Cradle to Prison Pipeline® Discussion Guide

Children's Defense Fund

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Now that you viewed the Children's Defense Fund's *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline*SM Report, you know that there are several factors, which in combination, place far too many children and teens on a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment and, in some cases, premature death. The factors fueling the Pipeline include:

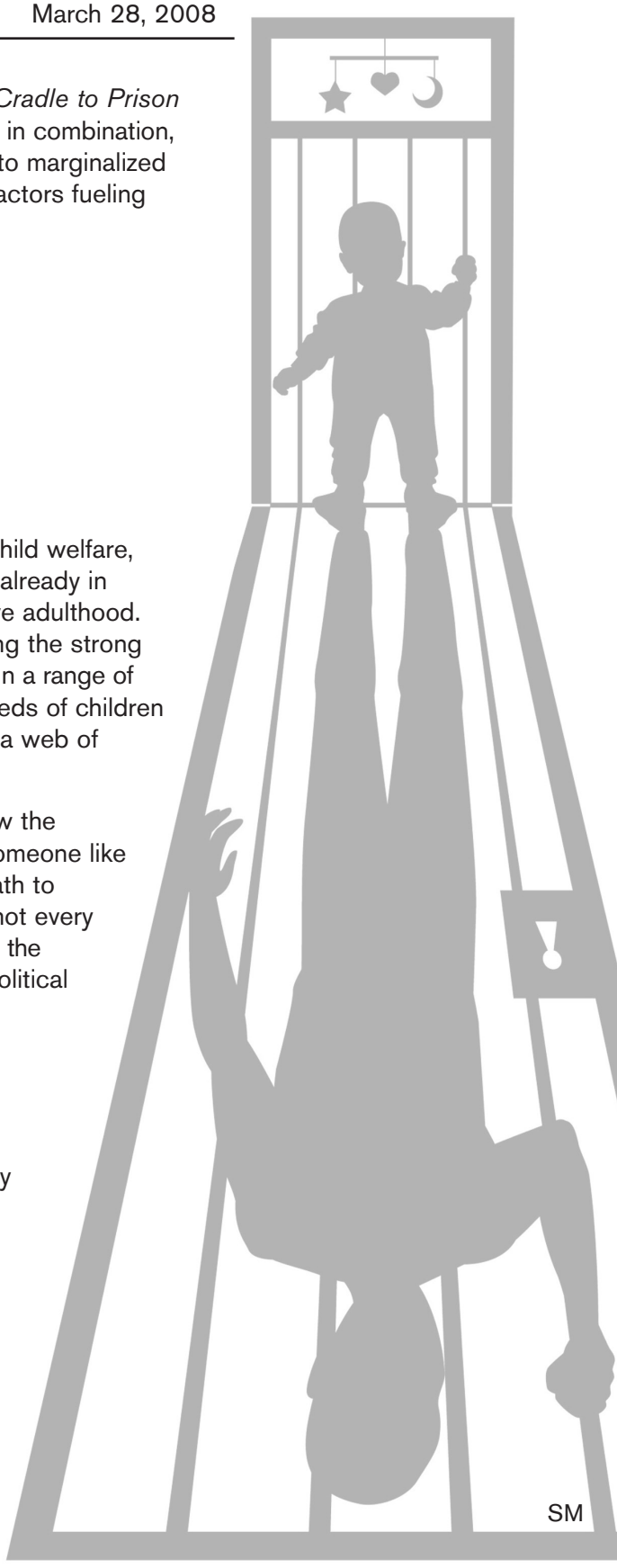
- Pervasive poverty;
- Inadequate access to quality health care;
- Gaps in early childhood development programs;
- Unequal educational opportunities;
- Intolerable abuse and neglect;
- Unmet mental health needs;
- Rampant substance abuse; and an
- Overburdened, ineffective juvenile justice system.

We must work to prevent children and teens from entering the child welfare, juvenile justice and criminal justice systems and rerouting those already in the Pipeline towards a healthy enriched childhood and productive adulthood. This will require the reweaving of family and community; rekindling the strong tradition of self help; creating a unified and informed voice to attain a range of public policies, practices and cultural values that address the needs of children and teens; and providing positive alternatives to the streets and a web of community institutions for mentoring children and teens.

On the following pages you will find a case study describing how the Pipeline has affected one teenager. We believe that rescuing someone like Jewel from this Pipeline and helping place her on a sustained path to successful adulthood, is complex yet possible. While obviously not every child and teen can or will be rescued, the vast majority of those in the Pipeline can be with the concerted action and broad social and political commitment to do so.

Through examination of this case study, we hope you will:

- Learn more about the policies and systems fueling the Pipeline;
- Understand how risk factors combine to place so many children on a trajectory to a marginalized life and even prison;
- Gain deeper, more personal insight into the lives of children and teens in the Pipeline; and
- Answer our urgent call to action to dismantle the Pipeline.



Jewel's Story[1]: Looking Forward to Her Future

Jewel, at the time, was an 18-year-old girl whose early childhood memories included walking the streets in the early morning looking for food, and waking up in a strange man's house after her mother, a drug addict, had left. When she and her siblings were taken away from her mother, they were split up. She went to a Catholic group home. Although she says it "wasn't that bad," she followed the predictable trajectory—and her mother's example—into a lifestyle of drugs and hustling and bad company. As Wright[2] put it, "It is naive to believe that simply by changing environments, all the memories, all the learned behavior, won't matter anymore. These kids take their problems with them, and the foster care system varies tremendously in quality."

At 12, she went to live with her father and his girlfriend in Covington. She said he worked hard and provided for her. "The only part was, he wasn't loving. I guess I needed that. Me not having that, I felt I could do whatever. I was really alone. I felt alone."

She "always struggled in school," she said. "In some parts, I do have strengths but in other parts, I don't. It got harder and harder as the years went past." She was held back in the ninth grade. At about that time, she began running away from home and skipping school. "I would leave, be gone two or three days, home a week and then back out again."

She hung out with a group older than she was on "street corners, certain blocks."

They were grown and I was trying to do what they did. They were people I could talk to. Even though they did bad things, they were there and I looked up to them. I felt like somebody was always there for me." What were they doing? "Drugs, hustling to get money, gang activities."

She said this life was "fun in the sense of I was able to do whatever I wanted to do. I could stay out as long as I wanted to. I had freedom. Nobody was telling me to do this or that. There was really no authority there." Her father, she says, didn't know what to do and let her do what she wanted.

The others had long since dropped out of school, but Jewel kept returning from time to time. "Sometimes, honestly, I would go to school because I was tired of walking the streets all day. Sometimes I could sit down and do the work. But I felt I was different from everybody. Some other kids were doing the same thing I was but not as severe." She did, though, have a teacher who believed in her and sometimes came to court to support her when she got in trouble.

The law first "got interested in me," as Jewel put it, for the so-called status charges of runaway and truancy, the typical first offenses for girls. Later, she was charged with possession of marijuana and assaults for "hitting people," including a teacher. This happened, she said, at a basketball game. A boy hit her and she told a teacher about it. "She didn't punish the boy so, I don't really know, one thing led to another. I started yelling and the teacher started yelling. I went towards her, and she pushed me down. I kept trying to get back up to get at her and when I did, I hit her. They grabbed me and took me to the principal's office. My father came and then the police." She pled guilty and went to the Campbell County Detention Center for a month.

Jewel said her anger was "really scary in a way. If you tried to stop me I would not stop till I felt like stopping." She now believes her anger wasn't so much against the teacher as against everything around her. "It was just…anger out of nowhere. Anytime I had a chance to blow up, I would blow up and I would feel better afterwards. Then again, I would have to face the consequences and it was more and more piling up and more anger."

At the detention center, she felt as if her life had shut down, yet she was "learning some things. Some people, mostly Black male and female authorities, would tell me what was wrong. At least they talked to me, and it did some good. That was just like the first step."

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1 This story was reprinted from Part II of the Children's Defense Fund's *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline*SM Report entitled "Case Studies of Children in or at Risk of the Pipeline in Ohio and Mississippi."

2 Professor John Wright is a member of the University of Cincinnati faculty in the Division of Criminal Justice. His research is used throughout the Children's Defense Fund's *America's Cradle to Prison Pipeline*SM Report.

When she was released and went back to her father's house, she spent two or three days staying home "trying to listen and do right," but after a week, she went out to the streets again. "I didn't have goals," she says. "My thinking was: 'This is the only thing I have. What else am I supposed to do?'"

The judge had told her that if he saw her again, he would give her more time. "But I didn't care. I was going to do what I wanted." The next time she came before him, at 16, she was sentenced to a year and six months in the Kentucky equivalent of Ohio's juvenile correctional facilities, also located in a rural area. "That is when I started goals. What did I want to do for my future? That's when I started to find out about my talents. I always knew I could sing, but poetry? First, I wrote down what I was feeling. That was the way the people there helped me, to talk about and write down my feelings, and then I started with poetry." Staff at the institution published some of her poetry on the Internet.

Interestingly, Wright says that research into resiliency—why some kids in terrible circumstances manage to come out all right—shows that one factor is being able to verbalize feelings. "I'm not talking about touchy feely stuff. This is a real survival skill."

Jewel's excitement was palpable as she described her breakthrough into possibility.

"That's when it came to me, 'You can do anything! I want to be a poet but then again, what about electrical engineering? Wow! I can be anything!' That's when I started to think I wanted to get a job and go to school. I wanted to do the best for myself. I didn't have to go back there on the streets. I could show people. Almost all my life, people didn't expect me to be anything. I'd be like the rest of my mother's family, which is known in Covington."

Once again, she resolved to change her life. When she got back home, she went to school, took the required drug tests and did all right for awhile. "But it was like: 'Where can I go from here? Where can I start?' And I went right back into it, started smoking weed again, running away, hustling. I didn't have a job. I was so scared out there now, since I was getting older. I was more afraid to die." Jewel decided to turn herself in.

This is an image that comes to mind about Jewel. She is walking on a road, a pathway, the one that ends in prison, hand in hand with others going in the same direction. At a way station along the way, people tell her there is a cut-off ahead to another path, one that leads to a brighter place. She doesn't like the road she's on so she listens, and when she sees the cut-off, she detaches herself from her companions and takes her first steps on the other path. She doesn't get very far. Her companions reach out to pull her back. She is alone and uncertain on this new path and no one there is reaching out to pull her forward.

Jewel was sent to a juvenile residential treatment center. "That's when I started working really seriously on how I was going to put my dreams in action." The most important decision she made was not to return to Covington this time. "I wasn't strong enough yet to handle that," she decided. She was almost 18 by then, and could legally live on her own, although she didn't know where or how.

At that point, Angela, one of her younger sisters came to see her. This sister, who had been very badly burned by fireworks when their mother left the children alone, had been placed in a foster home when she got out of the hospital. The director of an agency for troubled youth was Angela's volunteer mentor. The foster parents, used to caring for medically fragile children, couldn't handle the girl when she got well, and the foster mother telephoned the mentor at 3:00 a.m. and said they were going to put the girl in an institution.

"I said, 'Well, no. Let me come get her,'" the mentor recalled. She and her husband were not licensed as foster parents at that time but quickly became licensed, took the girl in and later adopted her. Of Jewel's siblings, this girl, now 17, has done the best; she will graduate from high school next year and plans to attend Kentucky State University. (Another sister, the eldest, has three children and has been in and out of prison, as has their mother. A brother just spent his 16th birthday in a juvenile correctional facility.)

Jewel had visited her sister from time to time, when the sister's adoptive family would pick her up at her father's house. "She was living there and doing good, and I wanted the same thing she had," Jewel said. "Really, I was jealous. When I told her I didn't want to go home, she said, 'Why don't you come live with us?' I said, 'They won't let me live with ya'll.' But she asked and they said yes."

Jewel moved in June 2003 to the family's nice, comfortable home in suburban Cincinnati. The interview took place around the dining room table. Her new guardian said she was always fond of Jewel but "couldn't keep up with her. It was hard not to bond. I could not let her go into a bad situation."

Her guardian had not previously heard Jewel talk about her experiences to others. When Jewel said, "Now that I'm here, I have people who love me. That's what I was looking for," tears welled up in her eyes. "When I think of the pipeline, I think about the adults in their lives or lack of," her guardian said. "We want to talk about the pipeline to prison after our kids are already there. We need to take initiative at the grassroots level to see the strengths in our kids, to nurture that, and commit ourselves to helping them grow. Sometimes we forget, as we design systems, the crucial importance of caring, competent adults."

Jewel attends high school. She is not in a class for those with severe behavioral handicaps, as she was before when she was angry and acting out, and she is working hard and doing well. She is a junior and this year is going to a vocational program where she will begin studies to become a registered nurse that she can continue in college afterwards. She won't graduate until she is 20 but "the good news is: it doesn't matter," her guardian said. "She's going to accomplish her goals and do something with her life."

Jewel says she now has "more like a normal life. I'm ready to take driver's training. I have a job on weekends. I'm starting to bring boys home." "Decent boys," her guardian interjects, who can hold a conversation and are in school. She knows that Jewel will have some "falls and bumps but we are laying the foundation for her to make it out there. She is becoming a new (Jewel)."

Says Jewel: "I feel good. I feel like there is going to be a future for me. I can't wait to see what it is."

Discussion Questions

1. What risk factors caused Jewel to enter the Pipeline?
2. What strikes you about Jewel and her story? How did you feel while you were reading her story?
3. How did adults fail Jewel? What effect did that have on her?
4. Before she moved in with her sister's adoptive family, how did Jewel feel about herself, her lifestyle and her community? Why did she feel that way? How did this affect her ability to get out the Pipeline?
5. What were Jewel's experiences at the juvenile detention centers?
6. What were her experiences upon leaving the centers? What did she need when she left the centers in order to stay on the right track?
7. At what point(s) could interventions have taken place to steer Jewel out of the Pipeline? What would those interventions have looked like? What prevented them from happening?
8. What ultimately got Jewel out of the Pipeline? What can that teach us about how to get other children out of the Pipeline?
9. At the end of the story Jewel's guardian says, "We need to take initiative at the grassroots level to see the strengths in our kids, to nurture that, and commit ourselves to helping them grow." How do we do that as individuals and within families and community organizations? What role would local, state and national governments play?
10. What specific action steps can you and/or your community take to keep children like Jewel out of the Pipeline?

To learn more about CDF's *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* Campaign and what you can do to dismantle the Pipeline, please visit www.childrensdefense.org/cradletoprison.