

9-10-2015

Underserved Populations in the United States: Research, Response and Resilience

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Recommended Citation

Robert Sanborn, Angelo P. Giardino, William V. Flores, and E. Christopher Lloyd (2015) "Underserved Populations in the United States: Research, Response and Resilience," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol15/iss1/8>

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Introduction

Academic and social service networks have been using the notion of resilience for more than two decades. In its most positive light, resilience can be described as not just surviving in difficult circumstances but actually displaying a set of skills, a manner of coping and an attitude whereby one actually thrives despite enormous challenge and adversity experienced in ones' life. But, are these skills resilient? What constitutes resilience? There is a growing view among many academics, policy makers and the general public that if we could learn more about how resilience emerges and manifests itself both individually and at the community level, then perhaps we could design interventions, shape policies and provide supports via well informed program designs that could actually foster the developing of those skills, coping mechanisms and attitudes that would be most likely to tap into an individual's or a community's ability to be or become resilient. Of course, talking about resilience almost immediately leads one to examine the other side of that coin, the adversity that individuals overcome as part of becoming resilient. What might one have to overcome?

How and why are they successful? This issue of the Journal of Family Strengths examines several adversities that a child and family may confront such as substance abuse, experiencing a troubled family situation causing one to enter the foster care system, exposure to stigmatization and victimization that often comes from identifying as LGBT, the struggles of early parenting, and coming to be homeless as a youth or young adult. Some individuals survive and grow stronger, others will struggle but find help and move forward. Regretfully some suffer and continue to be burdened. They find their life course hampered by the adversity to which they were exposed. Can we identify characteristics or

strengths that teach and compel others to adapt? Clearly, a first step in professional practice is the systematic study of differential responses in various circumstances to diversity. These articles share evidence from observation and practice with an eye towards developing practical, effective interventions that actually help those most in need. “Some have characterized this work as being oriented towards giving children “roots and wings”... essentially roots being supportive predictable caring environments and wings being the ability to dream and aspire... of course those roots need good fertile nurturing soil, regularly watering and a fair amount of sunlight and those wings need unencumbered clear skies through which to take flight.”

A personal reflection

Growing up in poverty by most would be considered an adverse experience from which resilient behavior might emerge. However, being poor is not a uniform experience. Some children and families navigate through difficult financial circumstances in a way that seems to build strength and motivation while others are caught in what can only be seen as traps and snares that regrettably are associated with being poor, living in poverty, coming from an underserved background. One of our editors (Sanborn), shares a personal reflection on his own experience. Dr. Sanborn, one can surmise that he was resilient, but he experienced adversity nonetheless. So why is he manifesting resilience, now being an editor for a professional journal while many others with similar circumstances display less resilience, and continue to suffer the effects of their early experiences? Let's hear from Dr. Sanborn:

As children we often have no idea of whether we are underserved, underrepresented or poor. Growing up in Puerto Rico I knew that

my family's wealth was as minimal as any of my friends. I didn't know we were poor; I was just a kid trying to get through school and life like all of my classmates.

As children we see lots of things but don't always understand their significance. I knew that we often ran out of food, but I didn't understand then that we were poor. I recall my parents and our friends' parents being quite young, often teenagers with little education, but to us it was the norm. I remembered that the public schools we attended seemed a little rough around the edges, but had little to compare it to. All of these things I remember, but none of them had any impact on my ability to imagine and strive for a happy future.

One of my fondest memories is of a warm summer day when we hiked two hours to a fruit orchard. We made our way through back fields and rain forested jungle to a particular spot where we would spend time eating as many canepa as we could before filling bags with the rare fruit and heading home, throwing the coveted fruit at one another as we went. I often think about those days as symbolic of what life is like for some children. Some gather fruit and are able to make their way through life, to carry on with their innocence and blissful ignorance still intact; to be resilient despite their circumstances.

The environment or ecological system in Dr. Sanborn's case in Puerto Rico communicated some level of care and concern which buffered the coercive effect that being "underserved" or growing up poor could

have had on him and them. Other children may not experience that social-emotional buffering and in their adversity come to experience lack of support and a level of unpredictability that has the potential to exact a tremendous effect on the child's developmental process and their view of the world around them. Beyond the scope of this commentary, good evidence is emerging that the level of support and predictability that surrounds a child and family is very much associated with better outcomes. A child fundamentally learns that there are people in their family, community and in the larger society who care about them and want to see them do well and be successful in life.

Articles in this issue

Adopted children have unique needs in correlation with potentially traumatic past experiences and permanent severing of ties with their biological families. "Underserved Adoptive Families: Disparities in Postadoption Access to Information, Resources and Services" observes the barriers faced by families when trying to access appropriate postadoptive resources and how they can be overcome to promote healthier environments and accessible resources for adoptive children and families.

African American children make up a large percentage of foster care children and have been shown to endure longer stays in foster care, undergo multiple placements, and frequently age out of the system without adoption. It is this cycle that leads to the value of permanency over educational pursuit. "Persistence, Motivation, and Resilience: Older Youth Aging Out of Foster Care and Attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)" examines this cycle and the role of HBCUs as a

familial safety net to these underserved youth through provision of stability programs and support of the pursuit of college educations.

Approximately 2.5 million American youth experienced a period of homelessness in 2013. “Then You Fall Off: Experiences and Responses to Transitioning to Homelessness in Youth and Young Adults: A Qualitative Study” examines experiences of youth entering episodes of homelessness in order to define critical points of intervention. The determinations of these points of intervention are part of a larger picture to develop exits out of homelessness and facilitate sustained self-sufficiency for youth in unstable environments.

Teen parents are a multiple faceted aspect of underserved youth. Traditionally teen parents are viewed in a negative light and are criticized for their actions. This is not only a disservice to the parents, but also to the child. “The Strengths Perspective: Providing Opportunities for Teen Parents and their Family to Succeed” studies the impact of bringing a child into such a negatively charged environment and advocates instead for the illumination of a silver lining. Every individual has their strengths and if those can be highlighted then teen parents can overcome their challenges and create a strongly bonded family environment built for the success of both parents and child.

LGBT youth recurrently experience higher risks of sexual victimization. “Deconstructing the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender Victimization Association: The Case of Sexual Assault and Alcohol-Related Problems” examines the relationship between LGBT victimization and the role of alcohol substance abuse. Their findings serve to promote a deeper understanding of underserved LGBT youth and facilitate the development of programs geared at better aiding these children and expunging trauma from the LGBT childhood experience.

There is a correlation between victimized youth, foster care and homelessness that, in part, culminates with an exposure to drugs and subsequent addiction. Harris County STAR drug court has been a particularly impactful program in serving and rehabilitating drug addicted individuals. “Are Drug Courts Successful in Reducing Recidivism among Chronic Offenders?” examines the complex components of drug courts to determine qualities that contribute to success and reduction in recidivism. In particular, it examines the unique qualities of the Harris County STAR drug court to determine how struggling drug addicts can best be aided in recovery and reintroduced in to society as positive and contributing members.

Conclusion

Too many of our children end up just as the data and research predict they might: in a spiral of poverty and adverse experience. This issue of the *Journal of Family Strengths* takes a different approach in viewing underserved populations. Under this examination it becomes clear that children have the exceptional ability to be resilient. But even with resiliency in tow many children still need help to alleviate their circumstances and too many of our children don’t get the help that is needed.

It is common practice for easily amendable problems to take precedence over harder issues. To be a proponent of positive change we must resolve to align our priorities with those who are in greatest need. It is our duty to not only provide appropriate assistance but to do so in a manner that is both easily accessible and dignifying, to be the buffer Dr. Sanborn was fortunate enough to have and never allow these children’s experiences to penetrate their gift of resilience.

A solid, reliable bridge must be built to help individuals in our communities overcome the obstacles they encounter on their paths. It is in academia, with the tools of demonstrated research, that we aim to lay the support beams for this bridge to be built, to lay the foundation for policy makers to come and assemble the bridge and for direct service workers to maintain its structural integrity. To do so, our resiliency must match those of whom we wish to serve. One can hope that the research and the will to implement best practices reach more of our needy children and those that endeavor to serve them.