



Charles E. Mock\*

## CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY AND PUBLIC POLICY

### Introduction

Our children's future will be nothing more than re-runs if we do not find opportunities for more synergistic efforts to bring God's intended future for God's children into fruition. This presentation uses the historic Underground Railroad metaphorically as a starting point. During the days of slavery, courageous men and women (Black and white, formally and informally religious, rich and poor, slave and free), along with Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, collectively cried out, "*I can't take it no longer.*" Clayborne Carson,<sup>1</sup> in his autobiographical work on Martin Luther King, reminds us that—sooner or later—the cup of endurance runs over, forcing us to cry out, "*I can't take it no longer.*"

As a result of drinking too long from the bitter cup of slavery, a movement was born inspired by divine providence and motivated by a constant thirst for freedom. As we know, that movement was symbolized by an invisible train, consisting of tracks, stations, station masters, safe houses, trackmen and trackwomen, who at the risk of their livelihood and even their lives, courageously dedicated themselves to the abolition of unjust state-sponsored policies and practices and the system

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*Editor's note:* The statistics in this essay are from the Children's Defense Fund ([www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)) unless noted otherwise.

<sup>1</sup>See Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management and Warner Books, 1998).

that continued to produced them. This structure derailed the hopes and dreams not only of present parents but their children as well. Derailed is train terminology, referring to a train running off the rail, or jumping the track due to externally controlled circumstances. It usually happens when the person responsible for working the track switch to make sure the train runs on the right track to its final destination decides to throw the switch at the wrong time intentionally or unintentionally. The train ends up crashing into another train or running off the track—derailed.

#### **Derailments: Poverty, Health Care, Early Childhood, Child Abuse, Mental Health, Juvenile Justice System, and Community Violence**

The following disturbing statistics indicate that national and state trains that should be carrying all children to a destiny of freedom, justice, equal opportunity, and equal access are leaving passengers behind. The following “passenger” report of our nation’s children, gives us a snapshot of the major areas of concern; therefore, the emerging challenges require a systemic, purpose-driven, and collaborative strategy, no less divinely inspired and freedom motivated, than that of the conductors of the Underground Railroad.

#### **Poverty: Too many derailed!**

Child poverty in America continues to grow even though most poor children live in working families. In 2004, 13 million American children (one in six) were poor, an increase of 12 percent since 2000. In 2004, child poverty rose for the third year in a row in working families. A disproportionate number of minority children live in poverty:

- more than 1 in 3 Black children



- nearly 1 in 3 American Indian children
- nearly 1 in 3 Latino children
- one in 10 Asian children
- nearly 1 in 10 White, non-Latino children

Children living in extreme persistent poverty are more involved in delinquency, especially serious delinquency.

### **Prenatal and Health Care: Too many Derailed!**

Poor children of color are less likely to have access to health care. In the United States 9 million children (one out of nine) are uninsured. Of the 9 million uninsured children, 87 percent have a working parent. Black children are nearly twice as likely as white children to be uninsured. Latino children are almost three times as likely as white children to be uninsured. A low birth-weight child is 50 percent more likely to score below average on reading and mathematics tests. The percentage of Black babies born at low birth-weight is twice that for white babies. Adolescents who had elevated blood lead levels in childhood are more often delinquent and antisocial.

### **Early Childhood: Too many Derailed!**

Poor minority children are less likely to enter elementary school prepared.

### **Three-to-Five-Year-Olds Able to Perform Three Out of Four Basic Reading and Math Skills**

White	Black	Latino
42%	35%	25%

Percentage of Children Who Are Read to Every Day

White	Black	Latino
64%	48%	42%

Early childhood education and development programs like Head Start are desperately needed to reduce future projections regarding at-risk children.

### **Child Abuse and Neglect: Too many Derailed!**

Children in families with annual incomes below \$15,000 are twenty-two times more likely to be abused or neglected than children in families with annual incomes \$30,000 or more. Children in foster care or with a history of abuse and neglect are at higher risk of future derailment. Children in foster care have higher rates of:

- grade retention
- lower scores on standardized tests
- higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and drop-out rates

Children in the juvenile justice system are more likely to have a history of child abuse and neglect than children outside it. Poor children are more likely to be abused or neglected. They are also more likely to be placed in foster care. Children of color enter foster care are at higher rates even when their families have the same characteristics as white children and families. Children of color remain in foster care longer than white children.

### **Mental Health Care: Too many derailed!**

Lack of access to community-based mental health services is causing thousands of poor children every year to be derailed.



Black children are less likely than other children in foster care to receive needed mental-health services. Two thirds of the detention facilities in forty-seven states needlessly detain children as they wait for these services. As many as three-fourths of incarcerated youths have mental-health disorders and about one in five has a severe disorder. Given the same symptoms, more Black youths than white youths are incarcerated, while fewer Black youths than white youths get needed mental-health institutional care.

### **Juvenile Justice System and Incarceration: Too many Derailed!**

Children of color are more likely to be incarcerated in both the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

#### **Minority Youth in Detention**

Minority percentage of total youth population: 34%

Minority percentage of youths in detention: 62%

One in three Black boys born in 2001 will spend time in prison at some point in their lives. At-risk toddlers who lacked quality childcare and early development programs (Head Start) were five times as likely to become chronic law breakers as adults. For those charged with drug offenses, Black youths are forty-eight times more likely to be incarcerated than white youths. Among youths with no prior admissions, Latinos are thirteen times more likely to be incarcerated for drug offenses than whites. For violent offenses, Latinos are five times more likely than whites to be incarcerated.

The writer zeros in on Dauphin County, the county of his birth in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The statistics on child and youth derailment are egregious.

**Dauphin County:**

In 2004, the African-American youth ages ten-seventeen made up 25% of the population in Dauphin County. Whites represent 66%. However, African Americans represented:

- 48% of the number of juvenile arrests (52% for whites)
- 58% of the referrals to juvenile court (32% for whites)
- 59% of cases petitioned (charges filed) (33% whites)
- 66% of cases resulting in delinquent findings (26% whites)
- 63% of cases resulting in probation placement (30% for whites)
- 86% of cases resulting in confinement in secure juvenile correctional facilities (14% for whites)
- 67% of cases transferred to adult court (24% for whites)

**Community Violence: Too Many Derailed!**

In 2003, 2,827 children and teenagers in the United States died of firearm injuries including:

- 1822 homicides
- 810 suicides
- 195 unintentional and undetermined shootings
- Children of color are more likely to be killed by gunfire in the United States. Of children and teens murdered by gunfire in America:
  - 1,052 were Black
  - 707 were White
  - 427 were Hispanic



- 39 were Asian, Pacific Islander
- 24 were American Indian/Alaska
- The firearm death rate for Black males ages fifteen to nineteen is more than four and one half times that of white males (same ages).

### **Mental Health, Michael Torres, and Derailment**

An African-American psychiatrist, Michael Torres, who has done a great deal of research in the escalating rate of African-American suicides and homicides, helps us to understand this unfortunate phenomenon from a mental-health perspective. His research indicates the most significant risk factors are the presence of a severe mental or physical illness, substance abuse, and access to a lethal means such as firearms. His research attributes such derailments of our children to the lack of awareness of symptoms of mental illness, lack of awareness of treatment resources, or, poor access to resources which increase the severity and duration of mental illness. Most importantly, his research reveals that access to firearms obviously involves politics, public policy, and law enforcement issues. In his own words:

When we think about high homicide rates in our community, there are several contributing factors. Issues related to access to firearms are important. The impact of poverty along with the internalization of capitalism on the psyche of young people who turn to the drug trade and its destructive lifestyle is another consideration. Related to that are all of the issues that result in the poor quality of education that gives young people very little inspiration or motivation to stay in school. From a psychological perspective,

there is a foreshortened sense of future that undermines the notion of delayed gratification, which in turn prevents them from pursuing higher education. There is a lack of self-respect and self-worth which is exacerbated by the internalization of racism. It is no wonder then that life has so little meaning and that is so easy to give up or take away. The African American church has little significance in their lives and has had too soft and too inconsistent a voice in terms of advocacy and political participation.<sup>2</sup>

It is Torres's concluding statement that challenges the faith community, especially African-American and other minority-American churches, not for more efforts but a synergistic movement toward abolishing twenty-first century forms of slavery—the contributing causes of such derailments.

### **Marian Edelman Wright and Future Derailments Eliminated**

According to Marian Edelman Wright, to eliminate future derailments we must:

- get families prenatal and health care;
- expand access to and use of early childhood education and development programs;
- prevent child abuse and neglect;
- provide all children needed mental health care;

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<sup>2</sup>This quote is from the presentation, "Social and Cultural Considerations in Community Mental Health," from the symposium, "Faith and Health Ministries," sponsored by the Home Missions Division of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., Institute for Urban Ministry, The Hershey Company, Harrisburg, PA, October 7, 2006.



- improve low-income and minority children's access to quality education;
- prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system or incarceration; and
- protect children from community violence;

Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is working to intervene in the lives of those trapped, or derailed, by a system of national and policies that reinforce slavery, oppression, injustice, and unequal access with a *healthy start*, a *head start*, a *fair start*, a *safe start*, and a *moral start* in life. This systemic intentionality of children-advocacy could easily be viewed as one train-car among many dedicated to assisting our nation's children in arriving at a destination far different from the one to which we have grown complacently accustomed. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were two conductors among many that made a freedom train bound for the Promised Land. Tubman was quoted as saying, "*I could have freed thousands more if they had only known they were enslaved!*" Is it not the business of ecumenically-minded church leaders to open the eyes of the conductors of our nation and the states' public policy, whose hands are throwing the switches and causing the derailment of too many of our nation's children?

### Conclusion

*Slavery* is alive and well. *Injustice* is alive and well. *Racism* is alive and well. There are too many self-serving conductors of government and business whose hands are on the controls. A greater hunger and thirst of such passengers as market capitalists and megabusinesspersons to the shores of Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of global democracy have left too

many American children on the wrong track or derailed on route to their future. When will the derailments stop? Will they ever stop?

History—the Underground Railroad—can repeat itself. The question is “when”? Part of the answer is when the cup of endurance, the cup of human personalities, and the cups of faith from the people of faith, begin to collectively and cry out from the depths of their souls, “*We can't take it no longer!*”