

# OPINION

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## America's Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline

### A scourge of epidemic proportions

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Suppose that over the next decade, a quarter of all the children born in New York, North Carolina, Texas, Colorado, Ohio and Pennsylvania were infected by a virulent new strain of polio or tuberculosis sometime during their youth.

Clearly, our response to a health crisis affecting a combined population of 80 million people would be to mobilize the nation's vast public health resources. Medical labs would operate around the clock to develop new vaccines.

Unfortunately, an infection akin to this hypothetical tragedy is actually coursing through Black and Latino communities across the nation. I'm not referring to a virus such as HIV-AIDS or a hazardous bacterium. I'm talking about the criminalization of poor and minority children who enter America's "Cradle to Prison Pipeline."

Together, African Americans and Latinos comprise a segment of the U.S. population equal to the six above states. Like the victims of a crippling or wasting disease, once drawn into the prison pipeline, tens of thousands of young people have the opportunity to live happy, productive lives stolen from them, not by festering microbes, but by years spent behind bars.

The Children's Defense Fund has studied the grim pathology of the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline" and its devastating impact on our nation's poor children and teens. 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, espe-

cially poor minority children, will grow up to become productive adults.

These factors include disparities in access to health and mental health care, underperforming schools, broken child

tion, criminalized youngsters return to communities that are ill equipped to positively reintegrate them. Outcast and unemployed, they become the teachers and role models for a new crop of youngsters

"Cradle to Prison Pipeline" one of the most damaging health problems in America today.

A major factor in determining whether a child enters the prison pipeline is access to health and mental health care. Currently, more than nine million children in America are without health insurance. Unlike children in more affluent communities, few institutions are available to intervene and address the health problems of children from low-income families. Few public schools have the resources to recognize health issues such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder or dyslexia and to provide children with counseling and therapy, for example. The behavior of children with these problems is more often perceived



*Disparate treatment based on income and race plays a role at virtually every decision point in the clogged*

*American system of justice.*

welfare and juvenile justice systems, and a toxic youth culture that praises pimps and glorifies violence.

Hardened by long terms of incarceration,

pushed onto the street corners of America's socially and economically depressed neighborhoods.

This cycle of re-infection makes the

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## An African American President?

### Obama has things in his favor, but also faces obstacles

Although Barack Obama is different from previous African-American presidential candidates, it is still unclear if most Americans are ready to elect a black president, say two Duke University political scientists.

Last month, U.S. Sen. Barack Obama took his first step into the 2008 presidential race by opening an exploratory committee to raise money and begin building a campaign.

Kerry Haynie, an associate professor of political science who teaches a class on African-American politics, said Obama represents the latest iteration of "new black politicians."

"Unlike his most recent predecessors, Rev. Al Sharpton and Rev. Jesse Jackson, Obama does not have roots in the Civil Rights movement, he doesn't rely on the black church as his base of support, and he sees himself more as a



*His most important strengths are his charisma, his innocence and what appears to be an ability to bridge racial and partisan divides.*

-- Kerry Haynie, Duke University political scientist.

problem-solver than an agitator or an activist. He is attempting to transcend race and party identification," Haynie said.

Haynie and fellow Duke political scientist Paula McClain say Obama has many things working in his favor, but also faces great obstacles.

"His most important strengths are his charisma, his innocence and what appears to be an ability to bridge racial and partisan divides," Haynie said.

"His lack of national and international political experience and his untested ability to raise large sums of campaign cash are his most important weak-

nesses." and presents himself as willing to listen to other points of view. This ability will make him appear less strident than some of his competitors."

But McClain and Haynie, who are the co-directors of the Center for the Study of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Social Sciences at Duke, both question the likelihood that Obama will succeed in the race.

"Obama has had a meteoric and somewhat unfettered rise," McClain said. "Unlike his potential competitors, he has not experienced the 'rough-and-tumble' politics that is characteristic of presidential politics."

"Second, Obama faces the major issue that still clouds much of American politics today -- race and how it plays out in the political arena," said McClain, whose research includes racial minority group politics. "Since the 1940s, when pollsters began asking the question, the majority of Americans have said that they would vote for a

*He has not experienced the 'rough-and-tumble' politics that is characteristic of presidential politics.*

-- Paula McClain, Duke University political scientist



within the mainstream of the party and Jackson's bid resulted from frustrations with the party's attention to issues of concern to black Americans. Obama's status will attract money, professional campaign staff and media attention, all essential to running a strong and competitive campaign," McClain said.

McClain added that Obama, "while liberal in his leanings, is perceived as

black (Negro) for president. Yet, we know this is not the reality and what people say to a pollster about their potential support for a black candidate often is not what is reflected in the voting booth."

McClain said she believes Obama "stands a good shot at being the Democratic nominee to president. Of course, Hillary Clinton is the biggest obstacle he faces."

## Poppies Up, Bush Down

### Demand basic competence

BY JIM HIGHTOWER



Here's some big news on the agricultural front - this year's crop has reached the highest level ever, with an increase of 49 percent over last year's production! Unfortunately, we're not talking about American corn, but the opium crop in Afghanistan.

You remember Afghanistan, don't you? That's where Osama bin Laden was supposed to be headquartered, so our military pounded his Taliban backers shortly after 9/11. Even though the Bushites failed to get Osama either "dead or alive," we were told that they had conquered Afghanistan, ousted the Taliban, put a new leader in place, and set that country on an inexorable path to democracy. Mission accomplished!

But wait - Afghanistan has now turned as messy as Iraq. The Taliban is both resurgent and insurgent, Mr. Bush's handpicked leader can't travel outside of the capitol of his own country, and the poppy fields - which sustain the Taliban with millions of drug trafficking dollars - are flourishing again. Despite the fact that poppy eradication has been a centerpiece of Afghanistan policy, costing us taxpayers millions, there was a 59 percent hike in the acreage devoted to poppies last year. "You can say it's out of control," said the head of the U.N. office on drugs. Indeed, the White House itself has expressed alarm that Afghanistan is in danger of becoming a full-fledged narcotics state.

After Bush & Company have spent \$88.2 billion of our money and lost American lives there, the one clear result is not a shining monument to democracy and peace - but a country at war with itself, largely ruled by warlords and religious extremists, while currently supplying 92 percent of the world's opium crop.

The Bush policies have been a failure. It's time to stop blindly following bad leaders and demand basic competence in the global effort to stop terrorists.

Jim Hightower is the best-selling author of "Thieves In High Places: They've Stolen Our Country And It's Time To Take It Back."

The Portland Observer Established 1970  
 USPS 959-680  
 4747 NE Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97211

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, PUBLISHER: Charles H. Washington  
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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Portland Observer, PO Box 3137, Portland, OR 97208

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