

Ending the cradle to prison pipeline

Written by Marian Wright Edleman NNPA Columnist
Wednesday, 18 July 2012 16:00

A Black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and a Latino boy a one in six chance of the same fate. The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 7.1 million adult residents. One in 33 are under some form of correctional supervision, including prison, jail, probation, or parole. Michelle Alexander writes in her best-selling book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* that there are more adult African Americans under correctional control today than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began. In 2011, our state and federal prison population exceeded that of all European nations combined. Something's very wrong with this picture.

The numbers are frightening – and there's more. That's why the Children's Defense Fund will focus on this unjust crisis in one of the main plenary sessions at our national conference in Cincinnati on July 24. This epidemic of mass incarceration has created one of the most dangerous crises for the Black community since slavery and affects everyone in our nation. Black males have an imprisonment rate nearly seven times higher than White males, and Hispanic males have an imprisonment rate over twice that of White males.

Mass incarceration is tearing fathers and mothers from children, and economically and politically disempowering millions by taking away the right to vote and ability to get a job and public benefits in some states after prison terms are served. One in nine Black, one in 28 Hispanic and one in 57 White children have an incarcerated parent.

Mass incarceration has also become a powerful economic force and drain on taxpayers. Annual state spending on corrections tops \$51 billion and states spend on average two and a half times more per prisoner than per public school pupil. I think this is a very dumb investment policy. Federal spending on prisons totaled \$6.6 billion in fiscal year 2012.

An added danger driving mass incarceration is the privatization of prisons for profit. The Corrections Corporation of America, the largest private prison corporation, has proposed to 48 state governors that it will operate their prison systems for 20 years with a guaranteed 90 percent occupancy rate. A majority of all those incarcerated have committed nonviolent offenses. Some young prisoners I recently visited are in prison for use or possession of marijuana.

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The toxic cocktail of poverty, racial disparities in child serving systems, poor education, zero tolerance school discipline policies, racial profiling, unbridled prosecutorial discretion, and racial disparities in arrests and sentencing are funneling millions of young and older poor people of color, especially males, into dead end, powerless and hopeless lives. So we are bringing an extraordinary group of experts together at our national conference to talk about how to halt the epidemic and get our nation back on course and our children into a pipeline to college and productive work.

The panel will be moderated by Charles Ogletree, the Jesse Climenko Professor at Harvard Law School and founder and executive director of Harvard's Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice. The panelists are legal scholar Michelle Alexander, the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*; Elaine Jones, former Director-Counsel, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., and chair of CDF's strategic planning committee on mass incarceration and the privatization of prisons; the Honorable Patricia Martin, Presiding Judge, Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois Child Protection Division and President of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges; Michael A. Nutter, mayor of Philadelphia and incoming chair of the U.S. Conference of Mayors; Dr. John Rich, professor and chair of Health

Management & Policy and Co-Director of the Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice at Drexel University School of Public Health; and Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of Equal Justice Initiative, who successfully argued the recent cases before the U.S. Supreme Court ending mandatory sentences of life in prison without parole for juveniles.

They'll share their thoughtful research and experience about how to better ensure public safety through prevention and early intervention and fairer law enforcement policies. They'll also examine mass incarceration as a continuing method of racial control and discrimination and recommend measures to replace the Cradle to School to Prison Pipeline™ one to college and productive work.

The panel will lead into an interactive town hall discussion with various speakers, including formerly incarcerated participants, to focus on how we can close off the major feeder systems fueling the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and mass incarceration and create new hope and

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opportunity for children in their place. It will be a critical chance to hear from leading experts, identify how we've reached this point, and determine how together we must build a focused, effective movement to say no more.

Join us in Cincinnati to learn more and add your voice. It's time to reroute our children, youths, and parents from prison to college and productive work. And it's way past time to stop the uniquely American blight of mass incarceration permanently.

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