

The New York Times

Economix

Explaining the Science of Everyday Life

May 25, 2009, 9:54 am

Hard Times for the Kids

By Nancy Folbre

Nancy Folbre is an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The Great Recession is hurting almost everyone, but its harmful effects on kids could last for years to come.

A new [report](#) issued by the Child and Youth Well-Being Index Project at Duke University warns that virtually all progress made in family economic well-being since 1975 could be wiped out over the next two years.

The project regularly publishes a Child Well-Being Index (C.W.I.) — a kind of check-up list for children’s social health. Family economic well-being is measured by a composite of the poverty rate, median annual income, parental employment and health insurance coverage for children.

The complete C.W.I. includes measures from six other domains in addition to family economic well-being: health, safety and behavior, education, community connectedness, social relationships, and emotional and spiritual well-being. The domains are equally weighted and their values compared to levels in the base year of 1975.

It sounds complicated, but the report basically explains how the thigh bone is connected to the hip bone: Changes in one area of children’s lives, like parental job loss, can lead to residential instability, which in turn, reduces educational attainment. Similarly, declining income can lead to increased reliance on low-cost fast food, which increases children’s obesity and worsens health.

The United States has long suffered from one of the [highest child poverty rates](#) among the industrialized countries, exceeded only by that of Mexico. The C.W.I. project forecasts that more than one out of five American children will live in poverty in 2010. Past experience suggests that when the overall C.W.I. is declining, it declines twice as fast for African-American and Hispanic children as for whites.

Historical studies like Robert Coles’s [“Children of Crisis”](#) and Glen Elder’s [“Children of the Great Depression”](#) trace the profound effects of economic hardship on the younger generation.

Quantitative studies have also measured its long-term consequences. Two social scientists, Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, [analyzed evidence](#) that poverty stunts the development of children's capabilities. A recent [study](#) based on the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics estimates the negative effect of recession-induced poverty on future income, employment, education and health.

Public policies could do more to blunt this impact. As the C.W.I. report notes, recent improvements in children's health insurance coverage are having positive effects.

I sit on the board of the [Foundation for Child Development](#), which finances C.W.I. research. Many other nonprofit groups, including the [National Center for Children in Poverty](#), the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#) and [First Focus](#), also struggle to publicize issues of child well-being.

During this recession, many other problems, including huge bank bailouts, are competing for public attention and taxpayers' money. Sometimes I wonder how closely the Child Well-Being Index would mirror an Adult Wrong-Doing Index.

If I were going to construct such a new index, financial malfeasance would rank high among the measurement domains. But in the composite, apathy among those who could do more to help poor children would receive at least an equal weight.

- [Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)
 - [Privacy Policy](#)
 - [NYTimes.com 620 Eighth Avenue New York, NY 10018](#)
-