

A Delta's Point of View

Attacking the Cradle to Prison Pipeline

By Marian Wright Edelman

I'm writing to you, my Delta Sigma Theta Sisters, about a disaster that is ravaging communities throughout our nation. It's not a natural disaster like a hurricane that pounds a city and eventually loses energy and dissipates. This disaster is man-made and is a constant destructive force many times more devastating than a thousand hurricanes, floods, or earthquakes. I'm talking about the Cradle to Prison Pipeline, which is responsible for criminalizing tens of thousands of our children and robbing our communities of their futures.

The Cradle to Prison Pipeline is, of course, a figurative expression that, nevertheless, represents a tangible, complex set of factors in the lives of countless children and teens destined for ruined lives. Through its Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Initiative, the Children's Defense Fund has found that race and poverty are major forces that fuel the prison pipeline. Other factors include broken families, deficient schools, lack of access to health care and mental health treatment, and a shredded safety net that denies many poor children a second chance.

The greatest factor in determining whether a child is destined for a prison cell is poverty. Poverty contributes to family stress and breakdowns and is the largest predictor of child abuse and neglect. Children in families with annual incomes below \$15,000 are 22 times more likely to be abused or neglected than children in families with annual incomes of \$30,000 or more. The circumstances of abused children are seldom improved, however, when they are "rescued" by the child welfare system and placed in foster care. Time and time again, child welfare agencies have demonstrated that they are scarcely more capable of raising children than an abusive parent.

Inadequate or nonexistent prenatal care and health care are also preconditions for future entrance into the prison pipeline for many children from poor families. Without quality prenatal care, developing babies may not receive proper nutrition or may suffer the effects of drug alcohol, or tobacco poisoning that can impede their long-term physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Access to health care and mental health treatment is critical, yet more than nine million children in America are without health care coverage. Young children who have not had regular health care may begin kindergarten with a learning disability or mental disorder. If the problem goes undiagnosed and untreated, the child may fall irreversibly behind in his or her academic and social development.

Children in the most economically depressed communities are the ones who need the most help, but they are often stuck in under-funded, overcrowded schools with few resources and usually do no art, music or other enrichment programs. Poor urban schools have the highest numbers of teachers who are inexperienced or lacking degrees in the subjects they teach. An individualized approach to schooling children is losing ground to one-size-fits-all zero tolerance disciplinary policies. We are seeing a dramatic increase in full-time police officers in middle and high schools who can independently arrest children on school property for any number of infractions,

including non-violent, loosely defined offenses such as “disorderly conduct” and “malicious mischief.” Expulsions and suspensions are also on the rise.

Once children drop out or are put out of school, the pipeline is only one wrong turn away. With the doors to churches and community centers closed and no positive alternatives to the street, children out of school are headed for a lifetime in the pipeline. The prison pipeline is responsible for the disproportionately high rates of arrests, convictions and incarceration of tens of thousands of children and teens from poor families and virtually guarantees that they will not grow up to be healthy, self-sufficient adults.

The prison pipeline is creating a shortage in the number of upstanding men in poor and minority neighborhoods—men who can contribute to the economics of their communities, who can be good husbands and fathers, as well as positive male role models. The Cradle to Prison Pipeline is robbing us of the men who can be partners in our efforts to build stronger communities. Over the past two decades, scholars and journalists have written about “the endangered Black man,” the widening gap between minority male and female enrollment on college campuses, “social pathologies” of Black male behavior and, more recently, *Marriage Is for White People*, a book by Joy Jones. This crisis isn’t new, but it is getting worse.

I grew up in a small town of fewer than 10,000 people in South Carolina. It was a place where no one locked their doors because our homes were open to one another. We were family. I went home this summer and was disturbed to find that nobody walks outside at night any more. They’re afraid. The Cradle to Prison Pipeline has reached my little hometown in South Carolina. It’s no longer just a problem in large urban areas.

The women of Delta Sigma Theta are college educated; many are quite accomplished. Yet the Cradle to Prison Pipeline is never far from any of us. It touches our families and those closest to us. It affects us all directly as mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters of children and teens at risk of being sucked into the prison pipeline.

This crisis is real and it’s urgent, and we must move from studying the Cradle to Prison Pipeline to marshalling the forces to dismantle it. That’s why I’m calling upon all of my Delta sisters to form a leading force in this monumental struggle. There are many things we can do. We should start by guaranteeing health and mental health care for all children in America. It should be a national priority to invest in greater financial support for Head Start and Early Head Start. Schools must be fully funded, and zero tolerance policies responsible for mass suspensions and abusive treatment of young children must be abolished. As individuals and members of our communities, we must take personal responsibility for the children around us. This means mentoring and helping to adopt or create effective community programs like the Harlem Children’s Zone, the Boston Ten Point Coalition, and CDF Freedom Schools.

Children cannot escape the Cradle to Prison Pipeline alone. They need all of us to show them the way out.