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THE DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF MINORITY YOUTH IN THE FAMILY AND CRIMINAL COURT SYSTEMS: INTRODUCTION

*Hon. Judith S. Kaye**

Never have I more wanted to draw potential readers into every single page of a law journal feature than I do now.

Concededly, I am partly motivated by pride in the wonderful day-long program envisioned, assembled and actually presented last September at our Judicial Institute by two outstanding groups within the New York State Unified Court System—the Franklin H. Williams Judicial Commission on Minorities (chaired by Judge Lewis Douglass) and the Family Court Judges' Association (chaired by Judge Gayle Roberts), with Judge Cheryl Chambers as the constant guiding light. It is no small accomplishment to pull together a program of this quality, to fully engage two hundred very busy lawyers and judges, and to fill them with critical information and utter resolve to effect meaningful change. They did it!

But my motivation goes well beyond my pride in that extraordinary day.

* Chief Judge of the State of New York; Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals of the State of New York. She is the first woman to occupy the State Judiciary's highest office and the first woman to serve on New York's highest court. She also serves as Chair of the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. She has served as President of the Conference of Chief Justices, Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Center for State Courts (2002-03) and Co-Chair of the Commission on the American Jury of the American Bar Association (2004 05). She is a graduate of New York University School of Law.

The subject of the material that follows—the disproportionate number of minority youth in the family and criminal court systems—demands the attention of every single one of us. Too many children, overwhelmingly minority children, are graduating from family court to criminal court, a “cradle to prison pipeline,” in the words of Marian Wright Edelman and the Children’s Defense Fund. These children not only are denied their birthright in our prosperous nation, but also go on to become the next generation of robbers, rapists, and murderers. It’s not just their future; it’s ours too.

As you will see in the ensuing pages, this is not hyperbole or rhetoric. It is fact. We can know the terrible path a child’s life may take almost from birth. We can know, for example, what likely lies ahead for the low-birthweight baby born to a drug-addicted, teenaged, single mother. We can know the grim picture ahead for many children just from the zip code where they reside. I cannot imagine that anyone reading these articles could turn to the last page without asking, “What can I do to change the picture?”

Because we need fully engaged minds and hearts to change the picture, I am grateful to the *Journal of Law and Policy* and its editors for enlarging the audience beyond those of us who were privileged to attend the program at the Judicial Institute. I am also grateful to Jessica Jean Kastner for her thoughtful contribution. She set out to do what each of us needs to do—study the facts and devise *solutions* to reduce the number of minority youth (indeed, all youth) in the criminal and family court systems. Having myself agonized over the problem for well over a decade, I have to admit that Ms. Kastner has come up with several promising ideas.

The challenge is for each of us to do likewise, and then to turn promising ideas into concrete action. It is, after all, the children’s future—our nation’s future too.