program from a widows’ to a divorced and never-married mothers’ income support program. Often without knowing it, modern advocates of various antipoverty efforts have echoed the words spoken at the
1909 White House Conference on Children: “. . . the circle of philanthropic effort has widened to include the inefficient and delinquent parent, because of the child. . . . there is one cause for which we can obtain wide sympathy and ample support, and that is the child.”

Attitudes Toward Poverty
When the public’s evaluation of poverty itself is examined, an inherent tension in the value framework regarding poor children becomes clear. On the one hand, children are seen as inherently needy and deserving. On the other hand, children are also necessarily attached to adults, and adults are expected to be self-sufficient. In fact, there is probably no more consistent and uniform finding in survey research than that the public values jobs and work for able-bodied poor adults. As one researcher put it, “Work programs, regardless of how they are explained, are popular because they seem to engage all sides of the public’s mind: its egalitarian desire to help those in need, its hierarchical desire to enforce a central societal norm, and its individualist desire to foster independence and self-reliance.”

When Americans marshal reasons for fighting poverty, the emphasis is not on income poverty as defined by statistical measures created and employed by academics and program administrators. Rather it is on poverty as a condition of misery, hopelessness, and dependency. Fighting poverty—defined as raising the income level of those at the bottom of the economic distribution up to the poverty income line—has never had strong support from the American public. Even at the height of 1960s radicalism, there was never public support, including among the poor, for income guarantees to combat poverty. Support for governmental help with jobs has consistently outweighed any public interest in income assistance for nonelderly adults. All the familiar reform refrains in U.S. political history have addressed this approach to poverty: help for those who will help themselves, aid for the deserving but no reward for vice and folly, a hand up rather than a handout.

Academics and opinion leaders may disagree about whether children’s problems, and poverty more generally, are a function of individual moral and motivational failings or of societal deficiencies. The truth is that the American public considers both personal responsibility and socially provided opportunity as essential. Because of the perception that welfare programs replace work and opportunity with cash and dependency, however, Americans dislike welfare programs for families with children, while still supporting children’s causes generally.

Hence, value underpinnings for child poverty programs embrace competing desires for economic self-sufficiency and for fulfillment of basic needs. Furthermore, public attitudes endorsing the fulfillment of children’s basic needs do not generally extend to adults. Poverty statistics can be presented in a way that makes children appear to be a demographically separate group, but they are not viewed by the public as being separate. The poverty of children is inherently bound up with the poverty of caretaker adults, and there are few straightforward ways to “fix things for kids” without also working through or on adults.

Programs that do provide benefits directly to children, rather than through caretaker adults, have received more broad-based public support in recent years. For example, efforts to modify the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) as part of the Republicans’ Contract with America were defeated in 1995 as were similar efforts during the Reagan administration. The 1995 proposal would have reduced projected NSLP expenditures by about 5% over five years and attempted to achieve greater efficiency by block-granting funding to the states and reducing federal oversight. It was successfully beaten back by an aggressive advocacy campaign that focused on the prospect of large increases in the number of hungry children if the programs were changed. In contrast, the well-publicized finding that more than one million additional children would be plunged into poverty under the 1996 welfare reform bill because of the cutoff of cash payments to their nonworking parents did not derail enactment of that law. And, as described in more detail in the article by Currie in this journal issue, on a per-child basis, real Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) cash payments to poor families declined over the past 20 years, while real expenditures on in-kind programs for poor children grew dramatically.
Similarly, the public desire to encourage work and support those who help themselves has facilitated the dramatic fourfold growth in expenditures on the Earned Income Tax Credit (see also the article by Plotnick in this journal issue), a program designed to reward work for low wages.

Public norms have also changed so that mothers are now included in the overarching consensus that adults should be self-sufficient. Income assistance for poor children and their parents grew out of a normative order that saw mothers’ work outside the home as a threat to family life. When a family lost its male breadwinner (through death or abandonment), public payments were legitimated as a way of keeping the family together and upholding the main maternal child-rearing role of women in their separate domestic sphere. Attitudes and behavior in this regard have been transformed with astonishing speed in the past several decades. Between 1949 and 1994, the proportion of married mothers with young children and who worked outside the home rose from approximately 10% to 60%, and opinion surveys show a comparable shift in American attitudes favoring the participation of mothers in the labor force. This shift in attitude makes it even more difficult than previously to combat child poverty simply by transferring money to families with children.

**Opinion leaders present two extreme ideological perspectives with regard to using government to address problems of children. This divisiveness came into sharp focus when First Lady Hillary Clinton’s 1996 book celebrated the African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” as a suggested metaphor for America’s approach to children.**

Mrs. Clinton writes, “There is no such thing as other people’s children,” and adds, “Children will only thrive if their families thrive, and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them.” This vision includes an extensive public and private support system with government playing an important role in helping families with their responsibility for children’s welfare. It embraces a strong child protection system with a broad conception of child abuse and thus more intervention in families, as well as developmental services, such as government-regulated quality child care. As the First Lady defines it, the village of our mass society is no longer a place but “the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives,” and there seems to be little that could not be under the collective scrutiny, caring, and provision of this extended village.

Critics of this view claim to share some similar values with regard to children and the need for parental responsibility and supportive communities, but believe that it is not the role of government to build communities that nurture children. Its opponents criticize the first perspective as a big-government, collectivist approach to child rearing. Similar criticisms were voiced in the debate over the Child Development Act of 1971, vetoed by President Nixon, which declared that comprehensive child development programs should be available as a matter of right to all children. They arose with greater virulence in 1996 in reaction to _It Takes a Village_. The turmoil can be expected to grow in the future as conservative activists push for legislation protecting parental rights from what is seen as the cultural liberalism of education and government establishments.

This second perspective focuses primarily on energetic family support from local community institutions such as the church, neighborhood groups, and volunteer organizations. It rejects a strong government presence in child and family matters and views...
government as serving children and families best by stopping the harm its policies already cause families, schools, and voluntary community activities. As one proponent of this perspective states, “We, not the government, must take care of our neighbors. When it comes to welfare, we are the ones who must give sacrificially of our time and money. . . . Cultural change must be fought for and won in our homes, in our schools, on Main Street, even in our places of worship. The only reason to rebuild the village is to solidify those non-governmental institutions that support and offer resources to the family. True cultural change will inoculate us when political change threatens our values.”

The American public, however, holds a third, more integrated view of government, as both problem and problem solver. It both values the family as a fundamentally private unit that should carry the prime responsibility for children and acknowledges that the welfare of children in families can be significantly strengthened or weakened, depending on what the government and communities do or do not do.

So deeply embedded is the premise that the central responsibility for children’s well-being rests with parents that governmental assumption of responsibility can fail to occur even under the most dire circumstances, as in the well-publicized failures of child protective service agencies to intervene in some cases of extreme child abuse. Likewise, although well-run programs that assume parental functions appear capable of helping young children who are identified as at risk of school failure and antisocial pathologies, proposing strong government intervention in this direction runs the risk of a public backlash.

Therefore, from 1986 to 1994, despite the changes in party control of the Presidency and Congress, the American public varied little in its feeling that there are roles for both government and individual self-help in improving the living standards of poor Americans. Moreover, surveys taken in the mid-1980s, during the Reagan Revolution, suggest that the public view of antipoverty programs depends on the kinds of needs different people are thought to have and the nature of the public program in question. The proportion of Americans in favor of scrapping government welfare programs remained in the single digits. Cash assistance and food programs were seen as appropriate for the elderly poor and disabled persons but inappropriate for other adults. Food programs were seen as a high priority for poor children but not all children. Special kinds of training and education programs were most willingly supported for all disabled persons and nonelderly poor adults because they could bring new groups of people closer to the independence that comes with employment. Priority for catastrophic health insurance was given first to children, then the elderly, but not to other adults. The public’s overwhelming priority for poor parents was for work and work-related services. Though these data are crude, they do provide a picture of public thinking that shows the complex ways in which value judgments are made.

Increasingly, however, policy reforms such as an aggressive government jobs
program or tax increases to finance new programs to help children must confront the public’s distrust of government and politicians’ promises. Rebuilding trust, always a slow process, will depend on showing the public that new policies and the people who make them are, in fact, trustworthy.

Conclusion

Americans generally agree that there is a public, governmental responsibility to assist those who are lacking the necessities of life—the necessities being understood to include a promise that all persons have a reasonable chance of working toward their own individual notions of success. This promise has come to be called the American Dream, and Americans today still generally stand together in supporting this longstanding dream.28 What exists in the public mind is a blending of value categories—joint responsibility for assuring opportunity to all and personal responsibility for working hard and honestly to make use of it.29 Such a public ethos supports a pragmatic approach that endorses finding workable programs to fill practical needs and fit everyday life.

Work holds center stage as a value for the behavior of adults, but it is work with—and not as a substitute for—public help in entering and surviving in the labor market, including educational and other assistance offering people second or additional chances to make something of themselves. To fit public value preferences, public policies should support personal efforts but not assume responsibilities that rightly belong to individuals or guarantee outcomes for individuals or particular social groups.

Because children’s poverty is seen as inherently connected to adult parents, it is within this connection that any child’s right to income must first reside. Any child has a publicly enforceable right to material support from the two human beings who brought him or her into the world. Only recently has this public value begun to be used to promote the enforcement of child support laws.30

In public valuations, however, the national minimum standard of living is not a matter of income but of life chances in which people can get the help that is needed to take responsibility for themselves and their children. It does not yield to a neat aggregate measure any more than does the American Dream. The way to achieve this national minimum is not through a government program but through a commitment involving the whole nation in which opportunities for parents to become self-supporting are offered throughout both public and private sectors.

Reformers committed to a view of poverty as an income gap problem may argue that this approach will not help if minimum income needs are not met. For example, moving mothers off welfare and into jobs that pay below-poverty-level wages does not represent success from an income-poverty perspective, but it may well be a success to the public eye. Working parents are seen as positive role models for their children.31 Furthermore, working is regarded as a worthy way to live and a societal norm Americans seek in navigating between the values of personal responsibility and a fair chance for all.32

The looming problem foreshadowed in public values is that disparities in these life chances may result as state variations are given full play in the current era of policy devolution from Washington.33 Though it is currently small, increasing concern about inequality of opportunity across states will likely play a large part in driving the next cycle of child poverty reforms.


14. Pear, R. *G.O.P. finds it difficult to deflect attacks on the school lunch proposals*. *New York Times*. April 9, 1995, at Section 1, p. 18. There exists a broad base of support for school feeding programs from nonpoor groups including low- and middle-income families who may receive subsidized meals and farmers whose surplus commodities are used in the program. Support from these groups may help account for the resiliency of the program in the face of attempts to cut it back.


19. Looking at this viewpoint more broadly, there is little reason to confine the village concept to children. It also takes a village to deal well with the infirm and ill, the elderly and homeless, and the economically downtrodden.


21. See, for example, the Parental Rights and Responsibilities Act of 1995, a constitutional amendment proposed and defeated in the 104th Congress (S. 984/H.R. 1946). For parental rights legislation at the state level, see the proposed Colorado Parental Rights Amendment, Amendment 17, defeated in the November 1996 elections.


26. Survey participants were asked to respond to the following statement, “Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans.” Those who agreed were at point one. Those who felt it is not the government’s responsibility and that each person should take care of him- or herself were at point five. Responses were consistent in each of the eight years in which the survey was conducted. Between 13% and 19% of respondents were at point one (the government should do everything possible). Between 8% and 12% responded at point five (people should take care of themselves). The largest category of responses (43% to 48%) was at point three (there is a role for both the government and for individual effort). National Opinion Research Center. *General population surveys*. Chicago: NORC, 1986–1991, 1993, 1994.


32. All of this comes into view with reported public attitudes regarding welfare reform. Ninety percent or more of Americans seek welfare reform to give people the means to become self-sufficient and not to cut costs by getting people off the welfare rolls. Sixty percent agree with the practice of providing welfare payments to unmarried mothers under 18 who have no other way of supporting their children, but 90% want welfare mothers with small children, like other able-bodied welfare recipients, to be required to work or learn a job skill. Many Americans support time limits on the receipt of welfare but, most strikingly, when the deadline is followed by a community service or job requirement. Weaver, R.K., Shapiro, R.Y., and Jacobs, L.R. The polls—trends, welfare. *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Winter 1995) 59,4:606–627.