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The Social Context of Childrearing: Public Spending in Oakland, 1970-2000

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This paper takes stock of spending in Oakland on children from 1970-2000, in order to gauge the trends in families' "collective consumption." Using funding for schools, parks, libraries, museum and the police as a proxy for public spending on children's lives generally, I find that while monies for parks and the museum declined, funding for police and libraries stayed level. Schools offer a more complex case, in which increases in per-pupil expenditures may be mitigated by ballooning needs for special education services, and in which parent-raised funds contribute further to intra- and inter-district inequality. I propose the notion of "concentric rings of consumption" to analytically treat these parent-raised funds, which are not quite private but not quite public either. After reviewing a case of privatized educational services, I suggest that public spending decreases lead to three linked and overlapping outcomes: "compensatory spending," or the individual's choice to buy goods and services, "public squalor," or the fraying of public services left to those who have no other option, and "ambient privatization," or the perception of the first two of these trends.

Introduction¹

Has public spending on children declined as private childrearing consumption has mushroomed? What kind of social context accompanies the rise in household spending on children? The growth in family-based consumption has been linked to the rise in television-viewing, the increase in paid employment for women, the effectiveness of advertising, and other trends. All of these factors have been used to explain what might be called a “needs inflation” on the part of American families: the expansion of what might be considered necessary and appropriate for market solution. Yet families define their needs within a social context of public spending, and that context, particularly in California’s cities, is one where forces of privatization and taxpayer backlash have pummeled the locality’s ability to provide. What are the links, if any, between private and public provisioning?

In this paper I investigate these questions by examining data related to public² and private spending on children in Oakland from 1970 to 2000. After presenting a brief overview of current theory and questions related to understanding the social context of childrearing consumption, I compare trends in public spending on schools, parks and recreation, libraries, and museums –all areas in which children participate – with demographic data for families. I contrast these findings with the shared perception among Oakland residents that there has been a sharp decline in public spending and services in Oakland.³ Because my interviews with Oakland residents suggested that public safety influences their childrearing decisions, particularly for low-income residents, I also compare data about public safety with the perceptions of my interview

¹ This paper was researched and written while the author was a Graduate Fellow at UC Berkeley’s Institute for the Study of Social Change, and is based in part on interview data conducted with support from the National Science Foundation. I thank Rivka Polatnick, Barrie Thorne, David Minkus, Christine Trost, and the other ISSC fellows for their comments and guidance on earlier drafts.

² “Public spending” refers to those monies spent by public entities such as cities and states.

³ These interviews were part of the larger study that I conducted of 45 families from three different socioeconomic environments in Oakland, one a high-income public school, another a high-income private school, and the third a low-income public school.

subjects. I contrast these findings concerning public spending and “collective consumption” with a case study of the consumption of private services. Finally, I use these findings as the basis for expanding upon Barrie Thorne’s (2003) notion of the “privatization of childhood,” and its likely effects, especially for the marginalized, adrift on what Peter Saunders (1986) called the “waterlogged welfare state.”

In brief, I find that overall downward trends in public spending are somewhat mitigated by a leveling off in some cases and brief increases in others. While funding for city recreation has declined, spending on police and the libraries has hovered at the same levels over the last 25 years, and school spending actually increased over the last ten years, albeit not to 1970 levels.

This mixed story of trends in public spending stands in stark contrast to a strong shared perception among my interview subjects that public spending on children in Oakland has sharply and unequivocally declined. I consider the disparity between the mixed actual trends and caregiver perceptions to argue that the withdrawal of public services has three overlapping effects on the pattern of collective versus individual consumption: 1) direct compensatory spending (e.g., education and tutoring services) to replace what the city does not adequately provide; 2) “public squalor,” to use John Kenneth Galbraith’s term, brought about by dwindling participation in the public sphere of schools, museums, libraries and parks, as it becomes the sole and threadbare preserve of those whose tight budgets give them no other options; and 3) indirect ambient privatization, which I define as the increasing predilection of caregivers to meet routine family needs through marketized solutions, encouraged in part by a privatization ethos that makes public solutions always seem worse. The “privatization of childhood,” then, is a three-pronged process with uneven impact across the various arenas of children’s lives, the most severe being, as we shall see, in schooling.

A Social Context for Childrearing Consumption?

Childrearing in the U.S. today takes place in an ever more commodified milieu (Cross 2000, Schor 1998, Zelizer 1994, Brown 1994). From food and clothing to education and after-school care to toys and games, commodified care for children in the United States has increased in the last several decades, despite the declining share of children in the population. While a number of commentators have argued that the growth of the suburbs ushered in such individualized consumption habits and ideals – with “residential neighborhoods... [becoming] a mass of small, private islands” as Jackson (1985, 280) described it – families in cities have not been immune to such trends. Indeed, as will be explored further in this paper, increased private spending by urban families may be the first step in decoupling from the ever more fragmented collectivity.

Barrie Thorne (2003) has dubbed this phenomenon the “privatization of childhood,” in which caregivers rely on market-based choices for a vast array of goods and services formerly provided in the public sphere. Most recent scholarship on consumption, however, does not pursue analytic links between public and private spending. Rather, scholars often portray consumption as a habit, often a vice, of individuals, caused by the role of shopping in cultivating fundamental lifestyles and identities, pervasive increases in television-viewing, or the rise in employed women (Cross 2000, Schor 1998). While these trends are certainly social, scholars suggest their impact is primarily felt in changes in individual beliefs and ideologies – one’s reference group changes to include the moneyed class on the television situation comedy “Friends,” for example, which causes one to develop more expensive tastes. Yet is it possible that changing “tastes” don’t explain everything about rising childrearing expenditures? What of the basic material requirements of providing for children? How have patterns of public and private provision for children changed over time?

More than 25 years ago, in what is now a classic text in urban sociology, Manuel Castells (1978) argued that the city is a unit of “collective consumption”. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Castells viewed the public services provided by cities as the state’s assumption of the costs of the reproduction of labor. Although widely criticized as functionalist, optimistic and ahistorical, Castells’ theoretical intervention and subsequent iterations in later texts (see, e.g., Castells 1983) were enormously influential in recasting the field of urban sociology, particularly in Britain (Saunders 1986, Clarke and Bradford 1998).

Castells’ formulation is a complex and evolving one, and my treatment here will necessarily be abbreviated. In general, the notion of collective consumption calls to mind a continuum, with individualized consumption on the other end; thus it brings both private spending and public spending into the same analytic view. This approach fills out the missing social context for childrearing consumption, and promises a new perspective on the social trends affecting families. In what follows, I consider several relevant changes and updates other scholars have made to the notion of “collective consumption,” before adopting it for my purposes here.

Critics, such as Saunders (1986), have argued against conceiving of cities as units of collective consumption because of 1) the observation that such activity was not only the province of cities, nor did it wholly define them; 2) the difficulties in demarcating what counted as collective, and 3) the doctrinal problems created by de-emphasizing production or separating it from consumption. I am neither concerned with outlining the proper purview of urban sociology nor am I necessarily constrained by Marxist parameters. Thus, in the context of this paper, only the second criticism listed above raises an important question – what counts as collective consumption? In answer, I rely upon Patrick Dunleavy (1983), who helpfully developed a rigorous typology of consumption involving individualized and socialized consumption, in

which only certain forms of socialized consumption are wholly collective. Those services are, as British sociologist Peter Saunders (1986) described them, “collectively organized and managed, allocated on non-market criteria, and paid for at least partially out of taxation” (233).

For his part, Saunders argued that Castells’ treatise was perhaps appropriate to the city of the 1970s, but that collectivized provision was but a stage that laid the groundwork for the transition to the new, postmodern city, characterized by privatized consumption (Saunders 1986; see Clarke and Bradford 1998 for an excellent summary of the debate). What made this privatization different from the Hobbesian world of early industrialization? According to Saunders, in the postmodern city, the state aids these private transfers through discounts, subsidies and tax cuts, without meddling clumsily in the actual provisioning. Saunders valorized privatized consumption and the freedom and autonomy he attributed to it, but gave a nod to the “minority [who] is cast adrift on the water-logged raft of what remains of the welfare state” (Saunders 1986, 318). While Saunders’ view of the privatized world is jollier than many participants – not just the minority on the raft– would attest, due to the great sacrifice of time and care and the relationship often required to sustain it, his depiction of the receding public and the fragmenting collectivity is useful.

Clarke and Bradford point out that Castells and Saunders both elide consumption and provision, and that actually

“collective consumption” concerns the collective provision of means of consumption that may well be consumed individually (e.g. public housing). Likewise privately provided goods may be consumed collectively (e.g. private education) (Clarke and Bradford 1998, fn885).

This is an important distinction. Consumption and provision are essentially two sides of the same coin when the same person or people are involved in both processes. Thus “family provisioning” is part and parcel of “family consumption,” although the former term highlights

the work of provisioning – from “providing” for consumption through activities that earn household income to shopping for the goods and services later consumed. For the city, however, calling it a site of “collective consumption” is a political act, in that the semantic choice draws attention to the communal benefits derived from the public domain, such as public recreation or public safety. In addition, “consumption” as a term invokes rights and not responsibilities, an approach opposed to traditional notions of civic participation.

Conversely, labeling such public arenas as “public provisioning” emphasizes the work of providing for the collectivity, after which the provider may or may not share the benefits. In addition, the term suggests the responsibilities inherent in being a provider, such as caring for the dependent and being subject to evaluation on how well or reliably provisioning occurs. Nonetheless one can imagine Castells was purposeful in his favoring of “collective consumption,” since the term is consistent with his argument that public largess is part of the reproduction of labor, in a system in which notions of “civic participation” might be so much ideological miasma clouding the structural dominance of capital. At the same time, however, the term “collective consumption” helps to recast public provisioning as the mirror image of the individualized consumption that happens in someone’s home, and make more visible the analytic parallels.

How does the concept of “collective consumption” help us to think about privatized consumption trends, particularly in Oakland for children? Saunders’ portrayal of cities in which the role of the public has largely withered to one of providing subsidies and tax relief is a powerful one. Yet the arenas of “collective consumption” outlined by Castells and Dunleavy—the schools, the libraries, the parks – remain and cannot be eliminated without transgressing common standards of what a city is. For the purposes of this paper, I will borrow from both perspectives. From Saunders we have the portrayal of how cities have responded to the fiscal

crisis (with less and less outright provisioning and more enabling through subsidies and credits). But from Castells we understand that what public services are left constitute a communal meal, be it feast or famine. It is as if Castells describes an ever-withering component of everyday life, which, for our purposes, includes childrearing efforts.

In addition, as Saunders pointed out, after privatization has begun, it takes on a momentum of its own, realigning the boundary between private and collective consumption. For example,

the raising of public transport fares to cover reduced subsidies serves to encourage private car ownership...The more users who opt for a private solution, the poorer becomes the quality and the higher the prices for those who remain in the dwindling socialized sector...As welfare services crumble, charges rise and more and more people seek alternative solutions, we may expect all those who can to exit from the system with increasing haste (Saunders 1986, 317-8).

And those who can't, are stuck with the remains.

Can we demonstrate similar links, then, between private and public consumption for childrearing? Are families simply buying more to replace those services now not provided, or provided poorly, by the state? Or is there a ripple effect, in which families increasingly turn to the market for childrearing solutions, even for those needs that were never met nor even recognized by the state?

Methodology and Sources of Data

I sought to trace the trajectory of public spending on children in Oakland, California, a mid-sized city in the San Francisco Bay Area, and present a demographic profile of Oakland over the years 1970-2000, which offers insight into changes in “collective consumption” (Schrag

1999).⁴ Public spending on children is of course a broad and amorphous category, which could include anything from income transfers to food provision to childcare subsidies. In the interest of feasibility, I limited my target areas of research to public spaces where school-aged children spend time: schools, parks and recreation facilities, libraries, and museums. Except for data pertaining to schools, I found data on public spending in these areas in budgets for the city of Oakland. I selected budgets from the years 1981-82, 1991-2, and 2003-5, in order to capture a periodic snapshot of Oakland spending over this time span. Data about school spending came from the Oakland Unified School District, the California Department of Education, and various independent research institutes. I also analyzed data on public safety because my own qualitative research (see below) suggests that parents' perceptions of safety wield great influence on children's spatial mobility and thus on childrearing consumption. Population data come from the U.S. Census.

In addition, I sought to sketch out trends in the consumption of some private childrearing services. The universe of private childrearing services is, like that of public spending on children, a seemingly limitless one. Moreover, an analysis of spending on private childrearing services is made more difficult by the lack of any overseeing body or organization. Thus I limited my efforts for this paper to the sector in which spending on children is most concentrated: education. I obtained data on private school enrollment from the California Department of Education and from various research institutes. I also consulted market research about private tutoring firms in Oakland.

⁴ This investigation into the links between "collective consumption" and private consumption for children is part of a larger project on childrearing and inequality in Oakland. Relying on interviews and fieldwork at three school sites stratified by income, I explore the ways caregivers construct "good-enough" childhoods out of market and public sources. I consider how the context of one's micro-communities (neighborhoods and schools) shapes one's perceptions and experiences of consumption and inequality. Finally, I study such consumption-oriented moments in childrearing as birthdays, Halloween, and visits from the Tooth Fairy to interpret contextualized meanings of care and childhood.

In addition to these primary data sources, I also studied several important analyses by other scholars on the topics of public and private expenditures. Peter Schrag's work *Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future* (1999) covered the decline in "collective consumption" on the state level, including the story of Proposition 13, the statewide referendum that severely impeded the state's ability to increase property tax revenues. Victor Rubin's (1985) dissertation, "Fiscal Austerity and the Reorganization of Urban Services: Planning for Children and Families in the 1980s," was particularly helpful, as was the monograph from a related research project on Oakland children's activities entitled *The Serious Business of Growing Up* (Medrich et al. 1982).

These data do not include another important actor in the landscape of public spending on childrearing: namely, the county. One study by the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth (OFCY) found that the county of Alameda provided an estimated \$125 million in services for children in 2000, using a very rough approximation of what percentage of county aid recipients were Oakland residents. (This figure contrasted with the approximately \$15.5 million provided for children by the city of Oakland, and the \$338 million provided for children by the Oakland school district.) I did not include county figures in this report for two reasons: 1) county services target people in economic need, and often are programs designed to address social problems like child abuse, child runaways and truancy – problems for which families less often seek private solutions than, say, the problem of falling behind in school; and 2) a breakdown of county funding by locality was not available to parse out the resources that Oakland's children received (OFCY 2001).

This paper is also based on interviews I conducted as part of a larger project on childrearing and consumption. I interviewed parents and children from 54 families with a 5 to 8

year-old child living in Oakland, California. Interviews lasted from 1.5 to 3 hours, and most often took place in the subject's home; sometimes I interviewed them twice.

I sampled families from four sites, three of which were stratified by income. Ten families were drawn from the roster at the Sojourner Truth after-school center, a subsidized facility in the flats of West Oakland, where 90 percent of the families are African-American and the rest recent Latino or Asian immigrants. Another 15 families came from a hills school in Oakland, where the mean annual income (\$166,000) was almost 10 times that of the flats families. Most of the hills families were white, although several were immigrants and four of the 15 were affluent African-Americans. A private school in Oakland I call the Arrowhead school was the source for 12 additional families, whose annual income averaged \$186,000. Arrowhead is a progressive school with many gay/lesbian, adoptive, and scholarship families, making it more diverse than the hills public school. I solicited the fourth group of families, comprising seven in all, using a local email listserv for parents. These were white families of more modest means, with an average annual income of \$66,000. In addition, I conducted 3 years of fieldwork in the schools and in after-school care locations where their children spent time.

Findings

Demographic Change in Oakland, 1970-2000

When one compares Oakland's population of 1970 to that of 2000, one finds that overall numbers have not changed dramatically, while the racial/ethnic composition of the city has.⁵ Mirroring changes in California as a whole, Oakland has gone from being predominantly white to being comprised of four major racial/ethnic groups: African-Americans, Whites, Latinos and

⁵ One should note, however, that from 1970 to 1980 Oakland experienced 6.13 percent dip in population, from which it rebounded in the following decade.

Asians. Even Oakland's largest group, African-Americans, comprises only 36 percent of the total. Over the period 1970-2000, the city population has grown by 10 percent, with a total of 399,484 in 2000. As Figure 1 shows, the racial/ethnic makeup of that population has shifted significantly.⁶

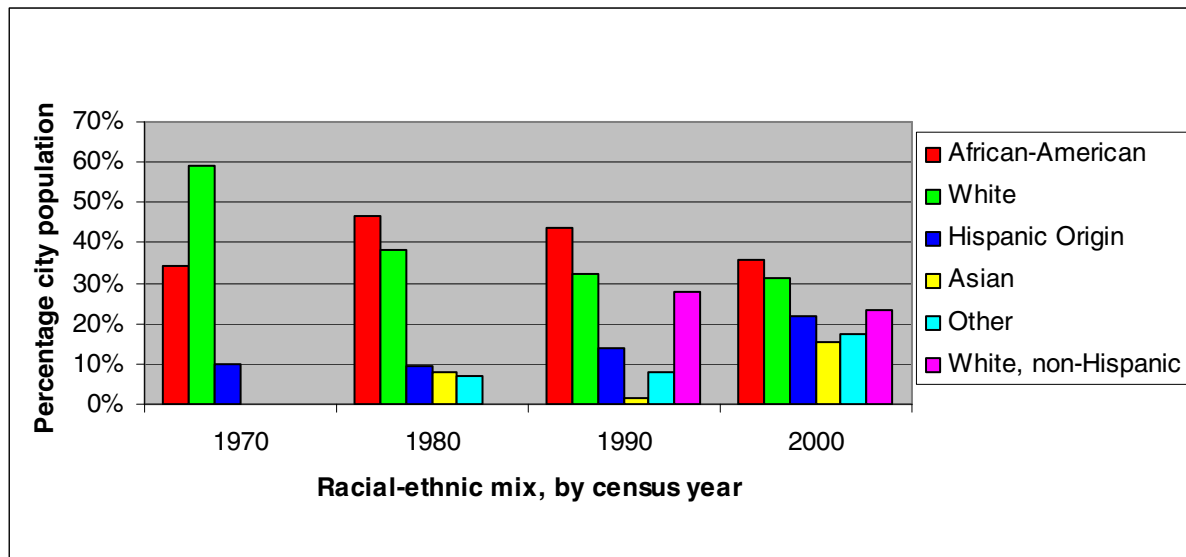


Figure 1. Oakland Demographic Change, 1970-2000.
Source: U.S. Census 1970b, 1980b, 1990a, 2000a.

While the overall population over this thirty-year period has increased by 10 percent, the number of children under 18 has remained almost constant. Thus the 99,871 children and youth in Oakland in 2000 constituted 25 percent of the population, down from 27.4 percent in 1970. Again, however, the slight decrease in proportion is less portentous than the racial/ethnic shift,

⁶ Figure 1 is calculated from Census data (Medrich et al. 1982, Oakland Chamber of Commerce 1983, U.S. Census 1990a, U.S. Census 2000a). "Hispanic" in 1970 consisted of all individuals with Spanish surname or language, and as in all four census years, may be of any race. "Other" consisted of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Native American, and "other races." In 1980, "Asian" included Pacific Islanders, as it did in 1990 (but not in 2000). "Other" in 1980-2000 included American Indian and "other races." For 2000, "Other" is the author's calculation and includes people reporting ancestry of Pacific Islanders, American Indian or Alaskan native, "some other race," or "2 or more races."

detailed in Figure 2.⁷ While in 1970, 43 percent of children under 18 were white, by 2000, their numbers had dwindled to 21 percent, with only 11 percent of these being non-Hispanic whites.

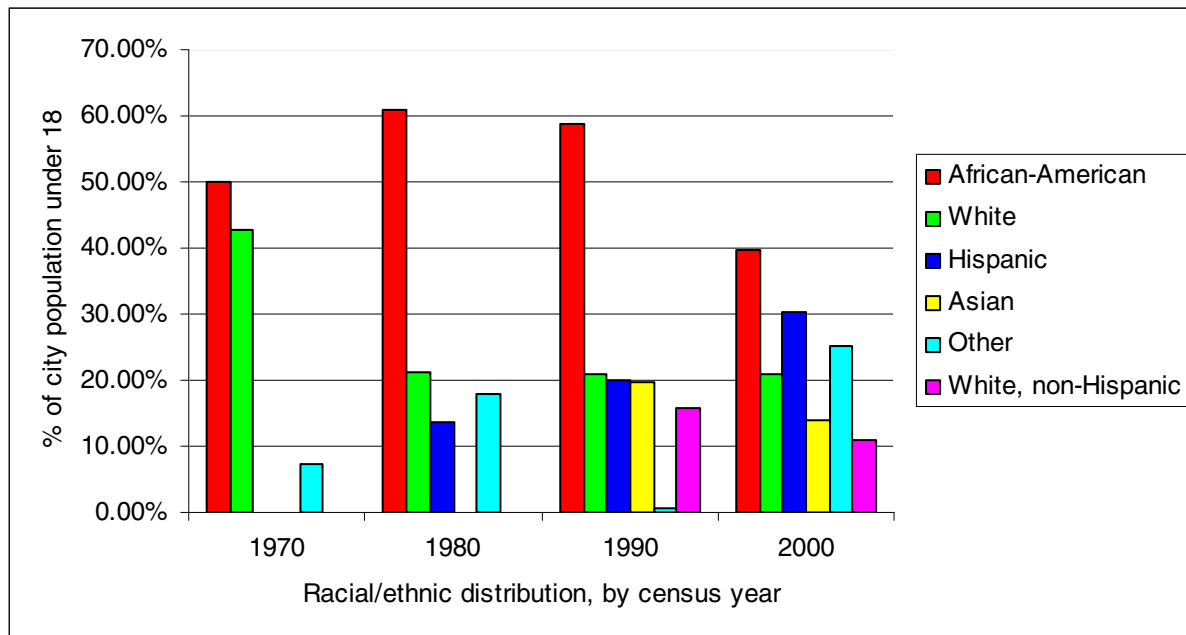


Figure 2. Changing Demographics of Oakland's Children and Youth, 1970-2000.
Source: Census 1970b, 1980b, 1990a, 2000b.

Schrag (1999) suggests that the increasing distinctions between the perceived users of public services – the young, the poor, immigrants, people of color – and the aging, white California electorate contributed to the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. Asked about libraries closing as a result of Proposition 13, initiative co-author Howard Jarvis said: “It doesn’t bother me a damn bit...because most of the children they’re for can’t read” (Rubin 1985, 108). Racism

⁷ Figure 2 is based on the author’s calculations from census data. In 1970, “Hispanic” consists of all individuals with Spanish surname or language, and as in all four census years, may be of any race. “Other” consists of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Native American, and “other races.” In 1980, “Asian” includes Pacific Islanders, as it does in 1990. “Other” includes American Indian and “other races.” Hispanic measures individuals “of Spanish origin,” a new definition. In 2000, “Other” includes Pacific Islander and Native American categories as well as “two or more races” and “some other race,” the latter designation identifying fully 16,248 children, or 16 percent of Oakland children enumerated in the 2000 Census.

and suspicion of others contributed to voter alienation that unraveled the collective basis for “collective consumption” throughout the state.

Demographic changes also tell a story about how needs in Oakland have changed, and so might influence how the city spends what revenues it still has. For example, the percentage of total households headed by a single parent went from 7 percent in 1970 to a high of 16 percent in 1980, resting at 12 percent of households in 2000. At the same time, the percentage of households with income below the poverty line – an artificial number considerably lower than what is needed to support a household in the costly Bay Area -- has inched upwards from 17 percent of households in 1970 to 19 percent of households in 2000.

Collective Capacity in Oakland 1970-2000

In some ways, Oakland had its economic peak in 1950 (as measured by employment rates and public spending), before deindustrialization and racial disputes fragmented the city’s capacity and willingness to provide for the commonweal. Oakland did not share in the growth and prosperity of the Bay Area in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1960s unemployment in Oakland was roughly twice the national average, and among minority youth it was nearly 50 percent (Rubin 1985).

Thus Oakland was already in a weakened economic state when Proposition 13 sharply decreased revenue from property tax assessments as a source of state funding. The initiative froze property tax assessments at 1975 levels, and restricted increases to 2 percent annually for inflation, until the property changed hands, at which point it could be reassessed at the purchase price. The tax rate was limited to 1 percent of each parcel, and local agencies, including schools, were effectively prohibited from issuing any new bonds, with only a few exceptions (Schrag 1999). Rubin documents the after-effects in Oakland, noting that the city immediately suffered a

4.5 percent cut in overall expenditures – a softer-than-expected hit ameliorated in part by fee increases grandfathered in before Proposition 13, and in part by state bailout funds. By 1982, however, the impact of four lean budget years was significant, leading to what Rubin called “a steady deterioration of the city’s capacity to provide services” (1985, 226).

There were three other important events in the post-Proposition 13 story of Oakland revenues for children – the recession of the early 1990s, the Kids First initiative of 1996, and the boom of the late 1990s, stemming largely from the rising fortunes of high-technology companies in the South Bay whose influence was felt even in Oakland. The effects of each of these historical moments can be seen in Oakland budgetary allotments.

In 1996, the city’s voters passed an initiative that required 2.5 percent of unrestricted revenues to be directed towards services that would benefit children and youth, above and beyond those services already funded in the 1995-1996 budget. Dubbed the Kids First initiative, this funding stream in 2003-04 directed almost \$8 million additional dollars towards non-profit and/or public school programs in Oakland (Oakland Policy Budget 03-05). In contrast, in 1995, the city of Oakland gave about \$200,000 to private, nonprofit agencies serving children and youth.

Collective and Privatized Consumption in Oakland 1970-2000.

*Schools*⁸

Schools tell a mixed story of the links between collective consumption and private consumption. On the one hand, many parents are dissatisfied with the public school system, and for some groups, students are exiting the system in droves. On the other hand, public

⁸ Most of the funding for Oakland schools comes from state sources, although federal sources of money are also important. Thus including this category diverges from the rest of this paper, which has focused on city-provided services. Yet so much of children’s lives fall within schools – their time, social networks and institutional contexts – that it seemed crucial to consider the ebbs and flows of education budgets as well.

expenditures, as measured by the average daily attendance (ADA) allotment, have not gone down in the last decade, but rather have increased. Our ability to ascertain how much of that ADA is distributed to the classroom is hampered by the fact that special (and expensive) services provided by the school district have greatly expanded over this time. In addition, school budgets in more affluent areas increasingly bear the imprint of parent-raised dollars, which vary widely across the district, heightening inequality between schools, while increasing considerably (beyond the “official number”) the dollars spent per child in the affluent Oakland hills schools.

From 1970 through 2000, the percentage of Oakland’s children in elementary and high schools who attended public school hovered around 86 percent, from a high of 87.9 percent in 1970, to a low of 85.7 percent in 1980.⁹ But the seeming constancy of these numbers obscures a great discrepancy and a classic statistical portrait of white flight: in 2000, fully 44 percent of white children under 18 went to private school, while only 11 percent of African-Americans and 9 percent of Asians did (U.S. Census 2000a).

One report, by the Educational Testing Service, assessed parent satisfaction with schools nationally and found that Oakland had the second highest level of parental dissatisfaction in the nation. Oakland parents also registered among the highest levels of intensity of dissatisfaction, with almost 21 percent feeling so dissatisfied with public schools that they wanted to move. Nearly 55 percent of Oakland parents who sent their children to private school did so because they were dissatisfied with the public schools, as opposed to 30 percent in San Francisco, a demographically similar school district (Carnevale and Desrochers 1999). The city’s more than 50 private and parochial schools make up one-third of the total schools, public and private, in Oakland (Coburn and Riley 2000).

⁹ Census data, calculated by the author (U.S. Census 1970c, 1980a, 1990b, 2000c).

Proportionately speaking, the students exiting the public school system at the greatest rate are, not surprisingly, white children, who made up 19 percent of those enrolled in public elementary schools in 1970, and only 5.8 percent in 1998. These figures need to be viewed in light of the demographic shift of Oakland from a city with a majority white population in 1970 to one in which the total non-Hispanic white population registered just over 20 percent in 2000. (See Figure 1.) But African-Americans also are rejecting public education; in absolute terms, African-American families send the greatest number of children to private (including parochial) schools. In 2000, 2,435 of the Oakland students attending K-8 private schools were African-American (U.S. Census 2000a).

How do these enrollment trends track with public spending? At the state level, California spending on education overall varied according to the state's economic fortunes, but stayed consistently lower than the national average. California's K-12 expenditures per student, which have been below the national average since before the mid-1970s, plummeted in the early 1990s, but recovered a few years later, until dropping off again when the market collapsed in 2001. (See Figure 3.)¹⁰

¹⁰ In Figure 3, data for 1977-78, 1978-9, 1989-90 and 2001-02 are based on estimates, derived by Ed-Data from the National Education Association's "Ranking and Estimates 2002-03" report.



Figure 3. California's K-12 Expenditures per Student as a Percentage of the U.S. National Average.
Source: Education Data Partnership 2004.

Over this same time period, however, Oakland's per-child spending went from below the state average to above it. According to Rand California, per child spending by the Oakland school district was \$4,415 in 1990 and rose to \$6,676 in 2000. Thus while children in Oakland were exiting the public school system, public expenditures on schools actually increased.

Two important caveats make it hard to gauge trends in Oakland's public school funding. The first is the growth in special education services required by children who qualify for them and who are thus mandated to receive them by federal and state law. However, in part because of California's byzantine school-funding process, it is extremely difficult to quantify exactly how much of each ADA dollar goes to special education.

An additional factor complicating the picture of public school funding is the role played by each individual school's parent body and the funds parents raise to supplement state and federal ADA allotments. These essentially private subsidies contribute vastly to inequality between the schools of Oakland, as affluent families whose children attend schools in the

Oakland hills raise six-figure sums to contribute to discretionary spending on art, music, and physical education programs, field trips, science equipment and library services. In comparison, many schools in “the flats,” the low-income areas of the city, do not have PTAs, or if they do, these parent organizations raise much less money.

For example, Hoover Elementary, with about 530 students, reports that its PTA, with a membership of one, raised \$1,200 in 2002. In contrast, Hillcrest, a school of about half the size, raised \$150,000. While in some other school districts parent-raised funds are distributed across the locality’s schools to “raise all boats,” in Oakland, parents of widely varying fundraising capacities, whose children already attend schools with significant class segregation, contribute to raising just their own child’s boat. The parents’ association at Redwood Heights Elementary School, for example, raised \$106,000 in 2002, which went to fund a librarian, field trips, office equipment, a lunch supervisor and classroom grants for teachers, all at Redwood Heights. At Horace Mann Elementary School in East Oakland, in contrast, a \$900 take from parent fundraisers in 2002 amounted to \$1.77 per student (Tucker and Gammon 2003).

In addition to intra-district inequity, however, there are also great disparities between districts in parents’ capacity to raise funds. The adjoining city of Piedmont holds several fundraisers per year to raise \$1.3 million. In Woodside parents have raised a similar figure for fewer kids – adding about \$3,000 per child to the coffers, while in Menlo Park, families raise, on average, \$900,000 per year (Tucker and Gammon 2003). These totals are often widely publicized and touted by the districts themselves as evidence of their caring and active parent community, and surely act to lure Oakland parents of school-age children to move to these districts. After all, while Oakland’s official per-child spending may be greater, Oakland’s student population is a complicated one, with special education students, English language learners and other children with special needs. When parents in these wealthy suburban districts

raise such significant funds, they know those monies go to their own children – offering “collective consumption” of a limited kind, where the collectivity is for “*our* children.” It is likely that the disparity in parent-raised funds contributes to the lower percentage of children who attend public school in Oakland, when compared to wealthier neighboring districts like Piedmont, Orinda, Moraga and Lafayette.

Indeed, these parent-raised funds, both within and outside of the district, do more than make difficult the task of evaluating public spending on children. They also expose a weakness in concepts like “privatization” and “collective consumption.” While these notions might appear mutually exclusive, parent-raised monies suggest a middle ground, one where the collectivity is so limited that the public is in effect privatized. Like the phenomenon of gated communities, which wall off the wider public in favor of a community restricted to others with similar social and economic profiles, parent-raised monies target their own schools in their own communities. A form of self-taxation, these funds are not then diverted to the needs of “other people’s children.”

Thus while public school spending in Oakland has risen in recent years, funding does not come close to pre-proposition 13 statewide levels, nor to national ones. In addition, the actual impact on the classroom is unclear, mitigated as it is by special needs spending and complicated by private parent fundraising. At the same time, education is becoming privatized in Oakland, to the degree that parents can afford to make the switch. Public and private consumption is linked with regard to schools, although the relationship is a complex one.

Parks and Recreation, the Museum, and Libraries.

Oakland’s funding of Parks and Recreation and of the city’s museum tell an even starker story about the withering of “collective consumption.” (The library is a different case treated

separately below.) Oakland Parks and Recreation (OPR) manages the city’s playgrounds, public pools, recreation centers, and parks, and thus figures prominently in any accounting of Oakland’s role in the lives of its children, second perhaps only to the school district. The OPR was once heralded as among the best in the nation, according to oral histories of Oakland residents, who describe OPR programs where children could drop by after school for high quality, free activities in the 1960s and 1970s (Thorne 2003).

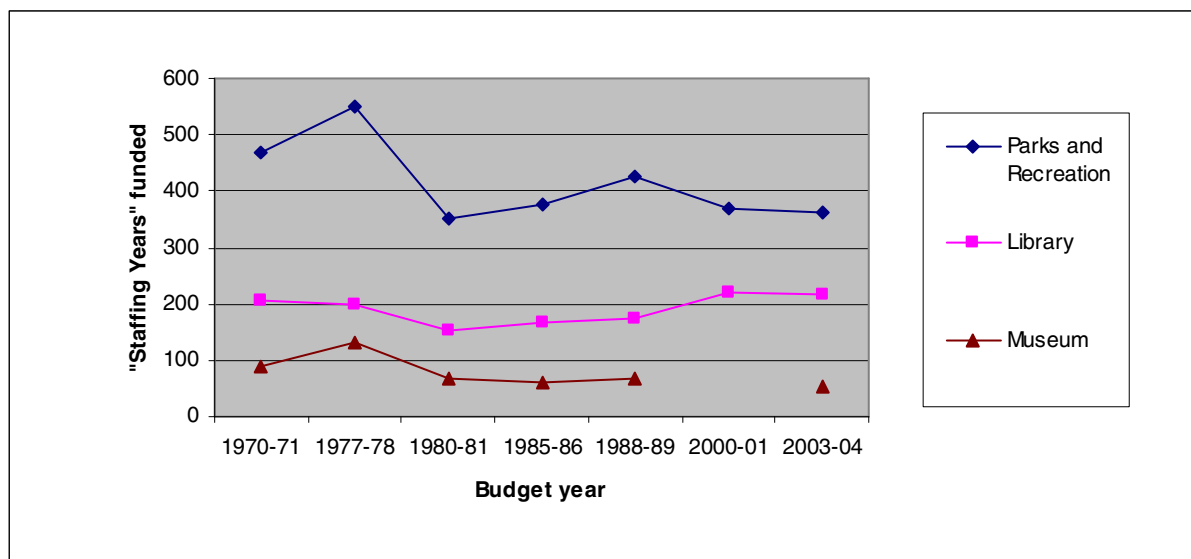


Figure 4. Oakland Public Services, 1970-2003.
Source: Rubin 1985, Oakland 1991-92 Adopted Policy Budget, Oakland 2003-5 Adopted Policy Budget.

Figure 4 shows the historical trajectory of the department in terms of the number of staffing years that were funded¹¹: Parks and Recreation peaks in 1977 before plummeting in the 1980s, and never fully recovers its staffing level of 25 years ago. In 1970, the OPR funded 467 positions. Thirty years later, even though the city’s population had grown by 10 percent, while

¹¹ “Staffing years,” or the funds required to hire a full-time employee, are used here instead of dollar figures for ease of comparison; dollar figures are difficult to compare without consideration of inflation and other factors. Museum data for 2003 are computed by the author from distinct “cultural arts and marketing” sub-units within the city budget due to the fact that the city changed the way it reported funding. Data for museum expenditures for the year 2000 are missing.

the child population remained essentially the same, the OPR funded 363 positions, representing a 22 percent decrease from 1970 levels. The numbers of facilities in operation show a similar pattern of decline: while the number of parks maintained by the OPR was 154 in 1991, that figure was down to 106 by 2003 (Rubin 1985, Oakland 2003-5 Adopted Policy Budget).

The Oakland Museum is a four-level art, natural history and cultural facility with educational programs and links to some Oakland public schools. Public spending on the museum is similar to the case of the Parks and Recreation Department: as Figure 4 shows, the numbers peak in 1977, before declining sharply in 1980 and leveling out thereafter.

The Oakland Public Library is an interesting case, documented by Rubin in his 1985 thesis. While the library suffered some cuts in the post-Proposition 13 years, the head of the library also proved effective at marshalling private fundraising and volunteer efforts, as well as fostering a strong constituency to help defend the library against further cutbacks. Some of these efforts might explain the library's full recovery by 2000 of staffing positions lost since 1970. While 20 percent of the library's staffing positions were cut after 1977, subsequent budgets restored the full complement of library personnel, the only department to do so among the ones studied here.

Public Safety

Public safety is the only one among the government programs investigated here that does not explicitly target children in much of its programming; a city's public safety of course benefits everyone who lives in it. At the same time, however, interview data from the larger research project of which this paper is a part suggest that for parents, public safety has a significant impact on children's lives: It can influence how much time children spend inside, how much physical activity they do, and how much supervision or entertainment they need.

Interviewees testified that dangerous neighborhoods and concern for child safety led them to limit children to inside play only, which then led them to buy electronic toys to enable the kids to stay amused indoors. One respondent, Lashona, talked about trying to keep her two school-aged daughters safe in her home, located next to what she said was a “crack-house”:

Well, we don't allow them to go out because the street is right here... It's just so dangerous around here. You know, with all the drug traffic and everything. Girl, this drug-infested area – I'm trying to get somewhere in San Leandro or Hayward somewhere, where it's nice... You wouldn't want to be caught over here at night!

Public safety has a paradoxical relationship with public spending. Figure 5 depicts the trend in the numbers of police-reported incidents of seven major crimes in Oakland.¹² These crimes include homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, and larceny. While the number of these reported crimes increased from 1970 to 1980, at the same time that the population *decreased* by 6 percent, the incidence of these crimes has declined dramatically since then, plummeting to just 13,408 in 2000, or just 54 percent of the 1970 number, even though the total population is 10 percent greater.

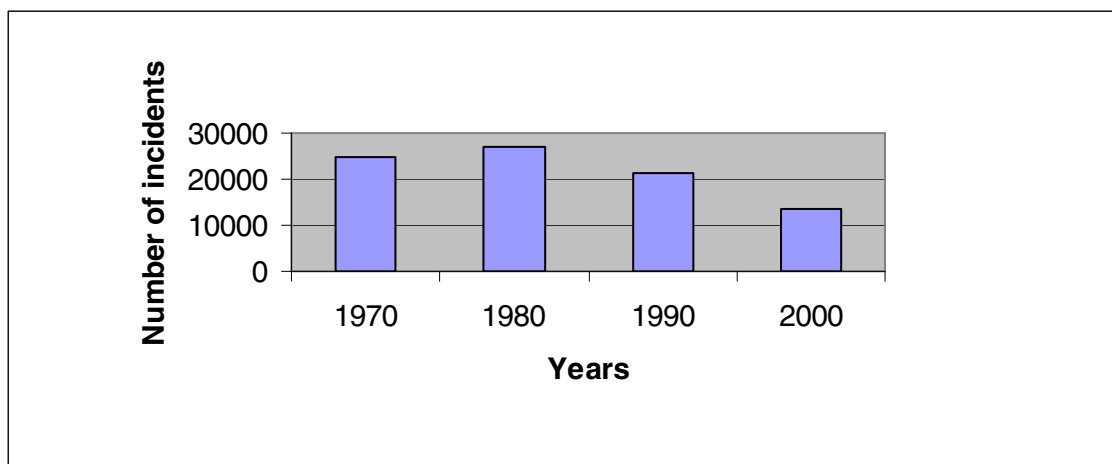


Figure 5. Incidence of Seven Major Offenses in Oakland, 1970-2000.
Source: Data provided by the California Department of Justice, Criminal Justice Statistics Center.

¹² Figure 5 shows the “California Crime Index” for Oakland, relying on police reports of seven major crimes.

What was the trajectory of Oakland public spending on police during this period? As Figure 6 shows below, spending on public safety as expressed in “staffing years,” the most easily comparable funding measurement, has hovered a little over 1,000 for the last 25-odd years, jumping to 1241 in 2000 before settling back down to 1181 in 2003.¹³

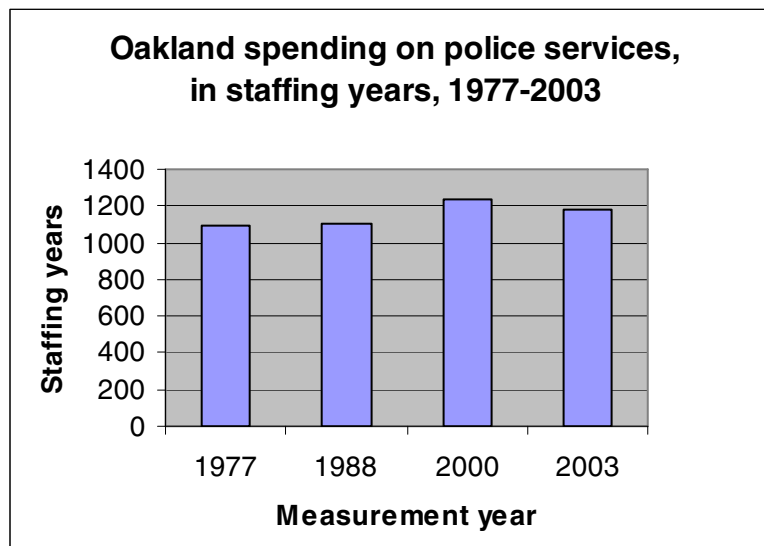


Figure 6. Oakland Spending on Police Services, in Staffing Years, 1977-2003.
Source: Oakland policy budgets 1981-2, 1991-2, and 2003-05.

These staffing numbers do not track with either population growth or public safety, as measured by the incidence of seven major crimes. The drop in major crimes in Oakland mimics national trends of improved public safety, and there is much debate in the criminology literature about whether demographic changes or pervasive reforms in police methods have brought about the phenomenon. Within the limited range of variation in police staffing such as Oakland experienced from 1970-2000, however, public spending on police, while certainly important, does not appear to have predictive value for public safety in Oakland.

¹³ Figure 6 reports “staffing years” of both uniformed and civilian personnel in the Oakland police department.

Still, the perception continues of Oakland's fraying public safety. This perception has less to do with the historical record than perhaps a comparison with surrounding areas, which have also experienced sharp downturns in crime. The Oakland Fund for Children and Youth offer the following summary of 1999 crime rates per 1,000 residents for Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda County. As Figure 7 shows, only rape and arson were less prevalent in Oakland than the rest of the county as a whole:

	Murder and Man- slaughter	Rape	Robbery	Aggra- vated Assault	Burglary	Larceny- Theft	Motor Vehicle Theft	Arson
City of Oakland	0.19	0.90	7.09	10.49	16.27	49.35	13.78	0.85
City of Berkeley	0.01	0.31	4.06	4.45	13.61	55.87	9.16	0.34
Alameda County	0.01	1.70	0.08	1.60	6.60	31.00	4.60	1.60

Figure 7. Crime Rates Per 1,000 Residents in 1999, Selected Areas.
Source: Oakland Fund for Children and Youth 2001.

Thus the public safety component of the social context for childrearing consumption is a contradictory one: while public spending on police in Oakland remained, for the most part, level across 30 years, public safety improved dramatically. At the same time, interview data suggest perceptions of increased danger to kids cause parents to keep their children inside and spend more on their children's indoor entertainment needs.

Summary of Findings

While Oakland's child population did not change significantly from 1970-2000, the provision of services to Oakland's children has. One important new funding source has

expanded the revenue streams going towards children's needs: the Kids First initiative, which mandated about \$72 million to be spent on children over 12 years. At the same time, these sums appear small when compared to the total revenue picture presented by the City of Oakland. The annual budget for just the city's Parks and Recreation department was about \$29 million in 2003 alone.

Kids First! aside, the trajectory of money spent on services for children by the city of Oakland, as measured in two areas – parks and recreation and the city museum – has been one of decline since 1970. While libraries evinced a decrease at first and then rebounded, overall the provision of public services for children has withered over the past thirty years.

The case of schools is more complex, but also crucial. Even the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth (OFCY), the organization set up to distribute the Kids First! monies among public and non-profit applicants, concedes that it administers only 1.8 percent of the total money spent on children by the Oakland Unified School District alone. As the OFCY observes, "In general, funds made available for school make up the vast majority of funds we use as a society to ensure the pro-social development and future for our youth" (OFCY 2003, 65).

While the racial/ethnic composition of the public schools has changed dramatically, and the proportion of those seeking other options has increased, these changes have not tracked with per-child spending by the Oakland Unified School District, generally a conduit for state and federal and not city-level funding. Rand and Educational Data Partnership figures show that spending has increased over the last 15 years, albeit not as fast as the national average. School advocates argue that the student population has altered significantly so that children need more services. Now the district must offer more programs to address special education needs, forestall drop-out rates, provide remedial help, or address linguistic barriers to education for the significant proportion who come to school with English as a second language (e.g., fully one-

third of Oakland public school students in 1998). These contrasting developments make it difficult to demonstrate a direct relationship between public funding developments in late 20th century Oakland and individual childrearing decisions with regard to schooling. In addition, at the level of parent perception, Oakland's spending increases do not bring per-child spending even close to the average in other high-cost states such as New York or New Jersey. Thus while Oakland Unified has increased its spending over the last 15 years, two kinds of comparisons may put these increases into context: comparisons of school spending in other states and comparisons with neighboring districts who advertise their impressive parent-raised contributions which supplement per-pupil funding. Parents who make these comparisons when evaluating the school district may view Oakland's increases as too little too late.

Public safety is even more paradoxical because the safety record appears to bear little or no relation to the public spending on police, at least when one considers the small degree of variation in staffing experienced in Oakland since 1977. Oakland has become much safer, despite some claims and perceptions to the contrary. As in the case of public schooling, perceptions of public safety depend on what comparison families are making – in both cases, the view does not appear to be a historical one, but rather a contemporaneous comparison with other places.

Private Spending

The world of private choices for parents – from private transportation to private schools to private lessons – is enormous, and a thorough treatment is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we can view one example of private after-school tutoring services to offer a glimpse into the “privatization of childhood” of which Thorne (2003) wrote.

In 1992, in addition to the market for ad hoc individual private tutors, there were four main corporate players providing after-school tutoring services for children – Sylvan Learning Centers, Britannica Learning Centers, Huntington Learning Centers, and Kumon. These companies offered services nationwide with over 1300 centers combined. With the exception of Kumon, these services were primarily for children perceived as having academic trouble, and who needed extra help to catch up. That year, entrepreneurs started the after-school educational services firm SCORE! in Northern California, specifically because there was no one providing after-school center-based help to children who were doing just fine in school, but whose parents wanted to give them an academic advantage with extra work in a supervised location.

SCORE! started in Palo Alto, with extensive ties to its founder's home school of Stanford University, but soon opened a center in the Oakland hills, where concerned middle-class parents could avail themselves of school-outside-school. In 1992, the company's one center in Palo Alto made \$5,296 in earnings. By 2003, SCORE! had achieved about \$60 million in earnings nationwide, while the Montclair site was making an annual profit of approximately \$500,000 (Glenn Tripp, SCORE! manager, personal communication). SCORE! had tapped into a lucrative market of parents who were hungry for private solutions to a central problem – their children's academic preparation.

Paradoxically, this explosion of growth occurred during the decade that the Oakland schools increased their ADA allotments. Comments from Lashona, the mother quoted earlier, are typical among parents I interviewed. Talking about her plans to move, she said she was considering nearby Berkeley so her two daughters would have a better chance:

Because Berkeley is a very educated town. And there is nothing but education all around. There is always something going on to do with education. So I know they would learn double what they're learning here. Because this town has nothing. It has nothing to offer. Nothing. And so...San Leandro is even better because they have money. See that's the thing. They have money to put into the schools. They're [Oakland's] taking money out of these schools and we don't even have. I mean, we don't have anything as it is. They want to close down the lunchrooms and stuff....Oakland just don't have it.

Discussion

A review of the trends in public spending on children in Oakland over the last thirty years offers a mixed story. Certainly in large part, public spending has declined, as the budgets for the departments of Parks and Recreation and the Museum show. Yet library and police funding has largely stayed level, and school spending, while initially dropping, increased over the last ten years. As stated above, we must view that increase with important caveats – mediated as it is by parent fundraising in Oakland and neighboring/competing districts, and muddied by rises in special education services and help to children with limited English proficiency, among other programs.

Given this context, what can we suggest is going on vis a vis privatization of childrearing? Certainly there are limits to what we can claim is the influence of local spending, most importantly because of the potential impact of national trends, such as “the human capital arms race” (Michael Hout, personal communication). Families may seek out private academic services, for example, because they perceive an escalating need to increase their children’s learning, perhaps to improve their chances in an increasingly competitive college market. This trend may occur regardless of local spending on schools, or even of perceived school quality.

In addition, the case of parent-raised funds for public schools, and their contribution to the inequality across and within school districts, shed light on one problem with the notion of collective versus individual consumption – that is, the difficulty of defining the collective. One alternative is to think of childrearing consumption as taking place within concentric rings, with the individual and family at the center, spreading out to ever wider communities – perhaps one’s carpool group, followed by one’s classroom or school, followed by one’s neighborhood, and so

on. Thus “collective consumption” becomes more dynamic, relying on mutable definitions of the collective doing the consuming.

That said, however, we can offer here a sketch of the potential impact of a shrinking public sphere, or perhaps more importantly, *the perception* of a shrinking public sphere. These findings suggest three likely effects of declining public spending, which in turn affects how families make private spending decisions vis a vis their children: direct compensation, public squalor and ambient privatization. While these factors overlap, they each can be viewed as a distinct possible outcome of the links between public and private spending.

Direct Compensation

In the most straightforward arena of impact, some families might purchase childrearing services either formerly provided by public entities or still publicly provided but in such an inferior manner that supplementation from private sources is needed. In this area, families are objectively replacing or supplementing public provisioning to meet needs that are commonly agreed upon.

Public Squalor

In 1958, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) famously observed America was a nation of private affluence and public squalor, where we have filthy streets and clean houses, poor schools and expensive television. Those who can, exit the public sphere. Those who have no other option but to stay make up the minority cast adrift on Saunders’ water-logged raft of a welfare state. The public then becomes the province of the needy, which, in a vicious cycle, further discourages participation in the public sphere by people of greater means. In addition, as

many scholars of the state have contended, when the composition – in racial/ethnic, gender, age or other terms – of those who receive services differs markedly from the electorate as a whole, support for funding those services dwindles accordingly. Thus, as Schrag argues, the passage of Proposition 13 reflected the increasing racial/ethnic differences between the electorate and California’s children and youth. They become, as Linda Gordon (1994) observed, “pitied but not entitled.”

Ambient Privatization

Declining public spending also contributes to privatization in a more abstract way, which occurs in the realm of beliefs and perceptions illustrated throughout this paper. As “the public” becomes ever more associated with squalor, individuals find it more and more difficult to recognize stability or even increases in public funding levels. Thus, despite shifts in public spending trends, privatization in one arena can persist and potentially even spread, as private solutions come to be viewed by those who have the means to adopt them as the only way to tackle common problems.

This last area is one in which future research would be well rewarded. We need more information to be able to ascertain how perceptions of a withering public sphere take root, and how they respond to external changes. Does disinvestment in one area spread ambient privatization to other areas? Are particular arenas for public spending more influential than others in seeding widespread hope or despair in public services? Is there a “tipping point” after which the public is perceived not as the boat lifting us all, but rather as a waterlogged raft? How are perceptions shared across communities and particular social networks, and how do they differ? Future research can help us take stock of ambient privatization and its effects on both individual and collective consumption related to childrearing.

Conclusion

When we consider the demographic changes Oakland has experienced over the last 30 years alongside changes in spending on public schools, we discover a two-step process of disengagement with the collectivity and its consumption. Many urban families with the means to exit public institutions do so, choosing private school, private pools and private teams, which results in their ever more tenuous connection to urban life. Changes in their work/family configurations – a job loss or salary reduction, an additional child born, an unprecedented increase in tuition – can cause these families to exit the urban collectivity altogether by heading to the suburbs and a “more private public.” Thus we can perhaps view the disengagement with the public evinced by the urban middle class as one step in a progressive decoupling from the collective consumption that is the city.

Clearly, the most significant implication of the trends in public spending (however gentle the slope downward) concerns the effect of these trends on the lives of lower income kids in the central city. Neither should we underestimate the impact of these trends on some inhabitants’ fiercely held belief that “Oakland has nothing” to offer. The collective consumption that Castells argued would reproduce the worker and, more importantly, redistribute some of the advantages enjoyed by the affluent to improve the opportunities and childrearing resources of the poor, is being replaced by individual consumption. As people with the money, energy, and will to disengage from the institutions and services that make up public life increasingly choose to do so, they abandon the thousands of children and parents who can’t. Under these circumstances, child advocates must not only fight the actual downward spiral of public spending on childrearing, but also, and perhaps equally as important, combat the perception of that very same spiral.

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