

# Dismantle the Cradle to Prison Pipeline—Our Future Depends on It

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

**I**n 1968, the day after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed, I went into riot-torn Washington, D.C., neighborhoods and schools urging children not to loot, get arrested, and ruin their futures. A young black boy about 12 years old looked me squarely in the eyes and said, “Lady, what future? I ain’t got no future. I ain’t got nothing to lose.” I’ve spent my life working to prove that boy’s truth wrong. I had no idea it would be so hard.

Today a toxic cocktail of violence, poverty, racial disparities in child-serving systems, poor education, and racially unjust zero-tolerance policies are fueling a Cradle to Prison Pipeline® crisis that is funneling millions of poor children and adults into dead-end, powerless, and hopeless lives.

A black boy born in 2001 has a one-in-three chance of going to prison in his lifetime, and a Latino boy has a one-in-six chance of the same fate. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 7.1 million adults are under some form of correctional supervision including prison, jail, probation, or parole. Black males have an imprisonment rate that is nearly seven times higher than white males, and Hispanic males have a rate more than twice that of their white counterparts. This epidemic of mass incarceration has created one of the most dangerous crises for the black community since slavery and it affects everyone in our nation.

Federal spending on prisons totaled \$6.6 billion in 2012 and annual state spending on corrections tops \$51 billion. This federal and state spending spree to warehouse prisoners has perverted our nation’s

priorities. States spend on average two and half times more per prisoner than they spend per public school student, this at a time when a majority of children of all racial and income backgrounds cannot read or compute at grade level in fourth- or eighth-grade and huge numbers of youth drop out of schools. The privatization of juvenile and adult prisons is yet another added danger. The world's largest for-profit, private prison corporation, the Corrections Corporation of America, recently offered to run the prison systems in 48 states for 20 years if the states would guarantee a 90 percent occupancy rate.

The greatest threat to America's democracy and economic security comes from no enemy, but rather from our failure to dismantle this Cradle to Prison Pipeline and to invest in and prepare all our children for the future. Tomorrow is today. Children of color, who already are a majority of babies being born in the United States and who will be a majority of our child population within this decade, face bleak futures without high-quality early childhood programs and high-quality, equitable public schools that would prepare them for college and our workforce.

Closing the income and racial achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children and between white and nonwhite children is an urgent national priority. Today, every 1.5 seconds during the school year, a public school student is suspended; every 8 seconds during the school year, a public high school student drops out; every 19 seconds a child is arrested; and every 3 hours and 15 minutes, a child or teen is killed by a gun.

As soon as a child gets in trouble, too often the first thing schools do is kick them out of class or out of school, despite the fact that most suspensions punish nonviolent offenses. Zero-tolerance school discipline policies push children out of school at the first sign of disobedience using widely subjective catchall offenses like being "disrespectful" or being "disruptive." It should be of little surprise when so many of the children who are punished by being pushed out of school go on to become high school dropouts and stay away from school for good. And it should be



even less surprising when many of the young people who drop out of school are the same ones whose behavior we continue to complain about, the same ones we fear, and the same ones we pay to build costly prison cells for later.

Here again the racial disparities are clear: New data show that one in five black boys and more than 1 in 10 black girls received an out-of-school suspension during the 2009-10 school year. Black students were more than three-and-a-half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers for the same offenses. The findings are even more troubling for the most serious forms of discipline: More than 70 percent of students involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement are Hispanic or black. We need to get to the root of these disparities and rid our schools of this dual standard of discipline.

We must dismantle the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and replace it with a pipeline that leads all children to college and productive work. We must invest in prevention and early intervention. We must help children in their earliest years, so they can all start school ready to learn. We need teachers who recognize and value the ability of each child to learn. We need to replace zero-tolerance policies with real alternatives to keep students engaged and learning in safe schools and out of the juvenile and criminal justice systems. And we must confront the violence that saturates our culture and threatens our children and us.

We know what works. Let's close the gap between what we know and what we do. The future of our children and of our nation depends on it. ■