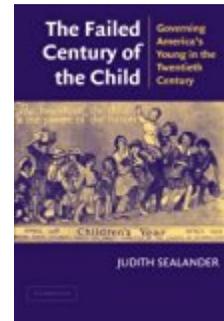


Judith Sealander. *The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America's Young in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. x + 374 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82878-9; \$32.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-53568-7.

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Published on H-Childhood (May, 2007)



## The Challenges of Childhood Policy

Last month, the United Nations released an exhaustive survey of the well-being of children in twenty-one “rich countries.” The study ranked the United States at or near the bottom in quality of life categories such as child poverty, education, delinquency, nutrition, and physical and mental health.[1] These findings should come as no surprise to anyone who has been paying attention to the dismal state of American children in recent years. However, its historical roots are less well known outside the small circle of scholars who study children and childhood. Judith Sealander attempts to remedy that deficit in *The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America's Young in the Twentieth Century*, a wide-ranging and engaging policy survey that should inspire some much-needed discussions in policy circles. She develops the argument that today's woeful state of childhood in the United States is a result of failed government policies in separate chapters on juvenile justice, child abuse, child poverty, child labor, compulsory secondary education, early childhood education, special education, nutrition, exercise, and immunizations.

Sealander's main argument is that “childhood policy” often “cloaked other aims” (p. 4) not clearly related to children. A host of special interest groups come in for harsh criticism throughout the book, particularly federal agencies, professional organizations, and social activists, each portrayed as hoping to advance their own respective causes through childhood policy. According to Sealander, policymakers often acted hastily, in response to public panics demanding immediate government ac-

tion. Rushed policies typically misused social scientific knowledge, with results that often backfired. Unlike David J. Rothman, who memorably characterized Progressive child-saving policies as a blend of “conscience and convenience,” Sealander emphasizes bad faith and incompetence.[2] Despite the occasional disclaimer, she is far less inclined to allow for altruistic or even conflicted intentions among groups with differing agendas. Her focus on locating blame sometimes leads Sealander away from analyzing the contested, dynamic meanings of childhood and adolescence that produced and were produced by disparate policies. Because the book surveys “public responses to the concept of *childhood*” (p. 5) in published and official sources, it tends to overlook the diverse yet often hidden perspectives of groups who resisted, accommodated, or even ignored professional authority. A greater inclusion of children or working-class parents as actors in contests over the meaning of childhood and the care of children might have enriched some of the historical vignettes. Historians such as Linda Gordon and Mary Odem have led a wave of scholarship in which the viewpoints of children and parents compete with those of experts and policymakers.[3]

Juvenile justice, the subject of the first chapter study, follows this formula by describing the well-documented failures of the Progressive juvenile court, probation, and training school mainly as artifacts of a social control agenda. Although juvenile justice failed to realize its avowed promises of delinquency prevention and juvenile rehabilitation, it was, we are reminded, a “victory

for the emerging professions of social work and psychology, allied with Progressivism's women's clubs and other social reform institutions" (p. 23). This interpretation reflects the earlier work of Anthony Platt; recent scholars have portrayed juvenile justice as a "contested terrain" shaped by children and parents as well as established authorities.[4] Other state and local governments adopted versions of Chicago's juvenile court system that differed wildly by region. In rural areas, juvenile cases often transpired in district or sometimes county courts on dates set aside in advance. Few states sponsored probation departments, and training for probation officers and training school employees lagged well behind reformers' goals. The result, as Sealander notes, was an expanding web of juvenile justice that subjected its charges—disproportionately black and Latino as early as the 1920s—to adult-style punishment rather than therapeutic rehabilitation. Concerns about this state of affairs appeared sporadically in national discourse, finally peaking in the children's rights and de-institutionalization movements of the 1960s and 70s. By then, many juvenile courts had abused their status as civil rather than criminal forums, warehousing offenders in institutions that were often worse than adult prisons. Sealander's discussion of the "rights revolution" in juvenile justice covers familiar territory but gives too much attention to the role of attorneys in securing due process rights for juvenile offenders. Given this emphasis, it would have been fair to point out that many attorneys represented juveniles for little or no payment, at considerable personal and professional risk. This critique aside, she very cogently captures the recent line of thought among legal historians that the rights revolution inadvertently set the stage for harsher sentencing and incarceration practices. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contemporary debate over whether to abolish or radically reform juvenile justice.

The other chapters follow a similarly ambitious chronological scope that sometimes moves too quickly past the middle decades of the century. The chapter on child abuse argues that private child protection initiatives in the early part of the century focused on "irresponsible" immigrant families (p. 57). This discussion of the clash between native-born Protestant reformers and working-class immigrant families would have been enhanced by framing it within the tradition of "Christian nurture" that emerged in parenting literature of the preceding century. The claim that the National Origins Act of 1924 helped put an end to concerns about immigrant children may need qualifying, given the Americanization cam-

paigns aimed at Mexican immigrant families in the West throughout the 1920s.[5] The story then resumes in 1962 with the discovery of "battered child syndrome," which gave rise to a "child abuse industry" that subsequently capitalized on widespread fears by presenting horrific images of abused children (p. 74). The Children's Bureau and the American Humane Association, two agencies in decline, saw child abuse as an opportunity more than a social ill, as described in this section. Thus they pushed for tougher state requirements for reporting child abuse, but failed to account for the resources this would entail. In the 1970s, the public discourse on child abuse severed its traditional association with poor and nonwhite families and reframed it as a classless, "color-blind" problem. Sealander asserts that this shift contradicted statistics showing an overrepresentation of African Americans in child abuse cases. She chalks up this disparity between rhetoric and data largely to political correctness and the self-interest of lawyers and scientific experts. The chapter's conclusion vividly describes the desperate plight faced by contemporary child protective agencies, which are woefully underfunded and overburdened. Staff turnover, high caseloads, and poor training have become endemic, and, compounded by a doctrine of "family preservation" at all costs, sometimes cause agencies to overlook clear instances of abuse. Today's headlines regularly include stories of children missing or killed under the purview of child protective services.

Although they cover a range of topics, the next two chapters on child poverty and child labor interestingly contrast highly unpopular welfare policies against widely supported youth work programs. While the image of welfare "chiselers" undercut the Aid to Dependent Children program as early as 1949, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was both successful and popular. The CCC is also practically the only childhood policy lauded in the book as an unqualified success—"the exception that proved the rule" (p. 138) because of its clear and specific goals, and maintenance of "Army-style discipline to produce order and promote hard work" (p. 165). By comparison, the National Youth Administration, also created during the New Deal, receives scant mention. The NYA sponsored a broad-ranging vocational and educational program, including "civil scholarships" for working-class collegians, which would seem to contradict Sealander's contention that a successful child initiative must be narrowly construed.[6] Nevertheless, Sealander convincingly demonstrates that the Job Corps, created in the 1960s, was disastrously corrupt and inefficient. The chapter concludes by surveying a few recent

state-run work programs for at-risk youth, such as Texas YouthWorks, in which boys helped build housing for the poor. Although she suggests such programs echo the CCC's focus and discipline, the rhetoric employed here is reminiscent of the juvenile boot camps that became highly popular in Texas and other parts of the country in the 1990s.

An uneven quality pervades the three chapters covering education policies. The chapter on secondary education characterizes Progressive education as a quasi-conspiratorial movement with chiefly "nonacademic ambitions" (p. 195) for public high schools. John Dewey is associated with a cadre of "influential university-based educational theorists" (p. 194) who "did not particularly care about the best ways to improve reading skills or teach math" (p. 196). The claim that the CCC rather than the high school more fully realized Dewey's vision of a "microcosm of democracy" overlooks the Dewey-inspired vocational curriculum that developed at many CCC work sites.[7] Overall, Sealander's criticisms of Progressive education echo postwar critics, such as Arthur Bestor, who lambasted as anti-intellectual the "life adjustment education" curriculum that emerged in many suburban high schools. The chapter shifts abruptly to a discussion of the "standards" movement of the 1980s that grew out of the culture wars of the 1960s and 70s as well as the early postwar curriculum struggles. By contrast, the discussion of preschool and kindergarten focuses heavily on the 1960s, especially the Head Start program, which attempted to extend early childhood education to poor and working-class families. Promulgated with a mixture of altruism and self-interest, Head Start elicited a dispute over its long-term benefits, a debate which is ongoing. Over this same period, schools generally began to accommodate students with disabilities, the subject of a separate chapter that nicely contextualizes the rise of special education with the normalization of disability in everyday life. After federal education bills in 1966 and 1970 funded teacher training in special education, the landmark Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 required schools to offer special education services, which Sealander likens to affirmative action in that it forced schools to redistribute their meager resources. She concludes, provocatively, that schools have become "skewed" (p. 290) unfairly in favor of disabled students, whose parents unleashed a tidal wave of litigation that further drained school funds by the 1990s.

The last two chapters offer compelling surveys of government responses to children's health issues, particularly diet, exercise, and immunization policies. The

discussion of the rise of physical education and fitness regimes is fascinating, and illustrates one of the book's themes that even well-crafted policies may not produce intended results. Despite the growth of a physical education curriculum, the establishment of national fitness standards, and the emergence of women's athletic programs, American children are statistically more likely to be overweight and unhealthy than in past generations. By contrast, compulsory childhood immunization for diseases such as smallpox and polio would seem to present an example of success. However, by the end of the century, parent groups began filing an increasing number of product liability lawsuits claiming that some vaccinations had harmful results; these efforts may have helped undermine efforts to offer universal access to childhood vaccines.

The conclusion suggests that the century of the child remains an unfinished and largely misunderstood revolution. According to Sealander, these "cautionary tales" represent "state interactions with the citizenry at large" and not just children (pp. 356-57), a statement that highlights a recurring interest throughout the book in larger questions of policy and governance not limited to children. Scholars seeking information about key childhood policies and national policy debates will find this book highly useful, while social and cultural historians interested in the experiences and viewpoints of the purported objects of those policies—children and their families—may object to the book's methodology and may find some of its arguments somewhat reductive. Perhaps this is inevitable in a study that covers a vast amount of territory. However, in many cases (Head Start comes to mind), evaluations about the effectiveness of a given policy or program that draw largely on survey data might have been complicated by greater use of ethnographic literature.[8] Like contemporary policymakers, educators, and social scientists, historians must grapple with the daunting task of assessing policies that do not always lend themselves readily to quantitative measurements. The criticisms of the *The Failed Century of the Child* offered here stem from the difficulty of satisfying the recent turn in the history of childhood, which takes the viewpoints of families and children seriously, while trying to synthesize a century's worth of childhood policy. This valuable policy history offers a view beyond our hermetically sealed sub-fields in history to better understand how childhood policy is made from above, but in the process we may lose the ability to grapple with how it is remade from below.

Notes

- [1]. *Report Card 7: Child Poverty in Perspective* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, February 2007).
- [2]. David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and its Alternatives in Progressive America*, rev. ed. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002 [1980]).
- [3]. Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence: Boston, 1880-1960* (New York: Viking, 1988); Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995); for a recent example, see Stephen Robertson, *Crimes Against Children: Sexual Violence and Legal Culture in New York City, 1880-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005).
- [4]. In addition to Odem, see Steven L. Schlossman, *Transforming Juvenile Justice: Reform Ideals and Institutional Realities, 1825-1920* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois, 2005 [1977]); Anne Meis Knupfer, *Reform and Resistance: Gender, Delinquency, and America's First Juvenile Court* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and David S. Tanenhaus, *Juvenile Justice in the Making* (New York: Oxford, 2004). For a Canadian example, see Tamara Myers, *Caught: Montreal's Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2006).
- [5]. George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 87-107.
- [6]. Richard A. Reiman, *The New Deal and American Youth: Ideas and Ideals in a Depression Decade* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1992).
- [7]. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Random House, 1961), 318-324.
- [8]. Excellent recent examples include Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000); and, Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003).

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**Citation:** William Bush. Review of Sealander, Judith, *The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America's Young in the Twentieth Century*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13122>

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