

OPINION

Invest in a Positive Future for Children Now

Our future depends on the next generation

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

In the Children's Defense Fund new report on the State of America's Children we give a comprehensive overview on the well-being of America's children. But just who are America's children and families today? Children make up almost one in four of the people living in the United States today. They are the poorest age group in America. And the younger they are the poorer they are—cheating them in the years of greatest brain development. In chapters on child population and family structure we take a closer look, and a national child and family portrait begins to emerge.

One of the most striking facts about America's children is the rapidly blurring distinction between who is a "minority" child and who is in the "majority." Today, almost 45 percent of America's young are children of color, and by 2019—just

eight years away—they will be the majority of our child population. In fact, the majority of children are already children of color in the District of Columbia and nine states—Hawaii, New Mexico, California,



Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Florida, Maryland, and Georgia.

The number of Hispanic children has increased every year since 1980, rising from

5.3 million in 1980 to 17 million in 2009. The number of white children has decreased every year since 1994, and the number of black children has remained steady over the past two decades.

Behind these numbers and statistics is an urgent call to action. Throughout America's history and still today, children's life chances have always been unequal based on color, although God did not make two classes of children and every child is sacred. But practicality will force what morality has been unable to achieve.

We can't afford to keep leaving

whole groups of children of color behind who are becoming our nation's majority without condemning our entire nation to failure. Right now The State of America's Children 2011 tells us children of color are behind on virtually every measure of child well-being. They face multiple risks that put them in grave danger of entering the pipeline to prison rather than the pipeline to college, productive employment, and successful futures.

Children of color are at increased risk of being born at low birth weight and with late or no prenatal care, living in poverty and extreme poverty, lacking family stability, facing greater health risks, lacking a quality education, being stuck in foster care without permanent families, ending up in the juvenile justice system, being caught in the college completion gap, being unemployed, and being killed by guns.

The multiple risks facing children of color are cause for great concern from us all who need to raise a next generation that can care not only for themselves and their own families but also our seniors of tomorrow. While today there are almost twice

as many children as seniors, the national snapshot shows that by 2040, that gap will close. There will be 94 million children and 81 million seniors.

Our children's success in education and in employment will be essential to keep our society functioning, businesses running, adults teaching, and health care professionals serving everyone's needs.

Today's children will care for all of us tomorrow and we'll be counting on them as the economic drivers of the future who will be raising their own families, assisting their parents, and investing in the economy and in Social Security to keep us all thriving. We must take extraordinary steps to address the crisis today—so we will have a generation who can succeed in life.

The snapshot of our nation's families tells us a lot about where our next generation is heading, because family structure and stability make an enormous difference in every child's life and impact the availability of resources—both emotional and financial—for children.

Single parents often need extra support and teen parents even more. About 70 percent of all children—but fewer than 40 percent of black children—live with two parents. Twenty-three percent of all children and half of black children live with their mother only. Black children are more than twice as likely as white children, almost twice as likely as Hispanic children, and three-and-a-half times as likely as Asian/Pacific Islander children to live with neither parent. Teen parenthood also varies widely; the birth rate for Hispanic teens ages 15 - 19 is twice that for white teens but just above that for black and American Indian teens.

Taken together, all of these numbers paint a clearer picture of what our country's children—and future—will look like. It's clear that if we still want to see a strong, prosperous America tomorrow, it's time to invest in a positive future rather than negative future for millions of our children right now. There is not a moment to wait or a child to waste.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Dedicating 'The Dream' on the National Mall

Be proud and contribute to the cause

BY WILLIAM REED

A week of events is planned in Washington, D.C. around the dedication of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial on the National Mall on Sunday, Aug. 28, the 48th anniversary of the day King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Preceding, and following the ceremony will be star-studded concerts, luncheons, dinners and receptions attended by an array of African-American leadership.

A quarter-million people will gather on and adjacent to the four-acre plot on the northeast corner of the Tidal Basin to dedicate a monument to Martin Luther King's legacy and its location on American history's Main Street. The event



will feature the first African-American President of the United States as he honors the first African-American with a memorial on the National Mall—and the first non-president so honored.

Thousands of contributors and community leaders will join President Barack Obama at the site. Central to the thinking of Martin Luther King was the concept of the "Beloved Community." The MLK National Memorial's centerpiece is the "Stone of Hope", a 30-foot statue of Dr. King, with a 450-foot inscription wall with excerpts of his sermons and public addresses.

The process of designing, funding and constructing the memorial was coordinated by the nonprofit Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial Project Foundation. Harry E. Johnson Sr. and his Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity deserve credit for

arriving at this historical reality. Johnson has served as president and chief executive officer of the foundation since 2002. A former fraternity president, Johnson reports that the MLK Memorial cost \$120 million to build. The U.S. Congress gave \$10 million in matching funds.

In his public invitation, Jonson said: "We look forward to sharing with you a joyous and historic day for our nation."

To many, King symbolizes the Civil Rights era's great American Revolution. After MLK's assassination in 1968, his fraternity Alpha Phi Alpha proposed a permanent memorial in Washington, D.C. Alpha Phi Alpha's efforts gained momentum in 1986, after King's birthday was designated a national holiday. In 1996, Congress authorized Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to permit the fraternity to establish a memorial in the District of Columbia, and gave the group until November 2003 to raise \$100 million

and break ground. In 1998, Congress authorized the fraternity to establish the foundation to manage the fundraising and design and approve building of the memorial.

It was an uphill climb for Johnson's foundation to build the MLK Memorial. A MLK King Family company, Intellectual Properties Management Inc. proved to be a significant obstacle. The family wanted the foundation to pay licensing fees to use MLK's name and likeness. The King family pledged that any money would go to the King Center's charitable efforts. The King Center in Atlanta is the location of King's grave and a National Historic Site. Estimates suggest that the King family charged the MLK Memorial Foundation \$800,000 in fees. Now, it's all "OK" between the foundation and the MLK Family. Children of MLK, Bernice and Martin Luther King III toured the National Mall site in October 2010 and are expected to

attend the dedication.

Black Americans have reason to be proud and to be MLK memorial benefactors. As we raise a toast, it would be "significant" if there were more contributions from our community to this cause. Most of the MLK memorial's construction costs were underwritten by American corporations and organizations such as the National Basketball Association. General Motors Corporation gave more than \$10 million and will serve as dedication chair. The Tommy Hilfiger Corporate Foundation is dedication co-chair, as is Stevie Wonder, who wrote MLK's "Happy Birthday" song. A minority, female-owned and operated firm, McKissack and McKissack, is a part of the MLK memorial design-build team. To make a donation, visit www.mlkmemorial.org.

William Reed is president and chief executive officer of Black Press International.

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