"Assessing the Crisis: Black Males and Secondary Education"

Washington and Lee University

Melissa Poorman

Professor H. Beckley

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Assessing the Crisis: Black Males and Secondary Education

I. Introduction

Steven Jackson[1] is a Black 16 year-old boy who enjoys playing football and reading mystery novels. Like the average teenager at Thunder Ridge High School, Steven likes to play around with his friends when his social studies teacher finishes the lesson early. What distinguishes Steven from most boys his age is that his high school is located in a juvenile correctional facility. Steven is incarcerated at Natural Bridge Juvenile Correctional Center in Western Virginia. Steven has been incarcerated for the past year because he was arrested for selling drugs. He says that when he is released from the facility in June, he is likely go back to selling drugs if he returns to his hometown of Hampton, Virginia, because everyone else there is still involved in the trade and there are no other options for him at home. He says that the reason he got involved in the drug trade when he was 14 was because his mother let him do whatever he wanted and never asked any questions. In a more quiet moment, Steven admitted that he wished that his mother had been strict with him and had not let him hang out with his friends without asking questions. He also says that he never really liked school because his teachers acted as if they did not care if he did his school work and that they never expected him to do well, so he just did not do the work, and that is why at age 16 when he should be in the 10th grade, he is still doing work at the eighth grade level.

Stories like Steven's are not uncommon. In recent years, Black males have been candidly described as an endangered species. This crisis of the Black male has been attributed to several factors and is visible in literally all aspects of society. They are largely absent from institutions of higher learning and from the labor market. They also

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[1] Name changed for privacy reasons

drop out of school and are incarcerated at a high rate. These issues can all be attributed

to the position of Black males within the realm of secondary education. The current

problem encompasses several issues: a high drop-out rate, low test scores, and small rate

of entrance into colleges and universities. The outcome of their failure within the

secondary education system presents itself through their low labor force participation,

high rates of poverty, and high rates of incarceration. The most likely culprits of this low

achievement among Black males are: family effects, poor quality schooling, and

neighborhood effects. With such a large problem at hand, it is important to find a remedy

or remedies that will exterminate this crisis of the Black male. The possible remedies of

the crisis facing Black males in the secondary education system must take into account all

the factors contributing to the crisis and the current outcomes to be successful.

II. Problem

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A. Drop-outs/Graduation Rate

An alarming number of Black males are not graduating from high school. In a

2001 study by the Urban Institute, only 42.8 percent of Black males in the nation

graduated from high school.[2] This is compared to the 68 percent of all students who

graduated nationwide.[3] These figures do not paint a pleasant picture for the status of

Black adolescent males in today's society. Not only are their graduation rates leagues

below those of all other students in the nation, but they are also leagues below Black

females in the nation. In 2001, the graduation rate of Black females was 56.2 percent.[4]

Though this rate is still below the national average (by 11.8 percent), Black females still

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[2] Christopher B. Swanson (2004). "Who Graduates? Who Doesn't?" Urban Institute. Retrieved Feb. 26 2008 from Urban Institute website, 23.
[3] Ibid, 20.
[4] Ibid, 23.

out-graduate Black males by 13.4 percent. Black males also fare worst in a comparison

with males in other ethnic groups. In the class of 2001, White males had a 70.8 percent

graduation rate, Hispanic males had a 48 percent graduation rate, Asians/Pacific Islanders

had a 72.6 percent graduation rate, and American Indians/Alaska Natives had a 47

percent graduation rate.[5] In seemingly any comparison of graduation statistics, Black

males are left behind.

Graduation rates vary across regions. In the Northeast, there is a 35.7 percent

graduation rate for Black males, and a 74.5 percent graduation rate for White males. In

the South, there is a 44.4 percent graduation rate for Black males, and a 64.9 percent

graduation rate for White males. In the Midwest, there is a 39.2 graduation rate for Black

males, and a 75.3 percent graduation rate for White males. In the West, there is a 47.5

percent graduation rate for Black males and a 71.5 percent graduation rate for White

males.[6] From these figures, a Black male is most likely to graduate if he lives in the

Western part of the country and least likely to graduate if he lives in the Northeast. That

these numbers are so far below the national average, so far below the graduation rate of

White males, and that they vary so much across regions explicates that young Black

males are in serious trouble, no matter where they live in America.

However, it seems odd that Black males in the Northeast are less likely to

graduate than Black males in the South, while White males in the South are less likely to

graduate than White males in the Northeast. Considering the South's infamy for

inadequate schooling, the correlation between White males in the South and White males

in the Northeast seems more fitting than the correlation between Black males in the South

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[5] Swanson, 23.
[6] Ibid.

and Black males in the Northeast. There must be something about life in the Northeast that results in Black males' poor graduation rates (in relation to their graduation rates in the South). A possible explanation is that the "two conditions known to exist in urban America--high levels of Black segregation and high rates of Black poverty" could lead to high incidences of crime and less school participation.[7] These conditions are apparently not as prolific in the South. This is one of a large array of reasons that could result in the aforementioned correlation, but it is very likely that the neighborhood effect is the most prominent reason for the correlation.

B. Test Scores/Achievement Gap

Test scores are a prime indicator of educational success. In a 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, the average score of White students on the eighth grade math test was 276.4, while the average score of Black students was 238.2. On the reading test, the average score of White students was 269.4, while the average score of Black students was 241.6.[8] If nothing else, these figures attest to the long-standing achievement gap between Black and White students.

Economists point to studies that show that though the achievement gap slightly narrowed during the 1970s and 1980s, there has since been a steady widening of the gap since the 1980s.[9] Results from NAEP are key tools to gaining a better understanding of the problem. NAEP is a non-biased testing system that is more or less the nation's

[7] Douglas S. Massey (1995). "Getting Away with Murder: Segregation and Violent Crime in Urban America." University of Pennsylvania Law Review, 143 (5), 1203-1232. Retrieved March 2, 2008 from JSTOR database, 1203.

[8] John E. Chubb and Tom Loveless, editors. (2002) Bridging the Achievement Gap. Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 204.

[9] Sarah Theule Lubienski. (2002). "A Closer Look at Black-White Mathematics Gaps…" The Journal of Negro Education, 71 (4), 269-287 Retrieved Feb. 25, 2008 from JSTOR database, 269.

educational report card.[10] During the aforementioned period when the gap narrowed, the test scores of Whites were stagnant while the test scores of Blacks were on the rise. In contrast, "the period between 1986/1988 and 1999, when the gap grew, the pattern reversed: White students improved their achievement but Black students made few gains on NAEP."[11] There is no conclusive data that reveals exactly why these trends occurred.

While data is available on the Black/White test score achievement gap, less is available on the Black male/Black female achievement gap. The gender gap among Blacks tends to manifest itself in middle school, at which time "the pieces of the underachievement puzzle are beginning to take shape and to align in ways that foreshadow the disappointing school outcomes associated with older Black male students."[12] In a 1996/1997 study of Black eighth graders in Charlotte, North Carolina, females scored higher than males in the reading achievement tests. The average female score was 156.95 and the average male score was 155.01.[13] Though these numbers do not show a large gap, it does show the beginning of a trend that later manifests itself in several ways, for example, in the large gap between Black males and Black females who enroll in college. A 1990 study in Prince George's County, Maryland revealed comparable information that compares Black males to all other students. "In the first and fourth grades, 23% of the African American males were in the top reading group, but by grade six only 12% were in the top groups."[14] As Black males moved to middle school,

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[10] Lubienski, 269.

[11] Jaekyung Lee. (2002). "Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gap Trends: Reversing the Progress Toward Equity?" Educational Researcher, 31 (1), 3-12. Retrieved Feb. 25, 2008 from JSTOR database, 4.

[12] Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Anthony D Greene. (2006). "Connecting Pieces of the Puzzle: Gender Differences in Black Middle School Students' Achievement." The Journal of Negro Education, 75(1), 34-48. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from Research Library database. 34.

[13] Ibid, 41.

[14] Antoine M. Garbiladi (1992). "Educating and Motivating African American Males to Succeed." The Journal of Negro Education, 61(1), 4-11. Retrieved March 31, 2008 from JSTOR. 6.

they started to achieve at lower levels. "The academic failure of African American males begins early and eventually leads to these youths becoming disinterested in school and some even dropping out before they reach senior high school."[15] Again, a somber picture for the future of Black males.

Another curious development is the difference between Black male and Black female SAT and ACT scores. "Despite the smaller number of males in colleges and universities, SAT and ACT data demonstrates that …African American males have obtained higher scores than African American females" from 2005-2007.[16] Though both Black males and females scored well below the White average, it is surprising that Black males outscore Black females. In 2007, the average SAT scores for "all males was 1037, compared with a national average of 1017 for all students. Black males' average score was 866 on the SAT compared with an average score of 859 for Black females."[17] The Black males who are able to stay engaged in school performing fairly well, even though not as well as Whites. This is promising, especially if the possible remedies for this crisis results in increased achievement for Black males in secondary education.

C. College Entrance

Overall, Black males and Black females are underrepresented in institutions of higher education. However, the rising college entrance gap between Black males and Black females is at the forefront of discussion.

Black females are by far earning more Bachelor's degrees than Black males. "In 1996 Black men earned 36 percent of all college degrees earned by African Americans.

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[15] Garibaldi (1992), 6.

[16] Antoine M Garibaldi (2007). "The Educational Status of African American Males in the 21st Century." The Journal of Negro Education, 76(3), 324-333,522. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from Research Library database. 326.

[17] Ibid.

Black women earned 64 percent of bachelor's degrees awarded to African Americans."[18]

Black women earned almost two-thirds of all the degrees awarded to Blacks! Even more

telling, this gap has been growing over the past two decades. For instance, in 1988,

"African American female undergraduates outnumbered African American males by

more than 240,000." This trend will no doubt continue to grow if left to its own accord.

"Data on past performances tend to be unreliable predictors of the future. Yet red flags

are waving. One cannot ignore what will happen if the past 20-year trend in bachelor's

degree awards between Black men and Black women continues."[19] This trend is

daunting because "if, on a straight-line basis, we project into the future the losses that

Black men have consistently logged over the past 20 years, we would find that by the

year 2097 Black women will earn all bachelor's degrees received by African

Americans."[20] Such conjecture is alarming, to say the least. Such a dramatic conclusion

is unlikely, but one must question why the trend seems to be pointing in that direction.

Though women of all races tend to earn more college degrees than men, Black

women seem to have higher rates of dominance over Black men regarding their higher

numbers of college degrees held than White women have over White men. "It is

probable that the huge and early lead in college degrees earned by Black women

compared to Black men can be largely be explained by their being trained for teaching

professions."[21] Though the days of overt discrimination when Black men knew that

higher education would not rid them employment discrimination are not as present, Black

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[18] "Special Report: College Degree Awards: The Ominous Gender Gap in African-American Higher Education." (1999). <u>The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education,</u> 23, 6-9. Retrieved March 4, 2008 from <u>JSTOR</u> database, 6.
[19] "Special Report," 6.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid, 7.

men continue to earn less bachelor's degrees then Black women. Figure one below depicts the high incidence of Black women with degrees, based on the proportion of Black women and Black men who have college degrees, (as compared to the incidence of White women with degrees, which is based on the proportion of White women and White men who have college degrees) and figure two depicts the staggering difference between the number of Black men and women who hold bachelor's degrees.
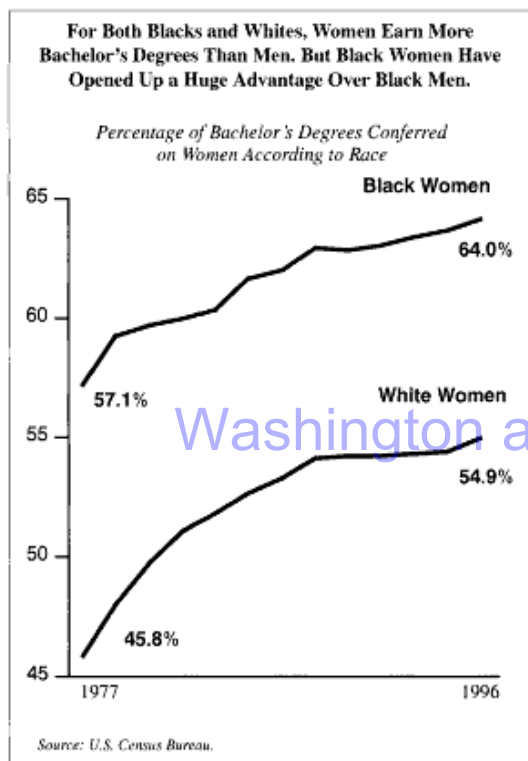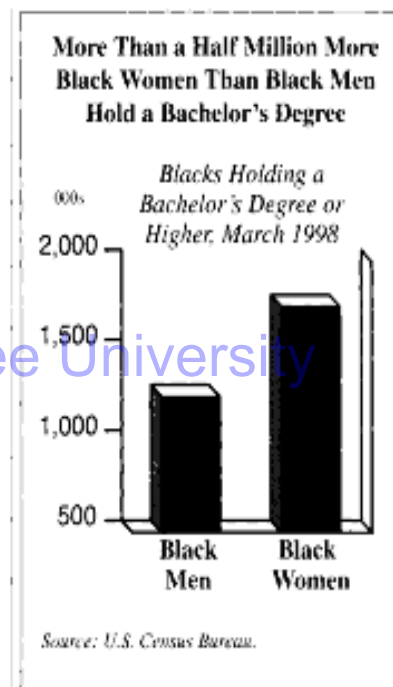

For Both Blacks and Whites, Women Earn More Bachelor's Degrees Than Men. But Black Women Have Opened Up a Huge Advantage Over Black Men.

Percentage of Bachelor's Degrees Conferred on Women According to Race

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 1

More Than a Half Million More Black Women Than Black Men Hold a Bachelor's Degree

Blacks Holding a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, March 1998

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Figure 2 ("Special Report").

III. Outcomes

The combination of high drop-out rates, low test scores, and low rates of college entrance tend to show themselves in certain ways. The outcome of these factors is particularly evident in the labor market, in poverty rates, as well as in the high incidence of Black men who are incarcerated. Though there is not always exact evidence that links the aforementioned factors to the outcomes listed, there are certainly instances in which

correlations can be drawn that show the relationship between these factors. The

implications of such high dropout rates, low rates of college entrance, and low test scores

are alarming.

A. Labor Market

On average, "high school graduates earn $6,415 more per year than those who

drop out."[22] Not only do dropouts tend to earn less than their diploma-holding

counterparts, but they are also more likely to be unemployed. "In 1998, 28.2 percent of

youths in the labor force who had dropped out of high school in the previous 12 months

were unemployed."[23] "Nearly half (46.2 percent) of less-educated non-enrolled young

Black men reported no earnings in 2001."[24] In a society in which a college degree is

becoming more and more necessary for employment, the Black males who the secondary

education system has failed find it difficult to make a living wage or to even attain

employment.

More so than low wages, unemployment (also referred to as joblessness), is

particularly problematic. "Joblessness is acute in inner cities, particularly among African

American men."[25] For example, in New York City in 2003, "only 51.8 percent of

African American men between 16 and 65 held jobs…By comparison, 75.7 percent of

White men in New York held jobs that year."[26] One of the main reasons for the high rate

of unemployment among African American men is "the education gap between African

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[22] Hoor Bhanpuri and Ginger M. Reynolds, Ph.D. (2003). "Understanding and Addressing the Issue of the High School Drop out Age." North Central Regional Educational Library. Accessed February 28, 2008 on North Central Regional Educational Library webpage.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Robert Mincy, et al. "Left Behind: Less-Educated Young Black Men." in Black Males Left Behind, Ed. Robert Mincy (Urban Institute, 2006),4.

[25] Julianne Malveaux (2004). "The Real Deal on Black Unemployment." Black Issues in Higher Education, 21(13), 33. Retrieved March 30, 2008, from Research Library database.

[26] Ibid.

Americans and Whites," as is depicted through the aforementioned drop out rates and test scores.[27]

A study of the labor force participation of less-educated (identified as those without high school diplomas) White men, Hispanic men, and Black men reveals an interesting trend. "The results show that employment and labor force participation rates among young White and Hispanic less-educated men are fairly comparable to one another, but these rates among comparable Black men have lagged behind those of the other two."[28] The gap between Black men and the other groups have continued to grow over time. Figures three and four below depict the labor force participation for males aged 16-24 and 25-34, from 1979 to 2000.

The large gaps between the rate of labor force participation for Black males in both age groups and the White/Hispanic rate is somewhat comparable to the differences in high school drop out rates. In the class of 2001, White males had a 70.8 percent graduation rate, Hispanic males had a 48 percent graduation rate, and Black males had a 42.8 percent graduation rate.[29] Comparable to their labor force participation rate, White males had a graduation rate of at least 70 percent. The drop out rate gap between White males and Hispanic males is a great deal larger than the labor force participation rate gap, and the drop out rate gap between Hispanic and Black males is a lot smaller than the labor force participation rate gap. Nonetheless, Black males are at the lowest end of the spectrum, whether in an evaluation of high school drop out rates or labor force participation rates.

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[27] Malveaux.

[28] Harry J. Holzer, Paul Offner, Elaine Sorensen. (2005). "Declining employment among young Black less-educated men: The role of incarceration and child support."Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 24(2), 329-350. Retrieved March 30, 2008, from Research Library database.
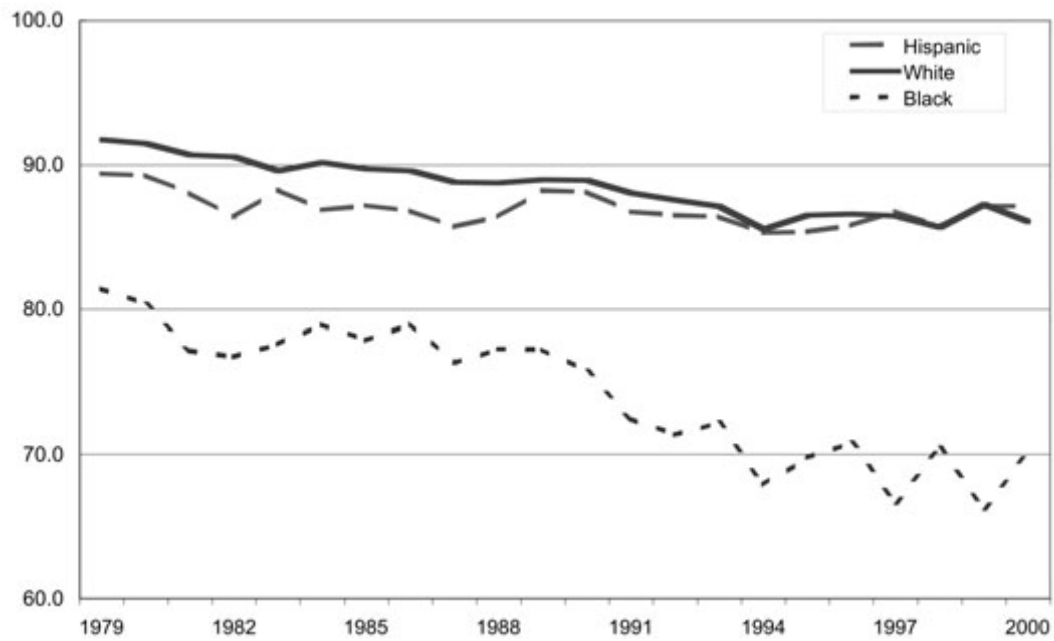
[29] Swanson, 23.

Figure 3. Labor force participation rates for less-educated males 16–24 years old, 1979–2000. (Holzer, et al)
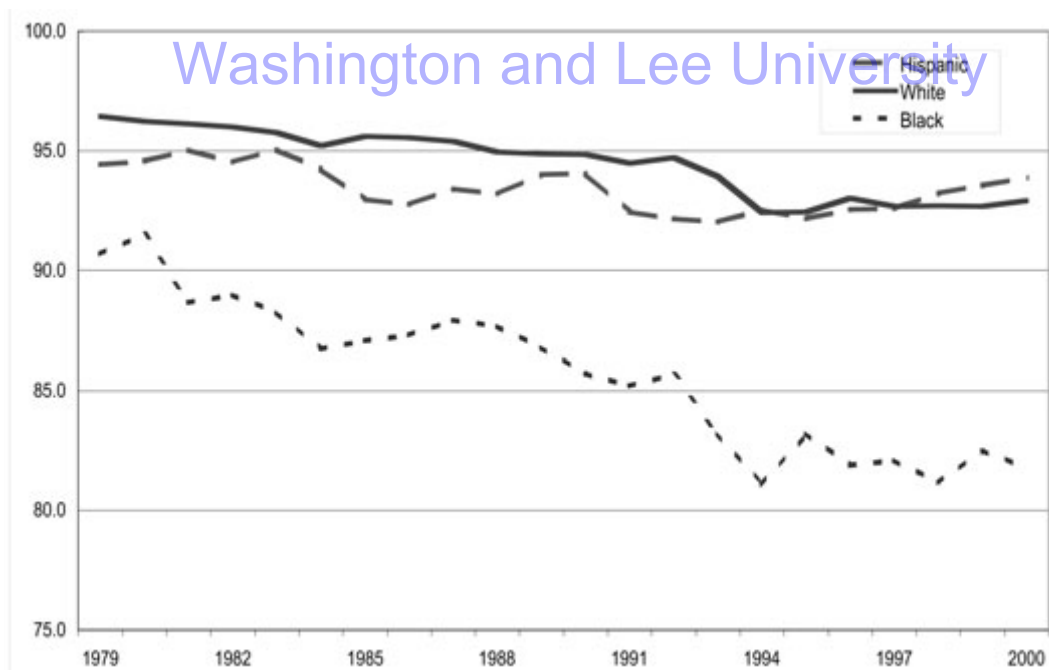

Figure 4. Labor force participation rates for less-educated males 25–34 years old, 1979–2000. (Holzer, et al)

B. Poverty

High rates of low-paying jobs and unemployment can lead to high incidences of

poverty. As expected, "less-educated non-enrolled young men without a high school

diploma had higher rates of poverty (22.1 percent) and near poverty (39.7 percent) in

2001 than those who completed their high school education (10.5 and 20.1 percent,

respectively)."[30] Moreover, "from 1980 to 1994, when Black men suffered from monthly

double digit unemployment rates," their median income "remained below the poverty line

for a family of four—that is, half the Black men in America did not earn enough in those

years to keep a family of four out of poverty."[31]

The effects of their economic position in society reach more than just the Black

men who are impoverished; the effect of their poverty on Black women and children is

noteworthy. Though Black male poverty is not the only cause for the rise in Black

female headed families, it has been deemed "a major contributor to family instability and

to the economic insecurity of Black mothers and their children."[32] A growing body of

research "substantiates the relationship between Black family structure and the

availability of economically stable Black males."[33] The basic idea is that "the numbers of

nontraditional Black families is a function of limited choices [for Black women] to find

individuals in a restricted and small pool of potential partners who can successfully fulfill

the normatively prescribe familial roles."[34] In other words, uneducated, jobless, poor

Black men are not viewed as husband material among Black women, which in turn

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[30] Mincy, et al, 6.

[31] William E Spriggs (2006, January). Poverty in America: The Poor are Getting Poorer. The Crisis, *113*(1), 14-16,18-19. Retrieved March 30, 2008, from Research Library database. 16.

[32] Ann M. Nichols-Casebolt. (1988). "Black Families Headed by Single Mothers: Growing Numbers and Increasing Poverty." Social Work, *33*(4), 306. Retrieved March 31, 2008, from Research Library database. 306.

[33] Ibid, 309.

[34] Ibid.

results in fewer incidences of marriage and more children born out of wedlock as is

evident through the research that points out that poverty and economic instability are

directly related to the number of female-headed homes. "A study examined the link

between Black male joblessness and female headship and found that in regions where

joblessness had increased most, so had female headship."[35] This correlation is troubling,

because people in female-headed homes "make up 58 percent of all poor," and that is a

terribly large percentage.[36] In turn, "children from single-parent households are more

likely than other children to experience behavior problems and drop out of high

school."[37] Thus, the effects of low educational attainment not only affects in the

individual Black male, but also his offspring and the Black family as a whole.

C. Incarceration

Another outcome that less-educated Black males face is a high rate of

incarceration. High school dropouts "comprise a disproportionate share of the nation's

prisons and death row inmates…Eighty percent of prisoners are high school dropouts,"

according to a 2000 study by the National Dropout Prevention Network.[38] Though the

figure for Black male prisoners who are high school dropouts is not readily available, it is

likely to be high, following the trend of all other dropouts. In 1999, there were 25

percent more Black men in prison than there were enrolled in an institution of higher

education.[39] (*Note that enrollment does not necessitate completion, as is witnessed by

the number of Black men who actually hold bachelor's degrees, as mentioned in section

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[35] Nichols-Casebolt, 310.
[36] Spriggs, 15.
[37] Ronald B. Mincy (1994). Nurturing Young Black Males. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute.
[38] Bhanpuri.
[39] "More Black Men are in Jail than are Enrolled in Higher Education." (2003). The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 41, 62. Retrieved Feb. 26 2008 from JSTOR database, 62.

II. C). In that same year, "there were 757,000 Black men in federal, state and local

prisons. In 1999, the latest year for which complete education data is available, there

were 604,200 African-American men enrolled in higher education in the United States."[40]

Overall, Black men make up 41 percent of the prison population, but only four percent of

all students in American colleges and universities. These proportions are completely

opposite those of Black women and White men. "In 1999, there were 1,038,900 Black

women enrolled in higher education in the United States. This was 15 times the number

of Black women incarcerated in federal, state and local prisons."[41] In that same year,

there were "4,540,000 White men enrolled in higher education," seven times the number

of White men incarcerated.[42] Though there is no direct evidence that proves that lack of

education is the only reason that Black men end up in jail, it is telling that a large number

of uneducated Black men end up incarcerated.

IV. Causes

The aforementioned outcomes of Black males' low academic achievement, as

shown through labor market effects, high rates of poverty and high rates of incarceration,

are often the most cited examples that there is a crisis facing Black males. These factors

do paint a grim picture of the Black males' status in American society, but they also lend

themselves to a seemingly simple question: Why are Black males so marginalized in

society and why are they facing a crisis? A problem so large that it has been elevated to

the level of 'crisis' no doubt has several very complex causes that can be attributed to the

proliferation of the problem.

A. Transition to Secondary Level/Family Effects

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[40] "More Black Men…" 62.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

The transition from elementary school to middle and then high school can be challenging for students. As students make these transitions, especially to high school, "they must cope with dramatic increases in school size, the structure of an academic schedule, and the complexity of school environments. These changes are particularly marked in urban areas in which most students attend large high schools."[43] Transitions to the secondary level are trying for all students, but are even more so heightened for African Americans in urban areas. With an increase in school size, "adolescents are suddenly faced with less time with teachers, and they are required to learn more in more concentrated periods of time, often in more traditional classrooms with less opportunities for teacher-student interaction, hands-on activities, and group work."[44] This in turn has an effect on the students' performance, and teamed with evidence that "suggests that minority males have the greatest academic difficulty following a move to middle-level schools and high school," suggests that the transitory period to the secondary level can be extremely trying for Black males. "African American males are particularly at risk because they, on average, have the fewest resources to meet academic challenges…and have also been shown to have fewer familial resources and may receive less guidance and support from families as they make these school moves."[45]

Parental involvement has been shown to be integral to students' academic success. "Adolescents whose parents maintain high involvement and support during high school do significantly better and are more likely to adopt positive coping strategies in

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[43] Melissa Roderick (2005), "What's Happening to the Boys? Early High School Experiences and School Outcomes Among African American Male Adolescents in Chicago." 151-227. In Educating African American Males, Olatokunbo S. Fasola, Ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press. 155.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid, 156.

response to academic difficulty and stress."[46] However, parental involvement tends to decline during adolescence. These declines are even more severe for Black males, especially in terms of the involvement of their fathers. "The lack of male role models in the lives of African American males deprives them of critical levels of support, particularly during adolescence….In addition…a common argument is that African American parents respond differently to the behavior of boys and hold them to lower expectations."[47] Though the latter suggested argument has its critics, it, along with the aforementioned statements, lends credence to the overwhelming stresses of the transition to high school that could lead to low test scores and high drop out rates for Black males.

The performance issues that arise from the transition are evident along gender lines and have implications regarding the students' social interactions. For example, a study found that "African American males in Chicago were approximately 50% more likely to fail major subjects in the first semester of ninth grade than African American females."[48] Again, differences arise between Black males and Black females. "These dramatic changes in school performance…suggest that declines in engagement in school may not simply be a process of adolescence but may be strongly shaped by the academic and social environments that students encounter in urban high schools."[49] In other words, the student's social groups and academic environment can influence his engagement in school. "Many of the issues that arise in studying African American adolescents' achievement motivation also center on…how emerging peer groups combined with adolescents' increasing awareness of racial barriers and stereotypes shape students'

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[46] Roderick, 156.
[47] Ibid, 157.
[48] Roderick, 153.
[49] Ibid.

behaviors and goals."[50] Social situations can affect student's engagement, but so can the interactions between students and teachers.

In the context of the environment of a large urban high school, "any move to more anonymous settings makes it more likely that teachers will rely on stereotypes and prior expectations in forming their relationships with students."[51] This certainly does not have good implications for Black males, who are infamous for having less than savory stereotypes associated with them. Because of stereotypes, "teachers may also be less proactive in reaching out to African American males and less likely to provide them with academic support and high expectations."[52] These factors, compounded with the aforementioned factors regarding the transitory period to the secondary level, result in a high school environment "in which African American males are marginalized and unsupported, thus decreasing motivation and sending messages that undermine a positive sense of competence and efficacy in school settings."[53] These transitional issues have their roots in the student's home. For example, the lack of parental involvement at home only heightens the stresses caused by larger class size in high school with less one-on-one interaction with the teacher. However, family effects stretch beyond parental involvement in the child's education.

These transitional problems do seem to have their roots in the family. Placing blame on the family is controversial, however, because "cultural explanations of behavior focus on the moral codes that operate within particular families, communities or

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[50] Roderick, 157.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid, 158.

groups."[54] This in turn leads to the belief that "change in behavior can only be brought

through cultural change."[55] That is not the argument of this paper. There are cultural as

well as structural problems that combine to create unstable conditions for black males,

and there must in turn be a combination of cultural as well as structural remedies.

Family members' actions and behaviors heavily influence how students behave

and students' outcomes in life. For example, "measured family background variables are

strongly related to the socioeconomic outcomes of disadvantaged youths in a manner

suggestive of potentially causal links."[56] Besides being strong predictors for students'

later economic status, family members also have effects on students that are immediately

present in the short run. Students are likely to model the behavior of their adult family

members. For example, "those with family members with drug and alcohol problems are

much more likely to use drugs"[57] than those students without family members who

participate in this behavior. Likewise, "youth who had family members in jail are almost

twice as likely to admit being involved in criminal activity in the last year than those who

report no family members in jail."[58] Participation in such deviant behavior, modeled

after their own family members, leaves little time for students to engage themselves in

their education. These behaviors in turn impact the already stressful period associated

with the transition to secondary level.

B. Quality of Education

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[54] Noguera, 58.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Anne C. Case and Lawrence F. Katz. (1991). "The Company You Keep: The Effects of Family and Neighborhood on Disadvantaged Youth." <u>NBER</u> Working Paper No. 3705. Retrieved April 8, 2008 from <u>NBER</u> database, 2.

[57] Ibid, 15.

[58] Ibid.

For those Black males who do stay in the public education system, they often face poor quality schooling. "Nationally, we do not educate Black male students well," and that is evidenced by the aforementioned low graduation rates of Black males.[59] Americans often respond to such information by arguing that the cause for the high dropout rate "is attributed to the students themselves, their communities, their cultures, or their families."[60] This is an unfair characterization that does not take into account the effect of a student's schooling on his academic output.

One of the most detrimental outcomes of the social structure of this nation on Black males is "their all-too-frequent placement in special education programs."[61] "A huge number of Black boys are tracked into caretaker-type special education classes where they forever classified as incapable of academic pursuit."[62] Black males have been disproportionately placed in special education programs, especially when their disabilities are those that are diagnosed by judgment, not biological factors. "The centrality of the role of judgment makes it a potential source of bias."[63] A 1992 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) revealed that "African American males are overrepresented in all disability categories."[64] A 1977 study investigated "whether regular classroom teachers displayed racial and/or gender bias in making referrals to special education placements. They found that when the teachers were told, that the child was Black or Hispanic, the child was more often judged as a

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[59] Michael Holzman (2007) "What distinguishes those high schools that serve Black males academically especially well, graduating on time and ready for college work?" American Association of School Administrators. Accessed Feb. 26, 2008 on the American Association of School Administrators website.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Beth Harry and Mary G. Anderson. (1994). "The Disproportionate Placement of African American Males in Special Education Programs: A Critique of the Process." The Journal of Negro Education, 63 (4), 602-619. Retrieved March 4, 2008 from Research Library database.
[62] "Special Report," 8.
[63] Harry, Anderson.
[64] Harry, Anderson.

candidate for special education" than if the teacher was told that the child was White.[65]

Even those instances in which the decision to place someone in special education classes

is test-based, there are still flaws associated with that process.

Researchers argue that "America's history of testing is rife with examples of how

often flawed technology is misused to determine the fate of individuals."[66] Black males'

overrepresentation in special education classes is something that follows them throughout

their elementary and secondary educations. "In countless school districts, tests continue

to be used for tracking and placement of students from kindergarten to high school.

Often, the tests used for this sorting process perpetuate segregation in the classroom."

Along with this, once tracked into special education grouping, these students tend to stay

in that category throughout their education.

Another cause for poor educational attainment among young Black men is the

culture of the education system and how that culture classifies them. "The culture of the

primary and secondary education system appears to favor young Black girls over Black

boys. Teachers, who are predominantly female, see Black boys as disciplinary

problems."[67] This trend follows students throughout the lower grades. "The differing

treatment of Black boys versus Black girls in elementary school translates into lower

academic achievement by Black boys as they move up the academic ladder. Black boys

tend to behave according to teachers' expectations and their behavior then reinforces

teachers' expectations."[68] Along these lines, "more often than not, teacher expectations

regarding Black males are influenced by their stereotype of Black males in general,

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[65] Janette Herrera (1998). "The Disproportionate Placement of African Americans in Special Education: An Analysis of Ten Cities." Retrieved March 5, 2008 from ERIC database, 7.
[66] Ibid, 3.
[67] "Special Report," 8.
[68] "Special Report," 8.

which is frequently characterized by what has been called the five 'ds': dumb, deprived, deviant, dangerous, and disturbed."[69] This starts a cycle in which teachers stereotype their Black male students, who in turn fall into the stereotype because of the way that they are treated. In essence, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. "Because Black boys are generally assumed to b e more aggressive, hostile, and rebellious than other students, teachers tend to overreact to misbehavior of these youth, subjecting them to severe disciplinary treatment."[70] Such treatment from teachers "can produce either real attitudes of hostility and rebellion, or at least the kind of deviant or resistant behavior usually associated with those behaviors."[71] Again, these could be among the factors that contributed to Steven's poor rapport with his teachers back in Hampton, Virginia.

C. Poverty/Neighborhood Effects

Non-classroom factors can also contribute to Black males' achievement (or lack thereof) in school. "Scholars and researchers commonly understand that environmental and cultural factors have a profound influence on human behaviors, including academic performance."[72] That being said, what happens in the non-school hours and even within the school in non-classroom settings are also strong factors that influence the crisis of the Black male. One possible influence is any cultural factor that results in destructive behavior. "Anthropologists and sociologists have documented ways in which certain cultural influences can lower the aspirations of Black males and contribute to the

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[69] Ronald L. Taylor. (1991). "Poverty and Adolescent Black Males: The Subculture of Disengagement." Adolescence and Poverty: Challenge for the 1990s. Eds. Peter B. Edelman and Joyce Ladner. Lanham: Center for National Policy Press, 139-162. Retrieved April 2, 2008 from ERIC database, 148.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Pedro A. Noguera (2005), "The Trouble with Black Boys: The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males." pp. 51-78. In Educating African American Males, Olatokunbo S. Fasola, Ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press. 52.

adoption of self-destructive behavior."[73] Along these very lines, there is an argument that

the "community-based 'folk theories' that suggest that because of the history of

discrimination against Black people, even those who work hard will never reap rewards

equivalent to Whites, could contribute to self-defeating behaviors."[74] All of these

theories are grounded in the fact that Blacks are very likely to be impoverished, which in

turn affects how they perform in society.

Black children (male and female) are "are more likely to be raised in poverty and

more often experience persistent poverty during childhood as compared to European

American children."[75] They are also more likely to live in areas with high rates of

poverty. The Children's Defense Fund has found that "for each year a child spends in

poverty, approximately half a year is chipped away from the child's total educational

attainment."[76] Childhood poverty also leads to "lower wages and productivity during

adulthood by subtly lowering an individual's basic skills and ability to learn on the job,

for example, [and] by lowering the quality of education received."[77] Moreover, "Lack of

access to healthcare, adequate nutrition, and decent housing, growing up poor and in a

single-parent household, being exposed to substance abuse at a young age, and living in a

crime-ridden neighborhood are some of the variables" that negatively impact Black

males.[78] These variables, which are all associated with poverty, are possibly present in

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[73] Noguera, 57.

[74] Noguera, 57.

[75] Margaret O'Brien Caughy, Patricia J. O'Campo. (2006). "Neighborhood Poverty, Social Capital, and the Cognitive Development of African American Preschoolers." American Journal of Community Psychology, 37(1-2), 141-54. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from Research Library database. 141.

[76] Susan Weinger (1998). "Children living in poverty: Their perception of career opportunities." Families in Society, 79(3), 320-330. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from Research Library database. 321.

[77] Weinger, 321.

[78] Noguera, 57.

the lives of all poor children, but the effects must be heightened for Black children, who are more likely to live in poverty.

The neighborhoods that poor Black males live in and the characteristics of those neighborhoods can influence their outlook on life. Researchers in a 1998 study were "compelled to conclude that the harmful effects of living within an impoverished inner-city environment outweighed the damage inflicted by early exposure to drugs."[79] That is alarming, but is nonetheless indicative of the dangers that can face those living in a low-income inner-city neighborhood.

It is common knowledge that youth emulate the behaviors around them. Adult neighbors can be either positive or negative role models for Black males. Like family effects, "if adult neighbors are involved in an activity—crime, for example, or drug abuse—observation of this activity may directly influence youths in the neighborhood."[80] Steven provides ample evidence of this. He emulated the adults who were in his neighborhood by selling drugs, and as a result of that he is currently incarcerated.

Peer groups can also have a negative impact on Black males' opinion of educational attainment. "Peer groups play a powerful role in shaping identity because the desire to be accepted by one's peers and 'fit in' with one's peers often becomes a paramount concern for most adolescents."[81] This powerful influence has negative implications. "Research has shown that in secondary school, peer groups assume a great influence over the orientation young people adopt toward achievement."[82] For Black males, this often means that they downplay the importance of education to fit in with

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[79] Noguera, 55.
[80] Case, Katz, 20.
[81] Noguera, 63.
[82] Ibid.

their friends. "Some researchers have found that for some African American students, doing well in school is perceived as a sign that one has 'sold out' or opted to 'act White' for the sake of individual gain."[83] They stay away from these behaviors because "peer groups are also likely to impose negative sanctions on those who violate what are perceived as established norms of behavior and who attempt to construct identities that deviate significantly from prevailing conceptions of racial and gender identity."[84] Because of these negative stereotypes associated with Blacks who are studious, Black males are likely to take an alternate route, which does not include educational attainment. They instead tend to follow the path of the youth around them because "an individual's likelihood of getting involved in an activity depends positively on the fraction of his or her neighborhood peers involved in such an activity."[85] This could explain why Steven thinks that the only thing that he can do when he is released from NBJCC is continue to sell drugs—because the large majority of his neighborhood peers participate in the drug trade.

The causes listed here are just three out of many possible causes. These three are the most salient and readily identifiable causes of the low achievement of Black males. The troubling transition into secondary education due to family effects, poor quality education, and neighborhood effects are issues that poor Black males deal with constantly. Effective remedies must be put into place to curb the problem of the low achievement of Black males, to prevent the outcomes attributed with those problems, and to chip away at the causes ascribed to the problem. Besides a complete structural

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[83] Noguera, 57.

[84] Ibid, 63.

[85] Case, Katz, 20.

overhaul and revamping of the United States education system (which is no easy feat), the remedies must include a multi-faceted approach that will reach the target group and engaged them in the ways that will ensure success.

V. Remedies

A. After-school Programs

Experts often "look to the non-school hours as a prime time for providing…children with additional academic, social, cultural, recreational, and other enrichment opportunities."[86] After-school programs fit this bill. To be truly successful, "academic enrichment and remediation should be a primary focus of after-school and extended-day programs" because of the dearth of engaging academic experiences currently available to Black males.[87] After-school programs should also provide other activities so that students learn to be well-rounded. "Additional program goals for after-school programs should include providing a safe environment in which students can learn valuable social skills, receive nutritious meals, and participate in recreational activities."[88] Good programs will be multi-tiered and engage as well as promote academic achievement in Black males.

Research reveals that there are after-school programs that successfully increase student achievement. A study designed to determine the relationship between "high-quality after-school programs and desired academic and behavioral outcomes for low-

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[86] Olatokunbo Fashola, Robert Cooper. (1999). "Developing the academic talents of African American students during the non-school hours: Four exemplary programs." The Journal of Negro Education, 68(2), 130-137. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from Research Library database. 130.
[87] Ibid, 131.
[88] Fashola, et al, 131.

income students" found promising results.[89] Those programs deemed as high-quality had

strong ties to the neighborhood, schools, and the community, expected students to

participate regularly, were free of charge, and serviced children four or five days a

week.[90] "Middle school programs who regularly attended the high-quality after-school

programs…across two years demonstrated significant gains in standardized math test

scores, compared to their peers who were routinely unsupervised" after school.[91] As a

matter of fact, "regular participation in the program was associated with gains of 12

percentiles in math achievement scores."[92] These results were based on a group of

students who were largely low income and minority. The individual attention given to

students, strong relationship with community organizations, and high expectations set for

students would help Black males succeed because the take a strong turn from the

interactions that they have with their teachers at school. A program like this would have

been ideal for a student like Steven. It would have been a great means of

counterbalancing the negative relationship that he had with his classroom teachers who

he believed did not think he was smart enough to succeed. Perhaps caring, family-type

environment of a high quality after-school program like the ones mentioned above would

have provided Steven with the incentive that he needed to become engaged in his school

work.

B. Black Male Role Models

[89] Deborah Lowe Vandell, Elizabeth R. Reisner, Kim M. Pierce (2007). "Outcomes Linked to High-Quality Afterschool Programs: Longitudinal Findings from the Study of Promising Afterschool Programs." Policy Studies Associates. 1-9. Retrieved April 3, 2008, from Research Library database. 1.
[90] Ibid, 2.
[91] Ibid, 6.
[92] Ibid.

The "lack of male role models in the lives of African American males deprives them of critical levels of support, particularly during adolescence."[93] Programs like the Big Brothers program are designed to provide this missing piece for young boys. The program was "created specifically to provide young children from single-parent families with adult mentors."[94] The goal of the program is to provide young children "with role models in their everyday lives who will provide them with positive experiences, teach them to make healthy decisions, and help them strive for the best in life."[95] A study to determine the effects of the Big Brother program discovered "outcomes such as reduced aggressive behavior, improved peer relationships, increased school attendance rates, and improved school performance."[96] A program like the Big Brother program that catered specifically to Black males and that had successful Black males as the designated Big Brothers would no-doubt have similar effects, only more compounded because of the presence of the successful Black male.

The culture of American schools can condition Black males to think that they are better attuned to play sports than excel academically. "The location of Black males within school, in remedial classes or waiting for punishment outside the principal's office, and the roles they perform within school suggest that they are good at playing basketball or rapping."[97] On the other hand, "debating, writing for the school newspaper, or participating in the science club are strictly out of bounds."[98] Because it is difficult for Black males to envision themselves participating in activities like the Debating Club or

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[93] Roderick, 157.
[94] Olatokunbo S. Fashola (2005). "Developing the Talents of African American Male Students During the Non-school Hours." Pp. 19-49. In Educating African American Males, Olatokunbo S. Fasola, Ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press. 33.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Noguera, 64.
[98] Ibid.

Science club, they tend to stay away from those activities. "Such activities are out of bounds not only because Black males may perceive them as being inconsistent with who they think they are but also because there simply are not enough examples of individuals who manage to participate in such activities without compromising their sense of self."[99] By seeing successful Black men (not just professional athletes), adolescent Black males will realize that it is possible for them to be more than just sport stars; they will see that it is possible for Black men to succeed and have jobs.

Again, programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) would be ideal for this. "Research presents clear and encouraging evidence that caring relationships between adults and youth can be created and supported by programs, and can yield a wide range of tangible benefits."[100] For example, "participation in a BBBS program reduced illegal drug and alcohol use, began to improve academic performance, behavior and attitudes, and improved peer and family relationships."[101] Although these are the results of the program, "the BBBS approach does not target those aspects of life, nor directly address them. It simply provides a caring, adult friend. Thus, the findings…speak to the effectiveness of an approach to youth policy"[102] that provides for adults to interact "flexibly with youth in a supportive manner."[103] This is important, because as mentioned above, "support and guidance from adults are a critical part of the process that allows youth to grow into responsible adults. Yet today there is a scarcity of such support,

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[99] Noguera, 64.
[100] Joseph P. Tierney and Jean Baldwin Grossman (1995). "Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters." Big Brothers Big Sisters. Retrieved April 11, 2008 from Big Brothers Big Sisters website. iv.
[101] Tierney, Grossman, 2.
[102] Tierney, Grossman, 2.
[103] Ibid.

especially among poor youth,"[104] and Black males in particular. The effectiveness of this program is based in the support that it provides to youth, the support that is often lacking in their home environments. Putting successful Black males in the Big Brother role would be a step in the right direction. This, too, would have no doubt been a great help to Steven. With a (legally) successful Black adult male role model, Steven may not have been tempted to join the neighborhood guys who sell drugs. A Big Brother could have kept Steven out of Natural Bridge Juvenile Correctional Center.

C. Education Reform

Studies show that students learn and achieve more when there are high expectations set for them and when they have successful teachers. These factors are even more important for Black males, who often lack successful teachers who set high expectations for them, as was the case with Steven. With that said, the program that should be implemented to close the achievement gap and ensure that Black males do not continue to be marginalized in society is one modeled after Knowledge is Power Programs (KIPP). KIPP is a national network of open-enrollment public schools in under-resourced communities. Across the nation, 95 percent of KIPP students are black or Hispanic and 80 percent of KIPP graduates go on to college.[105] That is far higher than the national average of the 30 percent of blacks and 20 percent of Hispanics who go to college.[106] The KIPP program has five pillars that ensure that students are successful: high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead, and focus on results.[107] KIPP schools have high expectations for all students and promote choice and

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[104] Tierney, Grossman, 2.
[105] "Results of KIPP Schools" (2008). KIPP. Accessed April 15, 2008 on KIPP website.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.

commitment for students, teachers, and faculty. Students spend more time in school, including Saturdays, and teachers are available through cell phones for homework help every evening. Principals are given more power and control of funds, which is helpful because there is less red tape to go through in order to fund programs that principals and teachers find necessary for student improvement. KIPP schools also focus on results, meaning that they accept nothing but success from their students.[108]

Education reform designed after the KIPP model would end educational inequality as it is known today, and not only for Black males, even though they will greatly benefit from it. A system like KIPP would ensure that all teachers are dedicated to enhancing their students' knowledge and that their attitude towards success would leave no room for the harboring of stereotypes against Black males. A system like this sees educational achievement as its only goal, and that will be what truly benefits the students. Also, because students and parents sign contracts agreeing to do their best, all parties will feel ownership for their actions and realize the importance of achievement. By offering parents and students the contract, the school will be giving the message that the parents' as well as students' input really matters. A system modeled after KIPP will break down barriers and provide for a more stable learning environment in which all parties (parents, students, teachers, principals, etc) are engaged and looking towards academic achievement of <u>all</u> students. Indeed, the KIPP model makes up for all the deficiencies that are present in the current system.

All of the above mentioned remedies will be costly, but necessary nonetheless. Two call for the creation of programs and the other calls for the overhaul of the current

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[108] KIPP.

education system. The long run benefits will far outweigh the short run costs, however. With these remedies in place, Black males are sure to have higher human capital and become more fruitful members of society. In essence, these remedies will start paying for themselves when Black males finally get their due.

VI. Conclusion

Black males like Steven Jackson face a bleak future. He was raised in a single-parent home, participated in peer-led deviant behavior, and is now the official responsibility of the state of Virginia. The sad truth is that when he is released from the correctional facility, he is likely to revert back to his old habits because he is going to return to his old neighborhood, which has gone unchanged while he has been incarcerated. In his old neighborhood, his friends are participating in the same kinds of deviant behavior, the schools have not changed, and his family's economic standing has not changed.

There has to be hope for people like Steven. The first step is to acknowledge that a crisis does indeed exist. America is in a sad state when less than fifty percent of any group does not graduate from high school. The outcomes of poor educational achievement are ones that follow Black males throughout their lives and promote the continuation of the cycle of poverty, because their children, especially their sons, are likely to follow in their footsteps. To change the condition of Black males in society, change needs to start on a smaller scale. By creating after-school programs targeted to Black males and creating Big Brother-type programs that show what a successful Black man looks like, society will be showing Black boys that it wants them to succeed and that it is okay for them to succeed. To totally eliminate the problem, a society free of

inequality is ideal, but these programs are certainly a step in the right direction. For Steven's sake, more comprehensive research needs to be done on the topic, because as of yet there is still not enough information in the form of statistics, etc available. That will in turn pave the way for innovative programs like the ones listed in the remedies section of this paper.

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