As reports of foreclosures and job loss began to increase with the recent downturn of the economy, concerns about the economy’s impact on children also emerged. Articles such as “Recession exacts an emotional toll on children” (New York Times, 11/12/09) and “140,000 of state’s kids in poverty” (Star Tribune, 10/01/09) suggested that children had become “hidden casualties” of the recession. Many of these reports also noted that an increasing number of families caught up in the economic downturn were experiencing the hardships of income loss for the first time. The most striking observation reported about “newly poor” families struggling with foreclosures, job loss, reductions in income, and loss of access to healthcare was that they were newcomers to the social-services landscape.

There is a poignant history to the experiences of children in newly poor families—a circumstance that is not unique to our own times, having appeared almost a century ago during the Great Depression and as recently as the 1980s with the dislocation of workers that accompanied the restructuring of the U.S. economy. Each of these events has been accompanied by particular responses on the part of communities, religious institutions, and social welfare organizations. With respect to our current economic crisis, our interest is in examining both the impact of the crisis on children in newly poor families and responses by the community.

We began to track daily headlines in print editions of local and national newspapers. We also convened small groups of school social workers, homeless liaisons, and community agency staff members in the Twin Cities metropolitan area to conduct interviews. We used a set of questions to guide these discussions and to solicit responses by e-mail. This inquiry occurred during fall 2009 and spring 2010, when the economy was in a marked downturn. However, as the economic recovery is still uncertain, the issues raised in this article are still relevant. Ultimately, we used the information we collected to create an edition of Practice Notes titled...
“Children in Newly Poor Families: Coping with the Economic Crisis.” The edition of Practice Notes upon which this article is based was supported in part by CURA. Additional support was provided by the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare.

Issues Encountered by Twin Cities’ Families During the Current Economic Crisis and Community Responses

The Landscape of Financial Distress.

As we began collecting information, news articles and other reports provided context and statistics related to the economic downturn. A report by the JOBS NOW Coalition titled The Cost of Living in Minnesota (2009) noted that a single parent raising one child in Minnesota and working full-time would require an hourly wage of $18.75 to cover the cost of basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare, transportation, childcare, clothing, and taxes; however, 55% of jobs in Minnesota paid less than this amount. A two-parent family with two children and both parents working full-time would require an hourly wage of $14.03 for each parent to cover basic needs, and 39% of Minnesota jobs paid less than this amount. Other reports noted that in 2009, 25% of the children in Minnesota were living in families in which no parent held a full-time year-round job (Star Tribune, 10/01/09), and nearly 14% of the households in Minnesota reported that they did not have enough money to buy food (MinnPost, 01/26/10).

Our interviewees reported that, as an increasing number of families began to seek assistance with the deepening of the economic downturn, they observed the emergence of a number of help-seeking behaviors of newly poor families. For example, families facing financial difficulties for the first time were often reluctant to ask for help or to identify themselves as victims of the economic downturn. Further, newly poor families do not always know how to access social services and do not always have friends who know how to direct them. Some families chose to seek help in ways that allowed them to avoid being observed by neighbors (such as by attending church dinners or VFW dollar-taco nights outside of their own communities, or by grocery shopping at 2:00 AM so that others would not see they were using food stamps). Although some families may have hesitated to seek assistance, hungry children often drove them to look for help. Food-support programs appeared to be a particularly important source of support that newly poor families in the Twin Cities pursued. The widespread use of food support was captured in headlines such as “Hard times, hard choices: The decision to go on food stamps” (Star Tribune, 12/06/09). Articles such as this note that, since 2000, the number of people on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; previously Food Support) has grown by 50% in Hennepin and Ramsey Counties and by 167% in the other five Twin Cities metropolitan area counties (Pioneer Press, 12/06/09), and that millions in the United States are getting by on food stamps alone without any income (Star Tribune, 01/03/10). Interviewees and media reports also noted significant increases in the use of food shelves during the recent downturn.

Coping with Homelessness.

During the economic downturn, those working in schools have observed firsthand the impact of the economy on students. The school social workers we interviewed and communicated with for this project provided insights on these impacts.

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1 Practice Notes is a publication of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota that provides information on current research and best practices to social-work practitioners. To view the Summer 2010 edition of Practice Notes upon which this article is based, visit www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/CASCW/attributes/PDF/practicenotes/PracticeNotes23.pdf.
With foreclosures at the center of the economic crisis, homelessness has been a key concern in the school system, and school staff members have been working to identify children who lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” in order to provide support. According to data compiled by the Minnesota Department of Education, the number of enrolled students identified as homeless in Minnesota increased from 7,297 students during the 2005–2006 school year to 8,417 students during the 2008–2009 school year. School social workers highlighted some of the clues that suggest a child is experiencing homelessness, including missing school, arriving late, falling asleep in class, wearing the same clothes several days in a row, lacking regular access to showers, and coming to school unprepared and without homework or supplies.

One school social worker noted that educational neglect may become a problem for families who have lost their homes. After a family loses its home, they may move in with relatives, and parents may try to bring the children back and forth to their home school in an attempt to not disrupt the children’s lives any further. However, such an arrangement is often difficult to maintain, particularly as families quickly wear out their welcome and have to change houses repeatedly. In these instances, the children begin arriving to school late or missing too many days, resulting in the family being referred to county child protection workers for educational neglect. Although the district has some funds to provide assistance to these families, and staff members work hard to keep students of homeless families in their home school, it can be difficult to offer services as families move quickly from one home to the next.

School social workers also described the particular impacts faced by high-school students in this economic environment. In some families, older children feel pressure to find a job in order to contribute to the household income. In response to increased stress, some students have acted out behaviorally, resulting in threats by parents to be kicked out of the home upon turning 18 years old. In some cases, families with limited resources struggle to make sure younger kids are secure, leaving older kids to fend for themselves. Some teens have decided to leave their families altogether. In these instances, the teen may stay with friends or relatives and couch-hop from one home to the next as they wear out their welcome. These teens often get to school infrequently. Some suburban kids come into the Twin Cities to live. When shelters are full, homeless youth may seek bus tokens from outreach workers in order to stay safe and warm at night by riding the bus.

In response to the growing number of children facing homelessness...
during the economic crisis, school staff members have been on alert to identify and refer students for support. As part of the 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act, each school district is required to designate a local homeless liaison. This staff person’s role is to make sure that homeless youth have access to the same public education as other students, that they have the option to continue their education in their home school, and that they have the tools they need to succeed. Homeless liaisons often work in partnership with school social workers and guidance counselors to identify students who may need assistance and are connected to all schools within a district. They also work across districts, given that homeless youth are often mobile.

Coping with Food Insufficiency: The School Lunch Program. Throughout the economic downturn, the number of Minnesota students that have qualified for free and reduced-price school lunch has increased. These school nutrition programs operate through the United States Department of Agriculture and are administered through the Minnesota Department of Education’s Food and Nutrition Service. Families typically receive and submit applications for this program at the start of the school year, but they may obtain and submit an application at any time if financial changes occur during the year.

As the school social workers and homeless liaisons we interviewed noted, experiences with the school-lunch program vary. For students who qualify, although the program strives to ensure anonymity, the desire to avoid stigma may impact their use of the program. In some schools, a la carte items (such as nachos with cheese or soft-serve ice cream), which are not covered under the program and which must be purchased with cash, are more popular among peers than typical hot lunches. Some students who do not have the cash needed to buy a la carte items choose to go hungry rather than be singled out as different from peers.

For some families, the embarrassment of not being able to pay for school lunch keeps them from enrolling their children in the school-lunch program. Other families who have experienced a significant reduction in income struggle to afford even reduced-price meals or are just outside the reaches of the program, yet are unable to provide the funds needed to purchase school lunch. In these instances, children may bring cold lunches, charge the school lunch (which then incurs a debt for the family), or go hungry. According to school social workers, in some schools, lunchroom staff members observe how often students charge lunch and play an important role in connecting students with the subsidized-lunch program. However, if a student continues to charge lunch without later paying the bill, the school may decide to stop providing lunch to this student. Many schools used to try to absorb these costs, but they are also under financial strain and may no longer feel able to forgo receiving the fee. School social workers and the media have reported that some schools have used collection agencies to recover these fees.

In response to the challenges some families face in accessing school lunch, two Minnesota legislators, U.S. Senator Al Franken and U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, introduced bills in Congress last year to expand the subsidized school-lunch program and to increase access. These policy responses are described in the final section of this article.

Coping with Family Economic Distress. The school social workers we interviewed confirmed that children feel, hear, and know the pressures their families are under. They noted that children worry about not being able to buy things, about parents not being able to keep their jobs or pay bills, and about the well-being of their parents. One school social worker provided an illustration of a family in which there had been a lot of arguing between the parents after both had lost jobs. The student in this family started to have attendance issues at school because she wanted to stay at home to “protect” her mother. Another school social worker noted situations in which children lost access to medication for attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) because their parents could no longer afford it or lost medical coverage and felt they needed to put the money toward food, gas money, or other medications such as those for asthma or insulin. These students struggled with behavioral issues and started to feel frustrated, thereby affecting relationships with their peers.

Parents’ altered work arrangements also impact children. In some cases, a parent’s work schedule requires that children prepare for school on their own.
own. If a child gets up late and misses the school bus, the parent cannot always leave work or afford the extra gas money needed to bring the child to school. For some children, this sets up a pattern of school absences that lead to charges of truancy. In one case, a parent needed to take a job far from home, spending large amounts of time away from the family. The stress of this situation caused the child to lose focus and to become easily frustrated by school work and peers. In other cases, parents have decided to relocate the family due to a job change or a search for jobs. For some children, adapting to a new environment has been stressful, as they have had to work to form friendships in a new school and in a new neighborhood.

In response to these circumstances, school social workers that we interviewed told us that staff members at schools have made a concerted effort to “keep eyes and ears” open to the changing needs of students and have made adjustments as necessary to assist students in newly poor families. In some schools, staff members have encouraged students to have the free breakfast and to take leftover cereal and fruit to the classroom for snacks. Staff members also have organized support efforts. At one school, a school social worker distributed more than 100 backpacks filled with supplies at the start of the school year. Furthermore, schools have begun to use electronic correspondence with parents in newly poor families, who are often computer savvy, to provide information on available resources. In addition, when school social workers are concerned with the well-being of children of the “newly poor,” they can consult with the Minnesota Department of Human Services’ Child Protection program. In this consultation, child protection staff may make a number of resources available for responding to parents’ depression and anxiety. Initiating crisis-intervention strategies to assure the safety of the children may also be appropriate.

**Policy Responses**

The experiences shared by those we interviewed for this project remind all of us engaged in assuring the well-being of children how acute the suffering may be of a child whose expectation of a safe, comfortable, predictable world has been shattered when parents lose their homes, their jobs, and their roles as providers. Those who interact with children in newly poor families on a daily basis in the schools have initiated significant and targeted responses—for example, because a large portion of newly poor families are known to be computer savvy, some schools have begun sending information on available resources via e-mail. In an example from the broader community, at least one local church has created a link on their website to information on social services and “safety-net” financial resources to better reach these families. At the same time, lawmakers have attempted to introduce broader responses. The following policies had been proposed at the time this inquiry originally took place in late 2009 and early 2010:

- The Educational Success for Children and Youth Without Homes Act of 2009 (S. 2800) was introduced by U.S. Senators Patty Murray and Al Franken to reinforce and expand key provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth program. In particular, this legislation focused on promoting school stability, providing homeless students access to a full range of academic-support opportunities, enhancing school districts’ ability to identify and serve homeless students, assisting unaccompanied homeless youth, and increasing access to preschool

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**Resources to Help in an Economic Downturn**

The University of Minnesota Extension Service’s website offers *Getting Through Tough Times*, a series of 17 fact sheets. The series includes the following:

**Getting help**

- Community Agencies That Can Help
- Looking for a Job

**Financial decisions with less**

- Keeping a Roof Overhead
- Bartering
- Meeting Your Insurance Needs
- Deciding Which Bills to Pay First

**Dealing with stress**

- Communicating Under Pressure
- Controlling Stress
- Identifying Sources of Support and Friendship

**Figuring out how to do more with less**

- Stretching Your Food Dollar
- Setting Spending Priorities
- Strategies for Spending Less
- Talking With Creditors
- Making the Most of What You Have

**Children and tough times**

- How You Can Help Mom or Dad
- Deciding if Teens Should Work
- Helping Children Cope

For the complete set of fact sheets, visit www.extension.umn.edu/resourcemanagement/toughtimes.html.
programs for young children who experience homelessness. This bill was introduced in the U.S. Senate on November 19, 2009, and was referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

**The School Meals Stigma Reduction Act of 2010** (H.R. 5167) was introduced by U.S. Representative Keith Ellison and aimed to reduce stigma associated with school meals by requiring that schools refrain from implementing policies that would penalize students with unpaid school-meal bills. In addition, districts would be prohibited from using debt-collection agencies to collect these unpaid fees. This bill was introduced in the U.S. House on April 28, 2010, and was referred to the House Committee on Education and Labor.

**The Expand School Meals Act of 2009** (S. 1737; H.R. 3705) was introduced by U.S. Senator Al Franken in the Senate and U.S. Representative Keith Ellison in the House. This bill aimed to expand access to free school meals by making all children whose family income falls at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines eligible for free meals. In other words, children who are eligible for reduced-price meals would become eligible for free meals. This bill would amend the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (1946) and the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. It was introduced on October 1, 2009, in both the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House and was referred to committees in each. Ultimately, on December 13, 2010, President Obama signed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 into law. This law aims to increase access to school-meal programs and to improve nutrition of school meals to address childhood obesity.

**Recommendations**

Children in newly poor families present a challenge to be on the alert for their coping capacities. Those who interact with and assist newly poor families must be able to recognize different coping styles used by children. In families with an environment of emotional warmth, consistency in upbringing, and a social-support network, the coping style will be realistic. There will likely be a focus on success at school and an openness regarding how the parents are coping. The strengths and assets of children will be at the forefront, and children will appreciate their parents, who may serve as models of resilience under adverse circumstances. However, for children who see the family collapse under the stress of continuing economic crises, the child’s need for reassurance may be primary. The parents’ availability for reassuring responses may be limited by depression or the eruption of domestic violence. The support network for the child must particularly be on the alert in these situations.

To strengthen coping in these families, social workers must be available with relevant responses for mental health and strengths-based social services for the parents; search for and appreciate the assets that the child brings; be alert to behaviors indicating serious distress, such as bizarre behaviors or neurological tics, hair pulling, or deep sleep intervals; develop mental-health referral resources for seriously disturbed children; and recognize that school absences are often signs of distress. For students who are missing from school, school social workers should attempt to locate these children and plan for school reentry.

Esther Wattenberg is the Coordinator of Outreach for the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and a Research Associate with CURA, both at the University of Minnesota. Ann Beuch is a graduate of the Master of Social Work and Master of Public Policy programs at the School of Social Work and the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, respectively, at the University of Minnesota.

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For more information on the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota, visit www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/.