

Unfair children's health disparities: More reason for reform

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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In all of the recent debate over who deserves access to health care in our wealthy country, one often forgotten fact is that this is one more area where Black children and other children of color have always been left behind. Of the nine million uninsured children in America, minority children are uninsured and underinsured at far greater rates than white children.

One in 13 white children is uninsured, compared to one in five Latino children, one in five American Indian children, one in eight Black children, and one in nine Asian/Pacific Islander children. Health coverage for all children is a necessary step toward eliminating health disparities and ensuring access to care. And now is the time to take that step with real child health care reform.

Right now, we live in a nation where children of color experience significant health disparities that begin before birth and follow them throughout their lives. Black infants are more than twice as likely as white infants to die before their first birthday and have higher infant mortality rates than children in 62 nations including Barbados, Malaysia and Thailand. One in every seven babies born to Black mothers is born at low birthweight, a core risk factor for infant mortality and childhood developmental disorders. The rate of Black infants born at low birthweight in the United States is worse than the rate of low birthweight in more than 100 nations including Algeria, Botswana and Panama.

As they grow, Black and Latino children are worse off than white children in having access to regular health care. Black children are 56 percent more likely than white children to have gone more than two years without seeing a doctor and almost three times as likely as white children to use the emergency room as their usual place of health care. Latino children are two and a half times as likely as white children to have gone more than two years without seeing a doctor, are more than twice as likely as white children to have an unmet medical need, and are more than twice as likely as white children to have no regular place for health care.

Not surprisingly, Black and Latino children also have higher incidences of childhood illnesses than white children. For example, one out of eight Black children has asthma—one of the most common illnesses in children—compared to one in 12 white children. One out of every four Black two-year-olds and one out of every five Latino two-year-olds is not fully immunized, although we know that every dollar spent vaccinating children against measles, mumps and rubella saves \$16 in future costs. More than 30 percent of Black children and about 40 percent of Latino children report not receiving dental care. Minority children are more likely to be living in poverty. However, racial disparities aren't just about socio-economic status, although more than three-quarters of uninsured Black children have a working parent, and more than half have a parent who works full-time throughout the year.

Access to health care does more than keep our children healthy. Lack of access to health care can be responsible for considerable racial and income disparities, which can result in different life paths for children from their earliest years. While only a small percentage of all children in America are in fair or poor health, Latino and Black children are more than four times as likely as white children to be in only fair or poor health. Developmental delays caused by poor health make children less ready to learn in school, disproportionately affecting children of color's ability to reach their full potential and robbing America of the opportunity to have the healthiest and

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most productive workforce possible. In the emerging global economy, it is absolutely vital to the future of our nation's economic standing in the world that we make every effort to ensure our children get the best education they can. Keeping them in school and healthy enough to pay attention to the teacher is the most basic way to ensure that. And yet we're missing this simple opportunity for millions of our children.

It doesn't have to be this way, and we all need to tell that to our Members of Congress now. Until all children in America have access to health coverage, minority children will continue to be uninsured and underinsured at greater rates than higher income and white children. Health reform must make the system simpler and more equitable for children in communities of color. However, current health reform legislation in the House of Representatives fails to include the reforms children need. In order to create a level playing field for all children in this country, Congress must guarantee affordable coverage, head-to-toe benefits, and a simple and equitable enrollment process for every child in America. And in no case should some children be worse off under reform than they are now.

Congressman Bobby Rush is trying to do the right thing for children. Tell your Members of Congress and Speaker Pelosi to support the Rush Amendments in the House health reform bill.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>