

OPINION

Victims of Violence Not Going Away

Congress dithers on providing help

BY MARTHA BURK

While members of Congress waste time naming post offices and devising ways to get seniors to pay for billionaires' tax breaks through cuts in Medicare and Social Security, other important business is slipping through the cracks.

Specifically, if Congress doesn't reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act, signed by President Clinton in 1994 after a four-year battle, by the end of the year many valuable programs will end.

It is a fact that women are the most frequent victims of domestic violence, rape, and murder by spouses. Despite its name, how-



ever, this act has never been just about women. The Penn State scandal has chillingly reminded us that kids, both boys and girls, are very much at risk.

Most people don't know that according to the Justice Department, children under 18 comprise 67 percent of all sexual assault victims reported to law enforcement, and that only counts those reported. If the act isn't renewed, many services and prevention programs that help these young victims will go away.

The Violence Against Women Act began with discretionary grant programs to stem domestic violence and child abuse by funding battered women's shelters, rape prevention, and education, and by strengthening penalties for repeat sex offenders. When Congress renewed the act in 2005, new programs were created to prevent sexual assaults on campuses and to pro-

vide resources for young victims of sexual assault.

According to Justice Department statistics, in a typical three-month period the various programs serve almost 140,000 people, more than 10 percent of

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them children. Virtually everyone who asks for services, including men and boys, gets them, ranging from temporary shelter to rape crisis counseling and victim advocacy.

Given this track record and ongoing scandals like the one at Penn State, renewing the law ought to be a no-brainer. But it ain't necessarily so with the present state of Washington's gridlock.

First of all, President Barack

Obama supports the Act's programs, and the stimulus package he signed into law in early 2009 contained \$225 million in increased funding for the Violence Against Women office at the Department of Justice. We know

how that plays with Republicans, whose first priority, according to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, is to defeat Obama in 2012, the country's needs be damned.

Second, conservatives have always attacked the program as a handout for "national feminist groups." They ignore the fact that almost all of the money goes to local resources and also support the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Some want to do

away with the law altogether.

And even though most of the statistics come from the federal government, conservative advocacy groups actively try to debunk the numbers. As a result, funding for the legislature is under incessant attack, and women's advocates must constantly defend the law and the national statistics on violence that are its underpinnings.

Those on the front lines, crisis line workers, rape counselors, social workers serving abused boys and girls, and shelter personnel, know how important this legislation is.

Congress has until Dec. 31 to show that it can do something besides dither while a frightening number of women and children are raped, beaten, and abused.

Martha Burk is a political psychologist, women's issues expert, and director of the Corporate Accountability Project for the National Council of Women's Organizations.

A Moral Outrage and Wake Up Call

Child poverty in America

BY MARC H. MORIAL

The Census Bureau delivered disturbing news this month about how the Great Recession and its aftermath are affecting the most vulnerable among us — America's school children.

Out of a total of 3,142 counties in the United States, 653 saw significant increases in poverty among school-aged children from 2007-2010, an increase of 20 percent. Nationally, 19.8 percent of school children are now living in poverty.

This poverty increase has hit

large, urban school systems the hardest with 96 of the 100 biggest school districts reporting increases in the number of poor children. In Detroit, 47 percent of school children are poor. In New York, the poverty rate rose to 29 percent, up from 26.6 percent in 2007. This is a moral outrage.

While the debate drags on in Washington, D.C. about the right balance of spending cuts and taxes, a real and preventable tragedy is unfolding before our eyes. Through no fault of their own, millions more children, whose parents have lost jobs, are in need of free

school lunches, are going without health care and, as depicted in a recent "60 Minutes" segment, are homeless and even living in cars.

The new Census Bureau report comes on the heels of news in September that the number of poor people in America has risen to 46.2 million. That's 15 percent of all citizens and the largest number in 52-years.

Many previously middle class families are finding themselves standing in line at food banks and homeless shelters. According to the Children's Defense Fund, one in three African American and Hispanic children are living in poverty. This should be a loud and urgent wake-up call to Con-

gress and policymakers.

By the end of this year, if Congress fails to act, already struggling families face the end of the payroll tax cut. This would add about \$1,000 to a family's tax bill. The extension of unemployment benefits is also in jeopardy.

According to the non-partisan Center for Budget Policy and Priorities, unemployment benefits together with supports like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit are keeping seven million people out of poverty.

Beth Davalos, who runs Families in Transition in Seminole County, Fla., was interviewed for the "60 Minutes" segment on children living in cars. She ex-

plained in stark terms the impact poverty is having on a kindergarten child she was trying to help: "That little 5-year-old was so troubled over where she would be sleeping, she was not thinking about 2 + 2."

The fact is, we should not even be talking about child poverty in the richest nation on earth. We have the means. We simply need to summon the will to end it. If we can find the money to bail out Wall Street and give tax breaks to the wealthy, surely we can find the resources to provide food, shelter, health care and a good education for our children.

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