



News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association

Cover Story

Working with Impoverished Children and Families in the Child Welfare System

By Lisette Austin

Facts about poverty in the United States are stark. According to the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, America is exceptionally unequal when it comes to income—with 1% of the population controlling 23.5% of all the country's income. The United States ranks third among first-world countries in the level of income inequality. The US poverty rate is at 15.8%; only one advanced economy has a higher relative poverty rate—Mexico. Roughly 750,000 Americans are homeless on any given night, with one in five of those being chronically homeless. Nearly 22% of all American children are in poverty, a child poverty rate second only to that of Mexico. In 2007, 81 million American children under 18 years old were without health insurance.

What defines poverty? The US government annually publishes the *Federal Poverty Level Guidelines*. In 2011, the poverty line for a family of three is listed as a total family income of up to \$18,530 per year, or \$1,544 per month. However, this official guideline does not capture the full picture.

Monica Bogucki, a staff attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis who has specialized in providing legal advice to youth for over 20 years, outlines a wider definition of poverty. In a recent [National CASA podcast](#), she identifies three levels: near poverty, poverty (federal poverty guideline level) and extreme poverty. Families in extreme poverty would have an



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income closer to one half of the federal guidelines—around \$9,265 a year. Bogucki explains that those in the near-poverty category are typically what people call the “working poor”—living just slightly above the poverty line.

“About 20% of children under the age of 6 live in poverty,” says Bogucki. “But if you put the two categories of near poverty and poverty together, it’s now 43% of all children.”

With the recent economic downturn, the number of people living in poverty is increasing.

“There is a new category often referred to as the ‘newly poor,’” says Bogucki. “These are families who have never really lived in poverty, but now they are homeless or have lost nearly half their income. It’s hard to get statistics on this group because it is so new.”

Poverty and Child Abuse

The impact of poverty on children and families can be devastating. Ongoing poverty weakens parents’ and caregivers’ ability to cope with the inevitable demands and stress of day-to-day life. Economic hardship can mean difficulty finding safe housing, childcare, medical treatment, food and clothing. It can also lead to increased depression, family conflict, substance abuse and isolation—all of which can fuel child abuse and neglect. The federal government’s *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)* recently reported that children in families struggling with poverty are three times more likely to be abused and seven times more likely to be neglected.

Unlike previous NIS study cycles, the NIS-4 also found higher rates of abuse among African American children. However, further analysis shows that this difference in maltreatment rates is strongly related to the higher number of African American children and families living in poverty. In the end, poverty stands out as the strongest risk factor for child abuse and neglect in the United States.

Recognition of the intersection of poverty and the child welfare system is nothing new. The intention of federal child welfare policy over the last 100 years has been to not remove children from their homes simply “for reasons of poverty.” Unfortunately, it is still very prevalent for poor families to be labeled as neglectful and to have their children removed, sometimes for reasons that could be solved through basic financial support and connection to community resources.

With the economic downturn, many fear this trend will increase.

“With all of the cuts on the local, state and federal level, we will continue to see a majority of children removed because families aren’t able to provide what kids need physically, nutritionally and medically,” says Chanin B. Kelly-Rae, National CASA’s senior director for inclusion and equity. “We’ll see the reverberation of



those cuts in the coming years. Short term, a lot more kids and families are at risk of entering the child welfare system. It frightens me to think about the long-term prospect for communities of color that are already vulnerable and struggling to get a footing after centuries of discrimination and inequity.”

Disparate Outcomes

Once in the child welfare system, impoverished children and families face far worse outcomes when compared to those families with more financial and social support. Research studies have linked family poverty with more out-of-home placements, lower probability of family reunification and a higher chance of a return to substitute care even if reunification with the family does happen. Impoverished caregivers frequently have a harder time meeting court-established requirements due to financial barriers. It can also be difficult for families in poverty to retain legal services, especially after losing a child welfare court case. Again, the recent economic downturn only exacerbates this disparity, with more states forced to cut budgets that might normally provide assistance to families navigating the child welfare system.

Impoverished families also face biases from child welfare workers and service providers.

“One of the myths about people living in poverty is that they are poor because they choose to be,” says Monica Bogucki. “The families and children that I work with do not want to be on assistance, they want to work and move ahead with their goals.”

Far too often, service providers look at economically disadvantaged people through a narrow lens, missing their strengths, resiliency and resourcefulness.

“Things can get misinterpreted when dealing with socioeconomic issues,” says Bogucki. “Families in the system are sometimes labeled as ‘non-cooperative,’ when the underlying issue actually is that they simply don’t have the resources to carry out what is asked of them. Sometimes they are too embarrassed to admit they don’t have those resources.”

Awareness and Education Are Key

CASA volunteers who work with impoverished families and children can start by educating themselves about what it means to live in poverty and then examine their own biases and negative attitudes toward poor people.

“Self-awareness is key,” says Danielle Morrison, program director of CASA of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania. She has made it a priority to provide staff and advocate training about poverty issues. “It’s about knowing who we are, how we feel about ourselves and how we think about others. It’s about knowing how issues of poverty tug at our value systems.”

The *Bridges Out of Poverty* training is one way to become educated about the issues surrounding people living in poverty in our country. The training is based on the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby K. Payne, PhD. Her follow-up book, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, serves as the training manual in her workshops for service providers. The training focuses on relationship building, mentoring, program redesign and community collaboration.

Tracy Evans, National CASA's diversity manager, highly recommends the training. She was impressed with the use of case studies as well as the examination of the larger political and social issues that surround poverty.

"The training shapes the way you think about poverty and breaks down stereotypes that you may have had about folks who are impoverished in the foster care system," says Evans. "If parents can't feed their children three times a day, it doesn't necessarily mean they are willfully neglectful or abusive. Removing a child from an impoverished family can on the surface seem like a huge benefit to the child, but that's not always the case."

Chanin Kelly-Rae also stresses that it is far too easy to look at poor families through a negative lens. "The typical CASA advocate is someone who comes from an experience of being middle class," she says. "It's easy to think that impoverished families don't have a right to raise their children because they can't provide a middle class lifestyle. However, a bigger house in the best neighborhood does not make a better parent."

Identifying Strengths and Resources

When working with families and children who are in the child welfare system primarily for reasons related to poverty, CASA volunteers can actively work to identify and support family strengths. The goal is to then help the family access the resources they need to become better providers for their children.

"It's about stepping into the shoes of the family and looking at what basic needs the family has been able to meet," says Monica Bogucki. "See what it is they do have, and then try to build on that base."

In her National CASA podcast, Bogucki describes several steps to take when initially working with impoverished families. The first is to create a chart of current family resources.

"List every family member in the household and what benefit programs they currently access," Bogucki says. She then suggests making a list of what the family needs and steps to address those needs.

"I often see families who don't have any transportation," she offers as an example. "One of things you can do is ask the court



to order a bus pass, and that helps to extend the cash available to the household.”

Bogucki also recommends developing a list of local emergency resources such as food banks, counseling, homeless shelters and places that provide free or inexpensive clothing.

“The most difficult thing about living in poverty is that it can be very crisis-driven,” Bogucki says. “If this kind of list is available, it can help reduce stress because resources are already identified.”

Chanin Kelly-Rae adds a few more suggestions to the list. “CASA volunteers can also work to make sure the court system is helping families stay engaged and connected in their own communities,” she says. “Look at local kinship care and kinship placements so children can stay with friends, go to the same school and stay with the supportive team of people they know they can depend on.”

Agents of Change

The issue of poverty and how it intersects with the child welfare system is a large one that requires change on multiple levels.

“It’s no small challenge to deal with the systemic issues that keep families in poverty,” says Tracy Evans. “As long as poverty exists, we’ll have children and families who enter our circle of care under duress and with a great need for support, understanding and advocacy.” She stresses that change needs to happen at individual, organizational and community levels. “CASA advocates are the greatest strength for children in care because we hit at so many levels.”

Danielle Morrison agrees wholeheartedly.

“CASA volunteers are change agents,” she says. “We can help effect sustainable change around the issue of poverty.” She also believes strongly in recruiting volunteers from lower socioeconomic levels since they know first hand what the challenges are and what is needed to meet those challenges. “People from every walk of life have the potential to be an advocate and an agent of change.”

In the end, it is the families and children themselves who will teach advocates what they need to know to help make a difference.

“I have learned much about poverty issues through my clients and what they graciously share with me,” reflects Bogucki. “It has been a generous gift, and I’m very thankful. I am humbled by my clients and their tremendous strengths.”

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