



California Symposium on Poverty  
County Welfare Directors Association of California  
Sacramento, California

Mini-Plenary Session: "But Does It Work?" Separating Myth from Truth in the  
Evaluation of Child Anti-Poverty Interventions  
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Opening Remarks  
Carol Emig  
Child Trends

Good afternoon. I'm Carol Emig, President of Child Trends. It's a pleasure and an honor to be here today and to facilitate this session.

Child Trends is a research organization with the mission of improving outcomes for children. So our sweet spot – the place we most like to be – is at the intersection of research, policy, and practice. So I am delighted to be here today, with all of you and with my distinguished colleagues, Philip Uninsky and Judge Erica Yew. My job this afternoon is to provide some research context for their presentations -- I would call it the color commentary, but since I live in a world of statistics and empirical research, there's only so much color I can bring to this forum!

So let's get right to it. In the United States today, children are more likely to be poor than any other age group. More likely than working-age adults, and certainly more likely than the elderly.

Last month, we heard from the Census Bureau that 19 percent of US children were poor in 2008 – up from 18 percent in 2007, and from 17 percent in 2006. Economist Isabel Sawhill projects that the 2009 child poverty rate will be 21 percent, and that it will stay above 20 percent for the next ten years.

So, why does that matter? Other than the compassion we feel for these children, why does it matter to us as a society that 1 in 5 children are poor

Well, because of the work you do, you see the immediate and long-term consequences of child poverty every day. Chronically sick kids, kids who act out and kids who withdraw; little kids who struggle in school and older kids who've dropped out. You see poor kids bouncing from foster home to foster home, to group home – or pregnant way too early, or in a juvenile facility.

And you meet them again as adults, in the unemployment office or living on the street, or in family court, when they're about to lose their own kids.

These are the individual faces of poverty.

When we aggregate, we see the national face of child poverty – the statistics I mentioned a minute ago, as well as the risks that poverty poses to children. There is an extensive body of empirical research that lays out the association of poverty with a host of rotten outcomes. To summarize briefly:

Poor children are disproportionately exposed to risks that can impair their brain development, and compromise their physical health and their social and emotional development. A few of these risks are exposure to environmental toxins, maternal depression, parental substance use, trauma and abuse, violence and crime.

Middle class and rich kids aren't immune from these risks, but poor kids are more likely to experience them and to experience more of them.

Childhood poverty is also associated with poor birth outcomes, including premature and low birthweight births; chronic health conditions, behavior disorders and depression in adolescents. Adolescents growing up poor take risks at higher rate than other kids, including substance use and early and unprotected sex – or maybe they're just more likely to get caught and less able to manage the consequences.

Poor kids, on average, have worse academic outcomes -- lower test scores, higher dropout rates. As young adults, they're more likely to be unemployed and underemployed. What a surprise.

Now, it's important to remember that risk is not destiny. Poverty isn't a life sentence. Lots of poor kids grow up to do just fine. But lots don't. That should worry us – especially because child poverty is on the increase, with no downturn in the foreseeable future.

Many people point to the mid- to late-1990s as a time when child poverty was decreasing dramatically. It went from a high of 22 percent in 1993 to a low of 16 percent in 1999, where it stayed for several years. We can attribute much of that decline to a booming economy and the creation or expansion of supports for working poor families. Notice that I did not attribute the decline to TANF, which did move millions of mothers from welfare to work. These families didn't leave poverty because a mother's earnings increased. They left poverty because their earnings were augmented by earned income tax credits, wage supplements, and other income transfers. That, by the way, is the chief reason European countries have a lower child poverty rate than the US – European governments supplement family incomes to a much greater degree than we do. And European citizens pay much higher taxes to support this.

Income transfers of that magnitude seem pretty unlikely here in the United States. We just don't have that kind of social consensus. Instead, we've chosen to address the correlates of child poverty through a variety of programs and services. We have health interventions, and programs to boost academic achievement (or at least keep kids in school), to reduce youth violence and prevent teen pregnancy. We're not really trying to eliminate child poverty – we're trying to eliminate the bad things that are associated with growing up poor.

I noted a minute ago that not every kid who grows up poor ends up poorly. We all know kids who beat the odds. But seeing some kids beat the odds simply isn't good enough. As Geoff Canada, founder of

the Harlem Children's Zone, says, we don't just want some kids to beat the odds; we want to change the odds for all the kids.

I'm afraid we have a ways to go before we significantly change the odds. There's a laundry list of well-intentioned programs with underwhelming results. And so the American public is understandably skeptical about social programs. They're asking the question that is at the heart of this afternoon's session – DOES IT WORK? And until we can prove with rigor that interventions to help poor kids really work, we'll never see the investments in children's programs that we need to change the odds.

So how are we doing by that measure? Actually, not bad. There is a growing body of evaluation research that tells us what works to improve outcomes for kids -- and to what extent and under what conditions. Do we know everything we'd like to know? No. But we know enough to act, and we know enough to keep evaluating and improving what we're already doing. I'd just note here that we've summarized more than 400 of these evaluations on the Child Trends website, [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org), under the very original title of "What Works."

Our next two presenters have actually been doing for a long time this kind of hard, evidence-based work, and they have some impressive results to share with you.

Philip Uninsky is executive director of the Youth Policy Institute in Albany, New York and founder of the Partnership for Results. He has worked tirelessly and effectively with communities to establish and

maintain locally-governed, integrated service systems for children and families. The Partnership for Results was awarded an Innovations in American Government award by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government – and rightly so.

Judge Erica Yew serves on the Santa Clara County Superior Court, where she presides over the Family Wellness Court, an ambitious and successful program to serve children under the age of three whose families are struggling with addiction, homelessness, poverty, violence, and other issues. Those of us in the child welfare policy community have long admired the pioneering work of the Santa Clara courts and have held it up as an example of a successful intervention with families in the worst kinds of crises.