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 children and poverty. Child poverty is common in the United States—21% of all children were classified as poor in 1995. One child in three spends at least one year in poverty over his or her lifetime, and for more than 5% of children, poverty lasts 10 years or more. Most poor children are subject to a number of risk factors in addition to low family income; nonetheless, research shows that poverty has selective, but in some cases quite substantial, effects on child and adolescent well-being. Poor children not only experience material deprivation but also are more likely than nonpoor children to experience a number of undesirable outcomes including poor health and death, failure in school, out-of-wedlock births, and violent crime.

Child poverty can be reduced by a combination of policies, versions of which are currently in place in the United States, to help families earn more and supplement earned income with other sources of cash. In addition, the effects of poverty can be reduced by programs that provide benefits in the form of goods and services (such as food, housing, and health care) which are vital to children’s well-being.

The evidence suggests that, despite the frequently voiced sentiment that few programs work, the United States has a number of effective programs in place that address the needs of poor children and reduce their numbers, although more can be done. To garner public support, however, interventions to improve conditions for poor children should be consistent with public values that hold society responsible for (1) meeting basic human needs for those unable to help themselves and (2) assuring equal opportunity for all, while also expecting adults to take personal responsibility for the well-being of their children.

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 children and poverty. We hope the information and analyses these articles contain will further understanding of the important issues and thus contribute to reasonable changes in policies that will benefit children.

We welcome your comments and suggestions regarding this issue of The Future of Children. Our intention is to encourage informed debate about children and poverty. 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.

Richard E. Behrman, M.D.
Editor