

## Family Impact Seminar

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# Family Impact Seminar

## Recommendations to the White House Conference On Families

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A program of the  
George Washington University's  
Institute for Educational Leadership



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## Introduction

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Families experience government in a variety of ways. Just as each and every family is different, so are their experiences with government programs and policies. But there is one common element: for good or bad, directly or indirectly, families are affected. The following experiences of five families suggest the effects of government on family life.

The year after they marry, Robert and Cynthia Warner discover that Washington has penalized them for tying the knot: they, as a two-earner couple, must pay several hundred dollars more in income taxes than if they lived together outside of marriage. Couples with higher incomes have lost several thousand dollars to this "marriage tax." Altogether, 19 million American families lose money because of this provision.

The Jacksons enroll their daughter in Head Start. The shy child blooms in this pre-school program. And the Jacksons feel enriched by their own involvement as classroom volunteers and as members of the advisory board. By age six, their daughter has the basic skills for success in first grade. Ten years later she is staying on target, in the correct grade for her age, unlike other poor children who did not attend Head Start.

Joan McKenzie's mother requires continual care after being discharged from the hospital. Joan would prefer to hire a nurse's aide and care for her at home, especially since the doctor believes this would contribute to a rapid recovery. But for financial reasons, she reluctantly decides to put her in a nursing home: Medicare will pay for 100 days of post-hospital care in an institution—but not one cent if her mother is cared for at home.

*Dear Delegate:*

*Congratulations on being selected a delegate to the White House Conference on Families. Your efforts can help strengthen our country's commitment to family life.*

*When President Carter created this Conference he stated that it would "examine the ways in which family life is affected by public policies." A similar interest led to the formation of the Family Impact Seminar. For the past four years—with the help of many organizations and individuals—we have assessed how public policies affect families. Twelve state and local agencies are now testing our approach.*

*We have some recommendations for your consideration. This pamphlet presents them and explains the Seminar's work. I hope it will be useful to you.*

*Best regards,*

*A. Sidney Johnson  
Director  
Family Impact Seminar*

The day after their son was born, the Cummings learned that he is mentally retarded. They were in a state of shock; then, their doctor advised them of their school district's program that works with families of handicapped children in their own homes. Shortly after the Cummings brought their son home a specialist came to the house. In weekly sessions over the next three years, the Cummings learned how to help their son develop and, too, how to cope as parents of a handicapped child.

Karen Hughes is a social worker; her husband, Ted, is an engineer. They both work full-time. Over the last year, they have been able to attend only one of three parent-teacher conferences at their son's school because the meetings are always held on weekday afternoons. Their friends, the Swanns, live about a mile away. Although both work full-time, they have attended every parent-teacher conference because their school schedules some conferences in the evenings.

There is nothing unique about these examples: they occur in real life; they take place in every state; they are not limited to families of particular races, classes or creeds. All of them are the direct result of government policies. Some illustrate how families are penalized or weakened by government policies that are insensitive to their needs or aspirations. Others reveal how policies with a family focus support and strengthen the families they serve. Together, they suggest the haphazard ways many government programs affect families.

A growing recognition of these facts led to the President's decision to convene this White House Conference on Families. One of the Conference's three main objectives is to examine how government policies affect family life.

A similar concern led to the formation of the Family Impact Seminar in 1976. The Seminar was established to find ways to assess the impact of public policies on families.

The White House Conference on Families and the Family Impact Seminar share another important goal: to insure that the current concern for families has lasting effect.

The White House Conference is focusing the nation's attention on the state of American families. But White House Conferences are time-limited events. Long after this one ends, government policies will continue to affect family life. The major challenge to this Conference is to instill in government policymaking an on-going concern for the needs and aspirations of families.

With this in mind, we urge Conference delegates to consider how we can:

- sustain the growing awareness of the government's impact on families;
- assure that policymakers become more responsive to families' needs;
- empower families and ensure them a strong voice in government decisions.

These are the issues our Seminar addresses and our recommendations at the end of this pamphlet speak to them directly. We favor immediate reform of anti-family practices in programs ranging from tax policy to foster care. But our primary goal is to build into policymaking a continuous ability to assess the effects of government policies on families.

Our primary recommendation, therefore, is concerned with changing the policymaking process. *We propose that independent Commissions for Families be created by interested localities and states, and at the national level, to insure that government policies help families rather than hurt them.* Before presenting the details of this recommendation, as well as our other four recommendations,\* we need to provide some background. We will review the extent to which government programs affect families; explain how family impact analysis works; describe the Family Impact Seminar; and discuss some of the lessons we are learning.

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\* These recommendations represent the views of the Family Impact Seminar. They are not the views of the George Washington University or the organizations which fund the Seminar.

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## *How Do Public Policies Affect Families?*

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Any family that has paid taxes, contributed to or received benefits from Social Security, married or divorced, benefitted from the G.I. bill, or been involved with public schools, foster care, welfare, child care or the court system knows that government affects families. The question is not, does government affect families? The questions are how does government affect families and how can policies which hurt families be eliminated or reformed?

One of the first questions the Family Impact Seminar explored was how many government policies affect families. We reviewed the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance and found 268 programs—administered by 17 different departments and agencies—which have potential direct impact on American families.

The following examples suggest the kind of anti-family effects that can result from a policymaking process that rarely asks, "What effect will this decision have on families?"

Our foster care system provides help for families in times of crisis or serious need. Yet, foster care policies provide more funds the further a child is placed from his natural family; virtually no funds to strengthen the natural family, minimal funds for foster family care, and substantial funds for placement in institutions. Also, there are seldom services to help return the child to his natural family.

In recognition of the growing numbers of two-earner families, the income tax system provides a tax credit for child care costs. Yet, there was a section in this law which came to be known as the anti-grandmother provision. It said that if working parents paid their child's grandmother to care for him that payment was not deductible. But if they paid a neighbor's grandmother to care for him it was deductible. Fortunately, this provision was finally removed.

Military and corporate transfer policies move hundreds of thousands of families every year, but

too seldom take into account the impact these transfers have on family life. Too often employees who turn down a transfer—even for family reasons like wanting to remain near an ill grandparent or to keep a handicapped child in a special program—are moved off the career ladder they had been climbing.

Social Security is probably the government program that provides the most support to the most families: retirement benefits; disability benefits; survivors' benefits; and Medicare. Yet, Social Security tax and benefit formulas favor some one-earner families over some two-earner families. This is often true when a wife, after raising children, works outside the home and pays Social Security taxes on her earnings. If she works fewer years than her husband, and earns a lower salary—as is typical—their combined retirement benefits are sometimes no higher than if she had not worked and paid Social Security taxes at all.

The point is very simple. We need to stop imagining that government is somehow neutral to families, and start assessing the way its policies affect families.

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## *What is the Family Impact Seminar?*

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The Family Impact Seminar is a policy project in The George Washington University's Institute for Educational Leadership. Created in 1976, it seeks to develop a process for encouraging government to be more aware of what it does to and for families.

The Seminar is composed of 24 of the country's leading scholars and public policymakers concerned with families. The list of members appears at the end of this pamphlet. They convene several times a year to provide leadership and guidance to the work of the Seminar's core staff.

The Family Impact Seminar is based on the belief that families are and will continue to be the cornerstone of our society; a respect for the integrity, the diversity and the privacy of American

families; a conviction that public policies should strengthen families rather than weaken them; and a deep commitment to the idea that families themselves should participate fully in the decisions that affect them.

This is what we mean when we speak of a family perspective. These beliefs are the foundation on which we have built our family impact analyses.

### *Seminar Origins: Mondale Hearings*

The original interest in family impact analysis—which subsequently led to the creation of the Family Impact Seminar—came from the 1973 U.S. Senate hearings on “American Families: Trends and Pressures.” Vice President Walter F. Mondale, then Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth, said the hearings were “predicated on the simple belief that nothing is more important to a child than a healthy family . . . . We must start by asking to what extent government policies are helping or hurting families. These hearings are designed to encourage exactly that kind of reexamination.”

Many of the witnesses at these hearings recommended that family impact statements be developed for all public policies. The Subcommittee was very interested but concluded that legislation would be premature; this new and intriguing idea needed to be tested first.

The Family Impact Seminar was created to provide the kind of independent organization necessary to do this testing. Sidney Johnson, Staff Director of the Mondale Subcommittee, left government to found and direct the Seminar. During its first four years the Seminar has been funded by grants from twelve foundations and three government agencies: the Foundation for Child Development; Administration for Children, Youth, and Families; Charles Stewart Mott Foundation; Community Services Administration; Lilly Endowment; Ford Foundation; Carnegie Corporation; Edna McConnell Clark Foundation; Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation; Robert Sterling Clark Foundation; Needmor Fund; General Mills Foundation; Levi Strauss Foundation; Department of Commerce; Chichester duPont Foundation.

### *Cooperating Organizations*

To ensure feedback on our work from a broad spectrum of organizations we have formed a network of “cooperating members of the Family Impact Seminar.” Over 200 diverse organizations have joined.

Among our cooperating organizations are the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Association of University Women, American Council of Life Insurance, AFL-CIO, Children’s Defense Fund, Common Cause, Family Service Association of America, Association of Junior Leagues, League of Women Voters, NAACP, National Conference of Catholic Charities, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council on the Aging, National Council of Churches, National Council of La Raza, National Governors’ Association, National PTA, and United Way of America. These groups do not necessarily endorse all our findings. But they do believe that we are probing important areas of American life and wish to comment on our reports and help us improve them. Their guidance has been invaluable.

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### *What is Family Impact Analysis?*

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Family Impact analysis, as we define it, is a process of assessing the effects of policies on families. Its objective is to make policies more sensitive to the needs and hopes of families. It is designed to provide practical policy recommendations in a relatively short period of time.

Family impact analysis includes, at minimum, reviewing laws and regulations, interviewing policymakers, and learning directly from families how they are actually affected. It lays considerable emphasis on assessing how programs really work. For example, it examines the accessibility of services to families in terms of their location, their hours, and their sensitivity to cultural differences.

We have found that family impact analysis can

be conducted by a variety of organizations both inside and outside of government, and that family impact questions can often be asked and answered without complex and long-term research. A local PTA, for example, might question whether scheduling parent-teacher conferences on weekday afternoons is fair to families in which both parents, or the only parent, are employed. Similarly, families could question hospitals about whether they have "sleeping-in" facilities for parents of young children who are admitted to the hospital, and whether their visiting policies permit young children to visit their parents or grandparents who are hospitalized.

Policymakers can also raise family impact questions. The family perspective, for example, was part of the Congressional repeal of year-round daylight savings time. The first year of this experiment had produced the energy savings that had been predicted. But parents would not stand for a policy that meant their children must wait at bus stops in early morning darkness. Consciously or unconsciously this policy was repealed on the basis of the question, "What does this mean to families?"

There is, of course, a level at which answering family impact questions requires sophisticated research. Do welfare laws denying payments to families where the father is at home actually encourage fathers to leave? What specific effects does unemployment have on families? Experts disagree on the answer to these kinds of questions, and additional research is necessary.

#### *Family Impact Questions*

Perhaps the best way to convey a sense of how family impact analysis works is to list the kinds of questions it encourages. Our experience suggests that there are basic family impact questions that can be asked about almost any policy affecting families. They include:

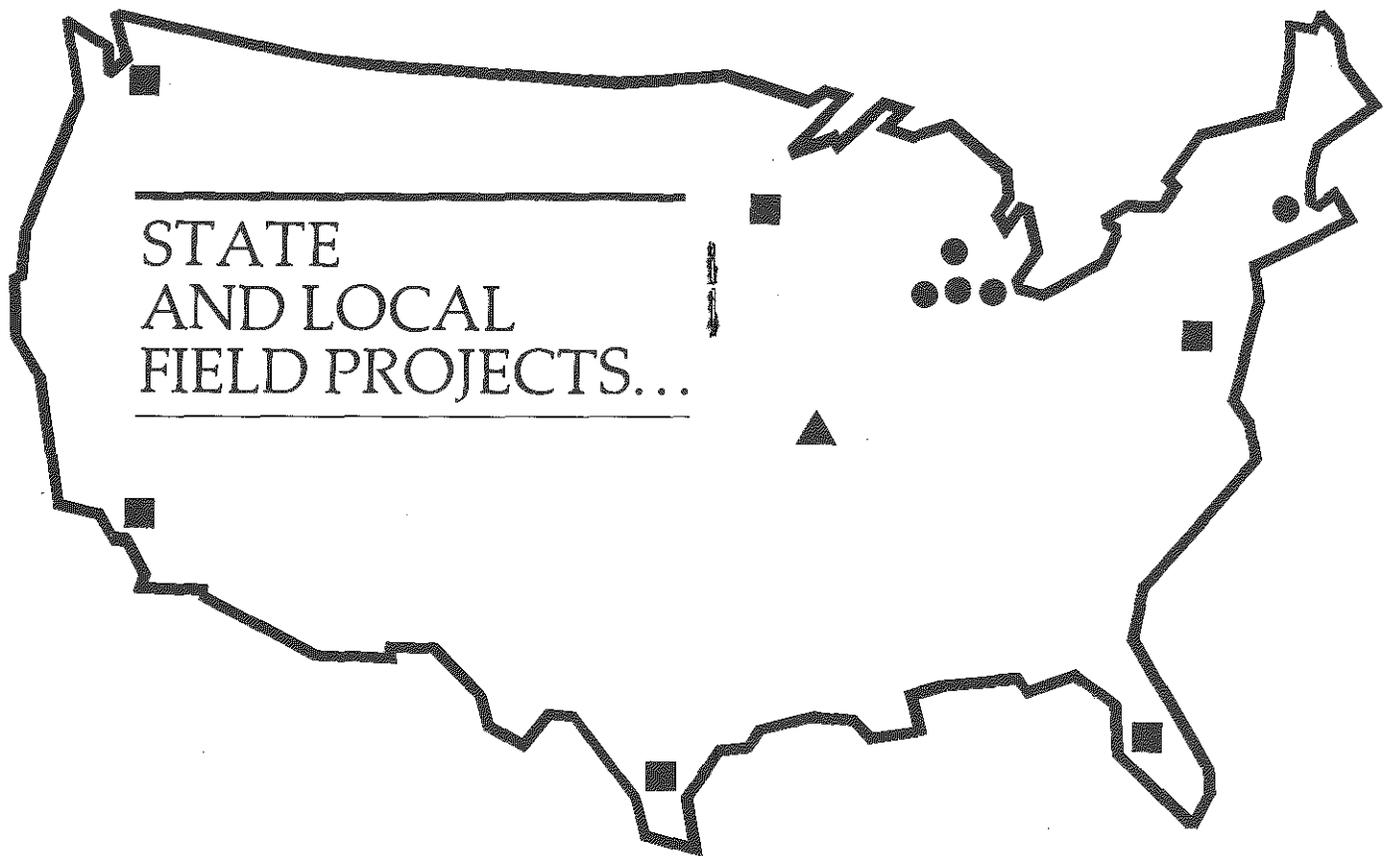
- Does the policy encourage or discourage marital stability?
- Do families have real opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect them?

- Does the policy encourage caring for family members by families themselves or by institutions?
- Is the program sensitive to the traditions, values and practices of families from varied racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds?
- Does the policy recognize that different family members may have different and competing interests on some issues?
- Does the program use or ignore existing family support systems like extended families and kinship ties?
- Does the program recognize the complex roles that family members play—especially parents—in coordinating the different aspects of their families' lives, and in dealing with so many agencies and professionals?

#### *Case Studies*

The Seminar first tested family impact analysis by studying public policies in three areas: foster care, teenage pregnancy, and work schedules. The studies illustrate the influence of public policies on families and the ability of family impact analysis to produce useful new perspectives. Each also reveals how reforms are necessary at several levels, not only in legislation but also in agency practices and procedures. All three will be published this winter by Temple University Press.

The foster care study, which examined in depth the foster care system in one state, demonstrates how well-intentioned laws may be undermined by restrictive practices and attitudes. It shows how a program originally designed to help families in times of crises too often splits and keeps them apart. It describes the communication problems and patronizing treatment of parents that limit their involvement with their children and, thus, their potential for reunification. It further describes the inequities in public funding between the care of children in foster homes, in their own homes, or those of relatives. But it also tells of promising innovations which may help foster care support and strengthen families. (turn to p. 12)



STATE  
AND LOCAL  
FIELD PROJECTS...

...of the Family Impact Seminar

■ *Foster Care*

- Children's Home Society of California  
Los Angeles, California
- Juvenile Welfare Board of  
Pinellas County  
St. Petersburg, Florida
- Ramsey Action Programs, Inc.  
St. Paul, Minnesota
- San Patricio County Committee on  
Youth Education and Job Opportunities  
Sinton, Texas
- Urban Services Agency  
Baltimore, Maryland
- Whatcom County Opportunity Council  
Bellingham, Washington

● *Teenage Pregnancy*

- Children's Hospital Medical Center  
Boston, Massachusetts
- Michigan Congress of Parents,  
Teachers, and Students:  
Lansing;  
Detroit and Wayne County;  
Grand Rapids and Kent County;  
Otsego, Montmorency and  
Alpena Counties

▲ *Education for Handicapped  
Children*

- Missouri Child Care Association  
Jefferson City, Missouri

The Seminar applied a similar family perspective to the topic of school-age pregnancy. Nine papers were commissioned which reviewed the policies and programs concerned with teenage pregnancy, and discussed how family members are involved in them.

The study concludes that teenage pregnancy is too often considered to be the adolescent girl's problem alone. Most programs disregard her boyfriend, ignore her family's role and support, and are thereby ineffective. It recommends involving teenage males and teenagers' parents in programs to prevent pregnancy and programs to support young mothers and children. It also proposes changing welfare laws which in some states provide financial assistance to a teenage mother only when she lives away from her family.

Finally, the work schedules study sought to determine if flexitime—which permits employees some flexibility in the hours they begin and end the work day—had a positive effect on family life. We were interested, for example, in whether it helped families with children cope better with the often competing responsibilities and demands of their jobs and their family life.

This study of a federal agency with a modest flexitime option demonstrates that minimally flexible work hours was an insufficient change to relieve the considerable stress of combining work and family responsibilities. It reveals that everyone loved having flexitime; but only those flexitime workers who did not have primary responsibility for children actually experienced less stress than their counterparts in a standard time agency. The study suggests that changes both in laws and in how supervisors actually implement these laws might make flexitime scheduling more helpful to families.

### *State and Local Field Projects*

Our second step to test the value of family impact analysis is our field project. Our case studies produced valuable insights. But we wondered if family impact analysis could be equally helpful to individuals and organizations who are working on a day-to-day basis with families, and who have limited time and resources to devote to policy

analysis. With the help of twelve outstanding organizations, we are exploring whether family impact analysis is also a useful tool for state and local agencies.

The names of these organizations, the policies they are analyzing, and their locations appear on pages 10 and 11.

These field projects have two major goals: (1) to discover policies that hurt families and should be changed, and to identify policies that help families and should be strengthened; and (2) to help us prepare a practical Guide to Family Impact Analysis for use by organizations and individuals who want to analyze how public policies affect families.

Six field projects are analyzing how foster care policies affect families; five are examining how policies concerning teenage pregnancy affect families; and one is exploring the effects on families of new laws regarding education for handicapped children. In running these projects, the agencies are investing their experience, talents and many of their own resources. The Seminar provides an intensive training session for the project leaders, a limited amount of seed money, and continual technical assistance.

The field projects will last for nine to twelve months—half will be completed this summer and the others by the end of the year. At the end of the project they will tell us if this approach was useful and how it can be improved. But already we have learned enough to conclude that this field test is our most valuable undertaking. It is practical and realistic. It has gone to the places where policies are implemented, and to the people who implement them. And, above all, it is involving and interviewing the families who are served by these policies and programs.

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## *What Lessons Are We Learning?*

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To date we have learned several lessons:

- The crucial question of how a policy affects families is rarely asked when a law is passed or implemented. Historically, our society has thought in terms of individuals—not families. Families are not even mentioned in the Constitution. Yet when family impact questions are asked, they almost always lead to suggestions about how families—and the individuals in them—can be better served.
- Despite the importance of laws, family impact analysis requires examining all levels of policymaking, including regulations, appropriations and the way services are actually delivered.
- Family impact analysis can be done at a variety of levels and by a variety of organizations and individuals, both inside and outside of government.
- Family impact analysis must recognize that a single public policy may affect different families quite differently, and different members of the same family differently.
- In a very real sense, all of us are experts on families. Many of our most important experiences take place in our families. Our deepest roots extend into them; many of our hopes, and our concerns come from them. As a result, family impact analysis must emphasize learning how public policies affect families from the very families they are affecting.
- Family impact analysis is still being developed. But it can be done well by a variety of individuals and organizations. Even without outside help, an individual or organization, beginning with just the basic family impact questions, can identify and question some important policy issues.

In summary, our experiences convince us that the process of family impact analysis is increasingly effective in revealing how public policies affect families, and in recommending ways they can be improved. But much like White House Conferences, an idea such as family impact analysis can capture the attention of policymakers one year then gradually fade out of sight. If we want to build a continuing concern for families into the policymaking process, we need to propose specific steps and work for their adoption. The recommendations that follow seek to do just that.

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## *Recommendations*

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Based on our work over the last four years, we urge that the White House Conference on Families adopt the following recommendations. They are designed to help assure that promising work of the Conference will have lasting effect.

We recognize that some organizations are making their policies more sensitive to the needs of families. We commend these developments and offer our recommendations as a way to support, extend and accelerate this progress.

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**1. Independent Commissions for Families should be created by interested localities and states, and at the national level, to insure that government policies help families rather than hurt them.**

The exact structure and roles of these commissions must, of course, vary according to the specific needs of each jurisdiction. For example, commissions could be created by an executive order of a Mayor, Governor, or President, or by laws passed by County Councils, State Legislatures, or the Congress. We recommend that they include to the greatest extent possible six essential elements. Specifically, we believe, each commission should:

- be composed of citizens from all walks of life, serving on a part-time basis, and representing the diversity and pluralism of families in that jurisdiction;
- listen to and learn from families about their strengths, aspirations and the difficulties they face;
- prepare family impact analyses on a small number of existing government policies each year. These analyses should be advisory and made available to public officials and the public at large.
- be established at first for a time-limited test period of several years;
- have modest funds available on a competitive basis to help organizations interested in examining the effects of policies on families;
- serve as a clearinghouse for information on family impact analysis.

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**2. More organizations and agencies—both public and private—should examine and improve the ways in which their own policies and practices affect families.**

These self-assessments will differ according to the interests and characteristics of the organizations which undertake them. Examples of the kinds of self-assessments we want to encourage include the following: more schools should assess how parents can become increasingly involved in the education of their children; more businesses should assess the impact on employees' families of a wide range of personnel policies such as those concerning leaves, transfers, and work schedules; and, more agencies serving the aged should examine whether their programs offer care in the home or only in institutions.

**3. More organizations of families themselves—and coalitions of community agencies serving families—should assess and improve the impact on families of relevant policies or programs.**

These assessments could be conducted by a wide range of organizations that have a special concern for families and direct knowledge of government programs, including Head Start Parent Associations, senior citizen organizations, PTA's, Leagues of Women Voters, organizations of parents with handicapped children, Common Cause, religious organizations, Urban Leagues and many more. These assessments could be aided by the family impact clearinghouses in relevant Commissions for Families.

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These recommendations constitute positive steps that we believe public and private organizations should take in order to make policies more sensitive and responsive to families.

There are two other suggestions concerning family impact and family policy which the Family Impact Seminar strongly opposes:

- 4. We oppose the suggestion that the environmental impact process can be applied directly to family issues. Family impact analysis differs substantially from the environmental impact approach.**

Family impact issues are complex, value-laden, personal and delicate. A family impact approach must, therefore, specifically avoid laws that require or are perceived as requiring analyses of all relevant policies and programs. And processes for family impact analysis must *not* include the creation of government bureaucracies which could intrude or be perceived as intruding into the sensitive and private lives of families.

The primary element that a family impact approach should borrow from environmental impact is the heightened public consciousness it created; in this case, heightened public consciousness about the effects of public policies on families.

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- 5. We oppose the idea of adopting a national family policy that seeks to impose a single set of standards for family life.**

Such a policy implies that there is a simple, uniform federal policy that should be universally applicable to all families. It suggests that there is some comprehensive national solution to the problems facing American families.

This concept directly contradicts our respect for the personal, private, sensitive and unique qualities of family life. It also ignores the diversity and pluralism among American families that are both facts of life and sources of national strength.

We propose, instead, that means be developed—such as family impact analysis, innovative private initiatives, or new legislation where necessary—to help make a variety of policies more sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of American families.

These recommendations—if adopted—can bring about fundamental changes in the policy-making processes of our country; help make government and private institutions more sensitive and responsive to families' needs and aspirations; underscore our respect for and commitment to family life; and help assure that families participate fully in the decisions that affect them.

These recommendations alone will not solve all the problems that face families. But they can serve as a significant first step toward the day when decision-makers consciously and consistently assess the effects of policies on families. And they can help assure that this first White House Conference on Families will make a lasting contribution to the health and well-being of American families.

## FAMILY IMPACT SEMINAR MEMBERS

- WALTER ALLEN, Assistant Professor of Sociology,  
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- NANCY AMIDEI, Director, Food Research and Action  
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### *Publications*

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A complete listing of Family Impact Seminar and Institute for  
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Family Impact Seminar publications include: TOWARD AN  
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IMPACT ON FAMILIES (\$3.00 postpaid); INTERIM  
REPORT OF THE FAMILY IMPACT SEMINAR (\$4.00 post-  
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(\$3.50 postpaid).

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