

Government programs aid in maintaining families

Editor's Note: This is the 14th in a series of 15 articles exploring "American Families in Transition." In this article, Catherine S. Chillum, a professor, psychologist and social worker, discusses how government programs can help meet families' needs. ©1983, 1982 by the Regents of the University of California.

By Catherine S. Chillum
social writer

Although there is widespread agreement that many American families are in trouble, there is little consensus about what should be done to help them.

Those who argue against programs for families often fear an invasion of family privacy.

But it is possible to design policies that make help available to families, if they wish to use that help, without necessarily intruding in their private lives.

Such measures are quite different from programs that seek to control the behavior of families. The latter approach, often popularly misnamed family policy, would certainly be inappropriate and probably unworkable in American society, except for flagrantly dangerous family behaviors, such as child or spouse abuse.

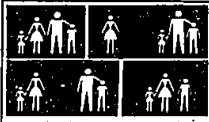
The well-being of families can best be advanced through a variety of means, including:

- the efforts of families themselves.
- educational and counseling programs made available to family members to help them deal more effectively with one another.
- service programs such as those that treat physical or mental illness and those that provide child care for employed parents.
- income maintenance and tax relief programs that support the economic security of families.
- employment policies that include provision for part-time work, flextime, maternity and paternity leave, affirmative action, job training, and provisions of public jobs.
- public education that provides opportunity for lifelong learning and development for all people from early childhood through old age.

In general, then, it is more useful to think of policies that provide a variety

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Families in Transition

of supports for family well-being rather than specific family policies, per se.

But why should family supportive policies be so numerous and wide ranging?

The answer is found in the nature of families as small groups interacting with a larger society. The well-being of families is a product of two major factors: (a) those in the outside world such as employment, income, prices, energy supplies, housing, transportation, health services, and schools, and (b) factors within the family, such as its size, structure, stage of development, individual characteristics of family members, and their styles of interacting.

THE INNER WORLD of the family is a small, interpersonal system that interacts with the larger bureaucratic systems. What happens to part of the family, for instance a severe conflict between husband and wife, will not only have reverberations throughout the family system, but it will probably also affect the behavior of each family member in transactions with the larger world of work, school, and community.

Similarly, actions of the larger environmental system make a strong impact on families and frequently upset the well-being of the total family group.

These larger systems, such as the organizations for which parents work, tend to be oblivious of the needs of the family as an interpersonal system. For example, employers often require that employees work overtime, regardless of the effects on family obligations and relationships.

Families with few social and economic resources of their own are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of forces in the outer environment. These forces can include government policies which are meant to help families but which, owing to citizen myopia, are often too meager and restrictive.

FOR EXAMPLE, federal policy requires that single mothers of young children who receive public assistance seek employment when their children reach the age of 6. However, no provisions are made to care for these children when they are not in school.

Typically, their mothers' wages are too low to pay for high quality day care. The cost of public community ne-

glect of these children may well be enormous.

What does this mean for public policy? Should low-income, single mothers of children between the ages of, say, 6 to 12 be given public assistance and not be required to seek employment?

Should public funds be allocated for all-day school programs and for child care during school vacations? Should further efforts be made to force the fathers of these children to support them? (Such efforts are often expensive and not very successful.)

Should legislation be passed that requires higher wages for single mothers? Should matters be left as they are, with the assumption that children over 6 can care for themselves while their mothers are working?

As this example shows, policy problems regarding the family are enormously complex and potentially costly.

ISN'T IT, then, too expensive and difficult to devise the large cluster of programs that seems to be needed? The task is not so impossible as it may appear.

Pieces of many of the recommended programs have been in place for a number of years: the Social Security system, including Medicaid and Medicare; Partial programs of family life education and counseling that are privately and publicly supported in many communities; some (but not enough) government-subsidized housing for low-income families; public education programs.

There is a good deal that families can do for themselves, especially if they have an adequate income. The culture of the early 1980s includes the rediscovery of the importance and "relevance" of families, after the individualism and "personal liberation" of the 1970s.

Along with rediscovery must go an awareness that families rest on a foundation of mutual responsibility, of giving as well as getting, of fostering the

growth of others as well as of the self.

ATTITUDES and values of these kinds cannot be forced upon families by public policies. Nor can we demand that people be denied a license for marriage, or, as some would wish it, for parenthood unless they have the "correct" knowledge and beliefs.

We cannot effectively regulate the behavior of the huge majority of family members, because family functioning is enormously complex and because families in a free society have basic

rights to personal privacy and self-determination.

But just as family members have responsibilities to themselves and each other, so does the larger society have responsibilities toward its families.

These responsibilities are numerous and complex, especially in a large heterogeneous society such as the United States — a society where citizens tend to be individualistic rather than family-oriented, suspicious of any kind of government program especially if the

program is federal, resistant to paying taxes to support public services, and inclined to look to simple, single solutions to intricate, multifaceted human problems.

Support of public programs to aid families depends on the will of the electorate. It is far from clear in these days that this kind of public will is present. If it is not, some of the nation's families — especially low-income families — might suffer further disorganization, conflict, and despair.



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