



FILLING THE CRACKS

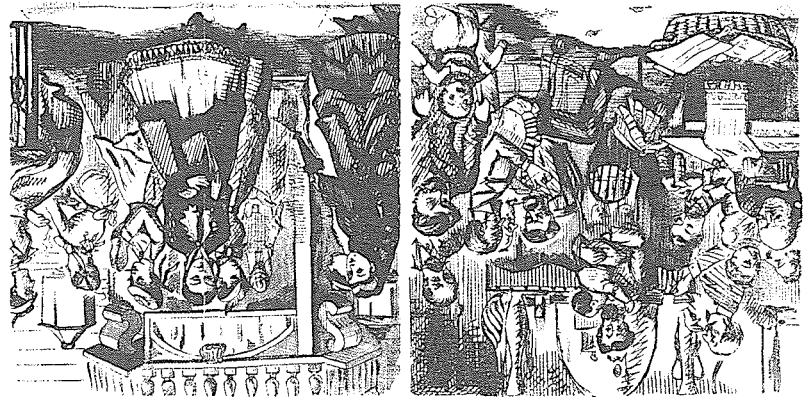
by Mary Jo Bane,
Lee Rainwater, and Martin Rein

On a summer day four years ago, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter promised a strongly "pro-family" White House. "There can be no more urgent priority," he told New Hampshire voters, "than to see that every decision our government takes is designed to honor and support and strengthen the American family." One way Carter proposed to strengthen the family was by requiring all plans for new federal programs—from housing to tax reform—to contain "family impact statements" similar to the "environmental impact statements" demanded by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Little has come of that campaign pledge, largely because no one knows how precisely to measure the effects on families of *current* federal programs, let alone those that do not yet exist. Moreover, the idea of a family "EPA," with all the bureaucracy it would entail, did not sit well with many politicians or their constituents. Still, Carter had a point. Since the 1930s, the federal government—and state and local agencies—have increasingly shouldered such "traditional" family responsibilities as child support, child care, child nutrition, and housing and financial support for the elderly.

Government aid to families in the United States has not gone as far as it has in France or Canada, where the state provides an allowance to parents (originally designed to encourage higher birth rates) for each child in the household. Washington has not sought to match the Soviet Union's much publicized state day-care centers, which enroll 41 percent of Soviet preschoolers. Still absent from the U.S. scene is any counterpart to Sweden's ubiquitous network of social workers who monitor family nutrition, child abuse, and the wants of the elderly. Nor does Washington imitate Scandinavian laws subsidizing "paternity" leaves for fathers of the newborn.

But, by chance or intention, Congress has created a myriad of programs that affect American families as never before. Two years ago, George Washington University's Family Impact Seminar reviewed 1,044 programs listed in the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance* for fiscal year 1976. It found 268 pro-



From Harper's Weekly, 1868. Reprinted by permission.

"How it would be if some ladies had their own way" was the title of this 1868 Harper's Weekly cartoon. Now that women increasingly have their own way, Washington has had to assume new responsibility for child care.

grams, costing \$180.6 billion and administered by 17 different federal agencies, that had at least "potential" impact on families. Of these, 63 (together worth \$66.0 billion) affected families directly; they ranged from sweeping programs costing billions of dollars (e.g., \$6.9 billion for food stamps) to less costly, but more precisely targeted efforts: \$12 million for family health centers, \$15 million for child welfare research.*

By focusing solely on federal financial assistance, the Seminar excluded numerous other government actions that impinge on American families. The federal income tax code, for example, contains not only deductions for dependents but also what is often called the "marriage penalty." As Isabel Sawhill, then director of the National Commission on Manpower Policy, noted in 1975, "If a man earning \$10,000 a year marries a woman who also earns \$10,000, they will pay an extra \$340 in taxes." Regulatory agency decisions, such as the controversial Federal Trade Commission's proposed 1978 guidelines for television advertising aimed at children, presumably affect families. So, more clearly, do decisions by state courts to grant divorces, place children in foster homes, or commit people to mental hospitals. To the dismay of conservatives, Washington's spending on social insurance and public assistance—e.g., the National School Lunch Program, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security—has risen

*Toward an Inventory of Federal Programs with Direct Impact on Families, Washington, D.C.: George Washington University Institute for Educational Leadership, 1978.

dramatically since Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society of the 1960s. Total federal, state, and local government social welfare expenditures climbed seven-fold between 1960 and 1977, from \$52 billion to \$362 billion. As a percentage of GNP, these expenditures nearly doubled from 10.5 to 19.7 percent.

While some contend that the government, with its vast outlays for social programs, is usurping family functions, it is more likely that Washington is stepping into a vacuum. American society, after all, is changing. Not every family today can provide the wide range of services performed by families in historian Peter Laslett's long-ago "world we have lost."

Federal aid to families did not emerge, like Minerva, fully grown from the Great Society. Indeed, Washington began giving substantial support to American families as early as 1935, when the Social Security Act was passed. Since then, government benefits for senior citizens have grown dramatically. Of the \$500 billion in the federal budget for fiscal year 1979, over \$150 billion was spent in various ways to help senior citizens.

As the American population becomes proportionately older, federal outlays for the elderly are almost certain to increase. In 1976, 10.7 percent of the U.S. population was at least 65 years old; by the year 2000, the Census Bureau estimates, the figure will be between 11.3 and 12.9 percent, and will continue to grow as the post-World War II Baby-Boom generation ages.

Social Security provided about one-third of the income of Americans over 65 years old in 1976. Forty percent of their income, however, came from their own earnings or that of others in their household. And it is clear that when assets and pensions are added in, over half the income of the elderly comes from private sources. Our own surveys by the MIT/Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies indicate that financial contributions from children are rare and, when they do occur, very small.

Seldom do the elderly share a household with their children. In 1979, only 8.6 percent of men and 20.3 percent of

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A MATTER OF POLITICS

"Family," says presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, is the first of "five short words" forming the heart of his campaign message. (The others: "work, neighborhood, freedom, peace.") Meanwhile, long-time feminist Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*) announces in the *New York Times Magazine* that the women's liberation movement must advance to "a new frontier: the family." Obviously, the family can no longer be taken for granted as a Fourth of July cliché. It is now a "buzzword," variously interpreted and linked to some of the most emotionally charged issues in current American politics, notably abortion, busing, welfare, classroom prayer, day care, the Equal Rights Amendment, and the rights of homosexuals.

Born of a 1976 Jimmy Carter campaign pledge, this summer's White House Conference on Families and its preliminaries have provided a battleground for groups active on those issues on both Left and Right. A number of "New Right" groups—among them, the National Christian Action Coalition, Family America, and FLAG (Family, Life, America, God)—saw an unholy alliance shaping up among government bureaucrats, social workers, and groups ranging from the National Organization for Women to the National Gay Task Force. So, in August 1979, they formed the "Pro-Family Coalition." Its leader, Connaught Marshner, dismissed as ingenuous the White House claim that the Conference would make the government more sensitive to the family. Rather, she contended, its true purpose was to create "the illusion of a national consensus" on family issues, along moderate-liberal lines.

The battle was joined in late 1979, when state conferences were held to select delegates for the three national meetings scheduled for this summer. In Virginia, last November, the New Right captured 22 of 24 seats. Soon thereafter they swept up all 8 of Oklahoma's delegates. When the governors of Indiana and Alabama withdrew their states from the Conference (Alabama's Forrest H. James said it conflicted with "traditional Judeo-Christian values"), President Carter's aides began to worry about a big Left-Right brawl on TV just before the Democratic national convention. White House control of the Conference perceptibly tightened. Late last spring, the "pro-family" forces estimated that they ultimately won fewer than 30 percent of the slots for the national meetings in Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles.

The White House was not, however, happy about the unexpected family feud. "We wish the whole thing would go away," one staffer told the *Wall Street Journal*. "It's been a nightmare." But many on the New Right think the uproar is just beginning. One of them is *Conservative Digest* columnist Paul Weyrich, who predicts that "the family will be to the decade of the 1980s . . . what the Vietnam war was to the 1960s."

A LEGAL MAZE

The American family has been legally regulated at least since 1636, when Puritan authorities ruled that all single persons in the Massachusetts Bay Colony had to live with families. Nearly 350 years later, a maze of federal, state, and local laws—and courts—exist to regulate conflicts between individuals within a household while safeguarding a family's right to privacy.

As early as 1888, the Supreme Court recognized the importance of marriage, which it described as "having more to do with the morals and civilization of a people than any other institution." But it was not until 1978, in *Zablocki v. Redhail*, that the Court declared that Americans have a fundamental right to marry.

The right to have children has been recognized by the Court since 1942. In 1965, this principle was broadened to include the right *not* to have children when the Court invalidated a Connecticut law prohibiting the use of contraceptives by married couples. And in 1973, in *Roe v. Wade*—the decision that declared unconstitutional a Texas law prohibiting nontherapeutic abortions—the Court concluded that the right to procreate was "broad enough to encompass a woman's decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy."

Federal and state courts have largely given parents free rein in raising their children. Education, religion, and moral upbringing are all viewed as domains into which government should not tread. Last December, a Michigan district court judge ruled that a mother who had withheld her children from a public school for religious reasons was entitled to instruct them at home even though she had no state certification as a teacher.

Parental authority is not unlimited, however. Parents cannot keep their "mature minor" children from having abortions or using contraceptives. States are increasingly concerned with child abuse and neglect. Wisconsin, for example, provides that persons who report parents for possible child abuse may not be sued even if their "good faith" reports prove to be unwarranted.

Divorce and child custody—traditionally the major concerns of family law—have been undergoing major transformations as legislatures and courts try to purge laws of sexual bias. Only Illinois, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota still require proof that one spouse is at fault for a divorce to be granted. Most state legislatures allow judges to divide property between divorcing spouses, but laws are increasingly being changed to help ensure "equitable," if not "equal," distribution. Forty states have enacted laws that, in some way, preclude gender as a basis for awarding child custody.

More changes may come as legal authorities conclude that the general courtroom is the wrong place for settling household disputes. One expert's suggestion: creation of separate family courts staffed by specialists.

of their children aged 3 to 13. Even among families with mothers who worked full-time, more than 40 percent of 3-to-5-year-olds and over 50 percent of 6-to-13-year-olds were cared for by their parents, usually the mother.

Parents are helped by a wide variety of paid and unpaid caretakers, including both relatives and friends. Most of these are informal baby-sitting arrangements: Fewer than 10 percent of preschoolers are in formal day-care centers (not including nursery schools) either full- or part-time. Indeed, some surveys have indicated that even when free, organized day care was available to working women, they preferred to make their own informal arrangements.

What Next?

The 1980s may bring a greater shift toward outside arrangements for the care of children. If high divorce rates persist, this trend obviously could be reinforced. In any event, women in their twenties increasingly enter the labor force. By 1990, 70 to 80 percent of women in their twenties through forties may work outside the home. They seem to be showing a greater commitment to their careers, and less to personal childrearing. These women are marrying late, postponing childbirth, and planning to have very small families.

But a shift toward outside-the-home child care, if it happens, does not necessarily mean that family values will be undermined. We don't know what such a shift will do. Sheila B. Kamerman and Alfred J. Kahn, of the Columbia University School of Social Work, argue:

It has yet to be shown that family values have been eroded anywhere by child-care arrangements, whether in nursery schools, centers, or in family-day-care homes. And the parents themselves, insofar as we have information, are overwhelmingly positive about group programs.*

The federal government spent more than \$2.2 billion on a variety of child-care programs in fiscal year 1977, including \$448 million on Head Start, \$500 million on tax credits for work-related child-care expenses, and \$809 million in grants to help states provide day-care centers for children from low- and moderate-income families. Only a small percentage of American

*"The Day-Care Debate: A Wider View" by Kamerman and Kahn, in *The Public Interest* (Winter 1979), p. 81. A more critical analysis is "Parental Evaluation of Child Care Alternatives" by Laura Lein, in *The Urban and Social Change Review* (Winter 1979).

children were served by these programs.

Thus, a national day-care program for preschoolers, long advocated by congressional liberals, would be extremely expensive, but there is a possibility of some trade-offs. If "welfare mothers" now receiving AFDC payments could put their children in public day-care centers, they might be able to work full-time, thus reducing their need for food stamps and other subsidies. But again, estimates vary, and the debate continues.

Government income supplements for one-parent families will almost certainly continue, of course, as will income guarantees for the elderly. Responsibilities for caring for the oldest and youngest members of our society—particularly the poor—will continue to be shared. Civilization means, in part, that people are not allowed to starve or live in dire need. The United States, through financial assistance programs, has dedicated itself to collectively filling in the cracks when individual responsibility—or capability—fails.

It is certainly possible for government to do more to *enhance* the family's ability to survive. It could provide more income security for poor *two*-parent families with children. Tax laws could be rewritten to remove "marriage penalties." The school day could be lengthened to eight hours, as it is in many countries, to keep children productively occupied while parents are at work. Adoptions could be subsidized to help foster parents make their foster children into full family members. And welfare laws could be revised. Despite two decades of attempted reform, 26 states—including Alaska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Virginia—still deny welfare to mothers with young children unless the father has left home; "in effect," says Sidney Johnson, director of the Family Impact Seminar, "families are encouraged *not* to stay together."

Recent history has shown that government—through Social Security, AFDC, food stamps—can take over the task, at least in part, of financial support for the elderly and for needy children without destroying family ties and responsibilities. Government and families have formed a partnership to care for American society's neediest members. The challenge for the future is to make that partnership work.

