



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

# **FAMILY RESEARCH MEETING:**

## **SUMMARY**

November 1991

## **Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation**

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) is the principal advisor to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on policy development issues, and is responsible for major activities in the areas of legislative and budget development, strategic planning, policy research and evaluation, and economic analysis.

ASPE develops or reviews issues from the viewpoint of the Secretary, providing a perspective that is broader in scope than the specific focus of the various operating agencies. ASPE also works closely with the HHS operating divisions. It assists these agencies in developing policies, and planning policy research, evaluation and data collection within broad HHS and administration initiatives. ASPE often serves a coordinating role for crosscutting policy and administrative activities.

ASPE plans and conducts evaluations and research--both in-house and through support of projects by external researchers--of current and proposed programs and topics of particular interest to the Secretary, the Administration and the Congress.

This report was prepared under contract between HHS's Office of Family, Community and Long-Term Care Policy (now the Office of Disability, Aging and Long-Term Care Policy) and Emprise Design. For additional information about this subject, you can visit the ASPE home page at <http://aspe.hhs.gov>. The Project Officer was Douglas Alexander.

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HHS/ASPE Division of Family and Community Policy

November 13, 1991

Prepared for  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

The opinions and views expressed in this report are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Health and Human Services, the contractor or any other funding organization.

On August 8, 1991, the Division of Family and Community Policy in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services convened a meeting of researchers of family issues to discuss the following questions:

- Why has so little family research impacted policy?
- What can be done to improve the situation?
- What issues are important to future research?

## **WHAT SHOULD/CAN BE THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN POLICY AND THE ROLE OF POLICY IN THE FAMILY?**

- ASPE's purpose is to inform the Secretary, the Administration, and through them Congress and the Press, by providing the best information about what is happening in families and how families function.
- Focus should not be on the family as a means of addressing all problems so that government won't have to; rather, families should be seen as "brokers" who help members connect with needed services that the family cannot provide.
- Because policy issues are relatively short-term and research comparatively long-term, when the results of issue-specific research are available, they may no longer be policy relevant.
- Because there is so much we don't know about the family, for now research should focus on filling in the major gaps in the data and finding a way to transmit this information to policy makers.
- ASPE's purpose is not to produce any particular policy outcome, but to provide the best data available and let policy fall where it may, based on that data.
- Perhaps more readily apparent than the need for policy research is the need for a research policy. If persons in the field looked at it collectively, would they do things differently?

## **WHY HAS SO LITTLE RESEARCH IMPACTED POLICY?**

- Research synthesis is frequently insufficient to make a policy case;
- Researchers may not know how to extrapolate from research to policy;
- Policy makers may not know how to access policy-relevant research and assess its quality;
- Researchers are not always aware of policy debates before conclusions are reached;
- Policy makers may not agree that opening the "black box" of family will better inform policy;
- There are major barriers within the research community to opening the "black box" of families: difficulty in finding cooperative subjects, getting funded, getting published, and setting tenure;

- Researchers may be hesitant to take on the responsibility of directly supporting a specific policy decision.

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION?**

ASPE can play a role in the following activities which would increase the relevance of research to, and the impact of research on, policy:

- Synthesizing and assessing the quality of available data;
- Assisting researchers to learn about the use of research in the policy making process;
- Informing the research community about policy-relevant issues;
- Putting together a research network--including securing funding and convening an advisory committee--that is willing to keep in touch with policy makers and become a proactive rather than a reactive force;
- Conveying to policy makers the importance of the family in terms of building social capital to ensure future economic productivity and prosperity;
- Allowing researchers to indicate the degree of certitude to be placed on an opinion so that the research is not given more certitude than it warrants and results are not generalized beyond what the research shows.

## **ISSUES IN FAMILY RESEARCH**

### Family Strengths and Types

- Researchers need to look for qualities that are universal among strong families (good communication, parent involvement) while keeping differences (in type, culture, race, economic status) in mind: too much emphasis on diversities will lose policy people.
- Family strengths can be collapsed into three categories: cohesion, adaptability, and communication.
- Family strengths should be considered with respect to the "type" of family (authoritative, traditional, etc.) because different "types" of families have different strengths.
- Family strengths need to be discussed in a way that is acceptable to the entire political spectrum; e.g., research should consider spiritual/ethical/moral values beyond religion.
- To become contributing adults, children need a balance of values including commitment, compassion, restraint, fairness, and justice.

## **THE FAMILY IN CONTEXT**

- It is not possible to view the family in isolation; the family is imbedded within the community, just as the individual is imbedded within the family.
- In addition to race, culture, economic status, and family type, the context in which the family is operating also plays a role in determining family outcomes.
- Some family types may be more effective in certain environments than in others; e.g., an authoritative family may be necessary for success in a risk-ridden environment.
- There is evidence that variance in some family research has been incorrectly attributed to factors that are easily measured at the expense of contextual factors that are more difficult to measure.
- Achievement of some family strengths may be inhibited by conditions/requirements of the environment/context; e.g., parental involvement may be lessened by the necessity of shift work.
- The qualities children need to survive in a given environment may be very different from those they needed to be successful as adults; e.g., survival in childhood may require the ability and willingness to fight, but willingness to fight in adulthood may be counterproductive.
- Little of the research on family has shown cause and effect with respect to environmental factors; e.g., why some neighborhoods consistently produce the same results even though different types of families move through the neighborhood.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THESE ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY**

- To hold the interest of policy makers, researchers need to concentrate on the variables that make the greatest difference in outcome and target interventions on communities where they will have the most effect.
- Research is needed to assess the relative importance of race, culture, economic status, family style, and environment in determining family outcome.
- Ecological research is needed to determine the function of environment in family outcomes; e.g., do some neighborhoods consistently produce the same results because the lack of a stable economic infrastructure means a high unemployment rate among men, which correlates with increased numbers of female-headed households, out-of-wedlock births, and so on?
- Broad-based studies are still needed to identify universal elements of strong families, but research is also needed to get beyond the surface structure into how families operate and what it is like to live in a certain type of family.
- Intervention policy may be most effective if directed toward alleviating the environmental obstacles which prevent parents from providing for their children the qualities essential to successful family outcomes.

- Family studies need to include information on fathers, whether present or not, and on all other related and non-related persons who play a role in the functioning of the family.
- Research needs to be extended beyond childhood and adolescence into young adulthood to examine what elements make a child into a contributing or noncontributing adult.
- For purposes of research on family outcomes, communities should be defined in terms of shared values, expectations, motivations, attitudes, and norms rather than in terms of geographic boundaries (counties/census tracts).

## QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ASKED

- Within the family: What is the quality of parental discipline, monitoring, supervision, communication? Is there warmth, love, nurture, intellectual stimulation, a balance between demanding and responding, reciprocity between rights and responsibilities, general concern for commitment? Is the relationship between parents mutually reinforcing or antagonistic in its effect on the children? Do the parents present a united set of values and direction?
- What do families do to promote the ability to master risk, to develop a sense of purpose, and to train and prepare children for "real life"?
- What are the interactive/reciprocal effects of family problems?
- How do families nurture/teach values? How do children internalize values? What role do values play in strong families and in the development of children into contributing adults?
- How do parents teach children how to think effectively?
- How do parents become the parents they are? How much is modeled from their parents and how much is shaped by adult communal circumstances?
- How has the character of adolescence changed over the last decade and what are the long-term effects of this change?
- What implications does the premarital relationship of parents have on the family? What are its effects on the children?
- What role do fathers play in strong families? What limits/assists men in providing nurture and care and in finding balance between family and other interests/responsibilities?
- Why are men more likely to abandon family relationships (his children and their mother)? How is this decision made?
- Given the changing nature of families with two working parents. what happens when children are not the predominant interest in the life of at least one of the parents? What social conditions can allow the same level of love and concern so children feel the necessary unconditional commitment?
- What is the nature of family links to the rest of the world (religious institutions, social agencies, work, etc.).
- What programmatic initiatives, especially at the local level, have been successful in helping to strengthen families?