

## Girls

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youth and older gang members into com-



Antoinette Edwards

munity meetings, where they are confronted

with the consequences of continuing criminal behavior, and also offered support and resources to restore their lives.

Antoinette Edwards, director of the City of Portland Office of Youth Violence Prevention, told the girls everyone present was invested in their success. She

urged them to think carefully and make good choices so they could have successful lives.

"You are supposed to be here. You have a purpose, and I love you," she told the girls. "But you've got to stop fighting, and texting mean things. You are carrying a weight that is not yours to carry. Release it. We need you."

She said she personally would intervene if anyone tried to hurt them, and she would answer their calls if they needed help. Edwards even handed out her cell phone

number as a sign that she meant what she said.

This meeting, for young women, featured mainly women speakers. Rev. Renee Ward recited a poem for the girls, and explained where to go to find help if they are experiencing violence. Anesha, 36, told the girls she had just got out of prison after a long sentence. She said her youth had been wasted

because of bad choices, such as agreeing to hold a gun for a boyfriend.

"If you've made a bad choice, choose again," Anesha

told the girls.

Several members of the gang enforcement team also spoke. Officer Chris Burley told the girls he didn't want to arrest them.

"We don't want to be putting you in jail because we know there are better places for you. But if your boyfriend asks you to hold a gun, or if he's telling you to walk the streets, we are going to be there and you are going to be arrested. So we don't want you to make any more bad decisions. We want you to make better decisions and we want



Lonnie Nettles

you to be a success.

"We want you to have a happy life."

After the meeting, several girls told The Skanner they had found the message helpful.

## Inequality

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Washington, ranked at number 30 for 2008-10, the top 20 percent of households had income 11.7 times greater than the bottom group. In Oregon, ranked number 36 in 2008-10, the top 20 percent had income 10.7 times that of the bottom 20 percent.

But Oregon is ranked 7th among the states for the fastest growing gap between top- and middle-income households.

"Oregon's economic story of the past three decades is one of surging income inequality," said Jason Gettel, policy analyst with the Oregon Center for Public Policy. "The destabilizing and debilitating effect that income inequality has on our economy should be a chief concern among Oregon policymakers."

### What caused the increase in income inequality?

The researchers say the reasons include: Growing wage inequality with wage stagnation for workers at the lower end of the wage scale

Globalization and the outsourcing of manufacturing and other skilled jobs

Unemployment spikes

Fewer workers in unions; unions tend to bolster wages

Government policies that have eroded the safety net, while reducing taxes for the wealthy

A federal minimum wage that is not inflation adjusted.

Expanded investment income that benefits largely wealthy households

But does inequality matter? After all, the American Dream does include the idea of working hard and getting rich.

Rising inequality brings a host negative effects, says Liz McNichol, a senior fellow on state economic policy with the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and a co-author of the report. One problem is a reduction in social mobility, she says.

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Another is lack of a skilled workforce.

"Income inequality makes it hard to create the workforce that we need for the future," she said. "Lower income kids tend to struggle in school. That's a problem for them, but it's also a problem for all of us."

African Americans, already disproportionately represented in the lower income brackets, are hurt more, the report says.

"Race is an important factor in determining which individuals move up the income ladder and how far; studies show that the upward mobility of black families is half that of white families. Moreover, in a major national study, almost half (45 percent) of black children whose parents were solidly

middle class ended up falling to the bottom of the income distribution, compared to only 16 percent of white children."

Another problem is segregation, McNichol said, as the rich increasingly wall themselves off from the rest of America, and the poor congregate in low-rent neighborhoods. When the wealthier groups have no stake in public education, and rarely come into contact with poor children and

families, we lose the political will to improve public education. Children born into poor families are

denied a crucial ladder into higher income brackets.

Other harms include the destructive impact of large numbers of people being denied adequate healthcare, food, housing and education. Crime, mental illness and other social ills rise when wages are too low to support families. And when hard work simply doesn't pay off, people lose trust in society, our government and our institutions.

"It's discouraging for those who are not at the top," McNichol said. "People feel that this is not the American Way, that it's not fair, and that it is going to have an effect on the American economy going forward."

Enter the Occupy Movement, with its focus on the enormous advantages of the wealthiest 1 percent. Occupy activists highlighted people's anger and disillusion over financial issues, such as: unemployment, foreclosures, gentrification and student debt.

And a Pew Research Center study released in January, found that, "about two-thirds of the public (66 percent) believes there are "very strong" or "strong" conflicts between the rich and the poor—an increase of 19 percentage points since 2009."

The federal government could change this trend toward greater inequality with policy changes that redistribute resources, the report says. Congress could remove tax breaks for the wealthiest groups, strengthen unemployment insurance and the safety net, and remove barriers to union representation.

But states also have a big role to play in reducing income inequality. For some states, that could mean avoiding increases to sales taxes, and instead reducing tax breaks for the wealthy. For most states it should include raising the state minimum wage and strengthening supports for working families, such as childcare assistance and unemployment insurance.

"States that adopt policies that reduce income inequality can help their states recover more quickly from the downturn," McNichol says.

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## Marijuana

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say.

But marijuana remains illegal under federal law. States are not required to enforce the federal prohibition, meaning they can make marijuana crimes legal under state law, but whether they can set up licensing schemes to promote violations of federal law is another story.

Many constitutional lawyers don't think so: In general, state laws that "frustrate the purpose" of federal laws can be blocked.

But the DOJ hasn't said whether it plans to sue to block the licensing schemes from taking effect. Seventeen Democratic representatives signed a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder and Drug Enforcement

Administration Administrator Michele Leonhart urging the DOJ to let the states

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proceed with regulating pot and to refrain from prosecuting people who comply with the state laws.

"These states have chosen to move from a drug policy that spends millions of dollars

turning ordinary Americans into criminals toward one that will tightly regulate the use of marijuana while raising tax revenue to support cash-strapped state and local governments," the letter said. "We believe this approach embraces the goals of existing federal

marijuana law: to stop international trafficking, deter domestic organized criminal organizations, stop violence associated with

the drug trade and protect children."

Proponents of the marijuana measures welcomed the letter and DeGette's legislation, which would amend the Controlled Substances Act to clarify that it shall not pre-empt state marijuana laws.

"It's fantastic to see congressional representatives move decisively to respect the will of the voters and facilitate the fundamental reformation of our marijuana laws at the state level," said Alison Holcomb, campaign manager for Washington's Initiative 502.

So far, no Washington lawmakers have signed onto DeGette's legislation.