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SERIES: GROWING UP IN AMERICA. The Reality of Childhood Today. Last in a series.

BYLINE: By RON HARRIS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

DATELINE: CHICAGO

BODY:

Residents here remember the Blizzard of '79 as cold, inconvenient and burdensome, but, ultimately, just a lot of snow.

They also remember that, when then-Mayor Michael A. Bilandic failed to remove that snow from the streets promptly, the citizens marched to the polls and booted him out of office in an astounding political upset.

In the 11 years since, Chicagoans have endured five strikes by teachers and watched as their school system became known as the worst in the nation. They have seen their children turn increasingly to gangs and drugs.

Youth homicides have doubled in the last five years; twice as many children are murdered as die in traffic accidents here. More Chicago youngsters live in poverty today than did so 20 years ago. Teen-age pregnancies among whites have risen. The number of unwed teen-age mothers has skyrocketed. Crack babies crowd hospital nurseries.

But no Chicago politician has been voted out of office because of the declining condition of children.

In many ways, that political reality is reflective of the nation as a whole, say those who monitor the well-being of the nation's children and the policies that affect them.

For many throughout the country, childhood has come to be associated with educational decline, gangs, drugs, teen-age pregnancy, abuse, homelessness, violence and death.

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How is it then, advocates for youngsters ask, that over the last decade so many other issues -- energy policy, the environment, military spending, the savings and loan debacle, sometimes even snow removal -- have taken precedence over the one thing adults claim to hold most dear, their children?

Two Key Elements

Interviews across the nation with congressmen, child advocates and policy analysts of all political leanings suggest that, although the answer has many parts, it ultimately comes down to two things.

First, children themselves have no power to set the agenda.

Second, adults -- either because of indifference, prejudice, the crush of other concerns or the conviction that child rearing is a personal matter -- have not come to believe that the difficulties and failures parents encounter in trying to raise the country's young deserve an important place in the national debate.

In short, adults do not embrace children's issues as their own.

It is not as if parents think the quality of life for their youngsters has improved. Three of four adults surveyed in a 1989 Louis Harris poll said they think that growing up is harder today than when they were young.

And in fact the problems are severe. The Children's Defense Fund, a Washington-based child advocacy organization, says that on the average day in the United States:

- 2,407 babies are born out of wedlock, 676 to young women who have had inadequate prenatal care.
- 2,740 teen-agers get pregnant, 40 for the third time.
- 1,105 teen-agers have abortions, 369 miscarry and 1,293 give birth.
- Nine children die from gunshots, six are murdered, seven commit suicide and 684 attempt suicide.
- 7,742 youngsters become sexually active and 623 children get syphilis or gonorrhea.
- 1,849 children are abused and 3,288 run away from home.
- 1,629 teen-agers are in adult jails.
- 2,989 children see their parents divorce.
- One child in five wakes up in poverty and 100,000 go to bed homeless.

"We know that a lot of problems are occurring and that our systems are not sufficiently prepared to deal with these problems," says Ruby Takanishi, director of the New York-based Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, "but at this point adults are abdicating or avoiding responsibility. We are either downright afraid or we're deeply ambivalent."

Possible Solutions

Children's advocates, whose leanings run from conservative to liberal, offer a variety of often strikingly different proposals to improve the lot of youngsters.

Some would like to see much larger investments in the nation's public education system; others would like to offer vouchers so that parents could pay for schools of their own choice, including private and parochial schools.

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Some propose programs to encourage mothers to stay home with their children; others propose solutions like increased business use of flexible working hours and the family leave bill, which would allow either parent to leave a job for up to a year and return at the same salary and position.

Some offer strategies to better aid dysfunctional parents so that their children do not become wards of the state, whereas others would like to see a mandated limit on the number of children welfare recipients could have, or a return to orphanages to deal with the growing numbers and costs of foster children programs.

Some propose national medical care for all children, regardless of income. Others argue that cutting taxes would strengthen families by leaving them more money to care for their children.

But all sides say there seems to be very little public enthusiasm for examining any of their proposals.

As studies have increasingly shown conditions for America's children worsening -- particularly since 1980 -- a core of business leaders, educators, politicians and others has warned of the impact on the nation's future.

"We are absolutely convinced that if we don't take action immediately we're going to find ourselves with a failing economy and social unrest," says Roseann Bentley of the National Assn. of State Boards of Education after her organization conducted a study of the status of today's children.

"If you have ill-educated young people, you won't get the services you want" when they are grown, Takanishi warns. "When you go to the hospital, you'll get the wrong drugs. You won't have the people for a productive work force."

"It's sort of pay me now or pay me later," says Bill Harris, founder of KIDPAC, which is the nation's only political action committee for children, out of more than 4,600 PACs. "If people continue to shove kids underneath the table, they will wake up to the realization that all the kids we threw away are coming back and eating up our taxes, our safety, and that we need them in the work force."

That message, however, has yet to find a place in the public's mind, analysts say.

"There isn't yet the connection among people who are more affluent that this is going to affect their standard of living and their children's standard of living," says Robert Greenstein, director of the Center for the Study of Budget and Policy Priorities, a research and analysis organization in Washington.

Impact on Affluent

Conservatives and liberals agree that the affluent will feel the effects in increased crime, higher taxes and a less efficient labor force.

"There undoubtedly is a portion of society that is affluent enough to continually escape most of the problems," says William R. Mattox Jr., director of policy analysis for the Family Research Council, a Washington-based research organization. "But that is the exception and not the rule."

If the powerful have not rallied around children's issues, neither have middle-class Americans. Part of the reason, say those interviewed, is that today's American families -- mostly two working parents or single working mothers -- are overwhelmed with the day-to-day chore of providing for their family.

"People who are raising children, unfortunately, have more immediate concerns," Mattox says. "They don't have time to ambush a congressman when he returns to the district or engage in letter-writing campaigns."

"They know if they read that bedtime story or pack that lunch box or play catch in the back yard, it will mean something for their children. They aren't convinced that getting involved in the political process is going to make a

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difference for their children."

In fact, the idea of petitioning government for redress when it comes to children is not in the psyche of Americans largely because they think of child rearing as an almost exclusively individual responsibility.

"Women and men think of their personal family problems as just that -- personal problems," says Donna Lenhoff, legal director of the Women's Legal Defense Fund, a Washington-based organization that was active in the passage last year of the family leave bill, which was later vetoed by President Bush. "They don't think that the problems they encounter in their home could be remedied in some way or addressed by government policy."

"That's part of our problem," says Karabelle Pizzigati, staff director of the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. "In England, Germany and other nations, it's part of their psyche that government (has a) responsibility to help raise the children. We have never collectively said it's part of our responsibility. We always shift the responsibility back to Mr. and Mrs. Jones."

Perhaps the one thing that keeps adults from collectively addressing the problems that face the nation's children is the belief that those problems don't really pertain to them -- that it's not their kids who are at risk.

For example, an ABC/Washington Post poll last September noted that 80% of those surveyed agreed that "considering everything . . . children have a harder time . . . growing up today than their parents did." But in the same poll, only 4% said they were dissatisfied with the status of their own children.

"Many people have a far more optimistic outlook on their own family and their own children than society at large," Mattox says. "They perceive the problem to hit close to home, but they perceive it to be greater among other families than, perhaps, their own."

Upper- and middle-income Americans tend to believe that these problems lie primarily with the poor, experts say, whereas many whites of all income levels associate them with African-Americans and Latinos.

Problems Widespread

The problems that afflict poor and minority children are certainly the most dramatic, advocates say, but white and middle-income youngsters have been greatly affected as well.

For instance, over at least the last 10 years, the percentage of pregnancies among unwed teen-agers has been declining among blacks and increasing among whites, the National Center for Health Statistics says. The Census Bureau reports that the dropout rate for whites ages 16 and 17 is higher than that for blacks of the same ages, whose rate has declined by half since 1970.

Unattended "latchkey kids," whom a 1989 USC study found far more inclined to use drugs and alcohol than children who were not left alone, are most likely to be white and to be middle- and upper-income, the study noted.

Finally, white youngsters smoke, drink alcohol and take drugs at a greater rate than black and Latino youngsters, the National Institute on Drug Abuse says.

Across the nation, however, children's support groups and agencies -- from the Boys Club of America to homeless shelters -- say the misconception that such issues are "black" or "Latino" has allowed the nation to drag its feet in search of solutions.

"Race is an issue," agrees Rep. George Miller (D-Martinez), chairman for eight years of the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. "You run across it in the subtleties. It goes to the urgency that people put on the issue. It doesn't mean that people don't care, but the problems become less urgent."

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One way that racial attitudes and misconceptions play a role in government responses to problems is suggested by the differences between poverty rates for the elderly and for children, says Greenstein, of the Center for the Study of Budget and Policy Priorities.

He notes that, since the inception of the federal War on Poverty in the 1960s, census figures show that the percentage of elderly people living in poverty has dropped by nearly two-thirds, while the percentage of children in poverty has increased.

"The public image of who the elderly poor are is less racially tinged than the image of who poor children and poor families are," Greenstein says. "When the public thinks of children in need, they think of black children and welfare mothers in the inner city." In fact, nearly half of all black children live in poverty, but they make up only a third of the nation's poor children.

Child advocacy agencies say they constantly encounter perceptions that the problems belong to some "other" group and struggle against them in the hope that middle-class Americans will see children's issues as theirs too.

"They don't perceive that there are a common set of political issues that affect all parents," says Robert Rector, policy analyst for family and social issues for the Heritage Foundation, a Washington research organization.

"We're trying to galvanize the middle class to get them to understand that these are issues that are cutting across race and class," says Marian Wright Edelman, executive director of the Children's Defense Fund, the most prominent children's advocacy group.

'Children Don't Vote'

Congressional leaders say children's issues lag far behind other matters in the minds of many in the nation's capital. The reason most cited is the one echoed by Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Tex.).

"The problem is that children don't vote," says Bentsen, who is considered to be at the forefront on children's issues. "Children are disadvantaged because they are not able to speak for themselves. They depend on various groups -- parents, concerned legislators -- and some of them do an admirable job, but (children) don't have direct means of representation."

Additionally, their parents do not speak with the same unanimity and power as other special interest groups, nor do they exert similar kinds of organized political pressure -- letter-writing campaigns, rallies, phone banks, direct action -- used by other lobbying groups. In Miller's words: "They don't put feet on the street."

"There's not anything equal to the National Rifle Assn. or the American Assn. for Retired People or the environmentalists on the children's level," Greenstein says.

And, Bentsen says, it shows. "I've had no delegations of parents lined up outside my door. They don't come in in an organized effort to the degree of other interest groups."

That is partly because only 34% of the households in the country have children, says John Brennan, Los Angeles Times Poll director.

Although parents have children in common, they have different interests that correlate to the ages of those children.

While some parents may be concerned about child care for their toddlers, others are worried about elementary education, and others are more concerned about their teen-agers and possible drug abuse.

"So, you're talking about a limited number of people on a shared-issue basis," Brennan says.

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That has left child advocacy agencies bereft of the one tool politicians most understand -- the vote.

"We don't have the political force to reward or punish," says David Leiderman of the Child Welfare League, an association of 625 child-care agencies across the country. "The pro-abortion or anti-abortion people have constituents who will vote someone out of office on a single issue. But there's not anyone who will vote for or against anyone on the single issue of whether or not he's doing a good job for kids."

The reason they don't, says Celinda Lake, a political pollster in Washington, is that "nobody *believes* anybody is bad on children's issues.

"You can get demerits for a lot of things, but you don't get demerits on children's issues because it's almost impossible to convince people that politicians are doing bad things for children," Lake says.

"So you try to run against a congressperson and you say they are bad for kids, and nobody believes it. The public just can't find any rationale to it. 'How can anybody not support kids?' They don't see the question of competing interests -- how money spent for some things actually takes away from money for education or child care or something else related to children."

Consequently, Miller says, "something else comes along that always seems to be more urgent. Tragically, most politicians look for what is current, what is popular, what is immediate, instead of what is long term. And children's issues are long term."

Leiderman, who has been involved in children's issues for 20 years, says it's the same old story.

"It's this crazy dichotomy that goes on in this country," he grumbles. "Everybody likes kids, everybody supports kids, but then nobody supports kids."

Finally, child advocates say, the media, which help to set the national debate by what they do or do not cover, have been largely absent on these concerns.

Greenstein says he gets hundreds of calls from reporters researching stories on a variety of issues, but very few involving children. "I think it's fair to say that the majority of newspaper editors aren't rushing to this issue," he says.

"Children's issues are just not a sexy issue," agrees Dan Amundson, who studies news coverage as research director for the Center for Media and Public Affairs. "They do not have a built-in constituency.

"There's a strong tendency in the media and in the political world to assume that children are the parents' responsibility until they violate the law. So, children find their way into the news when somebody can find a good angle."

Leiderman argues that, for most newspaper and broadcast reporters and editors, "the kids issue is not hard news.

"It's not big time. It's not handled by the Sam Donaldsons of the business. What's big time is foreign policy. It's politics. It's whether (Soviet President Mikhail S.) Gorbachev is going to survive.

"Look at what happened during the Persian Gulf War. We had experts all over the place analyzing everything about the war. More children were murdered or killed during the war right here at home than there were U.S. soldiers killed in the Gulf.

"If (the media) could spend one-tenth of the time bisecting and dissecting the war facing kids and families in this country as we did on the Gulf War, we could come up with some real answers.

"We know what to do about most of these problems, but we can't have the national debate. Unless the President,

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leadership in media, leadership in business start the debate, we're not going to have the debate.

"Otherwise," Leiderman concludes, "it's the same people talking to each other."

Times researcher Nina Green and the Times Editorial Library staff contributed to this series.

Parental Involvement in Education

Membership in the Parent-Teacher Assn.-PTA- soared when today's baby boomers were children. In the early 1960's, there was one PTA member for every three students; today the ratio is one to seven.

Percentage change, in thousands

Public School Enrollment

PTA Membership

Source: National Parent-Teacher Assn.: U.S. Department of Education

Poverty Rates by Age

Thanks in large part to the War on Poverty of the 1960's, fewer senior citizens are considered poor. Meanwhile, the number of poor children has grown.

Percentage of age group living below the poverty line

Source: Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Children's Defense Fund

GRAPHIC: Photo, Poverty Rates by Age ; Photo, Parental Involvement in Education ; Chart, Parental Involvement in Education, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times ; Chart, Poverty Rates by Age, PATRICIA MITCHELL / Los Angeles Times