

Children's Defense Fund

Testimony of Catherine Beane, Director of Policy, Before the Louisiana Senate Select Committee on Women and Children



November 14, 2011

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am pleased to join you in my capacity as the Director of Policy for the Children's Defense Fund. CDF is a non-profit child advocacy organization whose Leave No Child Behind[®] mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

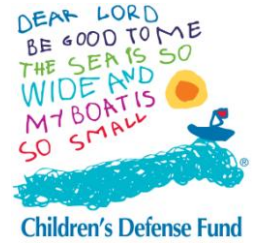
Since its founding in 1973, CDF has provided a strong, effective and independent voice for *all* the children of America who cannot vote, lobby or speak for themselves. We pay particular attention to the needs of poor and minority children and those with disabilities. CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investments before they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble or suffer family breakdown. With a national headquarters in Washington, DC, we have state offices covering 15 states where the majority of poor children and children of color live – including an office in New Orleans. We champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and ensure their access to health care, quality education and a moral and spiritual foundation.

In addition to my role with the Children's Defense Fund, I also come to you today as a fellow Louisianian. I grew up in Lake Charles, where my father, Dr. Buzzy Vanchiere, was a pediatrician, and my mother, Donna Vanchiere, is a nurse at St. Patrick's Hospital and has been involved in St. Margaret Parish for over 40 years. I've got brothers and sisters-in-law and nieces and nephews in Lake Charles and Shreveport. I've got cousins and aunts and uncles in Melville and Opelousas and Bunkie and Baton Rouge. And from 2007 until 2010, I lived with my husband and sons in New Orleans, where we welcomed my youngest son to our family. I come to you today as someone who is from here, and who is very concerned about the alarming rise in poverty and its impact on our children.

I have been asked to talk about the impact of poverty on children – on their life opportunities and outcomes, particularly as they relate to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. The Cradle to Prison Pipeline is an urgent national crisis that leaves a Black boy born in 2001 with a one in three risk of going to prison in his lifetime, and a Latino boy with a one in six risk of the same fate. The prison pipeline is fueled by pervasive poverty, racial disparities, inadequate health and mental health care, gaps in early childhood

development, disparate educational opportunities, chronic abuse and neglect, and overburdened and ineffective juvenile justice systems.

In my time with you this afternoon, there are three main points that I want to cover:

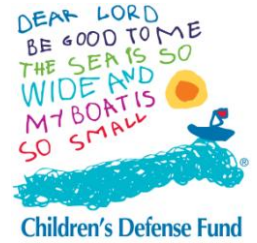


- First, child poverty in Louisiana is pervasive. I'll take a few minutes at the outset to paint the picture of child poverty at the national level and across the State of Louisiana.
- Second, pervasive poverty like that experienced by almost 300,000 children in Louisiana impacts their cognitive and emotional development, academic achievement, and access to health care – and is a main driver of the Cradle to Prison Pipeline.
- And finally, alleviating child poverty now is critical to dismantling the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and replacing it with a pipeline to educational achievement, successful passage to a healthy, productive adulthood, and economic stability for all who live here.

The official poverty estimates released in September by the U.S. Census Bureau should raise alarms for the country and for the State of Louisiana.

- 22 percent of children in America lived in poverty in 2010. That's more than one in five children, and the highest rate of poverty since 1993, when 22.7 percent of children were poor.
- Between 2009 and 2010, child poverty rose from 15.5 million to 16.4 million. The technical end of the recession in 2009 did not prevent almost a million more children from becoming poor in 2010.
- To give you a sense of things, a family of four is deemed to be poor when their annual income is under \$22,314. That's a family of four living on approximately \$60/day.
- In 2010, over seven million children – or one in ten – lived in extreme poverty, defined as an annual income of less than half the poverty level (that's \$11,570 for a four-person family – or roughly \$30/day).
 - This reflects an increase of 455,000 children in extreme poverty between 2009 and 2010
- Children under five were the poorest age group in 2010, with one in four infants, toddlers and preschoolers living in poverty. And half of this very young age group (2.6 million – 12.2%) lived in extreme poverty.
- Families with children faced higher poverty rates than families without children.
 - Children living in single-parent families (especially families headed by a single mother) were hardest hit by poverty.
 - Although poverty has affected all family types, the increases have been most severe among young families – those headed by an adult under 30,

especially those with children present in the home. 37.3 percent of young families experienced families.



Within this abysmal national story of child poverty, children of color suffer disproportionately.

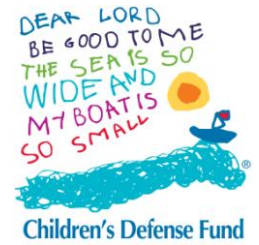
- While every racial and ethnic group experienced an increase in poverty in 2010 except for White children under five, young children of color are especially at risk:
 - Almost one in two young Black children (that's 45.5% of young Black children) and more than one in three young Hispanic children lived in poverty.
 - Moreover, one in four young Black children (under 5 – 25.3%) and more than one in six young Hispanic children (under 5 – 17.3%) lived in extreme poverty.

The story for Louisiana mirrors in far too many respects the numbers at the national level:

- 27% of all children in Louisiana were poor, an increase of almost 12% between 2009 and 2010 –and 12% of all children in Louisiana lived in extreme poverty, an increase of almost 16%.
- Among the very youngest, 32% of Louisiana's children under the age of 6 lived in poverty – an increase of 10% between 2009 and 2010, and 15% of Louisiana's children under the age of 6 lived in extreme poverty, an increase of 11%.
- As at the national level, the story for children of color is incredibly alarming:
 - Almost half (47%) of Louisiana's Black children lived in poverty in 2010.

The pervasive poverty experienced by almost 300,000 children in Louisiana is one of the most significant drivers of the Cradle to Prison Pipeline – and poverty impacts many aspects of children's lives.

- **Health Coverage:** Poor children lack access to health coverage. Poor children have more severe health problems than higher-income children, and fare worse than higher-income children with the same problems when looking at the impact and severity of their conditions. For example, a poor child with asthma is more likely to be reported in poor health, to spend more days in bed, and to have more hospital episodes than a high-income child with the same condition.
- **Hunger and Food Insecurity:** Poor children are more than three times as likely as non-poor children to live in homes with low food insecurity, where not everyone had enough food all the time. Moreover, while more than 400,000 of Louisiana's children receive nutritional support to alleviate



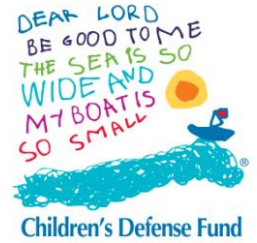
hunger through free and reduced priced lunches during the school year, only 25,912 are served in the summer food service program – leaving some far too many children who are assisted during the school year susceptible to hunger during the summer. And children who are hungry cannot grow and develop as they need to in order to thrive.

- **Developmental Delays:** Research has found income-related disparities in cognitive skills in children as young as nine months old; the gaps are wider at 24 months. Young poor children are three times as likely not to have a parent read to them as non-poor children and are considerably less likely to recognize all letters, count to 20 or higher, or be able to write their first name. Early gaps in cognitive and non-cognitive skills tend to persist later in life.
- **Family and Home Environments:** Half of all children living with a parent who did not complete high school are poor, compared to about one-eighth of children whose parent completed high school. Compared with kindergarteners from families in the bottom fifth of the income distribution, children from the top fifth have three times as many books at home, are read to more often, watch far less television, are four times as likely to have a computer in the home, and are more likely to visit museums or libraries.
- **Falling Behind in School:** Poor children do worse in school and are less likely to graduate from high school than their non-poor peers. For instance, in 2009, only 17 percent of low-income eighth-grade students were performing at grade level in math compared with 45 percent of higher-income students.
- Once children fall into poverty, they have a hard time breaking out. Low-income youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 are five times as likely as their high-income peers to be out of school without a high school diploma or GED.
- **Criminal Involvement:** Youth from low-income households have an increased likelihood of participating in serious crimes compared to those from higher-income households.
- One of the most telling facts about Louisiana is that it spends more per prisoner than per student each year -- \$10,422 per prisoner vs. \$8,937 per student

Once children fall into poverty, they have a hard time breaking out. Beyond the moral imperative to tend to the least of our brothers, we should all share the sense of urgency and motivation to address the critical needs of so many children in our community because the costs of child poverty are born by all of us.

- Everyone pays when every fifth child is poor.
- Taxpayers ultimately pay as expenditures on social services, medical care and criminal justice increase and government funds have to be diverted from other pressing needs.

- Taxpayers also pay when a poor child needs special education or must repeat a grade and when a poor child suffers mental and physical disabilities that require costly care.
- Businesses pay when poor children grow up with less education and become less productive workers who require more training, cannot work as fast or learn new machinery and techniques, cannot understand an instruction manual, or make costly mistakes with customer orders or valuable equipment.



So what do we do about it? That's the question that lingers here in the Louisiana state capitol, in statehouses across the country, and in our nation's capitol.

It's easy in this day and age of fiscal austerity to say we just don't have enough money to address the problem.

But as my colleague Melissa Boteach from the Half in Ten Campaign has already shared with you – we know what to do to alleviate poverty. We know what works to support families that are struggling.

And as it happens, investing in our children and protecting them from budget cuts make good economic and common sense, as well as good moral sense.

One thing that we must keep in mind is that one third of all those living in poverty are children – children who lack a voice in the political process and in the decisions that are made by their parents. Whatever some may think about individual responsibility and pulling one's self up by one's bootstraps, children should not be punished for the choices of adults, be they parents or politicians.

We have an ethical and moral obligation to tend to these least of our brothers and sisters. Even faced with budget deficits at state and national levels, we simply cannot afford *not* to prioritize our children as we make the critical decisions.

Thank you.