

Children as Social Problems

This chapter contemplates children as social problems. Many middle- and upper-class parents in industrialized societies are experiencing a growing unease about their children's everyday safety and security. We'll examine how this concern about children's wellbeing plays itself out differently for working-class and poor children whose social needs and problems often entail substantial economic costs to society. We'll discuss how certain political responses to these costs downplay social and economic circumstances and, instead, point to personal responsibility of parents and children as the main (if not the only) solution to the social problems of poor children. In the process, poor children themselves often come to be blamed for their own victimization.

The Bogeyman Syndrome and the Power of Rhetoric

In the introduction to this part of the book I mentioned the widespread fear of Halloween sadism in the United States. Although few cases of such sadism have been reported since the late 1980s, parents still remain frightened. In many communities children are allowed to "trick-or-treat" only in the immediate neighborhood or inside lighted and protected shopping malls. Very few children roam the streets far from home, free to demand candy from adults and perhaps play tricks on them, as in the past. In short, Halloween has, to a large extent, fallen victim to the **bogeyman syndrome**, the general fear of the victimization of children in contemporary industrialized societies, most especially the United States (Louv, 1990, pp. 28–41).

The Social Construction of Children as Social Problems

How did the bogeyman syndrome come about? Sociologist Joel Best, who as we saw earlier investigated and found little evidence for Halloween sadism, points to two important factors: (1) the sentimentalization of children, which evolved gradually in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and (2)

television movie, *Adam*, in 1983. Adam's father, John Walsh, testified before Congressional committees about the problem and was one of the leaders of a movement to increase public attention to the problem. Walsh and others pointed to shortcomings in the procedures of criminal justice organizations, including the FBI, regarding recordkeeping on missing children. Walsh pointed out that the FBI kept better records of missing automobiles than it did of missing children.

The fact that the statistics on missing children were poor was a major element in the nature of the rhetoric of claims regarding this problem. Missing children crusaders used inclusive statistics that captured the extent of the problem with very broad strokes. For example, a frequently repeated claim was that 1.8 million children were reported missing in the United States each year (Best, 1990, p. 46). This figure was an extrapolation from available records in various states and cities and included runaways, which in fact made up the majority of the cases. Still, the claimsmakers argued that 50,000 of these 1.8 million cases were stranger abductions, with children returned in 10 percent of the cases, murdered in another 10 percent, and the remaining 40,000 unaccounted for. Best argued that the claims-making rhetoric started with a large inclusive figure of 1.8 million and then used the smaller, but still shocking 50,000 figure to typify the problem. While hardly typical of missing children, prominent cases were given great attention by the media on news programs, and mass-produced pictures of missing children began turning up on billboards, milk cartons, utility bills, and even "junk mail" ads.

The missing child crusaders' success in dramatizing what they saw as a serious problem resulted in what Best termed a "backlash of counterclaims." Investigative reporters from several newspapers disputed the 50,000 abducted children claim, pointing to the fact that the FBI investigated only 67 cases of child abduction in 1984. Others joined in the backlash pointing to what they saw as growing hysteria, and some pediatricians and child psychologists argued that fears of abduction might harm more children than kidnapping (Best, 1990, pp. 48–51).

Not surprisingly, according to Best, critics of the missing children crusaders tended to distort the original claims in their counterclaims. They sometimes argued that the abduction figures were padded—that the numbers cited included runaways—when this was never the case. However, instead of pointing out such distortions, the advocates of missing children first seemed to back off statistics altogether (arguing that one abducted child is one too many), and then to redefine the whole category of stranger abduction. One example of such redefinition was the inclusion of sexual molestation cases where the victims (often preadolescent girls) have been moved from one location to another in the commission of the crime, but not kidnapped. The goal of this numbers game is, according to Best, to maintain the

claims-making processes that occur in the definition and construction of social problems in modern societies. Let's look at each of these factors in turn.

In her historical study of the changing social value of children, sociologist Viviana Zelizer (1985) noted how a new definition of childhood became well established in response to children's decreasing contributions to family economy in industrialized society at the turn of the century. Schooling became compulsory and many child protection laws, especially laws restricting child labor, were established. These changes brought about a sentimentalized vision of childhood in which children were to be nurtured and protected.

Best has argued that this sentimentalization of childhood had a major effect on the definition of the social problems of children. He maintains that the social problems of children, like all social problems, are to a large extent subjective in nature. By this he means that there is little objective agreement on the nature of social problems. Rather, social problems are defined or constructed as a result of claims-making processes or *rhetoric*. In this instance, *rhetoric* refers to the persuasive communication various social groups employ to try to convince others of the existence and degree of various social problems like poverty, crime, or child abuse.

In her historical study, Zelizer showed how the nature of this rhetorical process was evident in the widespread concern that was expressed over children's accidental deaths in New York in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Of primary concern were child deaths in public places, especially city streets. Many public and private organizations and groups banded together to promote safety campaigns and laws to reduce accidents that resulted in child injuries and deaths. These campaigns were successful in that accidental deaths for children began to decline in the late 1920s and 1930s, even though automobile fatalities rose steadily overall during this period. Zelizer, however, argued that safety campaigns alone could not explain this decrease. These campaigns were only one aspect of a trend that promoted the domestication of children—their movement from the streets and their increased isolation from the adult world (Zelizer, 1985, pp. 49–55). Children now spent more time in the home, school, and in playgrounds. Thus, we see that one cost of protection for children is their loss of control over their lives and of freedom to carve out their own spaces. This is a point we will return to below.

Best extends Zelizer's view of the power of rhetoric in instances where adult groups seek to protect children, in his analysis of the concern over child abduction by strangers in the 1980s. Several notorious cases of children being abducted and killed by strangers in the late 1970s led to much concern and debate about the prevalence of such occurrences. Perhaps the most well-known case, the kidnapping and murder of Adam Walsh, was depicted in a

focus on the original typified example of the problem, here, stranger abduction (1990, p. 52).

Similar controversies and rhetorical claims-making processes have run their course in recent years in other areas of social problems related to children. Many of these have involved charges of sexual abuse in child care centers and even in whole communities. Some even involved bizarre claims of satanic ritual and witchcraft as part of the rhetorical strategy. In most cases the charges have not led to convictions. For example, in the MacMartin case in California, several preschool teachers were imprisoned for a number of years before and during a trial in which they were found not guilty. In the "Cleveland case" in Great Britain, more than two hundred children were suspected victims of familial sexual abuse and were removed from their homes. They were later returned and the charges judged to be spurious (Jenkins, 1992).

Losing Sight of the Everyday Social Problems of Children

Two questions must be considered regarding the rhetoric of claimsmaking that is applied to child victims. These two questions are addressed only in passing by those, like Best, who take a constructivist view of social problems. First, why do the typified, but often distorted, examples (child abduction and murder, satanic rituals, and so on) have so much appeal in claims-making processes when they are such rare events? As one investigative report in the *Denver Post* put it, the number of such abductions was "fewer than the number of preschoolers who choke to death on food each year" (as quoted in Best, 1990, p. 48). (Of course there is something hollow about this argument. Child abductions by strangers are more frightening than accidental deaths, even if they are less likely to actually occur.) Still, why do these sensationalized events command our attention?

Second, why do those who engage in such rhetoric seem to lose sight of the real character of social problems that affect children's everyday lives? Typified cases—those that are highlighted because they are thought to embody the essential characteristics of such incidents—draw all the attention, while typical social problems of children—those that occur on an everyday basis—get lost in the rhetoric. For example, at one point in his analysis Best argues that the missing-child movement could have responded to its critics by retypifying the problem and shifting their focus to the plight of runaways. But they did not. Why? Surely, runaways constitute the majority of missing children, their numbers are very high, many have been maltreated in their families, and most live in very threatening circumstances. Why do their problems seem less appealing? Finally, how can we debate the improper categorization of girls who have been sexually molested as stranger abduction

victims without acknowledging that such molestations are so destructive of the lives of many children?

To answer the first set of questions we need to return to the image of the bogeyman. Although social constructionists like Best (1990, 1995) and Jenkins (1992) focus primarily on how fears connected to the vulnerability of children play themselves out in public discourse, they do offer some speculations about the underlying causes of the bogeyman syndrome. Their "displacement or substitution" model holds that "a contemporary 'politics of anxiety' about an uncertain future leads people to displace their vague and free-floating worries onto more manageable concerns, with clear representations of innocent victims threatened by deviant individuals rather than by unfathomable systemic changes" (Stephens, 1993, p. 249).

Jenkins pushes the argument a bit further, arguing that this sort of displacement can be used to push through restrictive laws on sexual behavior or religious cults, increase censorship, and impose harsher criminal penalties and parole procedures that would be difficult to legitimize under the United States Constitution (1992, p. 20; Stephens, p. 249). For example, recent incidents like the child sex murders of Polly Klaas and Megan Kanka have led to more restrictive laws regarding child sex offenders. Although more than half of the states now require convicted sex offenders to register with government authorities after they leave prison, the tragic case of Megan Kanka prompted the New Jersey legislature to pass Megan's Law. Megan's Law requires community notification that past offenders are living in their midst. The constitutionality of the law is being challenged in court, and all sorts of questions are being raised about possible side effects, such as vigilantism against past sex offenders who claim they have reformed and paid their debt to society. However, the images of young Polly Klaas and Megan Kanka are compelling. As columnist Anna Quindlen observed, "it is easy to imagine embracing any measure that gives even the illusion that we can make the world a less dangerous place for the little loves of our lives" (1994, p. 11). Even though the constitutionality of New Jersey's Megan's Law is still being challenged in the courts, a federal version of the law was overwhelmingly passed in Congress and quickly signed into law by President Clinton in May 1996.

It is clear that the media plays an important role in the bogeyman syndrome and the displacement model (Louv, 1990, p. 31). A recent cover of the *New Yorker* (1995) depicted three young children in a playroom surrounded by toys. The children were all white and the large collection of toys suggested an upper-middle-class home. One boy was cutting paper dolls out of the newspaper with the word DRUGS running across the freshly cut dolls. The same child wore a party hat made from newspaper with the word RAPE clearly visible. His playmates, a boy and girl, wore similar hats. The headline

running across the top of the girl's hat read "Terrorist Bombers," while the large, block initials "O.J." could be seen on the boy's hat. Only the artist of the magazine cover, A. Spiegelman, knows precisely what she or he was trying to depict. However, three points seem clear. First, children are threatened by many dangers that seem to be beyond the control of even the most caring adults. The United States is a heterogeneous and rapidly changing society. As we saw in Chapter 4, we spend less time with our kids because of increasing job demands and rely on day care centers, after-school programs, and other institutional settings to care for our kids. Second, these dangers, however remote, are magnified and sensationalized by the press and media. Third, and perhaps most importantly, these dangers are no longer confined to children of the lower classes and the poor. These three ideas combine to create a sense of unease, a lack of control in an ever-changing and more threatening social environment—the bogeyman syndrome.

What of the second question? Why do those who engage in rhetorical claims-making processes seem to lose sight of the real social problems that affect children's everyday lives? Here the answer is related to *what children* we are talking about. For example, as tragic as the murders of Polly Klaas and Megan Kanka were, they were no more deplorable than the violence perpetuated by and on primarily poor, minority children in the United States every day. In 1989 the homicide rate for black, male ten-to-fourteen-year-olds was 7.3 per 100,000 (4 per 100,000 for black females of this age group). The rate was a startling 92.7 for black, male fifteen-to-nineteen-year-olds (12 per 100,000 for black females). Keep in mind that the overall homicide rate for the United States was around 10 per 100,000, which also was the rate for white, male fifteen-to-nineteen-year olds (the rate for white, fifteen-to-nineteen-year old females was 3 per 100,000). To gain a more concrete understanding of these statistics, consider that there were 3,020 teenagers murdered in the United States in 1990–91 (a rate of nearly 17 per 100,000), compared to 17 teenagers murdered in France in the same period (a rate of .4 per 100,000).

These statistics, as well as reports of drug-related killings and drive-by shootings, do of course make the newspapers. However, we seem to have become hardened to such stories. Further, there has been no groundswell of support for tougher penalties for those who sell guns to youth, or for promotion of crime prevention programs and youth organizations that offer alternatives and protection to youth in impoverished environments. This lack of attention to the violence and other very real problems in the lives of children who live in poverty alerts us to the specific applicability of concepts like the bogeyman syndrome and the priceless and sentimentalized child. These concepts apply to middle-class children in mainstream society. Indeed Zelizer points out that "the sacred child is thus a private luxury; children in need of

public support are treated unsentimentally, assisted only if the investment is justified in economic terms" (1985, p. 216). Best, Louv and others also caution that we must be careful that the needed debunking of the excessive fears of child victimization not draw our attention away from the very real, everyday social problems of many of the world's children (Best, 1990, p. 188; Louv, 1990, p. 32; Stephens, 1993, p. 251).

Blaming the Victim

Before turning to an examination of various social problems in Chapter 10, it is useful to consider a second way children are seen as social problems. **Blaming the victim** refers to the tendency to hold children personally responsible for the complex social and economic forces and problems that so dramatically affect their lives. At first glance it might seem odd that children, who, we all agree, deserve our attention, protection, and support, come to be blamed for many of the social problems that affect their lives. However, we know from our earlier discussion of socialization theories, which view children as incomplete and immature, that children are also seen as in need of instruction, training, and discipline. For this reason, children often are treated as an out-group—as separate from and inferior to adults.

Children as an Out-Group

Because of their immaturity and dependency on adults, children have limited rights and, as noted child authority Penelope Leach points out, they are often treated as an **out-group**. By this Leach means that children are not seen as adults in the making, or as junior selves, but as inferior and not worthy of the same respect as adults (1994, p. 204). As we've discussed in earlier chapters, this tendency leads us to overlook children's perspectives and the autonomy and creativity of their peer cultures. When it comes to viewing children as social problems, this tendency to separate children from ourselves and fail to take their viewpoints into account has many unfortunate consequences, as we shall see.

The Scandinavian countries are the most noted in the world for their recognition of children's rights. In 1981 Norway established a **Children's Ombudsperson**, an office that houses a person or representative children can go to with complaints when they feel their rights are violated or when decisions are made that greatly affect their lives and their views are not taken into account. Consider a few of the housing cooperative rules that a group of children sent to their Ombudsperson in 1989:

- Children are not allowed to scribble on walls.
- Children are not allowed to make noise in the corridors.

- Children are not allowed to hang around inside the building outside other apartments.
- Children must not leave belongings outside; such belongings will be placed in the rubbish containers. (Leach, 1994, p. 210)

These rules exist in a country that is one of the most enlightened in the world when it comes to children's rights! However, it should be pointed out that in the United States and many other countries, there are housing developments where children are forbidden to live altogether. In commenting on these rules Leach points out that children should not, of course, be allowed to write on the walls or make lots of noise in the corridors. The point is that "nobody should be allowed to do so and therefore that notices—and enforcement of regulations—should either address all age groups or none" (Leach, 1994, p. 210). Furthermore, some of the rules clearly discriminate against children. The children are not to hang about talking in the halls, but as Leach points out, surely nobody would break up a group of adults talking about last night's game (or complaining about their kids, for that matter). And how about property rights? Would it be acceptable to place in the rubbish containers items of value that adults have left lying around?

One characteristic of rules like these above and of thoughts about children in general is that there is often a tendency to accentuate the negative. The implication is that because some children behave badly, they all do. For example, I recently read an op-ed piece in my local newspaper in which an economist referred generically to children as "brats." He introduced his article with a personal story about one particular child who had misbehaved in a department store. However, the article was about children in general (their costs to society, and so on) and soon the word *brats* was substituted for *children*. Of course, some children might legitimately be classified as brats, and most children behave badly now and then. However, this tendency to generalize and regard all children negatively can have dire consequences for children, especially when it surfaces in various political ideologies and agendas.

Personal Responsibility and Blaming the Victim

When I was a teenager in the 1960s, the memorable phrase, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," from John Kennedy's inaugural address, still had some meaning. Lyndon Johnson initiated the war on poverty and the federal government was seen as the leader in fighting social problems. Then things changed. The question Ronald Reagan asked in his first presidential campaign was, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" The phrasing here

was intentional. He did not ask is the *country* or is your *community* better off today. By this time people no longer viewed the federal government as a leader in solving social problems; rather, it was seen as the cause of the problems. The prevailing attitude was that the government should stay out of people's personal affairs, and people should take care of themselves. More recently this view has translated into a crusade about morals and personal responsibility.

The debate over whether problems like unemployment, poverty, crime, divorce, and teen pregnancy are primarily the result of individual values and behavior (the conservative position) or socioeconomic structural factors (the liberal view) is long and ongoing. Since the mid 1980s the conservative view has had more influence. This fact has profound implications for children and youth, because more and more of them are living in poverty, are from divorced families, are victims of crime, are teen mothers, or are the children of teen mothers. We will discuss these social problems of children at length in the next chapter. Here, let's examine how the current ideology of personal responsibility plays itself out when it comes to children living in poverty. We'll look especially at teen mothers.

When politicians look for ways to cut a growing budget deficit, welfare spending is an obvious target. Setting aside the fact that the real value of the welfare benefit package (cash assistance plus food stamps) for a family of four fell 26 percent between 1972 and 1992 (see McLanahan, 1994), removing welfare mothers from the chain of distribution is an appealing budget-cutting strategy for those who argue personal responsibility. Their argument is that welfare actually creates poverty by encouraging poor women to have more children and gain increased benefits (Murray, 1984). Although it is true that welfare may induce some women to have more children, there is little evidence to support Murray's view that this is a widespread pattern or that welfare increases dependency (Bianchi, 1993; Lehman & Danziger, 1995). In fact, in 1992 nearly 73 percent of families who received Aid For Dependent Children (AFDC) had two or fewer children and the average AFDC family size has decreased from 4.0 to 2.9 persons from 1969 to 1992 (The Twentieth Fund, 1995; U.S. Congress, House Committee on Ways and Means, 1994). Further, although most welfare recipients move on and off assistance over a period of several years, 30 percent of welfare recipients leave welfare permanently in less than two years, and 50 percent leave welfare permanently in less than four years (Bane & Elwood, 1994; The Twentieth Fund, 1995). In some ways these facts are unimportant to the personal responsibility argument, because underlying them is the belief that poor women should not have children at all. However, to voice this out loud takes the argument a step too far even for most conservatives (see Jenks & Edin, 1995). After all, many of us (liberal or conservative) would not be around if our parents had

made fertility decisions on the basis of their income. And many Americans do not believe in making children suffer for their parents' decisions. As a result, the personal responsibility approach to welfare has become more focused on *out-of-wedlock births of teenage mothers*.

The teen pregnancy debate. As we will see in the next chapter, the dramatic increase in the rate of out-of-wedlock births among American teens from 1960 to the early 1990s is a highly complex problem that can be linked to several interrelated factors. However, the debate about its causes has often centered around one main issue: More and more teenagers are engaging in promiscuous sexual behavior. President Clinton referred to the problem as an "epidemic of illegitimacy"; conservatives like Charles Murray maintain that this factor drives a whole range of social problems, from poverty and welfare to crime and drugs (Kramer, 1995). This line of thinking led Clinton to propose welfare programs that require teen mothers to sign personal responsibility contracts to stay in their families and stay in school or look for work if they are to receive welfare benefits. Murray goes much further, saying welfare to teen mothers should be cut off altogether.

Framing the teen pregnancy debate as primarily a matter of personal responsibility is quite appealing. Highly complex socioeconomic conditions that have dramatic effects on peoples' lives can be explained by the much more concrete and understandable failure of individual teenagers to control their sexual impulses (Luker, 1991). As we will discuss more in the next chapter, although the risk of teen pregnancy is universal, some youth are much more at risk than others. The families, communities, schools, and other institutions are just not working for many young girls who become teen parents. They see little hope in their futures and often drift into sexual relations, pregnancy, and parenthood. Let's put this structural argument aside now, though, and pursue further the conservative focus on the individual behavior of teen girls.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that all teens start off on equal footing when it comes to making decisions about sexuality. Some teen girls become pregnant and have children out of wedlock, others do not. Many of the girls who do will need to turn to the government for welfare support for themselves and their children. Such support is not only costly, the argument goes, it also rewards the irresponsible behavior, behavior that should be punished, or at least shamed. We can do as Clinton suggests and administer a little shaming in a positive way by having girls sign a personal responsibility contract before they can get support, or we can go the tough love route and follow Murray's proposal to cut welfare support off altogether for teenage girls.

Before we act on these proposals, however, it is useful to consider some of their underlying assumptions and how they compare to the real lives of the children they most affect. First, these proposals assume that all (or the overwhelming majority of) teen births are the result of *teens* acting irresponsibly. Thus, adolescent females and males need to learn to take responsibility for their actions. If they can't act responsibly (or if their parents can't keep them in line) the government should not be expected to bail them out. Second, the proposals assume that all females (even very young girls) are ultimately responsible for their sexuality, resulting pregnancies, and births.

The first assumption, that teen births result from teenagers acting irresponsibly, seems credible. Teenage mothers are giving birth to out-of-wedlock babies. But are the *fathers* of these babies also teenagers? A national survey of about 10,000 teen mothers conducted from 1989 to 1991 found that half of the fathers of babies born to mothers between the ages of fifteen and seventeen were twenty years old or older, and 20 percent of the fathers were six or more years older than the teenage girls they impregnated (Landry & Forrest, 1995; Steinhauer, 1995). Several state surveys report similar results. For example, a 1993 California study found that nearly 65 percent of infants born to mothers between the ages of ten and nineteen were fathered by men of post-high-school age. This finding did not vary significantly by race or ethnicity; the proportion of infants fathered by adults was only slightly higher for Hispanic and non-Hispanic white mothers than it was for black mothers. Even more troublesome was the finding that the younger the mother, the greater the age gap. With high school girls, fathers were, on average, 4.2 years older than their partners, and with mothers in junior high school, the fathers were on average 6.7 years older. Furthermore, 13 percent of the adult fathers were at least twenty-five years of age (Males and Chew, 1996). Similar findings were reported in Washington state, where the average age of fathers of infants born to twelve-to-seventeen-year-old girls was twenty-four (Males, 1994; Steinhauer, 1995).

Although some of the cases involve seventeen-to-nineteen-year-old girls bearing the children of men a few years older, the number of girls sixteen and younger who are being impregnated by adults is shocking. Clearly the assumption that the teenage pregnancy problem is simply *kids* having sex is wrong. In many states laws of consent prohibit people over the age of eighteen from having sex with those under sixteen, and in California the age of consent is eighteen. In spite of this, many blame young girls not only for bearing the children of these unions, but also for a whole range of other social problems. What we have here, based on the very laws of our society, is a classic case of blaming the victim. What's to be done? Columnist Ellen Goodman recently suggested that it may be time to dust off the

statutory rape laws and return the word *jailbait* to American society's vocabulary. After all, she argues, "a 13-year-old girl is by no means on a level playing field with an 18-year-old boy. Nor is a 15-year-old on a par with a 26-year-old" (Goodman, 1995). Reviving statutory rape laws surely makes more sense than placing the blame for adult misbehavior squarely on the shoulders of children. Some might object that most of these men would be hard to track down, that they have few resources, or that the legal system is already clogged with minor crimes. Others might argue that these girls (or their parents) should be wary of older men and should reject their sexual advances. These arguments again miss the point: These "older men" are adults. *It is their responsibility to control their sexual urges and not prey on young girls.*

Finally, this issue has to do with gender as well as age. The second assumption underlying recent proposals to control teen out-of-wedlock births is that females are ultimately responsible for their sexuality. Some, like Murray, even argue that it is the female's duty, in civilized cultures, to keep the natural sexual urges of males in check. The very idea is wrongheaded, but such an argument is clearly absurd when we are talking about young girls and adult men. It is even more ludicrous when we consider that significant numbers of teen mothers are the *victims of sexual molestation, rape, and sexual assault*. In the studies we discussed above, 70 to 75 percent of the youngest teen mothers (those fourteen and under) report they were molested, coerced into having sex (or raped), or sexually assaulted during their childhoods (Males, 1994; Steinhauer, 1995). In the study in Washington state, the mean age of the male offenders was 27.4 years (Klein, 1996). In some of these cases the offenders were stepparents or boyfriends of mothers or older sisters. As is often the case in sexual abuse, the girls are often frightened, have emotional attachments with their offenders, or blame themselves for their situation. The latter response is hardly surprising in a society that assumes most teen mothers are morally irresponsible.

One recent proposal to help teen mothers advocates government run, privately funded "second chance homes" where pregnant teens "could be protected from predators, given something like the structure and support of a permanent home, taught motherhood and morality" (Klein, 1996). Conservatives like this idea; liberals say it sounds like orphanages. Speaking for conservatives again, Charles Murray says, "I'd like to see it given a try. At the very least, it might have a deterrent effect. Of course I'd also like to see some city try a complete suspension of benefits, so we could compare the results" (as quoted in Klein, 1996, p. 39). Under Murray's plan both teenage mothers *and* their children are punished without any real accounting of the charge of personal irresponsibility. With both of the solutions, all pregnant girls are

lumped together to be held personally accountable for their pregnancy—whether they have been personally irresponsible or not.

Blaming the victim clearly is not the answer to the problem of teenage pregnancy. Although it is true that all teenage girls become pregnant because they have had sex, the reasons and circumstances that led to their sexual activity are many and varied. The politics of shame ignores this complexity and does a great disservice to teen mothers and their children.

Summary

As we saw in this chapter, children are often viewed as social problems. One example of this tendency is captured in the notion of the bogeyman syndrome, which illustrates the general fear of the victimization of children in contemporary industrialized societies, especially in the United States. The bogeyman syndrome can be seen in the widespread belief in certain urban legends concerning threats to children's safety (like Halloween sadism) as well as in the disproportional concerns about relatively rare crimes (such as child abduction and sexual abuse in day care centers). The bogeyman syndrome developed for two main reasons: (1) an increasingly sentimentalized view of children and (2) the *rhetoric* various social groups employ to convince others of the existence of social problems. Such rhetoric is often constructed in a variety of ways. For example, the problems of economically secure children are often differently constructed than are those of the economically disadvantaged. Middle- and upper-class parents take care of their children's basic needs and are thus much less dependent on federal and state welfare programs than are the parents of poor children. However, they are quick to organize and lobby their communities and the federal government when they believe the general welfare and safety of their children is threatened. This is evidenced by the recent, swift passage of a federal version of New Jersey's Megan's Law, which requires states to notify law enforcement officials and the community when a convicted sex offender moves into a neighborhood.

Parents of poor children have a much more difficult time getting their case heard; they must struggle to meet the basic needs of their children and often come to rely on government support. As a result, the economic costs of the social problems of these children are much more visible. The political rhetoric that occurs in response to the social problems of poor children often involves an inverse conceptualization: The victims come to be blamed for their social problems. In this rhetoric, children often are seen as an out-group

whose rights and needs are less important than those of adults. In fact, in some cases the needs of certain groups of most especially poor children are seen as inconvenient, burdensome, and even threatening to the moral order. Much of the rhetoric in the recent debate regarding the problem of teen pregnancy is a prime example of blaming the victim. Some argue, for example, that the problem of teen out-of-wedlock births is so acute and so threatening to society that all teen mothers and their children should be denied government assistance. Others take a less extreme view but still hold that a lack of personal responsibility on the part of teenagers is the main cause of the problem. The fact that children of many of these teens are fathered by adults and that a large proportion of teen mothers grew up and live in impoverished environments and that a significant number of teen mothers are victims of incest, rape, or sexual assault is often overlooked.

Although entry into the arena of public debate about children's social problems may be more difficult for economically disadvantaged children in the United States and around the world, these children, their parents, and their advocates are speaking up more and more. Indeed the extent and severity of the social problems of the world's children seem overwhelming. It is for just this reason that advocates for children have a responsibility to speak out. In the next chapter I shall continue this debate by addressing the social problems of children.