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Kriste Lindenmeyer. *"A Right to Childhood": The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997. xi + 368 pp. $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06577-4; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02275-3.

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Child Welfare and Public Policy

Kriste Lindenmeyer has written a fascinating study of an important U.S. government agency, the Children's Bureau, that has long deserved an historical analysis of the caliber she provides. The Children's Bureau was the first government agency in the world concerned exclusively with the needs of youngsters; it was the first national government agency in the United States to be headed by a woman, and, during its heyday, from 1912 to 1946, its leaders helped reduce infant and maternal mortality, wrote portions of the Social Security Act pertaining to children and women, and worked to extend health care to mothers and children during World War II.

While recognizing the unique nature of the Children's Bureau, Lindenmeyer resists the temptation to write a paean to the agency. Throughout she presents a balanced view of the Bureau: criticizing it when appropriate yet also giving proper attention to its many accomplishments. Hers is the first published book to deal with the whole history of the Children's Bureau from is inception in 1912 as an independent government agency to 1946 when it became a part of the Social Security Administration.[1]

The book is written in straightforward, clear language and is organized chronologically. Lindenmeyer begins with the reformers Lillian D. Wald and Florence Kelley, who, in the Progressive Era, were the first to call for the creation of a federal government agency to guarantee "a right to childhood" for all American youth. They sought an agency that would be concerned with all aspects of children's lives: that would serve "the whole child." Lindenmeyer points out that while women's groups were among the first to campaign for the new agency, many men also supported its creation. Male support in Congress was essential, because in 1912, when Congress voted the Children's Bureau into existence, women could not yet vote.

In the first year of its existence, 1912-13, the President appointed Julia Lathrop to head the Children's Bureau. Women continued to head the agency until 1972, when President Nixon appointed the first man to be the agency's chief. Lathrop and her female successors depended on a network of female volunteers throughout the nation both to support the Children's Bureau and to help it carry out its work. The Bureau also provided important opportunities for professional women. Before the creation of the Women's Bureau in 1920, it was the main avenue to federal government employment for college-educated women. Nonetheless, not all women supported the agency. Lindenmeyer properly avoids treating women as a like-minded pressure group, and she correctly notes that conservative women opposed the agency and campaigned for its abolition.

In its early years from 1914 to 1920, the Children's Bureau took as its first task the goal of reducing infant mortality, which was extraordinarily high in the United States at the time. To accomplish this goal, the Bureau began collecting statistics and then launching an educational campaign aimed at mothers by providing them pamphlets on infant care. Lindenmeyer believes that the weakness of this program was that it emphasized individual mothers' responsibilities for child health rather than community or business responsibility. And when the Children's Bureau also sought to reduce maternal mortality, it did so by stressing prenatal care but without providing women with any birth control information.

In 1920, the Children's Bureau supported the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act, the first attempt by the federal government to provide health care to any Americans. The act provided grants-in-aid to the states to help fund programs to prevent infant and maternal mortality. Lindenmeyer's description of the rise and demise of Sheppard-Towner from 1920 to 1929 generally follows that of other writers on the subject. She argues that in the history of the Children's Bureau, the

story of Sheppard-Towner shows that the agency was able to increase awareness of children's and women's health issues, yet only infant mortality declined during the 1920s. Maternal mortality stayed unchanged in part due to the Children's Bureau's continued unwillingness to distribute birth control information.

Also in the 1920s, the Children's Bureau tackled the issue of child labor, although without much success. All the agency could do was collect information and publish thirty-one studies demonstrating the evils of child labor. Bureau officials condemned the practice, but they offered no alternative sources of income to poor families. Lindenmeyer also points out that the Bureau's vision of the American family was firmly middle-class. Bureau leaders expected all children to live in two-parent households with an employed father and a homemaker mother. When that proved impossible for many poor women and children, the Children's Bureau supported state mothers' pension laws that presumably let widowed mothers stay at home while the state replaced the father's income. Yet the Children's Bureau's own studies showed that mothers' pensions rarely supplied children and their mothers with adequate financial support. The Bureau did not support day care programs that might have promoted independence for families headed by single mothers.

During the Depression, New Deal and World War II, the Children's Bureau became more activist, and its budget increased substantially. Bureau leaders helped write the Aid to Dependent Children portion of the Social Security Act, which would prove a powerful tool for alleviating child poverty. Yet Bureau leaders continued to hold traditional views of women and children and expected impoverished mothers to stay home and make do with minimal ADC payments. When Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 which abolished child labor in most businesses engaged in interstate commerce, the Children's Bureau enforced the legislation. Yet the law affected only about 6 percent of employed children and was often ignored during World War II. The Children's Bureau's greatest success during the war was with the Emergency Maternal and Infant Health Care Program which provided medical care to servicemen's wives and children. However, it lasted only until 1949 and was not extended to all women and children.

Overall, the 1930s and 1940s were years when the power and influence of the Children's Bureau seemingly grew, and, yet at the same time, its "whole child" philosophy was undermined. Instead of one agency looking after the interests of children, various government agencies administered various programs for children. Most notably, the Social Security Administration, not the Children's Bureau, administered ADC. In 1946 when the federal government was reorganized, the Children's Bureau was moved from the Department of Labor to the Federal Security Agency. The Children's Bureau became more removed from a cabinet officer because it was a part of the Social Security Administration within the FSA. In 1953 it moved to the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Lindenmeyer concludes that despite the mixed results of many Children's Bureau actions, one government agency that deals with all children's issues ("the whole child") might be the best way to handle current issues of child welfare. Children by their very nature need a powerful agent to lobby on their behalf. The Children's Bureau once served this function, and youngsters today might benefit from the aid of an agency so focused on their needs and concerns.

Note

[1]. Other books that cover some aspect of Children's Bureau history include Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986) and *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Lela B. Costin, *Two Sisters for Social Justice: A Biography of Grace and Edith Abbott* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); Richard A. Meckel, *Saving the Babies: American Public Health Reform and the Prevention of Infant Mortality, 1850-1929* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

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