

Election Special--Support for Children - In Theory

by Peggy Farber

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(Oct-Nov '00) Despite the concern that the candidates are all expressing for children and families, many have not taken positions on some of the biggest problems actually facing New York City children:

The crisis in affordable day care. Simply put, it costs more to purchase day care in New York City than many parents can afford. Costs run about \$4,000 per child a year for the least expensive alternative, a babysitter, and as much as \$7,500 a year for a spot in a city-run public day care center. Private day care and nannies can, of course, run much higher. But parents with full-time minimum wage jobs earn just \$10,712 a year. A third of all full-time workers in New York City do not earn enough to lift a family out of poverty, according to a [recent study](#) of economic growth in New York City.

Child care subsidies are available to low income working parents in New York City, but there aren't enough to go around. There are some 30,000 children on a waiting list, as there have been for several years. And now, a new population of parents is streaming into the low-wage job market, parents leaving welfare, adding to the competition for child care subsidies. Roughly 50,000 adults have begun to work each of the last two years, and there are still an estimated 250,000 adults receiving public assistance who are expected to begin work, either in workfare or low wage jobs.

The state has been using a surplus in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) as a stop-gap measure to expand the city's day care budget. But the surplus is temporary. As soon as the Temporary Assistance program is re-authorized in 2002, and the drop in New York's welfare rolls is registered, the surplus will disappear. At that point New York may find itself with a child care crisis of monumental proportions.

None of the candidates for major office has campaigned on this issue. Only Clinton has proposed relief. She supports expanding child care subsidies to 1 million more children nationwide, but does not indicate whether funding for the expansion should be federal or local. She also supports eliminating federal tax liabilities for poor families that claim the maximum allowable child care expense. This could put as much as \$2,400 for child care in the hands of poor parents.

The Dismantling of Juvenile Justice Programs. Nationally, the number of kids under the age of

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18 serving time in adult prisons has more than doubled to 7,400 in the last decade. In New York State, adolescents aged 13-15 are tried in adult court if they commit serious violent crimes, and all teenagers in New York over the age of 15 are tried in adult court and sentenced to adult prisons. New York's laws have been the toughest in the nation for over a decade, but the rest of the country is catching up. Since 1992, 45 states have passed laws making it easier to prosecute youngsters as adults.

The presidential and senate candidates have been surprisingly quiet on the subject of juvenile crime, a topic that only a year and a half ago, following a spate of school shootings, dominated political discourse. Law and order, generally, has dropped off the campaign radar scope. The Bush campaign Web site does not list crime as an issue at all.

But Congress has not forgotten juvenile crime. It has been working since 1996 to toughen the federal juvenile justice law to bring it into alignment with new stricter state laws, and [advocates for children](#)

predict the bill will finally be acted upon in the next Congress. The bill, which Congressman Lazio supports, is currently in the House-Senate conference committee. It substantially lengthens sentences for youngsters convicted of federal crimes, relaxes rules about separating juvenile and adult prisoners, and imposes adult probation rules on federal juvenile prisoners.

Gore, Bush and Clinton have not declared their positions on the bill. However, the Clinton White House has fought to soften the bill's harshest provisions.

New York children's advocates are particularly concerned about the legislation because it reinforces prevailing attitudes in New York, which have driven up incarceration rates of young people, even as crime rates have dropped. "

What we're seeing is kids being prosecuted and sent away from home for considerable lengths of time for incidents like school fights that in the past might have been handled in community-based treatment programs," says Jackie Dean, director of the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division.

For a look at the voting records of congressional representatives on major children's issues - both those that are part of the campaigns and those that are not - check the Children's Defense

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Fund's http://www.cdfactioncouncil.org/voting_record.htm Action Council report on the 105th Congress. This is where you will also find Congressman Lazio's record on children's issues.

Peggy J. Farber is freelance journalist specializing in children's issues. Her reporting on conditions of NYC children has appeared in City Limits Magazine as well as on National Public Radio.