

NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

WORKFORCE & FAMILY PROGRAM

WHY NOT MORE FOCUS ON CHILDREN?

Issue Brief #12

July 16, 2007

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The 2008 presidential primary season is shaping up as one unprecedented in American history. Fundraising reports from the first two quarters of 2007 demonstrate the breakneck pace with which this latest presidential season has begun. Fundraisers aren't alone in setting a new pace, as state after state has moved up the date of its Presidential primary in a bid for increased influence. What has not changed is the focus of the early primary politicking. In the past few weeks, would-be presidential candidates have been forced to answer questions on the employment status of Don Imus, whether they hunt rabbits or squirrels, and the price of a gallon of milk. This focus on "gotcha" politics and commercial minutiae elbows aside room for discussion of more meaningful topics. The tragedy at Virginia Tech underscores the need for our nation to focus on our young people. What about the status of children in the United States?

Put to the test, candidates would not doubt claim children among their first priorities. Like most Americans, they likely suffer from a familiar dichotomy between the priority they claim for children and the priority children actually have as the result of their actions. The Urban Institute recently released a report, "Kid's Share 2007" detailing the declining share of the federal budget dedicated to programs for children. The report concluded that between 1960 and 2006, federal spending on children's programs declined from 20.1 to 15.4 percent of domestic spending. If current policies remain in place,

federal spending on children's programs will decline from 2.6 to 2.1 percent of GDP in the next ten years.

The Foundation for Child Development's 2007 Child Well-Being Index (CWI) concluded that after years of progress, improvement in the quality of life for children has stalled in recent years. Family economic well-being and educational outcomes have essentially flat-lined in recent years. Child health is in a steep decline. The epidemic of overweight and obese children has become a major drag on overall child well-being, and in spite of increasing attention, all indications are that this problem will continue to worsen. The increased prevalence of single-parent households continues to negatively impact children's social relationships. According to Dr. Ken Land, of Duke University, "The troubling stall we're seeing in the CWI over the past five years tells us that, even in relatively prosperous times for the country, we cannot assume children's quality of life will automatically improve."

Children also face deep and persistent disparities in their quality of life depending on race and ethnicity. African-American and Hispanic children are still more likely to live in poverty and lag behind in education.

The idea that quality of life for American children has stalled should be among the major issues addressed by presidential candidates. The difficult questions of what to do about it should

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be asked by the media and answered clearly by all candidates. Child well-being is a bipartisan concern, and we hope that candidates from both parties include child well-being as a main issue. Political rewards may be reaped by those who do, and practical rewards for the nation are at stake.

Earlier this month, the novelist Anna Quindlen said, “We love the platitudes: ‘Children are our future. They are the promise of tomorrow. Our children are our chance at immortality.’ But this is a nation that loves the notion of children but doesn’t really like the reality of kids.” It’s time for our nation to confront that reality, and there’s no better time or place to have that discussion than in an unprecedented presidential campaign season, just like this one.