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A SPECIAL POLICY ISSUE FROM THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

WINTER 2009



Helping Families Succeed: Federal Policy Opportunities

We are at a turning point in America. The historic election of Barack Obama signaled a broad mandate for change; at the same time, the economy's alarming plummet demands bolder and more innovative interventions than we've seen in several decades. These developments are forcing an examination of—and response to—trends that began eroding the security of tens of millions of Americans long before the breakdown in the housing and credit markets and the collapse of key financial institutions. The new administration faces sobering challenges—and unparalleled opportunities—to steer the nation's investments toward strategies that will offer economic stability and the promise of a bright future for all Americans.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is committed to lending support to President Barack Obama and the new Congress by translating into concrete federal policy recommendations the lessons, hard data, and experience we've gleaned working with families, communities, and public social service systems over the past few decades.

As a foundation dedicated to improving the futures of disadvantaged children, families, and communities, we recognize the severe toll that greater financial stress can exact on core populations we serve. These include children and families in



poverty and those living in communities of concentrated poverty, including increasing numbers of families of color; groups facing significant barriers to success such as immigrants, single parents, and people who have been incarcerated; and very troubled families at risk of being torn apart—and those who’ve already been torn apart—by the removal of a child or caregiver.

Many Casey grantees as well as other service providers are suffering a severe cash crunch, and some are having difficulty sustaining their services for the children and families who need assistance most. As these organizations struggle to stay afloat and respond to the crisis, we’re working to assess and respond to emerging needs, both nationally and locally in our home city of Baltimore.

At the same time, we’re renewing and heightening our focus on the enduring values and core challenges that have always motivated our work, and these values have led us to an intensified advocacy on behalf of:

- Fighting against poverty for low-income workers and promoting opportunity for their children through policies that provide good jobs, support work, enhance incomes, and strengthen families and communities;
- Revamping the child welfare system to ensure a safe, nurturing, and permanent family for every child, and to reduce and ultimately eliminate racial disparities;
- Combating injustices, inefficiencies, and racial disparities in the juvenile justice system and reducing reliance on secure detention;
- Vigorously collecting and rigorously applying data to guide policy and assure the best return on investments to improve child and family well-being.

In this special issue of our newsletter, we offer a general framework for improving federal public policy in areas where the Casey Foundation has the deepest experience, the best evidence of successful strategies, and the greatest confidence about what it will take to create a more level playing field for children and families living on the economic margin.

With dollars stretched tight, it’s all the more critical that policies and programs aimed at children and youth reflect our knowledge about what works. And with the right forces coming together, we’re optimistic that this critical time in America can set the stage for actions and reforms that will point the way to brighter futures for vulnerable children.

Douglas W. Nelson

Douglas W. Nelson, President and Chief Executive Officer, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Reduce poverty and promote opportunity

REDUCING POVERTY was an important theme in the presidential campaign last year, and public opinion polls show that Americans of all political stripes want more attention paid to the goal of eradicating poverty. More than 37 million Americans—including 13.3 million children—live below the official poverty line and the current economic downturn and rise in unemployment are projected to cause significant increases in the number of Americans who are poor and in the percentage of children living in deep poverty.

Now more than ever, we need creative and effective policies to enable families and future generations to build a better life and achieve the American dream.

While the Casey Foundation is best known for its work in urban areas, rural poverty also has become a growing area of focus for us. More than one in five rural children is poor, and their families often face particular obstacles like lack of transportation to get to where good jobs are and less access to opportunities and support services.

“In the past 18 months, we have seen a broadening consensus that dealing with poverty is a social and economic imperative, important to our democracy, our competitiveness in a global economy, and our national security,” says Ralph Smith, the Casey Foundation’s executive vice president.

“The Foundation is pursuing—and supports policies that foster—a two-generation strategy that at one level stabilizes and strengthens the economic condition of an adult generation of workers marginalized by global market forces, and on the second level commits to equipping their children with the knowledge, skills, experiences, values, and opportunities that will prepare them to participate fully in the mainstream economy,” says Casey Foundation President and Chief Executive Officer Douglas W. Nelson.

“A robust expansion of policies, programs, and strategies we already know to be effective—a truly two-generation approach—could halve the U.S. poverty rate in less than a generation.”

The success of this agenda hinges on fostering a broad-based, common sense consensus across political and ideological lines that:

- 1) promotes workforce participation through increased attention to job creation and skills development;
- 2) provides supports so that low-income workers can get and keep good jobs and build assets and savings; and
- 3) surrounds children and youth with the opportunities, resources, and supports as well as the norms, habits, and role models they need to become successful adults.

Some policy proposals to advance these objectives include:

Workforce Participation

- Create a 21st century workforce in the United States and increase the supply of high-quality, family-supporting jobs.
- Expand workforce development partnerships and other innovations that have demonstrated success in training those who lack the skills to succeed in today’s increasingly high-tech workforce, including programs that provide young people with hands-on skills development, college credits, and corporate apprenticeships.
- Ensure that underskilled workers and those displaced by the recent economic turmoil are supported in competing for the millions of new jobs likely to result from new public investments in infrastructure development, food systems, renewable and more efficient energy sources, and health care reform.

Income and Assets

- Use the tax code to help augment the incomes of low-income workers through such measures as expanding and increasing the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), tripling it for childless workers who now receive almost nothing, expanding other refundable tax credits, and lowering the income



threshold of the Child Tax Credit so that more families can benefit.

- Help families overcome obstacles to keeping good jobs through such measures as guaranteed child care assistance for low-income working families and expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act.
- Increase and index the federal minimum wage and guarantee all workers a minimum number of paid sick days.
- Provide incentives for families to save for emergencies, education, retraining, retirement, and homeownership and offer financial education to help them make good decisions and protect their earnings and assets.
- Make markets work to provide accessible and affordable goods and financial services and outlaw predatory practices in consumer and mortgage lending.

Support for Children and Youth

- Promote successful parenting by supporting and expanding ongoing demonstrations to encourage and sustain healthy marriages and

responsible fatherhood, and use incentives such as conditional cash transfers, which provide income supplements to low-income families that meet certain criteria in terms of effective child-rearing practices.

- Close the achievement gap and improve the opportunity to succeed in school through initiatives that ensure grade-level reading by the end of third grade, focus on chronic absence in the early grades, and have been successful in boosting high school graduation rates and reducing dropout rates.
- Reduce teen pregnancy and high-risk behaviors by expanding proven programs that mobilize communities to help young people and young families cultivate the decision-making skills, habits, and motivation they need to succeed.

Better Data: We also recommend an overhaul of the federal poverty measure to provide more accurate information to develop and assess anti-poverty efforts (see page 10).



Refundable Tax Credits Aid Non-custodial Fathers

When Odalis Beard learned that he was eligible for a new refundable tax credit for low-income working parents who don't have custody of their children, he was pleased that he'd have some extra money to spend on his eight-year-old son Richard.

"I don't make that much money," says Beard, 40, of New York City, who works part-time stocking shelves at a grocery store. "When I get something, the first thing I think about is my son."

In 2006, New York became the first state to offer non-custodial parents an Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a well-known tool to reduce poverty and encourage work. The largest cash assistance program for low-income families, the EITC has traditionally benefited custodial parents, primarily single mothers, and their children.

By providing the credit (or tax cut) to non-custodial parents, primarily single fathers, New York hopes to increase the men's income, work participation, child support payments, and parental involvement. Washington D.C. has adopted a similar program.

"It is one of many tools to get fathers to understand the importance of being both financially and emotionally responsible," says Kenneth Braswell, director of the New York State Fatherhood Initiative, which is operated out of a state agency that oversees programs for low-income adults, including the new tax credit.

"The intent is to provide an incentive to get more individuals to try to pay their child support in full," says Braswell, "and to provide some financial relief for non-custodial fathers paying child support, given that they cannot write off their payments on their tax returns."

New York State's pilot program, available to parents earning about \$34,000 or less, reflects growing national interest in an important anti-poverty tool—

tax credits that are refundable so that a family not earning enough to pay taxes gets the credit as a refund. President Barack Obama proposed several refundable tax credits during his campaign.

In New York, the new tax credit went to only 5,280 residents (out of about 40,000 potentially eligible) during its first year, with the state distributing just over \$2 million. The average refundable credit was \$392; the highest, for lower-income families, was \$1,024.

Some of the barriers affecting participation and effectiveness include the difficulty of finding eligible parents to let them know about the credit, a requirement that a parent must have paid child support in full during the current tax year, and a federal law mandating that tax refunds of parents who owe child support from previous years be intercepted to offset debt.

A Columbia University evaluation of the new tax credit, supported by the Casey Foundation, will examine the factors limiting non-custodial parents' participation, how parents are spending their credits, and the impact on their employment and earnings.

"This is just a start," says Braswell. "If we find that people are doing significant things with the money, it gives us a case to expand and get more people in the door."

Odalis Beard, of New York City, who received a refundable tax credit for non-custodial parents, enjoys an afternoon out with his son Richard, picking him up at school and eating at a pizzeria.

Rebuild the nation's child welfare system

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, over a half million American children and youth are living away from their families in foster care, generally prompted by issues of neglect or abuse. While the child welfare system is designed to keep children safe, that isn't enough. All children need and deserve to be connected permanently to a nurturing family that offers unconditional support.

"In many respects, we succeed at removing children from dangerous environments only to put them in a different kind of harm's way," says Casey Foundation President Douglas W. Nelson. "We simply cannot make any child truly secure until we can ensure that he or she will again become part of a loving and lasting family."

Three key steps to rebuilding the child welfare system include improving federal child welfare financing, supporting measures to ensure permanent family connections for every child, and expanding Medicaid support so children get needed health services.

The way federal child welfare financing is now structured runs counter to key goals like seeking permanent family connections for every child or ensuring the well-being of children who have been maltreated. For example, the current system offers an open-ended entitlement to care for children removed from their families but only limited funds to provide more support to

troubled families and prevent out-of-home placements in the first place.

Remedies include:

- Allow states flexibility to use their federal funding to prevent children from being placed in foster care and promote permanence through measures including reunification of families, adoption, and guardianship.
- Provide federal reimbursement to states for all children who require care, by no longer linking child welfare funding eligibility with the income standards in the long-abandoned Aid to Families with Dependent Children welfare program.
- Supplement current incentives offered to states for timely adoption with similar incentives for timely, safe, reunification and for permanent legal guardianship.

To ensure a healthy, enduring family relationship for all children—regardless of age, race, culture, national origin, special need, or complex circumstances—the federal government should:

- Focus special attention on reducing and ultimately eliminating persistent racial disparities in child welfare by requiring states to disaggregate by race key measures of performance; setting aggressive goals; and regularly publishing data measuring the amount of progress achieved.

- Provide the special supports needed by older youth leaving the foster care system, such as expanded tuition assistance and continued Medicaid coverage to age 25.
- Build on promising state models that provide incentives, flexibility, services, and supports to respond differently when poverty, not maltreatment, is the primary threat facing a child in a case of alleged abuse or neglect.

Many children and youth in state custody, especially older youth aging out of foster care, go without needed health and mental health services. Steps to address this issue include:

- Rescind recent Medicaid rules narrowing access to Medicaid rehabilitative and targeted case management services for children and youth in the child welfare system. Encourage the flexible use of Medicaid regulations to ensure that those in foster care get the health and therapeutic services they need.
- Expand Medicaid coverage to age 25 to ensure that youth and young adults aging out of the foster care system have their health needs met.

Better Data: An annual report should document progress in meeting the goal of permanent family connections for children nationally and by state, with data disaggregated by gender, age, race, ethnicity, family income, geographic setting, and special needs.



Guardianship Furthers Goal of Permanent Family for Children

Becoming the guardian of three grandchildren has been financially challenging for Carolyn Jackson, but she doesn't regret it. Guardianship has offered the children, ages 8, 2, and 1, not only a safe haven from a troubled home but a permanent, loving family connection.

"They have a network of people who love them, immediate and extended family," says Jackson, 52, of New Haven, Connecticut. "Grandparents are do-or-die folks. They'll stick with them through thick and thin."

Jackson is part of a promising effort known as subsidized guardianship, which provides a permanent family connection for children who have been neglected or abused and would otherwise be in foster care. This strategy got a boost last year from a new child welfare reform law that allows federal, not just state, dollars to be used to fund guardianships. In the 37 states now offering subsidized guardianship, relatives who become legal guardians for children whose parents cannot care for them receive financial help. And now that federal funding has been secured via the new law, the rest of the states should begin authorizing subsidized guardianships as well.

Children of color, who disproportionately stay in the system without a permanent home, and older youth, who often struggle when they "age out" because they don't have a family to count on, are among the groups for whom subsidized guardianship can be particularly helpful.

Data show guardianship helps to reduce the trauma of out-of-home placement, enable greater contact with birth parents and siblings, preserve family history and culture, and lower recurring abuse rates.

In the past, many foster parents caring for relatives' children were reluctant to become guardians for fear of giving up foster care payments without receiving adequate subsidies. But the new law means those eligible could receive the same payments as foster

care parents. The law also includes other helpful provisions, like providing greater incentives for adoption, requiring that close relatives be notified when a child is about to enter foster care, and extending federal foster care payments to youth up to age 21.

The federal guardianship funds can be used only for relatives who are foster care parents switching to guardianship and whose children come from low-income households that qualify for public assistance. But relatives who don't qualify could still be eligible for state-funded subsidies depending on how states handle it.

"We've made progress, but we've got further to go," notes Sania Metzger, policy director at Casey Family Services in New Haven, the Casey Foundation's child welfare agency.

Jackson gave testimony before Congress that helped get the new law passed. But for now it will not necessarily benefit her grandchildren financially because she was never their foster parent. She'll keep receiving \$576 a month to care for her grandchildren—far less than foster care payments—but hopes Connecticut will use freed-up state funds to help others like her.

All guardians "should get the same benefits as foster grandparents," Jackson says. "We're doing the same job, and we help keep them connected to their families and communities."

Carolyn Jackson, speaking at policy forums on subsidized guardianship (left and right), is the guardian for three of her grandchildren in Connecticut, including Dalonna Jackson (center).

Reform the juvenile justice system

THE JUVENILE JUSTICE system in this country is badly in need of repair. As Casey Foundation President Douglas W. Nelson notes in the 2008 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* essay, “Among all the policy areas affecting vulnerable children and families, juvenile justice has probably suffered the most glaring gaps between best practice and common practice.” With its punitive approach and overreliance on detention for troubled youth, the system is “shaped by misinformation, hyperbole, and political prejudices.”

Scholars, advocates, and practitioners have amassed a body of evidence on what has and hasn’t worked in combating delinquency over the past 20 years—and on steps needed to spur reform. A key contributor has been the Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), which has shown that jurisdictions can safely reduce reliance on secure detention while also reducing the glaring overrepresentation of young people of color in the system. The core principles of JDAI and its proven interventions are being replicated in more than 100 jurisdictions nationwide.

“Given what we now know and in light of the terrible costs of retaining the status quo in juvenile justice, there remains no reasonable excuse for inaction,” Nelson notes.

While many aspects of juvenile justice reform must be state and locally driven, the federal government can play a crucial role as a catalyst for change and constructive new approaches.

The federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act needs to be reauthorized with enhanced provisions to reduce racial disparities, strengthen core protections against confining status offenders and mingling juveniles with adult offenders, and improve conditions of confinement when young people are confined.

“Many states and localities lack financial resources and technical know-how,” says Bart Lubow, the Casey Foundation’s director of Programs for High-Risk Youth. “They look to the federal government for guidance on how best to tackle juvenile justice challenges.” To fulfill this role, the government should:

- Clarify and strengthen requirements for states to address racial disparities in the juvenile justice system and launch an intensive effort to ensure equitable treatment of youth across racial and ethnic lines.
- Establish a mandatory reporting system for all unusual incidents, injuries, and deaths to curb violence in secure detention facilities and repeal federal legislation that inhibits litigation related to these incidents.

- Revisit federal rules and regulations that encourage the transfer of juveniles to adult courts and encourage all states to set the age of majority at 18.
- Shift standard practice from the failed training school incarceration model of juvenile corrections to community treatment programs that have proven successful for most delinquent youth and rely on small, therapeutic facilities for the minority who pose a serious public safety threat.
- Provide incentives for states and local jurisdictions to keep youth better served through child welfare, special education, and mental health services outside of the juvenile justice system, which lacks the expertise and resources to provide effective treatment.

Better Data: To fill gaps in detailed and reliable information about delinquency programming, the U.S. Department of Justice should establish a national data system for juvenile justice and boost research and dissemination efforts to promote best practices.



Former Juvenile Justice System Youth Serve as Probation Officers

As a juvenile court probation officer in Chicago, Hector Escalera can relate to the kids he works with—kids arrested for crimes—because he was once one of them.

“I was a little out of control,” says Escalera, 34, who now has a seven-year-old son and a career that belies the turbulent childhood that landed him in the juvenile justice system. “I trusted those that were in my community, but they were leading me into drugs and gangs.”

“I’m just happy that I made it, that I had the support and encouragement of this department and the people here,” says Escalera. The young people he now works with “remind me of me,” he says. “If I succeeded, they can.”

That’s the message the Cook County Juvenile Probation and Court Services Department hopes to send by hiring probation officers who were once in the system. “When our kids succeed, it helps dispel the myth that these are ‘throw-away kids,’” says Mike Rohan, director of the department. At the same time, “kids connect with officers who have been in the system.”

This innovative hiring strategy is a byproduct of juvenile detention reforms undertaken by Cook County, a model site in the Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. Since 1992, JDAI has worked to ensure that young people are not unnecessarily or inappropriately confined, which is a costly practice that has negative repercussions for youth and society.

Between 1996 and 2005, Cook County reduced its average daily population in locked detention from 682 to 420, developing alternatives for young people who don’t pose a serious threat of fleeing or jeopardizing public safety. It also instituted new hiring practices to make the department more representative of—and responsive to—the mostly minority youth it serves. Most of the dozen probation officers who are former clients are African American or Latino. The department recruits these officers by providing college and vocational training scholarships to promising clients, then offering internships and special hiring consideration to some graduates.

Escalera says the young people he mentors are at first resistant, but he wins them over by being “creative and consistent.” Finding out that he has been in the system makes a big difference. “They can relate to me,” he notes. “When we relate to each other, we have a better understanding, there’s a bigger trust. We know how to communicate.”

Hector Escalera, a Chicago juvenile court probation officer who was once a youth in the juvenile justice system, warns kids about the consequences of gang involvement (left) and meets with parents (center) and a young client (right).

Improve the nation's data on children and families

GOOD DECISIONS are based on good data, and a hallmark of Casey's approach is using sound data to advocate and build strategies for change. KIDS COUNT consistently earns high marks and gets attention from policy-makers for tracking changes in the educational, social, economic, and physical well-being of children. However, the nation's ability to make the best program and policy decisions is often stymied by inadequate data.

Census Data

Most pressing is the need to ensure that the 2010 Decennial Census is adequately funded, managed, and promoted. The government relies upon the data to determine how to distribute nearly \$400 billion each year for important programs and how many representatives a state gets in the U.S. House. The public and private sectors and nonprofits also use the data to evaluate initiatives, analyze target populations, and allocate resources. An undercounted community loses out.

"As we approach the 2010 Census, we must get an accurate count to provide low-income populations and communities their fair share of public funds—and political representation," says William O'Hare, a Casey Foundation senior fellow.

The Obama administration should nominate, and the Senate should confirm, a strong new Census Bureau director quickly so that the agency has

effective leadership. It is also important to stave off proposed cuts, relative to what was spent in 2000, in advertising and outreach that can make critical differences in Census response rates. And residents should be hired to follow up with people who do not return their Census forms, particularly in historically undercounted communities.

To make the Census more efficient and effective and less vulnerable to partisan attack and manipulation, the federal government should make the Census Bureau more independent; for example, by removing it from the U.S. Department of Commerce. The director should have a five-year term to ensure continuity in Census preparations.

State and Local Data

While the federal government has shifted greater responsibility to states for child and family programs, state officials lack timely, accurate, and state-specific data to ensure these programs are working. A federally funded annual state-by-state survey should be conducted to provide solid data on child and family well-being.

Strong neighborhood-level data also are needed to support initiatives that help families by addressing local challenges and strengthening community resources. Federal funding should be used to increase the sample size for the American Community Survey so it produces reliable data for urban and rural communities.

Health-Related Data

Key health surveys that monitor child well-being need to be funded adequately to provide comprehensive data, by race, income, and family structure, from birth through the transition to adulthood. And proposed cutbacks in the data states are asked to collect on birth certificates should be defeated to ensure fundamental and reliable information on issues like the adequacy of prenatal care, the problem of preterm births, and the effects of smoking on birth outcomes.

New Poverty Measure

Research clearly demonstrates the adverse effects of poverty on all aspects of child development, yet the current U.S. poverty measure is outdated and sharply underestimates families' costs as well as their income, resources, and benefits. The federal government should enact a new measure that would factor in current costs of health care, transportation, child care, housing, and utilities, as well as geographic cost-of-living differences. It should also count non-cash sources of income, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, food stamps, and housing vouchers. The new poverty measure also should be used in conjunction with other measures of economic well-being. "An accurate measure will better inform the strategies we use to help vulnerable families," observes Casey President Douglas W. Nelson.

Support legislation that helps strengthen vulnerable families

IN ADDITION to the four specific sets of federal policy actions and approaches recommended in these pages, we highlight below some legislative measures affecting children and families that are either due for reauthorization or will provide critical support to vulnerable families and help prevent their circumstances from worsening in today's economy. These include:

- The State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which provides funds to states to provide health insurance to uninsured children in low-income families that don't qualify for Medicaid, should be reauthorized with funding significantly increased to improve health care access and quality.
- Food stamp caseloads have increased sharply in recent months, with at least one in every five children receiving food stamps in 25 states. A temporary increase would offset the impact of rising food prices and help millions of households that have lost jobs get by.
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) should be reauthorized and fully funded, along with other programs that provide critical support to vulnerable young children and their parents.
- Because states use outdated policies that cause many low-wage and part-time workers to be ineligible for unemployment insurance when they are laid off, fewer than 40 percent of unemployed workers receive unemployment benefits. Proposed legislation that would give states incentives to expand and extend unemployment benefits should be passed.
- The No Child Left Behind law designed to improve public school performance should be reauthorized, fully funded, and revised to provide more uniform and objective assessments for children and teachers and more support for schools that need improvement.
- Measures like housing vouchers and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program should be expanded to help low-income families struggling with high rental and energy costs.
- The TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) block grant should be reauthorized in 2010 and overhauled to focus not just on self-sufficiency but on helping families move out of poverty.

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CASEY CONNECTS

Winter 2009

*A newsletter published by
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
www.aecf.org*

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Baltimore, Maryland

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

A set of policy briefs containing more detail on the issues discussed here is available on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's website, www.aecf.org. Also learn more about Casey's grant-making approaches and policy and practice reform agenda on behalf of disadvantaged children, families, and communities. We also suggest you visit:

www.kidscount.org Check out our KIDS COUNT Data Center for the latest state-, county-, and city-level data on more than 100 measures of child and family well-being.

www.caseyfamilyservices.org Discover how Casey's child welfare agency, with divisions in Baltimore and throughout New England, is helping children find lifelong family connections.

www.jdaihelpdesk.org Visit this practical and practice-based resource for useful information on reforming juvenile detention systems across the nation.

www.spotlightonpoverty.org Find news, ideas, and actions related to fighting poverty and providing opportunity to all children and families during the current economic downturn and beyond.

www.firstfocus.net Obtain research, reports, and resources from First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization that is committed to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions.