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The Vicious Cycle: Poor Children, Risky Lives

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AT FIRST BLUSH, NEW HAMPSHIRE WOULD SEEM to be a great place for children, parents, and families, and in many ways it is. The state is typically ranked among the most affluent, most healthy, least crowded, most scenic, and most educated of all states in the nation. The average per capita income in New Hampshire has consistently been in the top ten. In the first half of this decade, New Hampshire was ranked¹ first among all states for quality of life for children every year but one, when it was ranked second. In 2005, New Hampshire and Maryland had the lowest child poverty rates² (10 percent compared to a national average of 18 percent; notably, one-third of all children in the nation's capital live in poverty). One-quarter of New Hampshire children live in a home where neither parent has a full-time job (that number is almost twice as high in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alaska, and Washington, DC). There are fewer dropouts from New Hampshire high schools than in most other states, and we generally live longer in New Hampshire than in other states.

Yet these aggregate figures belie the complexities of many children's lives in the Granite State and mask significant variations in child well-being across specific New Hampshire communities. As well, recent trends are especially of concern. Between 2000 and 2006, New Hampshire's child poverty rate increased (got worse) by 67 percent; the national increase during this time was about 8 percent. The childhood poverty rate grew much faster than the adult poverty rate in New Hampshire. In Coos, Carroll, Sullivan, Belknap and Cheshire counties, children are much more likely to live in families with lower incomes than those in Rockingham and Hillsboro counties. As a whole, about 18 percent of all children in

the state are eligible to receive a free or reduced price lunch at school (a reasonable proxy for overall community economic status). But almost all (83 percent) of children at one Manchester elementary school are eligible, two-thirds of children at a Rochester elementary school are eligible, and over half of the children in schools in Laconia, Nashua, Claremont, Conway, Franklin, and Berlin, and many smaller north country towns qualify for these subsidized meals. In fact, New Hampshire may not be such a great place to live for many children, especially those whose families live in regions of the state with high unemployment and where social supports are not easily available (in both dense urban and sparse rural neighborhoods). Compared to children living in our most affluent communities, children living in the poorest 20 percent of towns and cities in NH are five times more likely to have not had access to prenatal care, have a mother without a high school education, and be eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Children in the poorest communities are also twice as likely to score below the basic (lowest) level of the NH educational assessment program.³

This essay explores the greater risks that children living in poverty face for developmental and educational challenges, which in turn make them less likely to be economically successful as adults. In New Hampshire as in other states (and nations), children who grow up in conditions of economic scarcity are significantly more likely to experience pre-, peri-, and post-natal complications that lead to developmental problems. To the extent that those early problems are not mitigated through effective support of the child and family, they can become the precursors to varying types and degrees of cognitive, social, motor, and behavioral impairments. Developmental impairments that are the result of early childhood poverty may occur in children who would

¹ Data and rankings are from the Anne E. Casey Foundation, <http://www.aecf.org/>.

² The federal poverty definition consists of a series of thresholds based on family size and composition. In 2008, the poverty threshold for a family of two adults and two children is \$21,200.

³ State data are from Kids Count NH Data Book, 2007 (<http://www.childrennh.org/web/PDF/NHKCEntireBookFinal.pdf>)

otherwise be healthy and wise but lack access to such basics as stable and warm housing, a steady and nutritious diet, adequate clothing, and tools for learning such as books, computers, or trips to Boston. In short, this essay explores the vicious cycle of poverty, early childhood impairment, and later disability, both in general and in the particular context of an affluent state that has some of the wealthiest and poorest communities in the country.

The Vicious Cycle, Part I

The most powerful predictors for early childhood poverty and related developmental problems are the educational level of a child's parents and the child's race. Failure to complete high school is almost always associated with lower wages and more frequent periods of unemployment, greater job instability, lack of access to health insurance, and less contact with social support systems that could mitigate some of these challenges. Under educated parents also may have more difficulty carrying out their parenting responsibilities due to lack of knowledge about child development, the daily demands of coping with poverty, and their own health problems resulting from poor diets or housing. In this sense, some children find themselves at risk as early as the point of conception if their parents are under educated, poorly nourished, and not in the regular care of a physician. If, as happens in one out of every ten births, the mother is less than 20 years old, her child will have a 70 percent chance of living in poverty. If a child is born to African American parents, she will have a 44 percent chance of living in poverty in the United States (compared to a 37 percent chance for Hispanic children and a 14 percent chance for Caucasian children).

During pregnancy and in the period of labor and immediately after birth, conditions associated with poverty can be a direct threat to the fetus and newborn as well as the mother. Pregnant women living in poverty are significantly more likely to give birth prematurely and to give birth to children who are below their expected full-term weight. Premature and low birth weight babies are in turn more likely to have respiratory problems because of underdeveloped lung function and capacity. Respiratory problems that are present at birth or soon after reduce oxygen flow to the brain, affecting the cerebellum as well as cerebral cortex. Damage to the former caused by oxygen deprivation leads to motor impairments that may be diagnosed as cerebral palsy, with varying degrees of severity and consequence for movement as well as speech production. Damage to the cortical parts of the brain can affect cognitive functioning,

sensory processing (auditory, visual, spatial), language processing, and social skills. As well as these peri- and post-natal threats, children born into poverty are more likely to be exposed to environmental conditions that threaten development, including the presence of lead paint and other heavy metals in the soil and air, greater incidence of asthma in polluted urban environments, higher frequency of upper respiratory and middle ear infections (associated with under heated, drafty homes and resulting in chronic hearing impairments), and dietary problems including childhood diabetes and diarrhea from tainted water sources. If a newborn is confronted with these kinds of challenges in the first weeks and months of life, and he lives in a family with few material resources and inadequate health care or other social supports, he is more likely to experience developmental delays or disabilities as he grows older.

The Vicious Cycle, part II

As our newborn grows during the first years of life—becoming a toddler and then moving out into the neighborhood, perhaps into out-of-home child care, and eventually into kindergarten and elementary school—the social conditions in which she lives will interact profoundly with the capacities that she had at birth and has acquired since then. She will learn especially from the adults in her life. If those adults are stressed or depressed because they are in low-wage, unstable jobs that do not include health insurance, if they do not know about the importance of preventive care, good diet and exercise, or the importance of early literacy for young children, a child who may have experienced modest complications of pregnancy or birth is at increased risk for further compromises in her development. She may demonstrate delayed language acquisition (critical for expanded vocabulary and social relationships), poor motor skills (necessary for early drawing and writing), or difficulties in attending to complex tasks.

These potential delays or disabilities will be expressed just at the time that formal classroom settings expect the skills necessary for early academic achievement. Listening to and following directions, sitting still for increasingly long periods of time, making new friends at school and in the community, acquiring literacy and numeracy, memorizing facts, learning the routines of the school day—all of these complex demands of formal schooling become that much harder when a child's early development has been placed at risk due to the disadvantages associated with poverty. If the teachers who work with such children are not prepared to identify early learning problems, or if such teachers simply have

too many demands in the course of a day to attend to individual needs, the child's challenges may be exacerbated by behavioral problems related to communication difficulties, social ostracism or teasing, and feelings of incompetence.

The Vicious Cycle, part III

Children who are both poor and experiencing developmental or learning disabilities are at least twice as likely to drop out of school before graduation than those in the general population. In fact, the presence of a diagnosed disability is the single strongest predictor of high school drop-out rates. Young adults without a high school education earn about one-third annually compared to those with a baccalaureate degree (averaged across all ethnicities; the ratio is closer to one-fourth for African Americans). Poverty, especially as a contributor to developmental problems in childhood, too often begets poverty, and in turn, greater risk for disability in the next generation. The point is that there are strong and consequential correlations among family income, early childhood development, academic achievement, ethnicity, and lifelong earnings.

A Note of Caution and a Note of Hope

This essay has presented generalizations founded in decades of empirical research. However, it would be wrong to conclude that all children born into poverty experience significant learning or developmental problems, and even more incorrect to conclude that childhood disability is a singular cause of later poverty. The variables discussed here are correlated, but that does not mean that one necessarily causes another. The probability of early disability is increased measurably by low family income, but it is not at all guaranteed. Race, place of residence, parental education levels, and access to teachers and other adults who can provide expert and caring support all make a difference.

In recent years, there has been a critical body of research on childhood resiliency. Here, the focus is on those children who grow up in economically and socially compromised conditions but who turn out to thrive in spite of those conditions. The most important contributors to such resiliency seem to be strong and stable kinship networks; the presence of at least one adult who provides continual care, attention, and guidance to a child; and access to basic social, educational, and health services. In addition, we know that high quality early education, effective elementary and secondary schools, stable employment for parents that includes health insurance benefits, and social policies including lead

paint prohibitions, early intervention for children with disabilities, drop out prevention programs, and living wage requirements all can prevent the vicious cycle. In fact, there are many students at the University of New Hampshire and other universities who faced less than optimal economic conditions as children yet are now succeeding in higher education. A combination of talent, social support, and hard work has made it possible for these students to thrive against difficult odds.

There are two important points here. First, poverty is a preventable condition. There are many examples of social and economic policies in other industrialized countries in which childhood poverty rates are considerably lower than those in the US. We do not have to accept poverty as a necessary condition of industrial or post-industrial societies. Second, following from the first, childhood disability caused by the conditions of poverty is preventable. This is demonstrated clearly when we compare rates of disability in poor vs. affluent communities; that is, when we pay attention to the "growing divide."

So we are left with a series of questions to ponder. If we know these things, why don't we act more aggressively and systematically to practice them? If as a society we dedicated ourselves to reducing the incidence of poverty, what affect could that have on the incidence of childhood disability, academic failure, and disparities in lifelong earnings? To the extent that there is a growing divide between rich and poor in America, couldn't that be mitigated significantly by assuring that all children, regardless of ability, race, and family income have the best possible early, elementary, and secondary education as well as access to higher education? As I write these lines on July 4, 2008, I wonder ultimately why we can't rededicate ourselves to the ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all of those who live among us. An increasingly divided nation does not move us toward the more perfect union that our Constitution envisions.