



Editorial: We need the courage to do what works

Milwaukee, plagued with childhood poverty, holds a key to reducing that scourge. But does anybody care? The nation must overcome the main obstacle to fighting it: the lack of will to do so.

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The nation has within its grasp the power to end childhood poverty. What it lacks is the will.

That's the conclusion we draw from an extended conversation on the topic among experts - at a recent conference at the Medical College of Wisconsin and, later, at a Journal Sentinel round table.

In the world's richest country, more and more children are growing up in families constantly struggling to scrape together the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing, health care. In Milwaukee, two of every five children are officially poor - the seventh-highest rate among America's big cities. Nationwide, one of every six falls into that category - easily the highest rate among the world's wealthy countries.

Social science research shows how America could end this scandal by shrinking the ranks of needy children. In fact, a pilot program that took place in Milwaukee - **the New Hope Project** - could serve as the centerpiece of an attack on poverty. All that's missing is the will to wage such an attack. America must find that will.

At the round table, Brother Bob Smith, president of Messmer Catholic Schools, pointed to what ought to be powerful motivation: "If any of you and I were stranded on an island and you had a loaf of bread and I didn't, you would never sleep because you would know that I was always thinking of a way to get some, if not all, of your bread."

Cocooning kids against the ravages of poverty is just plain right. How well a nation treats its children is a measure of its greatness. In addition, poverty leads to a witches' brew of social ills, such as teen pregnancies, blighted neighborhoods and unsafe streets - ills that

carry big price tags for police, courts, prisons, emergency medical care and remedial education.

What's more, poverty entails a loss in wasted talents. Kids growing up poor have fewer chances to develop their skills than do their better-off peers. For all these reasons, poverty saps the economy in southeastern Wisconsin.

At the Medical College, author and social welfare professor Mark Rank pointed out that poverty is a function of the nation's economic structure. When jobs abound and pay rises, poverty shrinks. When jobs vanish and pay falls, poverty rises. Thus, government could and should fight poverty through fiscal, monetary and regulatory policies that result in the expansion of family-supporting jobs.

Still, a free-market economy may rarely boast enough decent jobs for every adult who wants one. What's more, such an economy goes through cycles in which the number of jobs rises and falls. Hence, the need for a safety net - government programs that protect children and others from poverty that the marketplace fails to eliminate. Trouble is, as Rank pointed out, America's safety net is the most threadbare among the world's rich nations. Government must strengthen it.

Finally, the fight against poverty often entails efforts to improve individuals through education and job training. Rank says those efforts, while worthwhile, won't reduce poverty overall. Rather, they affect who's poor.

An almost forgotten concept arose in the conversation on poverty: the social contract - a bargain struck between the individual and society. In the American formulation, the individual agrees to work hard; in turn, society allows the individual to get ahead. But these days, society is renegeing on its end of the deal.

Many moms and dads *are* working hard but with little to show for their effort. Keep in mind that most poor kids have working parents. One key to ending childhood poverty is to increase the rewards for work.

One approach is to tinker with the economic structure - such as by letting the minimum wage rise automatically with inflation or mandating sick leave, which many workplaces now lack.

Another approach is to strengthen the safety net - such as by raising the earned income tax credit or expanding public medical insurance to cover more low-wage workers and their children.

A comprehensive attack on childhood poverty could have as its nucleus a program like the **New Hope Project**, which ran from 1994 to '98 in Milwaukee and served as a model for Wisconsin Works. Unfortunately, in putting together W-2, the state bastardized the model.

Greg Duncan, a social policy professor at Northwestern University, was so impressed as an evaluator of New Hope that he wrote a book about the city-sponsored program. Though aimed at adults, the program wound up improving the lives of children, who did better in school and had fewer scrapes with the law than their needy playmates whose parents were not in the program.

New Hope rested on two tenets that, unfortunately, don't guide public policy today: 1) People who are willing to work full time should be able to do so, and 2) such work should push them above the official poverty line.

Adopted on a broad scale, New Hope would entail widespread use of wage supplements, day care centers, subsidized health insurance and community-service jobs. Workers in such publicly financed jobs would do socially beneficial chores that would otherwise not get done - such as tutoring in after-school programs, acting as neighborhood security aides, clerking for community groups, stocking shelves for food pantries.

Another proven component of an attack on poverty must be quality early childhood education, which, in Wisconsin, translates into raising state standards for licensed child care centers. Still another component is universal health care.

We also know what doesn't work. President Bush's fiscal policy, centered on tax cuts, has failed to reduce childhood poverty, which, on the contrary, has spread during his tenure. Also, W-2 appears to have little impact on the problem.

Social science research tells us what does work. The nation and the metro area must summon the will to put the research to use.