POLICY BRIDGE

Easing the Pain

Communities Must Act to Heal Wounds of African-American Boys and Young Men

Pain –
1. *(n.) a symptom of some physical hurt or disorder*
2. *(n.) emotional distress; a fundamental feeling that people try to avoid*
3. *(n.) a somatic sensation of acute discomfort*
4. *(v.) cause emotional anguish or make miserable*
5. *(n.) something or someone that causes trouble; a source of unhappiness*
6. *(n.) a bothersome annoying person*

Source: Lookwayup.com

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The plight of young African-American males can best be described by the aforementioned definitions of pain, which in many ways summarize their life experiences. Too many young black men endure severe daily emotional stress or anguish, which they often strive to avoid by any means necessary. Their daily walk comprises many perceptions or assumptions that paint them as causes of trouble and sources of discomfort or unhappiness. The weight of these perceptions and beliefs are often unbearable and leave many of these boys and young men feeling hopeless, confused and trapped in a society that does not value them.

These feelings of worthlessness have been exacerbated by the recent case and court decision regarding Trayvon Martin. The series of events that led to his death as well as the assumptions and stereotypes about African-American teenage boys and young men were at the center of countless debates across the country. Are all young African-American

men viewed as shiftless, suspicious and dangerous? Under what circumstances is it safe to wear a hoodie or to question why you are being followed? These and other questions are in the minds of countless African-American youth as they attempt to persevere through a tumultuous life journey in America.

President Barack Obama in a July 19, 2013, speech cited the Trayvon Martin tragedy as emblematic of a broader American problem regarding African-American teenage boys and young men. He challenged the nation to figure out what could be done to give this specific population a sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them. These are powerful and potentially prescriptive words that should not be left for political banter. Only through sound political leadership and bold public policies can the daunting challenges of young African-American males be fully identified, addressed and resolved.

WHO CARES?

All young people want and deserve a caring adult and usually thrive when they have one, as has been evidenced by numerous research studies. But what happens when young people don't have such a figure in their lives who cares? Research shows that they are more likely to affiliate with gangs, engage in criminal activity and drop out of school, all of which increases the likelihood of an experience with violence and/or the penal system. Mayor Mitchell Landrieu of New Orleans, Louisiana, addressed the challenge in a June, 2013 speech at the 81st convening of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, stating that "America is drunk on violence, and those paying the biggest price are African-American males". Landrieu added that something must be done to address the senseless deaths taking place all over the country. Among other things, he offered an economic imperative. He reported that economists at the University of California, Berkeley estimated each murder to cost the nation $7 million dollars, and he challenged lawmakers to think of lost revenues, as well as "generations of promises lost" as a negative consequence of murder. In Cleveland, there were 97 murders in 2012, which would, using the UC Berkeley estimation model, equal $679 million in lost revenue in just one calendar year.

Mayor Landrieu called on federal lawmakers to invest as mightily in this risk to American life as they have in airline safety (TSA) and border patrols for immigration control. Each of these initiatives created thousands of jobs that commanded significant federal financial investment, which at the time was not fully accounted for in a previously approved budget. That same level of urgency and "investment at all costs" mentality should be evident when the thousands of minority youth murdered across the country are counted as a lost resource that can never be recovered. Because many in positions of power and influence have turned a blind eye to the issue, many minority youth, parents, caretakers and service providers on the ground are asking, "Who really cares?" The answer to this question will determine the likelihood and level of support that this appallingly American problem receives from all branches of government and all levels of the community.

WHO UNDERSTANDS?

Although it may be easy for adults to question the senseless acts of violence among African-American youth, they often do not fully understand the grim reality of the problems because they have not experienced the pain of today's urban youth. African-American teenagers and young men often have very different views of the world, how it works and what they need to do to survive. This can lead to distorted thinking about how they operate within their communities. This is best evidenced by a recent study done by the University of Chicago, which had worked with the National Bureau of Economic Research and the City of Chicago to study how to prevent homicide. The researchers decided to focus on a different determining factor of violent crime: the perpetrator's frame of mind.

The University of Chicago researchers conducted a randomized controlled experiment with 1,400 seventh through tenth grader boys in an effort to teach them to think before they act and to consider long-term consequences. In one exercise, students were grouped into pairs with one member being given a ball. The other was told to get the ball out of his partner's hand. In every case, the pairs brawled for the ball. Afterward, they were asked why they didn't simply ask for the ball. No one participating in the exercise had even considered asking for the ball. Several commented that if they had asked "the other kid would have thought I was a punk."

Another study that explored the frame of mind of black teen males was the African American Adolescent Respect Scale (AAARS). Created in 2001 by Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary of Portland State University the AAARS was designed to highlight the importance of respect in African American culture and explore the relationship between respect and the use of violence among young African-American males.

The AAARS survey examined "pro-social" attitudes toward respect in four areas: family, peer group, institutions and culture. Dr. Leary asked 200 African-American adolescent boys whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements, including:

- "I listen to and appreciate the guidance my parents give me."
- "No one will give you respect unless you demand it."
- "I am valued and appreciated by my teachers."
- "The police trust and appreciate me."
- "Sales people are happy to assist me in department stores."
- "My father is a good role model."
- "I may hurt someone if they try to embarrass me in front of people."
- "You can get respect if you are in a gang."
- "I have a good chance of getting jobs that I qualify for."

Dr. Leary's survey found that the youths who had more "pro-social" attitudes toward respect reported less use of violence.

These two studies begin to shed light on the challenges faced by today's African-American male youth, given that conflict mediation, respecting peers and cooperation are often seen as signs of weakness in urban neighborhoods. These examples point to the fact that the current mindset of many urban youth leads to negative, detrimental behaviors, such as acting

out in school or disrespecting authority figures. Although they may know better, African-American male youth have been hardened and hurt by the streets to a point where too many feel obligated to demonstrate power and aggression over compassion and responsibility in all types of interpersonal relationships.

In addition to the propensity to escalate trivial matters to life-threatening violence, these youth wrestle with myriad other issues on a daily basis. These include single- parent households, abject poverty, hunger, drugs and alcohol, dilapidated schools and neighborhoods, an anti-education culture, uninterested adults, a lack of organized sports or arts activities, and a lack of jobs. In combination, these daily realities result in a suffocating life experience. When family, peer, community, institutional and cultural areas are broken or non-existent, urban youth hold onto whatever they can find that offers some benefit (real or perceived), such as affiliations with gangs, "fast" money and the practice of taking versus asking.

African-American teen boys and young men may very well be the least understood demographic group in America, which in and of itself highlights the scope of the crisis at hand.

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE?

The uncovering of catastrophic and negative trends affecting African-American youth is not new. In fact, many of these issues have been researched and written about for decades, only to result in some of the examined indicators actually worsening over time. Perhaps those who conduct research have not been able to connect with "doers" on the ground who have the capacity to implement change. Perhaps the doers have not been able to find the financial support necessary to execute successfully the programs needed. Or, perhaps all of the potential contributors are waiting for Superman instead of tackling the problem head-on from their respective vantage points.

Regardless of the reason, the truth of the matter is that everyone is responsible for reversing the lack of investment and interest in African-American boys and young men. Parents; community leaders; churches; schools; neighbors; local, state and federal lawmakers; businesses; media; professional sports teams; nonprofit agencies; the juvenile and adult justice systems, and minority youth themselves all need to take responsibility.

Political economist Robert Reich wrote in the introduction to *The Power of Public Ideas,* a 1988 compilation he edited, of the need to develop a new philosophy toward American policy-making that better reflects societal good. Reich, who later went on to serve as President Clinton's labor secretary, challenged elected officials, administrators and policy analysts to live up to their "core responsibility" of providing the public with "alternative visions of what is desirable and possible, to stimulate deliberation about them, provoke a reexamination of premises and values, and thus to broaden the range of potential responses and deepen society's understanding of itself" (pp. 3-4).

Based on Reich's articulation, one could argue that re-examining our premises and values about African-American boys and young men will broaden and deepen society's understanding of the plight of this group and provoke new responses to this systemic national problem.

But this re-examination cannot take place in a vacuum or be limited by the lens of parochial interests. All stakeholders need to learn to work together, forming uncommon allies and alliances and tinkering with approaches that have never been tried before. These alliances should not be ephemeral, but should last for extended periods of time so lessons learned can be shared and successful approaches can be expanded and replicated.

STATUS OF BLACK MEN AND BOYS

Education
Graduation Rate

47%   78%

14%

Unemployment Rate
for Black Men,
20 Years and Over,
in June 2012

Work
**Median Hourly
Wages for
Full-Time Workers**

$14.90 $20.84

Black Males Who Drop
Out of High School Are

38X

More Likely to Be
Incarcerated Than
Their Peers With
a 4-Year College Degree

Poverty
**Income Below
Poverty
Threshold**

26%   9%

Homicide
**Per 100,000
(12-19 Years Old)**

39   3   17

Inmates
Per 1,000

47   7   18

Legend

Black
Males

White
Males

Hispanic
Males

Fathers Living
Apart from
Children
Per 100

44   21   35

HIV
**New Infections
Per 100,000**

104   16   40

Source: Foundation Center, 2012

For this to happen, a leading organization or authority will need to be established to organize the effort and to hold the partner organizations together. The creation or identification of such an entity will be the first step for any community to move from discourse to action. The entity could be a local government "commission" of sorts but would more likely realize success if it was a free-standing nonprofit organization not subject to tenuous political budgets. The entity should clearly represent African-American males and other important stakeholders, such as parents, the faith community, educators and human service practitioners. The entity could also play a lead role in advocating for and implementing the recommendations below.

PUBLIC POLICY AND COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the challenges faced by young African-American males requires a multi-faceted approach consisting of targeted public policies and community actions. These may include:

Support Community Youth Programming – Whether it is after-school programming, neighborhood sports leagues, tutoring, mentoring or meals, inner-city youth (especially African American males) need to be engaged and challenged in a safe and productive environment. Structured activity also helps them to feel connected to the broader community, learn to work in teams and build trust. Local government officials and philanthropic organizations should survey activities being offered in targeted communities and assess what should be added or augmented specifically to assist African American males. Community dashboards tracking outcomes in this regard should be established and evaluated annually to measure progress.

Teach Parents, Guardians and Teachers the Tool of Social Autopsy – Caring adults are desperately needed to teach and guide young people, particularly African American males, how to make sound decisions that keep them free and clear of problematic situations. Helpful tools, such as the Social Autopsy model is effective in teaching and enabling youth to see the cause-and-effect relationship between behavior and the reactions of others. Rather than focusing solely on "trouble" that youth get into and the consequences that must be endured, the social autopsy model can be used to help African-American youth to think critically, consider the necessity of their actions, weigh the impact on others, and check their emotions, all while remaining street-savvy. Parenting classes and community workshops should be organized in partnership with local school districts to teach innovative approaches and best practices for reaching minority youth and persuading them to think more deeply about how they respond in the heat of the moment.

Initiate Alternatives to Incarceration – Far too many minority youth residing in the urban core make one bad choice that leaves them forever destined for a revolving door in and out of prison. We must re-evaluate the resources and incentives provided to the criminal justice system. Our society believes that it will be safer when African-American boys and young men are incarcerated or actively engaged with the criminal justice system. So we divert scarce public resources to support the increasing cost of incarcerating African-American boys and young men and provide incentives for keeping them incarcerated longer. Barring any major violent crimes, these youth should be placed into the criminal justice system as a last resort, with initial corrective measures consisting of community service and mandatory tutoring or GED classes. Another model that has worked well in suburban communities has been teen courts, where teens can be involved in holding each other accountable in a more civil fashion. Sentencing youth to detention centers begins to build the bitterness towards society and to

exacerbate the "us" versus "them" that many incarcerated youth experience. Those youth who are never affiliated with the penal system have the best chance of staying away from it and finding their pathway to productive lives.

Interface Regularly with African American Male Youth – Local governments should find ways to engage African-American male youth that are proactive and not reactive, and that help keep a pulse on the realities of life in their communities. These young people can share their real-time and real-world experiences with issues such as education, violence, housing, employment and social service needs. This awareness could help local governments to identify blind spots and improve services. Much like the community relations boards and advisory boards that are assembled for various organizations and initiatives in Northeast Ohio, an advisory board made up of young African-American males (and including a stipend) would go a long way toward showing them that they are valued and worthy of investment.

Provide Jobs and Supportive Services Leading to Careers – Many African-American teens and young men resort to crime because they know of no other way to support themselves. They often complain about the lack of opportunities to work and earn money, which has been a problem in Northeast Ohio with higher educated populations in general. In addition to the short-term summer job programs (which should be continued), year-round employment programs are desperately needed for these youth. These could include part-time positions working with community organizations and small businesses as well as governments and schools. Regardless of the type of work, the bigger advantage would be to demonstrate the value of work, teach responsibility and build self-esteem and trust in their community.

Celebrate Youth – The mass media has created such a negative image of African-American male youth that this perception must be countered with accolades, awards and recognitions. Every business, government unit, church, school and institution can begin to honor and recognize these youth in any number of ways. This will help them to feel appreciated and will ensure that they don't have to grapple with the notion that no one cares or pays attention to their good works. Youth that are embraced and recognized by their community will be far less likely to destroy it.

CLOSE

Young African-American males are hurting. Their pain might not show when they are seen hanging on street corners or when they offer a menacing stare to a passerby. It might not show when they are glorifying guns and drugs in rap music videos or when they are joining gangs. But the harsh reality is that they are hurting. For most of their lives, too many of them have not had a father figure and have not been seen as reliable and trustworthy. They have seen too many of their friends killed or sent away to prison. They have not been allowed to feel smart in school or powerful when they use their minds. Having so much of what they or those who look like them vilified and criticized inflicts pain, loneliness and anger.

It is time for America to stand up and realize that this subset of our population cannot be allowed to languish. They have to know that others value their contributions and believe in them. Change begins with our communities' willingness to invest and trust. Without a sense that their community "cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them" – and is willing to do so on a grand scale – the plight of the African-American male will never change.

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