

“Kids Who Changed a Nation: The Children’s Crusade of 1963”

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Historical Paper

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Process Paper:**How I Chose My Topic:**

I chose the Children's Crusade of 1963 because it's an event in the Civil Rights Movement that showed what young people could do. Whenever I learned that over 1,000 students my age marched, got arrested, and helped change laws, I knew this would be a good topic for the National History Day theme. This topic also allows me to tell an important story many people do not know about.

How I Conducted My Research:

I began my research by getting background information on segregation in Birmingham, Alabama and getting information on events that caused the Children's Crusade of 1963 to happen. I used articles, educational websites, and books from the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute to get a better understanding on the causes of the marches. After that, I looked for primary sources, including newspaper articles from around that time, photos of the police and fire departments, and video footage of the young people fighting for their rights. Also I read statements from eyewitnesses like James Bevel and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

After gathering all of my sources, I organized the information into three categories that related to the National History Day theme: Revolution, Reaction, and Reform. This better helped me understand how the Children's Crusade of 1963 events unfold and how it changed the nation.

How I Created My Project:

Whenever I finished completing my research, I wrote my thesis statement that led to my project. Then I created an outline that followed the sequence of events: what caused the students to march, how the police acknowledged the marches, and how the nation reacted. I used my primary sources as evidence to back up each section.

I compiled my paper by writing the body paragraphs first, then included my introduction and conclusion. I revised my work to make sure my writing was clear and that each paragraph connected to my thesis statement. Finally, I created my bibliography using the NHD citation format.

How My Project Relates to the Theme “Revolution, Reaction, Reform”:

The Children’s Crusades of 1963 fits the theme because it shows all the three parts:

- Revolution: Over 1,000 black young students in Birmingham a youth-led march to challenge segregation.
- Reaction: Police reacted with violence, using fire hoses, dogs, and mass arrests against the children.
- Reform: The startling images and news coverage caused national outrage, which pushed the president toward major civil rights reforms, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This event displayed how young people sparked change and helped modify the Civil Rights Movement. This event demonstrates how young people sparked change and helped transform the Civil Rights Movement.

“Kids Who Changed a Nation: The Children’s Crusade of 1963”

The Children's Crusade of 1963 was a youth-led revolution that challenged segregation in Birmingham. The violent reaction from police shocked the nation, and the public pressure that followed helped push the federal government toward major civil rights reforms, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Segregation in Birmingham

In the spring of 1963, the city of Birmingham, Alabama became the most important event of national attention. Segregation was deeply rooted into every part of life, and black people faced unfair treatment, discrimination, and violence that caused their lives to be bad.

Birmingham earned the nickname "Bombingham" because more than 50 dynamite explosions took place during this time.¹ Many of which were carried out by white supremacists. Black people lived with the constant threat of violence, and the legal system offered them no protection. Public places such as schools, parks, restaurants, and theaters were segregated, and if you attempted to break these rules you were met with hostility. While black residents protested for months, many were limited by fear of losing their jobs, being arrested, and worse getting killed. Despite these challenges, the Civil Rights Movement continued to grow, and leaders searched for new ways to break the stronghold of segregation in Birmingham.

Revolution — Why Students Marched

It was the courage of over 1,000 children and teenagers that finally stood up to the nation to pay attention. The Children's Crusade of 1963 was a youth led revolution that stood against

¹ Momodu, Samuel. "Bombingham (Birmingham, Alabama) (1947–1965)." *BlackPast.org*, BlackPast, 6 July 2025, blackpast.org/african-american-history/bombingham-birmingham-alabama-1947-1965/.

segregation in Birmingham. The violent response from police shocked the country, and the public insistence helped guide the federal government toward major civil rights reforms, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The events in Birmingham illustrate that young people were not only witnesses to history they were strong agents of change who helped change the nation. (See Appendix B & D)

Birmingham was known as one of the most segregated cities in America. Blacks living in the area met discrimination in schools, jobs, restaurants, and public places, and local authorities imposed segregation through laws and intimidation. Civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had been arranging protests, boycotts, and sit-ins for months. An excerpt from *Civil Rights Queen: Constance Baker Motley and the Struggle for Equality* states that “Through sit-ins, demonstrations, and boycotts, protesters sought to expose the cruelty of Jim Crow and draw attention to the value of Black purchasing power; ultimately, they hoped to desegregate the city and increase Black employment opportunities (Brown-Nagin).”² However, many adults feared losing their jobs or being arrested, especially because Birmingham's white business leaders and police force often punished anyone who participated in demonstrations. The movement needed a new strategy-one that would bring attention to the injustice without placing working adults at risk.

James Bevel, a young and energetic SCLC organizer, proposed a bold idea: involve students. He believed that young people had the intensity, courage, and liberty to take movement in ways adults could not. Bevel began visiting local schools, churches, and youth groups, teaching students about nonviolent protest and explaining how their participation could help

² Brown-Nagin's Tomiko, and 2022. “Rescuing MLK and His Children’s Crusade.” Harvard Law School, Harvard Law Today, 14 Jan. 2022, hls.harvard.edu/today/rescuing-mlk-and-his-childrens-crusade/.

change the future. Many students were impatient to join the movement because they were tired of being treated as second-class citizens. They wanted better schools, equal opportunities, and the freedom to live without fear.

Reaction — How Birmingham Responded

Thursday, May 2nd, is “D-Day” as students “ditch” class to march for justice. In disciplined groups of 50, children singing freedom songs march out of 16th Street Baptist church two-by-two.³ The church served as a vital meeting place for the movement. The children marched politely to downtown Birmingham, singing negro spirituals of freedom while holding signs demanding justice. The youngest of the group were 6 years old, and the oldest were high school seniors preparing to enter into adulthood. Their bold and courageous actions marked a crucial point in the Civil Rights Movement. For the very first time, children became the leaders of a significant protest, proving that the fight for equal rights was for everyone, not just adults. Their decision to protest exhibited a revolution in the movement’s strategy and showed the power of youth activism.

Birmingham’s Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor, reacted with intense force. Connor was known for his aggressiveness in ensuring the laws of segregation were followed. He was very eager to use violence to keep racial control. In his reaction to witnessing the children marching he decided that creating extreme hardships would scare them into giving up the movement and stop future protests. Instead, his reaction did the opposite.

Police officers used attack dogs, dominant fire hoses, and mass arrests to stop the marches. Firefighters turned hoses on children with such force that the water knocked them off

³Zinn Education Project. “Mighty Times: The Children’s March.” *Zinn Education Project*, 30 Nov. 2004, www.zinnproject.org/materials/childrens-march/.

their feet, ripped their clothing, and pushed them across the pavement. Police dogs charged at students, and officers dragged children into paddy wagons and police buses. Thousands of children were arrested on the first day alone, filling the city's jails and prompting officials to use school buses as temporary holding cells. (See Appendix A & C)

Adam Volle stated that “The violence was captured by news photographers and television crews for dissemination worldwide, and the images of police committing acts of brutality against schoolchildren horrified Americans.⁴ These images spread across the nation as newspapers, magazines, and television outlets ran with them. Americans were stunned at how children were being treated with such violence for demanding equality. The public's response sparked a new level of sympathy for the Civil Rights Movement and applied pressure on political leaders to do something. Foreign newspapers used the events to bring shame to the United States during the Cold War, a time where the nation was portrayed to be a leader in democracy and liberty. (See Appendix F-H)

The violent reaction of Bull Connor boomeranged. Instead of bringing the movement to an end, it brought to light the cruelty of segregation and reinforced the determination of protesters. The bravery of the children and the horrifying images of police violence became a major point in changing the world's opinion in favor of civil rights reform.

Reform — How the Nation Changed

The wide and public outrage caused by the Children's Crusade left the federal government with no choice but to act. The President at the time, John F. Kennedy, aware of civil rights issues,

⁴ Volle, Adam. “Birmingham Children's Crusade | History, Facts, Purpose, & Civil Rights Act | Britannica.” *Www.britannica.com*, 15 Nov. 2023, www.britannica.com/event/Birmingham-Childrens-Crusade.

came to the conclusion that he could no longer avoid the issues in Birmingham. On June 11, 1961, he confronted the nation in a televised speech, calling civil rights a “moral issue” that required immediate attention. Kennedy revealed that African Americans were being denied basic rights and that the protection of those rights should come from the federal government.

President Kennedy’s speech sparked the beginning of a huge change in federal guidelines. The happenings in Birmingham assisted with creating support for what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Segregation in public places and discrimination because of race came to an end due to this Act. It gave the federal government the authority to put civil rights protections in place. Even though the struggle for equal rights would continue after the law was put into place, the Children’s Crusade was vital in pushing the movement forward. It displayed that peaceful protest-even by children-could expose unfairness and force the nation to challenge its failures. (See Appendix E)

More youth led movements popped out across the country because of The Children's Crusade. Students noticed that their voices were important and that they could change national policy. The protest in Birmingham became a tower of strength and determination, demonstrating that young people could change history. Their actions helped reshape the Civil Rights Movement from a regional battle into a national claim for liberty.

The Children’s Crusade of 1963 is an intense example of how young people like myself and my peers can create magnificent changes. Their peaceful uprising, the horrifying response they received, and the changes that followed demonstrates how resilience, courage and determination can move a nation. The valour of these students continue to inspire new generations to speak up for justice and equal rights. Their story shows me that a shift in the

nation can begin with being willing to take risks, stand up, and demand a better future-not just for myself, but for everyone.

Their efforts tell me that leadership does not come with an age limit, a particular status, or certain level of power, but on the desire to act when equality is withheld. Many of the children were younger than I am now, still they made the decision to act for change. Their parents' livelihood was on the line and arrests were possible. They marched with the knowledge that they could be attacked by dogs, sprayed by fire hoses, or hauled off to jail, and still they chose to walk out of their classrooms and into the pages of history. Their courage made the entire country face the reality of segregation's cruelty, the images of children being violently attacked astonished millions of Americans who had turned a blind eye to the problem for too long. The Children's Crusade proves the idiom "Out of the mouths of babes" to be true and young voices can break through silence and start national conversations avoided by adults. It also proves that change most times begins with regular people who refuse to accept inequality as "just how it is." When I think about their bravery, it encourages me to look at what issues in my own community need young leaders to rise up. Their bravery lets me know that the smallest acts of courage can lead to the biggest transformation

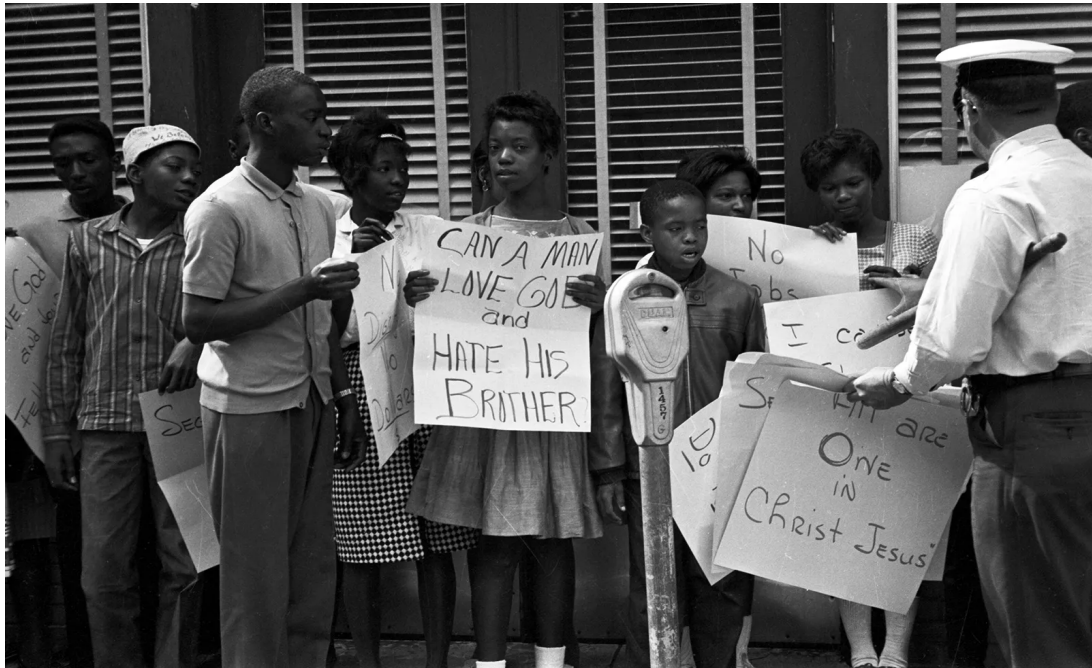
Appendix A



African American high school student Walter Gadsden, 15, is attacked by a police dog during a civil rights demonstration in Birmingham, Ala., May 3, 1963. Gadsden was an onlooker to the protest. On the afternoon of May 4, 1963, during a meeting at the White House with members of a political group, President Kennedy discussed this photo, which had appeared on the front page of that day's New York Times.

Threatt, Marvin. "I Marched with Martin Luther King Jr. In the 1963 Children's Crusade. It Was a Historic Day." *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 29 Apr. 2022, www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2022/04/29/i-marched-with-martin-luther-king-jr-in-the-1963-childrens-crusade-it-was-a-historic-day/.

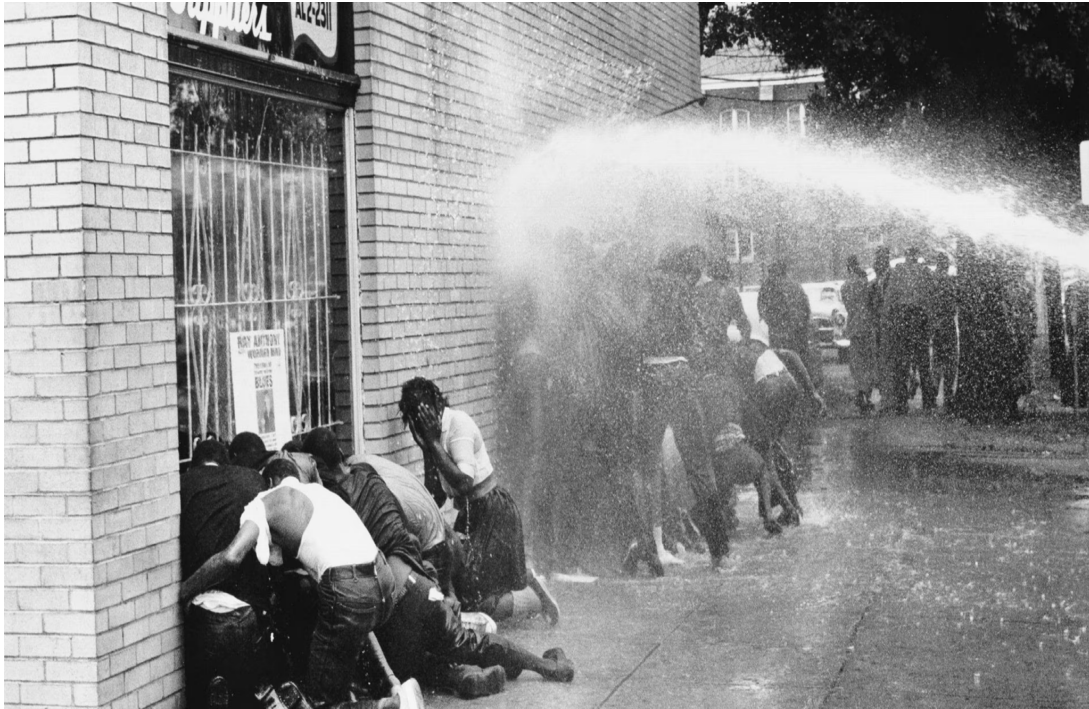
Appendix B



Police officer taking signs from adolescent civil rights demonstrators who had been marching down a sidewalk during the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, Alabama. Two of the signs "Can a Man Love God and Hate His Brother" and "All Are One in Christ Jesus."

Alabama Department of Archives and History. "The Children's March: Marchers," *Florida PBS Station*, 2021.

Appendix C



This image shows children who participated in the march being sprayed down to the ground with fire hoses.

Clark, Alexis. "The Children's Crusade: When the Youth of Birmingham Marched for Justice | HISTORY." *HISTORY*, 14 Oct. 2020, www.history.com/articles/childrens-crusade-birmingham-civil-rights.

Appendix D



School children and adults marching against segregation near the 16th Street Baptist Church on
May 10, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama.

Volle, Adam. "Birmingham Children's Crusade | History, Facts, Purpose, & Civil Rights Act |
Britannica." *W*www.britannica.com, 15 Nov. 2023,
www.britannica.com/event/Birmingham-Childrens-Crusade.

Appendix E



Following the brutal response to the Birmingham Children's Crusade in May 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered a historic, televised civil rights address on June 11, 1963.

Mitchell, Jerry. "1963: JFK Gave First Civil Rights Speech - Mississippi Today." *Mississippi Today*, MS Today, 11 June 2025, mississippitoday.org/2025/06/11/1963-jfk-civil-rights-speech/.

Appendix F



Protests involving children in Birmingham, Ala., still dominate news coverage on May 7, almost a week after the marches began.

The Kansas City Star. "Brace in Birmingham ." *The Kansas City Star*, 7 May 1963.

Appendix G



This newspaper chose to highlight the young age of some of the protesters by featuring a photo of a 6-year-old participant. As the article notes, police did not use violence against the children as they broke up the rallies on this occasion. This would not be the case when the protest continued the next day.

The Indianapolis Star. "Children's Crusade Begins, 1963 (1 of 2)." *NewseumED*, 3 May 1963, newseumed.org/tools/artifact/childrens-crusade-begins-1963-1-2.

Appendix H



News articles showcasing the events occurring in Birmingham.

PBS. "April 26, 2013 ~ Birmingham and the Children's March | April 26, 2013 | Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly | PBS." *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, 26 Apr. 2013, www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2013/04/26/april-26-2013-birmingham-and-the-childrens-march/16051/.

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Annotated Bibliography

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Interviews

“Oral Histories of the Children’s Crusade.” Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, www.bcri.org..

These interviews with student participants describe their motivations, fears, and experiences during the marches. They provide personal accounts that help students understand the bravery and determination of the young protesters.

Letters

King, Martin Luther, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” 1963. The King Center, thekingcenter.org..

Although written before the Children’s Crusade, this letter explains how they got nonviolent protest in Birmingham. It provides important context for understanding why youth marches were organized and how they fit into the movement’s goals.

Newspaper Article

“Birmingham, Alabama Demonstrations, 1963.” NBC News Archives, 1963.

This news footage shows police using dogs and fire hoses against student marchers during the Children’s Crusade. The video supplies strong visual evidence of the violent reaction from Birmingham officials and explains why the event shocked the nation and pushed federal leaders toward reform.

“The Chicago Defender Reports on Birmingham.” The Chicago Defender, May 1963.

As a major Black newspaper, The Chicago Defender offered a different perspective on the Children’s Crusade. Its review highlights how African American communities viewed the protests and the significance of youth activism.

“The New York Times Coverage of Birmingham Protests.” The New York Times, May 1963.

These present day newspaper articles report on the marches and the police response. They show how national media pictured the event and help explain why public opinion shifted.

Websites

Brown-Nagin's Tomiko, and 2022. "Rescuing MLK and His Children's Crusade." *Harvard Law School*, Harvard Law Today, 14 Jan. 2022,
hls.harvard.edu/today/rescuing-mlk-and-his-childrens-crusade/.

Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Birmingham, Alabama Racial Incidents, 1993." FBI Vaults,
<https://vault.fbi.gov/16th%20Street%20Church%20Bombing%20>

These publicised FBI files document federal monitoring of Birmingham during the protests. They give insight into how the government viewed the marches and the level of concern about violence, making them valuable for understanding national reaction.

Kennedy, John F. "A CIVIL RIGHTS MILESTONE." *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, 2022,
www.jfklibrary.org/events-and-awards/kennedy-library-forums/past-forums/transcripts/a-civil-rights-milestone.

In this televised speech, President Kennedy responds to events in Birmingham and calls civil rights a "moral issue." This source shows how the Children's Crusade helped push the federal government toward major civil rights legislation.

Luther King Jr , Martin. "Chapter 18: The Birmingham Campaign | the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute." *Kinginstitute.stanford.edu*, 1963,
kinginstitute.stanford.edu/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr/chapter-18-birmingham-campaign.

This source includes original documents, timelines, and descriptions of the Birmingham Campaign. It gives good reasoning on the planning behind the Children's Crusade and shows how youth involvement fits into the larger strategy of the Civil Rights Movement.

Momodu, Samuel. “Bombingham (Birmingham, Alabama) (1947–1965).” *BlackPast.org*, BlackPast, 6 July 2025,

blackpast.org/african-american-history/bombingham-birmingham-alabama-1947-1965/.

Smithsonian. “The Children’s Crusade.” *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, Smithsonian, 2 May 2016, nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/childrens-crusade.

This museum entry includes photos, artifacts, and a summary of the Children’s Crusade. It helps students picture the event and understand its historical importance.

Volle, Adam. “Birmingham Children’s Crusade | History, Facts, Purpose, & Civil Rights Act | Britannica.” *Www.britannica.com*, 15 Nov. 2023,

www.britannica.com/event/Birmingham-Childrens-Crusade.

Zinn Education Project. “Mighty Times: The Children’s March.” *Zinn Education Project*, 30 Nov. 2004, www.zinnedproject.org/materials/childrens-march/.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Books

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63*. Simon & Schuster, 1988.

Branch's book provides a detailed history of the Civil Rights Movement leading up to the Birmingham Campaign. It helps explain the political and social conditions that made the Children's Crusade required.

Hine, Darlene Clark, et al. *The African-American Odyssey*. Pearson, 2014.

This textbook gives background on segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the events in Birmingham. It helps students understand the general context of the Children's Crusade.

Levinson, Cynthia. *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*. Peachtree Publishers, 2012

This book provides a detailed statement of the Children's Crusade from the perspective of the students who marched. It includes quotes, stories, and photographs that help bring the event to life for young researchers.

McWhorter, Diane. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. Simon & Schuster, 2001.

McWhorter's book offers a full look at Birmingham during the Civil Rights Movement. It helps explain the reaction of local officials and why the Children's Crusade became a crisis.

Interviews

"Mighty Times: The Children's March." *Teaching Tolerance*, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2004.

This documentary features interviews with participants and photographs of the marches. It provides a clear, accessible overview of the event and is especially helpful for middle-school researchers.

Websites

“The Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument.” National Park Service, [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov/bcrn)..

This site provides historical explanation, timelines, and context for the Birmingham Campaign. It helps students understand the long-term impact of the Children’s Crusade.

“The Firehoses of Birmingham.” PBS American Experience, [pbs.org](https://www.pbs.org)..

This article and media collection explain the police response and national reaction to the use of fire hoses on children. It supports the argument that the violent reaction helped spark reform.

“Youth in the Civil Rights Movement.” Smithsonian Learning Lab, learninglab.si.edu..

This educational resource highlights the role of young students in Birmingham and other civil rights events. It helps students understand how youth leadership shaped the movement.

Appendix Graphics

Alabama Department of Archives and History. “The Children’s March: Marchers ,” *Florida PBS Station* , 2021.

A police officer taking picket signs from children denying them their right to peacefully protest against segregation.

Clark, Alexis. “The Children’s Crusade: When the Youth of Birmingham Marched for Justice | HISTORY.” *HISTORY*, 14 Oct. 2020,

www.history.com/articles/childrens-crusade-birmingham-civil-rights.

Innocent children peacefully protesting being sprayed down to the ground with powerful fire hoses to stop them.

Mitchell, Jerry. “1963: JFK Gave First Civil Rights Speech - Mississippi Today.” *Mississippi Today*, MS Today, 11 June 2025,

mississippitoday.org/2025/06/11/1963-jfk-civil-rights-speech/.

On June 11, 1963, President John F.Kennedy delivered his first ever civil rights speech, highlighting that color does not matter when Americans go to war so it should not matter when it comes to human rights.

PBS. “April 26, 2013 ~ Birmingham and the Children’s March | April 26, 2013 | Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly | PBS.” *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, 26 Apr. 2013,

www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2013/04/26/april-26-2013-birmingham-and-the-childrens-march/16051/.

Another article comes out highlighting that the situation is getting worse or deteriorating besides getting better.

The Indianapolis Star. “Children’s Crusade Begins, 1963 (1 of 2).” *NewseumED*, 3 May 1963, newseumed.org/tools/artifact/childrens-crusade-begins-1963-1-2.

Nearly 800 Negroes were jailed yesterday during the peaceful protest. Children have to wait for a paddy wagon because there is no space in the jails. Protesters even knelt down in prayer.

The Kansas City Star. “Brace in Birmingham .” *The Kansas City Star*, 7 May 1963.

With the protest group sizes growing Birmingham police call all off-duty officers and fireman to swarm the Negroes.

Threatt, Marvin. “I Marched with Martin Luther King Jr. In the 1963 Children’s Crusade. It Was a Historic Day.” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 29 Apr. 2022, www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2022/04/29/i-marched-with-martin-luther-king-jr-in-the-1963-childrens-crusade-it-was-a-historic-day/.

A police officer grabbed the fifteen-year-old Walter Gadsden by the collar, pulling the boy toward him to provide an easy target for the attack dog at his side. Gadsden looks on, powerless to repel the dog lunging for his abdomen.

Volle, Adam. “Birmingham Children’s Crusade | History, Facts, Purpose, & Civil Rights Act | Britannica.” *Www.britannica.com*, 15 Nov. 2023, www.britannica.com/event/Birmingham-Childrens-Crusade.

Anti-segregation march occurring with school children. The image shows the 16th Street Baptist Church that served as a pivotal landmark in the Children’s Crusade.

