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Responses to Michigan Student Caucus Questions Regarding Poverty
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1. a) We have discussed a number of factors that have led to increased poverty rates in the state of Michigan. Many people attributed this decline to the loss of jobs and declining economy in the state, but I was wondering what you believe is the major cause of poverty? Also, what should initially be done to decrease the percentage of those in poverty? I realize these are two very broad questions; however, I am curious what you think can be done to decrease this percentage.

This is a very complex set of questions. The economic answer is that there are not enough full-time jobs that pay a living wage that allows workers to support their families at standards of living above the poverty line. Until all jobs pay a wage that allows individuals and families to have incomes above the poverty line if they work full time, we will have the one in ten individuals and nearly 1 in 5 children living in poverty that we have today in this country and state.

b) I think it would be reasonable to assert that children growing up below the poverty line are more likely than those children who do not grow up under these circumstances to be living in poverty when they grow up as adults and have their own families. In these cases, it seems as if most families are not provided with the necessary tools and resources (i.e. education, family values, hard work, dedication etc.) in order to find ways to break out of poverty. In order to try and overcome this I want to know what you see as the most imperative factor in ending this cycle of generations of families finding themselves living in poverty? For example, if you had to provide one suggestion to help a family that has continued to live a poverty stricken lifestyle, what would it be?

That's another hard question with no easy solution. If I had to pick one, I guess I'd have to say education for children. It is only through education that children will have access to jobs that most reliably guarantee them a sustainable and reliable income. Of course, children living in poverty, those who need the most from their education systems, are instead sent to underresourced and overly stressed schools. (More on this below).

2. I am curious as to how you quantify and measure the effects of poverty on child and youth development over time? Also, what aspects of poverty do you think most heavily impact Michigan's developing youth? Are there any ways that we as a class can help to combat these issues?

There are both direct and indirect ways that living in poverty affects children and youth. Directly, a lack of money in a family means children will likely have restricted access to food, clothing, toys, medical care, and adequate shelter. We typically refer to these problems as "material hardships." In turn, these hardships translate into developmental problems for children in several domains. A lack of food (often called "food insufficiency" by the federal government) means children will not develop physically to their full potential; they may experience stunting (being shorter than they should be for their age), wasting (weighing less than they should for their age and height), and a variety of health problems, including asthma, diabetes, obesity, and dental problems. (The latter can be quite serious—a child in Maryland died last year because his mother could not find a

dentist willing to take Medicaid to treat his abscessed tooth). Children who do not have adequate clothing may get sick easier because they are not dressed for cold weather. As children age, having appropriate clothes also takes on a social value, such that not having the “in” clothes can lead to social ostracization. You get the idea.

As far as indirect effects of poverty, when families have low incomes, they have to live in less desirable areas with low rents (or that accept Section 8 vouchers). This often means they live in neighborhoods that are overcrowded and that have few community resources such as safe playgrounds or community centers. Children thus do not have safe places to play, and instead are exposed to violence and environmental hazards. In a study I did of youth in New York City, 80% had been victims of violence in their communities and nearly all had witnessed violence, some of it quite traumatic (e.g., murders, sexual assaults). Many researchers interested in neighborhood effects on children are also concerned that living in areas of concentrated poverty deprives children of adult role models that have had educations beyond high school and/or stable and well-paying jobs.

Living in a “poor” neighborhood also typically means that children have to attend “poor” or underresourced schools, that have fewer and less experienced teachers, inadequate resources (e.g., enough and current textbooks), and dilapidated schools. It is not uncommon for children attending underresourced schools to report that their school bathrooms do not have toilet paper or soap.

It’s clear that children living in poverty experience double (or triple) jeopardy—their homes, their neighborhoods, and their schools are all underresourced and as a result can impair their development. It’s hard to identify one particular factor that disadvantages children living in poverty more than others (a question you raised). I think advocating for social policies that support poor and low income families is our best hope for changing these circumstances (e.g., policies such as higher minimum wage, universal child care, child tax credits, etc).

3. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy as well as many other sources has said that there is a correlation between teenage pregnancy and poverty. Do you believe reports such as these sometimes oversimplify the matter in crediting the drop in teenage pregnancy with a decline in poverty? Can we accurately assess this as a matter of causation? Regardless, do you believe that increased sexual education can lead to decreases in teen pregnancy, which would lead to less poverty? Or is this a stretch?

This is a complex question and is not my expertise—I ran out of time to answer this one.

4. a) Parental, and for that matter adult, involvement and presence in a young child's life has been shown to be of great significance during this time of rapid growth. Many families, however, have both parents working long hours to bring in enough income to stay out of poverty. In addition, child care is a relatively expensive item. What state programs are currently being run or proposed to help low income working families so that young children are not simply left to raise themselves?

The welfare reform law allocated substantially more federal money for child care for poor and low income families. Unfortunately, it is still not enough and few eligible families are getting child care subsidies or finding child care centers that accept the vouchers. Two

states, Oklahoma and Georgia, have turned this issue around to be one of an opportunity to education young children rather than to support working parents; each state now offers universal pre-K for 4 and sometimes 3 year olds. Many countries offer universal child care, some from birth; see the reports on Early Childhood Education and Care at the Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth and Family Policies at Columbia University; <http://www.childpolicyintl.org/>

b) Do you believe parenting or schooling is more instrumental in improving education for underprivileged children? What more can be done by parents to improve the overall education and situation of children in poor areas?

This is a controversial issue and one we could debate for hours—unfortunately I ran out of time to answer it. Please see publications by the National Center for Children in Poverty that address these issues: www.nccp.org

5. Although to US is one of the most powerful nations, American children suffer the worst among 21 developed nations in health, safety and relative poverty. Why do you think child poverty is higher here and what consequences do you think this has for our future?

The U.S. does very little to reduce poverty. Although the government has lots of programs in place to help poor and low income families, they on the whole raise few families above the poverty line. An analysis by the UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre found that while the U.S. reduces poverty by 18% through its programs, France, for example, reduces poverty by 73% through its programs. Of course, the citizens there pay more taxes in order to pay for these programs, but European countries tend to place a premium on making sure all of their citizens have what they need to live. See the full report at: *From: UNICEF. (2005). Child Poverty in Rich Countries. Innocenti Report Card No. 6. Florence: Innocenti Research Centre.*

6. It is evident that growing up in poverty predisposes youth to a variety of "environmental hazards" that can cause youth to develop behavioral problems. What do you believe is the strongest influence in shaping these behaviors? SES, Family structure, education?

Please see response to #2 above.

7. There was a proposal to increase minimum wage in the state of Michigan by 25 cents. Do you think the increase in the minimum wage will help solve some poverty problems in Michigan, knowing that many industries and companies are already working with tight budgets?

There is a definite link between the level of the minimum wage and poverty rates. It is a fact that an individual working full time and getting paid the federal minimum wage would not earn enough to raise themselves out of poverty. Here is an excerpt from a discussion of this issue on the website of the Economic Policy Institute:

Can a worker support a family on the minimum wage?

One way to answer this question is to ask whether a full-time worker earning the minimum wage would have an income below the federal poverty line. A full-time worker (working 2,080 hours a year) earning \$5.15 an hour would earn \$10,712 a year, well below the 2007 federal poverty line of \$17,170 for a family of three. However, there are several factors that complicate this analysis. First, not all workers can find full-time work, and others are unable to balance full-time work with family responsibilities. Second, federal programs such as the EITC and food stamps boost the reported incomes of working families. And third, the federal poverty line is viewed by many as an inadequate measure of the income needed to support a family.

Taking into account the EITC, the current minimum wage is still inadequate to support a single parent with two children. In 2007, a single parent working full time with two children would have a combined earnings and tax credit of \$14,997, only 87% of the 2007 poverty threshold of \$17,170 for a family of three. The proposal to raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 fixes this problem. If the minimum wage were increased to \$7.25 by 2009, the minimum wage and the EITC would work in tandem to raise this family's income to \$19,796 (assuming maximum EITC for 2007), which is 15% above the 2007 poverty line of \$17,170. It would still, however, be much lower than the income needed to support a family as calculated by "family budget" measures of poverty, which range from \$23,000 to \$46,000 for a family of three, depending on where the family lives. The local cost of living—the price of food, rent, child care, transportation and other necessities varies a great deal.

From: http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/issueguides_minwage_minwagefaq

Any attempt Michigan can make to raise the minimum wage beyond the federal level will help ensure that working individuals and families can expect to live above the poverty line—that's not a lot to ask for folks working long hours in hard jobs. I encourage you to read the rest of that page for more information on this issue. I also encourage you to check out the Economic Policy Institute's analyses of "self-sufficiency budgets," in other words, the amount of money it would take a family to make ends meet without going into debt. They have calculated different budgets for cities around the country and they average twice the poverty line (ie around \$36,000).

8. a) I know that you earned your PhD in Child Development; I wanted to ask you, how do you suspect the impacts of poverty and community violence affect child development over time? And, what can we as students do to help tackle the issue of childhood poverty?

Please see response to #2 above.

b) I noticed that the School of Social Work does a lot of work with youth and the community. Of the many programs that the school offers--which youth program is most successful and why? Also, how can students who are not in the School of Social Work get involved with youth and community projects and programs?

I'm afraid I do not run any of these programs myself and so cannot provide direct information about them. Some of the more innovative programs are those that involve youth in identifying social problems and coming up with solutions—such programs are often referred to as "youth empowerment" or "positive youth development." Barry Checkoway, a professor here, has done a lot of work in this area. If you're interested in learning more, here's a website to learn about positive youth development:

<http://www.ncfy.com/publications/pdf/PosYthDevel.pdf>

9. *In the past 5 years, which cities across the US have done the best job addressing their poverty problems? What have they done, what results have showed, and how can Detroit and Michigan learn from these other places?*

New York City is by far the most innovative city in the country when it comes to reducing poverty. Mayor Michael Bloomberg has launched an ambitious set of initiatives to reduce poverty in the city. Several initiatives include:

- increasing the minimum wage in the city to a "living wage"
- paying poor and low income parents incentives to reward work and education as well as keeping their children in school and making sure their children go to all of the recommended doctor and dentist visits. This program is based on a very successful program in Mexico called *Oportunidades* (formerly called *Progresá*).
- child care tax credits for families
- programs for youth

I encourage you to go to the New York City government's Center for Economic Opportunity to learn more: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/ceo/html/home/home.shtml>

10. *Also, I researched a program called "Kids Count in Michigan", whose main focus is on improving the health and well-being of children in Michigan. Have you ever heard of this program or others like this that have made a difference in improving childhood poverty?*

Kids Count Michigan is part of a national effort by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track indicators of child and youth development across the country. Each year, the Foundation releases "Kids Count 2007" (or whatever year it is) comparing states on various indicators, such as child poverty, low birthweight babies, teenage pregnancies, graduation rates, etc. The link to the latest Kids Count report is at:

<http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/KIDSCOUNT.aspx>

Kids Count Michigan is produced by the Michigan League for Human Services in conjunction with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It is a breakdown of similar indicators by each Michigan county. Last year's report put an extra emphasis on health indicators. You can reach it at:

<http://www.milhs.org/>

Neither of these reports can do anything about reducing child poverty in and of themselves. They are helpful as indicators of whether child poverty is going up or down, which is one way to find out if policy initiatives are affecting the child poverty rate at all. Such reports are also read by state and federal policymakers, and as such may be able to raise the profile of child poverty so that lawmakers will do something about it.

Thank you for your interest in poverty. These were all excellent questions. Best wishes with your continued work for the semester.

Cheers,

Liz Gershoff