

Book Review

Jobs Aren't Enough: Toward a New Economic Mobility for Low-Income Families

By R. R. Iversen & A. L. Armstrong Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006

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The new book, *Jobs Aren't Enough*, addresses the plight of the working poor. The working parents who remain mired in poverty are contributing members of our community, but they nevertheless intersect frequently with the child welfare system. The working poor may be biological parents attempting to keep their family intact; foster parents trying to care for abused and neglected children; relative caregivers fostering grandchildren or nieces and nephews; biological parents attempting to reunite with their children; adoptive parents struggling to continue to meet the needs of their adoptive children; or even the case aides, mentors, child care workers, and respite workers who struggle to lift their own families out of poverty while working for the child welfare system. Child welfare, families, and poverty intersect so often that to be effective in addressing the safety and well-being of children, we must also consider the conditions and needs of families attempting—and often failing—to work their way out of poverty.

Iversen's and Armstrong's book is based on a remarkably comprehensive study of the lives of the working poor in the United States after welfare reform. The authors did not merely look at statistics and apply sociological or economic theory. Instead, they started with the families themselves, and listened to their stories. The sample included 25 parents, 15 partners, and their 66 children, drawn from areas around the country: Philadelphia, Milwaukee, New Orleans, St. Louis, and Seattle (Iversen & Armstrong, 2006, p. 1). The authors interviewed these parents and children extensively in their homes, as well as visiting and interviewing key individuals at the workforce development programs

the parents were involved in, the firms where they worked, and the schools where their children were educated. The study took place between 1998 and mid-2003, during times of both economic progress and economic recession. All of these interviews and observations are placed in context through statistics regarding the population as a whole, descriptions of the overall economic climate, and analysis of sociological and economic theory, including the myths that inhibit us from addressing the real needs of these families.

The authors identified three key myths about economic mobility that fly in the face of these families' realities. The first myth is that "initiative gets you in the door." This assumes that the accumulation of education and training, through individual effort, is enough to ensure economic progress and success. It ignores the systematic differences in opportunities according to race, gender, ethnicity, and other ascribed characteristics that are a function of institutionalized forms of oppression (p. 15). We need only consider the drastic differences in the quality of education provided to public-school students in the Austin community on the West side of Chicago, as compared to the public education offered in Wilmette to the children on the North shore, to know that the opportunities offered to individuals in our nation are neither consistent nor based solely on personal efforts. Furthermore, the authors note that the children of the economically disadvantaged lack the cultural capital—in the form of enrichment opportunities such as computers in the home; visits to museums; music, art, and dance lessons; and travel—that will make them successful in school (p. 15).

The second myth addressed in this book is that “hard work pays off.” This myth assumes both a career ladder that allows individuals to advance as a result of their efforts and a steady rise in wages that accompanies increased job responsibilities. However, research cited by the authors, as well as the experiences of families themselves, show that downsizing, outsourcing, and flexible management practices have led to increasing job insecurity and the erosion of career pathways, especially for low-wage workers (p. 16). Working parents often find only part-time work or shift work, and encounter requirements for training beyond the regular work week that interfere with their obligations to their children and families.

This leads us to the final classic American myth: that it is possible to “pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps” to succeed economically. This notion ignores the influence of social capital resources, networks, and connections, which affect both hiring and advancement in most firms (p. 19). It also ignores the challenges of life-stage mismatch, in which older parents must balance the demands of family and work lives, while supporting children on entry-level wages, and often dealing with physical limitations related to age and injury that affect their ability to perform or sustain physically demanding work. The balance of costs and benefits relative to job opportunities are different for family members who have responsibilities to their children and need to sustain their families in the present, as opposed to individuals who can take lower-paying jobs with more potential for advancement or who can endure periods of training and education with little income early in their careers.

Raising children both increases the need for higher wages and interferes with job advancement opportunities. The stories of the families and the analysis in this book highlight the significant negative effect that mandatory overtime, training, and second- or third-shift schedules have on parents’ ability to meet their responsibilities to their

children. As a social worker working with foster parents who were trying to lift their families out of poverty, I saw firsthand that parents often were forced to choose between their work responsibilities for overtime and training and their children’s needs for supportive services, advocacy, and educational services. Many of the parents I worked with were attempting to hold down physically demanding jobs, with schedules that did not allow them to be home with their children in the afternoon or evenings, and were simultaneously attempting to complete their own education or training so that they could pursue higher-paying careers. These foster and biological parents were often exhausted, usually unable to meet with service providers during the work week, and constantly trying to piece together child care and educational opportunities to ensure support and care for the children. Schools, caseworkers, and other service providers often became frustrated with these parents’ apparent disregard for the needs of the children, and utterly failed to understand or acknowledge the demands of work and the harshly pressing need for adequate income that these parents often faced. In this study, and in my experience in the child welfare system, parents constantly had to choose between the short-term, but at times urgent, needs of their children and the long-term economic mobility needed to raise their families out of poverty.

The authors point to the lack of “structured wholes” that would integrate the needs and demands of such families and the multiple institutions they deal with daily (p. 92). The authors repeatedly emphasize the fact that institutions such as schools, firms, work placement development programs, and other supports were funded, created, and sustained as if they were independent, parallel silos rather than intensely interconnected supports for families. For example, firms frequently penalize parents for any time taken off work, even as schools demand to meet during the work week with parents of at-risk children—at risk partly because of their poverty and lack of supportive and developmentally

appropriate child care and educational opportunities. For parents who are earning a very low income, the prospect of taking time off without pay, even if the employer is willing to allow this, often is simply not a viable option. The authors found that the parents in their study repeatedly expressed concern for the needs of their children and placed great value on education. However, schools often did not communicate with these parents, made demands that would jeopardize the parents' employment or income, and assumed that the parents were not interested in the child if they could not meet the school's demands. I found this to be true in my own work with foster parents and schools, as well as in the interactions between child welfare professionals and foster parents. The parent's adult, work-related economic responsibilities were often not taken into consideration at all. It was assumed that if a parent could not come to a critical meeting, was not home for a visit, or could not consistently transport the child to needed (and usually frequent) counseling or medical appointments, that parent did not truly care about the well-being of the child. I saw parents have to drop out of school, pay student loans on incomplete educations, and even lose jobs or job opportunities due to the demands of caring for their foster children. These foster parents cared deeply about the children in their homes, but were unable to balance the needs and demands of their work and their children.

The authors propose, and were able to find two instances approaching, systems that work together with the needs of the families to benefit all involved. Parents were provided with mentors and coaches on company time; had opportunities for training during work hours; were able to plan for and take, without penalty, the flex time needed to address concerns with and about their children; and were able to begin working toward earning a sustaining wage. However, these opportunities were rare and required considerable coordination and support.

Given the limitations in funding for schools, the recent economic downturn, the preponderance of unresponsive employers, and limitations in funding for child welfare services; Illinois families in the child welfare system face great barriers to upward economic mobility. Ideally, child welfare institutions would be a part of "structured wholes" that would coordinate support for both parents and children, work with employers and schools to coordinate services and schedules, and recognize the enormous struggles of parents and foster parents living in poverty. Assessment of children and parents would have to be comprehensive, considering and balancing the economic, social, educational, and emotional needs of all family members while developing and implementing service plans. Caseworkers could be trained to help parents access needed economic supports, such as tax and child care credits, workplace development programs, and other underutilized programs, as a way to support families in caring for their children. Casework agencies, attorneys, judges, and schools could work together to acknowledge and address the dilemmas faced by parents, while refraining from negative assumptions regarding parents' values and love for their children. Through these efforts, child welfare could become one of the systems working toward and within the relational, responsible, and integrated framework that is proposed by the authors to address poverty.

Iversen and Armstrong note, though, the lack of public will to address these seemingly intractable problems with a real, integrated network of services. The myths discussed by the authors—all of which assume that workers are single, healthy young men rather than parents facing multiple responsibilities—feed the public perception that economic mobility is an individual problem rather than a community responsibility. Therefore, the authors address the need to create public support for comprehensive programs and the restructuring of work before attempting to implement any changes.

The authors present four main initiatives aimed at shoring up the public will and challenging misperceptions so that we as a community can support low-income families: a presidential commission focused on family economic mobility, a series of town-hall meetings to garner media attention regarding the issue of family economic mobility, the establishment of a federal interdepartmental body focused on economic mobility, and a clearinghouse of information designed to disseminate and publicize research findings (pp. 212–213). Child welfare officials and policy makers should be at the table promoting and participating in initiatives like these. We cannot ignore the intersection of poverty and child abuse, treating children in isolation; rather, we must work toward real, sustainable solutions for entire families if we are to nurture our children and keep them safe.