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SURVIVAL OF THE FAMILY

John L. McKnight, Professor of Communication Studies and Urban Affairs; Associate Director, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research at Northwestern University in Illinois; and an advisory board member of the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, appeared before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Aging, Family and Human Services on September 17, 1981. What follows are his comments concerning the survival of the family in America.

I appreciate this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee on Aging, Family

and Human Services. In the brief time available I would like to focus upon two views of the family and the policy implications of each. My particular emphasis will be upon lower income families residing in our large cities because it is these families and the neighborhoods where they reside that are the focus of much of the research of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research where I am employed.

One hears, in the language of America, two views of the family. The first view is expressed by the voices from our major institutions in the profit, not-for-profit and governmental sectors. They speak of families as "markets," "producing baby booms," "in need of being strengthened,"

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and "having demographic patterns demonstrating various needs." This language is used by those who see families as small groups of related consumers and clients. One hears this language most frequently in the Board rooms of our major corporations, the staff meetings of our service agencies and the hearing rooms of legislatures. This common language demonstrates the uniformity of the institutional view of the family. Family is to buy. Family is to use. Family is to consume. Family is to be helped. Family is to be treated. And family is to provide effective workers and soldiers for the maintenance of the institutions.

The second view of the family is expressed in the voices we hear in the older neighborhoods of Chicago and our other great cities. There, families are the place where you are, from which you come, and to which you will return. Families are about survival. Families make, do, make-do, produce, solve, celebrate and, sometimes, fail. Families also exist in a special universe. They are surrounded by other bodies that make up the interrelated system necessary for the family to work. These bodies are the neighborhood organization, civic club, ethnic organization, local political club, family business, local union, church or temple and thousands of informal groups. It is this universe that gets much of the work of America done. It is this universe that provides the gravity that holds America on course as our great institutions and their systems increasingly fluctuate, wobble, veer, and fail. It is this universe that has inseparable parts. To injure one element is to injure all. It is also this universe, we would like to argue, that has been under systematic if unintentional assault for years as a result of the policies of Democratic and Republican administrations, conservative and liberal legislators.

The reason for this common assault is that in our country, the language, logic

and legislation of our leaders reflects a debate about which institutional sector will have more power over the family and its universe. Will more power go to those who use families as markets for goods; more to those who use families as clients; more to those who use families as revenue producers or soldiers? Who will get to use the family and its universe. Which of them will have more power?

Viewed from our neighborhoods in Chicago, the family and its related organizations are the center of life. Large scale institutions could be supportive. Instead they generally dominate and take power away from the family center. Indeed, in some few areas they have been victorious. There, families have become almost nothing but clients and consumers without the money, tools or authority to survive. Family poverty is the direct result of the empowerment of the giant systems that compete in these halls over control of our lives and the universe in which we live. From the viewpoint of these systems, families are not the center of society - they are the end of a pipeline, at the bottom of some institution's organization chart of society.

As policymakers, your effect upon the family universe will be determined by your view of the world. If the family is at the end of a pipeline, if you serve only to empower those who control pipelines, you will inevitably weaken the family.

On the other hand, if you wish to support the family universe as the working center of America, there are three basic policy directions that are appropriate. First, eliminate policies that disempower the family universe. Second, insure a legitimate, protected space for the family universe so it has an opportunity to compete with the huge monopolistic corporate, service and bureaucratic structures. Third, affirmatively support the economy of family and neighborhood life.

We haven't the time to go into detail regarding the options these policies

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suggest. However, we would at least like to provide brief examples in each area.

1) Policies that disempower the family universe.

Government policies are replete with programs that promote the division of families by age. This is most vivid in the case of the elderly where public programs encourage care by institutions rather than families. This process is described in detail in my paper titled "The Need for Oldness."



Many government programs are also injurious because they allocate massive resources to professionals who basically see the family as a client in need of treatment and therapy. The result has been disastrous in two ways. First, the service professionals have the increasing effect of convincing families that they are incompetent to know, care, teach, cure, make or do. Only certified experts can do that for you.

Second, the professional servicers take increasing proportions of public money, desperately needed by the poor, and consume it in the name of helping poor families.

In one Chicago neighborhood, for example, for every \$1.00 received in cash income by a person forced on welfare, professional medical carers receive 50 cents. This is only one professional service financed by government to treat rather than empower the poor. We need a radical new policy that reexamines these services transfer payments in terms of their potential to promote new investment for competence. At the very least, poor families ought to have a choice of income or prepaid doctors equal to half their income.

2) Insuring a legitimate space for the family universe.

There is a social and economic context that will insure the working capacity of the family universe. Our public policy is biased against that context by favoring large scale corporations to the disadvantage of small scale family and neighborhood enterprises as well as the small family farm. It appears that this administration, like its recent predecessors, sees the economy of the family as a trickle down beneficiary of large scale production. A Congress seriously concerned about family and production would begin to reexamine what we make and how we make it. Our cities are filled with desperate families unneeded by our corporate systems of production. But those families can make a life and renew our cities if you will allow and enable new tools and transfer authority so we can enfranchise families to produce rather than consume; to be the center of making rather than holding a cup to catch the trickles down from the great corporate and professional service systems. If you want to empower families, why not hold hearings on neighborhood economy, tools for community production, legal authority to create local energy management corporations?

3) Supporting the economy of family life.

In our older, inner city neighborhoods, families are the survival centers. If the entire universe around the family is

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strong, the family will do its job. But as the universe weakens, the family fights a losing battle. As the neighborhood savings institution begins to take all of the neighborhood savings and invest in the growth of suburbia, a part of the family universe dies. As the community schools become centralized and their purposes defined by professionals, a part of the family universe dies. As government advantages large corporations and the "uncompetitive" neighborhood enterprise collapses, a part of the family universe dies. As doctors, lawyers, social workers, teachers, counsellors and therapists are funded to provide more and more services, the functions of the local civic and ethnic associations and churches atrophy and representative neighborhood associations are often corrupted by becoming "end of the pipeline" vehicles for professionals who deliver services. A part of the family universe is dead. As television replaces the local political club as the vehicle for selecting our representatives, a part of the family universe dies. Finally, the family is alone - a sun with no planets, burning out.

The basis for an economy for family survival - the authority, tools, skill, capital - are being taken away. Now, the family in the inner city often stands alone. Therefore, there are two basic policy issues regarding those families.

First, are we, are you, prepared to remove the restraints and provide the protections to allow the family universe a central place in our society? To do so will require a new breed of elected representatives because we, the family and its constituent groups, have no real lobbies. Those who have taken our power and authority have loud voices here in Washington. They represent the great corporations, the great professions, the great bureaucracies. We wonder, out in Chicago, out in the neighborhoods, at the corner of Kedzie and Madison whether anyone here can even hear us.

Second, until you act, if you do act, to allow or enhance the universe and economy essential to families, many of us will stand alone and depend on government money to survive. We are good at surviving. That is the greatest skill of our families. We have eaten lots of rice to fill ourselves up. We know the taste of dog food. We've worn our old clothes for years. We stand in line for everything. We have time. It's often a very bad life - but with our family, we survive. Our family is strong.

What is new, what is absolutely outrageous is to hear our new government telling us we have to tighten our belt, accuse us of cheating, suggest we're lazy and then ask why the family isn't strong.

The survival of millions of low income American families in the heart of America's cities is the ultimate proof that the center, the strength, the reality of America is built on the family. There has been an assault on this family. Now, there is a full scale war hidden in euphemisms of "belt tightening" and calls for "across the board sacrifices". Many of our isolated families will be forced to take new measures to survive in the face of the current attack on the real income of the poor family. Therefore, in neighborhood after neighborhood, we see the economy of last resort developing - the drug industry building its market system in the vacuum created by a government that puts urban neighborhoods last, poor families at the end.

Families in our city neighborhoods are weakened because the professions want them as deficient clients, corporations want them as consumers while rejecting them as workers, and the government insists they live without a decent income. We are in desperate need of a pro-family policy, a policy that places the family universe at the center of our society.

Until you decide to become serious about our families, we can assure you of only one thing. We will survive in spite of you.