

CHILDREN AT RISK IN MANITOBA

Prepared by:
Erma Chapman
October, 1982

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Table of Contents	i
A. Introduction	1
B. Factors Determining Risk	1
Disadvantaged Family Background	1
Handicapped Students	3
Abused and Neglected Children	4
Unemployed/Low Income Families	5
Family Change	6
Transferred Students	7
Nutritional Deprivation	7
Teenage Pregnancy	8
Low Parent Education Level	9
Language Difficulties	9
C. Summary	10
Table 1 - Summary of Risk Factors, Number of Children Affected and Predominant Location	2

CHILDREN AT RISK IN MANITOBA

A. Introduction

Within the Province of Manitoba today, the education of many children is being placed at risk by a number of circumstances, most of which occur outside of school. Some of the effects of these influences are well known to educators; others may not be. Children "at risk" are those who, because of their genetic or environmental background, may not be able to benefit as much as possible from a regular school program. It is important for the reader to remember that "at risk" means just that; not all children exposed to the circumstances outlined in this paper will be affected by them. However, other children will be exposed to more than one circumstance (e.g., if a child comes from a single parent home, (s)he is also more likely to come from a low-income or unemployed home). Combined circumstances appear to increase the "at risk" status of a child and it also appears that the effects should at least be considered additive in nature.

What are these circumstances which place children "at risk" educationally? What effects do they have on a child's education? How many children in Manitoba are affected and where are they most likely to be found? The purpose of this paper was to outline the answers to these questions. A summary table of the effects is presented, followed by an explanation of the effects of each risk factor. The paper is concluded with a summary.

B. Factors Determining Risk

(1) Disadvantaged Family Background

For the purpose of this paper, the Inner City criteria as used by the Winnipeg School Division No. 1 (Davies, 1981) were used to define "disadvantaged" areas of the province; i.e., those areas with high incidence rates of chronic unemployment, single parent families, student mobility, low family income and low education level of parents in combination. (The effects of each individually will be discussed below).

TABLE 1
 SUMMARY OF RISK FACTORS, NUMBER OF CHILDREN
 AFFECTED AND PREDOMINANT LOCATIONS

Risk	Number Affected	Location(s)
Disadvantaged Home	18,000	Winnipeg Core Northern Manitoba Interlake Region
Handicapped	up to 40,000	all areas
Abused/Neglected	600	all areas, but high unemployment areas especially
Unemployed/Low Income	20,000 - 30,000	Winnipeg Northern Manitoba Southeast Manitoba
Family Change	40,000 - 46,000	all areas, but Southern Manitoba especially
Transferred Students	23,000 - 50,000 per year	Winnipeg Core Single Industry Towns
Nutritional Deprivation	up to 65,000	all areas, but Winnipeg Core and Northern Manitoba especially
Teen Pregnancy	up to 4,000/year	all areas
Low Parent Education Level	35,000	Winnipeg Core Northern Manitoba
Language Difficulties	1,900 ESL	Northern Manitoba Winnipeg
	60,000 to 80,000 poor readers	all areas

Educational Effects. Research conducted within the Winnipeg School Division has indicated that there is a significant degree of relationship between results of standardized testing and the five inner city criteria (Madak & Davies, 1979), indicating that the use of these criteria do indeed identify groups of children who are disadvantaged educationally. On average, children who enter schools in disadvantaged areas start school at lower levels than other students and do not make a 10-month gain during a 10-month school year, resulting in their falling even further behind as they progress through school (Madak, 1980).

Children Affected. According to 1971 Census figures, approximately 12,000 (or 8% of total) families with children in Manitoba had an income of less than \$6,000 and an education level of head of household of fewer than eight years. Based on an average of 1.5 children per family (1976 figure), about 18,000 children would be affected by a disadvantaged home.

Locations Affected. The two areas of the province which are most affected are Winnipeg's inner city area and Northern Manitoba. However, statistics indicate that some other areas of the province, such as the Interlake region, may also have to cope with one-quarter to one-third of their students being from disadvantaged homes.

(2) Handicapped Students

Educational Effects. Some children in Manitoba are unable to learn in a regular classroom due to severe physical and/or emotional handicaps. Support is available from the Department of Education for those students who need small group instruction for the major portion of the school day (Level I Support) as well as for those students who need individual instruction for the major portion of the school day (Level II Support).

In addition to these severely handicapped students, there are other children who are more mildly handicapped. Depending on the definition employed, up to 20% of students can be considered "learning disabled". Dr. James Gallagher, at a conference on learning disabilities held recently

in Winnipeg, advocated that this continuum of learning difficulties should be matched with a continuum of services.

Children Affected. In 1981, 1873.5 students were supported at Level I and 441 children were supported at Level II. These severely handicapped students represented 1.2% of Manitoba's student population. If all levels of handicapping conditions are included, then approximately 40,000 children in the province are affected.

Locations Affected. Funding was provided in all areas of the province for severely handicapped students. Thus, it does not appear that handicapped students are more likely to be located in any particular location, although there may be a tendency for parents of severely affected children to locate themselves closer to available facilities if possible.

(3) Abused and Neglected Children

Educational Effects. Children who have been abused or neglected score lower than other children on tests of intelligence and language skills (Pezzot, 1979). In addition, most of these children suffer from emotional problems related to abuse or neglect, the disruption caused by apprehension as well as placement in foster care. These emotional problems tend to distract the child from the task at hand, i.e., learning.

Children Affected. Three hundred and thirty cases of physical abuse were reported in Manitoba during 1981; although the number of cases of neglect are more difficult to estimate, an equivalent number would appear to be reasonable. These figures represent a 150% increase in cases over the last five years. Besides an increased awareness of abuse among members of the public, the increased number of reported cases of abuse also reflects an increase in unemployment figures. According to a recent report in Early Years, one of 20 children, on average, from employed families are hospitalized each year as compared to one of five children from unemployed families. Much of this difference is the direct result of child abuse and/or neglect.

Locations Affected. Reported cases of child abuse were not concentrated in any area of the province when they were compared to general population trends.

However, the strong correlation between unemployment and incidents of abuse suggests that child abuse and/or neglect may be more predominant in communities with extremely high unemployment rates.

(4) Unemployed/Low Income Families

Educational Effects. Unemployment appears to have a marked, albeit indirect, effect on children's performance in school. Students from unemployed families were found to attend school less frequently than students from employed families (Madak, 1980), and The Social Planning Council of Winnipeg (1979) found that attendance at school and achievement level are significantly correlated. Moreover, unemployment and low income are usually associated with other factors which place the child at risk.

Children Affected. As of August, 1982 the real rate of unemployment in Manitoba according to Statistics Canada was 8.9%. Based on a 1981 census count of 356,200 children living at home, this unemployment rate would suggest that about 30,000 children in the province are at risk educationally because of unemployment. Due to the difficulties inherent in using unemployment rates to calculate population effects, the number of children affected based on income supplement figures also was calculated. Within Manitoba, 6500 mothers are receiving provincial social allowances and an additional 8000 families are receiving assistance through the Child Related Income Support Program (CRISP). Based on an average of 1.4 children per family (1981 Census), approximately 20,000 children in Manitoba are affected. Considering the two methods of calculation, then, between twenty and thirty thousand children in the province are placed at risk by unemployment and/or low family incomes.

Locations Affected. The two regions of the province which had unemployment rates above the provincial average in August 1982 were Winnipeg (9.6%) and Northern Manitoba (14.8%). In addition, the Southeast region had the third highest rate at 8.2%.

(5) Family Change

Educational Effects. Family change can occur in either of two directions: the loss of a parent through death, separation or divorce, or the gain of a parent (and even siblings) through the blending of families. The research concerning the effects of single parent families on children's education has been mixed and recently has come under severe criticism for methodological flaws (e.g., Levine, 1982). Certainly it is an area in which children have been "labelled" in a prejudicial manner so often that many single parent organizations are suggesting that parents not tell the school their status. Although most children demonstrate marked changes in school behaviour for a few months following loss of a parent, fewer than 10% show any long-term detrimental effects. However, it appears that many children from single parent families are affected by other factors such as unemployment, poverty and high mobility rates.

A different situation is the "blended" family. Although there is little research in the area at the present time, informal discussions with school clinicians revealed that children from reconstituted families form a substantial number of referrals for educationally-based difficulties.

Children Affected. As of the 1981 census, 11.2% of families in Manitoba are headed by one parent, suggesting that approximately 40,000 children of the 356,200 living at home in Manitoba are from single-parent homes. According to statistics presented recently at a conference in Montreal, approximately 13% of families in Canada are blended. If this statistic is applied to Manitoba, then approximately 46,000 children are affected.

Locations Affected. Although single parent families can be found in all regions of the province, according to 1976 Census figures single parent families are most frequently located in southern regions. Presumably blended families would be found in all areas of Manitoba.

(6) Transferred Students

Educational Effects. Students who transfer schools show poorer performance on academic achievement tests than students who do not transfer, regardless of gender or socio-economic status. Furthermore, the more often the student transfers schools, the greater the effect on achievement (Madak, 1979, 1981, 1982). In addition, mobility appears to compound the effects of other risk factors, such as unemployment and family change, by removing social support systems which had previously been available to the student (Madak, 1982).

Children Affected. Based on the Family Allowance Data File for the period December 1979 to December 1980, approximately 23,000 students transferred into the province from either other countries or provinces (7,500 students) or transferred between divisions within Manitoba (15,500 students). This number does not include those children who transferred between schools within a school division, and therefore, these figures somewhat underestimate the total number of children affected.

Locations Affected. School transfers occur in all locations in the province; however, areas such as Winnipeg's core, single-industry towns and other areas of variable employment are the most likely locations to find students who have transferred on several occasions.

(7) Nutritional Deprivation

Educational Effects. Severe malnutrition can result in brain abnormalities and mental retardation, especially if it occurs during the child's first two years (Standing Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science, 1981). Educators are probably more familiar with the short-term effects of distraction, irritability and drowsiness of children who are hungry or do not eat a properly balanced diet.

Children Affected. According to The Manitoba Schools' Physical Fitness Survey 1976-77, about a quarter of school-aged children were found to be overweight by the time they reached grade six. In addition, up to a third of children do not receive the recommended levels of vitamins and minerals in their diet. Within the Winnipeg School Division No. 1, an emergency

fund for food is available at 12 schools, a lunch supplement program operates at three schools (about 150 students participate), 27 schools have a nutrition awareness program involving about 8,000 students which involves snacks, and 20 schools have a breakfast program, serving about 2,000 students a day.

Locations Affected. Poor nutrition occurs in all regions of the province but is most noticeable and severe in its effects in areas of highest unemployment.

(8) Teenage Pregnancy

Educational Effects. Although public schools no longer prohibit adolescent girls from attending if they are pregnant, eight out of 10 pregnant girls drop out of school permanently. The girls most likely to complete school are those who choose to live at home with their babies (80% of pregnant teens keep their babies and abortion is a viable option for only a few teens). An additional difficulty is that half of the children who are abused have a single, teenage parent. Nutritional deficits usually affect the children of teenage mothers, as well.

Children Affected. According to statistics released by the Mount Carmel Clinic, in Manitoba an average of 80 girls between the ages of 12 and 19 years of age become pregnant every week. Thus, over a year, about 4,000 Manitoba adolescents are affected. Although not all of these will be in school or unmarried, the number of Manitoba children at risk educationally due to pregnancy is substantial and even greater when one considers that their children will also be at risk. Teenage girls who become pregnant between 10 and 14 years of age are most likely to be at risk.

Locations Affected. Teenage pregnancies occur in all locations in the province, although they are probably less frequent in communities with a strong religious background (eg., Hutterite communities).

(9) Low Parent Education Level

Educational Effects. Low parent education level is a significant non-academic predictor of dropping out. Students from homes in which one or both parents have not completed high school should be considered at risk educationally.

Children Affected. According to 1971 Census figures, approximately 35,000 children in Manitoba came from homes in which the head of the households had eight or fewer years of formal education.

Locations Affected. The two areas of the province most affected by low education levels are Northern Manitoba (although it is improving) and Winnipeg's core area.

(10) Language Difficulties

Educational Effects. A significant academic predictor of children dropping out of school is being one year or more below grade level on tests of reading ability by grade seven. The reasons for the deficit may be numerous and may stem from other factors which have placed the child at risk, but no matter the cause, the poor reader should be considered educationally at risk.

Children and Locations Affected. Poor readers can be found in all locations of the province, but two areas in particular have student populations who do not communicate in English or French when they begin school. According to the ESL consultant for the Department, about 1,900 children in the province are receiving assistance under this program and most of these students are in the Winnipeg School Division, especially the core area. According to a spokesperson at Frontier School Division, approximately 80% of their students arrive at school with only limited English skills.

According to results of the cloze passage portion of the Manitoba Reading Assessment (1980), between 30% and 40% of students in the province are poor readers. Since the assessment was province-wide in nature, no estimate of locations affected could be determined.

C. Summary

A number of factors have been outlined which place children at risk within the educational system in Manitoba. The list is by no means exhaustive, in that many children are exposed to a variety of circumstances which result in sufficient emotional trauma to disrupt the ability to learn. However, those circumstances which affect a substantial number of Manitoba schoolchildren have been described. It must be stressed, however, that those children who are most at risk are those who are exposed to a mixture of the risk-producing influences. Although educators cannot be expected to dispel all of the social problems involved (eg., unemployment), they can and should be prepared to assist children with the educational needs which may be at risk because of factors outside of the school.