

OUR CHILDREN—

Of America's 36 Million, Many Need Help



Photo from U. S. Housing Authority
Their Environment Is Important. Where They Live and How They Play Is Important

WHO and where are America's children? What are their needs in our democracy? How are those needs being met?

Every ten years since 1909, the President of the United States has called a White House conference to find answers to these questions. After Theodore Roosevelt called the first one, Woodrow Wilson called the second in 1919, and Herbert Hoover the third in 1930.

Early last year, President Roosevelt called the fourth—the White House Conference on Children in a Democracy. With Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins acting as chairman, first session of the conference was held last April. The participants included government officials, physicians, economists, sociologists, educators, clergymen, social workers, and representatives of industry, labor and agriculture.

Last week in Washington, the second session of this conference had ended. For three days, 400 delegates listened to speakers, including the President and Mrs. Roosevelt, and discussed the contents of 11 topical reports and the general conference report. Then they adopted a long series of recommendations.

... Statistics and Background

As the twig is bent, so the tree is inclined. Because the children of our nation today will be the citizens of our nation tomorrow, because the burden of our democracy will eventually be theirs to carry, and because the character of our national life will some day depend almost completely on *their* character, facts about them are of first importance. And as disclosed at the White House Conference, the facts are big and challenging.

First of all, as shown at the conference, there is the broad statistical picture. In the United States in 1940, there are 36 million children aged under 16 years. Of these, 23 million are native-born of native white parentage. The balance—13 million—includes four million Negro children, 140,000 Indian children, 16,000 Chinese chil-

OUR CHILDREN

dren, 56,000 Japanese children, 3,000 Filipino children, 600,000 Mexican children, 335,000 foreign-born white children, and some eight million native white children of foreign or mixed parentage.

And as was also shown at the conference, the board statistical picture has a darkly significant background. Of America's 36,000,000 children, such disturbing things as these must be said:

- An estimated 8,000,000 are children living in families supported in whole or in part by some form of public assistance.

- An additional 250,000 are either in foster-family homes or in institutions for the care of dependent children.

- Some 23,000 are in state institutions for delinquent children, while about 180,000 are annually brought before juvenile courts as delinquents.

- The number of mentally deficient children is not known, but estimates vary from 360,000 to a figure four or five times that high.

- Although grade-school education is compulsory, hundreds of thousands of children aged 7 to 13 years are not going to any school.

- At least one-third of the nation's 36,000,000 children belong to families whose annual income is at or below a mere sustenance level—too low to meet the normal needs of life and health.

... All-Important Factors

From figures of this nature, it becomes clear that America's children constitute a real social and economic problem—no less than America's aged. Stated precisely, however, the problem is not a separate or distinct one, but rather an important part of the nation's over-all social and economic problem. Accordingly, its solution is largely dependent on whether or not America can meet and eliminate the challenge implicit in large-scale unemployment and great masses of the underprivileged.

But considered wholly by itself, the problem of America's children is worth careful attention, and that is why there have been four great White House conferences on the subject since 1909. The factors involved are many, covering as they do such all-important matters as population trends, citizenship responsibility, environment, education and even religion. How the children grow is important. How they are reared and educated is important. How numerous they are is important. How they mature into adult citizens of a democracy is important. All these things are important because they have direct bearing on the future character and well-being of the nation.

So it is that Americans have reason to look into the reports of the White House Conference that has just ended. Broadly speaking, the more significant of these may be classified under three

OUR CHILDREN

headings: (1) Population factors; (2) economic factors; and (3) educational and religious factors.

... Their Thinning Ranks

In respect to population, the story of America's children has particular importance. Expressed briefly, the child population of the United States has been steadily decreasing. In 1930, for example, there were approximately 38,000,000 children aged under 16, while today there are only 36,000,000. This downward development is expected to continue. According to experts, the striking fact is this: Between now and 1980, the aged can be expected to increase from a present total of 8,419,000 to a total of more than 22 million 40 years hence, while the population of children under 16 will show a decline of millions.

From a study of population distribution it is possible to show where and among what groups the birth-rate is declining. Variations in American fertility exist not only according to regions but also according to class: (1) In proportion to adults, farms have a higher percentage of children than have cities; (2) foreign-born families



WPA Photo

Their Health Is Wealth

have more children than have native-born families; (3) poor families have more children than have families in the upper and middle income brackets; and (4) poorly-educated women have almost twice as many children as have well-educated women.

What is the broad conclusion to be drawn from these population figures? According to a White House Conference report, the conclusion is this: *the majority of America's children today are being born into environments where income is low and education deficient.*

... Their Economic Lot

In respect to their economic status, it has been estimated that one-half to

OUR CHILDREN

two-thirds of the city children of America are in homes where annual income is too low to permit the family to buy items called for in an ordinary "maintenance" budget—a budget of about \$1,261 to meet the normal needs of living in a family of four. Worse still, it has been estimated at least one third of the families in the United States do not have incomes large enough for an "emergency" budget—a budget of about \$903 a year to meet inescapable requirements on a sub-standard but sustaining scale.

These figures, in the opinion of experts at the White House Conference, plainly mean that millions of America's children are being reared under conditions detrimental not only to themselves but to the nation as a whole. For example, according to this view, child labor remains a serious problem, although not so bad as it used to be. Because of family neediness, children continue to be exploited in agriculture, factory and store, injuring their health, depriving them of proper recreation, and placing them in harmful environment.

From the economic standpoint, experts feel, the problem of America's children will remain pressing until the general American economy substantially improves — until income levels are adjusted upward to permit a decent increase in living standards, and until action is taken to end things like bad housing and bad environment, which lead all too often to poor health and even poorer morals. In this connection, one of the worst examples of the child problem is held to be that of the 500,000 youngsters who belong to the nation's migrant families—the dispossessed who have been "tractor-ed out and blowed out" and who travel the roads in the west without a permanent home anywhere.

... Their Education

In respect to the educational field, judged on the basis of White House Conference reports, America is far from attaining its democratic ideal of equal opportunities for every child. Although school attendance is compulsory, hundreds of thousands are receiving no grade-school education whatever. Of all the children old enough to go to high school, 25 per cent do not go; and of all who do go, only 5 per cent later attend college. Other criticisms include these: (1) Many U. S. teachers are poorly trained, largely because teacher-pay is too low to attract able persons. (2) The educational opportunities of rural children are especially bad; their schools frequently are one-room buildings lacking the equipment needed for modern training, and millions of them have no access to adequate library fa-

OUR CHILDREN

cilities. And (3) many states are poor in tax income and cannot support sound school systems.

As a White House Conference report stated, it may be said that "this country is concentrating most of its educational effort on groups having the fewest children and least on groups that are replenishing its population." At any rate, some justification is seen for this view because America's educational statistics indicate that the poorer groups of the population—the groups with the highest birth rates—are receiving deficient schooling.

Child experts stress education because they believe that democracy cannot grow unless there is progressive development from year to year in scientific inquiry, technology and social organization. They also stress that education lacks an important essential when it lacks the cultivation of personal character and integrity. And according to some of those who were heard at the White House Conference, such cultivation cannot be realized unless education embraces religious instruction. But if there is to be any such thing, the American system will have to reshape itself somewhat, because it is a fact that some 50 per cent of the nation's youth today receive no formal training in any religion.

Ranging from religion and education to sociology and economics, the problem of America's children reveals itself in general terms as part of a *whole* problem in America—the whole problem of putting the entire nation to rights. As the White House Conference made clear, children are aided directly or indirectly whenever American families are aided either by public or private agencies. Thus it may be said that the nation's children—between eight and nine millions of them—have benefited through such broad government programs as housing, farm aid and work relief.

... The Chief Recommendation

In the record of the Fourth White House Conference on Children in a Democracy is full recognition of the fact that the child problem will not be solved until the over-all national problem is solved. First on the list of the Conference's 83 recommendations, therefore, is the recommendation to stabilize and increase "basic income of wage earner and farmer, whose families together constitute two-thirds of the population of the nation." Among the other recommendations are these: (1) A Federal policy of continuing flexible work programs; (2) enlargement of units of local school attendance and administration, and state and Federal aid for local public libraries; (3) immediate completion of ratification of the Child Labor Amendment.

To help put these and other recom

OUR CHILDREN

mendations into effect during the next decade, the Conference created a National Citizen's Committee to be aided by Federal authorities concerned with child welfare. Finally, as justification for its efforts in behalf of a better life for America's children, it quoted in its general report a statement made by Homer Folks, one of the Conference leaders:



Photos from FSA (by Lee) and WPA



There Are Darkly Significant Contrasts, and They Involve Matters Like Health, Character and Responsible Future Citizenship

"Somewhere within these United States, within the past few years, was born a child who will be elected in 1980 to the most responsible office in the world, the Presidency of the United States . . . He may come from any place and from any social or economic group . . . If we could unroll the scroll of the future enough to read his name and whereabouts, how many things we would wish to have done for him, how carefully we would wish to guard his health, his surroundings, his education, his associates, his travels, his ambitions."

Then the report added: "What we might wish to do for that unknown child, the future President, we must be ready to do for every child, so he may be ready to live a full life, satisfying to himself and useful to his community and nation."