

# *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*

---

*Volume 61, Issue 2*

2008

*Article 81*

---

## Higher Ground: New Hope for the Working Poor and Their Children

Greg J. Duncan\*

Aletha C. Huston†

Thomas S. Weisner‡

\*,  
†,  
‡,

### **Industrial Relations, Politics, and Government**

*Higher Ground: New Hope for the Working Poor and Their Children.* By Greg J. Duncan, Aletha C. Huston, and Thomas S. Weisner. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007. 166 pp. ISBN 978-0-87154-325-7, \$24.95 (cloth).

*Higher Ground* joins a growing literature depicting the lives of economically disadvantaged families in the United States and proposing policies to set them on a positive course. Authored by three leading social scientists who offer distinct academic perspectives, this book spells out in detail what it takes to create a package of policies that is responsive to the needs of poor families, cost-effective, and politically palatable. At the heart of this analysis is a study of a bold employment-based initiative, called New Hope, that was implemented from 1994 to 1998 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Policymakers attempting to develop effective strategies for tackling poverty are fortunate when evidence collected through the “gold standard” of random assignment design comes their way, and New Hope is an illuminating example of how such evidence is created. Hence, this book is valuable for what it tells us not only about strategies to fight poverty, but also about how to generate evidence on strategies to fight poverty.

The book, structured like an academic paper, is essentially in five main parts, describing the circumstances that drove the need for an employment program in Milwaukee, the program design’s technical details, the research component of the project, the findings of that research, and, finally, lessons for national policy. Although the findings that emerged from New Hope are not earth-shattering—the effects on employment, income, and children’s achievement reported here are quite close to those found for other comparable employment programs that supplement earnings—the book is a worthy investment for readers who desire a close-up view of a program painstakingly built on the belief that “if you work, you should not be poor.” The richness and intimacy of this view are owing in large part to the authors’ choice, following the examples of several other investigations of poverty (such as David Hage’s *Reforming Welfare by Reforming Work*, which describes the lives of poor women in Minnesota’s welfare program), to complement their conventional institutional analysis

with extensive use of personal stories. Specifically, they give prominence to the first-hand accounts of three New Hope program participants.

The book begins with lively descriptions of New Hope supporters, including business leaders and community activists, and the economic and social circumstances that fueled their support. Adequate funding does not by itself ensure success in mounting a new social policy initiative, the authors show; also essential are passionate leaders with political savvy and an ability to inspire others. The first few chapters of the book also describe New Hope’s unique approach: a social contract with low-income individuals that offered an earnings supplement and, conditional on participants’ working a minimum of 30 hours per week, a generous menu of benefits, including health care and child care subsidies. New Hope also offered community service jobs to those who otherwise could not find work. Its delivery design, informed by an academically based life course development perspective, was also pragmatic, focusing on the creation of a user-friendly setting. For participants, this translated to accessible services that were seamless in their responsiveness to changing life circumstances (with the exception of the minimum work hours requirement).

The background discussion is followed by a chapter describing the characteristics of New Hope participants. Participation in New Hope was voluntary, which helped ensure a higher level of motivation among participants than among eligible non-participants. The authors argue that members in this self-selected group were not, on average, “seriously troubled,” were knowledgeable enough to understand the costs and benefits of a New Hope-like program, and lived by a set of values, goals, and schedules that were consistent with New Hope.

The next few chapters describe the research evaluation component of New Hope and the findings. The level of technical sophistication that is often demanded by these chapters could, unfortunately, discourage some readers. The chapter on evaluation, for example, could easily have been relegated to an appendix, leaving more space in the introductory chapters to highlight the beauty of random assignment design more broadly for informing social policy. That chapter also concludes with the potentially misleading pronouncement that “we now have a clear verdict on how much better or worse Inez, Elena, Lakeisha and other New Hope participants fared.” Although the New

Hope benefits and services ended, by design, in 1998, the extent of the program's success will not be clear until enough years have passed to evaluate the post-participation trajectory of its subjects' lives, and of the lives of their children. As for other programs designed along the same lines, New Hope provides a suggestive forecast, since the effectiveness of any such experiment will depend as much on implementation as on a continual offering of its services and benefits, and its success will vary under differing economic and political circumstances.

Three chapters describe the effects of New Hope. Here, the authors share several interesting nuggets that might be news even to poverty experts. For example, we learn that New Hope allowed some participants to cut back on their work hours without risking the loss of financial benefits; the program had a favorable pattern of effects for single men, most of whom had prior histories of incarceration; girls, in contrast, exhibited increased withdrawal and reduced self-esteem; and adolescents did not seem to take on more home responsibilities, partly because New Hope increased opportunities for use of organized care among younger sisters and brothers. The personal stories of the three New Hope participants are sprinkled throughout these chapters, deepening readers' understanding of the nuances of New Hope's successes and failures. These voices serve as reminders of the goals and aspirations of our work environments that much of us share despite our other differences. For example, a participant's description of a job she had resorted to before entering the program as "boring . . . nothing that I wanted . . . I felt like I wasn't doing anything" (p. 60) is not far removed from what many American workers might say of their jobs.

Although the summaries and insights in the book's earlier chapters raise excellent questions about what it would take to scale up a program like New Hope, the authors only lightly revisit these questions in the concluding chapters. Is it feasible to hire and train caseworkers who are enthusiastic, dedicated, and able to serve as counselors without taking on functions better left to therapists? Can such a program succeed without the leadership of three or four unique dedicated individuals, as described in Chapter 1? Does society have an obligation to support and improve the work circumstances of low-income workers who might have generally safe and adequate jobs but complain of feeling demeaned or bored? More generally, is it desirable or not for governments to support programs that are tailor-made for particular segments of the low-income population that are not "seriously troubled"?

The authors' circumspection regarding such questions is disappointing. (Perhaps these disappointing patches in the book can set the stage for *Higher Ground*, Volume 2?) I would also have liked to see more detail about New Hope's strategies for marketing the program and recruiting families, and more discussion of how these strategies might play out in other real-world settings. Relatedly, although the honesty with which the authors acknowledge problems that arose in implementing New Hope is to their credit, I wish they had suggested ways to address some of those problems. Few observers are better positioned to do so than they. For example, there might be creative ways to smooth earnings supplement payments so that participants do not experience monthly uncertainty in their total income. And the administrators of programs like New Hope might consider expanding and integrating program offerings to address the relationship, domestic violence, and drinking/drug use issues that were reported by half of the women in this study.

A smaller quibble concerns the book's sometimes compromised accessibility. For readers lacking a fairly advanced research background, the authors' shining passion for New Hope will be dimmed somewhat by the book's technical sections. The sidebars and figures scattered throughout the text are not particularly engaging, and the technical appendix will not enable uninitiated readers to understand the data. More helpful and enlivening would have been further concrete examples—selections from recruitment brochures, for example, photographs of New Hope staff, or vignettes illustrating a specific family's experiences.

All in all, *Higher Ground* is a must-read for readers who are professionally involved in poverty policy research as well as those who are not but are keenly interested in the subject. It gives clear voice to a social philosophy grounded in the belief that a suitably designed social contract can help overcome poverty by joining individual initiative with societal supports. The latter half of that formula is critical. Fundamentally motivating New Hope's advocates was the recognition that a great many low-income families need a safety net if they are to pull themselves out of want; as a participant said, "You knew if things didn't [go well], if the transition wasn't real smooth, if anything unexpected happened, you'd have something there to catch you" (p. 92). Through its detailed case study, this book also gives readers a basis for judging the practicality of the social philosophy behind New Hope for shaping real-world policy.

Can New Hope work on a larger scale, under conditions different from those in the trial site,

without eventuating in yet another intractable bureaucracy? Perhaps the authors' reticence about this and other large questions is, in part, calculated to stimulate further discussion.

*Lisa A. Gennetian*

Senior Research Director  
The Brookings Institution  
Washington, D.C.

### **Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions**

*Worker Safety under Siege: Labor, Capital, and the Politics of Workplace Safety in a Deregulated World.* Edited by Vernon Mogensen. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2006. xxix, 242 pp. ISBN 0-7656-1448-0, \$69.95 (cloth); 0-7656-1449-9, \$24.95 (paper).

The central claim made by Vernon Mogensen, the editor of *Worker Safety under Siege*, as well as by most of the volume's contributors, is that deregulation is destroying workplace safety and health. Among the forces and conditions abetting this trend are political and corporate opposition to new regulation, poor enforcement of existing laws and regulations, weakened worker participation in health and safety, and aspects of globalization that have impeded uniform regulation of workplace conditions across national borders. The volume makes a strong case for this general argument. Some of the high points, for me, are the authors' discussions of a societal double standard that devalues the importance of workplace death, the almost unassailable strength of corporate power within the current political setting, and the particularly high risks faced by immigrant workers. A recurring *positive* theme is that workplaces are safer when strong regulations go together with worker participation in an employer's health and safety program, particularly in workplaces with strong and active unions.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed occupational safety and health activism in most advanced capitalist societies. This book's contributors demonstrate that the rights of workers that drew the most attention in those decades—notably, the right to refuse hazardous work, to be informed of workplace hazards, and to participate in joint health and safety committees with management—have since eroded. Most recently, the Bush administration has withdrawn numerous proposed safety standards of both OSHA and MSHA (the Mine Safety and Health Administration), while expanding

voluntary employer safety and health programs and establishing partnerships with businesses that exclude workers and their unions.

Throughout the book, society is depicted as seeming to accept a double standard: causing a death through negligence is a felony when it occurs outside the workplace, but a misdemeanor when it occurs on-the-job. Worldwide, legal punishment of employers is rare and typically less severe than legal punishment for violations of environmental or financial rules. The default perception is that workplace deaths and injuries are unexpected and unintentional happenings, or "accidents"—a point of view Jordan Barab roundly rejects, arguing that because workplace hazards are usually identifiable and the harm from them foreseeable, the term "accident" is rarely apt. Rory O'Neill further argues that negligent employers can almost always kill with impunity, even when major workplace disasters arouse public outrage and a demand for laws to end industrial manslaughter. OSHA is criticized for prosecuting fewer than 10% of the employers who, as shown by its own investigations, have knowingly sent workers into dangerous situations. A global campaign by unions in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and other nations demands corporate accountability, including incarceration of offenders, when workplace safety standards are ignored. Two "corporate killing laws" in Canada and Australia as of 2003 represent notable successes in this area.

Society appears to treat the workplace deaths of some employees, such as astronauts, more seriously than those of day laborers or construction workers. Particularly troubling are the deaths of immigrants and the poor, who do some of America's dirtiest and most dangerous work. Laura Rhodes points out that the U.S. economy is increasingly reliant upon foreign-born workers at the expense of their safety and health. Workers who speak little or no English must cope with safety manuals, signs, and instructions they do not understand, leading to increasing rates of fatal injuries among foreign-born workers. This problem is of unknown current magnitude—data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics do not include illegal or undocumented workers—and its future is blurred by the shifting, turbulent politics of immigration.

Vernon Morgensen observes that although corporations claim safety regulations are too expensive, businesses routinely overestimate compliance costs as a tactic to oppose regulation. Free-market advocates claim that deregulation's benefits will trickle down to workers, yet class stratification and inequality in the United States are growing, producing the worst disparity between rich and poor of any industrial democracy. Out-