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25TH ANNIVERSARY 1970-1995

FOCUS

The monthly magazine of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

From Troubled Youths to Responsible Fathers

A Cleveland-Based Counseling Program That Helps Young Men to Nurture Their Children Will Be Replicated in Six Cities

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POLITICAL TRENDLETTER

PERSPECTIVE

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National Policy Institute at a Propitious Time

Next month's Seventh National Policy Institute (NPI VII) may be the most important of all the quadrennial policy forums convened by the Joint Center and the seven national organizations of black elected and appointed officials. The institute will offer a platform for policy makers at every level of government to develop strategies for leadership in advance of the 1996 election campaign. The timing is propitious since the upcoming election will likely be a national referendum on the GOP "Contract With America," and on the policies and programs of the Clinton administration.

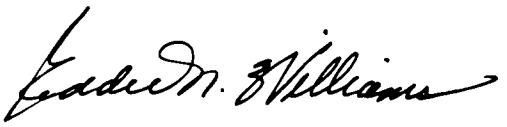
That is why I have urged FOCUS readers to join political, civil rights, and religious leaders at the Institute in Washington, D.C., on January 25–27, just five weeks before the first presidential primary. This unique nonpartisan meeting will provide a special opportunity to leverage the expertise and political power of African Americans and their allies in the development of responsive public policies. The Joint Center's cosponsors in this enterprise are the Congressional Black Caucus, the Judicial Council of the National Bar Association, the National Association of Black County Officials, the National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, the National Caucus of Black School Board Members, and the National Conference of Black Mayors. The institute will bring together elected and appointed officials at all levels of office; representatives from civil rights, labor, and community organizations; scholars; the media; heads of public interest groups; clergy; and business leaders.

Under the theme "The Changing Role of Government," a series of public policy workshops will offer participants the opportunity to exchange views on a range of issues of vital importance to African Americans. National leaders and experts expected to attend include Vice President Al Gore, Dr. Bernard Anderson (Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of Labor), La Varne Burton (Deputy Assistant Secretary, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services), Carleton Guthrie (Director, Southshore Bank, Chicago), Floretta McKenzie (former Washington, D.C., superintendent of schools), H. Carl McCall (Comptroller of New York State), Ohio State Representative Otto Beatty, William Spriggs (Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress), Wade Henderson (Washington Bureau Chief, NAACP), and Roger Wilkins (commentator and professor of history at George Mason University). Also on the program is Harvard law professor and PBS/TV commentator Charles Ogletree, who will moderate a national leaders' forum, "Strategies for '96 and Beyond."

Conference participants will consider new findings and new viewpoints on welfare reform, health care, the politics of education, and urban policy. They will find out what works (and what doesn't) in workforce development, urban job creation, and HIV-AIDS. They will grapple with the business of managing municipal budgets and getting their fair share of federal funds devolved to the states. Most important, perhaps, we will look at new ways to mobilize the black electorate. A series of showcases will provide examples of and insights into successful programs at the state and local level.

The timing of this event could not be better. As the country prepares for the coming campaign season, we must make sure our voices are heard and our influence is felt. ■

A convenient registration form for the Institute is on the last page of TrendLetter. An abbreviated event program for the Institute is on the inside of the back flap of the magazine.



PRESIDENT

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From Troubled Youths to Responsible Fathers

A Cleveland-Based Counseling Program That Helps Young Men to Become Nurturing Fathers Will Be Replicated in Six Cities

by David C. Ruffin

Charles Ballard is a gentle man with a fine wife and happy, secure children. He would be the model father for many children in America. What is more, he's the founder and head of the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, a national support organization that helps young black men become positive, nurturing fathers. But few people who knew Ballard as a teenager would have predicted that later in his life he would be honored across the nation for creating a unique program for rebuilding broken families.

In the 1950s, Ballard was a troubled black youth. He dropped out of high school in Alabama, and by the age of 17 had fathered and abandoned a child out of wedlock. An abuser of alcohol and drugs, he was a violent and angry young man. In those days, he says, "If you looked at me the wrong way, I'd curse you and punch you in the mouth." By his own account, Ballard was on a collision course with death at an early age.

Then his life changed. It happened while he was serving out a sentence in a Georgia prison in 1959. He was 22 at the time. "We were on a prison work gang, and one of the guards, armed with a shotgun started prodding me with verbal cracks," he recalls. "I was so angry, I was unaware that I was saying aloud that I was going to go after the guard. If other inmates hadn't been able to calm me down, I surely would have been killed that day."

After the incident, Ballard began to examine his life. An older inmate became a mentor and read him the Psalms and other passages from the *Bible*. Perhaps as an outgrowth of this relationship, Ballard began to realize that the reason he lived with so much rage was that he had never been nurtured by the guiding hand of a father. His own father had been diagnosed as emotionally unstable and had been committed to a mental institution when Ballard was just three and a half and died when he was eight. So, Ballard decided to turn his life around. Upon his release from prison, he found his own son, by then five years old, whom he had never seen and took responsibility for raising him. He later earned a bachelors degree and a masters degree.

Finding the Fathers

It was while supervising female health care workers in 1976 at a Cleveland hospital that Ballard noticed how seldom the fathers were mentioned in prenatal and postnatal health care records. Few fathers from the low-income, mostly black neighborhood accompanied expectant mothers on clinic visits. For two years, Ballard visited the obstetrics clinics, talking with the mothers and pregnant women there and collecting the names of 600 fathers. He began one-to-one counseling of the fathers on the list. Many of the men he worked with had been like him as a youth—school drop-outs and ex-offenders with backgrounds of drug and alcohol abuse.

Employing a nontraditional home-based counseling method, Ballard's goal was to foster "responsible fatherhood" by building bridges between generations of family members. He pursued this mission as a one-man support group on his personal time in the evenings and on weekends. "One of the things I had working in my favor was that, no matter how low they had fallen, I could relate to these men and empathize with their problems," says Ballard. "I always treated them as equals and always addressed them as 'mister', even if they were teenagers."

Ballard became the surrogate father and role model to dozens of men who came to rely on him as the only dependable adult they had ever known. This meant that Ballard frequently got midnight calls. "I got a call one night at 2:00 a.m. from a young man whose mother's boyfriend kicked him out of the house," he recalls. Ballard gave the youth money for meals and put him up in a hotel for two nights at his own expense. He was always there for them. "I was doing for them what I would have wanted someone to do for me," he says. In four years, he had counseled 400 men.

Embracing Self Worth and Gentleness

Eventually, he left the hospital and started working out of a community-based health center full-time. In 1982, with a budget of $57,850, Ballard formed the first free-standing, community-based agency with a focus on fathers. Called the Teen Father Program: A Family Service, the agency provided nontraditional, home-based services to fathers and their families, including one-to-one counseling, one-to-group counseling, and family therapy. The goal was to begin connecting fathers with their families and with their communities. Promoting responsible fatherhood enhanced family relations, encouraged men to establish the paternity of their children, and inspired fathers to further their educations, seek employment, and embrace risk-free lifestyles.

The program helped fathers, who ranged in age from 14 to 43, to develop a sense of right and wrong, personal discipline, self-determination, and self-worth. The program

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Mr. Ruffin is the editor of *FOCUS*.

Fathers

Continued from page 3

also engendered compassion and gentleness in the fathers and nurtured a desire to make their communities safe. Over time, the program expanded to a staff of 17 and a client base of 4,000 young fathers, their fathers, and families.

And the program worked. The attitudes of the fathers toward themselves and others improved and they became role models for their children. Many of the fathers participating in the program discarded their high-risk lifestyles—gang involvement, use of alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, violence, profanity, and unhealthy diets. Most fathers established paternity for their children often resulting in the dramatic improvement of the behavior of the youngsters.

A Spur to Higher Educational Attainment

Most of the fathers who receive services from the Institute have fathers who did not finish high school. A major goal of the Institute is to spur fathers to finish high school or obtain their GEDs and strive for even higher educational attainment to stop the intergenerational repetition of dropping out of school. A father's commitment to education has an extremely positive impact on his children. One father, an unemployed school drop-out who hadn't married the mother of his children, declared that he didn't see any need for school, because his father and his grandfather did not finish high school. Ironically, he wanted his daughter to finish high school, but he had never considered how his low educational achievement affected her attitude toward education. After counseling, he went back to school and was awarded a GED, found a job, and married his daughter's mother. Today, he is still married; his daughter is an exceptional student and has a full scholarship to Ohio State University. His two sons are also performing exceptionally well in school.

A 1993 survey of the fathers who have received counseling through the Institute revealed that:

- 70 percent completed twelve years of education. Nearly 12 percent completed at least one year of college;
- 62 percent were employed full-time; 11 percent were employed part-time;
- 92 percent developed positive values and attitudes;
- 96 percent experienced an improved relationship with the child's mother;
- 97 percent spent more time with their children and provided financial support.

Based on this "Cleveland model," the program became the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization in 1992, a national program that is now being replicated in six cities. In 1995, the Institute moved its headquarters to Washington, D.C.

Making Families Whole

The national need for responsible fatherhood programs is clear. The growth in the number of female headed households is well documented. According to Larry L. Bumpass, a demographer at the University of Wisconsin, a black child today has only a one-in-five chance of growing up with two parents until the age of sixteen. In 1992, two out of three first births to black women under 35 years of age were out-of-wedlock. In 1960, the number was two out of five. Among poor black women, 65 percent of those who have children have never married. Behind these numbers has been an increase in crime, lower educational attainment, unemployment, and increased welfare dependency in African American communities.

These trends must be reversed to make families whole. The most essential element of any community is the family. Families are where children learn to bless or curse the world, and learn gratitude, respect, love, and compassion for others. But this is not the job of the mother alone; the father has a valuable role to play.

Ballard, however, charges that in the past 30 years, outside institutions, especially welfare agencies, have been exercising greater influence, and control over the family. At one time, in order for a family to receive assistance from the government, the father could not be in the home. Although all families seeking assistance were affected by this policy, African American families were especially hard hit. The absence of the father has played a major role in the decline of black families in America.

Black fathers represent less than 7 percent of America's population, yet they are more than 50 percent of the inmate population in prisons. Fathers disconnected from their families are several times more likely to be involved in accidents, to be victims of homicide, or to commit suicide. These fathers tend to abuse drugs, to drink heavily, to be more susceptible to chronic disease, and to be committed for psychiatric treatment more often than fathers engaged in family activities. Additionally, fathers with no family involvement work less and earn less than those fathers who are involved.

Research data suggest that children growing up in single-parent homes, particularly where the fathers are absent, are more likely to experience limited life opportunities, and are susceptible to negative lifestyles. But research has also revealed that the presence of fathers in the lives of their children, and their children's mothers, in a positive manner, increases the stability of the family and the life chances of its members.

Replicating a Successful Model

The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood, through its national office in Washington, D.C., will replicate and manage its father-friendly program, in Atlanta, the District of Columbia, Milwaukee, Nashville, San Diego, and Yonkers in 1996. The program will be based on the Cleveland model, providing comprehensive nontraditional counseling to at-risk fathers who have disengaged from the lives of their children. But as the Institute grows, Charles Ballard will work to ensure that the program never becomes so big that it fails to give each father the respect and special one-to-one treatment that has made the program the success it is today. "Most men are capable of responsible fatherhood, all we need to do is lead them to it," he says. ■

December 1995

POLITICAL TRENDLETTER

Inside This Issue:

- Challenges to majority-black congressional districts continue as the U.S. Supreme Court hears cases from Texas and North Carolina.
- Justice Department statistics show that the U.S. tops all other countries in the rate at which it imprisons its citizens.
- While slashing funds for social programs, congressional Republicans have funnelled billions into defense programs the Pentagon doesn't want.
- Amnesty International charges that Congress's 1994 crime bill violates a human rights covenant.

Struggle Continues Over Majority-Minority Districts

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments December 5 in two cases that are part of a continuing legal struggle to determine the fate of majority-minority congressional districts across the country. Majority-minority districts in Texas and North Carolina are being contested on the grounds that they were drawn predominantly on the basis of race, without regard to traditional redistricting factors such as contiguity and compactness. Since 1993, in narrow 5-to-4 decisions, the High Court has established that drawing district lines predominantly on the basis of race violates the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution unless the state can meet the test of strict judicial scrutiny. That is, the state must show that it was necessary to consider race in order to fulfill a "compelling governmental interest" and that the actions taken were narrowly tailored to achieve that interest.

After the 1990 census, state legislatures and federal and state courts drew 26 additional congressional districts in which African Americans and Latinos were in the majority. In districts where white bloc voting has usually resulted in the defeat of minority-preferred candidates, the Voting Rights Act requires the creation of new majority-minority districts to provide minority voters the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice. In two states, North Carolina and Georgia, the Justice Department objected under the Voting Rights Act to congressional redistricting plans that did *not* include additional majority-black districts.

In the Texas case now under review, the state contends that the protection of incumbents was also a major consideration in its drawing of the new districts, leading to their unusual, sprawling shape. In fact, the state alleges that much more compact majority-black and -Hispanic districts could have been drawn, but that some pockets of black voters were shifted to neighboring districts to allow them to retain sufficient Democratic voters to ensure the reelection of white Democratic incumbents. Protection of incumbents, they state, is certainly a "traditional" redistricting factor. Justice Department lawyer **PAUL BENDER** also defended the districts by saying that Texas's compelling interest included compliance with the Voting Rights Act and offsetting the effects of white bloc voting.

The Supreme Court struck the first blow at majority-minority districts in its June 1993 *Shaw* v. *Reno* decision when it ruled that the unusual shape of North Carolina's 12th congressional district could only be explained as an attempt to divide districts along racial lines, without regard for traditional nonracial redistricting practices. The state argued that its compelling interest in considering race was compliance with the Voting Rights Act. Black voters charged that North Carolina had historically drawn districts to minimize the black vote and that white bloc voting had prevented African Americans from representing the state until 1992

when **MEL WATT**, from the 12th district, and **EVA CLAYTON**, from the 1st district, became the first African Americans to be elected to Congress from North Carolina in this century.

While neither of the Supreme Court's recent decisions (concerning districts in Georgia and North Carolina) sustained the majority-minority districts, both showed the same narrow 5-to-4 split. Voting with the majority in both cases were Chief Justice **WILLIAM REHNQUIST** and Justices **ANTONIN SCALIA, ANTHONY KENNEDY, SANDRA DAY O'CONNOR**, and **CLARENCE THOMAS**.

The High Court is likely to hand down its decisions in the two new cases next summer, just before the 1996 elections. The effect on minority representation could be devastating: all of the 17 black members of Congress from the South represent majority-black districts. Meanwhile, on December 13, a federal district court overturned two of Georgia's majority-minority districts (the 2nd and 11th) currently represented by **SANFORD BISHOP** and **CYNTHIA McKINNEY**, both black. If that court's decision stands, it will leave the 5th district in Atlanta, represented by Congressman **JOHN LEWIS**, as Georgia's only majority-black district. Georgia has a black population of 27 percent. **THEODORE SHAW**, a lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, asserts, "What's at stake is whether we're going to continue to have an integrated Congress."

U.S. Incarceration Rate Highest in the World

As of June 30, 1995, the United States achieved an unenviable first place: it became number one in the percentage of its population behind bars. According to a recently published midyear report by the U.S. Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, this undesirable distinction was achieved because of the largest annual increase in incarceration in history for the year ending June 30. During the period, the number of state and federal prison inmates increased by 89,707. More than a million were in state prisons and nearly 100,000 in federal facilities. Inmates in municipal and county jails, incarcerated on average for less than a year, numbered nearly half a million at last count. That brings the total U.S. incarceration rate to 565 inmates per 100,000 U.S. citizens—eight to ten times higher than the rate of any of the industrialized democracies of western Europe. The state with the biggest growth in inmate population was Texas, with a whopping 27 percent annual increase.

ALLEN BECK, the bureau's chief of corrections statistics and a coauthor of the report, attributed the precipitous increase in prison population to mandatory sentences for drug and violent crimes. "Three-strikes and you're out" statutes and "truth in sentencing" laws, which essentially eliminate parole, are also beginning to contribute to the growth in the population behind bars.

According to the report, the number of black inmates has grown at a faster pace than has the number of white inmates. Currently, 6.8 percent of all black adult males are incarcerated, compared to a rate of less than one percent among their white counterparts. Coauthor of the report and bureau statistician **DARRELL K. GILLIARD** notes that black males are heavily concentrated among drug and aggravated assault defendants.

Civil rights and civil liberties advocates charge that the racial disparities in the prison population are largely driven by racial disparities in sentencing laws. For example, federal sentencing rules applying to convictions involving crack cocaine, used mostly by inner-city blacks, are 100 times more severe than those applying to powder cocaine, a drug widely used by whites. First-time offenders convicted of possessing five grams of crack receive a mandatory sentence of five years in prison with no parole. But an offender must possess 500 grams of powder cocaine to receive the same sentence.

Earlier this year, the bipartisan U.S. Sentencing Commission recommended that the sentencing guidelines on crack and powder cocaine be equalized. If Congress had failed to object by November 1, these recommendations would have automatically taken affect. But for the first time since the Commission was formed in 1984, Congress acted to reject its recommendation, voting to overturn it by a vote of 316 to 98 in the House (it passed by a voice vote in the Senate).

With most state governments looking to trim their budgets, the future seems to hold an inevitable collision between two unpleasant realities: the cost of constructing new prisons and the release of prisoners to comply with court orders concerning prison conditions, especially overcrowding. Florida has already been faced with setting free additional dangerous felons because so many other inmates were serving mandatory sentences and

therefore could not be paroled. With mandatory sentences more popular than ever among politicians, America's prison population can be expected to keep growing.

Bombers, Submarines, and GOP Pork

While to the poor, the disabled, and the elderly, Congressional Republicans this year may seem like Scrooge, to defense contractors they look more like Santa Claus. Despite their claim that seeking cuts in revenue for Medicare and Medicaid was a tough choice made necessary in order to balance the budget, GOP leaders in the House and Senate seem downright profligate when it comes to military spending. The $243 billion defense appropriations bill they pushed through Congress was heftier by $7 billion than the defense budget request of the Clinton administration. The final version of the defense spending bill, reluctantly signed by the President, contains a downpayment for 20 new B-2 stealth bombers—planes that the Pentagon itself doesn't want—at a price tag of $1.3 billion each, as well as a Seawolf nuclear attack submarine, warships, aircraft, and weapons systems. Although Clinton had threatened to veto the bill, he signed it rather than jeopardize funds for the Bosnian peacekeeping operations, which were included in the bill.

The United States continues to raid domestic spending to protect a military budget that is already larger than that of all other countries in the world combined. Federal funding for housing, job training, school lunches, education, and other social programs has been slashed dramatically, as has funding for programs for environmental protection and improvements to the country's aging infrastructure.

Congressional Republicans have proposed to cut federal funding of the following programs or to eliminate them altogether: college student grants and loans, school-to-work programs, summer employment/training for needy youth, the Goals 2000 educational improvement program, Head Start, vocational and adult education, AIDS education and training centers, substance abuse prevention, energy conservation and environmental protection, low-income home energy assistance for the needy, legal assistance for the poor, and promotion of safe, drug-free schools and communities.

At a time when virtually all domestic programs except prison construction are being cut, Congress exceeded or accelerated funding for many military programs. During the House-Senate conference to reconcile their two versions of the defense spending bill, the conferees generally settled differences by agreeing to fund most pork-barrel projects rather than funding one project over another or funding projects at reduced levels. This allows several members of Congress to bring home the "bacon" to their districts just before the 1996 elections. For example, $974 million in advance funding was provided to build LPD-17 amphibious transport ships, which the Navy had not scheduled for construction until 1998. Interestingly, this item in the Appropriations bill was pushed by Rep. **BOB LIVINGSTON** (R-La.), whose New Orleans district contains the Avondale shipyard which could be selected for building the ships. Livingston chairs the House Appropriations Committee.

Funding was also provided for LDH amphibious transport ships to be built in the home state of Senate Majority Whip **TRENT LOTT** (R-Miss.). Likewise, part of the $770 million budget allocated for weapons and equipment for the National Guard and Reserve includes money for C-130 transport planes built by Lockheed Martin Aeronautical Systems at a plant that borders House Speaker **NEWT GINGRICH**'s (R-Ga.) district and employs many of his constituents.

Not all Republican members of Congress were in lock-step with the drive to raise defense spending. During the debate over budget priorities, Senator **CHARLES GRASSLEY** (R-Iowa) complained, "If we're going to have a balanced budget, there's no money for increasing defense." But his voice was the exception, not the rule.

Amnesty International Faults U.S. for Extending Death Penalty

In its recently released report on the state of human rights worldwide for the year 1994, Amnesty International, the Nobel Prize-winning monitor of human rights, charges that Congress's 1994 crime bill violates Article 4(2) of the American Convention on Human Rights. This convention is a human rights covenant

that was signed by 26 members of the Organization of American States, including the United States. The crime bill, which became law in September 1994, extended the death penalty under federal law to 60 more crimes, many of which, such as treason, espionage, and major drug-trafficking, are unrelated to homicide.

Amnesty officials sent a letter to the U.S. government repeating the organization's finding that the death penalty in the United States is imposed disproportionately on members of ethnic minorities, the mentally ill or retarded, the poor, and those without adequate legal representation. Among the areas of special concern mentioned in the letter were executions of juveniles and the mentally impaired.

Specific cases mentioned in the report include that of **WILLIAM HANCE**, a mentally retarded black man executed by the state of Georgia in March 1994. Georgia is one of the states in which Amnesty alleges that there is strong evidence that the death penalty is applied in a racially discriminatory fashion. In critiquing Hance's trials, the report mentions the near absence of blacks on the jury (only one juror was black) and the allegations of misconduct, misinformation, and racial bias at the sentencing hearing. Contradicting the announcement that the death penalty verdict had been unanimous, one juror stated that she had not agreed with the imposition of the death penalty but had been ignored. Her story was corroborated by another juror, who further complained that racially derogatory remarks were made by some jurors during deliberations.

Another case reviewed by Amnesty involved a black man in Nebraska, **HAROLD LAMONT OTEY**, who was executed after losing his bid for a pardon on a vote of 2 to 1 by the state board of pardons. Amnesty notes that the board's makeup was biased—one of its three members was Nebraska's attorney general, who had prosecuted the case and pressed for the death penalty in the first place. Grounds for clemency included the fact that Otey had no prior criminal record and seemed to have been rehabilitated in prison.

Other U.S. human rights violations for the year 1994 cited in the Amnesty report include the mistreatment, injury, and death of accused persons and prisoners at the hands of police officers or prison guards. Specific cases include that of **ERNEST SAYON**, a black man, who died in the custody of Staten Island (New York) police from asphyxiation caused by the compression of his chest and neck while his hands were cuffed behind him. The report also mentions **TIMOTHY PRINCE PRIDE**, a prisoner in San Quentin Prison in California, who was fatally shot in the back by a prison guard following a minor altercation with another prisoner. Amnesty officials also found that conditions in the super-maximum security unit of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary constituted "cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment," a violation of international standards. Amnesty sent letters concerning allegations of mistreatment of prisoners to authorities in Tennessee, Arizona, California, Florida, Maryland, and Ohio.

With prominent instances of brutality and racism among police officers coming to public attention during 1995, the next Amnesty report is likely to be even more critical of police treatment of prisoners.

Kitty Garber and Linda M. Cunningham contributed to this issue of TrendLetter.

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"Saving" Medicare and Medicaid Will Hurt

Poor and Minorities May Pay for GOP Plans to Make Massive Cuts in Two Successful Government-Supported Health Insurance Programs

by Bailus Walker

Three decades have passed since President Lyndon Johnson signed Public Law 89-97, establishing what we now call Medicare and Medicaid. Some aspects of Medicare and Medicaid can and should be modified, but, by and large, these programs have performed well to provide health care services to people who need them. Now, Republicans in Congress are working to reduce funding dramatically for these programs, an effort that would deny benefits to many of the poor, who are disproportionately African American and Latino.

Medicare was intended to relieve older persons, regardless of their socioeconomic status, of the burden of major medical expenses. In 1994, Medicare covered 36 million people (32 million aged and 4 million disabled). Medicaid is the single most important source of health services for low-income families with children, providing access to both preventive care and treatment. The two programs also made the provision of health care to the elderly, the disabled, and the poor an attractive business investment, converting it from a service reliant on the good will of health professionals to one driven by market forces.

But wildly escalating health costs along with a strong antigovernment mood in the country have placed controlling health care costs near the top of the domestic policy agenda. Along with government efforts to reduce the cost of Medicare and Medicaid, employers have reacted to the higher cost of providing health insurance by seeking out managed care plans, reducing benefits, and requiring larger contributions from employees. Two years ago, the Clinton Administration's comprehensive health care reform proposal, which sought to expand health care benefits as a major component of cost containment, died in Congress.

This year, congressional Republicans have been looking for ways to reduce federal spending to cut taxes while still balancing the budget. With Social Security off the table, Medicare and Medicaid have become prominent targets for cuts. The Medicare trustees report issued last spring, which predicted that the system would be bankrupt by 2002 unless there were spending cuts or increases in revenue, has been used to rationalize the Republicans' proposed cuts. The Congressional Budget Office also estimated that without significant changes the cost of Medicaid would skyrocket from $178 billion in 1995, to 458 billion in 2005.

Republican-sponsored legislation would slash Medicare spending by $270 billion over the next seven years, raise premiums, and offer inducements for moving recipients to private insurance plans, a semi-privatization of medicare. Likewise, over the same period, $182 billion would be chopped out of the Medicaid budget. Federal matching funds to the states to support Medicaid would be converted to fixed annual grants. (Currently, the federal government invests at least 50 percent of states' expenditures on Medicaid.) In addition, the new proposals would eliminate most existing uniform eligibility criteria and benefit standards, creating disparities from state to state in the provision of care.

Many are now asking how this emphasis on cutting costs will affect the quality and availability of health care, especially for the most vulnerable groups. There are three areas of concern. The first is: What will be the impact of the proposed Medicare and Medicaid changes on older Americans? While the affluent elderly seem willing to bear more of the financial burden of care, others, particularly minorities, may find it difficult to absorb hikes in premiums. In 1993, 43 percent of elderly black women living alone were poor.

A second concern is: What impact will these changes have on children? Medicaid is providing health insurance coverage for children whose parents work in low-wage industries that typically do not offer comprehensive health benefits. Leading health specialists have concluded that states will probably have to reduce the scope of existing Medicaid programs if the federal contribution is capped. The gravity of the situation is intensified by the increase in child poverty. In 1992, 60 percent of African American and Latino single-mother families—and 21.9 percent of *all* the nation's children—were poor.

A third concern is: How will cuts affect the future of public hospitals? Accounting for approximately 22 percent of the nation's hospitals, these facilities, which often offer community-oriented primary health care, are particularly vulnerable to congressional as well as private-sector efforts to reshape the health care system. Public hospitals derive a large fraction of their revenue from the treatment of Medicare and Medicaid patients, partly offsetting the expense of caring for the uninsured patients, who make up approximately 35 percent

Dr. Walker is director, health policy programs at the Joint Center.

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Medicare and Medicaid

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of their patient load. In some communities, plans are well underway to reduce services and close public hospitals—an important health resource for low-income African Americans.

Future dramatic reductions in funding for Medicare and Medicaid may undermine the administrative structures and improvements carefully nurtured in the past two decades to ensure that our most vulnerable citizens receive appropriate health care. If GOP proposals are adopted to cut spending for these vital health care programs, the prognosis for America's children and elderly is not good. ■

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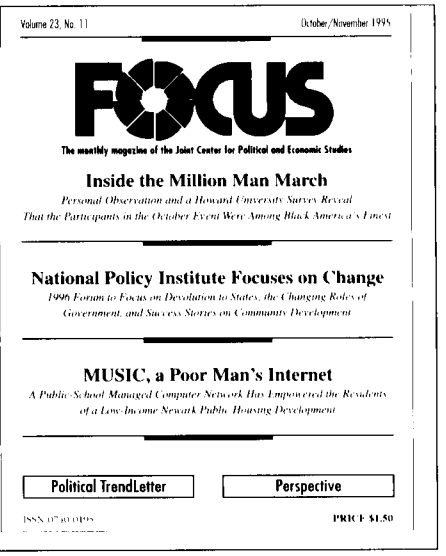
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