

# **The Cradle to Prison Pipeline Crisis**

**By Marian Wright Edelman**

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is grateful for the work of the Joint Center Health Policy Institute's Dellums Commission, which highlights some of the very dangerous trends in the status of children of color. Poor children, and especially poor black and Latino children, are coming into contact with the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems at younger and younger ages and for less serious and less specifically defined offenses that used to be handled in the community by school officials, community leaders, pastors, or families. The overwhelming majority of children being locked up involve nonviolent offenses.

Today, a complex web of social, economic, and political elements converge to reduce the odds that poor children of color will grow up to become productive adults and increase the odds that they will face a *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* Crisis (a trademarked concept of the Children's Defense Fund). CDF is preparing to release a report on this crisis that we all must name and address to prevent the clock of racial and social progress from turning backwards.

## **Why There Is a Crisis**

The *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* crisis stems from the overarching reality that the United States of America is not a level playing field for all children. At crucial points in their development from birth through adulthood, poor children—and disproportionately large numbers of poor children of color—face many risks that converge, cumulate, and overwhelm fragile young lives and significantly increase their involvement in the criminal justice system.

Poverty, exacerbated by race, drives the pipeline as poverty frays the bonds of family and community. A child in a low-income family is 22 times as likely to be neglected or abused. Black children are more than three times as likely as white children to be poor and about four times as likely to be in foster care. Children in the child welfare system are less likely to do well in school and more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. The lack of health and mental health care, beginning with late or no prenatal care and low birthweight births; poor, single, and teen parents; the lack of quality early childhood experiences and enrichment unprepared and unstable parents who lack supports; zero-tolerance discipline policies; a culture that glorifies materialism and violence; unaddressed mental health problems of mothers, fathers, and children; racial and economic disparities in child and youth serving systems; tougher sentencing guidelines; and too few positive alternatives to the streets and positive role models and mentors all up to a burden on fragile children that none should have to bear and many are unable to bear. Without significant interventions to prevent and remove these multiple, accumulated obstacles, poor and minority youth are often trapped in a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives and premature death.

## **A Comprehensive Approach is Needed**

All of these factors need to be addressed in a comprehensive way as children do not come in pieces. But right now CDF is especially focused on addressing unmet child health and mental health needs laid bare by Hurricane Katrina. We are calling for health and mental health coverage for all children in

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America as the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP) comes up for renewal in 2007. It is a moral disgrace and practical disaster that nine million children— one in nine— are uninsured and that millions more are underinsured. Eighty-seven percent of uninsured children have a working parent and a majority live in two parent families. Black children are nearly twice as likely and Latino children are almost three times as likely as white children to be uninsured. Black and Latino women are almost three times as likely as white women to have late or no prenatal care. A healthy start is the foundation of a child's sound development and every child in this rich nation should have it.

A low-birthweight baby, one potential risk from later or no prenatal care, is 50 percent more likely to score below average on reading and mathematics measures, and is more likely to experience educational disadvantages that can persist into early adulthood. Adolescents with elevated blood lead levels in childhood report higher levels of delinquency and anti-social behavior. Black children and children from poor families are not only more likely to have had asthma than white or Latino children and children from higher income families, they are more likely to suffer from disabling asthma. Children with *disabling* asthma have almost twice as many restricted activity days and lost school days as children with impairments from other types of chronic conditions. These kinds of childhood health disparities can have a long-lasting impact on future success in school and in life.

The acute dearth of mental health treatment for children in the United States results in thousands of poor children being unnecessarily sucked into the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* every year. Health coverage denied to millions of children affects academic performance. Reading scores and school attendance of uninsured children improve dramatically after they become insured. Some studies link health insurance and good health in childhood to increased future earning potential. The US General Accounting Office reported that thousands of families have been forced to relinquish custody of their children to the child welfare of juvenile justice systems in hopes of getting them treatment for unmet mental health needs. A recent Congressional study commissioned by Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) reports that two-thirds of juvenile detention facilities in 47 states are holding children solely because they need mental health services unavailable in their communities. This is unconscionable. Over a six-month period in 2003, nearly 15,000 incarcerated children waited for community mental health services in their states, some as young as seven. Other studies report that as many as three-fourths of incarcerated youths have mental health disorders and about one in five has a severe disorder. Studies also show that given the same behavioral symptoms, more black than white youths are incarcerated and more white than black youths are placed in mental health institutions.

Timely access to preventative health care for all children is not only the right thing, but the smart and sensible thing to do. It costs less to provide health coverage to children than to any other group. Every dollar spent vaccinating children against measles, mumps, and rubella saves more than \$16 in costs later on. The United States virtually alone in the industrialized world in not guaranteeing access to health care to all its children. It is time to do better. It is also time to change our perverse investment priorities. States spend three times as much on average per prisoner as per public school pupil. The only universal child policy is a detention or jail cell after a child gets into trouble.

### **Solving the Problem**

The *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* is neither inevitable nor necessary. This is unjust and robs America's children and future. We can reroute children to healthy, productive adulthood. Every *entrance into* the pipeline is also a potential *exit from* it if we build the political will to make it so. And we need to start

early before children get sick or drop out of school to prevent them from entering the pipeline in the first place. We need to resist its pull by reweaving the fabric of family and community; closing the adult hypocrisy gap; ensuring high quality community-based parent supports and systems of care including health and mental health; ensuring early Head Start and preschool, and quality schools and after-school and summer programs; and providing caring adult mentors who counter the violent, disrespectful, and destructive messages of our culture and of the streets. Our country's moral compass needs resetting.

Doing right for children is also doing right for taxpayers. We will save over \$1.5 million for every child we divert from the criminal justice system. It's time to choose cost-effective prevention over costly punishment and prepare self-sufficient citizens and productive workers in our competitive globalizing world. It's time to end the national shame of letting children be the poorest age group of citizens in the richest nation on earth. No other wealthy industrialized nation treats its children so poorly.

But our nation will not change its priorities unless black and Latino leaders and a critical mass of citizens demand it. It's time for a new civil rights movement to put the social and economic underpinnings beneath the hard-earned civil and political rights of the 1950s and 1960s and to restore hope, stability and a sense of future to our lost children in our lost nation.

If we could afford trillions in tax breaks for the wealthy, we can afford the far fewer billions needed to build healthy and educated children. After we ensure children health care in 2007, let's work together in 2008 to expand access to quality early childhood and poverty supports that prevent the abuse and neglect of children. And let's commit to decreasing child poverty by half by 2010 and to ensuring every child a quality education. To do otherwise is to sentence children to social and economic death. We already know what our children need to survive and thrive. Now it's up to responsible adults to provide children what they need.

*Marian Wright Edelman is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund and its Action Council, whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.*