

Book Review: System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation by Lauren Silver

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Silver, Lauren J. *System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015. xii + 198 pages. Paperback, \$29.95.

There are many misconceptions involving the welfare system and teen parents in the United States. In a culture valuing individualism and less government intervention, poverty and social assistance are commonly perceived to be due to personal failure or parental incompetence. Teen parents are generally viewed as selfish and short-sighted. Teenage, African American parents experience added stereotypes involving criminality and sexuality. All of these cultural labels inform legal and political debates, and shape how state or local agencies support families in the child welfare system.

In *System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation*, anthropologist Lauren Silver provides a detailed review of this system. Silver's insightful critique exposes a fundamental disconnect between the daily lives of mothers living in the system and system mandates and protocols that restrict optimal or healthy family outcomes. The book is based on Silver's two years as a program manager in a welfare system in a major U.S. city and additional subsequent time shadowing constituents in the same system. She spent numerous hours with clients, case managers, and program administrators, and documented a diversity of experiences at all levels. At times Silver found herself serving as an advocate supporting mothers seeking satisfactory solutions and effective services.

Silver's primary goal was to document how local and system-level bureaucratic barriers impede or prevent residential and educational mandates. A classic, local-level barrier experienced by many mothers involved a general lack of available childcare, which impacted mothers' participation in continued education. Mothers were forced to regularly skip classes or have unsanctioned babysitters (for example, boyfriends) stay with their children. In most cases, case managers were fully aware of this significant deficiency. At the system-level, Silver noticed conflicting system narratives that shaped staff behaviors and management expectations. One pervasive belief was that clients be sufficiently destitute and worthy of external support. This seems logical given the overall lack of system funding. However, on the other hand, clients were expected to exhibit sufficient personal responsibility and a potential for the successful transition to independence. These contradictory expectations put mothers in a precarious, stressful, and untenable situation: "Officials and the public continue to require superhuman efforts from disenfranchised youth, ones we would not require from our own children" (p. 76). Silver noted that many parents experienced constant anxiety that they might either lose their children or they could be outright dismissed from the program with limited notice.

Another recurring message in *System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation* involved the extensive troubles faced by welfare systems including staff turnover, inadequate training, insufficient funding, and changing regulations. It was common for youth in the SIL (supported independent living) program to go several months without a SIL case

manager, and novice case managers tended to be less effective advocates for their clients due to their lack of experience with family backgrounds and with the conventions of the system itself. Lack of funding and changes in system protocols and regulations provided additional pressure on case managers. Finally, Silver noted a disconnect between case managers and upper-level management that included differences in working environments and level of contact with clients. Upper-level administrators worked out of office complexes in suburban locales far removed from the neglected inner city workplaces of case managers and the meager apartments of the clients themselves.

Silver's book provides an in-depth ethnographic summary of the challenges encountered by adolescent mothers requiring social assistance. Silver considers psychological phenomena including identity formation, individuation, autonomy, self-efficacy, and the role of abuse on system mothers. She includes extensive details on individual cases to draw readers' attention to "material deficits, spatial barriers, and bureaucratic procedures" inherent in the existing, American welfare system (p. 19). Silver's work fits well with the contextual perspectives of Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* (1978) and Bronfenbrenner's *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979). Contextual theorists highlight that no child develops in a vacuum and that environments surrounding a child and family play a fundamental role both in daily life and on the overall beliefs or ideologies shaping cultural expectations. *System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation* would be a great addition to courses involving adolescent development, government policies, poverty, or sociological perspectives.

Lauren Silver closes her book advocating for a shift to "communities of care" (p. 153). She believes that most teenagers in the welfare system have the desire and capabilities to be successful citizens, but for this to occur national policies must shift away from a focus on individualism to a broader perspective involving a network of resources. This is an intimidating proposition as it entails upending the widely held notion that dependence on the government is solely the individual's problem. Yet, not all children are born in similar circumstances with equivalent opportunities and sufficient family support; therefore, a change in perspective is absolutely essential.

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