Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
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The U.S. Census Bureau's new poverty data for the states show millions of families struggling mightily to keep their heads above water in the wake of the Great Recession. Fourteen states saw statistically significant increases in their child poverty rates, 26 states saw small increases, and nine states and the District of Columbia saw small declines in child poverty rates last year. But the morally scandalous bottom line is clear: 16.1 million children are poor in our rich nation with more than seven million living in extreme poverty, too often scared, hungry, and homeless.

New Data Show Black and Hispanic Children Suffer Most

Although there are more poor White than Black or Hispanic children, Black and Hispanic children suffer most. In 25 states and the District of Columbia, at least 40 percent of Black children were poor; in four states, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, and Ohio, 50 percent or more of Black children were poor. Thirty-three percent or more of Hispanic children were poor in 32 states.

Children are the Poorest Age Group in America

In 2011, more than one in five children were poor in over half the states and the District of Columbia. *In half of these states more than one in four children were poor. Children are the poorest age group in America* , and the younger they are the poorer they are. More than one in four children under six were poor in 21 states and the District of Columbia during their years of greatest brain development. In 30 states and the District of Columbia, 10 percent or more of infants, toddlers, and kindergarteners lived in extreme poverty which means an annual family income of less than $11,511 for a family of four.

The 13 states and the nation's capital with child poverty rates 25 percent or higher are:

• Mississippi 31.8%
• New Mexico 30.7
• District of Columbia 30.3
• Louisiana 28.8
• Arkansas 28.1
• South Carolina 27.8
• Alabama 27.6
• Kentucky 27.4
• Arizona 27.2
• Texas 26.6
• Georgia 26.3
• Tennessee 26.3
• West Virginia 25.8
• North Carolina 25.6

These shameful child poverty levels call for urgent and persistent action. Citizens must demand that every political leader state what they will do now to invest in and protect vulnerable children from hunger, homelessness, and poor education and to prepare them to be competent future workers. It's way past time to eliminate epidemic child poverty and the child suffering, stress, homelessness, and miseducation it spawns.

A number of leading economists and researchers agree that investing in children today is the best way to prepare and create a strong America tomorrow. As Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke told participants at the Children's Defense Fund's national conference in July: "Economically speaking, early childhood programs are a good investment with inflation-adjusted annual rates of return on the funds dedicated to these programs estimated to reach 10 percent or higher. Very few alternative investments can promise that kind of return. Notably, a portion of these economic returns accrues to the children themselves and their families, but studies show that the rest of society enjoys the majority of the benefits, reflecting the many contributions that skills and productive workers make to the economy."

Do most Americans really want our children to get poorer while the rich get richer and to allow our budget to be balanced on the backs of poor babies while millionaires and billionaires receive hundreds of billions in more huge tax cuts they do not need? If you do not, speak up and vote for a more just America for every child.

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.