

## **Book Review**

*Creating an Opportunity Society*

Ron Haskins & Isabel Sawhill

(Brookings Institution Press, 262 pp., \$28.95)

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Is the American Dream attainable, or is it just a dream? The worst recession since the Great Depression has invited government bailouts, a falling stock market, high unemployment rates, unbelievable government debt, and a fair degree of skepticism. But over the past 40 years, a less than desirable picture of economic opportunity has been developing in the United States. America may not be the land of opportunity after all. Income inequality has widened the gap between the rich and the poor, making mobility more difficult. Economic mobility is lower in America than in Canada, Germany, or France. Furthermore, a child's future socioeconomic status is partially determined at birth. Children born into the middle class have an equal chance of moving up or down the economic ladder, but those born into a poor or rich family are less likely to move either up or down in adulthood.

In *Creating an Opportunity Society*, Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution undertake the ambitious goal of creating an American society where every child has an equal opportunity to achieve in life. They reveal the current state of opportunity in America and create guiding principles for future social policy. They conclude that the American Dream is achievable for those who "play by the rules," or complete life events in a specific order: first education, then employment, then marriage, and lastly, parenthood. Drawing on in-depth research and evaluation in

the areas of education, work, and families, Haskins and Sawhills' policy proposals are sure to provoke thought and debate as Americans consider the next wave in social policy.

Haskins and Sawhill acknowledge that the federal government has invested billions of dollars in domestic social programs, albeit misguided. Many programs are ineffective because they either target the wrong population, or are inconsistent with public values or research findings on human behavior. Haskins and Sawhill believe that social programs could be improved by considering these areas, as well as: political sustainability, personal responsibility, cost-effectiveness, and simplicity. Chapters 2 through 7 describe the state of opportunity in America and discuss reasons for its deficiency. Chapters 8 through 10 propose specific policies to expand educational opportunity, support and encourage work, and strengthen families. Chapter 11 suggests funding the proposals through "a new intergenerational contract" that invests in the young and encourages less dependence on the government after retirement.

To expand educational opportunity, Haskins and Sawhill support coordinated reforms at the preschool, K-12, and postsecondary levels. They provide an extensive list of recommendations for each level. We will focus on their proposal for expanding preschool by coordinating existing child care and preschool programs.

Haskins and Sawhill propose spending \$6 billion a year to expand and evaluate high-quality programs that serve children ranging from infancy to early elementary school. Local consortiums, made up of Head Start officials, state pre-K officials, local school representatives, and parents, compete for the funding (in addition to the Head Start and state pre-K funds already available). The consortium serves children from families below 150 percent of the poverty line. Parents receive vouchers to enroll their children in home-visiting and preschool programs that meet standards set by the consortium. Beginning at age four, children are evaluated until they meet an additional national standard of school readiness. To maintain federal funding, programs need to produce children who meet this national standard.

Haskins and Sawhill weave a strong argument for expanding preschool. As promised, their proposal incorporates political sustainability, personal

responsibility, cost-effectiveness, effective targeting, social science research, and simplicity. The consortium effectively targets low-income families and specific children age groups. Parents, educators, and school representatives are held responsible for ensuring quality learning environments. Also, combining the current state and federal funding for child care and preschool programs is cost effective and simplifies programming for young children from low-income families.

Preliminary findings from model preschool programs and public and political views toward children make this a winning proposal. Low-income and minority children are left behind as early as age three. High-quality preschools help to compensate for unequal environments in early childhood and to prepare children for Kindergarten and grade school. Model programs (Abecedarian preschool program, Perry Preschool Program, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers) are associated with both short- and long-term effects, including high school graduation and college attendance. In addition, low cost child care and preschool may increase parents' work and reduce poverty. While standards are often necessary for maintaining high-quality programs, it is difficult to envision the continual evaluation of four year olds to meet national standards. Careful consideration must go into the determination of such standards and the actual evaluation process.

To support and encourage work, Haskin and Sawhill expand on the 1996 welfare reform effort. To reduce poverty, the authors recommend a continuation of the two-part strategy: (1) strengthening work support programs, programs that supplement low incomes with cash or in-kind benefits, and (2) increasing work requirements for welfare programs. While the work and work support combination has made great strides in reducing poverty, Haskin and Sawhill highlight the additional need for child care supports for working parents and education and training for low-income workers.

To strengthen families, Haskins and Sawhill focus on three approaches: (1) reducing nonmarital births, (2) promoting marriage, and (3) reviving the marriage culture. Government influence on family composition is controversial; it even provokes some disagreement among the authors. Haskins supports the government encouraging marriage, because he believes that people in their twenties will inevitably bear children. If these people are

married, then the number of children born outside of marriage is reduced. Conversely, Sawhill supports the government reducing nonmarital births. Sawhill sees out of wedlock births as a timing issue, or a failure to delay childbirth until after marriage. The first argument produces programs that emphasize the value of marriage and teach relationship skills. The second argument produces programs that emphasize family planning and teach comprehensive sex education. We will focus on a third approach, Haskins and Sawhill's argument for reviving the marriage culture through a social marketing campaign.

Haskins and Sawhill propose that Congress appropriate \$500 million a year for a social marketing campaign illustrating the benefits of following the "success sequence" of: education, employment, marriage, and then children. Using the American Legacy Foundation's "truth" campaign to reduce smoking as a model, they seek to convince young adults that following this sequence is in their best interest. Haskins and Sawhill also encourage public figures to promote childbearing within marriage and children living with both parents.

Haskins and Sawhill somewhat disappoint with this compromise. While the proposal promotes personal responsibility and effectively targets the youth population, questions arise when considering its political sustainability, cost-effectiveness, research base, and simplicity.

On the issue of political sustainability, it is unclear that politicians and the American public would fully support this effort. With a large proportion of children raised by single parents, could the government openly fault this family composition or alternative family compositions? Alternatively, the media campaign could be viewed as a feel-good program and gain widespread support from politicians and the public. If this is the case, it may be difficult to terminate the media campaign, even if it is not successful in changing behavior. For example, the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) program continues to be used in American schools despite scientific evaluations that deem it ineffective at reducing drug and alcohol use (West & O'Neal 2004).

On the issue of cost-effectiveness, Haskins and Sawhill acknowledge the trade-off between effectiveness and program size. For the same price, more young adults would be reached through a media campaign than

through direct services. While social media campaigns show some success, transforming cultural norms is not the same as changing behavior. It is unclear if the proposed campaign would be effective, or even how to measure success. Five-hundred million is a high price for good-intentions support.

In another proposal, Haskins and Sawhill recommend a block grant of \$450 million a year for states to expand sex education and \$50 million a year for demonstration programs to research the most effective ways to reduce teen sexual activity, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections. This second proposal appears more promising. It creates sex education programs that are consistent with local values, and these programs incorporate proven strategies for reducing teen sexual activity and its unintended consequences.

In *Creating an Opportunity Society*, Haskins and Sawhill deconstruct the problem of opportunity in America. It is clear that a solution will not be simple, because the problem itself is so complex. Social policies incorporate the individual, the family, the lifecycle, and the larger American culture. Opportunity in America may not be equal, but those who follow the “success sequence” will have an easier time achieving their dreams. Many of the policy proposals are paternalistic in that they encourage an individual to do what is in her own best interest. This may offset government assistance later in life, but creating policies with a balance of individual freedom and paternalism remains difficult. In addition, the cost of these programs may prove to be a road block.

Haskins and Sawhill conclude their book with a section on how to pay for the proposals. The authors acknowledge the large cost of their proposals, but some of their suggestions appear more idealistic than pragmatic. For example, Haskins and Sawhill propose the creation of a new intergenerational contract. Due to societal and economic changes since the inception of Medicare, Haskins and Sawhill suggest a shift of investing in young Americans and encouraging or requiring them to save for retirement. Investing in the young is a promising proposal that may increase opportunities and economic mobility. However, it is very likely to be met by political opposition. Haskins and Sawhill suggest a gradual phase-in, but even so, this appears as difficult as reviving the marriage culture.

Haskins and Sawhill do more than simply paint a beautiful picture of

an ideal America. They set forth guiding principles to shape future social policy. If America is to remain the “land of opportunity,” we must consider the challenges faced by children from disadvantaged families and the efforts of those Americans playing by the rules and still having a hard time. Focusing on education, work, and strong families, Haskins and Sawhill provide carefully crafted and well-researched proposals to create more opportunity for Americans. While *Creating an Opportunity Society* may create more questions than answers, these are serious questions that the American public and policymakers should be asking.

## References

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