Schakowsky Argues Active Citizens Can Make a Difference

Bolstered by a strong economy, low unemployment rates, and “moderate” welfare reform policies, Illinois has seen “a significant decrease in welfare receipt without an accompanying rise in material hardship,” according to the latest findings from the Illinois Families Study (IFS).

The study concludes that work does “pay” for the poor — largely because of several strong work supports available in Illinois.

“That’s the good news,” said Dan A. Lewis, IFS director and IPR faculty fellow. “But, as the report makes clear, Illinois’ poor, even in what was a good economy, still face considerable hardships, often entering jobs with low wages and few benefits.”

The project is following the welfare reforms Illinois put in place in 1997 by tracking 1,183 of the state’s poorest families over six years.

Those who were working in 1999-00 were less likely to experience hardship in 2001 than those who were not working in 1999-00. Overall, the well-being of families surveyed in 2001 appeared to be “slightly improved” over 1999-00, according to the new IFS report, “Welfare Reform in Illinois: Is the Moderate Approach Working?”

Published in May, the report shows significant gains in wages, employer-sponsored benefits, and child health care coverage. Though many families experienced instability or hardship, many of the most severe hardships, including homelessness and food insecurity, decreased slightly over the two-year study period.

In its Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, Illinois adopted a middle-of-the-road approach, which includes “earnings disregards,” which included earnings disregards,

(continued on page 2)

Study Finds Work Pays for Illinois Welfare Recipients, But Many Still Face Hardships

Children and Teens Show Signs of Trouble

Children in families on welfare or in families transitioning off welfare since the implementation of welfare reform are at high risk for poor cognitive development and problem behavior. This was the major finding of a policy brief released in February that was authored by a team of researchers headed by IPR faculty fellow P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale.

Preschoolers in sanctioned families — families who have had their benefits reduced or eliminated for failure to follow stricter welfare program rules — are among the most vulnerable for emotional and behavioral difficulties. That finding and others contained in the brief “Welfare Reform: What About the Children?” suggest an urgent need for services and intervention. It is one of several policy briefs released in recent months by the $20-million Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study.

Preschoolers whose families were sanctioned and left welfare were three times as likely to show rates of serious emotional and behavioral problems as children in national samples,” said Chase-Lansdale, professor of human develop-
Illinois Welfare Recipients (continued from page 1)

child care subsidies, and a “stopped-clock option” in which the 60-month federally mandated lifetime limit for welfare payments is suspended during periods of employment. The federal welfare reform act of 1996 gave states leeway to fashion their own reforms within the federal guidelines.

Because Illinois welfare reform policies are considered moderate, or even generous in comparison to other states, the state illustrates the “middle-of-the-road” approach to reform under good economic conditions.

The researchers conclude that strong work supports are key to a successful transition off welfare. Even among those who were working and off welfare, 46% experienced some hardship in 2001. Median hourly wages remained fairly low at $8 per hour, and most workers did not receive benefits from their employers.

The large declines in use of cash assistance were not matched by comparable increases in work. Early half the IFS sample was still not employed in 2001. And the researchers report a “troubling increase” in the proportion of families who were neither working nor receiving welfare, accounting for more than 25% of the respondents in the 2001 survey.

Poor health and low levels of education appear to be the major obstacles to leaving welfare and getting and keeping a job. Nearly 25% of respondents in 2001 said their health was poor or fair, and nearly a fifth reported depression. Yet health insurance declined among adults. A quarter of respondents had no health insurance in 2001 and 30% experienced a gap in coverage during the previous year.

Though more Illinois respondents were aware of work supports, many did not take advantage of them, the study found. With the exception of child care subsidies and the Earned Income Tax Credit, the use of food stamps, Medicaid, housing assistance, and job training appeared to decrease over the two-year study period.

The work supports that appear to be most critical in Illinois are child care subsidies, the “stopped clock” option for employed TANF recipients and Medicaid and KidCare (SCHIP). The study found, for example, that material hardship decreased among longer term “stopped clock” users. Use of this option — along with receipt of a child care subsidy — appeared to promote and support employment.

With the TANF program up for reauthorization this summer, the researchers offer a number of recommendations to federal as well as Illinois policymakers. Among their recommendations to federal lawmakers:

- Expand Illinois’ “stopped clock” option nationally
- Increase federal support for child care, reward states with high take-up rates for their child care subsidies, and tie eligibility to income rather than TANF status.
- Make Medicaid more accessible to parents once they leave welfare.
- Require states to include secondary and postsecondary education as a legitimate work activity and maintain the current requirement of a 30-35 hour work week.

Among their recommendations to Illinois lawmakers to overcome the most severe obstacles to self-sufficiency:

- Restore child care funding in fiscal year 2003, maintain child care subsidies as a high spending priority, and encourage take-up of the subsidy.
- Expand income eligibility cutoffs for Medicaid coverage for adults and extend provision of Transitional Medicaid Assistance to at least 12 months for TANF leavers.
- Raise the TANF monthly cash grant, and ensure that both TANF and non-TANF working poor families have access to emergency assistance funds.

The researchers now are conducting the third wave of the study, which will show the effects of the slowing economy. “As the unemployment rate climbs and time limits begin to hit, the number of most vulnerable families will probably continue to grow, which requires greater attention from policymakers and service providers,” Lewis said.

Lewis and his IFS colleagues at four other local universities are surveying residents of Cook and eight downstate counties, which account for about 75% of the state’s TANF caseload. Other members of this University Consortium on Welfare Reform include Northern Illinois University, Roosevelt University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the University of Chicago. Nine private foundations and government agencies are funding the study.

Copies of the summary and technical report are available online at www.northwestern.edu/ipr/research/IFS.html or may be ordered from IPR’s publications department.

Summer Welfare-to-Work VISTA Conference

IPR faculty Greg Duncan, Fay Lomax Cook, and James Rosenbaum are planning and participating in a VISTA conference on Welfare-to-Work that will be held at Northwestern’s Evanston campus July 29-31. The meetings will assemble VISTA volunteers, project directors, and scholars to exchange knowledge about macro- and micro-level approaches to welfare-to-work over the past five years. Participants will focus on the impact of welfare reform on work opportunities and families and the role of educational and training programs.
JCPR Welfare Conference Focuses on Hard-to-Employ

The Joint Center for Poverty Research, with core funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, convened a panel of researchers for a conference on the hard-to-employ and welfare reform that was held February 28-March 1, 2002, in Washington, D.C.

The “hard-to-employ” include people facing multiple barriers to work, such as physical and mental health issues, domestic violence, substance abuse, a history of incarceration, transportation obstacles, and low education or little job experience or training. As welfare caseloads have seen the most work-ready leave for employment, the focus has shifted to the population that faces barriers to employment.

Although a significant body of research finds those who remain on welfare are often more disadvantaged than those who have left, Robert Moffitt and Andrew Cherlin, in their conference paper “Disadvantage among families remaining on welfare,” find that a sizable number of welfare “leavers” are not employed and have high poverty rates, suggesting that some of the more disadvantaged portions of the caseload have indeed left welfare. A sizable portion of this group may have experienced a sanction.

The research presented at the conference varied widely by topic, yet an emerging message was one of employment with barriers rather than barriers to employment. The question is quickly becoming “How do we help those with barriers to work?” not “Who cannot work because of barriers?” In other words, policy and programs should assist those individuals facing barriers to work with supports and individualized attention, rather than automatically assuming they cannot work.

Inclusionary Practices. IPR fellow Dan Lewis, Bong Joo Lee, research associate at the Chapin Hall Center for Children, and JCPR graduate fellow Lisa Altenbernd stressed this emerging message in their paper “Serious mental illness and welfare reform: From barriers to inclusion.”

Framing their work within the American with Disabilities Act, which strives for the inclusion in American society of people with disabilities, the authors examine how depression and work are related among current and recent welfare recipients and what factors exclude those with depression from real involvement in a civil society based on work.

The authors used both survey data and individual-level administrative data on use of Medicaid-paid mental health services from their Illinois Families Study (see p. 1). They drew on a subgroup of 239 families suffering from depressive symptoms, as indicated by an abbreviated Centers for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale. They focused on the independent effects of depression on work by controlling for other confounding factors.

They find that roughly 23% of the larger sample suffered from depression, most of it moderate or severe. Only 8%, however, were receiving mental health services (as indicated by Medicaid-paid claims). Those suffering depression were less likely to be employed, but many who were suffering from depression were nevertheless working. Those who were working were those with more job experience and job skills, fewer physical health issues, and more personal resources. Those with few job skills, for example, were 66% less likely to be working than those with some job skills. Respondents with little work experience were 63% less likely to be working than those with some work experience. The key to achieving the goals of inclusion, the authors suggest, is to help foster the human capital skills that make work more likely among this group of women.

Women’s Mental Health Issues. States vary in their approaches to assisting women with mental illness. Michelle Derr and her colleagues at Mathematica reported on several approaches in their paper, “Providing mental health services to TANF recipients,” which examined services in four states.

In Florida, for example, TANF funds have been used to purchase mental health treatment and outreach staff who link to various services. Tennessee provides short-term, solution-focused mental health treatment for TANF recipients. It also co-locates services in the welfare offices. Utah’s social workers conduct clinical assessments and some short-term therapy, as well as link clients to Medicaid-funded treatments. The service providers also determine whether mental health needs should be addressed separately or in combination with other personal and family challenges. As research at the conference underscores, TANF recipients rarely face only one barrier to work.

The most effective strategy for fostering integration between employment and mental health services appears to be co-locating the programs. When this is not possible, it is imperative to build trusting relationships between mental health and employment services.

Conclusion. If efforts are to move in the direction of inclusion, rather than exclusion based on barriers, the identification of mental illness and its support is critical. As some of the panelists suggested, casework on the frontline should offer women with mental health and other barriers a wide open gate by not prejudging who can and cannot work. On the other hand, not everyone can proceed through the same gate. Those with barriers require individualized support to help them get and keep a job. Toby Herr of Project Match, for example, suggested an approach that stresses participant-defined services, rather than network-defined services, in which the agency defines the services and the recipient is assigned to them. Others suggested the need to offer a suite of benefits and let families choose which benefits they can use most.

Greg Duncan, JCPR director and IPR faculty fellow, and Susan Mayer, JCPR deputy director and dean at the University of Chicago, organized the conference.

For more information and the papers, visit www.jcpr.org.
Does Jury Discussion During Trials Cause Rush to Judgment?

When Arizona's judiciary made unprecedented changes in its civil procedures, the move called for an unprecedented study into how juries work. Northwestern law professor and IPR faculty associate Shari Diamond, along with Neil Vidmar from Duke University, led the investigation that for the first time put video cameras in jury rooms.

The Arizona Jury Project study was prompted by Arizona's adoption of Rule of Civil Procedure 39(f), a controversial innovation in the civil court system. While other states prohibit jurors from discussing cases until all trial testimony has ended and they have received legal instructions, Rule 39(f) allows jurors to discuss cases during breaks throughout the trial whenever the entire jury is present.

"In terms of the innovation, there were critics and supporters who made fairly strong claims about what effects the innovation was likely to have," Diamond said. "The dose of reality that we were able to add to it suggested that neither of those pictures of the innovation's effect was accurate."

Critics of Rule 39(f) mostly worry that the innovation encourages jurors to make premature verdicts and favors plaintiffs, who present first during civil trials. Proponents of the rule argue that the opportunity to discuss a case throughout its trial allows jurors to clarify points of confusion or correct misconceptions that may be forgotten if put off until official deliberations begin.

The study tested both viewpoints and used data collected from videotapes of juries operating under both traditional no-discussion rules and Rule 39(f). Investigators also examined juror questions submitted to the judge and witnesses throughout the trial, judicial instructions on the law given to jurors at the beginning of the trial and just before official deliberations, and jury verdict forms. Finally, the jurors, judges, and attorneys filled out questionnaires at the end of the trial about their own personal reactions to the case. The data showed jurors' reaction to judges' instructions.

"What our close, detailed study of the jury behavior shows is that you cannot, even with well-intentioned jurors who are anxious to do the right thing, depend on a single instruction given to them at the beginning of the trial" to ensure all procedures are accurately followed, Diamond said. For example, one of the study's most significant findings was that jurors often ignored the Rule 39(f) instruction to only discuss a case when all jurors were present.

In cases that are more specifically outlined in Diamond and Vidmar's article, "Jury room ruminations on forbidden topics," published in 2001 in the Virginia Law Review, jurors in tort trials discussed topics such as insurance, even after receiving instructions to disregard the subjects.

Chief justices in all 50 states received a report of the findings of the Arizona Jury Project, which was funded by the State Justice Institute, the National Science Foundation, and the American Bar Foundation. Each member of the Arizona court system and the Arizona State Supreme Court also received the report. Diamond said future reports will take advantage of the unique opportunity the project afforded researchers to watch juries in action, focusing on such issues as expert testimony, juror questions, and damage awards.

Faith-Based Workbook Offers New Paths to Community Building

A new workbook soon to be released by the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute titled "Asset-Based Strategies for Faith Communities" presents a collection of stories from Christian churches and organizations throughout the United States. Each describes a particular faith-based initiative aimed at revitalizing a congregation or its surrounding community, and several stories include activities designed to spur economic development.

Like other groups doing asset-based community development, these congregations focus on the rich array of resources available within their communities rather than on deficiencies that might also be present. According to the ABCD model, effective community building requires understanding and mobilizing the skills and talents of local people: local, voluntary, citizen associations; local institutions; available land and physical property; and the local economy. By bringing together this rich variety of stories of congregations engaged in community-building work, authors Susan Rans and Hily Altman hope to inspire other congregations to use the asset-based development model in their own local work.

The workbook includes contact information to allow interested readers to network with the featured organizations and congregations. An appendix includes materials used by the featured Christian organizations, as well as materials from congregations and organizations of other faiths.

The workbook will be available this summer from ACTA Publications in Chicago (773-271-1030).
Chaired Professorship to Greg Duncan

Seven years after he moved to Northwestern from the University of Michigan, economist Greg Duncan was named Edwina S. Tarry Professor at Northwestern's School of Education and Social Policy (SESP).

Before a crowded room of well-wishers at his investiture on May 6, Duncan paid tribute to the “unique blend of development and economics” in the school's Human Development and Social Policy program that he has helped to shape during his tenure at Northwestern.

Duncan is one of the nation's leading experts on poverty and child development. In addition to his permanent appointment at IPR, he has directed the Joint Center for Poverty Research (JCPR) for the past two years and was deputy director for the three years prior.

Much of the credit for JCPR’s success can be attributed to Duncan, who has worked tirelessly in steering JCPR, organizing conferences, conducting congressional and local briefings, nurturing young scholars, and conducting several large research projects on the effects of poverty and welfare reform on children and families.

Duncan's classic 1984 book Years of Plenty introduced many social scientists and policy analysts to the dynamic nature of socioeconomic status, poverty, and welfare use. In the past few years, Duncan has co-edited Neighborhood Poverty (1997), Consequences of Growing Up Poor (1997), and most recently, For Better and For Worse: Welfare Reform and the Well-Being of Children and Families (2001) with IPR and SESP colleague P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale.

Among the many national networks and committees on which he serves, Duncan was a member of a prestigious interdisciplinary committee of the National Research Council that produced the book From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood (2000). It concluded that the window for brain development opens well before birth, and continues throughout life. Development is influenced both by nature and nurture, especially by nurturing adults.

Prior to his arrival at Northwestern, Duncan was a distinguished research scientist at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, where he helped develop and then directed the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

Duncan was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2001. In 1999 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Essex.

Child Welfare Discourse Fails to Factor in Racial Bias

Forty-two percent of all children in foster care nationwide are black, even though black children constitute only 17% of the nation's youth. And once black children enter foster care, they remain there longer, are moved more often, and are less likely either to be returned home or adopted than white children. Those are a few of the statistics that bolster arguments in a recent book, Shattered Bonds: the Color of Child Welfare (2001) by law professor and IPR faculty fellow Dorothy Roberts.

Roberts argues that the overwhelming number of black children in foster care points to the disturbing reality of racial bias that is rarely addressed in child welfare discourse. "Today's child welfare discourse is marked by an abysmal failure to grasp the racial harm inflicted by the child welfare system," Roberts says. "Most white children referred to child protective services are permitted to stay with their families, whereas most black children are taken away from theirs."

In her book, Roberts examines how the politics of race and class profoundly affect which children become involved in the system. She describes the racial imbalance in foster care; the concentration of state intervention in certain neighborhoods, including the alarming percentages of children in substitute care; the difficulty that poor and black families have in meeting state standards for regaining custody of children placed in foster care; and the relationship between state supervision and continuing racial inequality.

Child protection policy has conformed to the current political climate, which embraces punitive responses to the seemingly intractable plight of isolated and impoverished inner cities, according to Roberts. In recent years, federal and state policy have shifted away from preserving families and toward “freeing” children in foster care for adoption by terminating parental rights. Black families, who are disproportionately poor, Roberts says, have been hit the hardest.

Neglect, usually linked to poverty — not physical or sexual abuse — is the main reason that most children end up in foster care. (There are twice as many cases of child neglect as cases of physical abuse.)

High rates of poverty among black families, bolstered by stereotypes about black parental unfitness, create the system's racial disparity, according to Roberts. The racial harm profoundly affects the black community, extending well beyond the obvious injuries to blacks involved in the child welfare system, she argues.

Roberts proposes a child welfare system that would radically change the nature of state involvement by redefining child welfare to generously support children in their homes: “I don't see why as a society we are not willing to give generous supports for families, but we are willing to spend billions to remove children from their families,” she says.
“Dismal” Picture for Latinos in Chicago’s CAPS Program

Despite the efforts of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) program to reach out to the city’s rapidly growing Latino population, a recent IPR report found that community’s situation is troublesome.

With a 2000 population of 754,000, the number of Latinos in Chicago is expected to surpass the number of whites by 2004, and could surpass the black population by 2014, said IPR faculty fellow Wesley Skogan, principal investigator for the report, “Community Policing and the ‘New Immigrants’: Latinos in Chicago.”

About 70% of Latino families include a school-age child, and 61% prefer to speak Spanish, Skogan said. Because these population trends will greatly influence the future of Chicago’s public service infrastructure, the CAPS evaluators, funded by the National Institute of Justice, wanted to evaluate the conditions of Latino neighborhoods and Latinos’ relationships with the CAPS program.

“We found that it’s real dismal,” Skogan said. “Over the last decade, things got measurably better for blacks. For whites, things were never that bad but they got a little better. For Latinos, over the 1990s, things got worse.”

Among the findings:

- Latinos’ perceptions of their neighborhood conditions were worse than any other population group.

- Spanish-speakers were much more likely than others to report that conditions were bad,” the report stated. The evaluation questioned residents about gang violence, burglary, car theft and abandoned cars. Latinos generally felt these conditions had remained consistently bad or had worsened during the past decade, while other population groups perceived an improvement.

- Spanish-speaking Latinos were much less likely to know about the CAPS program than English speakers, despite the city’s aggressive marketing campaign to integrate Latinos. By 2001, about 80% of most population groups knew about CAPS, but awareness by Spanish-speaking people fell behind by about 19 percentage points from 1996 to 2000.

- While attendance rates among other population groups related directly to their perceptions of the level of violent crime, Latinos were less likely to attend district beat meetings even though most viewed their neighborhoods as unsafe.

- Latinos felt police service in their neighborhoods was poor. For example, the report cited a 1998 survey, which found that 40% of Latinos thought police in their area were “too tough on people they stop,” compared with 10% of whites and 33% of blacks.

In response to the report’s findings, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) has already attempted to address low attendance at beat meetings. It has chosen 30 beats in which meeting participation has been low, and plans to “try everything” to encourage attendance, including scheduling meetings on Saturdays and holding raffles, Skogan said.

But Skogan stressed that the CPD is not solely responsible for improving conditions in Latino neighborhoods. Many neighborhood conditions result from city service and social service problems as well, he said.

“This is a Chicago problem, not just the police department’s problem," he said. “The problems reach across many issues that are the responsibility of many different kinds of organizations.”

### Project CLEAR Puts Technology to Work for Police

CAPS researchers will evaluate the development and implementation of the Chicago Police Department’s Project CLEAR (Citizen and Law Enforcement Analysis and Reporting), the most extensive and state-of-the-art computerized information system to be installed into any major city’s police department. They hope to evaluate the impact of the program on police, citizens, and the CPD organization through future funding.

Project CLEAR will use new technology to promote proactive community/business involvement, improve police management, and foster the integration of other criminal justice agencies. CLEAR attributes include predictive resource allocation to deploy officers when and where they are needed, an unprecedented information system for management analysis and officer accountability, shared problem-solving information for community policing partners, “prepackaged” information to support decision making of all members, and information integration to manage offender flow through the criminal justice system.

“They're trying to increase problem solving and they're also trying to increase the integrity of elements such as police reports and evidence recovery,” said Susan Hartnett, IPR research associate, who is directing the evaluation.

Funded by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, the study brings together IPR evaluators and researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Center for Research in Law and Justice Studies. The police department received significant funding for the project from Oracle Corporation, which plans to pilot the technology in Chicago and then market it to other police departments.

In addition to encouraging community participation, Project CLEAR aims to computerize administrative tasks and move officers from behind desks onto the streets. The department hopes the computer technology also will increase officers’ accountability. For example, after a supervisor approves an officer’s incident report, the computer system will not allow the officer to change it.

The evaluators will conduct personal interviews with police department staff involved in every aspect of the project’s implementation and use and survey residents and police in selected districts to determine their computer literacy and use. They want to learn if residents would be likely to use computers for reporting crime and neighborhood problems.
School reforms that focus only on the classroom may miss important outside influences, suggests IPR faculty fellow James Rosenbaum in a report written for the Strategic Education Research Program of the National Research Council. Policymakers and others often blame teachers for students' failures, Rosenbaum points out. The implicit assumption is that classrooms are where learning occurs, and therefore low achievement must be the teacher's or student's fault. As a result, reforms are directed solely at teachers and students.

Learning, however, may be fundamentally affected by the organizational context in schools, from the structure and pacing of classes and curriculum, to the transitions between grades, to the overall decentralized approach to education policy, and larger contextual factors such as the neighborhood, health care, and housing issues. Focusing only on teachers and students, Rosenbaum suggests, may miss the bigger picture and ultimately undermine reforms.

The Importance of Organizational Features. Basic features of social organization of education are well known, but their impact is rarely considered or questioned, Rosenbaum suggests. Curriculum, for example, implies that courses have continuity over time, coordination across courses, and perhaps coordination with activities outside school. However, a great deal of what to teach and how is left to teachers. This highly individualized approach raises the question of how well the coursework is synchronized with students' day-to-day and year-to-year coursework in other classes.

Beyond curriculum, the transition from elementary school to junior high is accompanied by many social organizational changes that can affect learning, and that are rarely considered when assessing the learning process. Different teaching methods, more fragmented time, and a shift from a highly personal relationship with a single teacher to a more anonymous identity all can affect learning.

The highly decentralized nature of education policy in the United States is another aspect of social organization that can affect learning. In a mobile society such as the United States, local control over school policy can have a dramatic effect on learning. Students moving even across town often face vastly different expectations and coursework. This effect is especially pronounced for low-income students, whose families move more often than higher income families.

Beyond the school itself, neighborhoods, family life, and peers play a large role in their capacity to learn. Yet policymakers rarely examine the institutions outside school—health care, housing, the welfare system, employment, neighborhoods, and after-school activities—that may affect student performance.

Low-income children lose 30% more days of school each year owing to illness than higher income students. They are twice as likely to suffer from anemia, asthma, and to have severe vision impairment. Giving all children equal opportunity in school is unlikely to lead to equal achievement if low-income children come to school hungry, ill, and unable to see the blackboard.

Expand Research beyond the Classroom. Although students must eventually learn to deal with discontinuities such as those experienced in school, an individual's capacity to adapt may depend on maturity and attainment of certain skills. It is possible that discontinuities are more harmful at certain ages, for example, or may be eased if introduced in small steps. These issues deserve detailed examination. Prior research efforts that relied on classroom evaluations to understand the causes of low achievement are unlikely to reveal the full story. Without taking a larger organizational perspective, Rosenbaum suggests, any learning gains made in the classroom might be eroded by surrounding organizational features.

The report is available as an IPR working paper (WP-02-20) and may be downloaded from www.northwestern.edu/ipr.
MacArthur Lecture

Public Debate Could Sharpen Opinions of Uninformed Citizens

In his inaugural MacArthur lecture to a Northwestern audience on November 15, 2001, political scientist Dennis Chong assessed the quality of mass public opinion in the United States and the conditions in a democratic society that foster development of an articulate electorate. According to Chong, it has become conventional wisdom among scholars that citizens, on the whole, are poorly informed about the institutions and issues of American government and that they rarely display stable, consistent, principled views about political issues.

Particularly vexing in public opinion research, he said, are "framing effects" that occur when small changes in the wording of questions produce large changes in the opinions that people express. In one vivid example, only about 20% of the American public say too little is being spent on "welfare"; but about 65% say too little is being spent on "assistance to the poor." Alternative phrasings of the same basic question can significantly alter its meaning to respondents, even if the change in connotation is not always obvious to the researcher.

Chong, an IPR faculty fellow, observed that weak public preferences can be a serious problem in a democratic political system premised on the rule of the people. Public opinion may be so superficial that radically different representations of public opinion may be generated by manipulating how questions are framed. Either the public has no attitudes on many political issues, he suggested, or else it holds so many fragmentary and conflicting attitudes that it cannot reconcile or resolve them. Can democracy have a popular foundation, he asked, if we cannot reliably identify the public's preferences?

The good news is that there are ways to counteract superficial opinions and to strengthen public preferences, said Chong. Public deliberation and exposure to argumentation and information about political affairs has been shown to reduce ambivalence and improve the quality of opinion."The opinions of informed individuals are more likely to be anchored by individual and group interests, moral values, principles, and other reasons."

On the other hand, people who remain outside the political process, who are uninformed, and who do not participate in discussion or deliberation of issues, are more likely to be influenced by the framing and wording of survey questions because their opinions have weaker foundations.

Chong, who has studied public opinion on civil liberties issues, said great variation in public opinion by levels of knowledge and interest is evident in how people discuss controversial issues in open-ended interviews and in how they respond to these issues in structured opinion surveys. Some individuals are "maneuvered" easily by alternative framings of the issues, while others, by virtue of their greater involvement in public affairs, have acquired a more resilient perspective on the issues that is less susceptible to manipulation.

Chong cautioned that "having opinions is only half the problem in a democracy; people also must balance their strong opinions with a capacity to be flexible and open-minded."

When the first forays into survey research in the 1940s and '50s found citizens apathetic about politics, some scholars speculated that there might be some virtue in this condition, Chong said. Because democracy requires compromise and coalition-building, they argued that apathy could provide a better underpinning for a stable democratic system than a more intensely interested, politically active citizenry. High interest, it was feared, would lead to constant factional disputes and little collective reconciliation on important issues.

"How, then, can we have a more participatory democracy without developing an intense and intransigent collective public inimical to democratic debate and discussion?" Chong asked. The answer is that "somehow, the taste for opinions must be tempered by a taste for deliberation and open-mindedness."

An active public debate must be balanced by popular acceptance of a norm of tolerance toward differences of opinion. Chong sees some hope for this outcome in survey research findings that people who participate to a greater degree in public affairs, irrespective of their ideological leanings, are also more likely to support the basic democratic right of free expression.

Forthcoming Books


IPR’s Summer Interns Discover the Real World of Research

Working to finish his honors thesis during his last quarter at Northwestern, economics and sociology major Jordan Heinz already has an impressive body of work to show for his undergraduate research experience. In addition to his thesis on Social Security policy and a junior-year independent study project, he co-authored an article published in the winter of 2002.

The paper, “Social Security expectations and retirement savings decisions” was written with economist and IPR faculty fellow Charles Manski and Carnegie Mellon economist Jeff Dominitz. Heinz’s work on the paper, along with his independent study and senior thesis for which Manski is adviser, evolved from his experience in 2001 as an IPR summer research assistant.

“The summer research assistant experience really just shaped everything else I did at Northwestern with research,” said Heinz, who plans to enter law school in the fall of 2002.

IPR Associate Director Joseph Altonji was instrumental in organizing the program in 1998 and has served since then as director. The program has trained more than 20 undergraduates per year in basic research methods and statistical analysis by pairing them with IPR faculty fellows who request undergraduate assistance for their own research.

“It’s great for the student because it gives them a chance to participate in the research and see what they like,” said Ellen Whittingham, the program’s coordinator. “It’s great for the faculty because they get someone to help them with their research.”

The summer program has encouraged many students to form long-term bonds with IPR and, like Heinz, with professors. It has also given prospective graduate students an idea of what academic research is all about.

“I had these professors totally idealized and I still do to a certain extent,” said Medill junior Elizabeth Raap. “But it gave me a sense that there’s a lot of daily work involved too. It gave me a one-on-one relationship with two really great professors.”

Raap said seeing the day-to-day “grunt work” that is a necessary part of academic research gave her another perspective to help her decide whether to pursue sociology as a graduate student. As a research assistant, Raap split her time between sociology professors Mary Pattillo and Eric Klinenberg. For Klinenberg, she did preliminary research for a project about newspaper zoning trends. Raap said she met with Patillo once each week and kept in contact over e-mail. She and Klinenberg held a planning meeting at the beginning of each week, and she spent much of her time conducting research in the Northwestern library or on the phone with newspaper circulation departments.

“It’s exciting to be around undergraduates who have real energy and enthusiasm for research,” Klinenberg said. “I enjoy the mentoring and teaching experience, but I also learn something from the students.” For example, as a journalism student Raap was able to share “a really rich perspective on the media world I was beginning to study,” Klinenberg said.

Many professors participated because they had never worked with undergraduates before — often only master’s and doctoral candidates participate in such research, Manski said. An optional weeklong workshop at the beginning of the summer teaches the undergraduates how to use various computer statistical analysis programs that they may not have been exposed to in their coursework. After this introduction, the students’ role in professors’ research can vary greatly.

Renee Erline, who graduated from Northwestern in December 2001, worked last summer for human development and social policy professor P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale and her project, Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study. She had learned about the program when she attended research group meetings as a work-study student in the IPR office, and decided to become involved in the project full-time as a summer research assistant. She spent most of her summer entering data and checking coding for interview and observational portions of the project. When a full-time position as the study’s project coordinator opened in winter 2002, Erline’s experience with the project and as a work-study student made her a natural choice to fill the position.

Northwestern undergraduates who are interested in spending a summer as an IPR research assistant should contact IPR faculty fellows and faculty associates directly. IPR will begin accepting applications next spring for the summer program in 2003.
Schakowsky Lecture (continued from page 1)

are not registered. Among people ages 19 to 24, nearly 95% are not registered voters. Furthermore, 36% of African Americans, 69% of persons with disabilities, and 66% of Hispanics also are not registered to vote. “Unless there is an intense effort to increase political participation, the numbers will only get worse,” Schakowsky warned.

Even more alarming, Schakowsky said people from demographic areas most effected by public policy, including racial and ethnic minorities and the poor, are even less likely to vote or be politically active. She cited research by journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, author of the book Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America. Ehrenreich worked at low-wage jobs in retail, restaurants, and house-cleaning services to find out the reality of living poor in the United States. Schakowsky said one of Ehrenreich’s most startling findings was the lack of interest the author’s co-workers had in the approaching 2000 presidential election.

“These hardworking, low-income people who had the most at stake, the most to gain from a government that would be more sensitive to them, never even thought about the election, or at least not enough to talk about it at work, and I suspect not enough to go and vote,” Schakowsky said. “As a progressive congresswoman, I see their absence as a problem for public policy. Their voice may make a difference.”

One reason for this disconnect between citizens and policymakers, she said, is that “people think politicians aren’t them. And to some extent that’s true.” Schakowsky cited figures showing that 29% of Congress are millionaires compared to only 1% of the population and 66% have advanced degrees versus 1% of the population.

The makeup of Congress is even more disparate. Of the 9,782 members who have ever been elected to the House only 192 were women (62 serving currently), 107 African American, 72 Hispanic, and 15 Asians. Of the 1,232 elected to the Senate, 31 were women (13 serving now), four were African American, three Hispanic, and five Asian American. People also don’t get involved because they don’t believe they can influence the outcome of policy decisions, she said.

Schakowsky heralded election campaigns as important opportunities for politicians to invite their constituents to get politically involved. Most of her campaign funds for past elections have come in small increments from constituents who had never before been invited to support political campaigns. For example, in her first campaign for Congress in 1998 she raised more money from women than any other candidate.

Schakowsky also described the “Chicago ’98 Campaign School,” which has since evolved into a formal program in cities throughout the nation. The campaign school brought 17 volunteers to Chicago and assigned them the task of identifying 31,000 people who would vote for Schakowsky — just the number of votes the new candidate had determined she needed to win. The “students” found these voters by making door-to-door visits and personal phone calls, then became responsible for ensuring that the supporters actually went to the polls on election day. Schakowsky won with 31,462 votes.

Schakowsky said she first realized the impact ordinary people could make in 1969, when she and six other housewives fought successfully to put freshness dates on products sold in the grocery store. “We were convinced that if we cared, all America women cared,” Schakowsky said. “And we were right.”

The six women visited stores, clipboards in hand, and inspected produce for freshness. They dumped outdated foods into grocery carts and demanded that the stores’ managers get rid of the items. The report the women compiled from their visits captured national attention, and resulted in freshness dating becoming a nearly universal practice in groceries.

The experience changed her self-perception “from being an ordinary housewife to being an ordinary housewife who could make a difference,” she recalled. “It was empowering in a fundamental and enduring way.”

The congresswoman was also successful in improving cus-
Children and Teens Show Signs of Trouble (cont. from p. 1)

Those groups consisted of: 1) children in families on welfare after the implementation of welfare reform in 1997; 2) children in families who transitioned off welfare since the stricter welfare restrictions imposed by welfare reform were put into place; 3) children in families who transitioned off welfare prior to welfare reform; and 4) children in families with low incomes who never accessed the welfare system.

In comparing the young adolescents in these groups, the researchers discovered that those in families on welfare fared worst of all. “Forty-two percent of young adolescents in families on welfare have very serious and troubling emotional and behavior problems that require intervention from mental health providers,” Chase-Lansdale said. Adolescents in welfare families also show lower levels of cognitive achievement than other low-income teens in the sample.

With only one wave of data, the researchers cannot definitively conclude whether or not welfare reform has caused the problems they have identified. However, the study has allowed them to identify seriously vulnerable groups of children who are in trouble now and require immediate attention.

The brief outlines policy options that are immediately available for those vulnerable children in sanctioned families. They include assistance to families on welfare to bring them into compliance with the welfare rules before they are sanctioned; closer monitoring of sanctioned families; and the provision of additional supports, such as mental health services, academic enrichment, and after-school programs.

The policy brief was co-authored by Boston College professor Rebekah Levine Coley, IPR postdoctoral fellow Brenda J. Lohman, and IPR research associate Laura D. Pittman.

The policy brief is posted on the World Wide Web at www.jhu.edu/~welfare. A related brief, which focuses on sanctioned families, can be accessed on the IPR Web site at www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/policybriefs/lansdalebrief.pdf.

P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale