The UNICEF Report on Child Well-Being

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A recent report from the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, entitled “An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries,” assessed the general welfare of children in the European and North American countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The report, which recognizes that policy makers demand clarity, is an exercise in informed aggregation as the 40 examined indicators are summarized as 6 dimensions: Material Well-Being, Health and Safety, Educational Well-Being, Peer and Family Relationships, Behaviors and Risk, and Subjective Well-Being. A summary index was calculated for each dimension, and the average ranking across all the dimensions was then calculated for each country. The authors of the report have done a remarkable job analyzing and formatting the included indicators in a manner that permits valid cross-national comparisons.

The United States and the United Kingdom had among the lowest summary rankings of child well-being of all the examined countries. Although the specific findings in the report should generate calls for better programs for children in these countries, the larger message of the report may lie in what was not explicitly stated but merely implied by the indices: that the relatively low ranking of child well-being reflects relatively high levels of social inequality. The strength of this relationship is suggested in the Figure, in which the report’s child well-being rankings are plotted against the most widely used indicator of inequality, the Gini coefficient, which summarizes the extent to which the distribution of incomes in a society departs from complete equality. As is evident in the graph, the United States has by far the greatest inequality, with the UK coming close second, as well as the worst indicators of child well-being among the compared countries.

The scale of social inequality in the United States translates directly into substantial levels of absolute poverty, particularly for children. When one adjusts for the purchasing capacity of different levels of income in each country, the poorest families in the United States fare worse than their counterparts in many of the other countries included in the UNICEF report. Moreover, children are more heavily concentrated in the poorest segments of American society. Indeed, the material insecurity that a family with children currently feels is greater now than it has been since the Great Depression. The number of children living in or near poverty in the United States is so large that virtually all indicators of child well-being that are sensitive to social status will prove to be relatively low in international comparisons.

Beyond absolute levels of child poverty, the observed differences in social inequality are also associated with different political attitudes toward ameliorating poverty’s impact on children. A recent survey of attitudes toward income inequalities in OECD countries suggested that Americans are less aware of the actual scale of inequality at the top of their income distribution than was found in the other surveyed countries. More important still was the finding that attitudes in the United States toward reducing income inequalities were more polarized than in the other countries. Americans had similar attitudes toward reducing inequalities between the highest income and middle income levels, but had less interest than in the other surveyed countries in reducing inequalities between the middle and lowest income levels. This is likely expressed in the relatively weak social programs in the United States dedicated to ameliorating the effect of poverty on child health and development.

The United Kingdom provides an interesting contrast in view of its different European style political and welfare system. In the United Kingdom, under a Labour government, there has been a major shift in policy to reduce child poverty and improve educational attainment through major investment in deprived areas, an overarching set of targets (the Every Child Matters framework), and the appointments of an ombudsman for children and a children’s commissioner to oversee these policy developments. One might have expected better progress with the United Kingdom’s well-developed and universal welfare system, which includes a health service that has received unprecedented levels of federal investment in recent years (although one must be cautious in approaching the data which are up to 7 years old). The indicators have all received the same weighting for simplicity, but whether this is a reasonable assumption may require more research.

Nevertheless, for those looking at these data in the United Kingdom, there has been good progress in keeping children safe from injury, although the United Kingdom...
still fares poorly in immunization, infant mortality, and low birth weight rates. In terms of educational attainment, the United Kingdom appears to be in a paradoxical situation: children have relatively good access to educational equipment items such as books, computers, textbooks, and a place to work, but the United Kingdom has among the lowest percentages of 15- to 19-year-olds in full-time or part-time education.

There is something in the national character that is worrying from a child rights perspective, and that is how children feel in these societies. Children’s self-perception of health is rated as fair or poor for 1 in 5 children in the United States and the United Kingdom, compared with 1 in 10 children living in Spain. There are low ratings of family and peer relationships and high levels of reported bullying, particularly in the United Kingdom. Bullying has been a part of British life for decades and is featured in the works of social commentators such as Dickens. Perhaps some of this deep-seated social malaise among children and the attitudes adults have of children may partly explain the relatively high levels of risk-taking behavior, alcohol and drug use, and teenage pregnancy. The headlines in the newspapers immediately after the publication of the UNICEF report highlighted a nation living in fear of each other—both adults and children—with a real loss in trust between neighbors and within communities.

The UNICEF report strengthens calls to improve public programs for children, including education and access to health services. However, true progress in these essential arenas may require a more fundamental awareness of the scale of social inequality in both countries and a research and policy focus on strengthening social capital and its association with an improved sense of well-being and safety—a necessary prerequisite to better child health.1,2,7

REFERENCES