The status of children in Wisconsin

The state of Wisconsin has just released The Status of Children in Wisconsin: Recent Trends in Family Resources and Child Well-Being, authored by two IRP researchers, Sandra K. Danziger and Michael R. Sosin, as well as John F. Longres, University of Wisconsin–Madison.

The document reports on some general trends in the status of children, youth, and their families in Wisconsin. It examines economic and demographic characteristics, household composition and family life, and the well-being of children. Its express purpose is to assess needs of children and families as can be inferred from population data rather than from patterns of use of services and programs.

Danziger, Longres, and Sosin find that the children of Wisconsin seem to be facing potentially troubling trends. These involve increasing family turbulence, increasing demands for early independence, increasing hours of work, and multiple social pressures. Although the typical child still demonstrates a high level of educational achievement and relatively good health, the growth in such problems as teenage pregnancy, gonorrhea, and violent crime attests to the fact that a proportion of the population is not faring as well as the rest. And stability of performance on some measures for the average child represents a departure from the consistent and continuous improvements of the past.

The study shows enormous differentials among children. There is evidence of growing economic inequality and of uneven access to the resources that may promote adequate socialization and maturation. Those who are in single-parent families, who are poor, or who are members of minority groups appear to be particularly vulnerable. Therefore, while the majority of children so far seem to be facing the pressures of change with equanimity, children who have fewer personal, family, and community resources appear to show disquieting rates of deterioration in well-being.

The Status of Children in Wisconsin may be obtained free of charge from the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Community Services, Communications Unit, P.O. Box 7850, Madison, WI 53707.

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1The data on the income share of the bottom quintile are from Starting Even, Table 5.2, and are calculated from data in the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Series P-60, no. 68 and subsequent poverty reports. The statistics taken from the book are, unless otherwise noted, derived from special tabulations of census data (decennial censuses and the Current Population Survey) carried out by the author.


4Starting Even, Appendix Tables 1 and 2. The Appendix was written by Ross Finnie.

5Ibid., Appendix Table 8.

6The data on trends among youth are taken from Starting Even, Chapter 3.

7The data on trends among mother-only families are also from Starting Even, Chapter 3.


9Ibid., p. 713.

10Ibid., p. 717.

11Starting Even, Chapter 3. Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a federal welfare program to aid the elderly poor, provides some income support, but only about 60 percent of the eligible elderly participate, and in many cases the benefits do not boost them over the poverty line.