



**Statement
of
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**Hearing on
State of the American Child:
Securing Our Children's Future**

**Before the
Subcommittee on Children and Families
of the
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
U.S. Senate
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Thank you Chairman Dodd, Senator Alexander and other Members of the Subcommittee on Children and Families.

I am Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, and I am so honored to be able to join you for this important hearing focused on the "State of the American Child: Securing Our Children's Future." Your leadership in the Senate on behalf of children, Senator Dodd, has been so important to millions of children over these past three decades. You have shown us what can be done for children – you are a champion for children indeed. We will miss you.

Children have only one childhood and it is right now. Millions of children in our nation require emergency attention in our recession ravaged economy as poverty, including extreme child poverty, hunger, and homelessness have increased to historic levels, if irreparable harm is not to be inflicted on them and on our nation's future.

The greatest threat to America's national security comes from no enemy without but from our failure to protect, invest in, and educate all of our children who make up all of our futures. Every 11 seconds of every school day a high school student drops out of school; every 32 seconds a baby is born into poverty; every 41 seconds a child is confirmed abused or neglected; every 42 seconds a baby is born without health insurance; every minute a baby is born to a teen mother; every minute a baby is born at low birthweight; every three hours a child or teen is killed by a firearm. A majority of children in all racial and income groups cannot read or do math at grade level in 4th, 8th or 12th grade and over 80 percent of Black and Hispanic children, who with other minority children will constitute a majority of our population in 2023, are behind in these grade levels – if they have not already dropped out of school.

If the foundation of your house is crumbling, you don't say you cannot afford to fix it. Children are the foundation of America's future. We need to invest now in their health, early childhood development and education. Today is tomorrow.

God has blessed America with great material wealth but we have not shared it fairly with our children and our poor. Although we lead the nations of the world in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in billionaires, and in military technology, defense expenditures and military exports, our money and our military might have not translated into moral might, adequate child safety and well-being, and a concept of enough for those at the top and at the bottom.

Children are the poorest age group and the younger children are, the poorer they are. We rank highest among industrialized nations in relative child poverty and in the gap between rich and poor, and last in protecting children against gun violence.

The gap between the rich and the poor is the highest ever recorded in America. In the 1960's, when the economy was expanding, about two-thirds of the nation's income gains went to the bottom 90 percent of U.S. households. In the first half of this decade, it was just the opposite:

the wealthiest one percent reaped two-thirds of income gains. Between 2002 and 2007, the income of the wealthiest one percent of U.S. households grew more than ten times as fast as the income of the bottom 90 percent. In 2007, the income share for the wealthiest 10 percent of households, 49.74 percent, was the highest ever recorded.

In 2008, the highest-paid American CEO took home over \$100 million, an amount equal to the salaries of 2,028 elementary school teachers, or 3,827 Head Start teachers, or 5,275 child care workers. The average CEO of a Fortune 500 company earned 319 times as much as the average worker. The combined net worth of the United States' 408 billionaires is \$1.3493 trillion – greater than the combined GDP of 134 countries where more than a billion people live.

This fiscal year, the Department of Defense is scheduled to spend a total of \$683.7 billion. This is \$13.1 billion a week; \$1.9 billion a day; \$78 million an hour; \$1.3 million a minute; and \$29, 679.13 a second. Just one second of defense spending is more than a Head Start teacher earns in a year. Yet our children are three times more likely to die from firearms at home than American soldiers who are fighting in the Afghanistan war. Headlines blazed across America in June 2010 when America's military death toll in Afghanistan reached 1,000 after nine years of that war. No headline blazed when CDF released the disgraceful annual numbers showing more than 3,000 children – 3,042 children in 2007 – dying in the gun war at home. Six times as many nonfatal child gun injuries occurred that year.

The terrible Taliban terrorist threat to American child and citizen safety is rivaled by the terrible NRA threat which terrorizes our political leaders from protecting our children from the over 280 million guns in circulation which have taken over 110,000 child lives since 1979, when gun data collection by age began. More American preschool children died from guns in 2007 than police officers in the line of duty and more Black male youths die in one year from guns than all the lynching of Black people in American history. But where is our anti-war movement at home?

And where is our anti-poverty movement at a time when one in 50 Americans, a *New York Times* front page story tells us, has *no* cash income? “Almost six million Americans receiving Food Stamps report they have no income. They described themselves as unemployed and receiving no cash and no welfare, no unemployment insurance, and no pensions, child support or disability pay. About one in 50 Americans now lives in a household with a recorded income that consists of nothing but a Food Stamp card,” the *New York Times'* Jason DeParle reported.

This shocking *New York Times* article provoked no public outcry, action or shame. It did not stop some political leaders from trying to block extension of unemployment insurance benefits and to block more federal dollars to protect or create jobs, to expand tax credits for working families desperately trying to feed, house and clothe their children, or to increase investments to stimulate an economy struggling to recover with 14.8 million workers still unemployed and massive state deficits which will cause more job loss. How morally obscene it is that a nation with a GDP exceeding \$14 trillion cannot find the will, common sense and decency to provide a safety net to protect its more than 15 million poor children. The Subcommittee learned from Elaine Zimmerman, the Executive Director of the Connecticut

Commission on Children, at an earlier hearing and again when you took your fieldtrip to Connecticut that the legislature there enacted a bill to cushion its children from the harmful impact of the recession by decreasing bureaucratic barriers to accessing a range of benefits and tax refunds. State leaders recognized that the impact of even short periods of poverty can have a long term – even permanent – effect on children pulled from the stable security of their home, school, and friends when families lose their homes and jobs and are forced to move in with others or into homeless shelters. The loss of a sense of safety amidst the turmoil of economic insecurity fuels stress for parents and children and breeds a sense of hopelessness about the future. Our leaders and citizens need to respond.

This is a time when America can and must turn economic downturn into an opportunity to step forward to correct the gross imbalance of government subsidization of the wealthiest and most powerful among us and provide a safety net for all children from growing hunger, homelessness and stress. A college student working three jobs in Connecticut, causing her to make lower grades, feels she will never be able to get into medical school and fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor. Teenagers are leaving home to ease the burdens on their unemployed parents. Now is the time to correct the laissez-faire federal policies that enabled the few to run roughshod over the life savings of many hard working Americans and wreck the lives and dreams of millions of children. And now is the time to replace the costly, ineffective, unjust and abusive child and youth policies which favor punishment and incarceration and cost tens of billions of tax payer dollars with more cost effective prevention and early intervention strategies, based on best practices that put children on the path to healthy adulthood rather than into the adult criminal system.

We are the world's leading jailer and are criminalizing our poor and minority children at younger and younger ages – both shameful badges of misguided and negative leadership. A Cradle to Prison Pipeline® crisis, driven by poverty and racial disparities, is becoming the new American apartheid threatening to undermine the hard earned racial and social progress of the last half century. The prison pipeline sucks hundreds of thousands of children every year into a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, illiteracy, imprisonment and often premature death. Nationally, one in three Black and one in six Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment during their lifetime. There are more Black citizens under the purview of the corrections system today than there were Black people in slavery ten years before the Civil War according to legal scholar Michelle Alexander in her important book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

The federal government is spending \$6.2 billion and states are spending \$50 billion a year to incarcerate 2.4 million people. States are spending on average three times more per prisoner than per public school pupil. New York state spends \$210,000 a year on youths in abusive and ineffective upstate New York youth prisons. Black children are 32 times more likely than White children to be incarcerated. Seventy-five percent of them have committed nonviolent offenses and pose no threat to public safety – until they come out. This unjustifiable profligate state youth prison spending of \$210,000 per youth – the equivalent of four years at Harvard or Yale – is simply underwriting abusive prep schools for the adult criminal system. Their recidivism rate is 75 percent. Their results threaten rather than increase public safety and derail

so many youthful lives. There are far cheaper and more effective community based alternatives that help rather than hurt children.

It is time to replace the costly, ineffective and destructive prison pipeline with a pipeline to college, career and productive work for all our young people. We cannot afford not to provide a healthy, fair and safe start for every child and a continuum of support with the help of caring families and communities to enable them to reach productive adulthood. You have already heard researchers speak to how dumb and costly our failure to invest early in children is. Building on best practices and accelerating help children and their families need, especially as we move out of this deep recession, is the right and economically wise thing to do in a decent society. Saving child lives early and saving money go hand in hand.

The Children's Defense Fund posted earlier this year our *State of America's Children 2010*, which is a call to action for us all to stand up and demand an end to the massive child suffering around the nation. The catastrophic BP oil spill's assault on our environment was an urgent national emergency. But so is the catastrophic impact of this recession and the chronic plight and suffering of millions of children left adrift in a sea of poverty, hunger and homelessness and political neglect. Congress must see the recession and its aftermath as an emergency for children and take action for our children. We must secure our children's futures and our nation's future.

The selfish and reckless profiteering of Wall Street bankers who are still living high need to be adequately regulated – to prevent a repeat economic catastrophe. And wounded children losing teachers and days of schooling and safe spaces after school and in the summer, and enough food and safe housing need equal priority attention by their government. If we could bail out bankers to steady the economy, we can bail out babies who without our help will see their hopes and dreams for a better life wiped out. Denying children their basic human rights to adequate nutrition, health care, education, and safety from adult neglect, abuse, and violence should be a no brainer.

I grew up in a small rural county in South Carolina which I still call home. Marlboro County has a population of about 30,000: 52 percent African American; 42.5 percent White; and 3.7 percent American Indian and Alaska Native. Our unemployment rate at last look was 20 percent. A federal and a state prison are among the county's largest employers. I was deeply saddened by a recent story of three young teen boys in my county who were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. The first boy said he wanted to work at McDonalds; the second boy said he wanted to be Spiderman and when pushed for a real person, he could not think of one; and the third boy drew a boy lying on the ground and said he was going to be dead before he grew up.

This is not Dr. King's dream. This is not America's dream. This is not my dream for them. We can and must do better.

Thank you.