# Foreword

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Children and youth in the United States today, as well as in many other coun-
tries, are increasingly marginalized without having their physical and social
needs met or their human rights honored. The social, political, economic, and
cultural changes of the past quarter century have resulted in a substantial de-
cline in the well-being of millions of children. Equally important, few policy
decision-makers see meeting the needs of these children as a priority. As a re-
sult, the politics of childhood has shifted in the United States to emphasize re-
sponsibility for well-being far more heavily on the parental family than on the
community or society. At the same time, institutions of social control in local
communities have been granted great discretion in the ways they address chil-
dren's behavior in schools and neighborhoods.

This book by a respected group of social workers and social scientists raises
provocative questions regarding our perspectives about children and youth in
postindustrial U.S. society. There is at present considerable ambiguity in our
views about dependence and independence, about caring and being cared for,
about risk taking and responsibility for one's actions, and about societal respon-
sibility for the well-being of children and youth. Considering that most West-
ern countries, including the United States, have rapidly growing, aging popula-

tions that will depend heavily on the support of young people, one would think that greater care would be shown about the conditions of so many children and youth.

Written for students and practitioners of social work, this edited volume provides knowledge about the many dimensions of childhood and the institutions devised to provide for the development, care, and control of children. It helps social workers understand what it is like to be a child in the United States today, how others view childhood, and how social policies and institutions influence the well-being of children. The book examines many of the important social services sectors affecting our understanding of childhood today, including adoption, foster care, juvenile justice, teen parenting, human and legal rights, school exclusion policy and preschool programming, health care, and youth participation in developing and operating programs. It also suggests some alternative ways for addressing the challenges that we face.

First, some context: there are 73 million children below the age of 18 in the United States today, including 20 million below the age of 5.[1] The proportion of children of color approaches 40%, and 20% have at least one foreign-born parent. These populations are distributed unevenly across the country, as are the 17% of children living below the poverty level. Problems are concentrated in urban centers, depressed rural areas, and a few states. The conception of childhood as a negative period is not limited to the poor or to children of color because some children grow up in great affluence but still experience profound problems, while other children are growing up homeless and in abject poverty.

Although predictions are always problematic, it is safe to estimate that before these 73 million children reach adulthood, about 5 million will have experienced out-of-home placement, another 3–4 million will have a parent or sibling who is or has been incarcerated, 25% may not have completed high school, about 51 per 100,000 will have died an accidental death as an adolescent, and nearly 100,000 will have been sentenced to placement in an adult jail or prison. Some 12% will have experienced maltreatment in the form of abuse or neglect, 21% will have a physical or mental health disability, and millions will have been victimized with no report filed of their victimization; although they suffer in silence, the impact is no less serious.

On the other side of the equation, assuming that we are entering a period when more federal policy will be directed to children and youth, we would expect that most young adults will have grown up with at least a national health care program for children. There will be millions of first- and second-generation immigrant children who are prepared for successful adult roles, and, when compared with children who matured in the 1990s and the early twenty-first

century, many more will have benefited from quality child care. These children will also have benefited from entering adulthood at a time when racial and ethnic diversity is far more extensive in our society. Similarly, educational policy will have changed such that children and youth will be better prepared to participate effectively in a postindustrial society.

Last, and perhaps most difficult to estimate, is the type of physical and social environment these children will experience. It will probably have a more negative effect on children of color, poor children, and children with disabilities. The impact of the physical environment on childhood and youth is one of the elements that social workers seldom think about when considering social services for children and youth in the United States, but one needs only to point to the dramatic increase in childhood asthma to acknowledge the impact of environmental change on children, as many public health researchers have noted. On average, both children and youth are much more sensitive to the physical environment of their country and community than are adults, and it can be expected that they will demand that far more be done in the future than is being done now. Very young children are now keenly aware of environmental policies and encourage adult compliance, but they require the active involvement of adults in environmental protection for the decades ahead, as we struggle to develop a future world in which all can live. As a number of contributors to this volume show, young people are critically observing and assessing their worlds, and they are important contributors to changes in programs, communities, and public policies.

A growing and deeply troubling problem today is the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children and youth in the United States and many other countries. These boys and girls are so badly damaged that childhood has almost no meaning for them. Even in the United States there are cases of parents trafficking their own children; when the situation is identified, the child or youth is taken by the court and institutionalized for neglect, while, too often, the parent escapes legal consequences.

When the juvenile court was established in Chicago in 1900, society stated that children were immature and need to have the opportunity to develop in a nurturing environment if they were to become productive adults. In the latter half of the twentieth century we have moved away from that view and no longer acknowledge the differences between children and adults in critical areas that can have lifelong effects on youth. The risk of a child or youth being inappropriately treated as an adult challenges social workers and policy makers in the United States to give special attention to childhood and youth as a continuum with different tasks to be solved at each step in the maturation process. Some of

these tasks reflect developmental requirements while others are a consequence of the social and cultural politics regarding childhood and youth in society. Several of the authors in this volume discuss the impact of globalization on childhood. Despite vast differences in children's life chances in "the developed" and "the developing" worlds, contributors point to the ways that children's everyday experiences around the globe are increasingly politically, socially, and spatially intertwined. The world population in 2006 included 2.1 billion children, most of whom reside in developing countries with few resources, limited opportunities for elementary education, and health care so problematic that life expectancies are in the forties, not the high seventies as in developed countries. The heralded "advances" of the developed world are too often built upon conditions of political and structural violence that affect poor children from Detroit to Darfur. For example, the developed countries have established economic and political barriers that limit interaction and exchange. What does childhood mean where children are often expected to support the family at age 8 or younger? It is perhaps difficult to understand fully that in most African countries today the median age of the population is 17, and at that age many must be prepared to accept substantial responsibility in their societies.

Children and youth in the developing world are active agents in the construction of social structures and processes, but their options are sharply constrained, as anyone who has observed a child street beggar selling small objects on a busy street knows. The story of Ishmael Beah, a child soldier in Sierra Leone, as he tells it in his autobiography, is a powerful and gripping story of what happened to a young boy when his family was killed and he was recruited by the guerillas.[2] It is also a story of his rehabilitation with the help of staff from UNICEF as he learned to forgive himself and to regain his humanity. He now resides in the United States, where his story profoundly influences our conception of childhood in warring countries.

Many children in Africa and South Asia are "double orphans" because of the death of both parents due to HIV/AIDS. At very young ages they become heads of households responsible for the rearing of their younger siblings. Some of these children are in immigrant families who have come to the United States legally or illegally, but they influence our political and cultural conceptions of childhood and youth. They also influence their communities and our entire society. Certainly their conception of childhood and youth is socially and culturally constructed from the many experiences they have had in a variety of communities. One wonders if some of the children who are required to assume adult responsibilities at very early ages are not entitled to be dependent for a few years—if not on family, then on society.

A careful study and review of the social work authors in this volume can provide the reader with new conceptions about childhood and youth that will benefit their practice and direct them to participate in the development of more effective and meaningful social policies for the challenges that we face today and will face tomorrow.

## NOTES

1. The statistics cited in the foreword are taken from three sources: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America's children: Key indicators of well-being 2007* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2007); UNICEF, *State of the world's children, 2007* (New York: UNICEF, 2007); and U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current population survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2007).

2. Ishmael Beah, *A long way gone: Memoirs of a boy soldier* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).