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“One System, Many Failures: A Civil Rights Crisis Facing My Generation “

Presently, there are systemic failures that disproportionately impact my generation. The lack of juvenile justice reform, mental health awareness, and educational equity represents a widespread breakdown that criminalizes trauma, neglects mental health needs, and denies equal access to education. These failures are not isolated; they operate together to shape whether young people are supported or punished, empowered or excluded.

The fight for educational equity has long been central to the civil rights movement. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court affirmed that access to equal education is a constitutional right. Yet decades later, structural inequities remain deeply rooted, particularly in Louisiana. In Orleans Parish and East Baton Rouge Parish, schools serving predominantly Black and low-income students continue to face underfunding, overcrowding, and a lack of mental health resources. These disparities undermine the Fourteenth Amendment's promise of equal protection and reveal how inequality has merely evolved rather than disappeared.

Mental health awareness is essential, yet it is routinely overlooked. The absence of care fuels exclusionary discipline practices that push students out of classrooms and toward the juvenile justice system. This dynamic is a defining feature of the school-to-prison pipeline, which disproportionately impacts Black youth across Louisiana.

The juvenile justice system, originally designed to rehabilitate rather than punish, has failed to uphold that mission. Youth with untreated mental health needs are more likely to be incarcerated, and incarceration frequently worsens trauma while limiting access to education. In both Orleans and EBR Parishes, these patterns mirror the same racial and economic disparities seen in public education, reflecting a broader civil rights failure rather than isolated institutional shortcomings.

My understanding of this issue is shaped by both history and proximity; being raised by an HBCU-educated mother in a household grounded in faith and generational memory. In my living room hangs my great-grandfather's graduation certificate from Leland College, a Black institution founded in New Orleans in 1870 to educate formerly enslaved people when most access to learning was denied. That framed document serves as a quiet reminder that education has always been a form of resistance. Though I have attended private Catholic schools and often stood as a minority, that legacy taught me not to shrink, but to stand firmly in confidence and purpose. In regard to my strong southern heritage, Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl LIX performance was a striking mirror that confronted mass incarceration, racial inequality, and generational trauma, themes. They directly reflect the realities facing youth impacted by inadequate mental health care, educational inequity, and juvenile justice failures. His presence on

one of the world's largest stages represented a form of cultural resistance, affirming that Black experiences and truths deserve national visibility. The production was especially meaningful to me due to its location. Louisiana's history of racial injustice and high youth incarceration rates made the representation impossible to ignore.

This contrast highlights the reality that opportunity remains unevenly distributed. Educational equity, mental health awareness, and juvenile justice reform must be addressed together because they reinforce one another. A student denied mental health support is more likely to struggle academically; a student who struggles is more likely to be disciplined; a disciplined student is more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. As a senior in high school, I am aware that Louisiana's juvenile justice and mental health systems have not significantly improved since the 1996 investigation by the US Department of Justice. The investigation found that conditions in four Louisiana juvenile facilities were unconstitutional due to violence, unsafe environments, and a lack of adequate mental health care (US Department of Justice, 1996). A large percentage of incarcerated youth suffer from mental health disorders but receive little to no treatment. Additionally, Louisiana continues to enforce stricter juvenile justice laws while offering fewer community based mental health resources, increasing the likelihood that vulnerable youth are punished instead of helped. This shows that despite promises of reform since 1996, Louisiana's juvenile justice system has failed to make meaningful, lasting improvements.

For my generation, these interconnected failures determine futures. When schools lack resources, mental health needs go unmet, and youth are punished instead of supported, young people are set up to fail not because of a lack of ability, but because of a lack of institutional commitment. Addressing this crisis requires a renewed dedication to civil rights principles, equity, dignity, and justice so that education becomes a pathway to opportunity rather than a point of exclusion.