CHILDREN in the URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Linking Social Policy and Clinical Practice

Third Edition

Edited by

Norma Kolko Phillips
Shulamith Lala Ashenberg Straussner

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URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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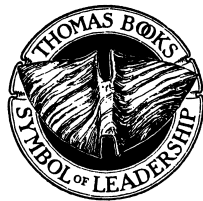# CHILDREN IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Linking Social Policy and Clinical Practice

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and

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PREFACE

Since the last edition of this book, enormous changes that impact children have been taking place in our society. We have seen many important "firsts" in the United States: the first African-American president; the first attempt at a health care system that includes everyone; the first time we see gay marriage sanctioned by the federal government; numerous firsts in medical care; a growing globalization; and, of course, the ongoing technology revolution which changes our lives from day to day. At the same time, though, we have experienced a reactionary pull that has halted progress in many critical areas; income inequality, racism, extreme poverty, violence, terrorist acts, and critical flaws in the educational and criminal justice systems that prevail and continue to have disastrous consequences for children.

The chapters that follow in this book discuss the cost in human terms of some of the missing opportunities for urban children and youth, and guide practitioners in their attempts to identify resiliency in children themselves, as well as strengths in their environments. In addition, the chapters illustrate the impact of social welfare policies on children, their families, and on the broader society.

In order to better prepare social workers to meet some of the pressing needs of children today we have added three new chapters to this edition:

- Beyond School and Community Violence: Providing Environments Where Children Thrive
- Urban Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Children, and
- Substance Use by Urban Children.

In addition to sections on "Economic, Social, and Environmental Factors Impacting on Urban Children" and "Familial Factors Impacting on Urban Children," a new section, "Behavioral and Physical Health of Urban Children" has been introduced, reflecting the current focus on the integration of health, mental health, and substance use issues as we attempt to understand human behavior and communities.

The changing environment has also impacted social service agencies. The growing consolidation of services and the increasing entrepreneurial approach of management moves social services further away from traditional social work values and closer to a business model. Coupled with weakened government support of basic needs of children, such as food, housing, and quality education, one must question the commitment of our country to social justice, protections from institutional oppression, and equal opportunities for all children. Nonetheless, based on our history, there is reason to hope that, just as happened a century ago, new solutions to the problems of the cities can, and will, be developed. We believe that the various chapters in this book will help social workers and social work students recognize the nature of some of the current problems affecting our children and come up with innovative solutions for the future.

We are grateful to our chapter authors who have continued to contribute to this effort, and we welcome aboard the new chapter authors; all have a keen understanding and appreciation of the fundamental importance of the relationship between social welfare policy and social work practice. We are indebted to our publisher, Mr. Michael Payne Thomas, who has persisted with good humor in guiding us in our efforts. Our children, Adam, David, Sarina, and Allie, continue to teach us as they take us to new places in life, and Dylan and Brooklyn bring the wonders of a new generation. Finally, we are both grateful for our enduring friendship, and for the joyous synergy of the creative process.

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Norma Kolko Phillips
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CHILDREN IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Section I

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

GROWING UP IN THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES FOR CHILDREN

Norma Kolko Phillips

Social problems exist in every setting, whether urban, suburban, exurban, rural, or small towns, and present profound obstacles for children and youth as they attempt to cope with developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence. Yet, because of the population density and the pervasiveness of social problems, the consequences of these problems are most visible in urban areas. It is not surprising then, that organized responses to social problems that had a particularly profound impact on children and youth were first developed in the cities.

Some social problems, such as family poverty, unemployment, discrimination and institutional oppression, crime, substance abuse, and language barriers, may be coincidental to the urban environment. Other social problems, such as homelessness, violence in schools and on the streets, gang activity, noise in public spaces, and overcrowding in schools and housing may be exacerbated by the population density of urban communities. Whether the problems were coincidental to, or were a product of the cities, their high visibility and the frequency of social disruptions have evoked societal responses both historically and today. Responses from community and political groups, as well as from the helping professions have taken many forms, including research related to understanding disruptions in children, families, and communities; innovations in services to individuals, families, groups,

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and communities; further development of social service organizations; and political actions aimed at the creation of policies that would increase opportunities for children and youth to reach their full potential. At the same time, though, these approaches have often served to protect the existing social order.

The opportunities and obstacles confronted by children and youth in urban areas in the United States can be understood, both historically and today, within the context of processes such as industrialization and ongoing technological advances, urbanization, and migration and immigration. Other overarching processes that must be considered include discrimination and institutional oppression; inequalities in education, housing, and wages; disparities in health care, and barriers to employment. This chapter will briefly examine the plight of urban children and youth through these lenses. It will focus on historical periods that produced significant social change, on innovative practice approaches that were developed in response to social changes, and on social policies affecting families and children today, particularly in urban areas.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR URBAN CHILDREN

In spite of the many social problems, the cities present vast opportunities in areas such as ethno-cultural diversity, and intellectual, educational, medical, recreational, and sociocultural resources. The "park bench" phenomenon, a socialization opportunity for young children and their caregivers in public spaces, is a unique benefit of urban life. An informal gathering of preschoolers not only offers them play and peer socialization experiences, but no less important, it offers opportunities for networking and peer support for the parents or caregivers. Community parks may also provide relatively sophisticated playgrounds, and in some cases state-of-the-art equipment, compared to the small playgrounds or the backyard swing set of an exurban or rural family. Stimulating programs for preschoolers are found, free in libraries, museums, and parks, and costly in theaters and private gyms. Street fairs and block parties, parades, and festivals can enrich the early experiences of young city children. In such settings, all families, including single parents and same-sex parents, are more likely to find social supports, both for themselves and their children.

The availability and geographical accessibility of quality day care in the cities make it more possible for parents to attend school or take advantage of job opportunities while raising a family. As children grow, recreation in the cities takes on a vastly different character than in other areas. The constant supervision required for young children outside the home keeps play for the urban child a more constricted experience than it is for their counterparts in rural areas. Exploration of nature and spontaneous outdoor adventures that are daily experiences for country children are lacking for children in the cities. Yet, organized teams, after-school programs, settlement house and "Y" programs, private sports programs, and summer day camps within both the public and private sectors provide many options for urban families with children. For the young adolescent seeking independence, the cities make it possible to move around using public transportation while their suburban, exurban, and rural counterparts remain dependent on transportation by family or friends.

Although the problems in urban public schools, both educational and social, drive many families out of the cities, families with children who have particular needs, whether for greater academic challenge or additional supportive services, have far greater opportunities in the cities. Alternative school programs, programs for gifted and talented children, and services for the academically and physically challenged can be found in urban public schools. For some with financial resources, private schools offering the full spectrum of programs, including specialized services, are likely to be available.

UNDERSTANDING THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

While there have been many approaches to understanding the nature of the cities, it is particularly useful to focus on those aspects of urban life that impact the development of children. While many young people find the sensory stimuli of the cities, such as their varied sights and sounds, to be interesting and challenging, some experience them as what Stanley Milgrim (1970) described as "psychic overload." Such a reaction might lead to both physical and emotional stresses (Fischer, 1984).

As early as 1938, the sociologist Louis Wirth pointed out that size, density, and heterogeneity can lead to isolation and social alienation

for people living in the cities. Neighborhoods develop that are defined by the values and lifestyles of their inhabitants; these in turn attract others sharing similar lifestyle and values. Consequently, each neighborhood assumes its own characteristics. However, most children and young people are not restricted to one neighborhood; they may go to school and to other activities in different neighborhoods, confronting different values and norms. For some, this may be an enriching experience, but for others, it presents conflict and a sense of not belonging to any one community. According to Wirth (1938), this may result not only in isolation, but also to a failure to conform to particular social norms, leading to antisocial behavior. In an effort to control these behaviors, there may be an increase in laws and policies, including rules, bureaucratic procedures, and police actions. Such interventions tend to value the norms, interests, and priorities of some groups above others (Fisher, 1984; Wirth, 1938).

Other sociologists have viewed the cities as a "mosaic of social worlds," built on "intimate social circles based on kinship, ethnicity, neighborhood, occupation, lifestyle, or similar social attributes" (Fisher, 1984, p. 32). The composition of each neighborhood is related to its function, such as employment opportunities or educational resources. The range of cultures contributes to the formation of urban "enclaves" (Abrahamson, 1996), which provide cohesiveness, protection, and a sense of security for their members. Therefore, while children living in segregated communities may experience exclusion and estrangement from the larger society, they also experience the security that may be offered by their particular urban enclave.

Urban neighborhoods and urban enclaves may form not only because their members choose to live amongst a familiar cultural or religious group, but also because the society limits the choice of their members by denying them access to other options. Factors such as discrimination and other manifestations of institutional oppression, as well as economic oppression, have led groups to live in defined urban enclaves (Turner & Herbig, 2005). These factors have been with us since the earliest days of urbanization. The process of gentrification, seen now in many urban areas, has introduced new challenges for families living in segregated areas, as the changes make it impossible for them to continue living in what had, for generations, been their own neighborhoods (Navarro, 2016).

CHILDREN IN THE CITIES DURING
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The shift from an agrarian nation to industrial capitalism that took place in the United States between 1865 and 1900 resulted in "a spectacular expansion of productive facilities and output that was without parallel in the history of the world" (Trattner, 1999, p. 81). This shift resulted in the growth of urban communities and also served as a catalyst for other processes, such as migration from rural areas to the cities and immigration from other countries. Along with urbanization came an exclusive dependence on employment and wages, rather than the self-sufficiency typically found in an agrarian economy (Leiby, 1978).

Between 1860 and 1920, the proportion of the population of the United States living in the cities increased from one-sixth to one-half (Trattner, 1999). In addition to farm workers migrating from rural areas to the cities, 23 million European immigrants arrived in the United States between 1860 and 1910 (Trattner, 1999). Many were poor and without knowledge of the country, its culture, or the English language. They settled in the cities where many worked as low-wage laborers. During this period, the population of cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston increased 300 to 400 percent, while Midwestern cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, and Detroit grew even more dramatically (Trattner, 1999). Districts consisting of tenement buildings developed in order to house the growing urban population. The depression of the 1870s left three million workers unemployed, contributing to the scope of poverty in urban areas.

By 1890, more than 1,200,000 people, or three-quarters of the population of New York City, were living in overcrowded tenement buildings. The wretched living conditions of children in the tenements of New York City's Lower East Side were vividly described by Jacob Riis. Writing in 1890 about financial exploitation of poor immigrants and the problems they confronted, Riis described the overcrowded rooms, and the lack of consideration for light, ventilation, sanitation, or safety. According to Riis (1890), "Where two families had lived ten moved in. . . . Thousands were living in cellars. . . . Young vagabonds, the natural offspring of such 'home' conditions, overran the streets. Juvenile crime increased fearfully by the year" (pp. 6, 11). Unable to

care for their children and lacking social supports, some mothers abandoned their infants, leaving them in gutters to be picked up by the police, or, during the winters, in hallways of buildings, where as many as three or four might be found in one night. Some babies were left outside the homes of the wealthy, and were turned over to the police. Ninety percent of such abandoned babies died (Riis, 1890).

AWAKENING TO THE NEEDS OF URBAN CHILDREN: THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL AGENCIES

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, approaches based on moral reform of the individual gave way to the recognition of the economic and social bases of poverty and of the problems of the urban poor. Work programs for poor women, institutions for homeless children, medical care, nurseries for children of working women, and facilities for feeding and housing the poor were established (Leiby, 1978). Voluntary agencies were formed and addressed social problems affecting urban children and youth, supplementing the minimal local public services that were available. For example, the Salvation Army, which was started in the U.S. in 1880, provided summer programs for urban children living in poverty, as well as nursing and medical care, and homes for prostitutes and their children (Leiby, 1978). By 1890, the Children's Aid Society, which "came into existence as an emphatic protest against the tenement corruption of the young" (Riis, 1890, p. 140), had served 300,000 children, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children had provided services to more than 25,000 children (Riis, 1890). While the voluntary agencies assisted children and youth in need, they also served the function of maintaining social control. For example, Charles Loring Brace, who established the Children's Aid Society in New York City in 1853, developed the Orphan Trains Program which, between 1854 and 1929 removed over 100,000 children from the streets of New York and sent them to foster homes in rural areas. This program was aimed both to improve opportunities for these children and to protect the city from what Brace termed "the dangerous classes" (Brace, 1872).