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THE WRITING OF STATE FAMILY IMPACT STATEMENTS: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

(abridged)

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SUMMARY

This report was prepared for policy makers who are involved in the formulation of legislation, programs or administrative rules and procedures that may impact the quality of family life. It contains a conceptual framework for what is sometimes referred to as family impact analysis.

Section I emphasizes the need for a more systematic way of monitoring trends in the quality of family life and provides some basic definitions. A distinction is made between measuring the changes on families that result from policy implementation and evaluating whether those changes promote the physical, social, and psychological well-being of the family.

Section II suggests that family impact analysis involves a process of forecasting how government policies and programs will interact with current social trends to effect changes in family life. The task of the family impact analyst is to determine the effects which are the unique result of public policy and distinguish them from the effect of other factors in the social environment.

Section III outlines the six steps for preparing family impact statements. They include: (1) identifying policies which may have an impact on families, (2) specifying the probable impacts of each policy on various types of families, (3) determining the extensiveness of those impacts, (4) evaluating the probable intended and unintended effects with respect to their contribution to the quality of family life, (5) comparing alternative policies with one another, or with the absence of any policy, in light of the advantages and disadvantages of their probable impacts, and (6) selecting the most palatable policy alternative.

This report acknowledges the fact that family impact analysis is in its developmental stages. The framework suggested here is one that will be refined as experience is acquired through specific applications.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose of Family Impact Analysis

Margaret Mead's (1974) remark that "as the family goes, so goes the nation" provides, in a nutshell, the rationale for family impact analysis. At present, the family is the principal social unit within which both the socialization of children occurs and the personality needs of adults are satisfied. Thus, the healthy physical and psychological development of individuals (whose competence obviously influences all aspects of the society) depends, to a major extent, upon the quality of family life.

To date, government on every level has failed to assume a coherent position with respect to the family. Although probably any legislator would subscribe to the idea that family life ought to be enhanced, policies and social service programs undertaken frequently have deleterious effects upon all families or on certain types of families. As Moynihan (1968) has suggested:

> "A nation without a conscious family policy leaves to chance and mischance an area of social reality of the utmost importance, which in consequence will be exposed to the untrammeled and frequently thoroughly undesirable impact of policies arising in other areas."

Not only does the inattention to family policy leave the family in a vulnerable position, but, in addition, it creates an administrative awkwardness which renders ineffective many programs, social assessment, and social planning measures. For instance, Lerman (1973) noted that "confusion is rampant (in income transfer programs) because of the large number of different rules about family units." Bell (1975) questions whether our labor statistics, and their subsequent interpretation, are at all meaningful if they are done on an individual, rather

than family, basis. It is for these reasons that the State of Minnesota has begun the effort to identify which units, other than individuals, might be the most efficient recipient units in social service programs.

In short, the family is buffeted from all sides, both by governmental activity and by general changes within the society. Efforts to relieve the strains of such buffeting have been incoherent at best, non-existent at worst. Family impact analysis has as an ultimate goal the provision of a benign social environment for family relationships. In approaching that goal, impact analysts will seek to eliminate policies which are ineffective in their intended effects upon families and to eliminate or modify policies which "backfire", so to speak, with unintended, negative family impacts.

A fuller description of the need for family impact analysis and for some sort of family policy in the United States appears in an earlier report by the Minnesota State Planning Agency, "An Annotated Bibliography for Family Impact Analysis." Interested readers might also consult the works of Kamerman and Kahn (1976), Cohen Connery (1967), and Wynn (1970) as well as the hearings of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth (1974).

B. Definitions

1. A <u>family</u> is a set of persons related to each other by blood, marriage, or adoption. There is a wide range of structures which are called "families". The means for classifying families into types are discussed in a previous report by Minnesota State Planning Agency, "Taxonomies for Family Impact Analysis."

2. Family impact is the set of effects which occurs to some or all families as the result of a governmental action (e.g., a piece of legislation, a program, an administrative decision) and which will not occur if that action is not taken. Impacts differ along at least three dimensions: direct vs. indirect; long term vs. short term; intended vs. unintended.

3. Family impact analysis is the procedure by which governmental activities are assessed with regard to their consequences (i.e., impacts) for families.[1] While the primary output of such analysis (i.e., a "family impact statement") is prospective, the analysis itself will build upon theoretical propositions developed from past social and behavioral research.

4. A family impact statement is a report prepared by an organization or individual(s) to assess the potential effects of a proposed policy or other governmental activity upon all families or upon certain categories of families. A tenative, step-by-step procedure for preparing such a statement is offered in this report.[2]

C. The Distinction Between "Impact" and Evaluation of Impact.

At the root of family impact analysis lies the basic reasoning that the quality of family life ought to be enhanced, or at least protected. While some individuals might consider this a merely arbitrary value choice, others will contend that it is a pragmatic societal strategy since families, as organizations, are principal units within which the socialization of children occurs, the

emotional needs of adults are satisfied, and the goods and services of the society are distributed.

However, the factors which motivate individuals to examine the effects of public policy upon the family do not affect the process of impact analysis itself. Family impact analysis refers to a set of methods for describing and understanding the consequences of governmental activities for families. It does not include a set of ethical quidelines for determining the "goodness" or "badness" of those consequences.

While the values of impact analysts will potentially influence their choice of questions or choice of units to label as "families", such influences can be minimized, just as they are in any scientific endeavor.

The procedure for drawing up impact statements suggested in this report attempts to separate the formal determination of cause-and-effect relationships (i.e., of independent policy variables upon dependent family variables) from the evaluation of whether or not a policy change which has an effect upon families ought to occur. Steps A, B and C suggested for the preparation of family impact statements are those directed toward the "value-free" identification of probable impacts of policy variables upon family variables. Steps D, E, and F are concerned with the evaluation of the desirability of those probable impacts.

It is crucially important that the distinction between the identification of impacts and the evaluation of impacts be made explicit and that it remain explicit throughout the process of family impact analysis.

II. THE COMPLEXITY OF CONCEPTUALIZING IMPACTS OF POLICIES UPON THE FAMILY.

A. A Basic Analogy

The impact analyst will approach his or her task much as the doctor approaches a patient. The doctor, when performing a physical examination, runs through a checklist of items which ensures an overall perspective upon the patient's physical condition. Additional, specialized tests are then performed either if the patient falls into a particular category (e.g., within a certain age group) or if the initial exam results indicate a potential problem in the functioning of some part of the patient's body.

The impact analyst will similarly approach a proposed policy or program with a mental checklist of items (or perhaps a more formal sort of checklist) and will "diagnose" the proposal in terms of its potential family impacts. Where an impact is suspected, the analyst will conduct "additional tests" to learn about that impact in detail. These "tests" might include: communication with other persons knowledgeable about families; consultation of research literature or historical material to discover the impacts of similar policies enacted elsewhere; and whatever other procedures the analyst considers necessary for making accurate predictions about the effect of a proposed policy or program.

Discerning the independent effects of policies upon families, however, is not a process without complexity. Just as several different factors might produce identical changes in an individual human's bodily condition, a variety of social factors, in addition

to public policy, might produce identical (or nearly identical) changes with respect to families. Since public policies coexist with other aspects of the social environment, the independent effects of those policies can be rendered nil in either of two cases: first, if social trends counteract the policy; or second, if social trends themselves bring about the policy goals, with the result that the policy itself simply has no effect. An example of the second case appeared in a study of Udry et al. (1976) which indicated that the subsidization of family planning services in the United States between 1969 and 1974 did not produce expected changes in reproductive behavior beyond those which were evident in the general reduction of the birth rate during the early 1970's. Thus, the government policy in question had no family impact beyond the impacts of trends in the social environment. Families are affected by many aspects of their social environment. The task of family impact analysis is to determine the effects which uniquely result from governmental policies or programs.

In closing this section, we should note that the impact analyst faces the same problem faced by any natural or social scientist: In a world where "everything affects everything", the scientist selects effects which are significant or relevant and discards those which are not. The major task for family impact analysts will be to inventory direct and indirect, immediate and long-term, intended and unintended, policy consequences, separating the significant from the trivial. In many cases, examining the relationship between public policy and the family

may require the employment of specific research designs and sophisticated statistical techniques for data analysis. In other cases, especially for the writing of family impact statements for proposed policies, non-statistical methods (e.g., "expert opinion") will be necessary because no data will exist for accurately specifying relationships between policy variables and family variables.[3] Impact analysis will require a team effort by many social scientists. The range of family phenomena is too broad for any one group to have a full understanding of all dependent, family variables, and the range of methods for analyzing and interpreting relationships between policy and the family stretches beyond the boundaries of any one discipline.

In the next section, a tentative framework appears as a set of guidelines which a state agency can use to assess the immediate, potential consequences of proposed policies. It is presented with the caveat that it is tentative, that it should be revised as family impact analysis becomes better developed, and that it does not include strategies for identifying all of the many indirect impacts which policies can have.

III. SUGGESTED STEPS FOR PREPARING FAMILY IMPACT STATEMENTS

A. Identifying Policy Components With Impact Potential

There probably exists no governmental activity which does not, in some way, affect families. However, the first step in preparing an impact statement will be the placement of a policy

into one of two broad categories: policies with potential impact and policies with extremely remote impact. Thus, the Highway Department's policy standards on asphalt or on paint for marking roadways would not require a full, family impact assessment, while the Department's decision on the building of a road through an existing community would require such an assessment. Note: the classification of policies as "too remote in effect" to merit a comprehensive impact assessment will constantly become modified as family impact analysis develops. So, for example. alteration of land use in a state park might be judged as something whose impact exists, but statistical and conceptual techniques cannot accurately gauge. However, as impact analysis develops, as data bases on family functioning increase, and as our conceptualization of the "recreational function" of the family improves, identification and evaluation of the consequences of such a policy might become quite simple.

Policies which are considered likely to have an impact upon families will then be fully described: each component will be identified. Those components which are considered the ones which will have an impact then become the subject-matter of later steps in the impact assessment.

When identifying policy components which may affect families, the analyst may need to move through several layers of government. The broad policy guidelines as they are legislated will receive modification as they filter down to persons who actually administer

programs, enforce laws, or carry out other governmental activities. The concrete family/government interface has greater impact than abstract policy formulations.[4]

B. Specification of Probable Impacts

With this step, the analyst selects dependent, family variables which independent, policy variables will likely affect. The family variables might be selected from any or all of three levels: the institutional level (e.g., a demographic distribution); the family group level (e.g., family cohesion); and the individual level (e.g., parental role performance).

It is extremely important that the analyst ask the proper questions with respect to the consequences of governmental activity upon families. If the range of variables considered at each of the three levels is too narrow, the impact analysis will be biased and inaccurate. A standard method for asking questions about the effects of proposed policies will undoubtedly emerge as family impact analysis develops. For now, the taxonomies described in the report, "Taxonomies for Family Impact Analysis", can serve to stimulate such questions.

Two taxonomies discussed in the report may prove especially helpful: "Intra-Family Systems and Transactional System" and "Family Development". The former differentiates units of analysis and lists some variables associated with each unit. It alerts the impact analyst to the fact that policies may have different effects upon different family members. The latter taxonomy

offers to the impact analyst a perspective upon the needs of families over the course of the life cycle (e.g., health, shelter, recreation, etc.). The analyst should attempt to determine the way, if any, in which a policy will affect the ability of families to meet these needs.

In specifying probable impacts, the analyst should indicate the degree of confidence with which one can accept the predications. That is, has survey research established the probable link between a policy change and a family impact? Has historical data revealed the impact? Or has the analyst simply had to rely upon "expert judgment" in making predications?

C. Determination of the Extensiveness of the Impacts

Once probable impacts have been specified, the analyst can estimate the number of families and the proportion of all families which a policy will affect. If, for example, a policy will potentially affect the social development of young children, then only families with young children are relevant units for the impact statement. If it will affect the ability of aged parents to live with their adult children, then only kin networks of parents and adult children are relevant units.

Estimation of the extensiveness of an impact can proceed as follows:

1) The analyst specifies the family type(s) which will <u>potentially</u> experience an impact.
2) The analyst estimates the distribuiton of the type(s)

within the population. When developed from census data, such estimates can be quite accurate. Accuracy diminishes when the analyst must rely upon small samples of the population.

3) The analyst estimates the actual number of families which will experience an impact.[5] So, for example, it may be the case that of all potentially affected families, only those within a certain income range or who live in a certain region will actually feel an effect.

D. Evaluation of the Advantages and Disadvantages of the Probable Impacts.

The first three steps are as "neutral" or "value-free" as possible. In formal terms, they involve the specification of independent, policy-related variables, of dependent family-related variables which will change as a result of policy-implementation, and of the distribution of family units for which the changes will occur. At this step, however, the analyst must do some evaluation of the impacts identified as likely outcomes of the policy under consideration. Such evaluations can be grouped as follows:

1. Determination of the extent to which the intended impacts of a policy will likely be realized.

(This pertains only to policies which are designed specifically to affect families. If no such direct effects are intended, the comments on this section of evaluations do not apply--the analyst will evaluate only the unintended

impacts.)

The first question which the analyst will raise concerning intended impacts is whether the results expected by policy makers are among the probable outcomes of the policy under consideration. Here, the impact analyst's task does not differ from that of any policy evaluator. If a policy is intentionally directed toward families and yet none of its intended effects will occur, then little reason exists to proceed further with an impact analysis, since, clearly, the evaluation is that the policy constitutes a fruitless effort.

2. Evaluation of unintended impacts

For each of the probable, unintended impacts which the analyst has previously specified, an evaluation should be made. The evaluation categories might be three-fold: positive, neutral, and negative.

The analyst should indicate the criteria by which the evaluation of each impact is made. As Kamerman (1976) has suggested, it may be easier to establish consensus on what is clearly "bad" for families than to define what is "good" for them; nonetheless, evaluations must be offered.

The analyst can evaluate policies with respect to their effects upon the ability of families to meet their needs.

The analyst can select other evaluative criteria from the literature on healthy family functioning. For example, the links between unemployment, individual depression, heightened tension between spouses, and poor nutrition

are well documented. Thus, a policy which reduces unemployment (or somehow mitigates its effects) could be rated positively with respect to its impacts upon the unemployed family breadwinner(s), the marital dyad, and the nuclear family; policies which do not reduce unemployment or minimize its effects would receive a negative evaluation. Although some disagreement may exist over whether certain items are truly needed or are merely optional, consensus will probably exist as a whole.

E. Comparison of alternative policies with one another and with the absence of any policy, in light of the advantages and disadvantages of impacts.

The impact analyst always makes at least one comparison: the predicted values of a set of family variables expected to be affected by a policy are compared with their predicted values in the absence of the policy. The difference(s) between the two sets of predicted values comprise(s) the "impact(s)". These impacts are then evaluated individually so that a final decision concerning the policy can be made.

The analyst may, in addition, have several, alternative policy proposals to evaluate. If this is the case, the "plusses" and "minuses" of each policy will be compared. The policy with the most "plusses" will likely be the one promoted by the analyst in the final recommendation, assuming that all impacts receive equal weighting in terms of significance. To this point, the analyst may have a work sheet which abstractly resembles this:

Policies	Evaluation Criteria A	B	C	D
I				
1	+	+	+	+
2	-	-	+	+
II				
1	+	+	+	+
2	o	o	o	o
III				
1	+	+	-	-
2	-	-	-	-

+ = positive effect of a policy component with respect to a criterion
- = negative effect
o = neutral or no effect

(Policy components are labelled as "1" and "2" for each of the three policies.)

F. Final Recommendation

Using the work sheet of evaluations of alternative policies, the analyst makes a final, brief recommendation. The basis for the recommendation and the degree of confidence which the analyst places in it are all included explicitly in steps A through E.

IV. CONCLUSION

This report has attempted to provide an initial basis upon which to build family impact analysis. Sections I and II outlined the issues in general. Section III offered a specific procedure for examining impacts. It is hoped that Section III will be continuously revised and expanded in light of whatever developments occur in the field during the next few years. One needed addition is a checklist which would ensure that analysts consider all aspects of family functioning

when examining a proposed policy. This checklist could standardize step B, the specification of probable impacts.

Despite the seeming complexity, the overall strategy for family impact analysis is quite straightforward. It involves: the identification of impactors; the specification of families whom they will likely affect (or whom they have affected, if done retrospectively); and the evaluation of those impacts. Whenever completed, a family impact analysis will offer to policy-makers new and valuable information to use when considering the advantages and disadvantages of a proposed policy.

NOTES

[1]This report deals with governmental activities. However, the phrase, "and actions by private organization," could be inserted whenever appropriate. The proposed model for assessing and evaluating impacts can be applied to private social service organizations, to business organizations, or to any other organization unit. In its general form, it is simply a means for examining the effects of policies generated from any source upon families. It can also include analysis of the consequences for families of the absence of certain legislation.

[2]Definitions 3 and 4 are modifications of those presented by Kamerman (1976).

[3]Family impact analysis, in an "ideal" sense, approximates a standard research design. In practice, however, research will not be possible each time that a policy is proposed and each time that a family impact statement is desired. "Expert opinion" will frequently substitute for the data desirable in a true research project. It is important to realize that family impact analysis is by no means just research.

[4]Again, it should be noted that policies and programs of organizations in the private sector can be included.

[5]The means for estimating distributions of families who will potentially and actually be affected by proposed policies are suggested in the report, "Taxonomies for Family Impact Analysis."

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