

## Children's Rights Movement

Since the establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912, the federal government has played a role in the welfare of children. Children's Bureau director Julia Lathrop issued a report in 1917 calling for federal aid to the states for public health programs covering maternity and infancy. Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress, introduced the Maternal and Child Health bill in 1918, and a version passed in 1921 as the Sheppard-Towner Act. Attacked as a Communist plot against the family by extreme conservatives and opposed by the American Medical Association, the legislation lapsed in 1928, to be revived with the New Deal.

In an era when one-sixth of children over ten worked for wages, child labor became a central concern of social reformers. Many states enacted legislation to give some protection to children, such as limiting them to a 10-hour day. The National Child Labor Committee proposed a Child Labor Amendment to the Constitution, which passed the Congress in 1914, but ratification by the states was blocked by an alliance between manufacturers and farmers spearheaded by the Southern textile industry. During Roosevelt's New Deal, the Fair Labor Standards Act incorporated provisions regulating child labor, and the child labor amendment was not revived.

Social Security's Survivor's Insurance and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) programs were designed to provide income support to widows with children. The ADC welfare component was expanded to describe families (AFDC) and include state options for unemployed parents. As the program expanded, more efforts were made to link participation with education and job training for mothers. During the 1960s the civil rights movement and the War on Poverty brought a new focus on poor children, with such programs as Project Head Start, the Youth Corps, and neighborhood youth employment programs. The Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program provided a national focus on maternal and child health and nutrition.

The dimensions of children in poverty are dismaying: 12 million children (one child in 5) in the United States live in poverty. Nearly 1 black child in 2 is poor -- although the majority of poor children are white (1 in 7 white children are poor). One in 5 children has no health insurance coverage. More than half the children who live in female-headed families are poor, and families headed by women make up 53 percent of all poor families. The United States may be the first industrial society to take better care of its elders than its children.

Advocacy for children has long been the domain of professional organizations of social workers and child welfare workers, from the American Humane Association to the Child Welfare League of America. With roots in the civil rights movement, the Children's Defense Fund, led by Marion Wright Edelman, has emerged as the leading public interest advocate for children, with a citizen

constituency beyond child welfare professionals. Child advocates are beginning to organize citizen lobbies on the state level, like California's Children Now. On the international level, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, a treaty document with roots in the 1924 World Child Welfare Charter of the League of Nations and the 1959 U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

For background, see Joseph Hawes, *The Children's Rights Movement: A History of Advocacy and Protection* (Twayne, 1991). The Children's Defense Fund publishes an annual *The State of America's Children Yearbook*, with data about children in the United States, including income, health, hunger, housing, and education, along with policy proposals. UNICEF publishes an annual report, *The State of the World's Children*, with data on nutrition, health, education, and other conditions relating to children.