

The Crisis African-American Males: Down, But Not Out!

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Sixty million were stolen from their homes. 40 million died on their involuntary curse. So many of the captives died along the way that they had to be thrown overboard to the sharks that followed the ships. Only 20 million survived. Once they arrived from their force relocation they were stripped of their customs, language, families, and religion. They were purchased and sold for their labor. Laws were passed against their learning to read, write, or do math. Laws were used to restrict their gathering in public, buying property, owning businesses. The land was to be a land based on the rule of law, yet these captives were unable to receive protection from this land of laws. No other group had their families separated by law, and no other group needed to get permission to marry. For over 200 years from 1660 to 1865, over 20 million of our relatives were held in slavery under imaginable conditions. In 2007, equality still escapes too many African-Americans young men.

It is almost impossible to pick-up a newspaper or turn on the television and not be bombarded by images of the conditions that so many of our African-American youth experience each day. In the last few years researchers and clinicians have increasingly focused their attention on the current status of African-American males. African-American males have significantly and disproportionately experienced the deleterious affects of unaddressed and misdiagnosed mental health problems, internalized and externalized violence, and the decline in rates of parental marriage, inadequate education, and racism. African-American young people are clearly under attack. It has been said, "that a society can be judged by how it treats its children". What judgment will be placed on America for its disregard for its most vulnerable resource.

Despite the difficulties that so many of our children face each day they are strong and resilient. For my time I want to talk to you on the subject: The Crisis of African-American Males- Down, But Not Out. So often in the mental health treatment field the focus of our interventions on the individual, rarely do we look at the larger family, community, and institutional context of mental health issues facing the African-American community. My talk will focus on the 5 crises that AA young are facing: 1) the Impact of un-addressed Mental Health Problems, 2) Homicide and Suicide, 3) the Decline of Parental Marriage, 4) Dysfunctional schools and Incarceration, and 5) Racism. Finally, I will make some recommendations on how do

support the strength and resilience of our youth and buffer the harmful realities they face.

1) **Impact of Unaddressed Mental Health Problems**

- 20% of adults and 1 in 10 youth have a diagnosable MI
- At least 7% of AA men will develop depression
- 15-25% use illegal drugs typically self-medicating
- The lack of treating the underlying mental health issues often have resulted in substance abuse. SA is responsible for 80% of all street crimes, 40-60% of all child abuse cases, and 49% of murders
- African-American males are less likely to receive treatment for their mental health needs than other racial groups. Only about 16% of AA males who have symptoms of MH problems ever present for treatment

The National Institute of Mental Health recently reported that mental illness accounts for over 15% of all diseases in the developed world. The burden caused MI is more than all cancers combined.

2. **Homicide and Suicide**

- More than 90 % of people who kill themselves have a diagnosable mental disorder
 - Suicide 3rd leading cause of death for 15-24 year olds
 - Males 2x's more likely to commit suicide than women
 - From 1980-1995 youth suicide rates for age 15-19 increased by 146%
 - Youth more likely to commit suicide after an altercation, perceived victimization by police, criminal justice system, etc.
 - Firearms were used in 72% of suicides
 - In Illinois, 39% of gun deaths were suicides
 - African-Americans were victims in 43% firearm deaths in Illinois
 - 89% were homicides
 - 5% of Chicago high school students (grades 9-12) report having carried a gun in last 30 days
 - 59% of students in grades 6-12 where to get a gun if they want it
 - Accidents, Suicides, and Homicides taken together represent 75% of all adolescent deaths

I want to mention six risk factors for completed suicide and suicidal behavior. Adolescents are more likely to complete suicide based on the availability of guns.

1. Prior Suicide Attempt. A history of prior suicidal behavior is the strongest predictor of future suicidal gestures or self-inflicted harm.

2. Mental Disorder/Substance Abuse. Approximately 90 percent of youth suicide victims have histories of identifiable mental disorders. The most common types are depressive disorders, alcohol or substance use disorders, conduct disorder or patterns of aggressive behavior, and anxiety disorders. Depressive disorders are linked with increased risk for suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicides. In fact, 80% of depressed youth report significant suicidal ideation, and 32 percent of these youth report one or more suicide attempts prior to adulthood.

3. Family History of Suicidal Behaviors. A family history of suicidal behavior substantially increases the risk of attempted and completed suicide in youth.

4. Psychosocial Factors. Research indicates that a history of physical or sexual abuse is a significant risk factor for suicidal behavior in youth. Furthermore, life stressors, such as legal or disciplinary problems and interpersonal losses (i.e., romantic break-ups, death), are associated with suicide attempts and completed suicide in youth. Additionally, hopelessness, impulsivity, aggressive behavior, and agitation are psychological characteristics associated with increased risk for suicidal behavior.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents are at increased risk for suicidal behavior. Recent general population surveys indicate that approximately 42 percent of these youth experience suicidal ideation, and 28 percent have made one or more suicide attempts during the past year. Many of the risk factors in these youth are the same as those for heterosexual youth.

5. Contagion. Researchers have found that cluster suicides are more likely to occur among adolescents and young adults than among individuals in other age groups. Approximately 5% of adolescent suicides in the United States are cluster-related. When a youth suicide occurs, intervention aimed at promoting grief and mourning and decreasing guilt, trauma, and social isolation, as well as providing psycho-education aimed at decreasing identification with the suicidal behavior, are recommended. Media coverage of suicide may spark suicide contagion.

6. Availability of the Means. Firearms are the most common method of suicide for adolescent boys and girls in the United States. In one study, firearms were present in the homes of 74% of suicide completers versus 34% of hospitalized suicidal adolescents. Because suicidal youth are sometimes impulsive, and because they are often ambivalent about killing themselves, the period of imminent risk is often short. Thus, restricting access to firearms may be an important prevention strategy. Similarly, potentially lethal drugs (such as prescription or over-the-counter sedative drugs) either should be removed from the homes of potentially suicidal youth or monitored closely by parents and guardians.

3) The Decline in Parental Marriage

- 78% of AA households were married
- According to the 2000 census 45% of AA households are married as compared to 60% of European-American households
- 42% of AA have never married while 27% of European-American have never been married (US Census, 2003).

2 Reasons b/c of time:

Economic Instability

- Rates of employment and unemployment are directly related to the decision to marry and stay married.
- Employed AA men are 2x's as likely to marry (Testa & Krogh, 1995)
- AA men and women are 2x's as likely to be unemployed as compared to European-American (US Census, 2000).
- A 2003 study of Neighborhood Context, Financial Strain, and AA Marriage Quality, found that the majority of AA's who are married were employed, well educated, and owned their own homes.

Availability of AA Men

- In the AA community between the ages 15-34 there are 46% male 54% female
- AA are 78% of the prison population
- For marriageable AA males there are 43 for each 100 AA females as compared to 63 marriageable white males to 100 European-American females

The result of the decline parental marriage is that:

- 50% of all AA youth are expected to spend at least five years in single headed households
- Difficulty to provide monitoring, supervision, structure, and support during adolescents
- more behavioral problems
- school failure
- delinquency
- lower overall well-being

4) Dysfunctional Schools /Incarceration

- 44% of AA finish HS as compared to 84% of European-American
- 72% of HS drop-outs will be unemployed
- There are 3 times more AA men are in jail than college
- 1/3 of AA men in their 20's are incarcerated, on parole, or probation
- Between 1980-2000, State Corrections spending grew 6x the rate of higher education

- Cost of paying tuition at 4 year public institution increased from 13% of income in 1980 to 25% in 2000

Those who are planning prisons are now using 4th grade reading levels as an indicator for how many prison beds will be needed.

5) Racism

African-American male adolescents are more likely than their European-American counterparts to be labeled conduct disordered or antisocial; to be disciplined, suspended, or expelled from junior high and high school; and to be arrested and incarcerated. Some of these differences appear to reflect racial bias resulting in more harsh treatment of African-American adolescents for comparable offenses. All we need to do is reflect over the plight of the Jena 6. It's interesting to note that studies that ask adolescents to describe their levels of delinquency there are no race differences.

Daily experiences with racism, inequality, and economic oppression have been demonstrated to be contributing factors in the mental health disorders of our youth. Little to no opportunity for employment increases one's susceptibility to depression. Additionally, racism harms the adolescent's basic sense of identity and their sense of safety and creating hypervigilance- always preparing for something to go wrong.

Buffering the Harmful Effects

Whether or not our youth will develop a psychological disorder is directly correlated with the balancing of risk and protective factors within their environment. Risk factors create circumstances that increase the probability that negative outcomes may occur or current problems may be maintained or exacerbated. However, risk factors are impacted by protective factors. Protective factors acts as both internal and external forces that help children resist and ameliorate risk (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky 1999). Risk factors are therefore, moderated or buffered by protective factors. Protective factors have been identified as existing within the domains of Religion and Church Membership, Extended Family Relations and Social Support, Racial Socialization, Responsive Discipline.

"Religion and Church Membership

Religion is an adaptive coping mechanism that has enabled African Americans to transcend the limitations and harshness of their social realities and to give meaning and direction to their individual and collective existence. Churches provide informal support (e.g., friendship, companionship, advice and comfort, help during illness, financial assistance), formal services (e.g., meals on wheels, transportation, group outings and vacations, ministerial counseling), and moral guidance. Religiosity and church membership enhance self-esteem partly as a consequence of the perception that one is held in high regard by other believers and by an omnipotent divine other who makes his/her presence felt in one's life. Religiosity also buffers the negative psychological effects of stress. Having a mother who seeks spiritual support is one of several factors that distinguish African-American children who are stress resilient from those who are stress impaired.

Extended Family Relations and Social Support

African Americans are more likely to reside in extended family households than are European Americans. Extended families are close kin relations within and across generations whose members are intensely involved in the reciprocal exchange of goods, services, and ongoing emotional support. As such, they are problem-solving and stress-coping systems. Typically, involvement with extended family is beneficial to young children and adolescents, partly because of increased support, monitoring, and supervision. African-American adolescents whose single parent is involved in extended family activities report fewer problem behaviors.

Racial Socialization

Given the especially egregious discrimination that African Americans have historically faced and continue to experience, it is not surprising that African-American parents generally provide more extensive racial and ethnic socialization than other parents of color who have been studied. For example, African-American parents are more likely to report talking with their adolescent children about racial and ethnic prejudice as a problem and how to handle it. African-American parents need to convey messages about children's cultural heritage and the importance of racial pride more frequently than messages about racial discrimination and how to cope with it. There is evidence that both racial socialization and group identity protect physical/mental health in the face of perceived racial discrimination and unfair treatment.

Responsive Discipline

Urban African-American and European-American parents modify their strategies for managing their children's lives and behavior in accordance with the risks and opportunities afforded by neighborhood conditions (e.g., resources, level of crime). This responsiveness has positive effects on children's development. For example, parenting characterized by a combination of restrictiveness, extensive rule setting, and warmth appears to be especially beneficial to the cognitive and socioemotional functioning of African-American children living in high-risk, crime-laden neighborhoods. This parenting style shields children from noxious elements and bestows them with a positive self-concept that helps deflect negative influences in their environment" (*McLoyd and Harrison-Hale*)

As I conclude, I want to speak to our youth. Notwithstanding these obstacles our youth are well able to overcome. God sees our affliction and hears our cries (Ex. 3:7). God told these people that he would deliver them out of captivity. You are the kin of the strongest of what the African continent produced. Even before the beginnings of this planet God had a specific plan for your life. Your job is to prepare to live out that plan. The future of your families and our community is dependent on you overcoming the statistics and the strategies that are designed to destroy you. The enemy wants you to be discouraged, confused, and afraid of hard work, preparation, and even success. The enemy tells you that education, studying, and focusing is too much like white, not enough like right. This is a trick of the enemy! Statistics or even the realities your life may suggest that achieving your goals and being successful seem insurmountable in comparison to the obstacles, but alone and in your own strength, you might feel like grasshoppers as compared to the giants in the face of your futures. Yet, I came by here to remind you, your parents, and the people who love you that no matter how large the obstacles they call can be turn into stepping stones if you all focus on the following:

Make a decision right now about how you want your life to be and put yourself in contact with people who are doing what you want to do, connect with God and like believers, connect with at least one adult who loves them unconditionally-no matter what! It is my belief based on experience and clinical research that these steps if implemented will help you to achieve your goals. Young people, parents, supporters

I pray that the grace and favor God be yours forever. Thank you!