

BIG

GAME-CHANGERS FOR CHILDREN

IDEAS



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

# A National Council on Children: Renewing Our Vision for America's Future

By Bruce Lesley and Shadi Houshyar

Children are born into varying circumstances, yet it is the promise of this nation that all our young people will be provided equal access to opportunities for prosperity. However, statistics indicate that as a nation we are failing our children and that more needs to be done to ensure a brighter future for our youth.

On June 8, 2010, at the first of a series of hearings on the challenges facing our children and families, held by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families, Chairman Chris Dodd announced that he plans “to introduce legislation to create a national commission on children, in order to regularly and closely examine the needs of American families and identify solutions.” As he explained, “there’s a reason our kids get report cards in school; they help us clearly identify how we’re doing. Only by assessing honestly our progress – celebrating our successes and acknowledging our failures – can we improve it.”<sup>1</sup>

Many child advocates agree that now is the time for action. Whether we call it a national commission on children or a national council on children – the best way to address these problems is to create a permanent entity that would catalyze the next generation of groundbreaking policies to improve child well-being in America. Such an entity would have the authority to gather data, analyze trends, issue an annual report card on the state of American children and make policy recommendations for improving child well-being.

The need is clear. Today, almost 13 million children live in poverty,<sup>2</sup> while nearly one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate on time, including nearly one-half of all African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.<sup>3</sup>

---

*Bruce Lesley, President of First Focus, has more than 20 years of public policy experience at all levels of government and a demonstrated commitment to making children's lives better.*

*Shadi Houshyar, Vice President for Child Welfare Policy at First Focus, has extensive experience working with families involved in the child welfare system and is particularly interested in the translation of research into effective child welfare and family policy and government programs targeting high-risk families.*

Overall, the United States ranks 20th out of 21 industrialized nations in measures of child well-being and poverty,<sup>4</sup> and maintains the second-worst infant mortality rate.<sup>5</sup>

As these data suggest, our nation is struggling to meet the needs of children and families. Now is the time for action. A national council on children would focus the attention of federal policymakers and national news media on children's issues, generate new ideas for policy reforms that meet the challenges children face today, and create momentum for once-in-a-generation change.

The primary goal of a national council would be to identify and consistently measure indicators of child well-being, to help maintain support for long-term investments in our children, and to set forth new public policy ideas aimed at improving our performance and making America first among nations on child well-being over the next decade. The council would assess the performance of the United States in ensuring the well-being of children and make recommendations to improve the lives of all young people.

Such a council should conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children; annually issue a "State of Our Children" report card on the status of America's children; and provide a yearly report to the president and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children and families in America.

A closer look at a former national commission on children and critical policies that followed will help inform efforts to create a council charged with developing a national action plan and improving child well-being in this country.

### **The National Commission on Children: A Brief History**

On December 22, 1987, a National Commission on Children was formed at the direction of Congress and the president to "serve as a forum on behalf of the children of the nation." When it set to work in 1989, the commission was charged with the task of assessing the status of children and families in the United States and outlining promising new directions for policy and programs. Members set an action agenda for critical issue areas, including child health, education, social supports, income security, and tax policy.

The commission conducted extensive reviews of existing literature and research, sponsored a national opinion research project to survey parents and children on perceptions and attitudes, and held meetings with parents, children, community leaders, and professionals. The commission also conducted hearings, town hall meetings, site visits, focus groups, and a number of forums. Two years later, in 1991, the commission approved a blueprint for national policy to benefit America's children and families. The final report generated momentum for a number of critical policies and was used by President Clinton as a catalyst for his domestic agenda, which included enacting the Earned Income Tax Credit, the

Child Tax Credit, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program, among other initiatives.

Based on the fundamental principle that every child should have the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential, the commission sought to identify ways to ensure that parents have the necessary means and supports to raise healthy children. Twenty years later, a closer look at how our children are faring makes a compelling case for creating a national council that would assess the status of our nation's children and set forth a national action plan to improve the well-being of America's youth.

### **Child Well-Being in the United States: The Need for a National Council**

America has always risen to the challenge of ensuring a brighter future for our children and grandchildren. Yet, almost 13 million children – 17.4 percent of the child population – were considered low-income in 2006.<sup>7</sup> Today, maternal substance use remains a leading preventable cause of mental, physical, and psychological problems in infants and children. In addition, the infant mortality rate increased in 2002 for the first time since 1958.<sup>8</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the relative position of the United States in comparison to countries with the lowest infant mortality rates appears to be worsening.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, the U.S. international ranking on this measure fell from 12th in 1960 to 23rd in 1990 and further declined to 29th in 2004.<sup>10</sup>

The United States also falls far behind other industrialized nations on multiple indicators of child well-being. A 2005 National Academy of Sciences report concluded that our students are lagging behind their peers in other developed and developing nations, noting that “for the first time in generations, the nation's children could face poorer prospects than their parents and grandparents did.”<sup>11</sup>

In 2007, a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study on child poverty found that the United States placed in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions of well-being reviewed.<sup>12</sup> A 2008 UNICEF report on child care revealed that all but two of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries – the United States and Australia – currently mandate some form of paid leave to employed parents following the birth of a child.<sup>13</sup> The United States is also singled out for providing low pay and maintaining high staff turnover among child-care professionals.

Other recent reports tell a similar story. In an international test of mathematical understanding, U.S. students finished 27th among participating countries.<sup>14</sup> In addition, a 2007 Child Well-Being Index (CWI) report determined that Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have better health outcomes than the United States.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, teen birth rates in all four countries are lower than in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The proportion of children who attend preschool is

lower in the United States than in all countries except the United Kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, 15-year-old American students scored lower in mathematics and reading than did their counterparts in all comparison countries on internationally administered standardized tests, leading to a last-place finish on a measure of educational attainment.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, a 2008 CWI report indicated that, after an upward trend for eight years (1994 through 2002), progress in quality of life for America's children "has now moved into a stall / slow growth period."<sup>19</sup> The report went on to conclude that the economic recession and slow growth of 2001–2002 negatively impacted several family well-being indicators, including the poverty rate. As the authors note, we can expect that the macroeconomic problems of 2007, 2008, and 2009 (e.g., housing finance crisis and rising inflation affecting gasoline, energy costs, and food) are likely to have similar if not far greater negative impacts on multiple indicators and domains of well-being. More recently, a 2010 CWI report found that "progress in American children's quality of life has fluctuated since 2002, and began a decline in 2009," reflecting "the effects of the Great Recession."<sup>20</sup>

These data suggest that as a nation we are struggling with the very same policy questions and challenges we faced nearly 20 years ago. It is essential for our leaders to set forth a strategic vision – an action plan – for our national policy on children. Indeed, this is our opportunity to reestablish ourselves as the global leader on the primary measure of a nation's prosperity: the manner in which its children are treated.

## A Call to Action

In its final report, the 1987 National Commission on Children cautioned that "investing in children is no longer a luxury, but a national imperative."<sup>21</sup> Investing in children remains a national imperative today. The United States ranks at or near the bottom among industrialized nations on most global measures of the status of children. The present is an opportune time to raise the visibility of children and youth on the national policy front, address challenges, generate solutions, and formulate recommendations to respond to the needs of our children.

## National Council on Children

A national council on children would conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children; annually issue a "State of Our Children" report card on the status of America's children; and provide a yearly report to the president and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children and families in America. It would also identify and select national indicators of child well-being to measure children's positive and negative development, and establish national goals for improvement. The council would develop year-to-year targets for improvement and assess how the United States fares with respect to achieving its national goals. Finally, it would make

legislative and budgetary recommendations to Congress and to the president to improve child well-being.

**Specifically, the purposes of the council would be to:**

- (a) Conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children;
- (b) Submit a report to the President and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children; and
- (c) Upon completion of the study and issuance of recommendations, transition to an annual assessment of the performance of the United States in ensuring the well-being of children, and make recommendations to improve children's well-being by carrying out the following:
  - Establishing national goals for improving children's well-being and developing year-by-year targets for improvement to determine how the United States fares with respect to achieving the national goals
  - Identifying and selecting the national indicators of child well-being to measure children's development, and assessing how the United States fares with respect to achieving the national goals
  - Making legislative and budgetary recommendations to Congress and the president to achieve the national goals for improving children's well-being

**Conclusion**

Children should not be an afterthought in federal budget and policy decisions. Establishing a national council on children is a critical first step to ensuring that the well-being of children in this country becomes and remains a national priority. The national council would track child well-being and make annual legislative proposals to ensure that the needs of our nation's children are met. Each year, the council would answer the question, "How are children in the United States faring?" In turn, Congress would be required to respond with comprehensive legislative proposals that address the needs of our young people. We believe now is the time to set forth and implement such a visionary proposal to better the lives of our nation's future generations.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> C. Dodd (Chair). State of the American Child: Hearing of the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, United States Senate, 111th Congress (June 2010). Opening Statement.

<sup>2</sup> S. Fass and N.K. Cauthen, “Who Are America’s Poor Children? The Official Story,” fact sheet (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Editorial Projects in Education, “Diplomas Count 2008: School to College: Can State P-16 Councils Ease the Transition?” *Education Week* 26, no. 40 (special issue, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), *Report Card 7: Child Poverty in Perspective. An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries: A Comprehensive Assessment of the Lives and Well-Being of Children and Adolescents in the Economically Advanced Nations* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, *Report Card 7*.

<sup>6</sup> *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*. Final Report of the National Commission on Children. National Commission on Children, Washington, DC. 1991.

<sup>7</sup> K. Bell, J. Bernstein, and M. Greenberg, “Lessons for the United States from Other Advanced Economies in Tackling Child Poverty,” in *Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation’s Future* (Washington, DC: First Focus, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Infant Mortality Statistics from the 2002 Period Linked Birth/Infant Death Data Set. *National Vital Statistics Reports* 53, no. 10 (PHS 2005-1120).

<sup>9</sup> M.F. MacDorman and T.J. Mathews, *Recent Trends in Infant Mortality in the United States*, NCHS Data Brief 9 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Health Statistics, *Health: United States, 2007, with Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans* (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century: An Agenda for American Science and Technology, Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, National Academy of Sciences; National Academy of Engineering; and Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF, *Report Card 7*.

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF, *Report Card 8: The Child Care Transition. A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Committee on Prospering et al., *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*.

- <sup>15</sup> K.C. Land, *2007 Special Focus Report on International Comparisons: A Composite Index of Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth* (Durham, NC: Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index Project, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> Land, *Special Focus Report*.
- <sup>17</sup> Land, *Special Focus Report*.
- <sup>18</sup> Land, *Special Focus Report*.
- <sup>19</sup> K.C. Land, *The 2008 Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI) Report* (Durham, NC: Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index Project, 2008).
- <sup>20</sup> K.C. Land. *The 2010 Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI) Report*: (Durham, NC: Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index Project, 2010).
- <sup>21</sup> *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families*. Final Report of the National Commission on Children. (National Commission on Children, Washington, DC. 1991).