



Columbia University

## The Clearinghouse on International Developments In Child, Youth and Family Policies

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## Beyond Child Poverty: The Social Exclusion of Children

Europeans talk differently than Americans do about disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their governments feel an obligation to do more. A currently favored concept, “social exclusion,” has become increasingly popular in policy discussions in Europe, Latin America, and Canada. Should we in the U.S. adopt the concept as the Congress, the White House, and social welfare service systems plan for the future? Would it enrich our child and family policy debates?

A recently released Columbia University report explores these questions and concludes that while specifics need to be worked out and negotiated, it is urgent and timely to take the child policy discussion “beyond poverty,” if we are to improve the situation of American children. As the report states, “Clearly, those engaged in the debate are not satisfied with what we now do. Our 1996 Welfare Reform chose “dependency” as its main target (how much would caseloads fall?)” As we write, there are those who want to adopt poverty reduction as the primary TANF target in the reauthorization legislation while others want to focus on marriage; and there is also comprehensive legislation in the Congress initiated by the liberal Children’s Defense Fund, which would “leave no child behind.” President George W. Bush borrowed the very same phrase but for a more limited education package which was enacted. What does all of this mean? Are we ready for “social exclusion” or some other summing up of disadvantage that goes beyond poverty?

This issue brief, perhaps raising more questions than it answers, reviews the concept and its potential for American usage.

### **The Background**

Among the reasons for exploring an alternative concept to poverty, or a supplementary concept, are (1) the growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the conventional measure of income poverty used in this country; and (2) the apparent limits of the poverty “frame” in rallying public will to mount the policies needed to lift families and their children out of poverty.

A key characteristic of “social exclusion” is the framing of the issue as social and community exclusion, rather than individual and personal culpability. It’s increasingly distinguished from financial poverty and focused rather on constricted access to civil, political, and social rights and opportunities. Social exclusion is particularly devastating for children because if encountered when very young, it closes children out of the experiences they need to start right -- access to health care and to preschool education, for example.

"Social exclusion " is a multi-dimensional concept, involving economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of disadvantage and deprivation. First used in France in the mid-1970s, European scholars and policy makers adopted the concept as an effort to go beyond poverty. "Social exclusion" is often described as the process by which individuals and groups are wholly or partly closed out from participation in their society, as a consequence of low income and constricted access to employment, social benefits and services, and to various aspects of cultural and community life.

Like poverty, social exclusion is not attributed to any single cause. Persistently low incomes, lack of job opportunities, place of residence or neighborhood, lack of access to education, to health care, and to other public services combine to trap particular groups in a situation of severe disadvantage. Although income and financial assets are still considered key elements in achieving positive outcomes for children, social exclusion is not primarily concerned with either of them (or with disability) but rather with the broader range of capabilities people enjoy or fail to enjoy.

Earlier efforts in the U.S. to go beyond the limitations of a financial measure employed the concept of the "underclass". This concept stressed individual involvement in a series of pathologies and, in the view of some scholars, carried a Social Darwinist innuendo. In contrast, although "social exclusion" includes attention to some of the same problems, it also may reflect concern with racism and discrimination as among the causes -- and a concern that socially excluded children will pose a threat to the future well-being of society as they grow up with little stake in the existing order.

## The Concept

Here, we draw on the work of several scholars, both American and European. The Italian sociologist, Chiara Saraceno, reports that the concept of social exclusion is popular despite lack of full agreement as to what it means or how it's caused. She notes that European policy makers and scholars view it as a way for a society to assess its performance and its risks with regard to social cohesion (social inclusion?) and individuals' well being. The U.S. political economist, Janet Gornick notes that for many Europeans the essence of social inclusion is access to economic and social rights, while U.S. culture and politics tend to reject the notion of positive rights in the sense of having a right to have needs met by the government.

John Micklewright, a British economist, agrees with others that social exclusion is a concept defying clear definition and measurement, but argues that perhaps the introduction of social exclusion into the U.S. debate could usefully stress "*disadvantage*" and attract policy makers who will not tackle "*poverty*". This has happened in the UK. He stresses that exclusion should not be viewed as a *substitute* for "*poverty*". If it has value added, it is as a *complement or supplement* and that is how it is used most of the time in Europe. He raises the question of what a special focus on the social exclusion of children would mean in the U.S. (Do Americans want a more inclusive society where children are concerned? Do parents who are "included" (employed?) rear children who demonstrate more positive outcomes?) If the concern is with the social exclusion of children, Micklewright would emphasize the questions of *who* excludes children and *how*? *Who* includes: parents, schools, employers, and/or governments. With regard to *how*, he notes that parents' own lack of skills and resources may contribute to the exclusion of their children. Schools can exclude through expulsion or by failing to adequately educate children. Employers may exclude by barring youth from labor markets. Governments, both local and national, can exclude by providing inadequate public services (health, education, housing, etc) and interventions.

There seems to be agreement that social exclusion would not be a satisfactory organizing concept if used merely as a variant on poverty and material deprivation. It could be *a useful supplement to the existing measure but not a substitute*. There is disagreement, however, regarding whether one could develop general

measures of social exclusion as such or formulate measures only in relation to particular domains (health, education, employment, housing, social protection). Would measures of “child well being”, as a positive construct be preferable?

How does a mother’s employment status relate to child social inclusion? The welfare results are mixed. When thinking about disabled, vulnerable, children – children with special needs -- what would help them to be included? Why is caring work not viewed as productive work or as facilitating social inclusion? Is paid work the only thing that gives identity, legitimacy, and social inclusion? (Why is it that non-participation in the labor force does not define social exclusion for millionaires or retired people in the U.S.– but it does for single moms?)

## **Measuring It**

If the concept of “social exclusion” is difficult to define, the U.S. economist Robert Haveman and his collaborator argues that it is even more difficult to measure. If it means a process that blocks people from full participation in the society, it raises a number of questions: What is “society”? Is it the person’s immediate community or some form of the majority ---or something else entirely? What is “exclusion”? If a person has many work-related contacts but lacks personal ones (lives alone shops alone, plays alone, bowls alone) is that person “socially excluded”? Is the relevant measure the quantity of contacts, the quality of contacts, or some combination? What dimensions of inclusion (labor market, consumption, recreation) determine whether a person is included or excluded? If a person is receiving public assistance – welfare – is she – and her children -- included or excluded? How do we account for the subjective aspects of social exclusion – given differences in individuals’ perceptions of their status? What measures are available to assess social exclusion and are there available data?

J. Lawrence Aber and his colleagues explore alternative definitions of social exclusion of children drawn from the European literature. They note the need to link the concept of social exclusion to existing measures of child well-being or to new measures yet to be developed. They point out that the concept is really only relevant to countries with robust economies --- to countries that have already confronted and addressed the problem of income poverty and successfully eliminated child poverty or achieved low rates. This is not yet the case in the U.S., but the potential is there.

Social exclusion is an important concept because it does go beyond income poverty and can provide new information and insights regarding causes and solutions to a wider range of problems and dimensions of disadvantage. How we label a problem – *how we frame it* --- does have significant implications. Calling a problem “social exclusion” may make a difference. Scholars acknowledge that for most people social exclusion of children is largely associated with social exclusion of their parents. Obviously, we cannot fully separate the social exclusion of children from that of their parents, especially with regard to very young children. In addition, there are risk factors linked to social exclusion, still separate from measures of child well-being, such as minority racial and ethnic status. Aber and his colleagues conclude that we must direct attention to exclusion “*of whom and by whom*” as well as exclusion “*from what*” and “*how*”. We must determine what are the forces, processes, institutions, and groups that are causing or leading children to be socially excluded.

Current international work on indicators of child well-being includes, in addition to poverty, access to health care, housing, caring services, education, and conditions of work. Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, now reports non-monetary indicators such as the percentage of households that cannot afford:

- to eat meat/chicken/fish every second day
- to keep home adequately warm
- to buy new rather than second-hand clothes
- (for those aged 16 and over) to participate in social, cultural and political activities
- to develop and sustain relationships with neighbors.

A British 2001 report, *Preventing Social Exclusion* identified a series of negative indicators in addition to low income:

- workless households
- teenage out-of-wedlock pregnancy
- drug use among youth
- high rates of adult illiteracy
- school drop out
- homelessness.

In the U.S., racial discrimination, and in the U.S. and elsewhere, immigrant status would be added as well.

## **The Questions in Focus**

For Americans seeking to improve the situation of children, what can this concept accomplish? How can it enrich the policy debate?

More specifically, *one major question is: How does all this relate to children?* If parents are socially excluded are outcomes for children always negative? There is some evidence that when former welfare recipient-mothers work in paid employment (achieving social inclusion) and obtain higher income, the result may be positive outcomes for their school-aged children, but negative outcomes for adolescents and the consequences are unknown for infants and toddlers..

*A second question is whether indicators of child well-being are any different than indicators of social exclusion and to what extent the social exclusion concept does go beyond material deprivation -- beyond inadequate resources and poverty? What does social exclusion add to the discussion of child well-being or could either term be used with the same results?*

*A third question is: Does there need to be a holistic measure of social exclusion or can there be a cluster of indicators (e.g. health, education, housing, as well as poverty and material well being)? Given that the concept is multi-dimensional, it would seem to require an array of data not just data on income poverty.*

To summarize, *the core question is:*

- ***Who is excluded (e.g. racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, the disabled) from what (e.g. health care, education, employment, caring services, economic well-being, social participation) how or by what (e.g. actors/systems/processes), with what consequences, and what does it mean to be included?***

## **Conclusions**

What does this add up to? There is some agreement now on what social exclusion is, if not on how the concept can be operationalized. There is some progress with regard to issues of measurement, but many

questions remain. The multidimensional aspect of social exclusion underscores the interactions among domains: Social exclusion in one domain often has consequences for others. There are links across domains of well-being, for example, between child health and income/economic security, family and family resources, and neighborhood/ community resources. There are links between education and family, neighborhood, and economic security, and between neighborhood and family, health, housing, and economic security. Social exclusion is a framework (or umbrella). Nonetheless, we need to explore further whether the concept could have political appeal, and what, if anything, it would add to existing policy discussion.. Will Americans reject it precisely because it is European, especially now given the political tensions? Is it less useful now that the economic situation has deteriorated, unemployment rates have grown, and welfare rolls are rising again?

Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn

The book ***Beyond Child Poverty: The Social Exclusion Of Children***, edited by Alfred J. Kahn And Sheila B. Kamerman can be purchased for \$15, prepaid, postage and handling included. Copies available upon request gratis to the media, public officials and administrators. To obtain a copy of the book, write to the Institute for Child and Family Policy at Columbia University, 622 West 113th Street, New York, New York 10025-7982, call (212) 854-5448, or email: [childnolicv@columbia.edu](mailto:childnolicv@columbia.edu)

*The Clearinghouse provides cross-national, comparative information about the policies, programs, benefits and services available in advanced industrialized countries to address child, youth, and family needs. The Clearinghouse is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

*The Clearinghouse periodically sends updates regarding international developments in child, youth and family policies. If you know of someone interested in receiving these updates, please refer them to our website where they can register for our on-line updates. If you wish to be taken off our mailing list please contact us at [childpolicyintl@columbia.edu](mailto:childpolicyintl@columbia.edu).*



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