



Homeland Insecurity: *Reality for America's Children*

As numerous presidential candidates crisscross the country their party's nomination, here are some facts that won't be mentioned often in their debates, ads and speeches: 8.6 million children are without health insurance, more than 3 million are reported abused or neglected, nearly 2 million have a parent in prison, and 13.6 million live in poverty's grip.

The awful truth is that many of our children experience homeland insecurity on a scale unknown in the other rich democracies. And, within the U.S. itself wide gaps in child well-being exist among the states: compared to states with the best outcomes, children in the bottom states are twice as likely to live in poverty, three times as likely to be uninsured, four times as likely to be incarcerated, and twice as likely to die before their fourteenth birthday.

We know a lot about how to fix these problems, problems that are desperate for the attention of the presidential candidates.

Whatever their political persuasion, the great majority of American citizens want all children to succeed. They believe we have a moral responsibility to help provide for the health, education and safety of children.

Keep listening closely to the candidates, because we are not likely to hear that spending on children was 20% of federal domestic spending in 1960, 15% in 2005, and is projected to be just 13% in 2017. Meanwhile, non-child spending on Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid was 22% in 1960, 46% in 2005 and is projected to be an astounding 59% in 2017.

Not surprisingly, U.S. child well-being ranks only 20th among 21 rich democracies according to UNICEF:

- In the area of health, the U.S. ranks last among the richest democracies on the two most important health measures – infant mortality and longevity – even though we spend nearly double on medical care per capita.
- In the area of child abuse, U.S. death rates are much higher than in the other rich democracies—3 times Canada's and 11 times Italy's. In 2005 at least 1,460 U.S. children died from abuse or neglect; 77% of the fatalities were children under four. Child abuse claims the lives of thousands, ruins the lives of millions, and costs more than \$100 billion annually. Yet the help an abused child receives is largely a tragic accident of geography.

- In the area of prisons, while the U.S. has less than 5% of the world's population it has 24% of the world's prisoners—plus much higher crime rates than other rich democracies. Imprisonment has become a substitute for addressing substance abuse, poverty, mental illness, and educational failure. It jeopardizes the life chances of millions of children who have a parent in prison.

These problems are closely related to poverty. Among 26 rich countries the U.S. has the second-worst child poverty rate. Federal budget policies helped make the elderly the least poor group in America. Children are the poorest of all groups. They deserve no less priority than any other group.

It's time for a new debate on the best ways our culture and our government can help families and children overcome homeland insecurity. The 2008 presidential candidates should present their agenda for helping America's children and families. This is a moment when the nation has a unique opportunity to push the presidential campaigns in the direction of children... insistence on new investments can help the country regain its footing on the priorities that matter most.

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