

OPINION

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A Real Crisis: Our Children are Dying

BY BERNICE POWELL JACKSON

It's a quiet kind of crisis, not much press, but it is no less real. Children and teens shot, many in gang warfare. In Los Angeles, nearly 80 children were shot in 2005, including a young man riding his bicycle in the alley by his house. In Cleveland, two young teens were shot within weeks of each other outside the same community center. But not only in our nation's cities, now the violence is moving to the suburbs and even to rural areas.

School gun violence hit the headlines once again with the shootings in Red Lake, Minn., the worst school-related shooting incident since the 1999 Columbine rampage. But five years ago after the Colum-

bine shootings, there were efforts to curb gun sales and distribution. In contrast, there was little such national debate this year.

In a report earlier this year, the Children's Defense Fund pointed out that since 1979, nearly 96,000 children and teens have died at the hands of guns. Of that number, about 36 percent of the victims were African American. A startling 10 times more black children have died by gunfire than were African Americans lynched. The death rate for African American men ages 15-19 is four times that of their white



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counterparts. Indeed, as CDF indicates, the number of children and teens killed since 1979 would fill 3,830 public school elementary classrooms. And four or five times that number have been wounded by guns.

Much of this violence is gang-related. A recent article in the Los

Angeles times cited more than a thousand gangs, with some 85,000 members in Los Angeles County alone, although some criminologists question this number. What we do know is that not only are gangs responsible for murder, kidnapping, robbery, rape and witness intimidation, but they are also be-

coming involved in so-called white collar crime, such as credit card fraud. What we do know is that many of these gangs have formidable arsenals.

While the Congress's response has been to pass a bill, which would expand the federal death penalty to gang-related murder and which lengthens sentences and creates new federal statutes governing gang-related murders, many of these organizations working with inner city youth have decried such legislation, pointing out that it takes away the power of judges to make decisions on cases. Meanwhile, the same Congress let expire the federal assault weapons ban, despite pleas from law enforcement and many local elected officials.

While we have drastically increased federal dollars going to defense and to tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, many of the dollars needed by community organizations, school systems and local governments for recreation and alternative programs for at-risk children have been cut. Huge budget deficits have even forced some school systems to cut sports programs, as well as after-school and evening programs, which might provide gang alternatives.

There is a real crisis in America. Our children are dying. And we are silent about it.

Bernice Powell Jackson is the executive minister of the Justice and Witness ministries of the United Church of Christ.

Workers Fall Behind with Persistently Low Wages

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

The federal minimum wage, which currently stands at \$5.15 per hour, hasn't been changed since 1997. The latest proposal to increase it was shot down by the Senate earlier this year. Since the federal government has made it clear that it isn't overly concerned with the working poor, many state legislators have gone out on their own and set higher wage minimums. Currently, 17 states and the District of Columbia have set wages above the federal minimum, ranging from \$6.00 to \$7.35 per hour.

A job should be an opportunity to not only make a living but to also comfortably provide for your family. This is, unfortunately,



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not the case for minimum wage earners. A worker earning the federal minimum brings home about \$10,700 a year - well below the federal poverty line for a family of three. So, despite putting in many hours of work each week, most low-wage workers are struggling and don't have the money available to pay for health

insurance and decent housing for their families, let alone the basics.

Most at or near minimum wage workers must rely on public assistance to supplement their incomes. Medicaid, subsidized housing and free school lunch programs help fill in the gaps low-wage jobs cause. With an

increase in the minimum wage, employers would shoulder more of the responsibility for their employee's basic needs, thereby lowering costs for the state and, ultimately, the taxpayer.

Critics of a minimum wage hike say raising the minimum wage will cost jobs. But a study by the Economic Policy Insti-

tute found that neither the 1996 nor the 1997 federal minimum wage increases caused job losses. The fact is these wage increases don't harm businesses because the costs are offset by the benefits of increased worker morale, higher productivity and lower turnover.

According to the Center for Policy Alternatives, if the minimum wage had kept pace with inflation since 1979, when the rate was \$2.90 per hour, it would now be over \$7.80 per hour or about \$16,000 per year. That same family of three would now be just above the federal poverty line. Working women, African American and Hispanic workers

would directly benefit from a minimum wage increase.

As the President and Congress continue to ignore the need for a minimum wage increase, workers fall further behind and state budgets are pushed to capacity as local governments attempt to provide safety nets to workers fighting to keep their families afloat. Kudos to the states for taking the initiative and setting their own minimums; let's hope more states follow suit. Maybe this will send the federal government the wake up call it needs.

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Labels Don't Help Children Learn

By
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The season of high-stakes standardized tests is moving into the season of unfair labels slapped on our public schools. The U.S. Department of Education is leading the way by telling parents across the country that their children and schools have failed to meet the demands in the so-called No Child Left Behind law.

Already on the failing schools list are about 11,000 public schools that are losing federal funding and local control because of these labels. It's estimated this list will grow by the thousands before the next school year begins. All this will be happening while the federal government is actually cutting education funding for most schools. Just at the time when, according to these labels, schools need more help, the federal government will be giving them even less.

To put the absurdity of the situation in perspective, here are some facts about the federal labels put on public schools by the so-called No Child Left Behind law:

Labels are arbitrary and don't mean anything.

Just a few weeks ago, U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings granted Florida's request for "flexibility" in how the state labels schools as either failing or making progress. This decision was made after only 23 percent of Florida's schools met the standard set in the federal education law.

The Tallahassee paper referred to the secretary's action as "the wave of a hand" that suddenly changed the labels of about 400 Florida schools. It wasn't that the tests or test scores changed. But rather, the Secretary of Education was granting a favor to the state. This doesn't help any parent learn about their child's achievement level, and only causes confusion as to why these labels are put on schools in the first place.

Labels are damaging to schools and children.

We know that in the federal law, there are 37 different ways for any school to get slapped with a "needs improvement" label. We also know that in many communities that translates to failure.

Despite a wide variety of ways for schools to be labeled "failing," there are only a few narrow methods the law allows for fixing schools' problems. This just doesn't make sense. Federal funding becomes more restricted when the labels are put on schools, making it even harder for schools to hire reading teachers, for example.

Labels don't help students achieve success in school or in life.

The lack of clarity that surrounds these labels only manages to confuse parents and demoralize teachers, principals and school employees. Furthermore, it takes away precious school funding from classes and projects that actually help students learn.

It's estimated that it cost the state of Connecticut \$8 million a year to develop and administer the federally-required testing and school-labeling system. These are taxpayer dollars that could be invested in things that work like smaller class sizes, high-quality teachers and up-to-date classroom materials. Investments in proven reforms and not labeling will make a difference in the way students learn.

Why the Till Case Still Matters

One of many racial murders that scream for redress

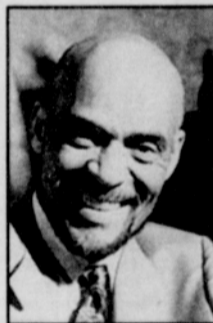
BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON

The mood was somber when FBI officials recently dug up the body of Emmett Till. The mood should have been downright grim. If ever there was a racial lynching case that screamed for federal action it was the Till case. While on a visit to Mississippi in 1955, the 14-year-old Till was kidnapped from his home at gunpoint, savagely beaten, shot and dumped in a river.

The instant the story broke nationally, black leaders demanded that the Justice Department and the FBI take action. This was the right demand to make given the absolute refusal of white Southern sheriffs to arrest whites suspected of racial murders. In the rare cases they were arrested, all-white juries refused to convict them.

The Till case was not an exception. In a farce of a trial, the two white men that killed Till were quickly acquitted. But that was not the end of it. The murder continued to send political shock waves across the nation. Black leaders, labor organizations, and numerous public officials implored the Justice Department to take action. Even then there was strong suspicion that others were either directly involved in the murder, or had knowledge of the killing.

Yet Justice Department officials still refused to do anything. They claimed that state officials were solely responsible for prosecuting racially motivated crimes, and if they refused or conducted a farce of a prosecution as was the case with the Till murder, there was little they could do about it. This, however, was blatant legal evasion. Federal statutes gave the Justice Department the power to prosecute individuals on civil rights charges when state prosecutors either failed to bring charges, or conducted a weak, ineffectual prosecution that resulted in acquittals. Federal law also gave the Justice Department the



power to prosecute public officials and law enforcement officers who committed or conspired with others to commit acts of racial violence. Congress enacted the latter statutes immediately after the Civil

War and they were aimed at specifically punishing racial attacks against blacks. In many of the racial killings local sheriffs and police officers directly participated in the attacks, or aided and abetted the killers.

Till was abducted at gunpoint. That made it a kidnapping case.

mined not to offend the politically powerful South. While the Till case sparked anger and garnered lots of press attention, in that era of Jim Crow segregation, it was still not enough to move federal officials to act. A half-century later federal officials were still reluctant to get involved. It took a resolution by Illinois congressman, Bobby Rush, and demands by civil rights leaders to get the Justice Department to agree to poke and probe into the murder to see if any new charges could be brought.

Now that federal officials have taken action in the Till case, they should not stop there. There are still more racial murders that scream for redress. Mack Charles Parker,

Till, though, was not solely a victim of a racist, and hostile white jury. He was also the victim of a racially indifferent federal government.

This automatically gave federal authorities jurisdiction over the case. They could have easily brought civil rights charges against the two principal defendants and any others who were suspected of complicity in his murder.

Till, though, was not solely a victim of a racist, and hostile white jury. He was also the victim of a racially indifferent federal government. In the pre-civil rights era, presidents and their attorneys general generally ignored or sparingly used the federal statutes to prosecute criminal civil rights cases abuses. This had less to do with the personalities, individual preferences, or even racial bigotry of the men in the White House and the Justice Department than with political expediency. They were deter-

Herbert Lee, and Jimmy Lee Jackson, to name three of the more blatant cases, were victims of racially motivated violence. No state or federal charges were ever brought against their murderers. Some of their suspected killers may still be alive.

Also, according to FBI reports, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a para-military terror squad in Mississippi, committed several murders between 1960 and 1965. In nearly all cases, FBI agents quickly learned the identities of the suspected killers through Klan informants, or the men's own boasts of the killings. There was only a token effort made to bring them to justice.

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