

CREATING THE POLITICAL WILL TO REDUCE CHILD POVERTY

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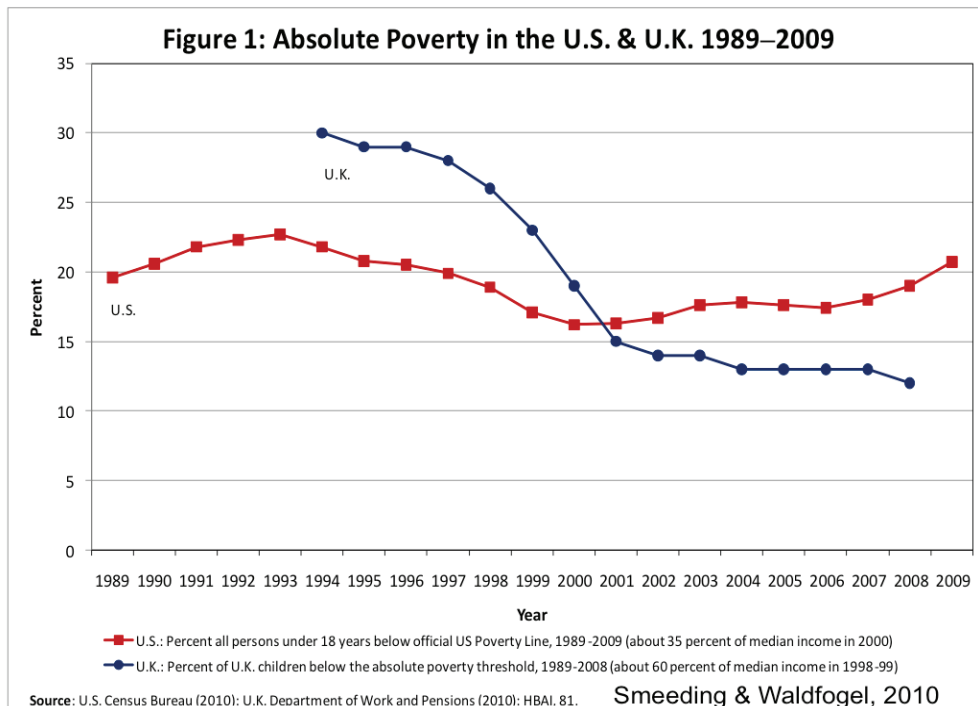
Children living in poverty continue to be cast aside in the United States. Only 8 percent of the federal budget goes to children, and this amount continues to decline over time.¹ We are the only industrialized country in the world that doesn't have a national paid leave program for working families. And children in Flint, Michigan, and around the country continue to suffer from brain and nervous system damage due to lead exposure from contaminated water, paint, and soil.

While some dedicated lawmakers, media outlets, and advocates are fighting for children, there is no long-term national strategy, or even a national dialogue, to address child poverty and the negative outcomes associated with it. The government's failure to prioritize children, time and again, demonstrates a lack of accountability.

The United States should look to other countries for guidance. In the United Kingdom, the child poverty rate remains lower than in the United States due to a national commitment and strategy to address it. In 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared a national goal to end child poverty through targets to cut the rate by one-quarter in 5 years and by one-half in 10 years, and eliminate it within 20 years. This commitment was the result of strong advocacy from child-focused organizations such as the U.K. Child Poverty Action Group. With cross-party political support, this commitment was codified into law in 2010 through the Child Poverty Act, which requires the government to

- track measurements and targets for relative poverty, combined low income and material deprivation, persistent poverty, and absolute poverty;
- develop a U.K. Child Poverty Strategy and require the nations (Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) to develop strategies as well;
- publish annual progress reports; and
- collaborate with local governments and other stakeholders to reduce child poverty.²

Measured in U.S. terms, the United Kingdom's efforts were a success in the first decade—resulting in policy changes that successfully cut the absolute child poverty rate by 50 percent between 2000 and 2010. The government implemented a set of policies that successfully raised incomes, promoted work, and improved child well-being, while U.S. progress in these areas stagnated (see Figure 1).



Unfortunately, in 2016 the Child Poverty Act was abolished. As a result, the United Kingdom will no longer track child poverty with any income-based measurements, and only after much backlash did the government agree to continue regularly publishing data on child poverty.³ Scotland is a bright spot, with the Scottish parliament recently having passed legislation to maintain statutory targets to significantly reduce child poverty.⁴

The abolishment of the Child Poverty Act, combined with funding cuts and detrimental changes to benefit programs, has caused the child poverty rate in the United Kingdom to rise again, and it is projected to continue to increase over the next four years.⁵ Despite this backsliding of progress, the U.K. example is still a valuable one for the United States because it proves that child poverty is not an insurmountable problem when the political will exists to address it.

Building on the past success of the U.K. model, the United States should establish a similar goal and take the steps necessary to cut child poverty in our country. The Child Poverty Reduction Act (S. 1630 / H.R. 3381) would establish a national child poverty target in the United States. Reintroduced in 2017 by Senators Bob Casey (D-PA), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), and Representatives Barbara

Lee (D-CA-13), Danny Davis (D-IL-7), Gerald Connolly (D-VA-11), and Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA-40), it would establish a national target to reduce the number of children living in poverty in the United States by half in 10 years and to eliminate child poverty in 20 years, as well as mandating that the federal government come up with a national plan to meet these targets.⁶

In order to identify the most effective interventions to meet this target, the bill mandates that the national plan be developed in consultation with nongovernmental entities providing social services to low-income children and families; advocacy groups that directly represent low-income children and families; policy experts; and officials of state, local, and tribal governments, including the working group of the largest state and local associations who administer or direct policy for antipoverty programs.

In addition, thanks to the leadership of Representatives Barbara Lee and Lucille Roybal-Allard, the 2016 federal omnibus spending bill included funding for a landmark study from the National Academy of Sciences on child poverty in the United States.⁷ This study will provide an evidence-based, nonpartisan analysis of the macroeconomic, health, and crime/social costs of child poverty as well as recommendations to reduce the number of children living in poverty in the United States by half in 10 years.⁸

Not only will this study will raise the profile of the issue of child poverty in the United States, but the recommendations issued will provide a starting point for bipartisan legislative action. Its release is slated for fall 2018.

In addition, several states have established child poverty targets, including Vermont⁹ and Connecticut.¹⁰ In California, a state child poverty task force was established to develop a framework to significantly reduce child poverty,¹¹ and in Wisconsin, a coalition of faith-based networks and antipoverty groups has begun a campaign that sets the goal of ending child poverty in the state.¹² On the international stage, the prime minister of New Zealand recently announced a national goal to reduce child poverty over the next decade and detailed three targets to meet this goal.¹³

While there is a lot of great research out there on the best policies and investments needed to lift children out of poverty in the United States, we lack the political will to implement them. A national target would provide a tool for advocates, the media,

and the public to hold the government accountable for identifying and implementing effective interventions to reduce child poverty. Now is the time for us to prioritize child poverty—our country can't afford to wait.

ENDNOTES

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