

Our poorest citizens—Children

by Daniel Patrick Moynihan

The following is excerpted from a statement addressed to President Reagan by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in response to the President's 1988 State of the Union address (*Congressional Record*, 100th Congress, 2d Session, Vol. 134, No. 4, January 28, 1988, S308).

In 1964, poverty was essentially a problem of the aged. More than a quarter of the aged were poor. But programs enacted under President Johnson and President Nixon, primarily within the Social Security area, greatly reduced poverty among the elderly. I refer especially to Medicare, to Supplemental Security Income, and to the increase and subsequent indexing of Old Age Insurance benefits.

In 1986, 12.4 percent of the elderly were poor according to the Census Bureau's official measure. This is a wholly unacceptable level of poverty among the aged. Even so it is a much reduced level, and this was anticipated.

By contrast, of a sudden we look up to find there are more poor Americans today than a quarter century ago, and that the poorest group in our population are children.

Moreover, in actual numbers and as a proportion of the age group—one in five—poverty is greater among children today than it was a quarter century ago.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, a child in America is almost twice as likely to be poor as an adult. This is a condition that has never before existed in our history. Most probably, it has never before existed in the history of the human species.

How has this come about? At one level the answer is simple. It is, as Samuel H. Preston put it in the 1984 Presidential Address to the Population Association of America: "The earthquake that shuddered through the American family in the past 20 years." The 20 years, that is, from the beginning of the poverty program.

Which is to say a new poverty problem has emerged. As the Census has just reported, in 1986, nearly one in every four—

23.5 percent—children lived with only one parent, 2-1/2 times the proportion in 1960. The vast majority—89 percent—of these 14.8 million children lived with their mothers. These include 18.3 percent of all white children, 53.1 percent of all black children, and 30.4 percent of all Hispanic children.

Estimates of the number of children who will live with a single parent at some point during childhood are yet more striking. Arthur Norton of the U.S. Bureau of the Census predicts that 61 percent of children born in 1987 will live for some time with only one biological parent before reaching 18. Inevitably, large numbers of these children require some form of public assistance.

Further, in providing such assistance, we have created an extraordinary institutional bias against minority children. The Social Security Act has two provisions for the care of children in single-parent families. The first is Aid to Families with Dependent Children, enacted into law as part of the original 1935 Social Security Act. The second is Survivors Insurance, added to the act in 1939. The characteristics of these two populations are quite different. The majority of the children receiving SI benefits are white. The majority of the children receiving AFDC are black or Hispanic.

Since 1970 we have increased the real benefits received by children under SI by 53 percent. We have cut the benefits of AFDC children by 13 percent. The U.S. government, the American people, now provide a child receiving SI benefits almost three times what we provide a child on AFDC.

To those who say we don't care about children in our country, may I note that the average provision for children under SI has been rising five times as fast as average family income since 1970.

We do care about some children. Majority children. It is minority children—not only but mostly—who are left behind.

Poor children on average receive less support today than they did 20 years ago. Is it any great wonder, on the edge of privation or worse, that they do not become model scholars? Surely, if someone a quarter century ago had predicted we would treat our children so, the rest of us would have predicted the troubles the children now have.

Why has this come about? Why this institutional bias? I believe we know why. Welfare has become a stigmatized program. Children dependent on it—as many as one child in three before reaching 18—are stigmatized as well. That surely is what institutional bias means.

Our legislation, with 56 cosponsors, is designed to get rid of that stigma by emphasizing child support and the education and training adults need to get off welfare. There has been a great deal of talk about both, but the federal government has really never backed either. Once that stigma is gone, or diminished, states will once again feel the moral obligation to maintain and even increase AFDC payments to dependent children. They are free to do so now. They do not. We want to change this.

Let me declare my own conviction in this matter. AFDC should be a national program, with national benefits that keep pace with inflation, in exactly the same way that Survivors Insurance is a national program with national benefits.

Had the Family Assistance Plan been enacted, we would now have a national program. Had President Carter's Program for Better Jobs and Income been enacted, we would have a national program. As a White House aide, I helped fashion the first for President Nixon. I supported the second in the Senate. Neither proposal became law. Both fell before a coalition of those who thought the benefits were too great and those who thought them too little.

But that is history. Our federal budget deficit is such that there is no possibility whatever of establishing national AFDC benefit standards at this time.

Welfare reform must become the art of the possible or it will become a diversion of the essentially unserious. ■

Order forms for *Focus* and other
Institute publications are at the back.
Subscribe now to our Discussion Paper
Series and Reprint Series.

Please let us know if you change your
address so we can continue to send you
Focus.

The new war on poverty

by Michael Novak

Michael Novak is George Frederick Jewett Scholar in Religion and Public Policy and director, Social and Political Studies, the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. He chaired the Working Seminar on Family and American Welfare Policy, which produced the report *The New Consensus on Family and Welfare* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute; and Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University, 1987).

Almost a quarter century has passed since the launching of the War on Poverty, and it is time to pay tribute to those who achieved so much through the efforts there begun. Not everything worked as planned, of course. Still, if we were to imagine the United States in 1988 *without* the programs for the poor put in place since 1964, their condition would certainly be far bleaker than it is today.

Programs for the elderly, for example, have cut deeply into the poverty rate of those older than 65 and have contributed greatly to unprecedented improvements in the health, longevity, and financial security of this important (and growing) segment of the population.¹

For the population younger than 65, poverty programs have also succeeded, if not in reducing the numbers of the poor to something closer to zero, at least in altering the concrete meaning of poverty. Until such programs came into existence, the cash income received by the poor (which determined whether or not they were below the official poverty line) was very nearly the only resource they had. With the addition of new noncash benefits after 1964, perhaps most notably Medicaid and food stamps, the number of those still poor according to the criterion of cash income may not have been as dramatically reduced as first hoped. But the broad distribution of noncash benefits certainly improved the condition of those officially counted as poor. Imagining them without such noncash assistance suggests how much bleaker their position might now be.²

No previous generation of Americans provided so much governmental assistance to the poor as has the generation of 1965–88. Nonetheless, few scholars or activists who have dedicated their lives to helping the poor feel much complacency about what has so far been accomplished. It is obvious that much more remains to be done.