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Lone parent families and poverty

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In recent years, there has been a trend to name child poverty instead of just poverty as a pressing social concern. While all poverty, in particular children in poverty is a tragedy, child poverty would be more aptly named family poverty. Children are, after all, only poor if their families are. On this point, we would be wise to name the types of families that are more likely to be poor. To do otherwise does a disservice to everyone involved.

Social science research agrees that the demographic group with the highest rate of poverty is the lone-parent family. Since 1987, Statistics Canada has shown female lone parent families to have disproportionately higher levels of poverty than other family forms. [1] Measured as “the proportion of people living below the low income cutoffs with a given group” children in female lone-parent families have ranged from a 22 year high of 65.7% in 1996 to a low of 32.3% in 2006. While progress has been made to lower poverty levels, in particular in the past ten years, statistics show that almost one third of female lone-parent families continue to live in low-income. [2][3]

We also know that the effects of poverty go beyond mere money and income. Statistics Canada reports that the effect of poverty on children has many detrimental outcomes including health (physical and mental), developmental and behaviour disorders – there is also a higher probability that as adults they will be in poverty as well. [4]

So what can be done?

In our analysis of poverty, we must consider four distinct issues. First, how to meet the immediate short-term needs of those in poverty; second, how to meet the long-term needs of those in poverty; third, how to minimize the number of people who fall back into poverty; and finally, how to prevent poverty from occurring in the first place.

Short-term needs

When individuals and in particular families enter into poverty, there are several levels that require attention. While not an exclusive list, the immediate needs of safety, food, shelter, clothing and children’s education must be addressed. It’s not clear that this should be the domain of government. One leading agency in the United Kingdom, having done much research and work on the ground with poverty-fighting groups, has determined that these needs are best filled by

grassroots community groups who know, understand and are best able to deal with the local needs of those in poverty and facing other social difficulties. [5]

Long-term needs

Addressing long-term needs is not an extension of the short term solutions. The Urban Institute, an independent nonpartisan think tank based in Washington DC, has been studying social policy domestically and internationally for over 40 years. In a 2002 report, they determined that “[s]imilar to the findings for poverty entry, persons who shift from living in a female-headed to a two-adult household are the most likely to experience a poverty transition – 51.9 to 65.2% exit poverty.” [6]

Minimizing the return to poverty

One of the biggest impediments that families face when attempting to move out of poverty is the “welfare wall.” While on social assistance programs, certain benefits such as housing, childcare and prescription drugs are subsidized. As a person attempts to move out of poverty, these benefits are eliminated, thus increasing the financial needs of the family, often resulting in a return to the poverty cycle or acting as a disincentive to work. In recent years the federal government has recognized this problem and moved towards addressing it through the Working Income Tax Benefit (WITB), which is intended to lower the welfare wall by compensating them for personal high marginal tax rates [7]

Preventing poverty

Lone parent families face a significantly higher rate of poverty than do their two parent counterparts. One of the bi-products of the steady erosion of the institution of marriage has been the rise of lone-parent families. [8] In short, family structure and stability play a large role in the eradication of poverty. Strong, stable married parents are less likely to fall into poverty, and their children are less likely to enter poverty themselves as they approach adulthood.

Governments

Public officials at all levels have a limited role to play. As mentioned above, community-based groups often have the best outcomes due to their ability to work with local residents. Public officials need to recognize and support this role. Furthermore, there is a need to evaluate programs for effectiveness. Rewarding funding to the organization or voice that cries the loudest is not the best way to determine which programs will be funded and which ones will not.

The problem of poverty is complex and fraught with competing interests and solutions. But there is one element of poverty we have consistently ignored—and that is the link to lone parenting. Lone parent families are at increased risk of living in poverty. For many, strong, stable married parent families is a defence against poverty or the pathway out of it.

Endnotes

1. Statistics Canada. (2002-2006). Persons in low income after tax, by prevalence in percent Retrieved May 14, 2009 from <http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/famil19a-eng.htm>;

National Council on Welfare (2006, Summer). Poverty Profile 2002 – 2003, National Council of Welfare Reports, Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, p. 39. Retrieved May 14, 2009 from http://www.ncwcnbes.net/documents/researchpublications/ResearchProjects/PovertyProfile/2002-03Report_Summer2006/ReportENG.pdf

2. *Ibid.*

3. Statistics Canada notes that, “there is still no internationally-accepted definition of poverty - unlike measures such as employment, unemployment, gross domestic product, consumer prices, international trade and so on. This is not surprising, perhaps, given the absence of an international consensus on what poverty is and how it should be measured. Such consensus preceded the development of all other international standards.” In spite of this, Statistics Canada tracking has been consistent over the decades.

For more information on poverty measurement see Fellegi, I. (1997, September). On poverty and low income, Statistic Canada. Retrieved May 19, 2009 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/13f0027x/13f0027x1999001-eng.htm>

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5. Centre for Social Justice, third sector working group. (2006, December). Denying the vulnerable a second chance. State of the nation report, London: Centre for Social Justice, p. 21. Retrieved May 19, 2009 from http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/client/downloads/BB_third_sector.pdf

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