

## **Child Abuse Symposium**

Plenary Talk

04-17-15

Introduction, title...

Thank you for the chance to speak on a topic dear to me, which is the lives and future of our young generation.

The goal of my talk today will be to broaden and deepen our conceptual understanding of “child abuse”—but also the concept of violence itself.

To do so, we must speak of institutional violence. This refers to the systematic forms of violence and coercion that are applied to entire populations of people. Just as rape and interpersonal violence are about power at the micro level, institutional violence is about power and social control at the macro level.

And these two forms of violence are deeply intertwined.

Incarceration is perhaps the most obvious example of the connection between institutional and micro forms of violence.

First—let’s get it straight. Incarcerating people is a form of violence. If I kidnap you, strip you down, cavity search you, and put you in a cage. I’m pretty sure you would experience that as a violently coercive act. When we do it on an institutional scale, and it’s done to people who are labeled “criminal,” it’s just “crime control policy”—stripped of it’s actual form.

Black youth in the U.S., for decades, have been the target of institutional violence via the criminal justice system in the U.S. African Americans are still incarcerated at 25 times the rate their white counterparts—controlling for all other variables including offense and criminal history.

Yesterday (brief explanation of event)

Dr. Angela Davis and young organizers from Chicago, Ferguson, Oakland, and San Jose came together to discuss what Dr. Davis called an “economy of violence”—think about that for a moment—that consumes our still deeply racist and capitalist society. We are a society “saturated in violence”—and that violence is systematically aimed at the young, the poor, and people of color—including those in the muslim world. Indeed, the children of Gaza know the concept of institutional violence all too well...

Thanks to resistance movements, I don't need to tell you about the incredible police violence against unarmed youth of color all over the country. Simply the names Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice—a 12 year old murdered by Cleveland police officers—now tell the story. It's nothing short of modern lynching—Tamir Rice is our Emmitt Till.

So, if we are to speak of abusing our youth—it should be impossible to avoid the topic of institutional violence. And current events continue to tragically make this crucial point.

Journalist Paul Buchheit published an article (multiple sites) yesterday that demonstrates the institutional violence inflicted on children by our neo-liberal capitalist economic system.

It's short and to the point—so I will quote it in full:

America's wealth grew by **60 percent** in the past six years, by over \$30 trillion. In approximately the same time, the number of homeless children has also grown by **60 percent**.

Financier and CEO Peter Schiff **said**, "People don't go hungry in a capitalist economy."

[BREAK IN HERE]

The **16 million kids** on food stamps know what it's like to go hungry. Perhaps, some in Congress would say, those children should be working. "There is no such thing as a free lunch," **insisted** Georgia Representative Jack Kingston, even for schoolkids, who should be required to "sweep the floor of the cafeteria" (as they **actually do** at a **charter school** in Texas).

The callousness of U.S. political and business leaders is disturbing, shocking. Hunger is just one of the problems of our children.

The U.S. has one of the highest relative **child poverty rates** in the developed world. As **UNICEF** reports, "[Children's] material well-being is highest in the Netherlands and in the four Nordic countries and lowest in Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and the United States."

**Over half** of public school students are poor enough to qualify for lunch subsidies, and **almost half** of black children under the age of six are living in poverty.

Nearly **half** of all food stamp recipients are children, and they averaged about **\$5 a day** for their meals before the 2014 farm bill **cut** \$8.6 billion (over the next ten years) from the food stamp program.

In 2007 about **12 of every 100** kids were on **food stamps**. Today it's **20 of every 100**.

**For Every 2 Homeless Children in 2006, There Are Now 3**

On a typical frigid night in January, 138,000 children, according to the **U.S. Department of Housing**, were without a place to call home.

That's about the same number of **households** that have each increased their wealth by **\$10 million per year** since the recession.

The U.S. **ranks near the bottom of the developed world** in the percentage of 4-year-olds in early childhood education. Early education should be a primary goal for the future, as numerous **studies** have shown that pre-school helps **all** children to achieve more and earn more through adulthood, with the most disadvantaged benefiting the most. But we're going in the **opposite direction**. Head Start was recently hit with the **worst cutbacks** in its history.

**Children's Rights? Not in the U.S.**

It's hard to comprehend the thinking of people who cut funding for homeless and

hungry children. It may be delusion about trickle-down, it may be indifference to poverty, it may be resentment toward people unable to "make it on their own."

[BREAK IN—BUT THIS IS A STRUCTURAL IMPERATIVE TO A CAPITALIST SYSTEM]

The indifference and resentment and disdain for society reach around the globe. Only **two nations** still refuse to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: South Sudan and the United States. When President Obama **said**, "I believe America is exceptional," he was close to the truth, in a way he and his wealthy friends would never admit.

Children are homeless and hungry in this country—also making them most subject to experiencing nearly all forms of "abuse" discussed at this symposium today, from interpersonal violence, to sexual abuse, to child trafficking—because our policies and economy make it so—systematically.

As we think of more micro forms of violence and abuse today, perhaps we can think of them within these broader institutional contexts—within this bigger "economy of violence" demonstrated in our domestic and foreign policies, and reflected in our corporate media.

My hope is that we can discuss some of these connections in discussion—thank you!