Age and Dependency: Children and the Aged in American Social Policy

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THE FIRST TERM OF THE REAGAN PRESIDENCY SAW major trend reversals in most social welfare programs; legal services for the poor, housing finance, health care for the poor, school lunches, student aid, food and nutrition programs, to name a few, were particularly targeted. Notably absent from the list in the beginning were programs for the aging, especially Social Security and veterans programs. Only as the economic situation tightened this past year did the Reagan administration begin to touch the social insurance system, and even then it proceeded with much caution.

How did the special public concern for the aging come about and how pervasive has it been as a matter of public policy? The politically privileged position of the elderly is marked both by change and continuity. On the one hand, aged, native white men had secured substantial benefits from the Civil War pensions through the late nineteenth century. But the pensions did not cover most women or nonwhites. And when the Civil War veterans and their dependents died the extended coverage lapsed so that by 1920, there was virtually no coverage. By the time of the development of the Social Security insurance system in 1935, the aging were one of the poorest groups in American society. Thus, it is only in the relatively recent past that

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the aged have used their position to gain public programs that put them at a relative advantage within the social welfare system.

This article traces the history of this theme in the United States from the early nineteenth century to the present time. It examines the interplay of several factors: the demographic, the political, the cultural, and the economic. It explores the ways in which policy implications are reflected over time in income-maintenance legislation and administration for dependent children and their caretakers, and for the aging. It looks at the changes in state pensions and the shifts in titles of the Social Security Act both in the level of support and the terms of entitlement and explores evolving concepts of private and public responsibility.

Trends in Family Structure

In the past decade, our understanding of the nature of family life has improved as scholars using a variety of sources—land records, censuses, personal narratives, and folksongs—have investigated the family in past times. Whereas sociologists and historians used to believe that the family had changed simply from an extended to a nuclear form as industrialization and urbanization progressed, we now know that the family processes of the past were far more complex (Shorter 1976; Laslett 1972).

While Laslett's work has demonstrated that the extended family was not common in Britain after the sixteenth century, work on the continent indicates that in a number of regions extended households, including either three generations or a number of married siblings, were quite common through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Given the importance of inheritance rules in these cultures, the relationship between parents and their adult children was crucial.

In Austria, the family farm was passed to only one child, after elaborate negotiations between father and son. As a result, children often had to wait until middle age before they could marry. The tension this created can be judged by the commonness of this theme in the region's folksongs. (One example gives the tone of these songs: "Father, when ya gonna gimme the farm, Father, when ya gonna sign it away?/ My girl's been growin' every day/ And single no longer wants to stay" [Berkner 1972].) As late as the 1940s, Arensberg and

Kimball (1948) found the same conflict in rural Ireland. There, elderly parents would only pass their land to their son and retire to the "west room" of the family homestead when they became physically incapable of carrying on with their work. As a result, unmarried men—waiting for their parents' retirement—would continue to be called "boys" into their thirties.

In the United States, there is significant evidence of tension between adult children and their parents. In colonial Andover, Massachusetts, for example, Philip Greven found that land was the linchpin in the system of patriarchal control:

> A fundamental characteristic of most . . . families, was the prolonged exercise of paternal authority and influence over sons. Long after the ostensible achievement of maturity, indicated by marriages which often were delayed until men were in their late twenties, sons remained economically dependent upon fathers, who usually continued to own and to control the land upon which their sons had settled (Greven 1970, 98).

Unlike Europe, in the United States the availability of land weakened paternal authority and reduced the number of extended families. Still, Easterlin (1976) contends that as late as 1860, the fertility patterns of rural northern families were a response to fathers' desires to settle their sons on land near them.

These tensions had a direct impact on the social status of the aged. In colonial America the aged had high social status characterized by "veneration": a feeling of religious awe for the aged. Unlike today, when lying about one's age implies claiming to be younger than one is, there is evidence to suggest that the aged actually claimed to be older than they were (Fischer 1978).

Yet, the power of the aged did not create love. According to Fischer, the aged "received respect without affection, honor without devotion, veneration without love." Thus, he concluded that in early America, these two aspects of the social condition of the aged "were combined in a system of age relations which grew steadily stronger through time. As time passed, old age became more exalted rather than less so—more honored, and yet less loved" (Fischer 1978, 224).

As capitalism took hold in the United States, family structure and family economy slowly began to change. First among the business class and then later among workers the demands of young children for education and other resources began to shift the priorities of family life. According to demographer John Caldwell (1978), the history of the family was marked by a "great divide." Before the divide, the combination of economic, demographic, and cultural arrangements maintained the usefulness of children to their parents. As late as the mid nineteenth century, family structure and ideology maintained the dominance of the older generation within the family.

> The familial system in the West depended on sharp division of labor: the husband worked outside the home for wages or profits . . . while a wide range of activities (clothing, feeding, providing a clean and comfortable environment, child rearing) was undertaken by the wife with the help of the children. . . . In effect, then, the husband ran his own highly efficient family-based subsistence system for providing services (Caldwell 1978, 509).

Yet, the foundations of this system were being undercut by the changing opportunity structure of the industrial city. During the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the business class—particularly professionals and business employees—began to restrict their fertility and to send their children to school longer. In Buffalo, New York, for example, the rate of high school attendance of the sons of professionals and business employees rose from 27 percent in 1870 to 69 percent in 1900 (Stern 1979).

By the turn of the twentieth century, the conditions that had supported the patriarchal system among the working class, too, gave way. The rising standard of living of the average working-class family improved the current and future life chances of the family members. Paralleling these family-level changes, the expansion of clerical occupations and the increased importance of formal education altered the opportunity structure faced by working-class families.

The success of the family under these new conditions called for a new strategy, one that stressed lower fertility, greater consumption, and most important, increased attention to children. The two most obvious features of this change were the rise in working-class school attendance and the decline in fertility. For example, again in Buffalo, the school attendance of the sons of laborers doubled in the first fifteen years of the century at the same time that the fertility of the entire working class fell precipitously (Stern 1979).

Earlier in American history the focus of family life had been the well being of the parents; the flow of resources was upward—from children to parents. By the turn of the twentieth century, this had been reversed among almost all groups. The flow of resources was now downward—from parents to children. The child-centered family had arrived.

Although the origins of child-centeredness are complex, one precondition of this change was the possibility that parents could provide adequately for their children. Among nineteenth century workers, economic crisis and unemployment were expected aspects of the family life-cycle. It was only with the rise in real annual income that parents could realistically expect to support their children through adulthood (Dubnoff 1978).

The decline in cyclical unemployment changed the strategy of the extended kin network as well. When economic crisis was an expected part of the life-cycle, the logic of family life favored the maintenance of family and kin networks as a means of providing a social support system that could be called upon in hard times. However, as the threat of privation faded, an alternative logic took hold: the nuclear family should insulate itself from the demands of other kin—including elderly parents—so it could conserve its resources.

This change in the family strategy of Americans was not universal. Among the poorest social strata, a different attitude toward children was common and they remained workers who contributed to the household economy. Similarly, during the depression, Glen Elder (1974) found that among "deprived" families, parents pulled them out of school and sent them to work. Among poor black families, according to Stack (1974), the use of extended kin networks for economic and social support continued to be common during the postwar period.

These changes in American family life had a negative impact on the aged. Fischer (1978, 225) found that "expressions of hostility to old age grew steadily stronger" during the nineteenth century. "Consciously omitted from the list of (the) worthy" poor by the New York Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor (Haber 1983, 37), the aged found themselves subjected to discrimination by some charity organizations. By the turn of the century, the neglect of the aged by private charities and the increased poverty among the elderly transformed America's almshouses into virtual old age homes (Katz 1983).

The movement to the new definition of family came about in a halting manner. In their study of Muncie, Indiana during the 1920s, the Lynds noted that "old age is not generally considered a 'social problem'." However, they did find signs of social strain, in particular "the apparently diminishing tendency of married children to take elderly parents into their homes." The Lynds believed that the problem of the aging was only beginning to be understood publicly. "Provision for old age is just reaching the stage . . . of occasional questionings of the adequacy . . . in urban surroundings of the traditionally assumed benefits of the threat of old age as an incentive to saving, and also of the adequacy of the poorhouse as the wisest instrument for caring for the aged needy" (Lynd and Lynd 1929, 35–36).

Although public opinion showed little interest in the problem of the aged before the Great Depression, labor economists and social reformers behind the scenes had been advocating social insurance and public pensions since the turn of the century. Beginning in 1921, the Fraternal Order of Eagles "cranked up and set in motion" its organization for the securing of old age pensions. The stage was set for public acceptance of public responsibility for the financial support of the elderly (Fischer 1978).

By the 1930s social observers saw the situation in another light. As employment opportunities decreased for older workers, the need for pensions for the elderly seemed to grow, as Paul Douglas noted:

> The problem of old age is steadily becoming more important as the public health movement and the reduction of immigration increase the relative proportion of the total population which is formed by those past the ages of fifty and sixty-five. Not only are the relative numbers of the aged increasing, however, but they are also finding it more difficult to obtain gainful employment. This is largely due to the decline of agriculture and the rise of urban industry, since this means a transition from a society where an old man can work on his home farm to the limit of his powers to a society where men who fall below given levels of efficiency tend not to be permitted to exercise such efficiency as they possess. There is some evidence, moreover, that within the last decade, it has become more difficult for old men to find employment within the field of urban industry itself (Rubinow 1931,vii)

At the same time as the need for pensions became more urgent, kinship financial responsibility as defined by state government narrowed.

The case could hardly be more clear; supporting your children was taken to be *the* purpose of parents; children did not have the responsibility to support their parents.

The changing cultural role of children and the elderly was paralleled by shifting demographic trends. The fall in the white fertility rate began by the mid nineteenth century and continued unabated until the 1940s. This, combined with the prolongation of life, increased the elderly proportion of the population. Thus, despite the alteration in the social role of the two dependent groups, they maintained a numerical balance. As I. M. Rubinow (1934, 224–25) commented:

> This increased burden of caring for the increasing number of aged is more than compensated by the greater decline in the number of the young through the falling birth rate. The proportion of children under fifteen is falling at a very much greater rate than the proportion of old people is increasing. Thus, that part of society which must carry the economic burden of productive activity really has no right to complain. The total burden of the two extremes of the span of life—the young and the old—is not increasing. And the care of the young is a much more costly task than the modest provision for the physical needs and health and comfort of the aged. It is because this burden of caring for the young has been so rapidly declining that we are enabled to extend that care over a very much longer period. Hence, our child labor laws, almost universal high school training for the majority of the children, and the increasing thousands of youths in colleges.

As children assumed the spotlight, the aged were increasingly marginalized. In 1935 the President's Advisory Council on Economic Security, for example, noted that while children, friends, and relatives were still the major sources of support for the aging, many children could no longer support their parents. The Advisory Council's report pointed to the difficulties of both self-support for the aged via employment and of family financial assistance and recommended a major government role in contributory old age insurance and means-tested pensions. Thus, the inability of many children to support their parents, which would have been a cause for ostracism in earlier societies, gained overt social sanction. As our society embraced this position, the care and support of the dependent aging increasingly shifted to the public sector (U.S. Advisory Council on Economic Security, 1935).

The change in family ideology also had a double-edged meaning for the parent-child relationship. Although it moved to center stage in terms of cultural and social importance, it placed an extra burden on poor parents. Not only were they culpable for their own poverty, but they could not even fulfill the minimal demand of parenthood: the support of their children. Whereas at midcentury Charles Loring Brace could laud the spunk and independence of the street urchin, by the turn of the twentieth century the child was no longer a candidate for independence. As Viviana Zelizer (1985) has noted, the child had moved from "useful to useless." The stigma associated with poverty deepened as parental responsibility sharpened and public responsibility declined.

Finally, the shift in the status of the aged and children had a political dimension. During the past forty years the aged have become an increasingly effective political lobby in support of Social Security. Children do not vote, nor have their (largely women) political advocates been able to wield effective political power on their behalf. Additionally, an air of moral virtue surrounds benefits for retirees from the labor force, while the children's cause has continued to carry some stigma connected with the public's view of the behavior of the needy children's parents.

Thus, the improvement in the public condition of the elderly during the child-centered era is only an apparent paradox. The rise in public responsibility for the aged had a base in the economic and cultural forces that eased the traditional private responsibility of adult children for the support of their parents. How, we can ask, did these forces actually play themselves out in social welfare during the last century?

Public Policy before the Great Depression

The twentieth century has witnessed a growth in government responsibility for dependents at both ends of the age spectrum. The increase in governmental responsibility for children is seen most clearly in the area of education, but many areas including financial aid, traditional child welfare services, recreational programs for adolescents, and health and nutrition programs have widened in scope and extended in reach. Similarly for the aging, financial aid, social services, transportation, medical and nursing services have all expanded in this century at a rate that would have been hard to predict in the nineteenth century.

There are however some interesting differences in the nature of the changes in social welfare programs for the aging and those for children in the last 100 years. For children, these years have been marked by a shift in emphasis from mass care to individualization in services. The history of child care in the nineteenth century takes us from the general institution, the almshouse, to the specialized institution, the orphanage—which often had educational goals and particularized religious auspices. Finally, at the end of the nineteenth century we come to foster care, the individualized service. This movement, to personalize service for each child, is paralleled in the legal system by the passage of the juvenile court laws, beginning in 1899, and by the establishment of special courtrooms for children (Axinn and Levin 1973).

The movement away from large institutions and toward family care was much less true for those aged who could not manage independent living. There was certainly some development of specialized institutions for aged groups during the late nineteenth century, based on religion or past military affiliation, a movement that accelerated a bit in the twentieth century. For the most part, however, the foster care movement which places dependent children in substitute families has not evolved for dependent aging individuals. In its place are institutions, boarding homes, and nursing homes, which have remained as warehouses for the elderly. Social insurance has enabled the well elderly to live independently, but those in need of care, for the most part, receive mass care.

The impact of the interaction of changing economic needs, changing family forms, and public social policy can be seen in the evolution of financial assistance policy for the aging and for children in the United States. From its earliest period as a nation, the United States has maintained an ideology of self-sufficiency, a preference for market-oriented solutions to poverty, and, except for veterans, for public aid, when necessary, tied to the lowest possible unit of government. For both groups the United States had undergone a series of income-maintenance policies ranging from almshouse relief, to means-tested pensions, to insurance-type entitlement programs. All demonstrate the historical development of public responsibility for the ultimate welfare of dependent people in the United States. The public sector—be it county, state, or federal—has been the provider of last resort for the aged as it has for children. An examination of the details of that support, of the levels of benefits, and the details of the terms of entitlement, demonstrate, however, that it is support given on a differential basis to the two age groups (Skocpol and Ikenberry 1982; Axinn and Levin 1982).

Age-categorized pensions for nonveterans were first introduced in some states in the second decade of the twentieth century. They were years of rapid population growth as European immigration soared. Additionally, the shift that was occurring from an agricultural to a predominantly urban society was accompanied by a steady migration from the farms. The cities swelled with those in need. The movement for income assistance was one of many reform efforts of the period (Boyer 1978; Rothman 1980).

For children the reform drive had many new aspects, but a major thrust was a continuation of the efforts to maintain them in individual homes. One part of the reform effort of the era was legal protection for children. By 1914 most states had laws covering hours and conditions of child labor in factories, mills, and workshops. Coincidentally, while removing children from the labor force, most states set minimum ages for leaving school. To help support poor children in their own homes, the first mother's pension law was passed by Missouri in April 1911. The first statewide, mandatory law, the Funds to Parents Act, was passed in Illinois two months later. Within two years, 20 states had provided cash relief programs for single women with children, within ten years 40 states had done so.

The adoption of mother's pension laws was accomplished in the face of opposition from the social work agencies. The first one was passed without them; subsequent ones, despite them. The basis for their opposition was their distrust of public money which would be given without "service," their fear that help would "pauperize" the recipients. Frederic Almy (1912, 482), Secretary of the Buffalo Charity Organization Society put it clearly:

> The crux of my opposition to public pensions today is that the public does not stand for fit salaries for relief. I am an advocate of more adequate relief, but I am an advocate first of more adequate brains and work for the poor. Relief without brains is as bad as medicine without doctors. I would much rather see doctors without medicine, or salaries without relief, as is the practice of some of the best of our charity organization societies. Like undoctored drugs, untrained relief is poisonous to the poor. Good charity is expensive,

> and poor charity is worse than none, yet what city would support adequate case work for its public aid.

Eventually, in many states social workers were able to shape the legislation and its administration to permit case investigation and behavioral conditions for the receipt of the grant. Financial aid to children was to be taken out of the general almshouse assistance approach—but not all the way.

Conflicting goals for the mother's pension program appeared early in its history. The policy intent that single mothers not be expected to work if there was a young child suggests one level of support; the goal of developing a "spirit of self-confidence, initiative, and generally a desire for economic independence at as early a date as possible" (Bogue 1928, 5) is quite the opposite. The first goal calls for a mother to be at home, parenting; the role-model goal requires her to be in the market place, earning money. The result of this conflicting value base was that partly by law, partly by administrative practice, mother's grants were always too low to support a caretaker and child. Furthermore, they were subject to wide variability in rules of eligibility, and consequently suffered from inadequate coverage.

The movement to provide pensions for the aging was based on several factors. As the percentage of the aging in the population rose, the unemployment rates for men over 65 rose too. At the same time, the percentage of people covered by the Civil War pension system was declining rapidly. Furthermore, by 1913 Australia, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, New Zealand, and Sweden had all enacted old-age support systems. The National Conference of Charities and Corrections, the major social work organization of the period, endorsed the principle of social insurance, although it did not support public pensions. As they did with mother's pensions, most social workers steadfastly opposed state pensions for the elderly on the grounds that this would be a dole which would serve recipients poorly if they received it without proper attention from a social agency equipped to offer expert casework services.

It was not until the 1920s that the old-age pension movement began to gather political support. Ironically, it was not the industrial East which first moved to provide economic security for older workers, but the West, where there were large numbers of single men. These miners, cowboys, lumbermen—individualists in the public image, but individuals alone in old age—were among the neediest of the aging. The very first old-age pension laws were passed in Arizona in 1914 (declared unconstitutional in 1915) and Alaska in 1915. Three states—Montana, Nevada, and Pennsylvania—passed voluntary pension bills in 1923. Many other states followed suit in the next few years (Leiby 1978, 214).

The 1920s saw a number of things come together. Demographically, the number of aged in the country was increasing. This was dramatically true in California which was to become the center of pressure for old age pensions. Sociologically, family structures were changing, making it ever more difficult for adult children to provide support. Economically, despite the overall prosperity of the 1920s, the aged were suffering increasing rates of dependency. Politically, the stage was being set by a combination of the work of professional analysts and grass roots organizations. It was 1929, however, before a mandated and partially state-funded system was legislated in California. Still, by 1930 less than 5 percent of elderly Americans were getting pensions. By 1935 most states had means-tested pensions, but in every case the payments were too low and the coverage inadequate.

During the depression, prior to the passage of the Social Security Act, a great many popular pension schemes developed for the support of the elderly. The names themselves are suggestive of their populist character: the Old Folks Picnic Association, EPIC (End Poverty in California), Ham and Eggs Movement. The plans included a wide variety of packets: free fishing licenses, dated money, financial support of amounts ranging from $50 to $400 a month for the aged who were defined at various ages from fifty on up. Most popular of all was the Townsend pension movement which originated in California and quickly spread across the nation through the organization of Townsend Clubs. Through rallies, marches, advertising, political campaigns, the Townsend movement made its influence felt both at the national and the state level. Nationally, it is credited with influencing the speed with which the Social Security Act was shaped and passed. At a state level, particularly in California, it is credited with liberalizing pensions considerably in the period of the late 1930s, so that by 1940, California's pension was the highest in the country ($417 per month) (Fischer 1978, 182).

If we evaluate and compare the status of income transfer programs for impoverished children and the aging as it stood just prior to the

Social Security Act we see the following: For both groups, the principle of public aid had been established, but on average the aged were maintained somewhat better; the principle of pensions—entitlement programs without the stigma of public welfare—had failed to be established. What had been achieved was a compromise: a set of categorical public assistance programs which varied from state to state and indeed county to county both in funding and in eligibility. This was true for both age groups.

Public Policy since the Great Depression

In August 1935 the Social Security Act was enacted and we entered a new period of income-transfer programming in the United States. The Act established a tripartite approach to income maintenance: (1) a group of federally administered insurance programs; (2) a group of federally aided, state administered, assistance programs; and (3) a group of programs to be funded only by states and localities. The first two of these groups were relevant for children and the aged.

Initially, there was insurance coverage only for unemployment and old age. Coverage was extended to widows and children with the addition of Survivors Insurance in 1939. Social insurance benefits are based on a joint employee-employer contributory scheme assuring an income to those who have worked but cannot necessarily be expected to maintain the burden of self-support in retirement. The 1950s saw an expansion and liberalization of social insurance so that it became increasingly redistributive, evolving from a limited individual retirement program for a small part of the aging population into a major protection system for older Americans. In the 1960s and early 1970s the program lost ground to economic growth and inflation, but the increase in benefits and indexation enacted in the early 1970s made the program a major antipoverty measure for those children and aging who are covered and a cornerstone of retirement planning.

The second group of programs evolved from the categorical assistance programs—the means-tested pensions—that existed in many states. By 1935 aid to the blind was available in 24 states, aid to the aged in 34 states, and aid to mothers in all states and jurisdictions except Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. The Social Security Act added federal funds and some federal guidelines to these programs. It is at this point that we begin to see clearly the differential treatment of dependent children and dependent aged beneficiaries.

Aid for the aging had achieved wide popular support during the years immediately preceding the passage of the Social Security Act. The aged were seen as a group with urgent and worthy needs. One immediate testimony to the popularity of this group is the placing of Old Age Assistance as Title I of the Social Security Act; Old Age Insurance was Title II. Franklin D. Roosevelt talked of poverty in old age as the product of modern industrial life. He put the matter this way:

> Poverty in old age should not be regarded either as a disgrace or necessarily as a result of lack of thrift or energy. Usually it is a mere byproduct of modern industrial life. . . . No greater tragedy exists in modern civilization than the aged, worn-out worker who after a life of ceaseless effort and useful productivity must look forward for his declining years to a poorhouse (Altmeyer 1981, 263).

Very concretely, the amount of money given by the federal government for support for children was dramatically less than that for either the blind or the aged. The grant-in-aid formula limited federal payments to one-third of a total of $18 per month per family provided for one dependent and to one-third of a total of $12 per month provided for each additional dependent child, i.e., $6 for the first child, $4 for the second. In the case of the aging or the blind, the federal government offered payment monthly of one-half of $30 for each eligible person. On the other hand, states received $30 per month toward the support of an aged couple. Additionally, the federal government paid 5 percent for administration in the latter categories, but not in the Aid to Dependent Children program. Furthermore, there was no provision in the legislation until 1950 for money payments to be made to any caretaker for a dependent child. The lower rate of federal reimbursement has meant that it cost much more for a state and county to support a child at a specified level than an aged individual. And by and large the states have not made up the difference. Additionally, the states were slower at the outset to institute public assistance programs for children than they were to pick up the other programs, suggesting that they shared the federal government's preference for support for the aged.

The approach to health care also varied for the two groups. For both children and the aging, the public provision of hospital, nursing, and health care services had been related to ability to pay until the mid-1960s. The passage of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 as amendments to the Social Security Act had the effect of sharply distinguishing the distribution of health services on an age basis. Medicare (Title XVIII) provided hospital and medical insurance for the population aged 65 and over. Medicaid (Title XIX) provided hospital and medical care to the medically indigent. The aging became eligible for health and medical care on a universal basis, children on a selective basis.

The issue came to the fore again in 1972 with the failure to pass a Family Assistance Plan and the passage of Supplemental Security Income, the guaranteed income for the aging and disabled. Vincent and Vee Burke (1974, 302), writing about the issue in *Nixon's Good Deed*, put the matter this way:

> America rejected a federal income guarantee for its children on October 17, 1972, but enacted one for its aged. Better treatment of the needy aged than of needy children is customary in American welfare.

The combined effect of market factors and public income-transfer policy can be seen in data on the incidence of poverty in the United States for the two groups. Tables 1, 2, and 3 record poverty rates for the entire population, for children under 18, and for persons aged 65 years and over. On examining poverty rates from 1959 to 1983 we can see that:

1. The overall poverty rate fell from 1959 (the first year for which we have this series) to 1969, stayed fairly constant through the 1970s, and has risen throughout the first years of the 1980s.
2. The rate for children followed the same general pattern. It fell the first decade, stabilized the second, is rising in the third.
3. The rate for the aging has fallen fairly consistently.

Note that at the beginning of the data period the aging had a poverty incidence of 35.2 percent, compared to 22.4 percent on average in the United States and 26.9 percent for children. A combination of high employment and low inflation brought poverty down for all in the early 1970s. But then as inflation and unemployment grew only

TABLE 1
Number of persons in poverty, 1959–1983 (in thousands, calculated in March of the following year)

	Total		White		Black		Spanish origin	
Year	Number	Poverty rate	Number	Poverty rate	Number	Poverty rate	Number	Poverty rate
1959	39,490	22.4%	28,484	18.1%	NA	NA	NA	NA
1960	39,851	22.2	28,309	17.8	NA	NA	NA	NA
1961	39,628	21.9	27,890	17.4	NA	NA	NA	NA
1962	38,625	21.0	26,672	16.4	NA	NA	NA	NA
1963	36,436	19.5	25,328	15.3	NA	NA	NA	NA
1964	36,055	19.0	24,957	14.9	NA	NA	NA	NA
1965	33,185	17.3	22,496	13.3	NA	NA	NA	NA
1966	28,510	14.7	19,290	11.3	8,867	41.8%	NA	NA
1967	27,769	14.2	18,983	11.0	8,486	39.3	NA	NA
1968	25,389	12.8	17,395	10.0	7,616	34.7	NA	NA
1969	24,147	12.1	16,659	9.5	7,095	32.2	NA	NA
1970	25,420	12.6	17,484	9.9	7,548	33.5	NA	NA
1971	25,559	12.5	17,780	9.9	7,396	32.5	NA	NA
1972	24,460	11.9	16,203	9.0	7,710	33.3	NA	NA
1973	22,973	11.1	15,142	8.4	7,388	31.4	2,366	21.9%
1974	23,370	11.2	15,736	8.6	7,182	30.3	2,575	23.0
1975	25,877	12.3	17,770	9.7	7,545	31.3	2,991	26.9
1976	24,975	11.8	16,713	9.1	7,595	31.1	2,783	24.7
1977	24,720	11.6	16,416	8.9	7,726	31.3	2,700	22.4
1978	24,497	11.4	16,259	8.7	7,625	30.6	2,607	21.6
1979[a]	26,072	11.7	17,214	9.0	8,050	31.0	2,921	21.8
1980	29,272	13.0	19,699	10.2	8,579	32.5	3,491	25.7
1981	31,822	14.0	21,553	11.1	9,173	34.2	3,713	26.5
1982	34,398	15.0	23,517	12.0	9,697	35.6	4,301	29.9
1983	35,266	15.3	23,974	12.1	9,885	35.7	4,249	28.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1960–1984.
[a] Revised.

the aging were relatively protected. They were for the most part out of the labor market and thus did not suffer from unemployment and their base income-transfer program (social insurance) had been indexed for inflation since 1972. Not only were more of the aged receiving aid, but for many (though not the very old) it was keeping them above the poverty line. For children, meanwhile, the situation has gotten progressively worse. Their income is adversely affected by the

TABLE 2
Related Children under 18 in Poverty, by Race and Spanish Origin, Selected Years (number in thousands, calculated in March of the following year)

	Total		White		Black		Spanish origin	
Year	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
1960	17,288	26.5%	11,229	20.0%	NA	NA	NA	NA
1965	14,388	20.7	8,595	14.4	NA	NA	NA	NA
1966[a]	12,146	17.4	7,204	12.1	4,774	50.6%	NA	NA
1967	11,427	16.3	6,729	11.3	4,558	47.4	NA	NA
1968	10,739	15.3	6,373	10.7	4,188	43.1	NA	NA
1969	9,501	13.8	5,667	9.7	3,677	39.6	NA	NA
1970	10,235	14.9	6,138	10.5	3,922	41.5	NA	NA
1971	10,344	15.1	6,341	10.9	3,836	40.7	NA	NA
1972	10,082	14.9	5,784	10.1	4,025	42.7	NA	NA
1973	9,453	14.2	5,462	9.7	3,822	40.6	1,364	27.8%
1974	9,967	15.1	6,079	11.0	3,713	39.6	1,414	28.6
1975	10,882	16.8	6,748	12.5	3,884	41.4	1,619	33.1
1976	10,081	15.8	6,034	11.3	3,758	40.4	1,424	30.1
1977	10,028	16.0	5,943	11.4	3,850	41.6	1,402	28.0
1978	9,772	15.7	5,674	11.0	3,781	41.2	1,354	27.2
1979[a]	9,993	16.0	5,909	11.4	3,745	40.8	1,505	27.7
1980	11,114	17.9	6,817	13.4	3,906	42.1	1,718	33.0
1981[a]	12,068	19.5	7,429	14.7	4,170	44.9	1,874	35.4
1982	13,139	21.3	8,282	16.5	4,388	47.3	2,117	38.9
1983	13,326	21.7	8,456	16.9	4,258	46.3	2,105	37.8

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1984.
[a] Revised.

unemployment of their parents and their aid program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), lags far behind the cost of living. And, perhaps even more serious, the number of one-parent families has risen sharply. The rise in illegitimate births, desertions, and divorce all mean that fathers in the United States are taking less financial responsibility for the upbringing of children (Preston 1984). Thus, both the public and the private sectors have contributed to the sharp increase in the number of children in poverty.

The differential impact of federal programs on the elderly and children is even more dramatic if we examine the impact of specific programs on the poverty rates of the two groups. If there had been

TABLE 3
Persons 65 Years and Over in Poverty, by Race and Spanish Origin, Selected Years (number in thousands, calculated in March of the following year)

Year	Total		White		Black		Spanish origin	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
1959	5,481	35.2%	4,744	33.1%	711	62.5%	NA	NA
1966[a]	5,144	28.5	4,357	26.4	722	55.1	NA	NA
1967	5,388	29.5	4,646	27.7	715	53.3	NA	NA
1968	4,632	25.0	3,939	23.1	655	47.7	NA	NA
1969	4,787	25.3	4,052	23.3	689	50.2	NA	NA
1970	4,709	24.5	3,984	22.5	683	48.0	NA	NA
1971	4,273	21.6	3,605	19.9	623	39.3	NA	NA
1972	3,738	18.6	3,072	16.8	640	39.9	NA	NA
1973	3,354	16.3	2,698	14.4	620	37.1	95	24.9%
1974	3,085	14.6	2,460	12.8	591	34.3	117	28.9
1975	3,317	15.3	2,634	13.4	652	36.3	137	32.6
1976	3,313	15.0	2,633	13.2	644	34.8	128	27.7
1977	3,177	14.1	2,426	11.9	701	36.3	113	21.9
1978	3,233	14.0	2,530	12.1	662	33.9	125	20.9
1979[a]	3,682	15.2	2,911	13.3	740	36.2	154	26.8
1980	3,871	15.7	3,042	13.6	783	38.1	179	30.8
1981	3,853	15.3	2,978	13.1	820	39.0	146	25.7
1982	3,751	14.6	2,870	12.4	811	38.2	159	26.6
1983	3,711	14.1	2,860	12.0	796	36.3	149	23.1

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1984 (and other selected years).
[a] Revised.

no income-transfer programs, the poverty rate for the aged would have been 63.7 percent in 1981, while that for children would have been 24.2 percent. Thus, the net impact of federal and state programs was to reduce poverty by 48.4 percentage points among the aged. By contrast, the same programs only reduced poverty among the young to 20.0 percent, a reduction of 4.2 percentage points (U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. Committee on Ways and Means 1983).

Conclusion

Prior to the depression of the 1930s and the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935, public financial aid—outdoor relief—was available for both the aging and for children in most states. Benefit payments were low, terms of entitlement highly restrictive. Not until the passage of the Social Security Act did the different economic treatment of the two groups become clear.

Part of this difference was a result of the evolution in the definition of family responsibility including the mutual responsibilities of husband and wife to each other, of parent to child, child to parent, grandparents and grandchildren to each other, brothers and sisters, even guardians and wards. Over the years, the concept of relative responsibility has narrowed. By the 1960s only a few states still were concerned with the relationships of grandparents and grandchildren or with siblings; all however were still concerned with the responsibilities of husband and wife to each other and of parents to minor children. The main issue was the question of the responsibility of adult children for their parents. Practice varied among the states. The enormous expansion of coverage in social insurance that occurred during the 1950s gave hope for decreases in the need for help in old age. And indeed some states did drop the requirement that adult children contribute to the support of their needy parents (Hoshino 1960). More common was an easing of contribution schedules until finally the courts declared a limitation on the principle of family responsibility, holding it to the spousal and parent-minor child relationships.

Reviewing income maintenance policy and the obvious preference of the electorate for programs for the aging to programs for children, a variety of explanations for this choice come to mind.

The shift in the legal definition of relative responsibility suggested a more massive shift in the division of public and private responsibility. The aged, reaping the benefits of a vast array of public programs, improved their economic and social circumstances while children, increasingly the responsibility of their parents, reaped a bitter harvest of poverty and lost opportunities.

The explanation of these trends lies in the complex interaction of culture, demography, and politics. As the child became the center of family life—both economically and emotionally—the aged were pushed from this stage. With the Great Depression, this movement gained public sanction in the assumption of public responsibility for the aged. Supported by a political coalition—including those who hoped to use the aged to set precedents for other groups—the aged have been able to maintain their public support in the face of cutbacks in other areas of social welfare.

The losers were children, in particular poor children. In this respect, the discrimination against children was intertwined with racism and sexism. The victims of public neglect are, indeed, "other people's children," in Lazerson and Grubb's (1982) striking phrase. If the other people are women and in particular black women, the lack of public interest is more understandable. Indeed, from 1935 when "caretakers" were excluded from Aid to Dependent Children until today, the worthiness of mothers and their willingness and ability to work have become the central issues in public assistance. If the price of punishing "unworthy" mothers is widespread poverty among children, our society appears to be willing to pay the price (Lazerson and Grubb 1982).

Sociological and economic forces play a role as well. The nineteenth-century separation of children into specialized institutions reflected several influences. There was the Catholic concern for the religious upbringing of Catholic children in a Protestant country. More general was the societal interest in education for disciplined living perceived as lacking in alternative living situations. When work and apprenticeship opportunities for children declined in the cities, the westward foster care movement took hold. Here, once again reformers saw an opportunity to provide a child with a "work model family" while meeting particular labor shortages. The child was a worker—present and future. The dependent older person was just that—a dependent. Thus, the early difference in treatment between the dependent aging and children was, if not dominated by economic reality, at least not contradicted by it.

The slow steady decision of the last thirty years that the unit of legal family responsibility would be a nuclear two-generational family appears more clearly economically dictated. The nature of an expanding industrial, monetized economy with its premium on mobility for the wage earner has been explored at length and there seems to be agreement in the literature on the need for a major public role in the support of all but at most two generations. The pattern of publicly provided retirement income is set. One speculative question to be asked, however, is whether at some stage it might be desirable to consider an increased public financial role in the upbringing of children. Labor force requirements led in the past to clear income maintenance policies for the aging, but to ambivalent ones for children. The American economy, and the American demographic picture, have shifted dramatically since then. In the face of the clear and present threat to the nation's children, perhaps we are at a point of reevaluation.

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