

# Child Poverty: Still an Epidemic in the U.S.

During her research for the Children's Defense Fund's recent report "Held Captive: Child Poverty in America," Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Julia Cass visited the Mississippi Delta; New Orleans and Baton Rouge, La.; and suburban Long Island, NY, to profile three different kinds of child poverty. Her trip to Quitman County, Miss. covered sadly familiar ground: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited the Black sharecropping community in Marks, the seat of Quitman County, in the summer of 1966 to preach at the funeral of a friend, and Marks was later chosen as the starting point of the mule train that left Mississippi for Washington, D.C. during the Poor People's Campaign.

Cass describes the community Dr. King saw: "Quitman was one of the poorest counties in America in 1960. Many Black families lived in rented houses or in shacks on the plantations where they worked, subject to eviction at any time. The White side of town had paved streets; the Black side was unpaved. The Black schools, housed in inferior, poorly ventilated buildings and using out-of-date books from the White schools, held split sessions so the children could help plant, weed, and pick cotton at different times of



**CHILD WATCH**  
Marian Wright Edelman

year. Many families could not pay the 25 cents it cost for a lunch at school."

Dr. Ralph Abernathy accompanied Dr. King on that trip, and in his autobiography he recalled how deeply their visit with children at a "fledgling" Head Start program affected Dr. King: "We looked around the primitive schoolhouse and saw them watching us, wide-eyed and silent, having been told who we were. They seemed bright and alert, but something bothered me about them. Then I realized what it was: virtually all of them were under weight, a condition that lent a special poignancy to their enormous eyes." After watching the teacher divide a single apple into quarters for four hungry children at lunchtime, Dr. King uncharacteristically broke down in tears and had to leave the room. Later, he said to Dr. Abernathy, "I can't get those children out of my mind... We can't let that kind of poverty exist in this country. I don't think people really know that little school children

are slowly starving in the United States of America. I didn't know it." Making this poverty visible to the whole nation became the goal of the Poor People's Campaign.

Senator Robert Kennedy had a similar reaction when I accompanied him on a trip to Mississippi the next year so he could see the poverty and hunger there firsthand. His profound shock and sadness motivated him to act too. Cass says, "Senator

Mississippi Delta), did succeed in expanding the availability of food commodities, food stamps and free school lunches and breakfasts. This basic safety net is still helping long-time poor families, and newly poor families losing jobs and homes during the current recession, avoid the kind of utter destitution, hunger, malnutrition, and starvation that shocked Dr. King, Senator Kennedy and the nation." In the current debate over

an apple to feed hungry children... since the vast majority meets the poverty requirements [for free meals at school]. This alone reveals what has changed and what has not... [T]he safety net set up in the 1960s and 1970s—food stamps, school lunches and breakfasts, Medicaid, housing programs, Head Start—has ameliorated some of the awful effects of poverty in Quitman County. But education and support systems to pull the next generation—the children—out of poverty are vastly insufficient and spotty. The inadequacy of federal, state, and local support for poor children in Mississippi is underlined by this startling fact: The after-school tutoring and reading programs in Quitman and three other Delta counties are financed by what is essentially foreign aid, The Bernard van Leer Foundation of the Netherlands—which focuses on children and families in what it refers to as oppressed societies.

Despite the critical immediate solutions to the pervasive child hunger Dr. King saw, the underlying crisis—pervasive child poverty—persists in the Mississippi Delta and across the country.

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Kennedy's visit put hunger on the national agenda and sparked a coalition of individuals and groups that produced reports on child hunger, malnutrition, illness, and death and pointed out the callousness of the federal school lunch program that had no place at its table for six million needy children whose families could not afford to pay... The spotlight on poverty, which shone for about a decade (following Dr. King and Senator Kennedy's visits to the

federal budget, some pieces of the safety net are once again under attack—yet this is one of the many places where our nation has made progress in fulfilling Dr. King's dream.

But is the safety net enough? "It is hard," Cass says, "not to think about how Dr. King would respond to the place 42 years after the Poor People's Campaign, when its signature mule train departed from Marks. He would not see a teacher having to quarter

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