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The Children of the Great Recession

Is The Great Recession over? Is it entering a double dip? Will the economy ever fully recover?

Almost every day several economists can be heard on the business cable channels discussing these questions. Agreement is scarce. Conclusions more so. And when the TV programs end, aside from being reminded of George Bernard Shaw's wisdom ("If all economists were laid end to end, they still would not reach a conclusion"), I think about one fact that we do know with certainty: Not since the Great Depression has the economic plight of the nation endangered children more.

How bad is it? A recent report, published by The Foundation for Child Development (FCD), provides the chilling details. This year, the number of children living in poverty will climb to 15.6 million, an increase of more than 20 percent in just four years. Moreover, the number of homeless children will spike more than 50 percent above 2007 totals, to nearly half a million.

This recession will erase more than three decades of progress in the key indicators of family well-being - poverty, parental employment, family income and children's health insurance. Perhaps even worse, the FCD study concludes that this economic shipwreck will reverse years of improvement in fighting child crime, drinking and drug use.

Most dramatically, these declines will be felt in America's classrooms. A declining U.S. economy leads directly to poorer school performance and lower school readiness. The FCD report points to recent history as a guide, pinpointing the two recessions of 1981-82 and 1990-91 as the key culprits for drops in reading and math scores during subsequent time periods, the mid-1980's and mid-1990's.

Today's young students who fall into poverty will face a similar fate. And there are many more affected at-risk students today than in those previous recessions. With their families unable to afford early education programs, they'll enter kindergarten behind their peers. Thinking that we can catch them up later is an illusion: students in poverty entering kindergarten are much more likely to register lower math and reading scores by the fourth grade and drop out of high school within a decade after that.

The results of inaction are clear: The Great Recession is pushing children into near-vertical decline and with them their future high school graduation rates and their job prospects.

It's up to all of us to prevent this debacle. And we can do it more inexpensively and more efficiently than any stimulus program. A recent Urban Institute report notes once again what so many other studies have shown: that low-income children who attend high-quality preschool programs are 40 percent less likely to be held back a grade, 30 percent more likely to graduate from high school and 100 percent more likely to graduate college. Waiting for the next spurt of economic growth is not an option. Instead, now is the time to tell our federal and state lawmakers to reaffirm our commitment to America's true insurer of economic growth and equal opportunity: early childhood education. With federal and state budgets strapped - and federal stimulus funds near an end - government spending priorities become all the more important. Given what's at stake, early childhood education must be their number one concern.

The Great Recession may be over. The Great Recession may still be going. The Great Recession may not soon end. But its damage is here today creating consequences for children that will reverberate throughout the 21st Century. The future economic success and survival of these children - and the nation - rests on how we respond to this challenge.