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# OPINION

## A Cruel and Unjust Juvenile Justice System

### Why are so many girls in detention?

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

I'm grateful for a powerful new book, "Girls in Justice" by artist Richard Ross, a follow up to his moving earlier Juvenile In Justice, which combines Ross's photographs of girls in the juvenile justice system with interviews he gathered from over 250 detention facilities across the United States. If a picture is worth a thousand words, the deeply disturbing photographs speak volumes.

Ross uses the power of photography to make visible the hidden and harsh world of girls in detention. These heartwrenching images coupled with the girls' ages and life stories should move us to confront the cruel and unjust juvenile justice system in our nation. These girls are ours: our neighbors, our children's classmates, our daughters and granddaughters, sisters, cousins, and nieces — and, for some young children, our mothers.

"Girls in Justice" begs the questions—why are so many girls, especially girls of color, confined in our nation's detention facilities, and what are we as a society going to do about it?



We must all work tirelessly to give hope and a fair chance to these girls and all children by promoting policies, programs, and supports that help them and their families, especially those most at risk. We must combat systemic problems that contribute to family and community dysfunction and wreak havoc on developing children including girls; we must dig beneath the surface and examine the root cause of girls' "offenses" and why injustice saps the hopes of so many young lives on our watch.

In 2013, one in five girls in the United States was poor, and girls of color were disproportionately poor. From birth to young adulthood, children—especially poor children and children of color—encounter multiple and cumulative risk factors that often result in their being funneled into the prison pipeline through the juvenile and criminal justice systems and locked up behind bars. Such massive incarceration is sentencing millions of children to social and economic death. The pipeline to prison is lodged at the intersection of poverty and race and is intolerable in a professed society of opportunity.

In 2007, the Children's Defense Fund launched the Cradle to Prison Pipeline crusade to confront youth incarceration and the factors driving it and propose solutions to replace it with a pipeline to college and

career. While twice as many boys as girls are arrested, girls are the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system. As girls rock the cradle they rock the future, and we must pay attention to both girls and boys to ensure the development of healthy families.

Girls of color and poor girls face special challenges before they enter the juvenile justice system, during their confinement, and when they return to their communities after release. At the front end, racial disparities and the lack of appropriate treatment and support that run through every major child-serving system negatively impact their life chances by pushing more children into juvenile detention and adult prison. These include limited health and mental health care; lack of quality early childhood support experiences (including home visiting, Early Head Start and Head Start, child care, preschool, and kindergarten); children languishing in foster care waiting for permanent families and shunted through multiple placements; and failing schools with harsh zero tolerance discipline policies, mostly for nonviolent offenses, that suspend, expel, and discourage children who then too often drop out and do not graduate. Too little effort is made to divert girls from the juvenile justice system despite the existence of successful evidence-based programs.

Girls in the system often encounter

a unique set of challenges. Almost three quarters of them have been sexually or physically abused. Most are arrested for nonviolent offenses such as truancy, running away, or alcohol and substance use which can often be linked to severe abuse or neglect. These nonviolent offenses, or status offenses, would not be considered offenses for an adult. Poverty has an impact: although the trauma of sexual violence and abuse affects many girls, poor girls often lack adequate supports to keep them from juvenile detention.

Victimized girls often face more trauma and stigmatization by being held in juvenile detention facilities instead of diverted to appropriate community-based alternatives. Whether confinement is temporary or longer term, programs and personnel are often not equipped to deal with their unique needs and sometimes exacerbate the trauma. Reports are rampant of confined girls being emotionally, physically, and sexually abused, isolated, separated from their babies, unable to visit their family members regularly, and humiliated through common practices like pat downs. Detention centers need more comprehensive, gender-responsive, trauma-informed, culturally-relevant services for girls.

After release, girls, many of whom may already have been disconnected from their families and communities,

need help through education, employment, and family and community support including programs to strengthen their families and assure them access to health and mental health services. Effective reentry plans should include school reenrollment, housing, job training, case management, and mentoring. All help reduce recidivism. We should all feel ashamed as the girls in this book talk about reentering detention multiple times and how these are generational patterns. This revolving door of individual and family confinement must end—now.

It is way past time for every adult to take responsibility for reducing the number of girls and boys behind bars through prevention and diversion programs and community supports both before and after detention. And it is way past time for adults of every race and income group to break our silence about the pervasive breakdown of moral, family, community and national values, to place our children first in our lives, to rebuild family and community, to model the behavior we want our children to learn, and to never give up on any child.

We do not have a "child and youth problem" in America, but we have a profound adult problem. It is time for adults to address it and to give all of our children true justice: hope, opportunity, and love.

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

## Make Black History Month and Every Month Matter

### Making a difference against racism

BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO

Black History Month has historically been observed in February each year. It is meant to honor and recognize the incredible courage and witness of African-American heroes and heroines who have shaped our communities, our churches, and our nation.

I am continually in awe of those who have made a difference in my life throughout the years. I am privileged to work with such folks every day, but will not call them out by name without their permission. It is important to set aside a special time of the year for this purpose, but it is time to proclaim that every month matters!



As we celebrate, we must also recognize that many issues still permeate our society because of institutionalized racism that is often not known, understood, nor acknowledged.

In the past year, we have been painfully exposed to the truth about racism in our nation. Racism that plays itself out in a health care system that responds to those who are insured or those who have the money to pay their way. Racism that plays itself out in crisis and violence that should never happen between communities and the police.

Racism that is evidenced in a mass incarceration system that results in a gross overrepresentation of black and brown men behind bars. Racism that denies equal access to money, from checking accounts to mortgage loans.

While there are many reasons for this inequality, I want to focus on

the issue of literacy. The fact that we face such a serious problem with illiteracy, also labeled low literacy, calls us to address the issue as an urgent matter. The impact of illiteracy is broad, intersectional and

*Churches and communities are actively leading the effort to help children and adults read. Reading Changes Lives is intended to build upon these efforts and launch an aggressive literacy campaign to address the looming disparity affecting those who are overlooked because of race and economic marginalization.*

complicated because it proportionally affects more people who are poor and people of color.

As a complicated and broad social justice issue, literacy impacts other issues, including economic justice, gender inequality, criminal justice, public education, and racial

justice. The ability to read touches every facet of life, from our faith to our health.

The United Church of Christ has a long commitment to public education and to education in general.

Reading Changes Lives is an all-church initiative launched in September by the UCC to raise awareness of the literacy crisis nationwide and the wide-reaching impact that the ability to read has on the quality of our lives.

Reading Changes Lives proclaims that literacy is a basic human right. Churches and communities are actively leading the effort to help children and adults read. Reading Changes Lives is intended to build upon these efforts and launch an aggressive literacy campaign to address the looming disparity affecting those who are overlooked because of race and economic marginalization.

February is a special month of the year that reminds us that it is time for reparations, reconciliation, and renewal. There can be no more important reparation at this time than to work toward the restoration of our zeal for education as a church and as a nation.

Just as #BlackLivesMatter—every month matters! Join us in the effort to raise literacy levels.

The Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo is executive minister for Justice and Witness Ministries in the United Church of Christ.