

# Separate and Unequal: America's Children, Race, and Poverty

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Fifty years ago, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that:

*“Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment—even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors of white and Negro schools may be equal.”*<sup>1</sup>

Even with a half-century to digest this notion and implement and enforce policies to make equality a reality, the United States today is still a country of “separate and unequal.” In fact, there is a growing gap between rich and poor children, and between black, white, and Latino children.

The United States is top of the list of industrialized nations when it comes to the number of poor children.<sup>2</sup> There are more children living in poverty today than there were 40 years ago when the war on poverty was officially declared. As noted in the article by Nightingale and Fix in this journal issue, black children are still twice as likely as white children to be poor, and a record number of black children are living in extreme poverty. In 2001, nearly one million black children lived in families with an annual income of less than half the federal poverty level (disposable income below \$7,064 for a family of three)—the highest number in 23 years.<sup>3</sup>

The portrait of inequality is astounding. (See Box 1.) Poverty accentuates racial disparities in children's health,

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and poor health and poverty spiral together in a vicious cycle that injures all children. The situation in the classroom reflects a similar gaping demographic schism. Fifty years after the Brown decision, black children are still almost twice as likely as their white peers to become dropouts. (See the article by Fuligni and Hardway in this journal issue.)

The result of this disparity is a direct pipeline from school to prison. Many high schools have become prep schools for jail. Pushouts, dropouts and expulsions all create an underclass of children who are ready-made for prison cells rather than dorm rooms. Society can no longer feign surprise when confronted with glaring overrepresentation of children of color in our juvenile justice system. A black boy today has one chance in 55 of earning a master's degree, but one chance in 5 of going to prison before age 30.<sup>4</sup>

It is reprehensible that a country such as the United States is home to more than 12 million children who live below the poverty line,<sup>5</sup> and more than 9 million children who lack health insurance.<sup>6</sup> Families who work hard and play by the rules should not face the pernicious sting of poverty, ill health, inadequate and unsafe housing, inappropriate and unequal education, and lack of affordable quality child care. More children live below the poverty line today than 30 years ago, even though the nation's per capita wealth—and our resources to end poverty—nearly doubled during that time.

The gap between the races will widen and poverty's grasp will strengthen if the nation continues down this current path. As the Hernandez article in this journal issue points out, in the year 2035, when baby boomers will retire, the economic support of this overwhelmingly white population will rely on a workforce that is more than 40% black and Latino. If training a pro-

## Box 1

### A Portrait of Inequality

#### Health:

- ▶ Young black children are twice as likely as white, Native American, Asian American, or Latino babies to be born with low birth weight.
- ▶ Babies born to Latinas and Native Americans are twice as likely as those born to whites to have mothers who receive late or no prenatal care.
- ▶ Young black children are twice as likely as their white peers to die from influenza or pneumonia.
- ▶ Black young adults are three times as likely as white young adults to die from complications of diabetes.
- ▶ Black children and teens are five times as likely as their white peers to die of chronic lower respiratory disease, and almost twice as likely to die of heart disease.

#### Education:

- ▶ Latino fourth graders are two to three times as likely as their white classmates to be performing below the basic level in mathematics.
- ▶ White fourth graders are three to four times as likely as their black and Latino classmates to be reading at the proficient level.

#### Juvenile Justice:

- ▶ Black juveniles are about four times as likely to be arrested as their white counterparts.
- ▶ Black males ages 15 to 19 are four times as likely as their white peers and twice as likely as their Latino peers to die from firearms injury.
- ▶ Black juveniles are five times as likely as white youths to be incarcerated.

Source: Children's Defense Fund. *The state of America's children: Yearbook 2004*. Washington, DC: CDF, 2004.

ductive workforce is indeed necessary for the future of the country's economic well-being, society cannot afford to be complacent about the joblessness among America's youth. The jobless rate rose to almost 60% in June 2004—the highest rate for youth in the 56 years that data have been reported, and the highest ever for a summer month.<sup>7</sup> Joblessness among black and Latino teens was even higher: more than 77% for black teens and 68.6% for Latino teens, the highest ever reported for young Latinos.

Nor should society be complacent about current tax policies that favor the wealthy at the expense of the nation's future productivity and moral well-being. Dividend tax cuts do little to benefit poor working families who will never receive stock dividends.<sup>8</sup> More than 260,000 children of active duty service members are excluded from receiving the Child Tax Credit, whereas American millionaires receive, on average, more than \$93,000 in tax breaks.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the national deficit

is skyrocketing: Even if all of the current tax policies were frozen today, our children would still inherit a debt of \$7 trillion.<sup>10</sup>

Child poverty is not an act of God. It is a by-product of the nation's moral and political choices. The United States has the resources to lift children out of poverty. This is not a financial issue, it is an issue of priorities. If there is the money to wage war in and then rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, if there is the money to send space-ships to explore Mars and colonize the moon, if there is enough money for tax breaks that disproportionately favor the wealthy, then there is more than enough money to reduce poverty through such programs as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Head Start, and Medicaid—programs that provide crucial services to help the poorest children.

A comprehensive plan, funded at \$75 billion annually, could ensure the end of child poverty by 2010.<sup>11</sup> Key elements of such a plan include the following:

- ▶ Ensure that every child is prepared for school by fully funding quality childcare and Head Start and making new investments in preschool programs.
- ▶ Improve the quality of public education by modernizing schools, reducing class sizes and providing incentives for high-quality teachers for the students who are most in need.
- ▶ Ensure that health insurance coverage is available for all children and their parents.
- ▶ End child hunger through the expansion of food programs.
- ▶ Ensure that children have a place to call home through decent affordable housing.
- ▶ Protect all children from neglect, abuse, and other violence and ensure them the care they need.
- ▶ Support families leaving welfare with health care, child care, education and training in order to be successful in the workplace.

Although ambitious, such a plan is far less costly than the recent tax breaks for the wealthy, or sending a spaceship to Mars.

It is time for new choices. It is time to work collaboratively and strategically on behalf of the nation's children who are suffering in poverty, violence, hunger, and homelessness. It is time to hold elected officials accountable for their words, their deeds, and their voting records. The stakes have rarely been higher for the future of Head Start and early education, for tax fairness and justice, for breaking the pipeline between our public schools and prisons, for guaranteeing health coverage for all children including immigrants. It is time to reaffirm the appropriate role of government in providing a social safety net for poor children. These are the issues that consume U.S. politics today, and how they are resolved will shape our future.

James Baldwin, celebrated author and essayist, once said, "If history were the past, history wouldn't matter. History is the present. You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history."<sup>12</sup> Just as what came before determines society's actions today, what society does today matters to future generations. The nation's demographic patterns may shift, but the challenges remain constant. The time is long overdue to honor the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and realize a future when all children, regardless of their race or ethnicity, are ensured a safe passage to adulthood.

## ENDNOTES

1. For complete text and information about the ruling, see the Brown Foundation Web site at <http://brownvboard.org/research/opinions/347us483.htm>.
2. Children's Defense Fund. *2002 facts on child poverty in America*. Washington, DC: CDF, November 2003. Available online at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/familyincome/childpoverty/basicfacts.asp>.
3. Children's Defense Fund. Number of black children in extreme poverty hits record high. Press release. Washington, DC: CDF, April 30, 2003. Available online at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/pressreleases/2003/030430.asp>.
4. Calculations by the Children's Defense Fund, based on U.S. Census Bureau's *Educational attainment in the United States: March 2002 detailed tables (PPL-169)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, March 2003. Available online at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/ppl-169.html>.
5. See note 2, CDF, November 2003.
6. Children's Defense Fund. Number of children lacking health insurance unchanged thanks to Medicaid and CHIP programs. Press release. Washington, DC: CDF, September 29, 2003. For more on this topic, see the previous journal issue *The Future of Children: Health Insurance for Children* (Spring 2003) 13(1).
7. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Table: Age 16–19 percent jobless and percent employed in June 1948–2004*. Seasonally unadjusted. Available online at [http://www.childrensdefense.org/data/june\\_youth\\_jobless\\_rates\\_by\\_race.pdf](http://www.childrensdefense.org/data/june_youth_jobless_rates_by_race.pdf).
8. For example, 94% of all Latino children in America will gain nothing from the dividend tax cut because their families do not receive any stock dividends. For additional information, see Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. *Exempting corporate dividends for individual taxes*. Washington, DC: CBPP, January 2003. Available online at <http://www.cbpp.org/1-6-03tax.htm>.
9. Children's Defense Fund. *Robin Hood in reverse: Bush administration budget choices take from poor children to give to the rich*. Washington, DC: CDF, February 2004. Available online at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/pdf/robinhood.pdf>.
10. Congressional Budget Office. *The budget and economic outlook: Fiscal years 2005 to 2014*. Washington, DC: CBO, January 2004. Available online at <http://www.cbo.gov/showdoc.cfm?index=4985&sequence=0>.
11. After two years of extensive consultation with child-serving and community leaders in every sector, CDF's Action Council developed a long-term policy vision to truly Leave No Child Behind®. Endorsed by more than 1,800 national, state, and local organizations, as well as hundreds of public officials, the comprehensive Dodd-Miller Act to Leave No Child Behind (S. 448/H.R. 936) was introduced in Congress in 2001. (It is not to be confused with the Bush Administration's single-issue No Child Left Behind Education Act.) Some of the provisions of Leave No Child Behind, such as the child tax credit, have been enacted. For more information, see the CDF Web site at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/theact/default.asp>.
12. Baldwin, J., and Mead, M. *A rap on race*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1971.