



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Concept Note

The Livable Lives Initiative

May 29, 2009

This concept note on the Livable Lives initiative has been developed by a group of social work and public health faculty at the Brown School. This is a work in progress, open to ideas and suggestions. At this stage, the purpose is to reach out to the broader Washington University faculty to assess interests and potential partnerships. The long-term goal is to create a substantial interdisciplinary effort in research and policy on the Washington University campus, and with partners beyond.

Challenge and Vision

A major challenge facing the United States is to create conditions so that low- and moderate-income families can lead lives with a reasonable degree of stability, support, and resources to take care of their basic needs (shelter, nutrition, health, education), find satisfaction in life, and raise and educate their children successfully. Both public policy and private sector action, guided by well designed research, have major roles to play in fostering this fundamental goal of basic well-being, social and economic stability, and active, engaged citizenship.

“Livable Lives”

A major goal of public policy should be to achieve “livable lives,” that is, lives with a reasonable degree of social, health, and economic security. The phrase livable lives extends beyond the basic consumption orientation of traditional social welfare policy, focusing attention on the positive conditions that should be achieved for social and economic development. Thus, livable lives encompasses more than a “living wage” or “family wage,” embracing a full range of social conditions and policy supports that can make life with a low or moderate income stable, secure, satisfying, and successful in raising children.

In addition, the term livable lives suggests understanding individuals and families across the life course. This includes dealing with life crises and recovering from them. And stated most positively, are individuals able to reach their potential, achieve their dreams, and live out their biography to its fullest extent? What conditions are necessary to make this possible?

While there are no boundaries on what might fall into this framework, it seems likely that major areas of focus would include the following: (1) *financial*, including income, savings, asset

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holding, financial capability; (2) *physical and mental health*, including nutrition, public health, health care; (3) *employment*, including stability, working conditions, transitions, and benefits; (4) *housing*, including both rental housing and home ownership; (5) *child development and education*, including pre-school, primary and secondary school, and post-secondary enrollment and degree attainment; (6) *community well-being*, especially social engagement honoring diversity; (7) *political access and representation*, particularly civic engagement and voting; and (8) *environmental sustainability* in the form of responsible consumption.

Regarding environmental sustainability, until quite recently few connections were made between the environment and social and economic issues, but in the 21st century this is likely to change fundamentally. The Washington University campus is well positioned for research leadership at this nexus of social conditions and environmental challenges.

The term livable lives also suggests a positive and activist orientation, which rests on three key assumptions: (1) livable lives are within reach, (2) conditions sometimes have to be created to make this possible, and (3) both public policy and private sector action are required to achieve this goal

Purposes and Rationale

The purposes of the “livable lives” initiative include a wide range of research and innovation to: (1) document conditions that may inhibit or promote the achievement of livable lives, (2) formulate and test innovations, (3) inform policies and practices that may lead to more livable lives, and (4) study impacts of these policies and practices.

While the livable lives initiative can and should be supported on the grounds of decency and social justice (traditional concerns of most religions, and professional values in social work and public health), there is an equally strong and perhaps more broadly accepted rationale—the entire society has a stake in seeing that the next generation of children grows up to be functioning and well educated in order to become socially and civically engaged and economically productive.

Background Conditions

Since the 1970s, the United States has experienced growing income and wealth inequality. Nearly all of the economic gains over the last 35 years have been concentrated in the upper fifth of the income and wealth distributions. Many Americans have been hard at work over the past three decades, only to find themselves falling further behind financially.

For example, median earnings of men working full-time in 1973, adjusted for inflation, stood at just over \$47,000. By 2007, their median earnings were \$45,000. Consequently, the typical male worker in the United States has actually lost ground over the past four decades in terms of wages. In the United States today, one out of every three jobs is classified as low-wage, paying less than \$11.50 an hour.

Accompanying wage stagnation has been a rising tide of economic risk and vulnerability. Job security has weakened, and the level of consumer debt has reached record levels. Increased economic vulnerability has led to social strains within families and communities.

Health is an area of particular concern. Notwithstanding significant advances and expenditures in the field of medicine, the US lags behind the rest of the world with respect to health status. A recent Commonwealth Fund study finds that the quality of the American health care system ranks low in comparison to other industrialized countries. Many disadvantaged populations struggle to live healthy and productive lives due to disparities in access and delivery of medical care. Individuals with low incomes and education, and people of color, often face exceptional challenges in maintaining health, and are less likely to have quality medical care.

At the same time, the social safety net has frayed. Middle and lower income families have endured retrenchments in social and economic protections. Cutbacks have occurred in social programs, and more Americans than ever are without health insurance. During this same period, public policy has exacerbated inequalities by generating large income tax cuts for the wealthy, along with highly regressive asset-building subsidies (via tax benefits, now exceeding \$400 billion per year) for home ownership, retirement savings plans, and other social purposes. Middle- and lower- income families benefit little or not at all from these massive asset-building subsidies.

The Midwest as One Emphasis

Economic stagnation and deterioration have hit the Midwest region of the United States particularly hard. In many respects, the Midwest epitomizes the difficulties of being able to attain a livable life. Manufacturing jobs have been decimated in cities such as St. Louis, Detroit, Toledo, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee. These areas have struggled with the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs, which have often been replaced by lower-paying service jobs that are lacking in benefits. Likewise, rural areas and family farming have been hard hit by the changes in the agricultural sector of the economy coupled with declining jobs and opportunities. The Midwest as a whole has endured a rise in unemployment and underemployment, poverty, and health problems associated with the stagnating economy. For example, poverty rates in the Midwest have increased at four times the national rate between 1999 and 2007.

As a result, more and more Midwesterners are struggling with resource insufficiencies and truncated capabilities, leading to physical and emotional hardship in households, and reduced social and economic functioning for the region as a whole. An important emphasis within the larger initiative will be a concern and focus upon the Midwest region, in which we seek to contribute to the knowledge base necessary for improving the economic and social conditions of those living in the “heartland” of America.

Wide Range of Theoretical and Practical Approaches

Theoretical formulations in this initiative may be essentially linear (quite common in the social sciences) or dynamic (which increased computing capacity has made more possible). There is plenty of room for both inductive and deductive approaches, although ultimate success in applied social science is essentially deductive. Properly specified, an intervention is a theoretical statement that is subject to empirical test. Only in such tests do we build knowledge that can guide action.

Conceptualizations from a variety of academic disciplines and applied professions can contribute to the understanding and investigation of the challenge for livable lives. We note just a few of these. Social work looks fundamentally at the “person-in-environment,” and emphasizes disparities across different groups in social and economic conditions, and policies and programs that can reduce disparities. Public health focuses on prevention of disease across populations by exploring linkages among social, economic, demographic, and environmental determinants of health. Sociologists have focused on class, race, and other segmentations as structural issues in society, and some sociologists view individuals in a dynamic, life course perspective. Psychologists may pay particular attention to individual attitudes and behaviors, and social psychologists on the individual in his or her social context, similar to the dominant theme of person-in-environment in social work theory and practice. The idea of “human flourishing,” espoused by social philosophers, also articulates this vision of human growth and attainment of human potential.

Economists focus first on income and level of consumption (assumed to represent well-being or “welfare”). Recently, scholars have looked more closely at assets and net worth as having direct effects on well-being, independent of the effects of income. Economists sometimes empirically link economic status and ability of individuals to achieve general well-being. For example, the health capital model put forward by health economists is an attempt to use dynamic models to link economic status, education, and other social factors to long-term improvements in health.

Medical researchers often concentrate on impacts of biology, genetics, and medical care delivery on the ability of individuals to improve their health status. Political science offers theories of citizenship and civic engagement. Business scholars provide important views of production, marketing, and consumption in households. Law scholars offer essential legal frameworks, particularly relevant for consumer protections and taking research knowledge into effective public policy.

Colleagues in Art and Architecture are increasingly engaged with low-income communities, drawing on theoretical approaches to creativity and insight in art, and spatial relationships and functionality in architecture. Researchers in Engineering are already partnering in various ways, particularly social aspects in public acceptance of engineering innovations. These are only some among a wide range of potentially valuable theoretical frameworks.

From Research and Teaching, To Policy and Practice

With excellent professional schools and academic departments, along with several strong research centers, Washington University is in an ideal position to undertake a major, distinctive, and consequential body of work in livable lives. Some of this research is already occurring at the Brown School, where life course research examines insecurities across adulthood, documenting basic conditions. Formulation and testing of policy innovations occurs with large-scale experimental research at the Center for Social Development. Several new public health centers at the Brown School are engaged in applied research in the areas of nutrition, health screening, and the built environment.

A variety of seminar and teaching initiatives are also related to livable lives. Several seminar series and journal clubs on campus serve to explore the intersection between economic well-being and social and health outcomes. These include the Work, Families and Public Policy series and the School of Social Work's Economics of Inequality journal club. In addition, several new courses will be dealing with issues central to the notion of livable lives. These include a proposed interdisciplinary course on livable lives to be offered in the spring of 2010 within the newly established Masters of Public Health program, a course in the fall of 2010 that will be jointly taught between economics and social work, and a course on social justice and public health that is currently under development at the Brown School.

Many other academic centers and research projects across the Washington University campus offer distinctive opportunities for partnership. Two among many examples are the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at the Law School and the Weidenbaum Center on Economy, Government, and Public Policy. Our task is to discuss and build new partnerships for innovative and productive scholarship.

In terms of applied research, the emergent Pagedale (and larger Normandy School District) initiative may provide a community site for research and testing new policies and practices. The Livable Lives initiative can also capitalize on other applied settings, particularly where there might be testable policy and practice innovations, especially some form of "natural experiment."

Emphasis on creating and implementing evidence-based practices and policies should be in the forefront. This can lead to bodies of research that are readily translated and disseminated to practice and policy.

Next Steps

While the agenda for the Livable Lives initiative is in formation, and very open to influence and change, possible next steps are:

- Discuss and build partnerships on the Washington University campus in Fall Term 2009
- Expand discussions to other experts
- Chart agendas for Livable Lives research
- Hold conference in 2010 with invited experts to assess issues, challenges, directions
- Develop funding to support research

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