

Low Income and the Life Chances of Three Year Olds

A Book Review

from Florence Rankin

Gilley, T. & Taylor, J. (1995). *Unequal Lives?* Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Lawrence.

Is it possible to have equal rights for all children in Australia? The reality is that not all children do have equal rights nor the same opportunities in our society. It is even difficult to suggest which life circumstances and lifestyles in families are going to disadvantage children. The contribution of social, economic and environmental factors combine to affect the life outcomes for our children.

An ongoing longitudinal study, the **Life Chances Study**, is being conducted by the Brotherhood of St Lawrence into the impact of low income and disadvantages on children. The published report examines and compares the changes in the lives of three year old children from 161 families in two adjoining inner Melbourne municipalities. The families have been interviewed three times, firstly in 1990 when the children were six months old, then at 18 months old, and for the third time when the children were between two and a half and three years old.

The report aims to specifically address issues for children on health and their development, the family context including stresses and support, and the use of services by the families. The issues for families are that of income, employment, housing, and the local community and finally based on these, the life chances for the children.

The diversity of the families of the children provides some stark contrasts in terms of education, occupations, family income, family size and structure, and ethnic background. For example, 16% of the children lived in sole parent families, 35% of the children were living in low income families and 27% lived in families where both parents were NESB. Low family income

was strongly associated with sole parenthood, NESB, and parents' limited education and unemployment.

Unequal Lives ? provides detailed documentation and supporting research on the response of families. The readable style is supported by quantitative data, and the presentation of the material incorporates case studies of five children who range from the most privileged to the most disadvantaged in the study. Comments from families of these families of these children illustrate the report and its findings.

The study, while not yet conclusive, does demonstrate that low income has a variety of influences on children, their families' attitudes to their health, behaviour and the development of their children, and the availability of services to these families. Many variables contribute to both the realities and the beliefs of the families about the future for their children.

The findings illustrate some important aspects in our society's failure to provide equality of opportunity for children growing up in low-income families during these crucial years and reveal a need for policies and services to be responsive to the needs of all low-income families with young children including Nesb and sole-parent families.

