Policy Implications of COVID-19 on Puerto Rico’s Children, Youth, and Families

Bruce Lesley
President, First Focus on Children

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This is likely a once-in-a-generation disaster, and it will affect every domain of human life. It will be traumatic. And trauma always falls hardest on the youngest among us. ... All the evidence suggests that children — and poor children especially — will bear an incredible burden during the coronavirus pandemic and the attendant economic shocks. But that evidence has trouble breaking into a national conversation dominated by mortality rates and work-from-home strategies. — Vann R. Newkirk II, “The Kids Aren’t All Right,” The Atlantic
“An in-depth analysis is not necessary to know that the new COVID-19 crisis means it never rains, but it pours for Puerto Rican children, living in poverty and having suffered the impacts of Hurricane Maria, the financial crisis and the earthquakes.”
“Every Aspect of Children’s Lives Is Being Impacted”

“People have been saying, ‘Oh, coronavirus doesn’t affect kids — the kids are all right,’” said Bruce Lesley, the president of First Focus on Children, an advocacy group. “They’re so not. They’re at greater risk of sexual assault, suicide, substance abuse, hunger — every aspect of children’s lives is being impacted.”

“Kids Are Essentially Immune”

Elon Musk @elonmusk · Mar 19

Kids are essentially immune, but elderly with existing conditions are vulnerable. Family gatherings with close contact between kids & grandparents probably most risky.
“Families First Coronavirus Response Act” (H.R. 6201) and “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security (CARES) Act” (H.R. 748)

General
- $150 billion for states, territories, localities, and tribes

Health
- Medicaid and CHIP will cover diagnostic testing
- Temporary increase in Medicaid federal matching rate (FMAP)
- Community health centers receive $1.32 billion in emergency funds

Hunger and Nutrition
- $500 million for WIC
- $15.5 billion for SNAP (food stamps)
- $300 million for food assistance for Puerto Rico and the territories
- Emergency Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfers for children
The Department of Agriculture only recently approved the first state plan to give low-income families money in place of the meals their children would have received in school for free or a reduced price. This provision, called Pandemic EBT, comes to about $114 a month per child, which is the value of a free breakfast and lunch for five school days a week.

(CNN) Millions of low-income children who can no longer get free meals at school because of the coronavirus crisis have yet to receive additional federal assistance promised to them by Congress.
“Families First Coronavirus Response Act” (H.R. 6201) and “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security (CARES) Act” (H.R. 748)

Cash Assistance

- $1,200 for adults and $500 per child
  - Problems for babies, kids 17- and 18-years-old & college students

- $1 billion for Unemployment Insurance

“The needs of a child – their shelter, their food, their care, their educational supports, etc. – are not 41.7 percent of the needs of an adult.”

– “The COVID-19 Crisis Is Catastrophic for Children Too,” Medium
“Families First Coronavirus Response Act” (H.R. 6201) and “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security (CARES) Act” (H.R. 748)

Education
• $13.5 billion for Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Act
• $14 billion for higher education institutions

Housing
• $3 billion for rental assistance
• Prohibits landlords from evicting or charging penalties for non-payment for 120-day period
• $50 million for Legal Services Corporation
• $4 billion for homelessness
• $25 million for Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Programs
“Families First Coronavirus Response Act” (H.R. 6201) and “Coronavirus Aid, Relief, Economic Security (CARES) Act” (H.R. 748)

Early Childhood
• $3.5 billion for Child Care Development Block Grant
• $750 million for Head Start and Early Head Start

Child Welfare
• $45 million for Title IV-B services, which can help foster parents, kinship caregivers, and residential providers
• $45 million for violence prevention and response services

Other Notable Funding
• $5 billion for Community Development Block Grant (can be used for child care centers, food banks, etc.)
UNICEF: “Children are the hidden victims of the coronavirus crisis.”
Every Aspect of a Child’s Life Is Being Impacted

HuffPost Politics
@HuffPostPol

Schools are struggling to educate 7 million students who receive special education services in the absence of physical classrooms. huffp.st/jArGNkF

First Focus on Children
@First_Focus

Coronavirus and schools: Free meals are (and aren’t) getting to kids - Vox bit.ly/2jotOmZ

How Children With Disabilities Are Getting Left Behind
Schools are struggling to educate 7 million students who receive special education services in the absence of physical classrooms. huffpost.com
Every Aspect of a Child’s Life Is Being Impacted

Abuse cases spike dramatically:

"Officials with Cook Children’s Medical Center in Fort Worth, Texas reported seven cases of severe child abuse between Tuesday, March 17 and Saturday, March 21. Two of those children died from their injuries." fox6now.com/2020/03/23/tex...

You have families that don't have stable housing, stable income. Maybe there's a mental health challenge or a substance abuse problem — and now the schools are closed... That is a recipe for disaster." bit.ly/3axxeQx

Coronavirus roils every segment of US child welfare system
Child welfare agencies in the U.S. have a difficult mission in the best of times, and now they're scrambling to confront new challenges local10.com
Children in Confined Settings Are Particularly Vulnerable

"Juveniles in detention are especially vulnerable during pandemics," writes Juvenile Justice Clinic Dir @SamBuck4JuvJust in Justice Collaborative Institute report, "To Protect Our Children & Fight the Coronavirus, Release Youth from Juvenile Detention." dataforprogress.org/memos/releasing...

DATA FOR PROGRESS
TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN AND FIGHT THE CORONAVIRUS, RELEASE YOUTH FROM JUVENILE DETENTION

Memo: To Protect Our Children and Fight the Coronavirus, Re...
In a national poll, we found broad bipartisan public support for releasing early some youth held in detention
dataforprogress.org

Mariya Parodi
@MariyaParodi

 EACH day that a child is in immigration detention is a day that poses greater and greater risks for COVID-19. When protecting public health rests on access to care for all, ICE endangers not only these children's health but also jeopardizes the public. amnestyusa.org/press-releases...
Falling short

The federal government’s annual contribution to Puerto Rico’s Medicaid insurance program for the poor is capped at a level much lower than what Washington gives to the states. The island covers the difference itself and, more recently, through a one-time payment under the Affordable Care Act, which is expected to run out next year.

Sources: Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services; Health Insurance Administration of Puerto Rico
First Focus on Children Testimony to House Health Subcommittee on Medicaid Block Grants - Feb. 29, 2016:

“The effects on Puerto Rico’s children have been devastating. Doctors are fleeing to the mainland or refusing to accept patients on Medicaid, leaving children without access to pediatric and preventive care.”
SUPPORTING OUR CHILDREN

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continues to evolve, a child's natural curiosity and ultimately their concerns may grow with the current and increasing uncertainty. The guidelines below are intended for parents, caregivers, educators, and child care providers on how best to care for and communicate with children. You are encouraged to actively engage in an open dialogue with children in ways that are appropriate for their child's age, developmental stage and state of mind. No matter what, the core messages should remain clear, simple, and consistent.

You are the buffer for your children. Every parent and caregiver must be the most reliable source of information and support. Nearly all of us are experiencing some level of concern, and perhaps even serious anxiety, about the challenges we are facing in this unprecedented world of the COVID-19 pandemic. That said, to the extent possible, we must try to shield our children from our own concerns and anxieties as much as possible. Children can sense and absorb the emotional state of their parents.
Problems with Medicaid Block Grants

- Arbitrary Caps: do not adjust for need, such as changes in –
  - population/demographic change
  - natural disasters
  - economic recessions
  - public health crises
  - medical breakthroughs/cures

- Lead to rationing of care
- Pit populations against each other
A Child Is a Child: Puerto Rico and Medicaid Block Grants

Equity and fairness demands that we treat all America citizens fairly and equitably.
“The Children Aren’t All Right” by Vann Newkirk II, *The Atlantic*

...the most likely outcome is that this pandemic, like most others in history, will again uncover our most basic inequities. For children and their parents, that might mean that mortality rates are only the beginning of the story.
Thank You!

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