

THE SHADOW OF
Poverty in America

Leave the Kids Alone

Poverty is their real problem

By Mike Males

In a boom economy, the most recent figures show that a staggering 40 percent of America's children and youth remain in low-income families. Thirteen million are poor, and 6 million of those suffer destitution in households with less than half of poverty-level income. U.S. child poverty rates are two to 10 times higher than in Western Europe, Canada or Australia. Poverty is so strongly connected to nearly everything adults think is wrong with "kids today"—murder, violent crime, unintended pregnancy, AIDS, smoking, dropping out of school—that it dwarfs every other factor.

Yet child poverty is rarely discussed today, buried under the popular, all-consuming "values" crusade and by the usefulness of children in pushing other agendas. New Democrats and Republicans agree that today's big menaces to kids are violent video games, TV, caffeine, R-rated movies, unfiltered Internet porn, raves, gangstas, Marilyn Manson, baggy pants, or any unmonitored free time. White kids with guns grace "kids without a conscience" cover stories in *People* and *Rolling Stone* that dismiss poverty as irrelevant.

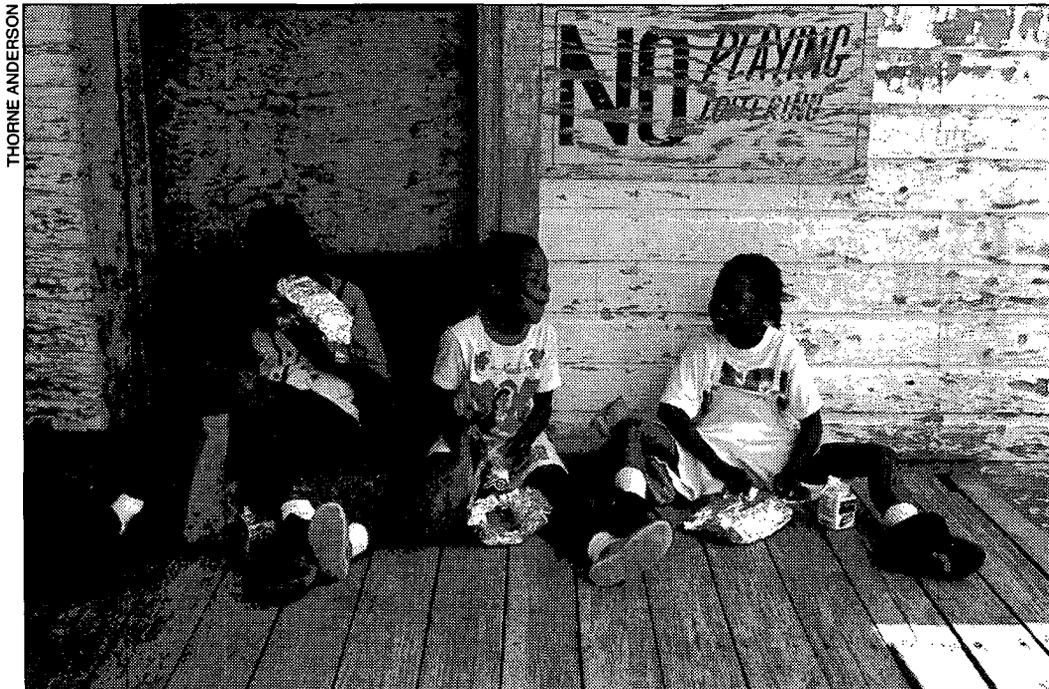
But in the real world, the likelihood of a youth being killed by gunfire, getting arrested, going to prison or dying before age 25 has a lot more to do with how poor he or she is.

Obsession with fictional screen images crowds out realities of grinding poverty, crumbling schools, vanished jobs and grownups in disarray. Culture warriors such as President Clinton, former Education Secretary Bill Bennett, the Manhattan Institute's Kay Hymowitz, *Tribe Apart* author Patricia Hersch and West Point video-game blamer Dave Grossman cite (or more often distort) scary statistics to buttress claims of a "youth culture" driven by pop-culture corruption into mass degeneration.

In truth, where U.S. kids enjoy low poverty rates like those of Europe, there are correspondingly low murder and gun-fatality rates. In California's five richest urban counties, with a combined population of 6 million, white teen-agers' poverty rates average 4 percent—similar to those of Scandinavian youth. Even in this state with one of America's highest gun-fatality rates—where white households are the most likely to harbor guns, violent cable channels and video games—the gun death rate among white teens (three per 100,000) is as low as Sweden's or Canada's. Meanwhile, poorer California youth of all colors (the vast majority black, Latino and Asian) suffer gun-fatality rates three to eight times higher. Poverty is associated with 85 percent of gun deaths among

children and youths, as well as the adults who commit most murders of children. The figures on gun murders per 100,000 youths show that class, not race, is the issue: richer white (0.8), middle-income white (2.1), lower-income color (3.1), poorer color (6.7). (Poorer California white youth are more affluent than the average youth of color.)

During the late '80s and early '90s, when the press, police and politicians went hysterical over the tripling in juvenile firearms homicides, no one mentioned a crucial factor clearly visible in crime statistics in major states like California, New York and Pennsylvania. There was no increase in murder among America's middle-class and affluent youths, whose trends



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Children are given lunch on the porch of City Hall in Homestown, Missouri.

stayed at low levels throughout the period. In fact, among California's white teen-agers, murder rates have dropped 40 percent over the past 25 years (especially during the '90s, when violent video games and movies supposedly were inciting them).

While upscale, suburban kids occasionally committed mayhem, the high rates of teenage murder and gun fatality in the early '90s occurred only among poorer youths, overwhelmingly those of color—especially youths caught in or between gangs warring to supply the soaring drug demands of white suburban adults.

So, if poverty is tied to higher risks of violence, and if more kids are poorer today, is the intense fear of “youth violence” exploited by politicians such as President Clinton and former California Gov. Pete Wilson justified?

No. For even as quotable crime authorities like Northeastern University's James Alan Fox and Princeton's John Dilulio warned in the mid-'90s that a new breed of “godless, fatherless, jobless ... adolescent superpredators” would bring a “bloodbath,” California youth were displaying dramatic decreases in crime. By the late '90s, as school shootings brought renewed cries that “killer white kids” had joined ghetto superpredators in a nationwide teen-murder epidemic, California teen-agers of all colors displayed their lowest rate of murder and serious crime in three decades.

Yet predictions of teen-age apocalypse became the excuse for a virulent, anti-youth reaction among affluent white voters and politicians. This led to massive defunding of California's once-proud school and university system, corporate abandonment of the inner-city, abolition of youth services and massive prison expansion. Left and right disagreed on what instigated the “youth crisis” and what should be done, but everyone batted the hatches.

Instead, California's new millennium was greeted by a youth population less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, less suicidal, less likely to die in traffic wrecks, more law-abiding, more likely to graduate from high school and enter college, and more apt to be employed and involved in community volunteerism than any generation in decades. From the mid-'70s to the late '90s, California's rates of youth suicides, violent deaths and felony arrests dropped 40 to 60 percent, and drug-related deaths fell an astounding 90 percent. These improvements predated the current fervor for cracking down on kids, and remain strongest in areas such as San Francisco, where get-tough



IMPACT VISUALS

Arturo Coronado bathes at his family home in Alamo, Texas.

curfews, drug enforcement and prosecution of youths as adults were rejected by authorities.

Superficially, the fact that kids are getting poorer and better might seem to excuse Washington's current proclivities, but closer analysis reveals that widespread poverty and packed schools are serious barriers to this generation. Youth behavior improved because it had to. Explosions in drug abuse, crime and family disarray among Baby Boomers, and the War on Drugs' punitive strategies produced a startling crisis: California's fastest-growing felon and prison population by far is white adults 30 and older, followed by adults of color. Deteriorating adult behavior forced millions of youths to assume adult responsibilities earlier in life—a precocity, ironically, greeted with cultural warriors' misplaced horror that media-savvy kids “are growing up too fast.”

Poverty, narrowed opportunity and harsher anti-crime policies are not the causes of improved youth behavior; they remain impediments reflected in struggles with chaotic families, crowded schools, massive student debt, race- and class-based inequality, and dead-end jobs. Even though young people have improved as a generation due to their own efforts and a few good programs, poverty's effects still are seen in poorer populations' sharply higher crime and violent death statistics.

It is long past time for liberal groups concerned with murder and firearms deaths to make reducing poverty their priority. America's high rates of child and youth poverty are not simply evidence of preventable inequality, but preventable fatality. ■

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The Union Difference

Janitors point the way out of poverty

By David Moberg

During rush hour one morning in late April, 38-year-old Augusto Cuevas, wearing his red “Justice for Janitors” T-shirt, sat down in the middle of a busy intersection in suburban Chicago, blocking traffic for two hours before police arrested him and 50 fellow members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Later that day, the companies that clean commercial and high-tech office buildings in the booming “edge cities” outside Chicago returned to the bargaining table for the first time in 10 days and agreed to boost janitors’ compensation by a dramatic 44 percent over three years. By the final year, Cuevas and his wife—also a janitor—will have family health insurance and each get paid \$8 an hour, up from \$6.65.

This victory—as in other recent SEIU triumphs in Los Angeles, San Diego and Cleveland—wouldn’t have happened without the courage and zeal of workers like Cuevas, a recent immigrant from Mexico. A decade ago, most union leaders saw such immigrants as passive, frightened and unorganizable. Now many envision them as the militant heart of a renewed labor movement. “We got to do whatever we got to do to try to get our rights and insurance,” said Cuevas, shortly after he was released by police. “Without insurance, we don’t see any future for our families.”

The janitors’ struggle highlights an important dimension of poverty in the United States. In big cities like New York, Chicago and San Francisco, nearly 90 percent of janitors in major office buildings have been organized for many years, and their jobs provide health insurance, pensions and a decent, basic family income of nearly \$25,000 a year. But until recently, in cities like Los Angeles or in new suburban growth areas, janitors rarely had insurance and earned wages well below \$8.20 an hour, the poverty line for a family of four. Both groups did much the same work, often for the same national companies. The union made the difference, lifting hardworking but unskilled workers out of poverty.

In 1998, there were about 28 million workers, 27 percent of the work force, who earned wages under \$8 an hour. Few of them—estimates run around 6 percent—belong to unions. Unions have been weak in the service and retail sectors that together account for two-thirds of low-wage employment, and labor leaders often believed that low-wage workers were too difficult to organize, despite their abundant grievances. Now some of the best organizing unions—such as SEIU, HERE (hotel workers), AFSCME (public workers), UNITE (needle trades) and the UFW (farm workers)—focus much of their efforts on low-wage workers. In recent years, these unions have scored wins with home health care aides, nursing home employees, laundry workers, hotel room cleaning staffs, child care workers and airport baggage handlers.

Low-wage work isn’t monolithic: most involves limited skills, but nearly 40 percent of low-wage workers have some college education. Many better skilled but poorly paid workers—child care and health care workers and graduate teaching assistants, for example—are now assertively organizing. While many low-wage organizing campaigns mobilize recent immigrants and minorities, nearly two-thirds of low-wage workers are white; though disproportionately young, 40 percent of low-wage workers are more than 35 years old.

All these jobs have one main thing in common: They don’t pay well. That’s partly because the workers who hold them lack market power and can be easily replaced. Increasingly, they are contingent workers—part time, temporary or supposedly independent contractors—or they may work for a subcontractor, while another powerful company holds the purse strings. The building owners, for example, set the rates for cleaning contractors, who employ the janitors. The contractors compete viciously for corporate crumbs and therefore are highly motivated to fight unionization. In many cases, from trash haulers to day care workers, government holds the purse strings, either hiring contractors or providing funds to reimburse all or part of workers’ wages.

These masked employer relationships are only part of the problem. “The primary obstacle to organizing low-wage workers is how unstable the jobs are,” says Allison Porter, outgoing director of the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute. Employers often are huge, deep-pocketed companies with widely dispersed sites, like McDonald’s or Wal-Mart, which overwhelm isolated efforts with their anti-union tactics but are too big to organize easily on a national scale. In manufacturing, employers routinely threaten to move—and actually relocate—out of the country to avoid a union and find even lower wages.

Further, low-wage workers often feel little attachment to their employers: They vote with their feet about discontent, churning through a series of rotten jobs. At the same time, they may be living on the edge financially and fearful of losing what little they have. David Chu, director of strategic research at the AFL-CIO, says that the biggest issue in unionizing low-wage workers is “whether you can organize and get them a contract that makes a difference in their lives.”

The janitors’ strikes demonstrate that the power to make such a difference starts with strategy. After clawing its way back over the past 15 years to represent more than 70 percent of janitors in several regions, SEIU carefully planned its contracts to expire near the same time this year. This strategy took into account both the importance of local building service markets and the growing power of national cleaning firms and realty companies. The key to both the