Criminalization of Young Black Males

Useni Eugene Perkins
(1) ASSOCIATION FOR THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK YOUTH; (2) BLACK CHILD JOURNAL-PUBLISHER, bcjournal@msn.com

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This paper examines the historical, social, cultural and political factors that contribute to the criminalization of a disproportionate number of young Black males. In doing so, it provides greater clarity for the reasons we are "walking in circles" to find a solution to why these youth are facing a future that is indisputably bleak. In framing this pronouncement, it will show how these factors have been institutionalized to create a system of racial oppression that targets young Black males to be both its victims and victimizers. As the result of this system, many young Black males are portrayed in the media, visual and print, as predators and social outcasts who are products of a subculture that is wreaked in violence and antisocial behavior.

To address these factors, the paper provides a number of preventative strategies and processes that can help ameliorate those factors which unobtrusively program young Black males to become the fodder for America's expanding Criminal Justice Industrial Complex. Included in these strategies will be specific guidelines to divert young Black males from being the victims of the "school to prison pipeline" which serves as the incubator for the Criminal Justice System. Additionally, it will provide a rites of passage paradigm to enhance the social development of young Black males.

Keywords

Young Black Males

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Useni Eugene Perkins
Chicago State University (retired)

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1. Problem Statement:

Almost daily, the mainstream media cites accounts of violence involving young Black males; these are deeply disturbing and exceedingly difficult to comprehend. These accounts represent various types of violence but are most dramatically expressed by the rise in homicides and legal interventions as the leading causes of death among young Black males, ages

15-24 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Indeed, the situation has become so critical that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared violence among young Black males as a national health crisis. The statistics that affirm this declaration are stunning, overwhelming, and constitute why many young Black males are being called an endangered species.

> This description applies in a metaphorical sense, to the current status of young black males in contemporary American society. They have been miseducated by the educational system, mishandled by the criminal justice system, mislabeled by the mental health system and mistreated by the social welfare system. As a result, they have become—in an unenviable and unconscionable sense—rejects of our affluent society and misfits in their own communities.
> (Taylor-Gibbs, 1988, p. 2).

Data from the American Statistical Association and the Bureau of Justice Statistics are even more disturbing as reported in their 2008 study on the surge in homicides among young Black males, since "From 2002 to 2007, the number of homicides involving Black male juveniles as victims rose by 31% and as perpetrators by 43%." Recent Bureau of Justice Statistics (2018) are even more alarming in that a reported 7% increase in the violent crime rate from 2014 to 2016, per the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, was the largest increase over a 2-year period in a quarter-century (since 1989 to 1991). The city of Chicago has seen a 36% - 43% rise in killings during the first three months of 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019 (Chicago Police Department, 2019). These statistics should not be taken lightly if we are serious about addressing the problems that contribute to the criminalization of a disproportionate number of young Black males. Implicit in these statistics is an assumption that the crimes are being precipitated due to the hostile, risk-taking, and incorrigible behavior that are some of the predispositions that contribute to criminality.

To explain the reasons for the surge in violence among young Black males, it is imperative that we examine the historical growth of violence in America and its debilitating effects on Black people.

2. Brief History of American Violence:

Violence abounds in America as though the country is on the brink of committing suicide. Despite the fact that in recent years violence has decreased slightly, America remains one of the most violent countries in the free world. In this regard, its genesis can be traced, in part, to the western

world's conquest of the Americas when Christopher Columbus came to the West Indies in 1492 and began a tradition of violence that resulted in the colonization and mass annihilation of thousands of the indigenous population. Columbus' arrival in the Americas brought with it a plethora of diseases and pestilence that disrupted the tranquil life that characterized many of the indigenous people who lived there. Under the pretense of providing humanitarian assistance to the indigenous people, European nations envisioned a new world order to help satisfy their lust for dominance and economic expansion.

As the Europeans overpowered the indigenous populations, they also fabricated a history that depicted the indigenous populations as the real aggressors who, therefore, deserved to be treated like criminals (Ross, 1998). Although the Europeans were the progenitors of the violence, the indigenous populations found themselves being labeled as deviants and outlaws who would not comply with the Europeans' self-serving codes of justice and equality. The codes that once governed the indigenous populations were no longer valid, therefore making it easier for the Europeans to mandate what constituted criminal behavior (Ross, 1998).

> The destruction of indigenous cultures includes the eradication of their judicial systems. Law has repeatedly been used in this country to coerce racial/ethnic group deference to Euro-American power. Understanding this history of colonization is essential because Native criminality/deviancy must be seen within the context of societal race/ethnic relations; otherwise, any account of crime is liable to be misleading. (Ross, 1998, p. 12)

Thus, this subterfuge became the paradigm used to criminalize the enslaved Africans kidnapped from their motherland to become human chattel for the ignominious Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade that resulted in the largest involuntary dispersion of people in the history of humankind.

3. Enslavement of young Black males:

The architects of America's diabolical and dehumanizing slave system fully understood that, in order to maintain their uprooted captives in a perpetual state of chaos, dependency, and despair, they had to strip the enslaved Africans of their traditional culture that served as the foundation for the socialization of their youth. As a result, most of the ceremonial, communal, and institutional processes that prepared young males for manhood were either contaminated or destroyed. Because these processes no longer

existed, Black youth were deprived of the social protocols that were established for supervising their behavior and conduct to be consistent with the values and moral attributes of their respective traditional societies. Severing these protocols resulted in the antithesis of how African children were traditionally socialized as discerned in the following statement.

> African people take great care to see that children are given all the necessary training in order that they will be hard-working and useful men. Great attention is paid to all aspects of children's "moral" development.
> (Clark, 1971, p.12)

Pro-slavers made a concerted effort to dehumanize the lives of young Black males in order to make them docile, obedient, and subservient to white authority. They also justified their dehumanization of Blacks as irreproachable because of the low value they had assigned to Black life. The devaluation of Black life by pro-slavers can be graphically discerned during slavery and after reconstruction by the lynching and assaults against Black males, which were common occurrences in America and left the indelible impression that Black life was, indeed, expendable. Lynching was sanctioned in the South and even some northern states because the image of the Black male had been deliberately aligned with criminality. Further, when whites committed these horrific acts against Blacks, they harbored no feelings of guilt or moral retribution. In fact, many white supremacists used the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as a metaphor to justify the lynching of Black men, women and children: "White ministers sometimes served as mob leaders, blessing lynchings, or citing the stories of Ham and Cain to justify white supremacy as a divine right" (Cone, 2015 page 76).

4. White Supremacy and its assault on young Black males:

Young Black males were targeted by white supremacists because they posed the greatest threat to white supremacy. White supremacists made every effort to abort any possibility of young enslaved Black males displaying overt hostility toward their ironclad authority. The following are examples of how this was executed during chattel slavery.

1. Young Black males were forced to develop their own coping skills because of the fragmentation of the family unit and the suppression of parental and adult influence.

2. Young Black males were groomed for manual labor and denied any opportunity to enhance their cognitive development for fear they may learn ways to confront their oppressors.
3. Young Black males were taught to constrain their true emotions so they would appear to be one-dimensional, predictable, and obedient to their oppressor.
4. Young Black males were severely punished when they violated any of the codes of conduct which were established to preserve the institution of slavery (Perkins, 2005, p. 16).

The assault on young Black males continued even after the abolition of legalized slavery as a result of the 1876 Hayes-Tilden presidential election compromise, which returned the white supremacists slaveowner-class to power in the South and facilitated the advent of Jim Crow segregation, thus assuring that Black males would face the sternest penalties if they were perceived, in any way, to have violated the customs and self-serving laws of white supremacy. Three of the most horrific examples of this were demonstrated in the following incidents:

1. The infamous Scottsboro Trial which persecuted and convicted nine Black males, ranging in age from 13 to 20, for the alleged rape of two white women aboard a freight train in northern Alabama on March 25, 1931. The trial became a cause-celebre, and eight males were sentenced to death while the youngest one was sentenced to life imprisonment.
2. George Junius Stinney, Jr., became the youngest person in America's criminal justice history to be electrocuted at the age of 14. Young George was accused of killing two white girls, ages 9 and 12, in Alcolu, South Carolina in 1944. An all-white male jury found him guilty, with no concrete evidence to collaborate its decision, deliberating for less than one hour. Subsequently, after 70 years, George was posthumously exonerated of guilt.
3. The brutal assassination of 15-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till by white supremacists occurred on April 28, 1955 in Money, Mississippi. After being kidnapped from the home of his uncle for allegedly disrespecting a white woman, three days later his mutilated body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River. Emmett was brought to rest at Roberts Temple in Chicago before thousands of mournful onlookers. His courageous mother, Mamie E. Bradley, asked for son's casket to remain open so all the world could witness this dastardly act of racial violence.

Dr. Bobby Wright attributes the devaluation of Black life by whites as being one of the reasons that Blacks are often prone to killing other Blacks: "The European system has encouraged the killing of blacks. And since blacks have been led to believe that they are a part of the psychopath white system they simply follow the practice" (Wright, 1971, p 26). Even more disturbing is the lesson many Blacks have learned that violence committed against other Blacks yielded a lesser punishment than violence committed against whites.

5. Black-on-Black violence:

The paradox of this analysis is that, although young Black males are disproportionately responsible for the violence committed against other young Black males, the Black community must still rely upon law enforcement to apprehend the youths who commit these acts. Regardless of how disingenuous law enforcement may be, it is still called upon to resolve conflicts in the Black community. In doing so, law enforcement often over-steps its authority and is overly zealous and punitive in its treatment of young Black males. The authors of *The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children* (Goff, et al., 2014) postulate that Black children are perceived as being older than their white counterparts and, therefore, are not treated with the "aura of innocence" that applies to white children. This racist perception is one reason young Black male are frequently stopped, frisked and perceived to be guilty before they receive "due process of law."

Law enforcement's motto of "serve and protect" should be the template for how it serves the Black community. Yet, when this motto is violated, it sends a signal to the Black community that suggests law enforcement is immune from punishment, even if it did commit an unjustifiable act of violence. The recent spike in killings of Black youth by law enforcement substantiates the belief that this immunity not only exists but constitutes a conspiracy that is abetted at all levels of the criminal justice system. To further conceal its misdeeds, law enforcement is protected by its "code of silence" that is standard among law enforcement personnel.

There is no simplistic answer to this paradox. And, it is sophomoric to assume that violence in the Black community can be reduced without assistance from law enforcement. Conversely, it is equally sophomoric to assume that Black-on-Black violence will automatically vanish without the involvement of law enforcement. I have no doubt that the Black Lives Matter movement, which has harnessed unprecedented support for challenging the flagrant aggression of law enforcement against young Black males, is timely and commendable. However, the outcry for justice when a

young Black male is killed by another young Black male should be just as vigorously protested as when a young Black male is killed by law enforcement. Mary Mitchell, a reporter with the Chicago Sun Times, addresses this same concern in her January 31, 2016, column where she wrote,

> While many whites are quick to point out that Black lives seem to matter only when a white officer is involved, too many African Americans are silent when it comes to the shocking number of Black people being killed by Black people.

However, to the contrary, I believe that, when the Black community takes a firm stand against Black-on-Black violence, it demonstrates the high value it places on Black life, regardless of who the perpetrator is. It should also be acknowledged, however, that violence committed by Blacks against other Blacks is not a unique phenomenon in America. The same fratricidal paradigm exists among other ethic/racial groups, even though it is less publicized. When members of any disenfranchised and oppressed ethnic/racial group are being marginalized, it should be no surprise that they will vent their anger and frustration on the people who live among them.

Although the criminalization of Black males began during slavery, the lingering effects it was having on the socialization of Black children and youth was of such concern that the *Journal of Negro Education* addressed it in 1950. In the edition titled "The Negro Child and Youth in the American Social Order" were articles written by many distinguished Black scholars including Dr. E. Franklin Frazier, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, and Dr. Kenneth B. Clark. One article by Dr. Ira D. Reid provides a general summary of its findings:

1. The systematic subordination of Negroes to whites in the American social system has a discernable effect on the socialization of the Negro.
2. The present racial organization of the American social system is a direct outgrowth of that subordination.
3. The resultant racial organization tends to provide for its members an escape from (and compensation for) the domination of the wider society.
4. Thus, the socialization of the American Negro takes place in two general areas of social interaction. The one broadly cultural, the other narrowly racial, in neither of which is the process of

socialization effected with other than marginal completeness and satisfaction (Reid, 1950).

Despite legislation that lowered some barriers to racial justice during the Civil Rights Movement, a disproportionate number of young Black males continued to be caught in a web of deprivation, poverty, and high unemployment. The criminalization of Black youth was foreseen by a few Black visionaries during the turbulent sixties. In his study of the causes of the 1965 Watts insurrection, Dr. Douglas Glasgow (1981) followed the lives of several young Black males and concluded that high unemployment was the main reason for the uprising.

The trap in which these youths are caught cannot be fully understood in terms of theories, statistics or comparison. It must be seen as a way of life, a constant struggle to deal with discrimination and rejection. It involves thinking about work and alternatives to work. (p. 81).

Samuel F. Yette a correspondent for *Newsweek* who also served as a high-ranking administrator in the Office of Economic Opportunity, reported that the Office of Economic Opportunity was developing programs to identify Black children who later would be targeted for incarceration. Mr. Yette based his premise on the "blame the victim" diatribe that was common in the sixties to suggest poor Black people were their own worst enemy because of their cavalier attitude toward relying on the system of white oppression to accommodate their basic needs.

First, it was necessary for Americans themselves, especially the Black poor, to understand and accept their "fault"—that their failure to prosper under the system was due to some innate flaw, but a flaw which was being corrected through compensatory measures, such as special laws, programs and other benevolences that the white guardians of morality and justice thoughtfully instituted" (1971, p. 81).

Parenthetically, prior to the late 1940s, most young Black males did have at least minimal access to institutions that once shepherded youth. These institutions (e.g. church, family, social organizations, etc.), were fundamentally and foremost the cultural conduits for the proper socialization of Black youth. Among the cultural imperatives they cultivated were the care and love of children, community connectedness, respect for elders, strong kinship bonds, educational achievement, a work ethic, a sense

of struggle and a moral reference for conduct that was supported by a strong spiritual and/or religious foundation. Unfortunately, today, many of these institutions have since eroded, leaving the present generation of young Black males with limited options to meet their socializing needs. Because of this failure, the socialization of many young Black males has become a catastrophe with enormous social and developmental liabilities. These liabilities invariably spawn some of the attitudes and emotional dispositions that can induce self-destructive and violent behavior.

During the sixties "institution building" was one of the primary goals of the Black Power Movement. Sadly, there are few institutions we actually control today that have a direct influence on the socialization of Black youth. In recent years, many people have echoed the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." Implicit in this proverb is that the community as a whole must share responsibility for the nurturing of its youth. In traditional African societies, elders who taught youth their history, values, and the properties of manhood did this nurturing. This process, often called the "Rites of Passage," was considered a mandatory stage for all young males as they progressed into adulthood. As a strong advocate of Rites of Passage, I feel when it is properly administered it can be a deterrent to the social contaminates that criminalizes many young Black males. Although there are many components to a Rites of Passage program, the following objectives should always be included.

1. To help a youth achieve a sense of his identity and a feeling of belonging and commitment to the Black community.
2. To help a youth achieve a level of social maturity and awareness that will enable him to function in a racist society without engaging in self-defeating behavior.
3. To help a youth realize and achieve masculine roles that are satisfying, responsible, and consistent with acceptable cultural norms and values.
4. To help a youth develop a philosophy of life that allows him to function in a responsible and mature manner.
5. To help a youth to relate positively to his parents, extended family, teachers and elders (Perkins, 2005, p. 257).

A well- structured Rites of Passage will also decrease the tendency for young Black males to engage in violent activities because of its strong emphasis on Black pride. Thomas (1987) explains that, "The best antidote to black homicidal violence comes from a pro-social effort based upon a self-image that gives a feeling of positive accomplishment and appreciation. Afrocentric pride promotes or enhances pro-social behavior" (p. 156).

6. Street institution and socialization of young Black males:

For a disproportionate number of young Black males, the education most relevant to them ostensibly comes from the streets where they regularly convene to discuss what the schools fail to teach them. I call this process the Street Institution because, like traditional institutions, it has a set of values, mores, and sanctions to govern and regulate behavior. The Street Institution becomes their primary reference because traditional institutions have not prepared them to survive in an environment that is predicated on fear, reputation, and power. For a young Black male to survive this toxic environment, he must undergo a rigorous apprenticeship that will compensate for the lack of direction from traditional institutions.

Today, many young Black males discern discrepancies in America's so-called mainstream society but do not know how to deal with them in a constructive way. Despite the fact that they have greater access to America's mainstream society than their parents or grandparents, many seem resigned to a life of social captivity. These young Black males have become captives of the system of racial oppression and find themselves subscribing to the very type of behavior that reinforces the oppressor's credibility in monitoring and controlling the behavior of the oppressed. For example, the broad-based social tolerance of hip-hop music is indicative of this phenomenon when "gangsta rappers" spew their verbal venom into lyrics that often glamorize oppression as though they have an indelible bond with poverty and violence. Although these rappers feel that they are opposing the system of racial oppression, because of their aggressive behavior and refusal to conform to traditional Euro-centric standards, in reality they have become pawns to the very system they oppose. Those youths who engage in gangsta rap appear to be oblivious to public criticism and take pride in spewing their lyrics in their cars, on public transportation, and wherever youth congregate around the schools or on the streets. Moreover, in keeping with their perception of reality, their lyrics are filled with violent, profane and misogynistic language. Whether or not gangsta rap induces violence is an ongoing debate. Although older youth may be sophisticated enough to ignore many of gangsta rap's inflammatory lyrics, I seriously doubt that children have the same discretionary perception. The "Street Institution," therefore, becomes their primary reference for coping with the ordeals and tribulations they encounter daily. Although the Street Institution's reactionary and self-defeating mode of behavior compounds their problems, it nonetheless provides Black males with a sense of emancipation, even if it is only illusionary and temporary (Perkins, 1975).

While the passion to express their masculinity is exemplary of most young males, among some young Black males, it is often the only thing they have to feed their shattered egos. For these young Black males, expressing their masculinity is their ultimate goal in life. Any affront to this expression is an act of aggression, hostility, and dishonor that can only be corrected by a retaliatory act of violence. In many poor and oppressed black communities, the norms for being a man are often predicated on toughness, indifference, and violence. These norms are translated into the "code of the streets" that accounts for most of the interpersonal violence in the Black community. Anderson states that, "Of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city black community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression," (Anderson, 1999, p. 33).

Although white males have historically set the standards for manhood in America, many young Black males have repudiated these standards and have established their own. Such repudiation has serious repercussions for the oppressed because their standards for manhood are in direct conflict with the standards set by the oppressor. Consequently, those Black males who do not conform to the manhood paradigm established by white males in the system of racial social oppression are labeled as deviants and/or menaces to society. For example, the popular style of wearing sagging trousers to display their shorts is an act of rebellion and arrogance that defies normal rules of social conduct. Regardless of the fact that this style of wearing trousers derives from the Criminal Justice System which restricts inmates from wearing belts, many young Black males see it as a "manly" act of disobedience.

Unfortunately, the young Black males who do oppose the Eurocentric manhood paradigm are powerless to change it, so they develop their own manhood paradigm that all too often is counter to the best interest of the Black community. Some adopt what Dr. William Oliver calls a "compulsive masculinity." However, the problem with adopting such masculinity is that one is more prone to committing acts of violence (Oliver, 1994).

7. System of racial oppression:

To decipher how the system of racial oppression operates, in the criminalization of young Black males, it is mandatory to have some understanding of its psychological manifestations. First, it is not normal for any people to accept oppression as being intractable. Therefore, the system of racial oppression must be able to manipulate the oppressed into being naive about its modus operandi. First and foremost, the system of racial

oppression must convince the oppressed that they are inferior and dependent upon the oppressor for their welfare and survival. This indoctrination is executed through the following strategies.

- Scientific Colonialism – The tenets of Eurocentric sociology and psychology that produce scientific studies which invariably place blame on the oppressed for their own oppression. (To my knowledge, this term was coined by Dr. Wade Nobles, 1986).
- Media Distortion – The promotion and fabrication of images of the oppressed that categorize its members as being immoral, shiftless, irresponsible, violent, etc.
- Benevolent Racism – The devious ways and means the oppressor uses to patronize the oppressed into believing the oppressor is sympathetic to their welfare.
- Miseducation – The corpus of misleading information the oppressor provides that vilifies the history of the oppressed and glorifies the history of the oppressor.
- Institutional Racism – The formalization of racism in the major institutions of American life that control the social, political, educational, and economic stability of Black people.
- Cultural Assimilation – The process the oppressor uses to convince the oppressed that their traditional culture* has no merit, and if they are to receive the fruits of the oppressor's superior culture the oppressed must forsake their own.
- Religious Indoctrination – The manipulation of religious scriptures by the oppressor to affirm the oppressor's self-professed superiority to save the oppressed from damnation.

The above strategies are interwoven, explicitly or implicitly, into the ethos of American society, thereby making the system of racial oppression as American as apple pie. Moreover, these strategies do not need to be reinforced by either legislative or conspiratorial means. Because they have been so thoroughly absorbed by all major institutions, they are indelibly anchored in all facets of American life. Conversely, even when legislation is amended to change the policies of racial oppression, its impact on the oppressed is minimal.

8. The Black Christian church and young Black males:

Historically, the Black Christian church has been the fountainhead of spirituality in the Black community. Even though it remains the most

durable institution in the Black community, the challenge it faces today, in many ways, may be more formidable than ever before. Despite the fact the early Black church during slavery could not publicly denounce the tenets of white supremacy, it did manage to convey a spiritual message of consolation and freedom to many of its enslaved participants. In addition, the most noted slave insurrection during slavery was led by a minister, Nat Turner, who had a vision from God that told him he was not intended to be a slave and should rebel against those responsible for his enslavement. Such a response to armed struggle may not be a rationale position for today's Black church, but neither should it be compelled to sanitize the doctrine of white supremacy.

Instead of chastising those Black youths who stay away from the church, the Black church needs to be more assertive in reaching out to these youths. This commentary does not place lightly the difficulty of reaching Black youth, whose orientation to the streets is substantive and compulsive. However, it does recommend that the Black church be more innovative and not become content in taking a band-aid approach to treating a youth who is hemorrhaging from neglect, abuse, and low self-esteem. Because the church is fundamentally a spiritual institution, spirituality should be one of its greatest assets. However, having an asset and making it relevant to young Black males can be problematic. Today's Black church can no longer assume that its historical presence as the fountainhead of spirituality in the Black community can sustain its credibility. The spiritual leaders of the civil rights movement may not have been revolutionaries, but they did demonstrate a willingness and commitment to challenge the status quo. However, as the advertisement industry fully understands, having a superior product is not in itself an assurance that people will use it. On the contrary, even a superior product needs a viable marketing strategy. The church is no exception. Some people may interpret this statement as depreciating the traditional role of the church. This is not the intention, but traditions do not always capture the minds of young Black males who have been programmed to survive the best way they can, even if it violates fundamental principles of morality.

9. Criminal justice system and young Black males:

The criminalization of young Black males is no accident when we have to support a Criminal Justice System that is a "growth industry." As we continue to intellectualize the state of violence, the Criminal Justice System has continued to build prisons throughout America. In fact, as of 2020 nearly 2.3 million people are incarcerated in America's Criminal Justice

System, and young Black males are over-represented within this population. Michelle Alexander (2020) makes this evident when she says:

> The process of marketing Black youth as Black criminals is essential to the functioning of mass incarceration as a racial caste system. For the system to succeed … Black youth must be made—labeled—criminals. This process of being made a criminal is, to a large degree, the process "of becoming Black" (p. 248).

Under the "get tough" legislation that permeates the Criminal Justice System and the Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 1998, young Black males are subject to suffer the most, so long as a disproportionate number continue to be harnessed to a belt of poverty that denies them full access to the American Dream. In fact, researchers from Northwestern University predicted in 1995 that, "…1/2 to 2/3 of the 100,000 poorest [Black] male three-year-olds of today will eventually end up in prison" (Mauer & Huler, 1995, p. 4). What makes this prediction even more disturbing is that it confirmed the "school to prison pipeline" theory that has become among the most salient explanations for the overrepresentation of young Black males in our racially biased Criminal Justice System. Assuming that this prediction has merit, we also can assume that the majority of these marginalized youth, first come in contact with the Juvenile Justice System that becomes the incubator for the Adult System. It is estimated that approximately 60% of the young Black males who are on parole will become adult felons. Judge David B. Mitchell (1993), who presided over the Juvenile Court in Baltimore, Maryland, made a poignant statement about the high rate of recidivism among young Black males: "Most juvenile institutions are simply little prisons where inmates make contacts for future criminal activities" (p. 10).

The Criminal Justice System is fast becoming the major institution for the maintenance and socialization of a disproportionate number of young Black males. Juvenile facilities, including 1,800 residential treatment centers, detention centers, training schools, and juvenile jails and prisons held 48,043 youth as of October 2015. Forty-four percent of these youth were African American, despite the fact that African Americans comprise only 16 percent of all youth in the United States. African American youth are more likely to be in custody than white youth in every state but one, Hawaii (The Sentencing Project, 2017). As a major growth industry, the system feeds on the deleterious effects of poor education, inadequate social skills, family impairment, easy accessibility of guns, a thriving drug market, joblessness, and a history of social disparity that cause many Black males to engage in acts contrary to their welfare. Moreover, to ensure that these

effects are internalized by Black males, the media, of every persuasion, encapsulates and embellishes them with images, visual and print, that are provocative, exaggerated, distorted, and racist. The consequence of this "media perversion" provides a racially biased kaleidoscope of Black males that portrays them as potential or habitual criminals. Unfortunately, many young Black males accept these portrayals as normative models for their behavior, values and lifestyles, thus making them prime targets for the Criminal Justice System. And, the social, economic, and educational disparities that contribute to this skewed portrayal make it inevitable that young Black males will continue to be its most accessible victims.

10. Gangs and young Black males:

Regardless of the risk associated with being a member of a gang, Black street gangs have appeal for many young Black males. Even though some youth may become members because of forced recruitment, large numbers join willingly for a variety of reasons. Although the Black community has never condoned street gangs, they were tolerated because they were generally perceived as natural outlets for growing adolescent boys to let off steam, flex their muscles, and participate in shenanigans. In fact, the expectation of boys expressing these behaviors is a fundamental requisite of manhood in America, which is ingrained in its patriarchal ethos. The street gangs' influence on the socialization of Black youth is reinforced by the strict sanctions it imposes on its members. These sanctions are uncompromising, and members are expected to conform to them or suffer the consequences, which can be extremely punitive.

   Due to the gang's rigidity, the lifestyles of gang members – especially the hard core – take on all the mannerisms and nuances that the gang hold sacred. What they wear, the way they talk, and how they act are generally determined by the gang ethos. This is particularly true of hard-core gang members who take pride in flaunting themselves as though they were street celebrities. However, the gang ethos is also binding on marginal gang members and wannabees. This emulation is evident in communities where one finds the majority of youth wearing similar clothing—or identifiers, as the practice is called by gang members. Because of this practice, many non-gang members are treated by the police as though they actually belong to a gang. The racist adage that stereotypes Blacks as "usual suspects" is a major reason that young Black male are often stopped at random for shakedowns by the police. This is to suggest that the criminalization of young Black males is very much akin to racial profiling.

   The epidemic of street gang violence that was spawned in the seventies left thousands of young Black males either maimed, incarcerated,

or killed. In some cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia, Black street gangs were being labeled by law enforcement agencies, local, state and federal, as America's number one criminal problem. Indeed, this labeling was taking place even though the Mafia and other crime syndicates were operating at their usual penchant for organized crime. During this period, Black street gangs were persistently shown on the news and in the newsprint as drug dealers, super-predators, and menaces to society. Gangs like the Gangster Disciples, P-Stone Nation from Chicago and the Crips and Bloods from Los Angeles became household names in some communities. Granted, these gangs did engage in many criminal activities that set a precedent for certain types of violence in the Black community. However, did they warrant the sensationalism and notoriety given to them by the various media? This is not to make an excuse for the reckless behavior and violence perpetrated by these Black street gangs, but rather make an appeal to view their behavior through lenses that span a much larger picture.

It is difficult to determine how much violence Black street gangs actually commit because of the way acts of violence are reported in different cities and cited by the Department of Justice statistics. There appears to be a tendency when reporting juvenile violence to skew the numbers to place blame on street gangs. However, one must be prudent in accepting this claim because, despite their notoriety, membership in street gangs has a minority status in most Black communities. Nonetheless, even a small percentage of young Black males who engage in violence can have a devastating effect on the community. When we add structural racism, which influences almost every facet of American life, to the proliferation of drugs, violent street gangs, and racial profiling, it becomes increasingly evident why the criminalization of many young Black males is so pervasive. These young Black males have been programmed to have little respect for adults and community values; no strong spiritual/religious foundation; refute the importance of a quality education; glorify the Street Institution, and to have a low regard for human life. Many young Black males have been indoctrinated to internalize these attitudes as acceptable standards for their behavior. However, I can fathom no greater formula for criminalizing a group of people than what many of our young Black males are exposed to on a daily basis.

11. What can we do to decriminalize young Black males?

What, then, can those of us do who are genuinely concerned about the criminalization of young Black males? I do not profess to have all the answers to this most urgent question. However, it stands to reason that the most effective way to decriminalize young Black males is to deprogram them

of the negative images, propaganda, and racially biased theories that are infused in their minds during the formative years and reinforced when they become young adults.

First and foremost, young Black males must be taught to understand how they are being programmed, consciously or unconsciously, to engage in risk-taking and self-destructive behavior. Included in these teachings should be the following lessons:

1. An awareness and appreciation of their racial and cultural heritage.
2. An understanding of all forms of racism.
3. An understanding of colonialism, neo-colonialism, plantation politics, and neo-slavery.
4. An understanding of their kinship with other people of African descent throughout the Black Diaspora.
5. An understanding of how and why the system of capitalism works in favor of the ruling class.
6. An understanding of the contradictions and hypocrisy in American democracy.
7. An understanding of social class and racial division.
8. The ability to distinguish who is their friend and who is their enemy.
9. An understanding of the trappings of popular (Western) culture and how it serves as a diversion to positive Black lifestyles and values.
10. An understanding of Western social theory and how it is used to stigmatize and depreciate Black people.
11. How to establish goals that are supportive and consistent with the needs of Black people.
12. An understanding of their roles as the future leaders and cornerstones for the Black race.
13. An appreciation of the humanness of Black people.

Obviously, these lessons will not be taught in traditional institutions that covet the status quo as though it were the "Holy Grail." Therefore, it is incumbent on the Black community to build and support institutions (e.g. church, social agencies, schools, etc.) to teach these lessons during the formative years of a child's socialization.

12. Summation:

As bleak as things appear for many young Black males, the fact that there are thousands who have managed to escape the perils of being criminalized should be of some consolation. This is not meant to be a contrived statement. In my work with marginalized young Black males for over fifty years, I have witnessed many of them reverse the dismal circumstances that place them in jeopardy. When we consider that approximately four hundred years ago, twenty Africans were brought to Jamestown, Virginia and cast into a new life in a foreign land that dispossessed them of their original culture, such an event is unprecedented in the annals of history. Yet, despite epochs of chattel slavery, discrimination, segregation, and Jim Crowism we are surviving as a people. This in itself is a testimony to our indomitable resilience and spiritual fortitude—to defy the odds that we have faced as a displaced people of African descent. It should also serve as a reminder to what Black people can achieve when we use our collective energy and determination to address what seems to be an irreversible problem.

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