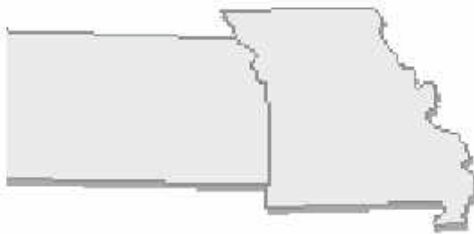


KansasCity.com

Posted on Sat, Jan. 28, 2006

AFRICAN-AMERICAN BOYS
THE CRIES OF A CRISIS

By E. BERNARD FRANKLIN *Midwest Voices*



**MIDWEST
VOICES**

If there is not major intervention in the next 25 years, 75 percent of urban young men will either be hopelessly hooked on drugs or alcohol, in prison or dead.

The data are clear.

Reports by the American Council on Education, the Education Trust and the Schott Foundation show that African-American boys spend more time in special education, spend less time in advanced placement or college prep courses and receive more disciplinary suspensions and expulsions than any other group in U.S. schools today. The Schott Foundation started the Black Boys Initiative in 2003, says President Rosa Smith, because "black boys represented the worst-case scenario for a group coming out of public education."

The foundation's 2004 state-by-state report on black male students found that, among other negative indicators, more black males receive a GED in prison than graduate from college.

In regard to last year's local violent crime, *Star* columnist Steve Penn recently reported that a disproportionate number of the victims (86) and suspects (54) in the 127 homicides were African-American. And most of them were African-American males.

Why might the violent crime rate be so high among African-American youths? They make up a brotherhood of the broken, bruised and defeated. Their girls have their mothers, aunts, teachers, school administrators and social workers to daily advocate for them. These boys have few advocates who understand their pain and speak up for them. Their issues don't reach the mainstream until white boys in the suburbs reach a similar set of circumstances.

What makes the plight of African-American boys so disturbing is that it appears as if few are concerned. The traditional social development institutions are failing them. Their family of origin, their schools, their churches, the youth-serving social service agencies, social workers — all are failing to reach this group of hardened boys.

Spencer Holland of Morgan State University cites the problem this way: Young African-American inner-city boys, coming from predominantly female-headed households with few, if any, adult male role models who value academic achievement, may come early to view school as no place for a boy. Performance-based instructional strategies in the primary grades that require children to copy and imitate behaviors demonstrated by primarily female teachers may lead boys to believe that school work and activities are "what girls do." Thus, they begin to reject learning activities for those behaviors that appear masculine.

In many schools, African-American boys are removed from traditional education by disciplinary interventions or by being tracked into special education. Vernon C. Polite, professor at Bowie State University and co-editor of the book *African American Males in School and Society*, in an independent study found that suspensions may range from two to 22 days, leaving large numbers of African-American boys to wander the streets daily where they begin engaging in crime.

Of African-American boys who enter special education, only 10 percent return to the mainstream classroom and stay there, and only 27 percent graduate.

In addition to data on the challenges African-American boys face in public schools, researchers point to less quantifiable factors. Professor Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago notes that black boys often do not feel cared for in their school or their communities. Polite also noted that the perceived lack of caring was the most devastating factor for African-American boys.

If African-American boys are not in school, they are not likely to be directed to youth-serving agencies like Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boy Scouts or YouthFriends, and these agencies are not really set up to support these tough boys. And many inner city churches don't have the budgets or the full-time staff to devote to their deep needs.

Nell Noddings, a professor at Stanford University, a former K-12 math teacher and the author of several books on caring, observes that "young black men and boys growing up without male role models and in conditions of poverty probably do need, more than anyone else, that assurance that somebody really cares.

"Many studies show the single most important thing in turning lives around is the ongoing presence of a caring adult."

The downward trend of Kansas City's African-American boys in school and society will not end unless educators, clergy, and community and business leaders make African-American boys a high priority.

If you don't believe me, wait 25 years from now and see what the results are. Or, do you really care?

E. Bernard Franklin is president of Metropolitan Community College-Penn Valley. To reach Midwest Voices columnists, write to the author c/o the Editorial Page, The Kansas City Star, 1729 Grand Blvd., Kansas City, MO 64108. Or send e-mail to oped@kcstar.com.

© 2006 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.kansascity.com>