Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of The Future of Children is to disseminate timely information on major issues related to children’s well-being, with special emphasis on providing objective analysis and evaluation, translating existing knowledge into effective programs and policies, and promoting constructive institutional change. In attempting to achieve these objectives, we are targeting a multidisciplinary audience of national leaders, including policymakers, practitioners, legislators, executives, and professionals in the public and private sectors. This publication is intended to complement, not duplicate, the kind of technical analysis found in academic journals and in the general coverage of children’s issues by the popular press and special interest groups.

This issue of the journal focuses on the juvenile court because it is an institution that plays a vital direct and indirect role in the lives of many children and youths and their families. Violence, homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, mental and physical illness, and changes in the structure and stability of families are manifest before the court as discrete instances of child abuse or neglect, delinquency, and status offenses such as truancy, running away, and ungovernable behavior. The court’s legal decisions about children’s lives are extremely important because of their profound lifelong consequences for the individual child or youth and because of the reverberating impact for social good or evil these still-maturing individuals will have on our communities as they become adults.

A number of problems in the policies and practices of the court have become apparent as this institution has struggled to address the significant social changes occurring in our nation in a way that will benefit the children and youths who come before it and fulfill its other responsibilities to parents and the community. Every one of these problems is solvable if we have the political will to make the changes that experience and understanding suggest are most reasonable and if we provide a sensible level of resources. A number of important recommendations about the court are outlined in this journal. Three issues that relate to these recommendations deserve emphasis. First, sustained community leadership from judges with knowledge and understanding of child development as well as the appropriate law is needed. Second, more adequate and coordinated data about these children and youths and their families should be available to the court from social service agencies, law enforcement, and penal and judicial systems to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Third, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and the legal profession, in general, need more education about the intertwined legal and social services that are necessary for the courts to address the problems of children and youths appropriately.

The articles presented here summarize knowledge and experience in selected areas that we believe are relevant to improving public policies in the United States that have an impact on the juvenile court system. We hope the information and analyses these articles contain will further understanding of the important issues and thus contribute to reasonable changes in policies which will benefit children.

We invite your comments and suggestions regarding this issue of The Future of Children. Our intention is to encourage informed debate about the juvenile court. To this end we invite correspondence to the Editor. We would also appreciate your comments about the approach we have taken in presenting the focus topic and welcome your suggestions for future topics.

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Editor