BETWEEN a ROCK and a HARD PLACE

RACE AND CHILD CARE IN MISSISSIPPI

A Report by
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A Note From The Author

In my 35 years as a political scientist, I have focused on three areas of study—political conservatism, the welfare system, and race. In this project, I was able to bring those three areas together, to form a framework for the examination of the child care subsidy program in Mississippi. It has been a challenging and enlightening five years of travel, reading, conducting interviews, and mining historical and contemporary narratives. I have come to feel that I am, in part, a citizen of Mississippi.

The process of writing this report has been unusually long because, due to an unpredictable interruption, the release was suspended for eighteen months. For that reason, I have written an Afterword to bring the report up to date. I urge the reader to pay close attention to the Afterword for a full picture of race and child care in Mississippi.

Early on in the research I saw that there is a troubling aspect of Mississippi culture I had not expected. Mississippians seem to be unusually fearful of criticizing the system, its policies, its culture, and its powerful leaders. Retribution is a palpable concern, especially for those who rely on the state for their livelihood. For that reason, I decided that I would give my interviewees the protection of promising not to quote them directly. Only a sense that this promise would put them at ease made me give up the rich possibility of direct quotation.

Having conducted 20 interviews, and one focus group, and travelled throughout the state, I feel that the openness and insights I encountered have given me a good understanding of the child care system in Mississippi. I have interviewed child care providers, academics, attorneys, preachers, and advocates. I have sat in on provider trainings and a two-day meeting of experts and specialists on child care from across the state. I have met with the top leadership of the Mississippi Department of Human Services. In all of these interviews, I have had the opportunity to ask questions that have given me invaluable information and helped me to clarify points of confusion.

But perhaps my greatest privilege has been to talk with the child care providers themselves. I have seldom envied them. Their job is dauntingly important, extremely difficult, and fraught with the tensions and stresses of working with adults and children who are living in poverty. The more I encountered those who work on the front lines of child care in Mississippi, the more I grew to admire them.

A striking fact — that the child care subsidy program in Mississippi is almost entirely an African American program — made me especially sensitive to issues of race and structural racism. This report is a case study of how structural racism works on the ground. It is an examination of the individual and institutional actions and policies that maintain white dominance in Mississippi.
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Race and Child Care in Mississippi” was written over a two-year period beginning in 2009. During that time, Mississippi was suffering the effects of the massive national recession that had begun in 2007. The recession hit the state hard, at a time when parts of it were still recovering from the destruction of Hurricane Katrina. Even before the recession and the hurricanes, Mississippi had placed at or near the bottom of all states’ rankings on health, housing, education, employment, and child welfare and at or near the top on poverty. For the low income women, men, and families of Mississippi, the challenges have been massive.

Although Mississippi is majority white (60.6 % vs. 37.2 % Black in 2008), its poor are disproportionately African American (55% of low-income households). Its overall poverty rate is 28%. Black people’s median earnings in Mississippi are about $10,000 less than whites. Approximately 13.9 % of children live below half of the poverty level, the highest percentage in the country. According to KidsCount, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Mississippi’s overall rank in child well-being is 50th out of 50 states. These statistics belie the idea of a “new Mississippi.”

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place” explains how structural racism preserves much of Mississippi’s pre-civil rights power structure and the racial inequality of resources and access. Structural racism impacts subsidized child care for poor and low-income women, especially through shortcomings in the state’s service delivery. Here, as so often, the state disproportionately underserves poor, Black, single mothers.

The report also addresses the link between poverty and child care. It would seem that child care is not at the center of poverty, but it is certainly at the center of leaving poverty. Research over several decades has taught us that the most important factor in raising a family out of poverty is education for the adult wage earner, in this case a low-income single mother. If she cannot access decent quality child care, a living wage will not be within her reach. Congress has recognized the role of education and training and built it into “welfare reform,” but gives the recipient a maximum of five years to complete the process of obtaining what she needs to become self-sufficient.

Mississippi has erected multiple arbitrary and punitive barriers that limit low-income women’s access to child care: (1) the tone of state literature about welfare and child care programs is hostile; (2) state literature paints the benefit as a gift and the recipient as a suspect; (3) arcane rules and paperwork make accessing child care benefits overwhelming; (4) administration of the process is often chaotic, with lost paperwork and inaccessible case workers; and (5) mothers must re-qualify for the child care subsidy twice a year, rather than once a year, as in some states. If a mother misses a deadline, the state removes her child from child care and places the mother at the end of the waiting list.

Child care is a crucial building block for the development of young children, not just a necessity for a mother who is trying to pull her family out of poverty. Recent research has shown that the benefits of good quality child care carry over into later life and predict greater economic success. Quality child care should be a high priority in Mississippi. Although the state has made efforts to improve the quality of its child care settings (e.g., developing the Mississippi Child Care Quality Step System), some argue that the state effort is not adequate.

Mississippi is a conservative state, not friendly to liberal programs for the poor. It reflects the growing national political sentiment of negative attitudes toward single mothers, especially mothers of color. This report places implementation of subsidized child care in Mississippi in the context of the national frame that distinguishes “deserving” from “undeserving” low-income single mothers. Those single mothers who are widowed or in economic distress because of physical disability, are “deserving” of state support, while those who choose or do not have the option to marry the father of their children are “undeserving.” In Mississippi, many white voters have supported this frame, supporting a Republican Party focused on “family values.” The deserving vs. undeserving fram-
ing of poverty is consistent with the increasing dominance of the Republican Party in Mississippi.

Because many white people in Mississippi think of welfare as a “Black” program, its image is doubly stigmatized—by the negative stereotype of welfare recipients and by the widespread belief that recipients are African American, who many white Mississippians believe are inferior to whites. (see box on p. 5) Mississippi’s Republican Governor Haley Barbour did not make the low income people of Mississippi a priority.

Although leaving children of color behind is no longer a matter of explicitly racial policies, it is the de facto practice in the implementation of Mississippi’s subsidized child care. By creating daunting barriers for low-income mothers in accessing subsidies for child care, Mississippi is disproportionately leaving their children behind. The expression “It’s a mindset”—I heard used so often in Mississippi by those trying to describe the system—refers to an insidious form of white supremacy among many of Mississippi’s white businessmen, land owners, and politicians.

White Mississippi elites claim that they apply a “colorblind” frame to policy-making, yet their color-blind policies reproduce racial privilege generation after generation. White policy-makers claim that behavior, such as teen pregnancy or failure to marry, explains the racial disparity in the need for social services. From this perspective, because low-income women—especially young, unmarried mothers and even more especially those who are mothers of color—have only themselves to blame for their fate, the white community feels they can morally ignore them.

With the help of the colorblind frame, the political appointees and sub-contractors who implement Mississippi’s child care policies may not understand that they are often acting against the interests of poor people. They may not see that the policies they favor help to maintain their own position in society.

In Mississippi, advocacy for low-income women and children tends to occur only in the non-profit and non-governmental sectors, which are both relatively under-resourced in comparison with other states. No adequately powerful counter-voice exists to offset public policy hostility toward low-income women. Further, racial consciousness is so entrenched in Mississippi that even policies that would appear to ease it turn out to have no impact. Mississippi could be said to be “Ground Zero” for structural racism. So intractable is this form of racism at all class levels that the elimination of Jim Crow laws and practices has failed to eliminate structural racism. Neglect of poor children of color in Mississippi is but one outcome.

Mississippi fought the changes that resulted from the Civil Rights Movement. When the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision (1954) declared that “separate but equal” was not a constitutionally valid basis for school segregation, Mississippi responded by establishing all-white “academies” for elementary and secondary school children. Though some racial attitudes and practices have changed in Mississippi, these academies, which exist to this day, are mirrored in largely segregated child care facilities.

The federal government bears a significant share of responsibility for persistent structural racism in Mississippi. The Colorblind Frame

In the Right’s view, affirmative action and other programs designed to address institutional racism (and sexism and heterosexism) have become both unnecessary (since racism doesn’t exist except in individual personal action or thinking), and unjust (since they should discount race and consider individual merit alone). Using polemical and divisive tactics, the Right attacks affirmative action as “racial quotas,” “preferential treatment,” and “reverse discrimination.” It cynically takes the language of the Civil Rights Movement, including the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself, to argue that individuals should be judged by their merit and character and not by their skin color. It contends that since racism, when it does occur, is between individuals, any remedy should be aimed at those individuals who can be identified as having directly suffered an act of racism. And, it also warns that preferential treatment accorded to a particular ethnic or racial group will create resentment among others (read Whites).

- Nikhil Aziz, Political Research Associates

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oversight, state governments were able to regain control of the distribution of federal resources, a process known as “devolution.” In Mississippi, as in other parts of the country, state-level control of resources has usually favored the financially and racially privileged and the politically connected. The Reagan Administration added social service cuts, known as “retrenchment,” that most severely affected the state’s low-income population.

As retrenchment and devolution became the dominant practice in federal funding, Mississippi increasingly lifted federally-mandated protection of racial equality. Block grants now allow the state greater control over distribution of federal funds within the state, enabling it to cater to local and regional prejudices and practices. Block grants have allowed Mississippi to tighten eligibility requirements for child care and other welfare benefits and to increase surveillance of benefit recipients.

Despite the work of truly impressive advocates for the poor and Black legislators who now make up 29% of the Legislature, structural racism in Mississippi is entrenched and destructive for low-income families. And the federal government has backed away from its role as enforcer of civil rights, seldom suing Mississippi for systemic patterns of racial bias.

Thankfully, for the first time in decades, the Obama Administration seems to understand the importance of quality child care and the use of child care subsidies as a means of addressing poverty. In Mississippi, the Barack Obama Administration’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), known as “stimulus funds,” specifically addressed shortcomings in child care delivery systems in a number of states. These “targeted” federal funds came with federal oversight (critics would say they came “with strings attached”) so the state had minimal discretion over them. Governor Barbour first denounced stimulus funds, then accepted the money. The funds targeted for child care provision initially allowed Mississippi to reduce its waiting list for subsidized child care from over 6,000 to a few hundred, though the list soon began to climb again. This one-time-only funding of crucial services will likely create distress when the funding goes away in 2012.

Mississippi has a number of excellent research centers and many scholars who have studied the state’s problems and made recommendations to state

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Contemporary racial attitudes in Mississippi are far too complex for this sort of simplistic dichotomy.

An excellent source for the history of changing racial attitudes on the part of white Mississippians is a 2007 book by Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. The book details how Republican conservatives and the Religious Right used language such as “individual responsibility” and “rights and responsibilities” to signal an agenda of white privilege and protection of the old racial status quo. Crespino explains, without over-simplification, how conservatives succeeded in Mississippi by striking a chord with white voters who had historically voted Democratic.

—Jean Hardisty

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I have found that two sources give a reasonably good account of racial attitudes—historical events and contemporary practices. In this report I have attempted to peel back the white racial attitudes that underlie contemporary policies as they affect low-income single mothers and child care in Mississippi.

The colorblind framework that underlies all public messaging from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Mississippi State Legislature can, itself, be an encoded version of racial attitudes. When “fraud” is the demon, rather than “poor Blacks,” yet it is low income Black women who are seen as inclined to commit fraud, the change in semantics seems a thin veil for oldtime prejudice against low-income Black women.

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government for improvements. Most of these recommendations have not been implemented. Nevertheless, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place” ends with a list of recommendations to reform subsidized child care:

**Five Recommendations to Improve the System of Child Care Subsidies in Mississippi:**

1. **Remove barriers that limit low-income women’s access to child-care subsidies, such as daunting paperwork, a suspicious attitude toward their efforts, and over-hasty cut-offs for minor violations of the rules.** These barriers disproportionately affect African Americans because in Mississippi African Americans are disproportionately poor and disproportionately recipients of child-care certificates.

2. **Increase state and private resources to the non-profit sector to support advocacy and social service efforts for low-income women and children.** This sector is now markedly under-resourced. Mississippi has had solid research for at least a decade about what reforms are needed, but only a strengthened non-governmental sector will be able to press for those reforms.

3. **Improve the transparency and openness of the Mississippi Department of Human Services.** Statistics on those served, by race and income status, should be readily available on the Department of Human Services web site. Based on the new census statistics in 2011, these data would enable child-care policy-makers and advocates to know how many low-income Mississippians are not being served.

4. **Increase the awareness of the effect of block grants on low-income Mississippians and mobilize the non-governmental sector to oppose block grants.** Because the federal Child Care Development Fund is scheduled to be reauthorized in 2011, now is a timely moment for public education on this issue. Additionally, ARRA funds, which have proved helpful because they were “targeted,” should be extended.

5. **Improve the efficiency of the subcontractors who deliver child-care subsidies across the state with better regulation of their work and a state demand for high-quality performance.**

The ultimate challenge for Mississippi—eliminating structural racism—would take a major reorganization of values, social practices, and the economic barriers faced by low-income people in Mississippi. Because power and money speak in Mississippi, only a dramatic redistribution of power and capital will change the future course of the state.