

Stephen C. Rasor*

OUR CHILDREN AND WELFARE

Introduction

My mother was a teenager during the time her generation called "the great depression." She lived in rural Arkansas and lost both parents during her teenage years. She experienced first hand the loss of family and economic stability. My upbringing was different both financially and in terms of family support. A name she often mentions to this day is President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He, for her, represented a leader who cared about those who were on the margins of society. Roosevelt's support of social programs and social welfare were important reminders that the government can help people when they need it.

Helping others when they need help is something most people affirm. But it is not that simple. Welfare, as we call it, is seen by many people as being a necessary part of our economic and political system, but definitely not something that is held in highest regard. In fact, so-called "welfare reform," enacted in 1996, attempts, in part, to eliminate welfare altogether during a time when the amount of poverty in the United States was growing.

We Americans have a problem with what we call "welfare." One major part of the difficulty has to do with our perception of those who are recipients of welfare. One of the myths perpetrated in our society, through a variety of sources, is that Black, teenage, unwed mothers and their children represent the overwhelming majority of those who receive welfare benefits. This is

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not the case. Most single parents who receive welfare benefits are adults and not teenagers. Most are white, and not Black. And more relevant to the topic of this article is the fact that when we are talking about children, in conditions that fall below the poverty level, white children outnumber Black children almost three to one. It is a racist myth that advances the notion that welfare and poverty are solely a Black thing! This essay considers all poor children, those under the age of eighteen years. Welfare and poverty are a children's thing.

Several things are attempted: explain the term "welfare"; discuss how it affects children; suggest the mixed feelings Americans have about it; highlight some of the ways that our government makes things worse; advance a few ways we can help individually and collectively; and argue for a particular theological position related to and for children.

Welfare

In 1935, Aid to Dependent Children came into being. When initiated by our government, it was reportedly not controversial nor large. The aim was to provide assistance to widows who in that time period were expected to stay at home and rear their children. Eventually, the program was renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to suggest that both parents and children were receiving assistance. Early on in the overall program, it was relatively small. This remained the case until the 1960s. However, during this period the case loads for welfare recipients significantly increased.

In addition to AFDC, Medicaid and the Food Stamps Program were added to help, particularly, women and children. These medical assistance and supplemental food programs are part of what we consider social welfare. Finally in 1975, the Earned Income Tax

Credit began, an initiative to reward the so-called "working poor" who do not yet earn enough to escape poverty.

These programs vary in terms of funding. For example, the Food Stamps Program has been fully funded by the federal government, whereas AFDC has been funded by local governments, state, and federal funds. What this meant, of course, was that different benefits levels existed, depending on the states and localities. Some women and children received more or less assistance if they happen to live in one state versus another.

More could be said about the political aspects of social welfare, but a simple example will suffice. The Food Stamps Program is fully federally funded, in part, because many conservative congressional men and women representing states that potentially grow and ship some of these foods, support it. Politically, it is acceptable to "give poor people food," whereas cash assistance is seen to be less so. Hence, AFDC that involves giving people cash money has been only partially funded by the federal government.

Our Children

Approximately two-thirds of the recipients of AFDC (what most Americans associate with the term welfare) are children. And they are **our** children. They are boys, girls, white, Black and brown. They are America's children. They are not to blame for their condition. They did not choose to be hungry, nor did they ask to live in poverty. Whether or not they are in our specific neighborhood, they are still **our** children. Children are a social responsibility, not the sole responsibility of individual parents. We can spend great periods of time blaming so-called "welfare mothers," who are disproportionately African American and Hispanic; but the fact is children are a social responsibility.

When Christian people allow themselves the luxury of discussing welfare and poverty on the surface level of blaming someone for supposed sexual and material irresponsibility, they are contributing to the problem. Our children are **our** responsibility. It is time to recognize that fact and work for the common good.

Lisa Cahill in her powerful book, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, affirms that families are in trouble, most especially their children.

Many critics of the state of American families cite astronomical divorce rates, rising numbers of teenage pregnancies, and the paternal absenteeism caused by both as key contributing factors to the plight of America's children. But a 1994 Carnegie Corporation report also cites persistent poverty, child abuse, high numbers of children in foster care, inadequate health care, dangerously inferior childcare, and lack of subsidized parental work leave as part of the bleak picture of children's welfare.¹

The actual numbers of children under the age of eighteen, who are presently living in conditions that we describe as "below the poverty level," is enormous. As Exhibit A demonstrates, over 11 million children or 16.3 percent of our children were living in poverty in 1999. These numbers have changed only slightly over the past thirty years. In 1970, over 10 million of our young people lived in poverty. More than 11 million in 1980 experienced the reality of poverty. For a country that enjoys great wealth and power, those numbers are staggering. Many of us, especially our children, are not benefiting from our so-called

¹Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 7.

“First World” self-perception.

Exhibit A²
Children Below the Poverty Level Since 1970
(Under Eighteen Years of Age)

Year	Number	Percentage
1970	10,235,000	14.9%
1980	11,114,000	17.9%
1990	12,715,000	19.9%
2000	11,018,000	15.6%

These 11 million children live in large urban areas as well as small rural settings. In fact, in the mid 1980s the overall rural poverty rate was approximately equal to that in central cities.³ Poverty and children are not simply a “problem” of our metropolitan areas. Children need food, shelter, and health care in the cities and the towns of the United States. They may display some differences in terms of where they live and their ethnic and rural backgrounds, but they deserve our attention and support. Exhibit B illustrates that white, Black, Asian, and Hispanic children are included in our family, with a disproportionate percentage being Black and Hispanic. But in terms of actual numbers, white children outnumbered Black children more than two to one in 2000. No matter, all children need our collective help.

²United States. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 122nd ed. (Washington, DC: USGPO, 2002), 441.

³Cornelia Butler Flora, Jan L. Flora, Jacqueline D. Spears, and Louis E. Swanson, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 283.

Exhibit B⁴**Percentage of Children Below the Poverty Level in 2000**

Year	All Races	White	Black	Asian	Hispanic	Percentage
2000	11,018	6,838	3,417	434	3,173	15.6

Attitudes About Welfare

As indicated above, many Americans have an incorrect view of welfare recipients. They think they know who they are and often feel one way or another based on that false notion. Warren R. Copeland says, "the commonly held stereotype of a welfare recipient is an African American mother of a large number of children who has lived on welfare for years. In fact a majority of the women who head welfare families are young, white, have only one or two children, and will leave welfare within a year or two."⁵ However, this myth persists in the minds and attitudes of many citizens of the United States.

It has been said that the question of poverty and how we respond to it, is as much a question about us (the nonpoor) as it is about the poor! Different people have different perspectives when it comes to this issue. It is a basic sociological presupposition that our individual and group worldviews often differ based on social location. We tend to see the world and differing people in it, often because of our gender, familial, racial, and social-economic position. This is not to suggest that we are socially determined, but in many ways an African-American woman with little education and reduced economic opportunities may see human

⁴United States. Bureau of the Census. *Statistical Abstract of the U. S.*, 441.

⁵Warren R. Copeland, *And the Poor Get Welfare: The Ethics of Poverty in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 15.

behavior quite differently from an upper middle class, well educated, white male. Both theoretically "see" the same reality, but evaluate it differently, in part, because of their social location.

In his important book, *And the Poor Get Welfare*, Copeland illustrates four representative ways Americans often view poverty and welfare. He argues that these perspectives illustrate, in many ways, the diversity of opinions and attitudes concerning social welfare. His premise is that welfare policy in the United States often relates to these different worldviews. The creation of changes to social welfare programs correlate with some of these perspectives.

One way some Americans see those who are impoverished is through the social lenses of individual action and behavior. Copeland calls this the "virtue of being poor but independent" perspective.⁶ This attitude is one that holds to a free-market economic system and that people need to work hard, not depend on governmental support, and thus individually find a way to make it. There is virtue in being independent and "doing it" on your own, argues those who maintain this position. This perspective leads to a policy attempting to eliminate all federal social-welfare programs. A significant number of Americans seem to hold this view.⁷ It is, in a word, the conservative individualistic worldview.

A second representative view, according to Copeland, is the "developing competent people" perspective. This attitudinal stance is the typical approach of American liberals. It argues that the society as a whole loses if those at the margins do not receive support. People who support these ideas advocate birth control, prenatal care, a national health care program, a stronger educational system and the like. In other words, people can be helped

⁶Ibid. See chapter 4, 61-73.

⁷Ibid.

to help themselves and we all benefit. Welfare-type programs are valid if they assist people in their own development. The Head Start Program for children serves as an example to which liberals point as being necessary and effective.⁸

A third view that many Americans seem to have might be called "behaving like a good poor citizen" perspective, being a more authoritarian form of American conservatism. It is a view of poverty and welfare that would demand that people work for whatever help they receive. Certain values centered on the so-called "work ethic" and "strong families" are assumed in this worldview. If people will behave the way a good citizen should, then some degree of assistance may be granted. But governmental support will need to make people become productive citizens. Poverty, according to this vantage point, has more to do with failure of social authority and less to do with individual "failure."⁹

Finally, Copeland argues that a fourth perspective exists in our society, one that a minority of people hold but one that is present—"struggling against an unjust system" worldview. This representative stance strongly advocates for the poor, especially women and children. It is a view that recognizes that the society in which we live needs fundamental change if people are really going to have equal opportunity and access to needed resources. The poor are innocent victims of an unjust system, one that in many ways results from our capitalist economic reality. This perspective, and the people who hold it, supports all forms of social welfare on the way to radical economic change.¹⁰

While these four views are not inclusive of the diversity of the American people's attitudes, opinions and leanings in regards to public policy, they do give some clarity to the perceived "prob-

⁸Ibid., 75-88.

⁹Ibid., 89-102.

¹⁰Ibid., 103-116.

lem” we seem to have with poverty and welfare. How we see other people and their life situation often influences our ideas, behavior, and support for or against social welfare initiatives.

Government Help

Franklin D. Roosevelt was a person and symbol of what government should do for those who need help, according to parts of the writer's family history. As stated earlier, if your situation is such that you have experienced the need for help, that understanding seems fairly commonsensical. If one has seemingly never known the situation of dependency, providing governmental support may seem at best far-fetched. But the fact is we do have varying forms of so-called governmental support. Unfortunately many of the ways that the government interacts with us really makes some things worse. While some initiatives, like the Women, Infants, and Children Program and Head Start, have improved the lives of poor children, others have undercut parents and families who attempt to rear those children. Until recent years, only one parent could receive welfare support, which in effect encouraged out-of-wedlock births and discouraged marriage. Welfare for many years had the effect of encouraging fatherlessness among poor families. While one government program was aimed at poor children, other related policies negated two-parent families.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West in *The War Against Parents* argues that parents struggle in attempt to rear children in today's world. Managerial greed and the collapse of economic security, a poisonous popular culture, the disabling of fathers and governments action that work against parents instead of for them, are among the many reasons they advance. Regarding governmental involvement, Hewlett and West argue that “starting in

the late 1960s, successive administrations, both Republican and Democrat, have pulled the rug from under adults rearing children, progressively dismantling programs and policies that undermine family life."¹¹ They give an interesting example of the absurdity of some of our current laws. If a family or an individual owns a horse, many of the expenses for breeding the horse are tax deductible—cost for food, stabling, training, vet and stud services, insurance and other expenses. No parent in rearing a child can deduct the cost of housing, food, medical care, or preschool education. Hewlett and West ask a question that points to one of our real problems related to government involvement and policy: "How did a nation so desperately concerned about the collapse of family values develop a tax code that ranks horses above children?"¹² This is simply one example among many. The point is that too often our governmental laws and policies undercut those few positive programs that attempt to help fathers, mothers, and their children.

The more recent 1996 Welfare Reform Act, has been touted by many as a successful legislature overhauling of the nation's welfare system. In 2001, it was reported that the "number of people receiving cash assistance from the government has fallen by half since President Clinton signed the Welfare Reform Act into law."¹³ It is the case that the actual number of American men, women and children, who had been receiving welfare support, has significantly dropped, approximately 53 percent.¹⁴ However, the poverty rate itself has remained relatively the same.

Cahill asserts that "recent data suggest that while welfare reform

¹¹Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 88.

¹²*Ibid.*, 89.

¹³Rebecca Carr, "Poverty Rates Suggest Little Has Improved," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 16 August, 2001, sec. A, p.12.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

may be moving people off the welfare rolls, it may not be moving them into decent jobs or out of poverty."¹⁵ The concern by some of our political leaders appears to be focused more on "dependency" issues and not the root problem for our children; namely, poverty. Recent studies seem to suggest that many of the assumed benefits of the 1996 legislation are not being realized. To move people off welfare rolls, but not address the more fundamental concerns that relate to poverty will not ultimately help **our** children.

Our Response to Poverty and Welfare

In a word, if your view of poverty and welfare coincides with two of the perspectives highlighted in this essay; namely, the conservative individualistic or authoritarian conservative world-views, the passage of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act may be a primary solution to the "problem." However, if your perspective is one that suggests a more aggressive stance for addressing poverty and welfare, views highlighted as being more liberal or radical according to Warren Copeland, then more action is needed. Our response in this case may be offered individually and collectively. If you see the plight of children as a priority for you, your faith community, your denomination, your local, state and federal government, then some additional steps need to be considered. There are significant actions we can take in terms of advocacy, collective support, and individual initiatives. Only a few examples will be given, which may suggest even greater possibilities for you and your faith community.

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya in their monumental study of *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, forcefully articulate that today our young people and their families are fac-

¹⁵Cahill, *Family*, 101.

ing crisis conditions—especially poor Black children, and youth. “Since the 1960s almost all of the problems of the Black underclass have worsened, from high rates of unemployment—especially among teenagers and young adults—to high levels of incarceration in prisons, teen pregnancy, and female-headed households. About half of all Black children are presently growing up in female-headed households, of extreme poverty.”¹⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya recount the long history of Black community and church support for children and families. They highlight numerous examples of ways African-American churches such as Concord Baptist Church of Brooklyn, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Jones Temple Church of God in Christ in Philadelphia, and others, have provided significant forms of community outreach to help children, youth, and adults. One creative example that illustrates a more cooperative approach is the “One-Church One-Child” program of the Illinois Department of Family Services, which enlisted the help of Black churches in Chicago to find families for more than 700 African-American children waiting adoption in 1981. By 1986 more than 600 of the children had been adopted by families within those churches and fewer than sixty remained.¹⁷ These are examples of individual and multiple churches working with local government departments, in response to the needs of children and adults.

In a more recent study of approximately 1000 Black churches by Andrew Billingsley, the author of *Mighty Like A River: The Black Church and Social Reform*, gives evidence to the fact that African-American churches see children and youth as a priority in the present day. Among the 1000 churches, the most frequent type of community outreach program centered on family sup-

¹⁶C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 345.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 191.

port. Some of these attempt to meet instrumental needs (food, clothing, and shelter) as well as more expressive needs (emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development). The African-American Church has taken seriously the needs of children and their families in the past, and many are attempting to respond to those needs presently.¹⁸ Billingsley notes that with some of the negative consequences of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, more will be required by Black churches and Black Christians in the future—much more.¹⁹

One of the most important resources faith communities can use in developing plans for creative response to the needs of our children is Susan Newman's *With Heart and Hand*.²⁰ Newman highlights ten different models that others are using to enable children and youth. Her examples are local and national programs demonstrating effective and collective ways to address the needs of Black young people. She gives the reader a wealth of resources to help individuals and groups implement plans that can be utilized locally and beyond.

Beyond these individual and group level responses, there are national organizations that advocate for and with poor children. They can supply resources for local, regional, and national level initiatives with which many of us can work. A few examples are the following: the Children's Defense Fund directed by Marian Wright Edelman; the National Council of Churches Committee on Justice for Children and Their Families located in New York; the Ecumenical Child Core Network in Park Ridge, Illinois; the Congress of National Black Churches located in Washington, D.C.; and the Interfaith

¹⁸Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 89-93.

¹⁹Ibid., 187-189.

²⁰See Susan D. Newman, *With Heart and Hand: The Black Church Working to Save Black Children* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1994).

IMPACT for Justice and Peace in Washington, D.C. These are illustrations of helpful organizations in dealing with poverty and our children. There are numerous others. To really make a difference in helping children move out of poverty and into a healthy and supportive environment, we will need to work together, participating in local, regional, and national efforts to both advocate for and develop programs with children and their families.

Jesus and Our Children

Those of us who are members of the Christian faith community know that Jesus highly valued children. In the midst of a society that significantly devalued women and children, Jesus pointedly followed his understanding of God's view of humankind. He articulated a community of God that affirmed the worth of those who had previously been marginalized and ignored. Jesus was so adamant about his high regard for children that he suggested to his followers that receiving God "like a child" may be the best way one might do so. Can we do anything less? If those among us who profess to be Christian men and women, clergy and laity, do anything less, then we are not only disingenuous but unfaithful to the Christ. To be a disciple of Christ is to work for and with children and families who need us. Together, in the spirit of Christ, we will be successful.

Conclusion

This essay has briefly discussed welfare and children. "Welfare," as we know it, seems problematic for many Americans. Public opinion and debate concerning welfare, has continued for years. Approximately 1 percent of the federal budget goes to sup-

port AFDC. In actual dollars, as compared to the other 99 percent, this amount is rather small. But welfare is not a small issue for many Americans. Too often we focus on everything but the primary ones who need our attention in these discussions—our children.





