

Children and the Law

One in three children under eighteen years of age in New York City lives in poverty, the majority of them black or Hispanic. Last year, one in five public high school students dropped out or were “pushed out”—the term for counseling out students unlikely to pass the Regents examinations. Many who do not complete high school are arrested for crimes.

Such alarming statistics as these were addressed on March 11 at the policy symposium *Children and the Law in New York*, organized by Professor Gertrud Lenzer, director of the Brooklyn College Program in Children’s Studies and the Children’s Studies Center. The daylong program, which attracted a wide range of professionals in the field—judges, attorneys, legislators, detectives, and educators—examined the need to reform the state’s and city’s protective services.

Symposium panelists representing various divisions of the juvenile justice and educational systems were uniform in their call for more outcomes assessment and better legal representation for children in foster care, the courts, and detention. While exposing failures, the symposium focused on model practices found effective in protecting children.

Conceived as a means to build momentum, the conference made a case for supporting legislation to create an independently funded New York State or City child advocate’s office with subpoena power.

Child advocates from New Jersey, Connecticut, and Rhode Island discussed their state’s practices. Rhode Island child advocate Lauren D’Ambra, Esq., remarked that the \$2 million annual cost of staffing an independent office would be less than the funds expended on civil suits brought against the city for negligence. The Honorable Jeremiah Jeremiah, chief judge for that state’s family court, stated that the number of youngsters saved by the Rhode Island office was estimated to be in the thousands.

Panelist Roger L. Green, then chairperson of the New York State Assembly Committee on Children and Families, commented that this reform and others were a matter of relocating funds, something that could be done, given enough media attention and voter pressure. Rhoda S. Jacobs, ’62, assistant speaker of the New York State Assembly, noted that if the Rockefeller Laws were revamped, the great savings in enforcement and incarceration costs could be applied to treatment programs.

Gertrud Lenzer closed the day by saying that the policy symposium was only a first step in changing rhetoric into action. The event, held at the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, was made possible by the Carnegie Corporation of New York with additional support from the City University of New York and Brooklyn College.

