



POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Improving the Lives of Families and Individuals

Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions that arise from mental or physical impairments. Individuals with developmental disabilities have trouble performing activities including learning, language, mobility, and other self-care routines.¹ Intellectual disabilities and mental retardation are often included under the term “developmental disabilities.”

Developmental disabilities form during childhood through young adulthood, and can affect someone throughout their lifetime.

Developmental disabilities affect approximately 17% of children younger than 18 years of age in the United States.² The prevalence of developmental disabilities is greater within the population of people living in poverty. It has been estimated that 20-25% of families that receive welfare assistance have a child or adult in the household with a developmental disability.³

Studies have shown potentially bidirectional connections between poverty and developmental disabilities.

Factors Associated with Poverty that Increase Risk for Developmental Disabilities

- **Environmental toxins** – Exposure to lead, mercury, dioxin, and other common chemicals has been found to lead to developmental disabilities, as well as reading difficulties and lower IQ.⁴
- **Damp housing conditions** – The presence of mold and mildew in housing can contribute to health issues, such as respiratory illness, and exacerbate developmental disabilities.⁴
- **Parental substance misuse** – Parental use of alcohol and drugs while fetuses are in the womb can contribute to a wide range of difficulties that are associated with developmental disabilities: fetal alcohol syndrome, attention deficits, hyperactivity, and learning disabilities.⁴
- **Understimulating early childhood experiences** – The absence of active care giving and early learning instruction at a young age are associated with the development of learning disabilities and other developmental disorders.⁵

Effects of Developmental Disabilities on Family Life and Poverty

- **Parental difficulty maintaining employment** – Parents of children with significant developmental disabilities have difficulty finding time to look for jobs, difficulty maintaining employment due to the added strain of caring for a child with complex needs, and often experience work scheduling conflicts.³
- **Difficulty participating in daily activities** – Families of children with disabilities have difficulty carrying out activities important to quality of life, such as a healthy sleep schedule, participating in recreational activities, sustaining daily hygienic routines, and consistently eating healthy meals.³

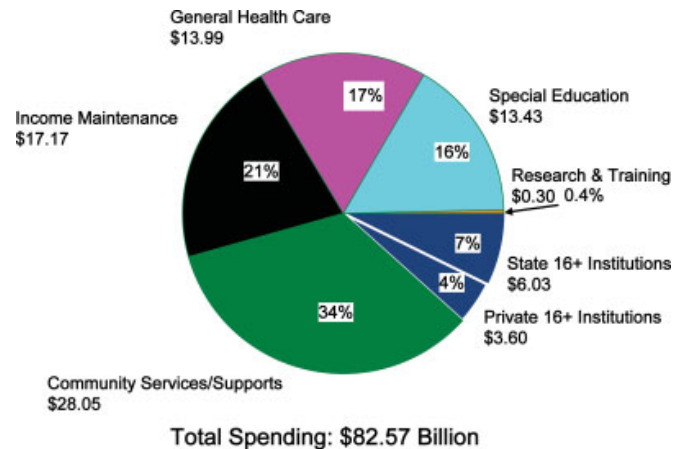
Future Issues in Treatment and Services

- The aging of the U.S. Population is going to bring about a change in the population of people with developmental disabilities being served. More people with developmental disabilities will be over age 65 and living in poverty than ever before.
- Caregivers and service providers are also aging, which will require new participants (e.g., employees, family caregivers) in the care of people with significant developmental disabilities.⁶

Recent Federal Expenditures on Developmental Disabilities (2004)

Important Features of Spending

- National yearly spending on developmental disabilities has increased exponentially since the Kennedy Panel in 1961, from \$8.3 billion in 1965 to \$82.57 billion in 2004.⁶
- Only 0.4% of yearly spending, or \$300 million, has been spent on research.⁶



Policy Recommendations

- **Subsidize urban renewal projects**, with a particular emphasis on quality, well-built structures that create a safe, toxin-free living environment.
- **Increase funding for research** that examines the relationships between poverty and developmental disabilities, as well as issues relating to geriatrics and developmental disabilities. Findings from this research will serve as a base for improving service effectiveness.
- **Provide subsidies for family members caring for adults with developmental disabilities.** As the population ages, more families will be faced with the prospect of caring for adult and elderly individuals with developmental disabilities, which can cause significant quality-of-life issues for caregivers.
- **Fund programs that provide quality early childhood education.** Researchers have found that inadequate care and education in a child's early years can put them at risk for experiencing developmental disabilities. Quality centers and programs not only educate young children, but teach parents how to facilitate their children's cognitive and emotional growth.

(Shaun Calix, June 2010)

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). Developmental disabilities. Retrieved April 29, 2009 from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/default.htm>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). Monitoring developmental disabilities. Retrieved April 29, 2009 from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/ddsurv.htm>

³ Meyers, M. K., Brady, H. E., & Seto, E. Y. (2000). *Expensive children in poor families: The intersection of childhood disabilities and welfare*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute.

⁴ Orzech, D. (2009). Chemical kids – Environmental toxins and child development [Electronic Version]. *Social Work Today*, 7, 37.

⁵ Keating, D. P., & Hertzman, C. (1999). *Developmental Health and the Wealth of Nations: Social, Biological, and Educational Dynamics*. New York: Guilford Press.

⁶ Braddock, D. (2007). Washington rises: Public financial support for intellectual disability in the United States, 1955-2004. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Review*, 13, 169-177.

For a complete list of references or more information about this topic, contact the Center for Family Policy and Research

The Center for Family Policy & Research is housed in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The Center's mission is to create and disseminate research-based analyses to promote the well-being of families through informed public policy and program development.

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