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Fragile Families: Fragile Solutions. Robert Halpern

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Robert Halpern, *Fragile Families: Fragile Solutions*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. \$ 49.50 hardcover, \$ 17.50 papercover.

In this comprehensive and informative history of social services directed at low income families, Robert Halpern asks why so many attempts to respond to their needs have failed. Although successive generations of social scientists, political leaders and interests groups have formulated innovative strategies to serve these families, the problems of deprivation, neglect and need persist. Child neglect and abuse is widespread, poor housing and health conditions characterize daily life for millions of Americans, and poverty is ubiquitous. After more than a century of systematic social service planning, the social services remain ineffective.

Halpern traces the historical development of the social services from their 19th century beginnings up to recent welfare 'reform' efforts in considerable detail. His style is readable and engaging. His critical approach is not destructive but helpful in understanding the errors and inefficiencies that have accompanied social service policy making and implementation. His narrative identifies a host of relevant factors. These include a lack of coherence in policy making, inadequate personnel, budgetary and other resources, political and ideological differences among policy innovators and, above all, a reluctance to address the fundamental causes of poverty and inequality. Halpern is not optimistic about the future, suggesting that attitudes towards the poor have hardened and that the prospect of concerted action remains slim. His own, somewhat guarded, proposals for dealing with the problem focus on community interventions that mobilize low income families for collective action. While community participation may be laudable, it is questionable whether the massive problems facing poor families can be addressed at the local level. Nevertheless, this is an important book which raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the social services. It should be widely read.

Martin Feldstein (Ed.), *Privatizing Social Security*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998. \$ 60.00 hardback.

Proposals to privatize social security which would have previously been dismissed, have not only become commonplace today but are now supported by many politicians. Although the