The Cradle to Prison Pipeline

By Marian Wright Edelman

Imagine a child standing on a bottle crate because he’s not tall enough. You’ve seen children like that—dimpled and wide-eyed in oversized T-shirts. They have to stand on crates to hand money to the men in the ice cream vans that come to their neighborhoods, or to peer over a candy counter. Now visualize a child who has to stand on a crate to be fingerprinted by a police officer.

Scenes like that represent a growing reality as younger and younger children in America are arrested and incarcerated in juvenile detention centers and adult prisons. Consider kindergartener Ja’eisha Scott who was arrested by three St. Petersburg, Fla. police officers after a temper tantrum in 2005 and taken into custody in handcuffs. She was five years old. Many of these children were born into circumstances that set the preconditions for their entry into what has become America’s “Cradle to Prison Pipeline.”

In its major Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Initiative, the Children’s Defense Fund is examining the sinister architecture of the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” and its devastating impact on our nation’s children and youth. The pipeline is made up of a complex array of social and economic factors as well as political choices that converge to reduce the odds that poor children, especially poor minority children, will become productive adults.

In the United States, where a high value is placed on individualism, there is a common belief that people get what they deserve, that children are “bad” because they “choose not” to be good. The realities defy such simplistic and narrow explanations. Poverty is the cornerstone of the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline,” compounded by decades of racial segregation that have concentrated poor minorities into dense, economically depressed and crime-ridden inner-city neighborhoods, small towns, and rural areas with nothing to do.

Large numbers of the children who sit in our Sunday schools leave church and travel down avenues where they are assaulted by a pervasive popular culture that demeans academic achievement and glorifies violence, conspicuous consumption, promiscuity, narcissism, celebrity, and misogyny. Children who enter the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” represent all races and ethnic groups, but in a majority of cases, those caught at the intersection of poverty and race are most at-risk because our society does not offer all children a level playing field on which to develop and grow.

Black adults must change this and insist on health and mental health care systems, early childhood supports, schools that educate, social services that protect and intervene early, and juvenile justice systems that rehabilitate and don’t discriminate.

A child’s family environment is critical in determining whether or not they enter the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline.” Parents should be the first source of love, support, values, and everything else
children need most. Parents should also be their children’s best first teachers—encouraging them to get a good education and to be responsible, contributing members of their families, neighborhoods and communities.

Too many absent fathers leave too many poor and minority youngsters in working families headed by single mothers struggling to hold their households together economically. Unfortunately, many of these mothers have little time or emotional stamina for nurturing and guiding their children. They are too overwhelmed to help their children with their homework, take them to a health clinic, advocate for them at their school, or provide them with enough adult supervision. They and their children need community support.

A black or Latino child may be marked for prison while still in the womb of a mother who does not have access to prenatal care or abuses drugs or alcohol, increasing the chances that the child will be a low-birthweight baby. The odds are against the child’s receiving regular health care and he may go for years without treatment for a learning disability or developmental delay.

Teen mothers, who have not fully matured and whose educations and personal development are stunted by childbirth, are often ill-equipped to prepare their children for adulthood. Children that start life under these conditions are often not ready to learn when the enter school and will begin life lagging behind their peers.

**Low Expectations at School**

Many children in depressed urban communities spend the safest part of their day in a poorly funded, understaffed, and low-achieving school. School teachers and administrators often have low expectations for children from marginalized families. Such children may have trouble concentrating or behaving well because of an unaddressed learning disability or mental disorder, or may be acting out because of a recent trauma like witnessing the brutalization of someone close to them.

Regrettably, few schools have the staff capable of recognizing this as the behavior of a child who simply needs help. More often, these children are seen as “disruptive,” and instead of offering them counseling or psychological therapy, educators dispense “zero tolerance” discipline—usually in the form of suspensions or expulsions—which does nothing to address the root causes of the behavior.

Teens get arrested for a broad range of offenses including curfew violations, burglary, car theft, assaults and homicides. But a growing number of child arrests are school-based for relatively minor infractions. One-size-fits-all, zero tolerance disciplinary policies in schools are a key to the growth in the number of poor and minority children who enter the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline.”

While zero tolerance once applied to serious offenses involving safety, it is now a catch-all disciplinary approach for real, perceived, and imaginary “misbehavior” that is often defined by subjective terms like “disruption” and “disrespect.” Children are now expelled and arrested for
“possession” of aspirin, Certs, and Midol, which are considered illicit drugs, and paper clips, nail files, scissors, and spitballs, which are considered weapons.

Inside the juvenile justice system, few poor minority children or teens receive fair treatment before clogged juvenile or adult courts pressed to dispatch as many cases as possible. It is not uncommon for a judge to rule on a hundred cases in one day. Youthful defendants who can’t afford an attorney must rely on overburdened public defenders whom they may have met for the first time on the day of their trial.

Often appearing in court without even a family member to accompany them, these youngsters seldom understand the legal process or the gravity of their situations and waive their rights. Typically, to get through a tall stack of cases, a public defender will recommend a guilty plea to a lesser offense. Intimidated and confused, a teen will accept that advice and begin a life behind bars with short gaps of freedom.

In the 1980s, fueled by a “tough on crime” political culture, lawmakers at all levels of government enacted draconian policies that promoted incarceration at the expense of prevention. The result: America’s juvenile justice and adult penal systems became dumping grounds for poor minority children suffering from family breakdown, mental health disorders, and failing schools.

Over the past three decades, an increasing reliance on incarceration as the answer to social problems has established the United States as the prison capital of the world. Statistics released in June this year revealed that 2.2 million Americans were behind bars, more than in any other country on the globe. At present rates, a significantly higher proportion of black and Latino men will go to prison than will receive a college degree. And one in three black baby boys born in 2001 will go to prison at some point in his life.

Dismantling the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” is challenging. The pipeline has been buttressed by successive waves of young people who return to poor neighborhoods after being criminalized by the juvenile justice system and hardened by incarceration. Few communities are equipped to positively reintegrate these prison returnees, many of whom become strong negative role models for children and young teens.

Policy makers, fearing they won’t be perceived as sufficiently “tough on crime,” are prepared to spare no public expense on enforcement and prisons, but seem unable to find needed funds to address the root causes of the disproportionate incarceration of poor youth in America.

The overwhelming majority of boys sucked into the prison pipeline are virtually precluded from ever becoming productive workers, good husbands to their wives and fathers to their children, or contributing members of their communities. Overall, the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” has ravaged poor and minority communities and will lead us back to slavery unless we stand up and break it up.

Pastors and community leaders must fight to ensure that every child receives health care including treatment for mental disorders, and have safe havens from the streets after school and during idle summer months.
The CDF Freedom Schools (SM) program is a model that’s making a difference. CDF Freedom Schools program is a literacy-rich summer and after-school model designed to serve children in communities where quality academic enrichment programming is rare, cost-prohibitive or non-existent. Local and state officials must be pressed to fully fund public schools, and establish policies that check the explosion of suspensions and expulsions.

We must be advocates for children who face a juvenile justice system stacked against them, and take personal responsibility for the at-risk children in our communities who need more positive role models, mentors, and caring adults in their lives. We must do these things because children are sacred. To fail is to fail at our greatest purpose.