

A continuing portrait of inequality: The Black Child in today's America

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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"The world does not want and will never have the heroes and heroines of the past. What this age needs is an enlightened youth not to undertake the tasks like theirs but to imbibe the spirit of these great men and answer the present call of duty..." --Carter G. Woodson

Carter G. Woodson, son of former slaves, pioneering Harvard-trained historian, founder of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and inspirer of Black History Month, sought to teach future generations of Black children about the great thinkers and role models who came before us. He was very clear that celebrating our rich Black history of struggle and courage was not the same as getting stuck in the past, but if we are going to understand the present and protect the future we must understand where we came from and what it took to get us here. Black History Month is not just for Black Americans. It is for all Americans as we are at the tipping point of a country where the majority of our children are non-White. Black history is American history. We can all be inspired by the progress made but clear about the progress that still remains to be made if we are going to move forward. We should use the extraordinary leaders from our history as examples to help us with the critical task of preparing this generation of children to be the new leaders our community and nation need right now.

The Children's Defense Fund's recent report on The State of America's Children 2014 shows children of color are already a majority of all children under 2 and in five years children of color will be the majority of all children in America. All of our children—including all of our Black children—truly must be ready in critical mass to take their place among the workers, educators, members of the military, and political leaders of tomorrow. America is going to be left behind if our children are not enabled to get ahead and prepared, in Dr. Woodson's words, to "answer the present call of duty." Yet CDF found the state of Black children in America today is grim.

Black children are sliding backwards on our watch and the Black community needs to wake up and the country needs to wake up and do something about it with urgency and persistence. Black children are more than three times as likely to be poor as White children. A Black baby is born into poverty every two-and-a-half minutes. Over 4 million Black children (40 percent) were poor in 2012, compared to 5.2 million White children (14 percent). Twenty-five percent of poor children are Black although Black children are only 14 percent of the child population. In six states—Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, and Wisconsin—half or more Black children are poor, and nearly half the states have Black child poverty rates of 40 percent or more.

Just under 40 percent of Black children live with two parents, compared to 65 percent of White children and 85 percent of Asian children. Each day, 1,153 Black babies are born to unmarried mothers and 199 to teen mothers. Although the percent of children born to unmarried mothers has increased for both Black and White children, nearly 3 in 4 Black babies are born to unmarried mothers compared to less than 1 in 4 White babies. Black children living with single mothers are three-and-a-half times as likely to be poor as Black children living with married parents.

Black children suffer worse health outcomes. Black babies are more than twice as likely as White babies to die before their first birthdays and Black children are twice as likely to die before

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their 18th birthdays as White children. Black babies are more likely to die before their first birthdays than babies in 72 other countries, including Sri Lanka, Cuba, and Romania. Although 95 percent of all children are now eligible for health coverage, Black children are 40 percent more likely to be uninsured than White children and over 1 million Black children (9.5 percent) are uninsured. Access to health coverage is not actual coverage until we make every effort to enroll every child.

Children who cannot read or compute are being sentenced to social and economic death in our competitive globalizing economy and too many Black students fall behind in school early on and do not catch up. Black children begin kindergarten with lower levels of school readiness than White children and our country has been very slow in investing in high quality early childhood programs unlike many of our competitor nations. More than 80 percent of fourth and eighth grade Black public school students cannot read or compute at grade level and Black children are more than twice as likely to drop out as White children. Each school day, 763 Black high school students drop out. Black students scored the lowest of any racial/ethnic group on the ACT® college entrance exam. Only 5 percent of these Black high school students were college ready compared to 33 percent of White students and 43 percent of Asian students.

Black children are at great risk of being funneled into the prison pipeline. A Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime. The schools are a major feeder system into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Black students made up only 18 percent of students in public schools in 2009-2010 but were 40 percent of students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions. A Black public school student is suspended every 4 seconds of the school day. A Black child is arrested every 68 seconds. Black children and youth make up 32 percent of children arrested and 40 percent of all children and youth in residential placement in the juvenile justice system. Black children are overrepresented in abuse and neglect cases and in foster care.

Gun violence is the leading cause of death among Black children ages 1-19 although there is no hiding place for any of us from pervasive gun violence in America. Each day, three Black children or teens are killed by guns. Black children and teens are nearly five times more likely to die from gun violence than White children and teens. The number of Black children and teens killed by guns between 1963 and 2010 is 17 times greater than the recorded lynchings of Black people of all ages between 1882 and 1968. Where is our equivalent anti-lynching movement today to give our children a chance to grow up safely?

I hope this Black History Month is not just about our history but about our obligation to protect our children and move our nation forward in our multiracial world. I hope it is a call to action to the Black community and every community to build the long overdue movement to stop the backwards slide of children of color on our watch and end the disgrace of letting children be the poorest group in the world's richest economy. If America does not begin to get it—that our future is entwined with our children's futures—we're going to miss the boat to the future.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund 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

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and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.