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Toward Effective and Family Friendly National Policies for U.S. Children and Their Families

TOWARD EFFECTIVE AND FAMILY FRIENDLY NATIONAL POLICIES FOR U.S. CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

CONGRESSWOMAN PATRICIA SCHROEDER*

Over the last decade, the well-being of America's families has become a popular topic of discussion. Research studies and news accounts have documented profound changes affecting children and families and how circumstances for many have spiraled downward. Moreover, consumer confidence has fallen to record lows and many believe that their own government and other institutions do not help and may even thwart efforts of individuals and families to help themselves.

In 1983, The House of Representatives created the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (the Committee) to provide an ongoing assessment of the conditions of American children and families and to make recommendations to Congress and the public to improve public and private sector policies. This special Committee serves as the only forum in Congress exclusively dedicated to making federal policies more attentive to the needs of the nation's families and children. Thirty-five members of the House of Representatives serve on the Select Committee. Two-thirds of the members are Democratic and one-third are Republican, reflecting the composition of the House of Representatives as a whole.

The priority of the Committee, under my stewardship since February 1991, is to reshape the national agenda and to compel actions that benefit families rather than ignore or actually harm them. This Article begins with a description of the profound impact of economic, demographic and social changes on the well-being of families and children. Then follows a section that describes the need for more substantial national debate and strategies for response. The Article also details the work of the Committee to support new priorities on behalf of children and families. It also addresses the contributions and responsibilities of others in the public and private sector to respond to children's and families' needs.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES WORSEN

Numerous recent reports affirm the findings of the Select Committee and point out that the status of young Americans remains dismal, with high rates of child poverty, violent deaths, child abuse, infant mor-

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tality and low birth-weight births. Many of these conditions should sound loud alarms. Among our youngest children, one in four is poor. More than one out of every five children lives in a single-parent family. More than nine million children have no health insurance. Nearly 40,000 babies die each year before their first birthday, millions of children are exposed to the toxic effects of lead, and more than 350,000 babies a year are born exposed to drugs. It is estimated that one in seven preschoolers is at risk of dropping out of school.¹

When young people reach their teens, the threats mount and become even more grave.² This year, one in four students will not graduate from high school with his or her peers. Another one of those four will graduate, but will be as deficient in basic skills and work habits as those who have dropped out. By 1995, some 14 million Americans will be unprepared for the jobs that are available. Last year the United States Office of Technology Assessment reported that one out of five of today's 31 million adolescents has at least one serious health problem. Teen pregnancy, HIV infection and AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), substance abuse, dropping out of school and homelessness among youth continue to rise. Approximately 1.1 million teenage girls become pregnant every year; the total number of AIDS cases reported among persons ages thirteen to twenty-four increased by seventy-five percent between 1989 and 1990; some three million teens are infected with a sexually transmitted disease annually.³

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS BUFFET FAMILIES

During the last decade, while family income increased for many families, the economic base of millions of America's families eroded.⁴ At the same time, the costs of raising a child have continued to climb. The Department of Agriculture estimates the cost of raising a child (food, housing, transportation, clothing, health care, education, child care and miscellaneous expenses) born in 1990 through age seventeen at \$151,170 for low-income families, \$210,070 for middle-income families and \$293,400 for upper-income families.⁵ Because their incomes

1. See COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, CHILDREN IN NEED: INVESTMENT STRATEGIES FOR THE EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED 3 (1987) [hereinafter COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT]; NATIONAL COMMISSION ON CHILDREN, BEYOND RHETORIC: A NEW AMERICAN AGENDA FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES 25 (1991) [hereinafter NATIONAL COMMISSION]; see generally CHAIRWOMAN OF SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES, 102D CONG., 1ST SESS., REPORT ON A PLAN OF ACTION FOR FAMILIES: RESPONSE TO A NATIONAL EMERGENCY (Comm. Print 1991) (Chairwoman Patricia Schroeder) [hereinafter CHAIRWOMAN'S REPORT]; SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES, 101ST CONG., 1ST SESS., REPORT ON U.S. CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES: CURRENT CONDITIONS AND RECENT TRENDS, 1989 (Comm. Print 1989).

2. See generally OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT, U.S. CONG., ADOLESCENT HEALTH: SUMMARY AND POLICY OPTIONS (1991).

3. *Id.*

4. See generally CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, SELECTIVE PROSPERITY: INCREASING INCOME DISPARITIES SINCE 1977 (1991) [hereinafter SELECTIVE PROSPERITY]; *Reclaiming the Tax Code for American Families: Hearing Before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families*, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. (1991) [hereinafter *Reclaiming the Tax Code*].

5. FAMILY ECONOMICS RESEARCH GROUP, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, EX-

have not kept pace with these costs, families are having much more difficulty ensuring their children's healthy development, economic security and preparation for productive participation in society.

Few families have gone untouched by these changes. The ranks of the middle class have shrunk⁶ as the ranks of those living in poverty or living on the edge and fearing poverty have swelled.⁷ In recent months, budget shortfalls, plant closings, other employment downturns and a burgeoning health care crisis have increased the challenges confronting families and children across the nation. The recession that officially began in August 1990, but which was being felt in regions of the country long before then, has compounded the economic insecurity that American families live with on a daily basis.⁸

America's families have been hit with a double economic whammy over the past ten years. A combination of federal, state, and local taxes, along with social security taxes, is taking an even bigger bite out of family income.⁹ At the same time, net incomes have stagnated or declined, despite families' efforts to keep up by sending a second wage-earner into the labor force.¹⁰ The economic entrapment of American families is in part due to changes in the national economy. These changes have created millions of new jobs in the service sector, but these jobs pay less than the jobs they replaced in the manufacturing sector of the economy and lack the long-term security and benefits, such as health insurance and pensions, that in the past have been considered standard.¹¹

The impact of this economic squeeze is far reaching. Real wages have not grown since 1973. As a result, between 1977 and 1990, middle-income families saw their real income decline by six percent. For moderate-income families, the drop was nine percent. After-tax declines were even steeper, averaging an additional percentage point for each income group.¹²

Changes in federal tax policy added to the growing income disparity between the very rich and the rest of Americans. According to a recent study, the percentage of income paid in federal taxes by the richest one percent of Americans will decline eighteen percent between 1977 and 1992, while the percentage of income that middle-income households will pay will remain unchanged.¹³ In 1988, the level of household debt

PENDITURES ON A CHILD BY HUSBAND-WIFE FAMILIES: 1990 8 (1991). The estimate includes the costs of food, housing, transportation, clothing, health care, education, child care and miscellaneous expenses. *Id.*

6. *America's Families: Conditions, Trends, Hopes and Fears: Hearing Before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families*, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. (1991) (testimony of Greg J. Duncan, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan).

7. See, e.g., William E. Schmidt, *Hard Work Can't Stop Hard Times*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 25, 1990, at 1; Leonard Silk, *Bleak Job Picture Darkens the Mood*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 1, 1991, at 2.

8. See generally CHAIRWOMAN'S REPORT, *supra* note 1.

9. See generally *Reclaiming the Tax Code*, *supra* note 4.

10. See generally LAWRENCE MISHEL & DAVID M. FRANKEL, ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE, *THE STATE OF WORKING AMERICA* (1991).

11. *Id.*; see also BENNETT HARRISON & BARRY BLUESTONE, *THE GREAT U-TURN* (1988).

12. *Reclaiming the Tax Code*, *supra* note 4.

13. See generally SELECTIVE PROSPERITY, *supra* note 4.

relative to disposable income reached a post-World War II high of ninety-four percent.¹⁴ Skyrocketing prices for child care, housing, medical care and college education also have contributed to the economic squeeze on families. For example:

- Families spend more than \$15 billion a year for child care, not counting any subsidies that they might be receiving;¹⁵
- The median sales price for existing single-family homes nationwide rose from \$23,000 in 1970 to \$100,000 in December, 1991;¹⁶
- Absent a major overhaul of the health care system, out-of-pocket health care expenses for families are expected to increase by 512% between 1980 and 2000, from \$63 billion to \$386 billion, excluding the cost of health insurance premiums;¹⁷ and
- The cost of a college education is rapidly becoming so expensive that families are having to go even deeper in debt to pay for it. In 1976/77, the average annual cost of post-secondary education ranged from \$1,935 at a public institution to \$3,977 at a private one. The comparable costs in 1989/90 were \$4,979 and \$12,348.¹⁸

The increasing tax burden carried by American families has further tightened the squeeze. Rising prices for necessities and stagnating income levels triggered an economic crisis for many families, and the increasing tax burden on families exacerbated the problem. For too long, America's families—especially middle-income families—have been footing more than their fair share of the nation's tax bill.

The shift in the tax burden away from corporations and the wealthiest of Americans to middle America, and particularly to families, is clear. In 1967, federal revenues raised from corporate taxes were four percent of the Gross National Product (GNP). About twenty years later, they were half of that. During that same time period, social security payroll taxes went up and personal income taxes took a bigger bite out of families' take-home pay. As a result, even though the 1986 tax reform law was supposed to lower taxes for all families, the effective tax rate for low and middle-income families was higher in 1990 than it was in 1980.¹⁹

The current tax burden on families goes far beyond the original federal income tax structure. In 1913, when the first federal income tax act was passed, there was a \$3,000 personal exemption for each taxpayer

14. See generally ROBERT POLLIN, ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE, *DEEPER IN DEBT: THE CHANGING FINANCIAL CONDITIONS OF U.S. HOUSEHOLDS* (1990).

15. MARTIN O'CONNELL & AMARA BACHU, U.S. DEP'T OF COMMERCE, *WHO'S MINDING THE KIDS?* (1990).

16. GLENN E. CRELLIN, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS, *HOME SALES YEARBOOK* (1992).

17. See generally FAMILIES USA FOUNDATION, *EMERGENCY!: RISING HEALTH COSTS IN AMERICA 1980-1990-2000* (1990).

18. NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUCATION, *DIGEST OF EDUCATION STATISTICS 1991* (1992).

19. See *Reclaiming the Tax Code*, *supra* note 4.

and a \$1,000 exemption for his or her spouse. There was no dependent exemption, but the standard tax rate was just one percent and accompanied by a surtax of one to five percent. The high personal exemption played the role of today's personal exemption and standard deduction and it was large enough that only a small portion of citizens owed any tax at all.²⁰

By 1948, the personal exemption was \$600 for single taxpayers and dependents and \$1,200 for couples and heads-of-households. More importantly, this per person \$600 exemption equalled forty percent of per capita personal income, resulting in a significant reduction in taxes for families with dependent children.²¹

Since that time, the value of these exemptions has eroded due to inflation. Although the 1986 tax reform law doubled the personal and dependent exemptions to \$2,000 and indexed them for inflation (they were \$2,150 in 1991),²² they represent only eleven percent of per capita personal income. Clearly, this modest increment was not enough to make up for nearly forty years of erosion in the value of these exemptions to families. In fact, the current equivalent of the 1948 \$600 personal exemption would be nearly \$7,800.²³

Tax rates have also increased significantly. In 1948, median family income for a family of four was \$3,187, and families paid just three-tenths of one percent of their income in federal income taxes. Social security taxes were two percent of wages. By 1989, the median income for a family of four had risen to \$40,763, but families were paying more than seven percent of their wages in social security taxes alone. All in all, families were paying twenty-five percent of their incomes for federal, state, local and social security taxes. This is nearly double the fourteen percent tax burden of thirty years ago.²⁴

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS FURTHER COMPROMISE FAMILIES' CAPACITY TO RESPOND

In 1990, there were 65 million children under age eighteen and 66.3 million families living in the United States.²⁵ Today, families with children comprise only thirty-five percent of all American households, compared with forty-five percent in 1970 and thirty-eight percent in 1980.²⁶ Children continue to decrease as a share of the entire population, and that proportion is expected to continue to decline. However,

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *See id.* at 23 (statement of C. Eugene Steuerle, Senior Fellow, The Urban Institute).

24. *See generally* HOUSE COMM. ON WAYS AND MEANS, OVERVIEW OF ENTITLEMENT PROGRAMS, H.R. DOC. 29, 101st Cong., 2d Sess. (1990); ELAINE C. KAMARCK & WILLIAM A. GALSTON, PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE, PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST: A PROGRESSIVE FAMILY POLICY FOR THE 1990s (1990).

25. *See generally* O'CONNELL & BACHU, *supra* note 15.

26. *Id.*

between 1980 and 1986, the number of preschool children increased by nearly eleven percent and will continue to grow.²⁷ Minorities will constitute an increasing proportion of all children, comprising nearly one in four by the year 2010.²⁸

Further, during the last decade, the proportion of children under age eighteen whose mothers work outside the home increased from fifty-three percent in 1980 to sixty-one percent in 1991. Fifty-four percent of children under six have mothers in the labor force, and women with infants make up the fastest growing group in the labor force. Two-thirds of working fathers with children under the age of eighteen have wives in the labor force. While the vast majority of single-parent families are maintained by mothers only, just over one million families were maintained by single fathers.²⁹

NATIONAL RESPONSE IS LONG OVERDUE

While national debate about issues affecting children and families is decades old, it has rightfully assumed a new urgency. The conditions of America's children and their families have serious implications for the health and well-being of the nation and its work force in the twenty-first century.

The United States still has a higher percentage of children living in poverty than either Western Europe or Canada.³⁰ Unlike most other developed nations, the United States does not have a national health program that provides medical care to virtually all of its population, yet it spends a greater proportion of its wealth on health care than any other country.³¹

In comparison with our Western industrial neighbors and competitors, the United States has fallen short time and again by failing to enact a floor of support for families and children. A prime example of this inaction is the Family and Medical Leave Act. It passed the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1990, only to be vetoed by President Bush. Both Houses have once again passed family leave legislation, and now it awaits conference committee action to iron out differences. It faces, however, the threat of another presidential veto.

Our nation's leadership and ability to compete in an increasingly global economic system and the very survival of our democratic institutions demand a thriving, healthy, educated and trained population. This population must be ready and able to enter the labor market, remain

27. See *Reclaiming the Tax Code*, *supra* note 4.

28. *Id.*

29. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (unpublished personal communication) (Mar., 1992).

30. HOUSE SELECT COMM. ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES, CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING: AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON, H.R. REP. NO. 628, 101st Cong., 2d Sess. 37 (1990).

31. See Sheila B. Kamerman & Alfred J. Kahn, *Government Expenditures for Children and Their Families in Advanced Industrialized Countries, 1960-85*, Innocenti Occasional Papers, Economic Policy Series, No. 20 (Florence, Italy) (Sept., 1991); CHAIRWOMAN'S REPORT, *supra* note 1.

there productively, participate in community life and function responsibly. Leaders in all sectors of society—from the classrooms to the boardrooms to the halls of national and state governments around the country—are calling attention to the critical conditions discussed above, their costs and their serious implications for the future.

In 1991, the bipartisan National Commission on Children underscored its findings and recommendations saying that “at every age, among all races and income groups and in communities nationwide, many children are in jeopardy.”³² Several other eminent national commissions, including one headed by former Presidents Carter and Ford, have echoed this alarm and called for placing children as high on the list of national priorities as our national defense.³³

REALIGNMENT OF NATIONAL PRIORITIES REQUIRED

Notwithstanding the increased attention to children and families, the nation's priorities for resources and development have far to go to become aligned with the needs of the nation's families. Over the last decade, the nation's priorities have fallen more out of sync with families. Not only has the federal government failed to make needed investments in successful and cost-saving interventions, but the implementation of many policies and programs has proven distinctly unfriendly to families. For example, the Select Committee has documented, in scores of hearings and special reports, that families must often fill out numerous forms and otherwise battle bureaucracies to obtain services or benefits to which they are entitled.³⁴ Service agencies are likewise besieged due to overwhelming caseloads, lack of clear and family friendly policies, uncoordinated efforts and inadequate resources. In the face of a changed world order, we have opportunities to reshape our nation's agenda and redirect its resources.

SUCCESSFUL AND COST-EFFECTIVE PREVENTION PROGRAMS MAKE SOUND INVESTMENTS

In recent years, researchers have turned more attention to the problems facing America's children and families, and to possible solutions. Research findings provide increasing evidence of effective prevention and intervention strategies. Three federally supported efforts—childhood immunization, Head Start and the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC program)³⁵—have shown marked success and cost-savings and have garnered wide bipartisan support in Congress and executive agencies, yet still cannot

32. See NATIONAL COMMISSION, *supra* note 1.

33. See FORD FOUNDATION, *THE COMMON GOOD: SOCIAL WELFARE AND THE AMERICAN FUTURE* (1989); COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, *supra* note 1.

34. See generally *The Risky Business of Adolescence: How to Help Teens Stay Safe*, Hearing Before the House Select Comm. on Children, Youth, and Families, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. (1992).

35. Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 9831-9852 (1988); see also 42 U.S.C. §§ 247b, 1786 (1988).

serve many who are eligible.³⁶

Childhood Immunization

Eradication of the major childhood illnesses is among the most significant medical breakthroughs of this century. Yet, large numbers of non-immunized preschoolers threaten a return of communicable disease outbreaks, which may seriously affect children's health as well as the health of the general public. In 1985 (the latest year for which data are available), at least twenty-five percent of children ages one to four were not immunized against most childhood diseases. From a 1990 Centers for Disease Control survey of first and fifth grade students in selected cities, the percentage of children vaccinated by age two against measles ranged from only fifty-one percent in Jersey City to seventy-nine percent in Pittsburgh. As a result, the incidence of purely preventable childhood diseases, such as measles, is on the rise—some 30,000 children fell victim to measles in 1990, with the highest incidence in the unvaccinated preschool population. More children died of measles last year than in any other year since 1971.³⁷

Other countries manage to do much better. Immunization rates for preschool children against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis average forty-one percent higher in many Western European nations than in the United States, and mean polio immunization rates are sixty-seven percent above those in the United States.³⁸

From the 1960s through the 1980s, assessments of the immunization program for children against the major diseases of rubella, mumps, measles, polio, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis and meningitis showed dramatic declines in the incidence of most of these childhood illnesses because of widespread immunization. More than 23,000 cases of mental retardation were prevented and 7,100 children's lives saved from 1963 to 1989 because of measles immunizations alone.³⁹ More than fourteen dollars is saved for every one dollar invested in the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine. The cost-benefit ratio for polio immunization is more than ten to one. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that savings are approximately \$1 billion per year for polio and \$500 million per year for measles.⁴⁰

Head Start

Experts agree that investing in early intervention and prevention programs improves academic and social achievement and is cost effec-

36. HOUSE SELECT COMM. ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES, OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS: COST-EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN, UPDATE 1990, 101st Cong., 2d Sess. (1990) [hereinafter OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS].

37. See NATIONAL VACCINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE, THE MEASLES EPIDEMIC: THE PROBLEMS, BARRIERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS I (1991).

38. HOUSE SELECT COMM. ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES, CHILD HEALTH: LESSONS FROM DEVELOPED NATIONS, 101st Cong., 2d Sess. (1990).

39. OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS, *supra* note 36, at 47-59.

40. *Id.*

tive.⁴¹ For the past twenty-five years, Head Start has topped the list of successful federal programs and has provided an invaluable service to millions of low-income children and their families. Head Start, established in 1965 as a nationwide program, provides enriched early childhood education as well as a range of other health, nutrition and social services to primarily low-income children before they enter school. Head Start aims to reduce the differences in preparedness for formal education between economically disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.⁴² Today, 596,000 low-income children are served by more than 1,300 schools and other designated community organizations.⁴³

The benefits of Head Start are well documented.⁴⁴ Studies are virtually unanimous that children show significant immediate gains in cognitive ability, self-esteem, achievement motivation and social behavior as a result of Head Start participation. Children who attended Head Start are less likely to fail a grade in school or to be assigned to special education than children never enrolled in Head Start. In addition, because Head Start provides not only early childhood education, but comprehensive and intensive health and social support as well, children's health and motor development are also improved. Head Start parents are also engaged in their children's preschool education in a unique way through the establishment of parent advisory councils and employment training and job opportunities.

Given that only the most severely disadvantaged children can be served by the program currently (in 1988, seventy-five percent of all Head Start families had incomes below \$9,000), the gains Head Start children receive are even more impressive. Report after report from government, universities, medical schools, business groups and think tanks demonstrate that investments in prevention for our youngest, most vulnerable children can save both lives and billions of dollars. The Select Committee highlighted that every dollar invested in quality preschool education can return six dollars in savings because of lower costs of special education, public assistance and crime.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, millions of children who could benefit most still fail to receive these services. Recent expansions in Head Start authorize full funding to ensure that all eligible preschoolers are served by fiscal year 1994, but such assurances are dependent on continued federal appropriations. Despite the \$250 million increase Congress voted for Head Start last year, at least seventy-five percent of eligible, low-income children ages three to five are still excluded from the program. President

41. *Id.* at 61-72.

42. See HOUSE SELECT COMM. ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES, FEDERAL PROGRAMS AFFECTING CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES, 101st Cong., 2d Sess. 86 (1990) [hereinafter FEDERAL PROGRAMS].

43. ANNE STEWART, U.S. CONG. RESEARCH SERVICE, HEAD START: PERCENTAGE OF ELIGIBLE CHILDREN SERVED AND RECENT EXPANSIONS 2 (1991).

44. OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS, *supra* note 36, at 61-72.

45. *Id.*

Bush's fiscal year 1993 budget proposal to increase Head Start by \$600 million will not allow all eligible four-year-olds to be served. Other proposals currently under consideration, although more generous, also fall far short of keeping on track for full support by 1994, much less 1996.⁴⁶

Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

WIC, first authorized in 1972 by amendment to the Child Nutrition Act of 1966,⁴⁷ provides nutritious supplemental foods to low-income pregnant and postpartum women, infants and children up to age five, who are determined to be at nutritional risk.⁴⁸ In 1986, after much delay, the Department of Agriculture released a five-year, \$5 million, five-volume study—the most comprehensive review ever undertaken of WIC—that unmistakably documented significant effects of participation in WIC.⁴⁹ The study reported that WIC participation reduces fetal deaths by one-third; reduces by up to twenty-five percent the number of premature births among high risk and minority mothers; improves the diets of pregnant women and children; brings more women into prenatal care earlier and improves the likelihood that children will have a regular source of medical care and be better immunized. The study also showed evidence of improved cognitive development among infants of participating WIC mothers and among preschoolers who became WIC participants as infants. In addition, one of the four studies in the evaluation, a historical study, found an increase in birth-weight of twenty-three to forty-seven grams.⁵⁰

A five-state study based on 105,000 Medicaid births conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture found that for every dollar spent on the prenatal component of WIC, the associated savings in Medicaid costs during the first sixty days after birth ranged from \$1.77 to \$3.13 for newborns and mothers, and from \$2.84 to \$3.90 for newborns alone.⁵¹ In April 1992, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) reported additional evidence of WIC benefits. The GAO study concluded that "prenatal WIC services reduced the rate of low birthweight births by twenty-five percent," and further found that the cost of the prenatal component is more than offset within the year following the appropriations of funds. Underscoring earlier findings, the GAO estimated that the \$296 million spent on prenatal WIC benefits in 1990 averted \$853 million in health-related expenditures during the first year of life and will avert \$1.0 billion in these costs over an eight-

46. Unpublished Memorandum, Children's Defense Fund (1992) (on file with author).

47. 42 U.S.C. §§ 1771-1788 (1988).

48. See FEDERAL PROGRAMS, *supra* note 42, at 77.

49. See generally FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRICULTURE, THE NATIONAL WIC EVALUATION: AN EVALUATION OF THE SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL FOOD PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (1986).

50. *Id.*

51. See generally FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRICULTURE, THE SAVINGS IN MEDICAID COSTS FOR NEWBORNS AND THEIR MOTHERS FROM PRENATAL PARTICIPATION IN THE WIC PROGRAM, VOL. 1 (1990).

een-year period.⁵²

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that in fiscal year 1991, 4.7 million pregnant and postpartum women, infants and children up to age five would receive WIC benefits.⁵³ Despite the demonstrated success of the WIC program, forty-five percent of all low-income, nutritionally at-risk women, infants and children cannot receive benefits because the program is not fully funded.

COST OF INACTION DWARFS COST OF EARLY INVESTMENT

Keeping the commitment to fund these core interventions fully by fiscal year 1996 would cost far less than the estimated fiscal costs of neglect. Those costs are estimated at:

- In one year, functionally illiterate adults cost \$224 billion in welfare payments, crime, poor job performance and remedial education;⁵⁴
- Each year's class of high school dropouts will cost the nation \$240 billion in lost earnings and foregone taxes over their lifetimes;⁵⁵
- Lost economic productivity attendant to illness and early death compounds the impact of rising health care expenditures. In 1980, the total costs of illness equalled nearly eighteen percent of GNP;⁵⁶
- According to an unpublished report of the White House Task Force on Infant Mortality, each of the nearly 40,000 infant deaths each year represents an estimated \$380,000 in lost productivity;⁵⁷
- Low birth-weight in newborns costs federal, state and local governments at least \$370 million a year for special education;⁵⁸
- As childhood communicable diseases escalate among preschoolers who are not immunized, so do the costs. The cost of treating congenital rubella syndrome alone is \$354,000 over a lifetime.⁵⁹

52. See generally U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE, *EARLY INTERVENTION: FEDERAL INVESTMENTS LIKE WIC CAN PRODUCE SAVINGS* (Apr., 1992).

53. Letters from Congressional Budget Office to Representative Patricia Schroeder, Chairwoman, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (July 26, 1991 and July 30, 1991) (on file with author).

54. See *Literacy in the United States: The Overview*, YOUTH POLICY INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER 33 (Nov./Dec. 1990) (Youth Policy Institute, Washington, D.C.).

55. OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESS, *supra* note 36, at 80; COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, *supra* note 1, at 3.

56. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE, U.S. DEP'T OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, *HEALTHY PEOPLE 2000 5* (1990) [hereinafter *HEALTHY PEOPLE 2000*].

57. WHITE HOUSE TASK FORCE ON INFANT MORTALITY IN THE UNITED STATES 21 (Nov. 30, 1989).

58. See STEPHEN CHAIKIND & HOPE CORMAN, *THE SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS OF LOW BIRTHWEIGHT* (National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc., Working Paper No. 3461, 1990).

59. *HEALTHY PEOPLE 2000*, *supra* note 56, at 5.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS AND POLICIES REQUIRE BETTER ENFORCEMENT AND
RESPONSIVENESS TO FAMILIES

Resetting priorities and investing in young children and families are needed strategies to improve the circumstances of the nation's children and their families. However, further action is needed to make sure that commitments are kept. The Select Committee has increased its efforts to ensure that government and other consumer services fulfill their promises and responsibilities to America's children, youth and families and that they are safe and friendly to the families who depend on them. We want to know whether programs designed to work for families actually work for them or work them over. If policies or programs come up short, are they really being implemented properly, or should they be redesigned or eliminated? For example, Congress enacted landmark child care legislation in 1990,⁶⁰ establishing two new child care programs that will send new federal dollars to the states to help subsidize child care for low and moderate-income families, keep families who are in danger of becoming welfare-dependent employed and improve the quality of child care. However, implementing regulations proposed by the Administration severely limit the ability of the states to ensure that families who receive child care subsidies under the programs will have access to safe child care.⁶¹

For example, the legislation for the At-Risk Child Care Program expressly prohibits states from imposing health and safety protections for child care funded under this program that do not apply to similar, unsubsidized care.⁶² Since all states allow some unregulated care (e.g., a provider who cares for a small number of children is not required to be licensed), states will not be able to ensure that children in subsidized care are in safe environments. In another recent effort, the Select Committee propelled the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to act on a truck underride safety regulation to provide greater safety to children and families on the road. The NHTSA had let the regulation languish for nearly two dozen years.⁶³

There is no question that much remains to be done. The Select Committee pursues this agenda of reshaping national priorities, investing in proven programs and making public policies and programs really work for children and families by engaging all sectors of society. Families, their government, employers and the independent sector all must contribute to and, ultimately, be held accountable for solutions.

60. 42 U.S.C. §§ 602-603, 9801, 9858 (1988).

61. U.S. CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, CHILD CARE: IMPLEMENTING REGULATIONS FOR NEW FEDERAL PROGRAMS (1991).

62. 56 Fed. Reg. 29,054 (1991) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pts. 255 and 257) (proposed June 25, 1991).

63. *Automotive Safety: Are We Doing Enough to Protect America's Families?: Hearing before the House Select Comm. on Children, Youth, and Families*, 102d Cong., 1st Sess. (1991).