Benjamin I. Page and James R. Simmons, *What Government Can Do: Dealing with Poverty and Inequality*

What Government Can Do: Dealing with Poverty and Inequality by Benjamin I. Page; James R. Simmons

Review by: Sanford F. Schram

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Interested Americans know how indifferent or even hostile the U.S. political climate is to the condition of poor people around the world. As recently as the 2000 presidential election, advocates who appealed to the large wage and asset gap separating families in the United States were accused of instigating class warfare. The plight of poor countries is almost completely absent from the U.S. debate. People concerned about poverty in other countries are struck by the enormous deprivations experienced by refugees around the world, by slum dwellers in megacities of the Indian subcontinent and South America, by the sense of hopelessness for vast segments of Africa. “Poverty” is the word we use to summarize the conditions that shock us, and per capita income is how we try to measure poverty or judge solutions to it.

Amartya Sen’s closely argued book is a compelling invitation to rethink the way we conceptualize the problems of deprived countries and populations. A discourse centered on levels of income is inadequate and misleading, Sen argues. The relief of poverty is not an end in itself, but a means to allow people full lives. If the goal of promoting development is for poor people to achieve basic human freedoms, then we should concentrate on that central objective rather than on the usual proxies for successful development, such as increases in gross national product (GNP) or per capita income. Substantive freedoms are for Sen constitutive of development, while development itself is thoroughly dependent on the achievement of substantive freedoms. This achievement is both an end and a means to that end.

Sen considers five basic human freedoms. These are (1) political freedoms (opportunities for people to determine who governs them); (2) economic facilities (opportunities to use economic resources for the purposes of consumption, production, or exchange); (3) social opportunities (for such resources as health care and education); (4) transparency guarantees (the freedom for people to deal with each other under conditions of disclosure and lucidity); and (5) protective security (including safety net provisions for the unemployed and indigent).

Sen contrasts his position to the “school of hard knocks,” which holds that such substantive freedoms should be secondary to a primary concern for “getting the economy going.” Getting the economy going will not necessarily achieve broader goals: “For example, the citizens of Gabon or South Africa or Namibia...

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or Brazil may be much richer in terms of per capita GNP than the citizens of Sri Lanka or China or the state of Kerala in India, but the latter have very substantially higher life expectancies than do the former” (pp. 5–6). To use an American example, African Americans as a group are very many times richer in income terms than the people of China or Kerala, even when adjusting for cost-of-living differences, but they have a lower chance of reaching an advanced age than people in either of those places.

The book is full of such revealing examples of the variability between income and first-order measures of well-being. The examples are not only between-country comparisons, but within-country differences in large countries. The examples also demonstrate the complexities of the relationships between measures of well-being. So while undernourishment is far higher in India than in sub-Saharan Africa, life expectancy in the former is far higher. That is partly because India has been comparatively free of acute famine and because its admittedly inadequate health-care services have not been overwhelmed by political and military turmoil. Similarly, there are huge differences in female to male ratios in the total undernourished populations of different countries and in sections of countries, with Kerala again scoring high on this indicator, while India in the aggregate scores low. “The main culprit seems to be the comparative neglect of female health and nutrition especially—but not exclusively—during childhood” (p. 106).

Sen provides examples from richer countries as well. Unemployed people in Europe enjoy a higher level of income support than do their counterparts in the United States, but the percentage of unemployed people in Europe is higher. That has consequences for well-being because unemployment affects work motivation and skills, self-confidence, morbidity, and mortality.

Sen highlights other complementarities to make his point about the importance of basic freedoms. While both China and India have moved to a more open economy, China has achieved more success in growth because of prior commitments to basic health and education services. So the Chinese people, because they were better educated and healthier, were more able to take advantage of market opportunities than the people of India. Moreover, Sen argues, such a commitment is not fantasy for a poor country. The delivery of basic education and health care are very labor intensive and, therefore, relatively inexpensive in low-wage economies.

While it may be obvious that basic health care and education are essential to a full life, it may not be obvious that democracy is important except as an end value itself: Some might argue, in fact, that democracy is an add-on, a luxury that should not take precedence over other freedoms. Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore who argues for Asian as against Western values, is a major proponent of the view that the pursuit of democracy hinders economic advance. (Sen makes short work of the claim that “Asian values” are indifferent to issues of freedom.)

A powerful argument about the importance of democracy for other freedoms is Sen’s observation that famines have never occurred in a country that is independent, that goes to the polls regularly, that has opposition parties and independent newspapers. The argument rests partly on a complex analysis of the dynamics of relative food shortages in the most common famine situations where there is no aggregate shortage of food. But it also rests on the observation that elected governments cannot permit famines to occur and indeed have a variety of means of preventing them. Famine prevention, he argues, is quite dependent on political arrangements. In richer countries famine can be avoided by various safety net entitlement programs and in poorer countries through such means as public employment programs. But it is the political pressure that
only exists in a democracy that makes famine intolerable. Sen quotes Mao Tse-
tung’s partial explanation for a famine that killed 30 million Chinese: “Without
democracy, you have no understanding of what is happening below; the situation
will be unclear . . . . Top-level organs of leadership will depend on one-sided
and incorrect material to decide issues” (p. 182). Democracy also has a direct
role in promoting human capabilities, an instrumental role that enables people
to express and support their claims for political attention and a constructive
role that allows people to participate in the conceptualization of need.

Sen’s defense of the primacy of democracy for development and his argument
for social opportunities raise the question of how he regards markets. It is a
question he is eager to take on, particularly in the context of what he sees as
the prevailing wisdom that the virtues of the market mechanism are now so
widely assumed as to need no qualification.

First, he points out that markets contribute massively to freedom, particularly
freedom to seek employment that maximizes a worker’s talents, wishes, and
opportunities. Like African-American slaves in the antebellum South, today’s
child laborers in Pakistan or Bangladesh and women in certain Islamic countries
lack the freedom to enter or not enter labor markets as they choose, and they
suffer enormous consequences. Even that great critic of capitalism, Karl Marx,
Sen points out, saw the emergence of freedom of employment (which depends
on markets) as “momentous progress” (p. 113). But the market, absent of con-
trols and supplementation, can leave many suffering from the lack of other
freedoms.

Well versed in the long-standing equity versus efficiency debates, Sen makes
the case for a variety of supplements to and regulations of markets. He argues
the importance, for example, of public goods, important protections or services
that an individual cannot or will not buy for herself, such as environmental
protection.

Sen also tackles head-on the issue of providing income supplements and
incentives. In the case of unemployment benefits, he argues that employment
is sought for a number of reasons in addition to income and that the disincentive
effects of unemployment benefits are unclear. Those effects need to be identified
and then become part of the public debate on how to balance the claim for
income against the claim of maintaining work incentives. The larger point is
that responsibility can be enhanced rather than diminished by expanding peo-
ple’s freedoms: “The substantive freedoms that we respectively enjoy to exercise
our responsibilities are extremely contingent on personal, social, and environ-
mental circumstances” (pp. 283–84).

Sen is similarly open about the competing claims of making public expen-
ditures for social opportunity and guarding against public deficits and inflation,
arguing that there is a difference between antideficit radicalism and genuine
financial conservatism. “The point at issue,” he observes, “is whether it makes
sense to give absolute priority to one objective only, viz., the avoidance of infla-
tion (a priority formalized by many central banks in Western Europe), while
tolerating remarkably high rates of unemployment. If the analysis presented in
this book is right, the making of public policy in Europe has to give real priority
to eliminating the capability deprivation that severe unemployment entails” (p.
141). “Financial conservatism,” he concludes, “should be the nightmare of the
militarist, not of the school teacher or the hospital nurse” (p. 145).

Conservatives and libertarians often make the argument that one reason not
to supplement or regulate the market in favor of the less fortunate is that public
programs can have unintended consequences. Of course, responds Sen, but
they can also have intended consequences, and sometimes the unintended con-
sequences can be positive. So, for example, the Maoist policies of land reform,
expansion of literacy, and the enlargement of public health care were not intended to ready the nation for a market economy but did precisely that for postreform China.

Sen concludes his tour de force with a reiteration of his basic arguments. “While economic prosperity helps people to have wider options and lead more fulfilling lives, so do more education, better health care, finer medical attention, and other factors that causally influence the effective freedoms that people actually [get to] enjoy” (p. 295).

These complex issues receive little attention in U.S. public debate. But decisions that affect the dynamics Sen describes are made every day in poor countries and in international agencies and donor countries. Sen performs the great service of arguing the critical need to supplement and regulate markets to help poor people achieve freer lives, and he takes on both the more moderate and the more ideological critics of those strategies.

It might seem crass to conclude by thinking about the consequences of Sen’s arguments for poor people in the richest country, but perhaps understanding those arguments as they apply to the United States might encourage us to apply them to countries we know much less about. One view of the Clinton administration’s economic policies is that under the tutelage of Treasury Secretary Rubin and Federal Reserve Board Chairman Greenspan, President Clinton gave up his cherished dreams of massive reinvestment in infrastructure, health, and education in order to reduce the federal budget deficit. The goal was to satisfy the long-term bond markets, reduce long-term interest rates, and hence increase investment and employment. The policy seems to have worked. And increasing employment is a crucial part of Sen’s notion of economic freedom. But economic safety nets, access to adequate education, affordable housing, and health care are also critical components of economic and social freedoms. In a longer-term perspective, the Clinton administration’s failure to add to these other freedoms in order to achieve the scale of reduction in the federal deficit may turn out to have serious consequences for poor people. Sen gives us the encouragement, the evidence, and the arguments to engage this vital debate, and he does it with enormous clarity, evenhandedness, and compassion.

Malcolm Bush
Woodstock Institute, Chicago, and Federal Reserve Board


Every few years a book is published that is designed to be accessible to a broad audience and to state plainly that government is far more effective than it is often made out to be; that social policy is really not destructive of basic work and family values; or that the time has finally come to push for a progressive agenda to guarantee access to a decent education for all, good jobs for those who can work, social insurance for those who cannot, and public assistance for those who for legitimate reasons are not able to have their needs otherwise met. These books usually are true to their word: accessible, demonstrating government’s effectiveness, and outlining a modest progressive agenda. There was John Schwarz’s America’s Hidden Success (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983); Theodore Marmor, Jerry Mashaw, and Phillip Havey’s America’s Misunderstood Welfare State (New York: Basic Books, 1990); and E. J. Dionne’s They Only Look Dead (New York: Touchstone, 1997). Now we get What Government Can Do by Benjamin I.
Page and James R. Simmons. This book is in many respects similar to its predecessors: well written, well documented, and a convincing plea for a real welfare state in the United States.

Yet, this book is not just reiterating or even updating work that has preceded it. It is also distinctive in its own right. Its distinguishing argument is that government social and economic policies are not just needed but are actually quite good at reducing poverty and inequality. The book provides a survey of public programs to indicate that if only given the chance, government could reduce inequality and even begin to eliminate poverty. This is no small claim, but this book largely delivers on it in the most concrete and straightforward way. Rather than offer a sophisticated theoretical argument, it makes its case by way of supplying an avalanche of evidence.

In three different ways, Page and Simmons address the issue of need for government policies to attack inequality and poverty. First, they provide statistical evidence that inequality and poverty are serious problems for American society. Second, they effectively place reducing inequality and poverty among the major functions of government, highlighting how government policies that limit inequality and poverty buttress the fulfillment of other fundamental purposes of government to establish the foundations for a market economy; provide basic public goods that cannot be provided efficiently through the market; ensure economic growth and stability; and help promote a sense of fairness, community, and inclusiveness that is conducive to maintaining social order. Third, and most impressively, Page and Simmons provide extensive coverage of all the major social and economic policies of the government today, highlighting their strengths as well as their weaknesses. They are especially effective in supplying concrete information that debunks myths about the supposed ineffectiveness of social and economic policies. Where there are weaknesses in current policies, What Government Can Do highlights how politics have often constrained policies so as to placate special interests and minimize interference with profit-making opportunities through the market or from government handouts.

What Government Can Do surveys tax policy, education, jobs policies, social insurance, and welfare programs. Its conclusion is that if serious political commitment were made to supporting policies that reduce inequality and poverty, then government’s effectiveness in attacking inequality and poverty could shine through for all to see. The political explanation for problems in social and economic policies is not new, though Page and Simmons do a good job of updating it for various policies with the latest statistical evidence on such matters as who benefits from tax breaks, how corporate welfare is wasteful, and how social policies, whether for subsidizing incomes of single mothers or providing public housing, are constrained by the need to placate powerful political interests during the policy-making process. Page and Simmons also use the latest empirical evidence to demonstrate effectively the solvency of Social Security and to question the supposed negative effects of welfare on work and family values.

Using evidence to cut through the fog of deception regarding our most fundamental social policies is important political work, and it is done in the most thoroughly documented way here. Yet where What Government Can Do is most especially effective is not so much in debunking the opposition to social policies as it is in demonstrating the effectiveness of policies as they are operating in government today, even before reform sets in to correct the distortions wrought by politics. The book is especially effective in doing this when it comes to social insurance programs, but Page and Simmons’s use of the latest empirical evidence is also impressive in demonstrating the effectiveness of wage supplementation policies, education programs, and even much maligned welfare programs such as the Food Stamp Program.
In the end, Page and Simmons return to the progressive agenda that others have advocated. Consistent with the rest of their book, Page and Simmons want to emphasize how the facts basically speak for themselves and support the classic model of a social welfare state where everyone is guaranteed a quality education and a good job at decent pay, supplemented by government policies where necessary, with social insurance benefits to cover those situations where people cannot work and public assistance for those whose needs remain unmet. And given the evidence they supply, it is hard to question that with sufficient political commitment, the U.S. government could quickly elaborate such a system even from existing policies.

What Government Can Do, therefore, replenishes the stock of books that plainly state the progressive agenda for social policy. This is a worthy cause and a needed exercise, in need of being redone periodically so as to stay current and provide the latest information documenting the good works in social policy. And a book such as this is good scholarship even if only in its own way, offering as it does a wealth of empirical evidence while trying to minimize theoretical insights in the name of keeping the narrative accessible to a broad audience. Yet, it is that latter goal that points toward a flawed, unstated political premise of books such as the one under review here. The fact of the matter is that these books do not matter much politically; they do not generate public support for the welfare state and do not result in the country getting any closer to adopting the agenda proposed. While mass-marketed books on the right are often successful in reinforcing prevailing prejudices—one need only think of Charles Murray's Losing Ground (New York: Basic Books, 1984)—books on the left seem to be less effective because they are challenging rather than reinforcing prevailing prejudice. I hold out little hope this book would, any more than the others of its genre, create a groundswell for its agenda. I fear that its impact on public discourse will be small compared to Losing Ground.

The question needs to be posed: Who reads these books? One suspects that these books are preaching to the converted. Now, I feel there is value in such an exercise in spite of what the cliché suggests. Preaching to the converted helps keep the flock in place, reminding them of their shared vision and reinforcing commitment. Yet, the converted in this case are a small minority of the American public. And if simply attending to the flock is the only realistic goal to be achieved here, it needs to be said that this is a qualitatively far more limited vision than what I think is the one that informs this book. What Government Can Do offers a narrative that foregoes making sophisticated theoretical arguments and eschews attempts to advance scholarship in the name of trying to put the facts before the mass public in order to inspire support for more progressive social policies. The fact of the matter is that facts are not dispositive when it comes to politics. Good arguments grounded in the best available facts do not make public policy. If they did, we would already have the progressive welfare state argued for in this book. Instead, public policy is influenced by far more than facts. We also need to consider the role played by stories, rumors, and gossip, as well as ideology and ideas. We also need to account for the structure of power in our society and how it limits consideration of the facts and distorts the best ideas. Page and Simmons are aware of these matters and suggest at the end that reform of the political system will be a necessary ingredient of any strategy to realize the progressive welfare state.

Perhaps, then, the most important stage for a book such as this is not the public sphere so much as the undergraduate classroom. There a new generation of citizens can be made aware of the basic facts concerning the necessity and effectiveness of social and economic policies. While this is hardly the dramatic stage
of mass mobilization, it is a noble stage nonetheless, and this book is deserving of that platform.

Sanford F. Schram
Bryn Mawr College


This is a surprisingly engaging and well-written story of the federal budget process as revealed through the lens of the national Food Stamp Program. The surprise is not Ronald King’s capacity to tell a story in an interesting manner, as welcome as it is, but his ability to make the often complicated and sometimes boring machinations of Congress and the White House come to life for the reader. So well has he pulled off this feat that *Budgeting Entitlements* is a work of interest and usefulness not only to scholars of public policy but to graduate and undergraduate college students and even to the general reader who wishes to know more about the inner workings of government policy.

A thoroughly researched book on a political struggle whose protagonists are Republicans and Democrats in the White House and Congress, King’s account really is about the conflict between human compassion and the cost of doing good—about our nation’s struggle with the Western concept of an ethical society and the costs of assuming the responsibilities that it entails. To be certain, this is not a new or even unique struggle in our nation but an ongoing policy debate with two poles: the collective responsibility for promoting the public good by protecting those in need and the fiscal responsibility to see that our bounty is not unduly spent. Indeed, this struggle is at the very heart of American social policy, particularly since the Great Depression brought it center stage and the New Deal transformed the way that we think about the relation between government and the individual. But both before and after the 1920s and 1930s, even as our collective sense of responsibility for individual well-being changed, cost has always been a factor: do we have enough to pay for what we might wish to do, and will benefits go only to those who need and deserve them?

In a sense, King’s work is but a more recent treatment of this classic policy debate with the costs of the Food Stamp Program as its modern-day context. The only difference, he notes, is that the struggle over food policy to protect the nation’s hungry takes place at a time of growing “fiscalization” of public policy. Every possible initiative to help the downtrodden has a price tag—both fiscal and political—often imposed before need even is evaluated. Virtually every debate over federal policy is one about the budget, virtually every discussion is framed (initially and often permanently) in terms of the costs rather than the need, and virtually every consideration is about short-run costs rather than long-term social benefits. These political shackles largely are forged by elected officials who dance the dance of being both compassionate and conservative in order to placate competing constituencies, even as they tie their own feet with the rhetoric of no new taxes. “In a world in which raising taxes meant political suicide,” notes King, “in which discretionary spending already has been severely trimmed, and in which the notion of public obligation to protect adequate welfare was increasingly under attack, it was logical to expect that the demand for effective entitlement restraint would reemerge with a vengeance” (p. 188). He refers to the policy debate over welfare devolution of the mid-1990s, of course, but this gets us a bit ahead of the story.

In a more narrow sense, this is a book not only about the unresolved tension
between welfare protections and fiscal responsibility but about how various budget rules affect the character and nature of social policy, and not always in the manner that was intended. Social science literature is replete with examples of unintended consequences, the intersection of good intentions and their unforeseen products. King’s work skillfully places the food stamp budget debate within this important literature by examining the impact of three forms of budget rules applied at different times to the Food Stamp Program: discretion, entitlement, and expenditure caps. Discretionary funding leaves it to Congress to determine annually the level of support for a particular program; the recipients of discretionary program assistance have no guarantee of any benefit or service, and, if funding is provided by Congress, equally eligible individuals do not necessarily have equal access to program benefits. The money goes as far as it goes, and those without have no recourse. Under an entitlement program, on the other hand, Congress must provide adequate funding for all eligible parties; if initial appropriations are insufficient, supplemental funding is appropriated. Under this scenario, Congress decides that a particular program is so vital that need will be met each year without subjecting it to the annual appropriations and review process. Spending caps are a middle ground between discretionary rules and entitlements: they operate like an entitlement up to and above the cap the program operates in a discretionary fashion so long as sufficient funds remain. In essence, caps are a marriage between fiscal conservatism and espoused compassion wherein Congress and the president are unwilling to finance obligations fully but also are unwilling to denounce them.

The Food Stamp Program has operated under each of these budget rules since it became a national program in the 1960s, and King analyzes why policy makers resorted to each form and how the Food Stamp Program has been affected by each form. Of particular interest is King’s evaluation of the way that Congress and various administrations have knowingly underfunded the program, to provide themselves with short-term fiscal victories to crow about, knowing that they later would augment their purposeful underfunding with supplemental corrections. This sleight of hand worked best for the White House under entitlement funding because Congress would have to ante up more funding later on, and it worked best for Congress under caps as a way to protect its oversight powers.

The original Food Stamp Act of 1964 provided a dual justification for the program: to serve the interests of agricultural producers and, secondarily, to feed the hungry. It began as a discretionary program, but King shows that as an entitlement during the mid-1970s, it served its function pretty much as its bipartisan authors had intended; it worked well as a countercyclical vehicle with benefits expanding during economic downturns and rolls contracting when times got better. Insulated from the annual fluctuations of politics, the program was a major success, as the case-load numbers dispassionately reveal. But of course it was not long before politics subjected the program to the ideological whims of the times. As both presidential and congressional politics became defined by the Carter-era recession and the looming federal budget deficits run up during the Reagan years, budget caps were imposed on the Food Stamp Program, which previously had operated as an entitlement. King deftly walks us through this shift, as well as later changes in the politics of food stamp budgeting up to and including the period of welfare devolution in the mid-1990s. The one constant through the periods of change in budget policy, however, was its political context. Ideological stridency increased with alarming regularity, and the war between the two nonjudicial branches of government was fought over the causes of poverty and the extent that government could (and should) do anything about it. King’s analysis stops as of 1996, but of course the issues remain.
With more than 30 million Americans suffering from hunger and food insecurity, even during the height of the nation’s record-long period of economic prosperity through the year 2000, any reader might be forgiven for wondering about the prospects for ever ending hunger. Without saying so directly, King’s analysis of the politics of budgeting suggests that we can expect overly cautious half measures at best. At worst we are treated to political leaders who use demagogic rhetoric to gain political support at the expense of the nation’s more vulnerable people. Among the cautious were Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, otherwise sympathetic people who were so transfixed with the minutiae of budget strategy that neither could bring himself to take any meaningful steps to end hunger. Somewhere between the cautious and the demagogic was President Richard Nixon, who once spoke eloquently about the moral blight that hunger represented to the nation only to turn around and impale the poor when he (and then Gerald Ford) found it expedient to castigate big-spending liberals as campaign time approached. And among the demagogues none surpasses Senator Jesse Helms, who has regularly referred to hungry people with such disdainful characterizations as “parasites,” an especially vulgar recrimination when its World War II application to Jews and gypsies is recalled.

What King does not do sufficiently is highlight the role of so-called New Right foundations and policy groups in poisoning public discourse so that officials who have the capacity to end hunger virtually ignore it instead. While King is technically correct in noting that hunger and malnutrition are an embarrassment across virtually all political persuasions, his focus on formal Washington budget politics does not allow for sufficient attention to the ways that fringe groups continue to deny the obvious problem of hunger and, in so doing, limit what is possible. To this day, for example, the Heritage Foundation spews out its opinions to policy makers, claiming both that there is no hunger in America and that the hungry have themselves to blame for their plight. Both Heritage and the American Enterprise Institute claim, with no scholarly input whatsoever, that hunger cannot be a problem because so many people are obese; to the thoughtful mind this is like arguing that cancer is not serious because people have heart disease. The cleverly packaged ideological enunciations of such groups get through to elected officials who are predisposed to believe such claims or who are too busy to know where to get dispassionate information from reputable sources.

Because King’s work is so detailed and covers several decades, its slight imperfections are relatively insignificant. He contends, for example, that the Nixon administration was predisposed to cashing out the Food Stamp Program (eliminating it as a separate program and providing cash benefits instead), yet Jean Mayer, who headed up the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health for Nixon, often recounted how Nixon opposed cashing out the program because stamps provided a safeguard against misuse that money itself did not, and this security was critical for maintaining public support for the program. In another instance, King recounts the plans of Congressmen Leon Panetta and the late Mickey Leland to use the work of the Harvard University–based Physician Task Force on Hunger in America (which I chaired at the time) to highlight the seriousness of hunger in the nation as a tool to counter further cuts in program support then being proposed by both Ronald Reagan and Helms. What actually happened was that a small coalition met with Panetta and Leland to say that we would denounce their lack of leadership on the issue if they did not get over their timidity. In prior years they had tried to hold the status quo by fighting further cuts in the program, instead of filing legislation to restore funds in the face of mounting hunger. We argued that they had to change the political dynamic on Capitol Hill, and, to their credit, both men became true leaders in
the successful effort to restore billions in food stamp and child nutrition programs cut in Reagan’s first omnibus budget, which was passed, it must be noted, by a Democratic Congress.

These imperfections are but quibbles about an otherwise very readable and clear account of the often complicated and dry federal budget process. By isolating the Food Stamp Program for such treatment, King makes the budget process more understandable as it pertains to policy issues in general. But his work is about far more than the federal budget process and the recent fiscalization of government. Budget politics is, first and foremost, politics and, therefore, about self-interest. While the ambivalence that elected officials manifest toward ending hunger may be borne of competing interests—fiscal restraint and human compassion—true leadership ultimately is about transcending self-interest for the public good. King has helped us understand why a nation virtually unconstrained by resources remains limited by elected officials who do not exhibit the moral leadership to bring an end to hunger.

J. Larry Brown
Brandeis University


In the words of Diana Mendley Rauner, “this book is a call to action to anyone who works for and worries about the next generation” (p. 1). Rather than reciting alarming statistics to emphasize the dire status of America’s youth, Rauner pursues her mission by presenting six inspiring examples of youth programs run by adults who commit themselves to nurturing the best in young people. Despite great diversity in settings and programmatic offerings, the central purpose of each program is to facilitate caring relationships that serve as contexts in which young people can learn skills, concepts, and values in preparation for adult roles and responsibilities. The articulation and elaboration of this basic theme, the importance of “caring” in the lives of young people, is the larger goal of the book. Rauner endeavors to give the concept of caring new power and meaning as a broad, overarching framework to summarize both what young people need for healthy development (care from others) and what we might wish them to become (caring individuals). Ultimately, the book aims for a broad reexamination of the way we interact with young people in several increasingly complex levels of contact: in our person-to-person exchanges, in our professional capacities, in the messages and actions of our organizations, and in our values and priorities as a society.

The book’s attention to safe, supportive, and inviting contexts for adolescent growth corresponds to an emerging movement among youth workers, researchers, and policy makers to understand and promote positive youth development. During the 1990s, for example, a major initiative undertaken by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development examined the role of major American institutions—families, schools, youth-serving organizations, health-care providers, and the media—in meeting the fundamental needs of adolescents as they make the transition into healthy, constructive adults (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century [New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1995]). The proposition that caring can serve as a conceptual foundation for linking diverse influences on positive adolescent socialization and development has its origins in the Lilly
Endowment’s Research Grants Program on Youth and Caring (Robert J. Chaskin and Theresa Hawley, *Youth and Caring: Developing a Field of Inquiry and Practice* [Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 1994]). Seeking a theoretical anchor for its grants on youth issues, the Lilly Endowment funded several studies and commissioned numerous papers to initiate a new, interdisciplinary field of inquiry focusing on young people and caring within the social contexts of family, school, community, and society. Practitioners and academics joined in this project, which entailed defining core concepts, debating philosophical values, exploring ways of measuring care, examining how caring behavior is cultivated, and investigating the benefits of caring environments. The Lilly Endowment’s research agenda was coordinated by the Chapin Hall Center for Children, where Rauner is a senior research associate.

*They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall* attempts to integrate the conceptual work on young people and caring with the practical concerns of its intended audience—parents, youth workers, and policy makers. To emphasize that the need for care may be less obvious but no less important beyond infancy and childhood, the book concentrates on the “organized, intentional care” that community-based programs offer to young people in the middle- and high-school years. Youth development programs have been part of the local and national fabric for decades. Viewed as an informal network ranging from grassroots groups to widely known organizations such as YMCA-YWCA and Campfire, youth agencies provide a context for normative socialization and development second only to public schools in the number of children served (Jane Quinn, “Where Need Meets Opportunity: Youth Development Programs for Early Teens,” *Future of Children* 9, no. 2 [1999]: 96–116). The book features exemplary programs that are consistent with a positive youth development philosophy stressing the provision of opportunities and supports to help young people gain competencies and skills that foster healthy adjustment as they mature.1 Rauner incorporates the experiences and comments of program participants to provide concrete descriptions of behaviors, practices, and policies that reflect caring in action.

To lay the foundation for her case, Rauner defines caring as a practice involving three interacting components: attentiveness, responsiveness, and competence. In this heuristic model, caring is predicated on awareness and sensitivity to the needs, concerns, desires, opinions, and life conditions of others. “Responsiveness” is the motivation that impels one to act based on this understanding of the other person. “Competence” refers both to the process—the general skills and attributes associated with successful attentiveness and responsiveness—and to the result—how well care actually addresses the other person’s particular needs and desires. Although Rauner states that “the final, and in a sense, most important quality of the caring process is the interactive nature of its three components,” her description of how this occurs is vague: “attentiveness prepares a way for responsiveness, and responsiveness demands competence, they each circle back to one another” (p. 23).

The initial conceptualization of caring seems overly broad and insubstantial, but Rauner intends it to be an organizing principle that can encompass all variety of caring actions. The meaning and value of caring gradually takes on weight as she uses examples from the model programs to illustrate its many manifestations. For instance, she explores how caring within the context of an ongoing relationship is characterized by mutuality, trust, and boundaries. She examines how caring behavior can be cultivated through expectations, norms, and experiences so that it eventually develops into a guiding ethic for relating to others in social situations. She also highlights the manner in which organizations can sustain care through their practices, structures, modes of communication, and values. To augment her observations, Rauner draws sparingly from
literature in the fields of psychology, sociology, education, and particularly moral philosophy. Her references to theory and evidence pertaining to interpersonal relations, organizational dynamics, and societal influences contributing to youth development are brief but relevant.

Unfortunately, the book comes up short in addressing what might have been its centerpiece: what does organized, intentional care actually accomplish? Acknowledging the many difficulties in measuring a multifaceted concept of care as well as the limited amount of research investigating the impact of care on youth development, Rauner implies the research challenges may be too great and urges the “leap of faith required . . . to believe that intentional care can have similar effects as the spontaneous, naturally occurring care that occurs in families and other settings” (p. 89). In the end, Rauner suggests that caring has inherent value as a social good even if it cannot be shown to have instrumental effects on desired outcomes.

It is clear that much more sophisticated research is necessary in this area, but Rauner does not mention recent progress in defining and measuring youth development constructs and demonstrating the beneficial results of youth development programs. In her comments on mentoring programs, for example, she omits any reference to the impressive findings of the most careful and comprehensive experimental study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America yet conducted (J. B. Grossman and J. P. Tierney, “Does Mentoring Work? An Impact Study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program,” Evaluation Review 22, no. 3 [1998]: 403–26). In fact, most youth development programs subjected to rigorous, high-quality evaluations have shown dual benefits—enhancing positive functioning while reducing adolescent problem behaviors—as Catalano et al. and Roth et al. have argued. Better use of the research literature could have bolstered Rauner’s thesis because numerous studies of youth development programs converge on the same conclusion; stated succinctly, “Young people need access to safe places, challenging experiences, and caring people on a daily basis” (Roth et al., p. 427). Furthermore, comprehensive reviews of successful programs identify the same guiding philosophies Rauner stresses in her illustrative examples. Successful programs listen and adapt to the needs of young people, provide individualized attention, give opportunities for participation in culturally appropriate activities, maintain high expectations, promote positive social values, and create environments in which caring adults support and empower young people in their development of competencies, as the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and Roth et al. have concluded.

Of course, Rauner has set out to do more than provide a definitive summary of youth development programs. In presenting the book as a call to action, her stated purpose is to advocate social and political change that creates for young people “a world infused with and organized by care” (p. 135). This activist orientation becomes even more apparent as the closing chapters focus on attitudes and beliefs. Rauner makes appeals based on moral and ethical arguments to place a premium on caring not only in the personal sphere but also in communities, public institutions, and society at large. This project is termed “subversive” because “a culture of care rests on values of mutuality, interdependence, and sharing of burdens—values that challenge many of the assumptions that undergird our existing institutions” (p. 133). In other words, an ethic of caring is inconsistent with prevalent self-focused, self-absorbed attitudes stressing individuality, competition, and personal fulfillment. Rauner also observes that caring has been devalued as it has been “privatized” and “feminized,” that is, relegated to the family and viewed as a feminine activity. To rescue caring from its marginalization in public life, she calls for a cultural shift from independence to interdependence and from rights to responsibilities.
In the final analysis, *They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall* contributes to the civic dialogue about how we prepare the next generation for adulthood. As endless school reforms demonstrate, it is extremely difficult to reach consensus regarding our goals and aspirations for young people and then to determine the best means to encourage their fulfillment. Rauner’s articulation of the concept of caring may provide some coherence in this process by suggesting a common language and a core set of values. In addition, the focus on community-based programs reinforces the importance of opportunities and supports for adolescent development beyond the domains of family and school. The book is particularly effective at the applied level, with the compelling accounts of successful programs giving a fresh perspective on the best practices for working with young people in organized settings. By accentuating the positive and the possible, Rauner has produced a book offering promise, hope, and inspiration for people who care about and who care for young people.

Thomas Keller

*University of Chicago*

**Notes**


Much has been written about the plight of the homeless—their characteristics, their reasons for being homeless, and the success of programs responding to their situation. Families, the focus of this book, are a growing group within the homeless population, and they present a distinct set of issues for social services. *Parenting in Public* makes a unique contribution to the literature on homelessness by focusing on services to homeless families at the personal level, that is, how to treat homeless parents, particularly mothers, on a day-to-day basis within shelters. In particular, this book describes how homeless parents confront the responsibilities of raising children within a system that may treat parents themselves as children. It examines policies and practices in the shelter system that affect parents’ abilities to parent and care for their children. Hence the title *Parenting in Public*: if one accepts public assistance in any form, then one is subject to public scrutiny.
Given the public nature of shelter life, Donna Haig Friedman advocates a family support model of treatment, with its six principles, to be followed within the family shelter system. Citing empirical evidence, she argues that this approach “produces favorable outcomes, including parents having higher levels of perceived control over resources, more positive assessments of relationships between themselves and their helpers, and a heightened sense of their own competencies” (p. 158). Friedman wants the reader to realize that poverty or becoming homeless does not necessarily result from a parent’s personal deficits but, rather, from society’s economic arrangements. She goes so far as to call for a revolution as “the only way to realize family support public assistance practices and policies in the United States” (p. 233). This revolution “is one that we characterize as ‘Power With’ not ‘Power For’ nor ‘Power Over’” (p. 233). In place of “self-sufficiency,” which many policies espouse, Friedman stresses “empowerment” in the sense of “no man is an island” and “it takes a village to raise a child.” Friedman’s notion of “Power With” maintains the value of “mutuality in all relationships and a respect for the potency of knowledge and intelligence gained from lived experiences” (p. 233).

Given this model and principles for how parents should be treated, this book serves as an excellent text for shelter providers. It sensitizes shelter providers to the plight of the homeless through reflections of former clients and providers that describe what many homeless parents feel when faced with the trauma of being homeless only to be thrown into a situation that can continually traumatize through lack of respect and sensitivity. While providers are the greatest beneficiaries of this book, those who are in charge of developing, funding, and supervising programs for the homeless will also benefit from reading this book. Its principles can also be applied, in general, to working with many of the populations served by social services, not just the homeless.

Friedman’s book is based solidly on both quantitative and qualitative research. Its strength is the more qualitative material—in-depth case studies at five shelter programs, detailed throughout the chapters, and phone interviews with 55 shelter directors in the Massachusetts shelter system. Friedman received a high response rate (over 80 percent of the directors) on mailed surveys and conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 frontline staff members and 39 mothers. Not only does she as researcher clearly present a rich picture of shelter life, her coauthors’ written reflections at the end of the chapters provide three more voices of former or current homeless mothers, frontline staff members, and program directors. Friedman is honest about the biases she brings to the research, such as her ethnic and class differences from the population being studied. The book places less emphasis on the quantitative results, which are mainly used to make comparisons with prescriptive, deficit orientations as opposed to family support orientations. While Friedman states significance in some of her findings, we are not presented with any statistical data to support these claims. The number of cases used for her findings is not always clear.

The family support model is supported in the literature in settings other than homeless shelters. Ana Leon looks at this model in terms of how it can help service delivery systems provide quality, community-based, client-driven, and outcome-based services to children and families (“Family Support Model: Integrating Service Delivery in the Twenty-First Century,” *Families in Society: Journal of Contemporary Human Services* 80, no. 1 [1999]: 14–24). She highlights how social work formerly emphasized a deficits-based approach and refers to Dennis Saleeby’s work on strengths perspective (“The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice: Extensions and Cautions,” *Social Work* 41, no. 3 [1996]: 296–305), which has received a lot of attention as an approach to working with clients. While Friedman focuses on strengths the homeless parent brings to the shelter, Leon focuses on how the
client can be strengthened by discovering resources that not only exist within herself and her family but also in her community. Others in the literature present the opposing view, that factors contributing to the mother’s homeless situation can also contribute to her inability to parent (see, e.g., Bonnie Hausman and Constance Hammen, “Parenting in Homeless Families: The Double Crisis,” American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 63, no. 3 [1993]: 358–69). However, even in their recommendations, Hausman and Hammen reflect on the nature of shelter parenting programs. Should such programs be mandatory and a condition for services, or should the provider recognize the trauma of being homeless and offer respite and strengthen the mother’s self-esteem? Friedman would tend not to require parenting programs since mandatory programming is counter to the principles of the family support model.

Friedman’s core argument is that “the quality of the shelter experience matters greatly” (p. 16). She goes beyond structural and individualistic theories (see Barry Jay Seltsier and Donald E. Miller, Homeless Families: The Struggle for Dignity [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993]) of explaining how families become homeless and emphasizes the family support model for treating families once they appear at the doorstep. The model emphasizes empowerment, strengths, mutuality, and respect and provides principles for understanding the effects of poverty and establishing a bond between helper and help receiver. The main difference between Friedman’s book and others on homeless families is its clinical focus on helping clients once they are in the system to reestablish a home and parenting relationships with their children. The book focuses on how to deliver services rather than on which services should be delivered. The richness of Friedman’s story of how homeless mothers feel about the system sensitizes providers to their situations and, it is hoped, will motivate them to reconsider the structure of their programs at these shelters. This book bridges policy and practice—Friedman ends the book with specific recommendations for revolutionary movements to realize family support policies and practices on the front line, within shelter organizations, and through public policy and poverty research.

Teresa Kilbane
Loyola University Chicago

Note

1. For other work on this issue, see Seltsier and Miller; George Thorman, Homeless Families (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1988).


In Critical Issues for Future Social Work Practice with Aging Persons, Sheila Neysmith brings together a number of perspectives on aging. This is an important focus for social work. Women continue to be overrepresented among the aging population. A 1998 Administration on Aging report identified chronic illness, poverty, reduced financial resources, giving and needing care, losing family and friends, and increased institutionalization as problems specific to aging women. Despite this and the rapidly rising number of aging women, research and social policy often overlook this important group.
Neysmith, the book’s editor and coauthor of the first eight chapters, provides a critical feminist analysis that focuses on vulnerable older women. This analysis challenges social workers to move beyond traditional, sometimes oppressive, frameworks to new conceptualizations of aging and disability. This volume identifies the problems of injustice, cultural inequity, and power relationships inherent in caregiving and receiving care that affect fundamental rights of empowerment and justice.

Because more Americans are living into older age than ever before, demand for a variety of social and health services is expected to increase. Social workers who do not necessarily plan to do so will find themselves working around issues of aging. They will need specific knowledge about the critical issues to best serve this population. Critical Issues is a much-needed work to prepare students for the implications of this dramatic demographic shift as well as to provide needed information to currently practicing social workers at clinical and policy levels.

The book’s chapters focus on long-term care areas that affect vulnerable groups, particularly women, as they age. Financially secure and healthy elderly people are not the center of attention. The analysis concentrates on the social conditions within which people age and the organizational context within which services are delivered. The aim is to challenge current social arrangements and explanations that reinforce privilege, while opening up alternatives that might allow people to have fuller, more satisfying lives. This provides a challenge to thinking, or paradigm shift, that the writers suggest is necessary if we are to serve the elderly in the most just and equitable manner. At the level of individuals, the determination of who gets what services in old age is based on individual characteristics of the client. This is problematic because we know that there are general predisposing factors and social conditions that oppress certain groups of elderly people. An emphasis on individual risk factors can quickly turn elderly people, rather than the social conditions in which they live, into the problem.

In the first chapter, Neysmith and Margaret MacAdam discuss the provider-generated definitions of health-care problems such as inappropriate service use, duplication of service, or gaps in service. The frontline practitioner enters into the almost impossible situation of trying to fit the older person’s problems into the available resources. When a family becomes involved in trying to secure assistance, conflict often arises between the practitioner and the family. Unfortunately, the resource negotiation relationship with older people and their families is inherently conflictual. Of course, the ultimate message here is that social work practice needs to be articulated in a way that will not result in older people or family caregivers or the individual practitioner seeing the other parties as the problem.

The notion of sometimes misconstruing and sometimes misusing power is an important theme articulated throughout the book. It forces social workers to look at how the context, social condition, and social location of older people are factors in everyday practice. The use of the term “critical” in the book’s title is well reflected in Neysmith’s choice of topics. One problem with the book is that the theme is dealt with differently through the chapters. Still, the authors establish distinct challenges, and, in total, the message is an extremely provocative wake-up call that illustrates the unfortunate gap between what we know and what we do. There are indeed differences between a more political and a more clinical response to problems of aging. Both are important. Social work advocacy efforts for aging women can integrate these responses to best serve this population.

Robyn L. Golden
Council for Jewish Elderly

With the advent of deinstitutionalization, families by default became the primary caregivers for adults with severe mental illness, who otherwise would have been in state psychiatric institutions. As a result of this shift in the locus of care from hospitals to community, researchers began to examine how these patients adjusted to community living. They found that there were consequences for both the patients and their families (see, e.g., Shirley Angrist, M. Lefton, S. Dinitz, and B. Pasamanick, *Women after Treatment: A Study of Former Mental Patients and Their “Normal” Neighbors* [New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1968] and Howard Freeman and Orzie Simmons, *The Mental Patient Comes Home* [New York: Wiley, 1963]). The return of the patient, many to households of family members, affected all domains of family life, including daily routines; work schedules; leisure activities; relationships with extended family members, friends, and neighbors; and financial resources; as well as general well-being, physical health, psychological strain, and emotional distress, particularly for the primary caregiver. This commenced a line of inquiry, beginning with the work of Jacqueline Grad and Peter Sansbury ("Mental Illness and the Family," *Lancet* [March 9, 1963], pp. 544–47), that came to be referred to as family burden research. With the now classic article by J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton, "The Schizophrenic Patient in the Community and His Effect on the Household" (*International Journal of Psychiatry* 12 [1966]: 165–76), the concept of family burden was further refined into subjective, "psychological or emotional costs" (p. 78), and objective burden, the costs resulting from what the family actually does for their relative. Investigations into the concept of family burden responded to the prevailing belief held by many professionals that families were the causal agent of the illness of their relative.

This family burden research has persisted (even entering geriatric research, by such investigators as Steven Zarit), and it is from this conceptual tradition that Tessler and Gamache’s research emerges. Given the 40-year span of this body of research, the question before us is, What does this book contribute to the knowledge base of the family burden conceptualization? The authors explicitly state that the unique aspect of their research is to survey multiple family members and not limit the sampling frame to "the primary or active caregivers" (p. 25). However, in this volume this unique aspect is not integrated theoretically and, consequently, is not employed analytically in a manner that refines our understanding of family burden.

In traditional survey research style, which reflects the authors’ training as sociologists and their long affiliations with the Social and Demographic Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts, Tessler and Gamache descriptively report the degree to which family respondents minded providing help to their ill relative. This help is defined in terms of a variety of basic needs that their relative had in the 30 days prior to the interview—such as making use of time, helping with taking medication as prescribed, shopping, housework, and laundry—and the frequency distribution of objective care provided by respondents. The researchers also report the percentage of families who actively had done something to try to control their relative’s aversive behaviors—such as drinking, engaging in embarrassing actions, or committing violent acts—and the extent to which the families were bothered by these behaviors. What we find after much quantitative descriptive material is that there was limited objective burden. Families are able to adjust; they feel an obligatory responsibility, even if a parent is unexpectedly having to care for an adult child; they perform these actions out...
of love for their relative and from concern for what might be the relative’s circumstances if this care were not provided.

Financial and emotional costs are also treated rather simplistically. These topics have been dealt with in greater depth and with more explanatory power in the literature; for example, Rovin Clark employs opportunity cost methods (“Family Costs Associated with Severe Mental Illness and Substance Use,” *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 45 [1994]: 808–13), and Jeffrey Draine and I discuss subjective burden with regard to the coping ability of the family member and social supports available, when controlling for such factors as severity and length of the relative’s illness (Phyllis Solomon and Jeffrey Draine, “Subjective Burden among Family Members of Mentally Ill Adults: Relation to Stress, Coping, and Adaptation,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 65 [1995]: 419–27). Had Tessler and Gamache employed a mixed methodology with some qualitative data, they might have enriched our knowledge of families’ experiences with a relative with a severe psychiatric diagnosis. They would also likely have enhanced the readability of the book.

Readers new to the family burden literature will not find in this book an in-depth understanding of the family burden conceptualization. The background literature covers the major topics in a cursory fashion with little focus on the nuances. The authors do address some of the more recent issues related to the topic, for example, examining the positive aspects of caregiving, such as sources of gratification and client contributions to the family unit.

The unfortunate circumstances of the two studies on which the book is based limit the extent to which either study is able to achieve the intended objective. The first part of the book is based on a family study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) that was to coincide with client interviews of the Ohio sites (Cincinnati, Columbus, and Toledo) of the Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Foundation’s Program for the Chronically Mentally Ill. This program was established in 1986 as a service demonstration that was intended to help “the chronically mentally ill function more effectively in their daily lives” through major system change efforts (p. 17). However, because of the vagaries of NIMH funding, this family study was not able to make use of the client interviews conducted as part of the RWJ evaluation. This was further complicated by the extensive missing data that left the investigators unable to use case manager data. Thus, the investigators were not able “to examine whether and in what ways the system changes had an impact on families” (p. 19).

The second study, which is presented in the third part of the book, was funded by the Ohio Department of Mental Health to evaluate the impact on families of implementing Ohio’s mental health managed care. Although the Federal Health Care Financing Administration did approve Ohio’s request for a Medicaid waiver, the state legislature did not approve the provision for carving out mental health services. Thus, again the investigators’ intent to examine the effects of a major policy intervention, mental health managed care, on family burden and family assessment of mental health services is not realized. But since the Ohio system, as those in most other states nationally, was moving toward managed care, the research proceeded as planned.

In conclusion, the impact of major system interventions on all family members, be they active caregivers or not, is a major public health concern. However, the authors’ intent in *Family Experiences with Mental Illness* is unfulfilled. For better treatment of family burden conceptualization and related issues, readers are referred to other writings by these and other authors.

Phyllis Solomon
*University of Pennsylvania*