

CENTER FOR NATIONAL POLICY

LUNCHEON

INVESTING IN PREVENTION

REMARKS BY

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There are 13 million children under the age of 18 in the United States living in conditions of poverty. That equates to roughly one child out of every five. The poverty rate for Black children is over 40 percent; for Hispanic children it is over 25 percent.

These are shocking numbers. In a country as affluent as ours is, and during a wave of growth and prosperity such as most of us are now enjoying, the rates of childhood poverty ought to make us squirm with embarrassment.

Approximately 23 percent of the children in America under the age of five live in poverty. In other words, more than 4.1 million kids are growing up deprived during the most critical developmental period in their lives.

These are the years when the basic foundation is developed for all the physical, intellectual and emotional growth that will occur in later years. If a child does not grow as tall as he or she might have under better conditions, we cannot give back to that child the height that was lost. We cannot give back the brain cells that failed to develop because of inadequate nutrition. We cannot give back the emotional sustenance they missed or the sense of personal worth they should have received. Whatever is lost during these years is lost forever. It cannot be replaced.

The nature, the extent and the implications of childhood poverty in America ought to provoke a sense of national outrage. I am mystified as to why it doesn't. Is it because we are unaware of childhood poverty and all of its consequences? Is it because we don't want to be aware of them? Is it because we don't know how to respond? Or has yuppiesm and selfishness spread like some unchecked disease, turning us into a nation of insensitive, uncaring middle and older aged Americans who don't really care what happens to future generations?

The Center for National Policy, working with survey researcher, Peter Hart has been exploring this set of critical questions. In an effort to design an effective communications strategy to deliver to national opinion leaders about childhood poverty, Mr. Hart has conducted a series of focus group workshops around the country, mostly involving young up-and-coming corporate executives. I think his work and his findings are fascinating and he will share the results of his experiences with you in several minutes.

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But before he does so, I want to take a moment or two to deliver my own message.

The real question we have to answer is whether we want to let high childhood poverty rates persist unabated from one generation to the next or whether we are willing to make the moral and pragmatic commitments necessary to reduce rates of childhood poverty.

Is a country that is not committed to full funding for Head Start ready to make a major commitment to improve the education and employment opportunities available to the poor?

Is a country that places limits on the number of poor women and children who receive the benefits of food and nutrition programs capable of demonstrating to future generations that the cycle of poverty can be broken?

There are many people in this country who say they are willing to make a major commitment to improve the lives of children - - - - but only after we reduce the federal deficit and balance the budget.

My answer to that line of reasoning is this: we can debate the future all we want. But there is simply no way to escape the facts of here and now. Too many of our children are poor. Too many live in substandard housing. Too many lack adequate medical care. Too many receive an inferior education.

The children of poverty did not create the deficit. They should not be the ones who are asked to pay for it.

We know the dangers of deficit *spending*. We know how important it is to sustain long-term, non-inflationary economic growth and redress our trade imbalance. But we must also learn that this country cannot afford to put off renewing its commitment to the poor -- especially poor children -- until we put our macroeconomic house in order.

Intellectually, it may make sense to get the "big picture" in order before we tackle poverty issues once again. But only those of us who are well fed, well housed, well dressed and blessed with a wide range of opportunity can afford that choice.

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Recently, the Committee for Economic Development, an organization composed of more than 200 leading business executives issued a landmark report entitled, "Children in Need." The essence of this widely quoted CED report is contained in the following paragraph.

"This nation cannot continue to compete and prosper in the global arena when more than one-fifth of our children live in poverty and a third grow up in ignorance. The nation can ill afford such an egregious waste of human resources. Allowing this to continue will not only impoverish these children, it will impoverish our nation -- culturally, politically, economically."

In order to make major inroads against childhood poverty, we will need to reaffirm the role of government in helping the poor and the dispossessed. We will need to put aside, once and for all, the notion that poverty, hunger and homelessness are problems for everyone but government. We will need to make clear once again to the American people that government is the one social institution in this country that is best able to help the poor and the dispossessed. Our effort cannot be limited to government, but it cannot succeed without government.

In effect, what we should be striving for, and what I hope Peter Hart's work can help get us closer to, is something we never have had in this country: a serious national effort to actually improve the social and economic status of children instead of just talking about it.

Among the items I would list on my children's agenda include but are not limited to:

1. Ending childhood hunger in America.
2. Full participation in the WIC program and similar state programs.
3. Access to prenatal care.
4. Effective teenage pregnancy prevention programs.
5. Expanding Head Start and Chapter One to all eligible children.

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6. Making quality day care accessible to children of parents who must work.
7. Immunizing every child against infectious diseases.

There is not a radical proposal in this bunch, but a package of proposals, which, if implemented would represent a major national commitment to improve the lives of children.

These efforts deserve full support based on sheer merit. If Peter Hart's work can get us from here to there more quickly and effectively, he will have made an enormously important contribution to our national well-being.