

Child Poverty is the Real Scandal

Written by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson
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Washington is descending into another silly season. Let's end this diversion of dust and smoke as partisans hype mock "scandals" for political profit.

The real scandals — like that of children in poverty — are simply being ignored. In this rich nation, nearly 8 million children under the age of 18 are being raised in what are called "areas of concentrated poverty." These are the ghettos, barrios and impoverished rural areas where more than 30 percent of families live below the poverty line (a little over \$22,000 for a family of four in 2010, when these figures date from). The number of children living in these communities is rising: It's up 25 percent since 2000, according to the Data Snapshot of Kids Count, the nonpartisan organization whose report is the source of this data.

Not surprisingly, African-American, Native-American and Latino children are 6 to 9 times more likely than white children to live in these areas. Children whose parents were born outside of the U.S. — the offspring of immigrants — are also more likely to be ghettoized. Two-thirds of these children are in large cities. Surprisingly, the highest rate is in the South and Southwest: Mississippi, New Mexico, Louisiana, Texas and Arizona. With the nation moving toward becoming a majority minority nation, these children are our future. We will rise or fall depending on how successful we are in tapping their potential and in providing them with opportunity.

Right now, we're failing the test. Our ghettos and barrios — and other communities of concentrated poverty — are dangerous to children. They're more likely to go to impoverished and underperforming schools, more likely to be unable to find good pre-school and child care, and more likely to lack quality health care. Their housing situation is less stable and their neighborhoods often lack adequate outdoor spaces. They must survive on dangerous streets.

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Children growing up in areas of concentrated poverty do worse in school and are more likely to drop out — even if they come from moderate- or high-income families. Those raised in middle- or higher income families are 52 percent more likely to fall down the income ladder if they grow up in these neighborhoods.

The scandal is that our public policy to deal with these children is as impoverished as their neighborhoods. You can't address their challenges by shutting down a public school and opening up a charter. High-stakes testing can measure how they fall behind, but it provides no remedy.

We need a comprehensive strategy to address concentrated communities of poverty. We need to rebuild these neighborhoods with affordable housing, sensible public transport, clinics and hospitals, groceries with good food while investing in the kids — through infant nutrition, universal pre-K, smaller classes in early grades, good teachers, smart schools, afterschool programs and affordable college.

In an age where globalization has ravaged communities, Kids Count argues that we need to develop “anchor institutions” — local hospitals, universities, government agencies — that hire locally, train locally and buy locally. These neighborhoods have to be figured into citywide and regional plans, not locked out of them.

Our diverse democracy won't survive if children discover that their success depends more on the luck of what family they are born into rather than the pluck of the work that they do. We can afford to remove the shackles that burden these children.