

CRADLE TO THE PRISON PIPELINE: MYTH, HYPE, OR CALIFORNIA'S STARK REALITY?

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The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP) of 1974, reauthorized in 2002 [and 2007], mandates that states receiving federal funding demonstrate efforts to reduce disparity. Yet disproportionate contact with African-American and Latino youth continues at rates greater than in the adult system. This disparity has a deleterious effect on the health and development of these children. The situation calls for a strong response from health professionals to advocate for equal treatment and culturally competent services. – Physicians for Human Rights

Every system, agency, public and/or private institution receiving federal dollars to serve youth is accountable for the tragedy unfolding in California's communities: struggling African-American students who are on a trajectory to prison or death. While the legislative mandate is an effective tool to monitor public health, educational, child welfare, and criminal justice systems, we are all neglecting a population with just as much promise, if not more, of becoming tomorrow's leaders as any other youth in this fair state...and we are all responsible for doing our part to reverse the negative outcomes and change the odds.

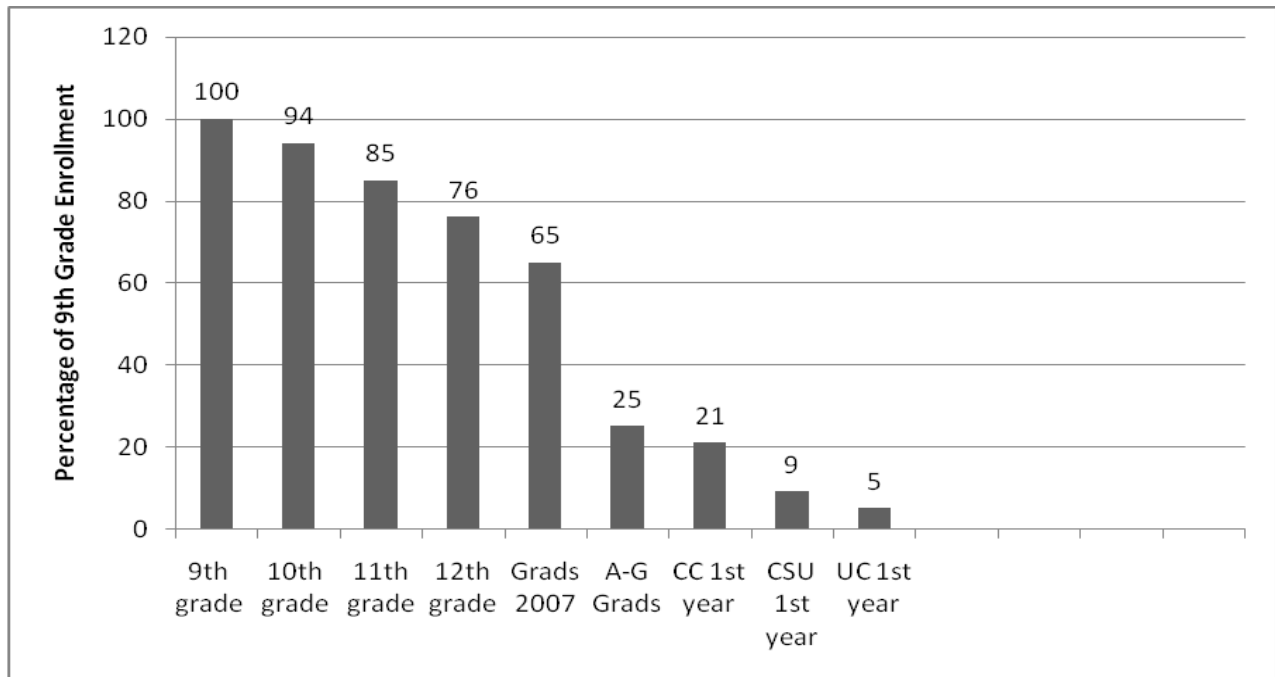
Granted, the problem is complex and overwhelming. A life that may lead to prison begins with an unborn child whose mother is struggling with poverty, addiction, and unresolved trauma. The U.S. Surgeon General Report of 2001 points to a vicious cycle of poverty for many African-American youth and families: Ninety percent of African-American youth who enter the mental health system live in poverty. Multiple interventions and coordinated systems change are needed at every stage for vulnerable African-American children and families.

Pervasive Disparities in Special Education Allocations

Demonstrated efforts to reduce disparity of African-Americans must be launched well before a youth, particularly an African-American male, enters the child welfare or juvenile justice system. The stakes are tremendously high. According to California Department of Education Superintendent Jack O'Connell's P-16 Council, "The State cannot afford-morally, socially, or

economically-to ignore the fact that major segments of the next generation continue to fall short of their potential. Quite simply, in a demanding global economy, the achievement gap threatens not only the future of California students, but also the future economic health and security of this state and nation.”¹

Fewer than 60 of every 100 African-American 9th graders in California public schools’ starting classes graduated in 2007. Less than 15 of these students graduated in 2007 with their A-G requirements fulfilled. The dropout rate for African-Americans in California in 2008 was estimated at 41%. Gender differences show a 46% dropout rate for African-American males compared to a 36% dropout rate for females. The following chart depicts the pathway to college for California’s African-American students, Class of 2007:



Source: California Educational Opportunity Report: Listening to Public School Parents, UCLA/IDEA and UC/ACCORD, February 2009.

Children with the highest needs are assigned the fewest resources and the least trained teachers. The percentage of under prepared special education teachers by school-level percentage of

¹ Closing the Achievement Gap: Report of Superintendent Jack O’Connell’s California P-16 Council, January 2008.

students in poverty is showing a steady increase, according to The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning.²

The racial composition of advanced courses in science, mathematics, and foreign languages in California high schools is telling: Whites and Asians dominate while African-Americans are scarcely represented.³ These are considered as college preparatory courses that could lead to successful matriculation to college, scholarships, and financial independence. Although school is viewed by many policymakers as the most stable institution in a poor child's life, for African-Americans, especially males, schools have become the purveyor of learning disabilities and marginalization which for many is the gateway to gang activity, alcohol, intravenous and other drug use, early sexual behavior, lack of spiritual grounding, and criminal behavior.

Children who are tracked to dead-end special education classes and who are at increased risk for juvenile crime often have inappropriate behavior and many teens involved in the juvenile drug court system are affected by Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) but many youth are also misdiagnosed, labeled, and pre-judged based on factors over which they have no control.

In 2004, California schools received \$4.1 billion from federal, state, and local sources for special education and then took an additional \$1.6 billion more from regular class funds.⁴ San Francisco Chronicle writer Nanette Asimov reviewed and printed summaries of cases, including financial figures (acquired by The Chronicle through the Public Records Act) that reveal alarming disparities in special education allocations.

In short, wealthy families can afford to hire lawyers to fight for "unilateral placement" for their children with disabilities. A unilateral placement is the practice of enrolling a child in a private school then billing the school district for tuition. Private day schools, boarding schools, summer camps, aqua therapy, horseback therapy, personal aides and travel costs are not appropriated in

² Guha, R., Shields, P., Tiffany-Morales, J., Bland, J., & Campbell, A. (2008). California's teaching force 2008: Key issues and trends. Santa Cruz, CA: The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning.

³ California Educational Opportunity Report: Listening to Public School Parents, February 2009, p. 15.

⁴ Asimov, Nanette (2006, February 19). Extra-special education at public expense. San Francisco Chronicle, page A-1. <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/02/19/MNG8THBH4V1.DTL>

most cases to urban youth with learning disabilities in California. The majority of African-American youth with learning disabilities are more likely to end up confined in juvenile correctional facilities.⁵

In 2006, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, past President of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), submitted an argument that a focus on the achievement gap in U.S. education is misplaced. Dr. Ladson-Billings stated, “this all out focus on the ‘Achievement Gap’ moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problems.”⁶ In her Presidential Address to AERA in San Francisco, California, Dr. Ladson-Billings pointed to historical debt, economic debt, sociopolitical debt, and moral debts contributing to the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White students. She urged the audience: “...we must use our imaginations to construct a set of images that illustrate the debt. The images should remind us that the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor healthcare, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind. The images should compel us to deploy our knowledge, skills, and expertise to alleviate the suffering of the least of these.”

With the growing body of knowledge on misdiagnosis of youth that have co-occurring disorders and who are subsequently tracked to special education programs, there is a strong need for mental health professionals and prevention/intervention providers to advocate (1) for more funding for research on appropriately diagnosing high-risk youth with co-occurring mental health and substance abuse problems; (2) that policymakers think at “right angles” to help marginalized youth by strengthening access to affordable housing, health care, child care, public transportation, job training, fresh food/farmer’s markets, financial literacy, media literacy, music and the arts; (3) for the development of alternative programs to reduce the number of African-American males in special education classes; and (4) given the importance of high technology

⁵ 2004. Criminal Neglect: Substance Abuse, Juvenile Justice and The Children Left Behind. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University.

⁶ Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). 2006 Presidential Address, From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools. Educational Researcher.

jobs to California's economy, develop accelerated programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics for youth with learning disabilities.

Improving the Outcomes of High Risk African-American Youth

Effective prevention/intervention/treatment programs and supportive services can help reverse negative outcomes for African-American youth. The following best practices were identified for working with and improving the outcomes of California's highest risk African American youth:

Prevention/Intervention Programs:

- Strengthening African American Families, SAMHSA Model Program
- Too Good For Drugs, SAMHSA Model Program
- Facing History and Ourselves, USDOE Exemplary and Promising Safe, Disciplined and Drug Free Schools Programs
- Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression Project (PLAAY), Howard Stevenson – teaches coping skills to African-American boys with a history of aggression

Recently Added Evidence-Based Practices on the National Registry for Evidence-Based and Promising Practices (NREPP) for high-risk African-American males:

- CASASTART (Striving Together to Achieve Rewarding Tomorrows, formerly known as Children at Risk), is a community-based, school-centered substance abuse and violence prevention program developed by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). CASASTART targets youths between 8 and 13 years old who have a minimum of four identified risk factors. Youth participants may remain in the program up to 2 years.
- Friends Care is a stand-alone aftercare program for probationers and parolees exiting mandated outpatient substance abuse treatment. The aftercare program is designed to maintain and extend the gains of court-ordered outpatient treatment by helping clients

develop and strengthen supports for drug-free living in the community. Program goals include reduced drug use and criminal activity.

- Parenting with Love and Limits (PLL) combines group therapy and family therapy to treat children and adolescents aged 10-18 who have severe emotional and behavioral problems (e.g., conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder) and frequently co-occurring problems such as depression, alcohol or drug use, chronic truancy, destruction of property, domestic violence, or suicidal ideation.
- Moral Reconnection Therapy (MRT) is a systematic treatment strategy that seeks to decrease recidivism among juvenile and adult criminal offenders by increasing moral reasoning. Its cognitive-behavioral approach combines elements from a variety of psychological traditions to progressively address ego, social, moral, and positive behavioral growth. MRT takes the form of group and individual counseling using structured group exercises and prescribed homework assignments.
- Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT) is a comprehensive and multisystemic family-based outpatient or partial hospitalization (day treatment) program for substance-abusing adolescents, adolescents with co-occurring substance use and mental disorders, and those at high risk for continued substance abuse and other problem behaviors such as conduct disorder and delinquency.
- Multisystemic Therapy (MST) for juvenile offenders addresses the multidimensional nature of behavior problems in troubled youth. Treatment focuses on those factors in each youth's social network that are contributing to his or her antisocial behavior.

Highlighted Supportive Services:

- Santa Clara County Probation Program – multidisciplinary rehabilitation including cognitive therapy approach.

- Detention Diversion Advocacy Program (DDAP), San Francisco – targets the highest risk youth in the juvenile justice system and offers intensive case management and a comprehensive range of community services.

Faith-Based and Community Collaborations:

Adolescents with strong religious beliefs are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use marijuana, according to a study published in the March 2003 issue of *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, a publication of the American Psychological Association. Youth ministries, community and faith-based efforts must go deeper than “hip pocket therapy.” Resources for faith-based outreach to high risk African-American youth include:

Cook, K.V. “You have to have somebody watching your back, and if that’s God, then that’s mighty big.” The church’s role in the resilience of inner-city youth. *Adolescence*, 35 (14), 71-73, 2000.

Harris, M. and Falloot, Roger, D., editors. *New Directions for Mental Health Services: Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems*. Number 89, Spring 2001. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

Watkins, R. with Barr, Jr., Jason A., Bryant, Jamal-Harrison, Curtis, William, H. and III Moss, Otis. (2007). **The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation**. Judson Press: Valley Forge, PA.

A comprehensive community partnership is featured in the Bakersfield City Elementary School District (Kern County) in the California Department of Education Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office’s Attendance Improvement Handbook (2000). The Stella Hills Elementary School formed an effective partnership with neighborhood stakeholders ranging from mental health agencies, local businesses, and apartment managers, to the city council, and the county supervisor’s office. In addition to neighborhood improvement and crime prevention projects, the partnership offers access to a clothes closet; referral network for counseling; parenting and life skills classes; and even makes phone calls to families on school mornings to ensure that students get up and prepare for school.

The aforementioned handbook also describes a Senior Tutors for Youth program in Contra Costa County that connects students in detention facilities and group homes with tutors from a local retirement community. Youth receive guidance twice a week from the senior citizens on strengthening their written and verbal skills and practice mock job interviews.

The National Cares Mentoring Movement, a partnership with the National Urban League, 100 Black Men of America, the Links, Inc., and the YWCA, was launched in 2007 to increase the availability of and access to mentors for African-American youth.

Towards the Restoration of Valuing Everybody's Child

Fact: More than five times as many young African-American men are under the control of the criminal justice system than African-American men of all ages enrolled in all four year degree programs, even when private educational institutions are included.⁷ The bottom line is that we are all accountable. Every life has value. A mother who is struggling to get her life together has the same hopes and fears as a mother of an affluent family: Every mother longs for her child to have a better life than she had and her deepest fear is to not be able to protect her child from danger.

When the starting teacher's salary in California is \$35,760.00 and the base salary for state prison guard's is \$57,000.00 (with state prison guards' average gross pay including overtime and bonuses is \$73,428.00), the stark reality is: the worth placed on African-American youth's lives, particularly males, in the state of California is greater in prison than in school.

A former gang-member, an African-American male from Long Beach-Compton, recently shared with the writer of this paper that his circle of male friends all shared the same thing in common growing up: No one had a father in his life. He did not place any value on his own life or anyone else's life. In fact, he did not expect to live very long and that he longed to be the gang member shot, killed and memorialized in the minds, hearts of the living on the rest in peace (RIP) t-shirts. An encouraging teacher and a mentor in the community convinced him that his life had worth

⁷ Schiraldi, Vincent, et al. Young African Americans and the Criminal Justice System in California: Five Years Later. Report from the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice; February 1996.

beyond what the streets could offer. He no longer affiliates himself with gang culture, enrolled in college, and is a teaching intern in a summer program for underserved youth.

Superintendent Jack O'Connell's efforts at accountability notwithstanding, every school district should be required to conduct a comprehensive study on the status of African-American male students at all stages of educational involvement. And schools cannot succeed alone in the effort to dismantle the effects of poverty's profound and relentless cycle.

Author Tim Wise's observation on inequity aptly states that we must all take responsibility for discontinuing poor practices that contribute to the cradle to prison pipeline:

*I realize that none of the people in this room and none of the people in any of the rooms to which I speak every single week in this country somewhere are the ones who themselves, individually or even collectively, are responsible for the creation of this system of inequality, of privilege, of oppression, of marginalization. And that is not the point. I know we didn't create it, but we are here now, and we inherit the legacy of that which has come before...it isn't about guilt, it's about responsibility...When we get tired of living in the funk, in the residue of that which has been given to us by others, with no regard for the impact and the damage that they would do to us and to our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren...When we get tired of living in that residue, in that funk, and saying enough, then we'll get busy cleaning it, not because we created it, but because we are the only ones left to do the job. And if we don't, we'll be back or our children, grandchildren, and our great grandchildren will be back in rooms just like this one in generations to come. But I assure you, if they inherit this legacy, as we have inherited, the stakes will be far greater. The risk will be far greater....And so if we don't want to see that day come, it is up to us to get busy. It is up to us to take responsibility, not because we are guilty but because we are here. Tim Wise - **The Pathology of Privilege: Racism, White Denial & the Costs of Inequality**, 2008*

Ifetayo Freeman has served in local, state and national youth development efforts for close to twenty years. While working on her Bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, she received a Presidential Fellowship to conduct a rites of passage program for girls. She possesses a dual Master of Education from Teachers College at Columbia University where she received the Alpha Kappa Alpha Academic Excellence Award and the International Youth Leadership Institute - W.E.B. DuBois Award for Outstanding Support to Youth Leaders. Ifetayo

is one of the original Freedom School trainees and participates in the annual youth leadership forum of the Children's Defense Fund each summer. She has lectured and facilitated workshops on such topics as Child Poverty, Education Policy, and Teen Pregnancy Prevention. Ifetayo is a project manager for ONTRACK Program Resources and currently oversees the Community Prevention Initiative and California Youth Technical Assistance and Training Projects.

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The African American Technical Assistance and Training Project is managed by ONTRACK Program Resources, Inc. ONTRACK offers cost-free consulting services and training on issues related to improving access, decreasing disparities and increasing successful treatment and recovery outcomes for African Americans. For more information on available services visit: www.getontrack.org

Additional Resources:

Brock, L., O'Cummings, M., and Milligan, D. (2008). *Transition Toolkit 2.0: Meeting the Educational Needs of Youth Exposed to the Juvenile Justice System*. Washington, DC: National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At Risk (NDTAC). Online at: (See link below).

http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/nd/resources/toolkits/transition_200808.asp

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Singleton, G.E. and Linton, C. (2006). **Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Inc.

Stewart, Eric A. and Simons, Ronald L. (2009, February). The Code of the Street and African-American Adolescent Violence. National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Research In Brief: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Program.

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Western, B. Schiraldi, V. and Zeidenberg, J. (2003, August). Education and Incarceration, Washington, D.C: Justice Policy Institute.