PUBLIC POLICY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH
Children and Youth At Risk in Challenging Times --
Impacting and Reforming Policy, Law and Perceptions
(SW M290N/PP M216)
Tuesdays, 2:00 to 4:50 pm, Public Affairs Rm. 4371

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Tuesdays after class (or by appointment)

“The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”
Franklin D. Roosevelt¹

“There are two lasting bequeaths we can give our children.
One is roots. The other is wings.”
Hodding Carter, Jr.²

A. The National Backdrop

As families face economic stress and struggle in today’s ever-challenging times, children and youth increasingly find themselves lacking fundamental supports and basic safety nets. As a result, our nation’s children and youth are facing a growing array of challenges. Some of the varied -- and too often seemingly insurmountable -- concerns facing America’s youth are summarized below. These issues, and reforms that can effectively and strategically address these problems, will be discussed in greater depth over the course of the class.

1. Child Poverty³

Children are the poorest age group in the US. Indeed, one in every five American children -- over 15 million of our kids -- lives in poverty. While our country is home to 406 billionaires and countless millionaires, a baby is born into poverty every 32 seconds and over 2,500 times a day. These numbers have been on a continual upward trend since the year 2000 and an additional five million children could end up in poverty before a full economic recovery occurs. The proportion of children in the US below 125% of the poverty line at the start of the decade was higher than in almost any other industrialized country (with the exception of the UK, where a 20-year effort to end child poverty was launched, resulting in a 23% decrease in child poverty through 2004, even while our nation’s child poverty figures continued to rise).

More than half of all poor children live in eight states; our home state of California has the highest number of poor children in the nation and the fourth highest percent of poor children. Family structure and educational attainment are strongly related to whether or not children will end up being raised in poverty. Children living in households headed by single mothers were more than five times as likely as children living with married parents to be poor – 42.9 percent vs. 8.5 percent.

2. Abused and Neglected Children – Life In Foster Care Drift

Each year, nearly 650,000 children come into contact with California’s child welfare system. One in every five children in California will be referred to child welfare services at least once during the first seven years of life; as many as 40% of African American children will have contact with child welfare by age seven. The vast majority of children who enter foster care (over 80%) are removed from their homes as a result of neglect – the byproduct of poverty, substance abuse or other family struggles. While foster care is intended to serve as a temporary safe haven, too often youth we bring into our charge languish in foster care limbo; more than 50% of children in foster care in our state have spent over three years in care and over 20,000 youth “age out” of care and into young adulthood every year.4

Closer to home, Los Angeles County has the dubious distinction of housing one of our nation’s largest child welfare systems. As a community, we collectively "parent" over 20,000 abused and neglected children.

For many youth in foster care, their formative years are characterized by movement from placement to placement, disruption of schooling, and the severing of ties with all that is familiar -- including siblings and extended family. It is thus not surprising that foster youth find it difficult to keep up. National studies report that 75% of children in foster care are working below grade level in school, almost half do not complete high school, and as few as 15% attend college. Nor is it surprising that these struggling youth become troubled adults when they grow up and transition from foster care. Within two to four years after young people “emancipate” from foster care, 51% are unemployed, 40% are on public assistance, 25% become homeless, and one in five are incarcerated.

3. Education, Employment, Health and Mental Health Concerns5

One-third of American students never graduate from high school; only half of all students of color graduate high school. These outcomes have significant economic consequences -- on average, high school dropouts earn 27 percent less than high school graduates and 58 percent less than college graduates. Moreover, youth who have dropped out of school are at higher risk of incarceration -- 75% of state prison inmates and 59% of federal inmates did not finish high school.

4 For more detail on the referenced facts and figures, as well as other general background on California’s Child Welfare system, see the California Child Welfare Council, Child Welfare “Facts at a Glance” at www.chhs.ca.gov/initiatives/CAChildWelfareCouncil (under Issues and Reports).
5 For more information on these issues as well as the referenced facts and figures see Deteriorating Employment Rates and Income Threatens the Future of Young Workers and Young Families: Black Young People and Young Families Fare the Worst, www.childrensdefense.org (February, 2011) (see also reports on education and health outcomes for youth at this website); see also reports at Center for Law and Social Policy, www.clasp.org.
Employment opportunities for youth reflect an equally dismal track record; teen employment rates are at their lowest level in nearly 60 years. Only 26% of 16-19 year olds are working and a recent report suggests that young people have lost more ground economically than any other age group over the last three decades. The figures are even more disheartening for black teens, with fewer than 15% gainfully employed.

Basic health care and health insurance pose yet additional areas of concern for our nation’s children and youth. Over seven million children in the US (10% of all kids) are uninsured. While parents across the country can now put their 20-something kids back on their private health insurance as a result of President Obama’s federal health reform efforts, foster children who were raised in the care and custody of the state may not be afforded the same benefits. Yet these youth have particularly acute health and mental health issues. Indeed, studies show that when youth enter the dependency court system approximately 80 percent have a chronic medical condition, and one in four have three or more chronic problems, including failure to grow, asthma, anemia, neurological conditions, and visual, hearing, or dental problems. Older youth in care are at significantly increased risk for drug abuse, early sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy. And it is not uncommon for children and youth who have been abused and neglected to have significant developmental and mental health concerns. Indeed, studies have shown that post-traumatic stress syndrome occurs among foster children at a rate twice as high as U.S. war veterans, 15 percent of foster youth attempted or contemplated suicide, and 29 percent spent some time in a psychiatric hospital. These health and mental health challenges are particularly intractable in a system where children move from placement to placement, there is no continuity of care, records are often difficult to locate, and information sharing hurdles are rampant.

4. Juvenile Justice Challenges

The trends in our juvenile justice system reveal similarly troubling patterns. In 2007, law enforcement agencies in the US made an estimated 2.18 million arrests of individuals under the age of 18; females accounted for nearly one-third of these arrests. More than 31 million youth were under juvenile court jurisdiction in 2007 and juvenile courts handled around 4,600 delinquency cases per day. Today the US incarcerates more youth than any other country in the world and is alone in imposing the sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for crimes committed by children.

As with the child welfare system, the racial composition of arrests and prosecutions of juveniles reflects a disturbingly disproportionate number of youth of color. While African American youth represent only 17% of the total youth population, they account for over 30% of juvenile arrests, 35% of youth judicially waived to criminal courts, and 58% of youth admitted to state adult prisons.

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6 See Deteriorating Employment Rates and Income Threatens the Future of Young Workers and Young Families: Black Young People and Young Families Fare the Worst, www.childrensdefense.org (February, 2011).
It is not uncommon for children from the dependency system to cross into delinquency -- the risk of delinquent behavior is 47% higher for victims of abuse and neglect. These so-called “crossover youth” have already fallen through our large systemic cracks. Studies reflect that the vast majority (over 83%) of youth who move from dependency into delinquency have previously unaddressed mental health or substance abuse problems, over one-quarter have no school affiliation at all, and many have turned to gang involvement as a substitute for the family and stable adult connection they lack. When they do enter our justice system, former foster youth are more likely to end up charged with a crime and spend longer periods of time in custody.

5. Understanding and Influencing Youth Policy

With all of these facts and figures as a backdrop, the imperative to improve policy, practice and perceptions in regard to the most vulnerable children and youth in our community is clear. Yet too often policy making in this arena is scattered, responding to the crisis or high profile story of the moment; practices and decision making are reactive, rather than strategic; and public perceptions are driven by the negative shadow cast on youth at risk as a result of tragedy and scandal driven media coverage. Understanding these many and varied challenges is an integral part of improving the plight of youth in our nation and crafting an effective agenda for reform of youth policies and practices.

B. Course Description

1. Course Overview

The purpose of this course is to enable students to comprehend the dynamics of legislative, administrative, and policy changes designed to improve conditions and promote fairness for children and youth. The course will explore existing policies and practices in relation to children and youth, including key child welfare, education, health, mental health and juvenile justice issues. The course will also examine public perceptions and media coverage of struggling children and youth. Classroom discussions, student debates, a wide array of reading materials, articles and reports, and in-class videos will enable students to develop strategies for analyzing and impacting existing policies, practices and perceptions in relation to issues impacting children and youth. Techniques for influencing decision makers, government and legislative leaders, and the media will be explored and innovative approaches to some of the most critical challenges facing children and youth at risk will be discussed.

During class discussions, students will learn about several pressing problem areas in the youth policy arena. Through diverse reading materials, videos and classroom guests, students will have the opportunity to benefit from the perspectives of youth and other stakeholders who have been part of the government and court systems involving children and youth. Students will also learn how to analyze statutes and cases and will participate in debates of particularly timely policy issues.

At the end of this course, it is expected that students will have an enhanced understanding of critical legislative, judicial and social issues, challenges, and policies relating to children and youth. Students will be better equipped to understand and impact policies and practices in this arena, will have a deeper understanding of how new laws and policies are shaped, and will understand how to use the media, legislation, and other avenues of persuasion and reform to promote more balanced and positive public perceptions of, and improved outcomes for, children and youth.
2. Course Expectations

Given the interactive nature of the course and the critical nature of the class discussions and presentations, as well as the limited number of class sessions, all students are responsible for reading the assigned materials and attending and participating in class. Reading materials will consist of a collection of texts, articles, stories, and reports, compiled in the course Reader. If a student is unable to attend class due to illness or an emergency, please contact Professor Krinsky (preferably in advance of class) at krinskym@yahoo.com. Additional assignments may be required to make up any missed class session. Students who miss more than two classes sessions may be at risk of not passing the course. Repeated absences, tardiness, or leaving class early will impact the participation portion of the grade.

Information on the course and classes will be distributed to students via email and through the course website. All students are responsible for checking email and ensuring that the Registrar has their correct email address.

Students will be asked to submit one page “reflections” on the assigned reading one day prior to four class sessions – students can determine which sessions they wish to submit reflections for, but at least two of the sessions must be in the month of April. These reflections will help guide the class dialogue and will summarize the student’s reaction to assigned reading. Reflections should be submitted via email – preferably in Word format – to krinskym@yahoo.com on or before **1:00 pm the afternoon prior to the selected class session.**

Class attendance, participation and contribution to class discussions and debates, as well as reading and reacting to the course materials, are an integral part of the course and will account for 30% of the student’s final grade. The remainder of the final grade will consist of: the student’s initial class-led discussion on the selected issue area (20%), the final presentation on the student’s reform topic (25%) and the final paper (25%).

3. Student Reform Project

Each student will be expected to research, develop and lead a discussion on an issue or challenge facing children and youth at risk. By the end of the quarter, students will craft an innovative proposal addressing how to change policy, practice or perception in regard to that issue. Class-led discussions on the issue or challenge selected by the student will take place during class sessions in April and May. The student’s selected challenge area and possible approaches to address the identified issue will be vetted and form the basis, after feedback from classmates, for the student’s “reform” project. Reform projects can include legislative proposals, new innovations in youth policy or children’s practices, media or community outreach proposals, legislative changes, court reforms, or other innovative advocacy initiatives. At the end of the quarter, students will turn in a written paper (no longer than 10 pages) discussing the selected issue and proposed reform project, and will also present orally to the class their proposal during the final week of class (with the number of sessions to be scheduled based on class size). Members of the class will have the chance to step into the shoes of policy makers and decide whether they would implement the proposed reform.

Each student will be required to submit a short one to two page overview of the challenge area identified and possible reform ideas on or before **April 16.** Details on the outline, final paper, and student presentations will be provided over the course of the class and on the course website.
C. **Course Schedule and Topics**

I. Introduction to Youth Policy Issues and Challenges -- The National, State, and Local Backdrop  
(April 2)

- Child poverty – current backdrop; trends over time
- Role of government in overseeing the fate of children and youth – exploring the boundaries of government engagement; statutory definition of “abuse and neglect”
- Impetus for the child welfare system – historical background
- Overview of challenges and outcomes for youth at risk
- Youth policy trends and efficacy over time
- Structure and expectations of the course

II. “This is My Life” – Youth Policy Advocacy Through the Lens of Children and Youth  
(April 9th)

**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class**

- Perspectives of current and former system-involved youth
- Importance of youth engagement
- Youth participation in advocacy initiatives, case planning and court hearings -- how to effectively empower, engage and include a youth voice
- Developing and supporting youth advocacy movements
- Advocates for children – different models of representation

Invited Guests: Current or former foster care or JJ youth

III. Perceptions Matter – Children and Youth Through the Eyes of the Public and Media  
(April 16th)

**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class; bring to class an item from the broader media on children or youth at risk**

One page outline on issue or challenge selected by student and possible reform ideas due

- Public perceptions of children and youth at risk and other unempowered populations
- Media coverage of youth at risk and youth policy initiatives
- Open vs. closed courts – the ongoing debate (AB 73)
- Awareness campaigns and advocacy strategies to impact public opinion and engage the community

Invited Guest: Journalist/Expert on Media Challenges and Coverage of Youth Issues

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10 Note that topic areas and dates/class order are subject to change based on speaker availability and class scheduling. Speaker categories are tentative and will be firmed up as the course progresses. Class sessions with student-led discussions will occur during the class sessions in late April and May. The student reform project presentations will occur during the final week of class.
IV. Breaking Down the Silos -- Funding Issues and Challenges; Piecemeal Parenting; Data and Information Sharing Hurdles  
(April 23)  
**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class**

- Funding of services and supports for youth at risk  
- Funding structure and choices as a policy “driver” – balancing flexibility and accountability  
- Effective use of data  
- Information sharing hurdles and barriers – balancing privacy and information sharing; debunking information sharing myths  
- Building collaborative leadership and breaking down government silos

Invited Guest: Government and/or advocacy experts on building collaborative leadership in advancing youth initiatives and strategies for breaking down silo’d systems

Student Presentations on Issue or Challenge Area

V. Issues and Challenges Facing Teens and Youth In Transition  
(April 30th)  
**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class**

- Youth Aging Out of Foster Care and JJ – Challenges of transition age youth and different models and perspectives on extension of care  
- Unique problems vulnerable populations (including LGBTQ and homeless youth)  
- Housing and employment challenges for transitioning youth  
- Barriers to higher education and “hot” education reform issues

Invited Guest: Experts on older youth, homelessness and education advocacy

Student Presentations on Issue or Challenge Area (continued)

NOTE: NO CLASS ON MAY 7TH (class session will be made up through the individual student meetings to be held the last two weeks of May.)

VI. Health and Mental Health Challenges; Caring forDisconnected Youth; Disproportionality  
(May 14th)  
**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class**

- Health and mental health “hot” issues – may include psychotropic medication; disconnected youth as medical subjects; pregnant and parenting teens  
- Issues and challenges facing caregivers  
- Exploring inherent biases  
- Data and possible explanations relating to overrepresentation of African American and Native American children and youth in foster care and JJ

Invited Guests: Health advocate; caregiver expert

Student Presentations on Issue or Challenge Area (continued)
VII. Legislative and Legal Advocacy – Two Vehicles for System Reform
(May 21)
**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class**

- From idea to law – navigating and understanding the legislative process
- Effective legislative advocacy strategies
- Moving policy initiatives in tough fiscal times; different tools of legislative persuasion
- Ensuring a legislative after-life – promoting effective implementation
- The court process – overview, limitations, and recent reforms
- The unique role of the dependency judge and challenges facing juvenile courts

Invited Guest: Juvenile court judge and current or former legislator and/or expert on initiative and legislative processes

*Finish Student Presentations on Issue or Challenge Area (if needed)*

VIII. Individual Student Meetings
Week of May 21 and/or May 28 -- Student meetings with Professor Krinsky on reform proposals; dates will be scheduled for student meetings, as needed, based on student interest and availability

IX. Trends and Challenges in the Juvenile Justice System -- Is Rehabilitation a Dead Concept?
(May 28)
**Submit any Reading Reflections by 1 pm the day before class**

*View Juvies film*

- Studies, data and patterns for youth who move from dependency to delinquency (“crossover youth”); legal constraints that inhibit holistic approaches
- Public perceptions of delinquent youth
- Juvenile justice trends and sentencing issues -- backdrop and current advocacy initiatives; reentry challenges
- Juvenile death penalty and Life Without Parole (“JLWOPs”) sentences

X. Final Student Presentations on Reform Proposals
June 4th – Final presentations will be scheduled on the last day of class (and possibly an additional day that week, if needed, based on class size)

*Last day of class: Student reform proposal papers due (bring a copy to class and also submit via the course assignment drop off and via email – in Word format – to Professor Krinsky)*