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The recession generation



Ruby Takanishi **Foundation for Child Development**

We've become a nation of fortune tellers. As we enter another month of recession, we look for every potential sign of recovery in the job market. We watch the stock market for patterns pointing to our economic future.

One key measure, however, has been largely left out of our tea leaf reading — the well-being of America's children. Yet how our children fare during and after the recession is a powerful gauge

of how we as a nation rose to the challenge.

How much damage will the “recession generation” experience? And are there ways we can minimize it?

A new report from my organization, Foundation for Child Development, is the first report to project the impact of the recession on our children.

The forecast is grim.

This recession will wipe out virtually all the progress made in children's economic well-being since 1975. Not only are family incomes dropping, but the decline will also drag down other areas. Social relationships are projected to become more fractured as home foreclosures force families to move. An increase in violent crime-and cuts in afterschool and summer programs-will threaten children's safety. Obesity is expected to rise as parents rely more on low-cost fast foods. The impact will be especially severe for low-income children of color and immigrant children.

(continued on reverse)

Both parenting and policy can make an enormous difference. For parents, it means checking in with children more often, especially if there have been major changes in their lives, such as a laid-off parent or a move. It means being more mindful of alternatives to fast food and of how their children spend after-school time.

For policymakers, it means, protecting education dollars from the chopping block. Research including ours has projected a likely decline in pre-kindergarten enrollment. The Obama Administration has pledged to address that with about \$18 billion for Pre-K/early education and the education of low-income children. But policymakers must also help schools retain talented teachers and principals in the face of budget cuts.

In a recession, investing in the well-being of young children may not appear to be the highest priority. But it would be a mistake not to do everything we can to make sure today's young people have every opportunity to succeed—not the least because of dramatic demographic shifts in our country.

Right after the Second World War, there were five workers for every retiree; today, the ratio is more like three to one. Social forecasters have been warning about this change for the past three decades. The future is now here.

Research ranging from the Great Depression to the present shows that children can suffer lasting developmental and emotional effects from economic deprivation. We must make sure our policies now protect their future — and ours.

Policymakers must resist sacrificing a generation to save a few dollars today. Meeting all children's basic rights to health care and a good education, starting with Pre-Kindergarten and continuing past high school, is not only the right thing to do, it is also critical to the survival of our nation as a leader in the global economy.

But policy alone is not enough. Parents and communities must also do their part.

Only when children are given every opportunity to reach their full potential can it be said that we have “let America be America again,” to borrow the words of poet Langston Hughes. When we improve the prospects of every child, we fulfill one of the central tenets of the American Dream: creating the right conditions so the next generation of Americans can dream, too.

Editor's Note: *Ruby Takanishi is President of the [Foundation for Child Development](#) in New York.*