

Bringing the 'Invisible Man' to light

by Marc_H._Morial

Prominent black scholar and author Ralph Ellison once depicted the black man as socially invisible in his watershed novel "Invisible Man." His hard-hitting portrayal of life in 1940s black America suggested that it'll take more than a major civil rights movement to bring the nation out of its racist past. That was in 1953.

Since then, much progress has been made in terms of black men gaining greater visibility in the United States. At the anecdotal level, black men have broken down color barriers in a wide array of arenas - from sports to medicine to the arts to law to higher education to finance - and have risen to great prominence, giving their white brethren a run for their money.

From Barack Obama to Tony Dungy to Thurgood Marshall to Colin Powell to Tiger Woods to Russell Simons to Spike Lee, there are a multitude of black male role models to choose from who have proven that they can compete and excel on the same level as whites.

But for all the outstanding examples of black men defying a culture of low expectations dating back to the slavery era that was created and placed upon them by mainstream America via the media and other outlets, there are many more who are light years away from fulfilling their true potential. They represent the greatest source of untapped potential in the United States.

In many ways, two different worlds exist for black men.

In one world, the number of black males who have earned college degrees has quadrupled since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In the other, more black men are earning general equivalency diplomas in prison than are graduating from institutions of higher learning.

In one world, young black males grow up in two-parent households with annual median incomes rivaling those of white families. In the other world, more than half the nation's 5.6 million black boys grow up in fatherless families, 40 percent of them impoverished.

The existence of these two worlds serves as an example of what is possible and a warning about the consequences of racism, inequality and marginalization. For the countless outstanding black males who have defied the odds and achieved the national spotlight, there are countless more who are languishing in the shadows.

There is definitely a crisis afoot among black men that we must stop complaining about and take action to resolve - if not for them and their families, for our society as a whole.

Since 1976, the National Urban League has released its State of Black America, a yearly assessment of conditions affecting the black community. This year's report, which focused on the black male crisis, showed little improvement in terms of narrowing the overall equality gap between blacks and whites in the United States, as measured by its Equality Index, a statistical measurement of disparities or "equality gaps" between blacks and whites across five different categories - economics, education, health, civic engagement and social justice.

It also showed that black males lag behind their white counterparts on many major levels. They are more than twice as likely to be unemployed ... seven times as likely to be incarcerated, with jail sentences that are on average 10 months longer ... nearly eight times as likely to suffer from AIDS ... and for those between the ages of 15 and 34 years, nine times more likely to be killed by firearms.

But instead of concentrating on the downside, let us look at the upside. There is some promise for blacks, especially young male ones, in what the report found.

A higher percentage of young black children is enrolled in early childhood education programs such as Head Start than young white children - 66 percent compared to 64 percent. And the youngest blacks have made strong improvements in school readiness - scoring at 94 percent of that of whites, up from 81 percent in 2006. They have even surpassed, or nearly matched, young white children in terms of some home literacy activities: 81 percent were taught words or numbers three times a week, compared to 76 percent of whites, and 54 percent were read a story once a week, compared to 56 percent of whites.

A major disconnect, however, occurs after elementary school as blacks begin to fall behind whites. Disparities in writing proficiency scores widen as black students grow older. In fourth grade, they perform at a level of 87 percent of whites. By the time they reach 12th grade, their scores are at 74 percent of whites. By the time they've reached adulthood, they're the most likely to have dropped out - 15 percent compared to 12 percent of whites. For black males, that percentage rises to 18 percent compared to 14 percent of white males.

A reason behind the widening achievement between black and white students as they get to high school is likely explained by differences in teacher quality and educational spending. According to this year's Equality Index, 21 percent of teachers in majority-black districts had less than three years' experience, compared 10 percent in majority-white districts. Also, 49 percent in the middle grades taught in subjects outside their college major or minor, compared to 41 percent of middle-grade teachers in white districts. On top of that, dollars spent per black student was only 82 percent of what was spent per white student.

On the economic front, the unemployment numbers overall aren't great: blacks are twice as likely to be unemployed. However, as their education levels rise, so does their employment - enough to surpass whites in some cases.

For example, for blacks over 25 who have less than a high school education, only 40 percent are part of the work force, compared to 47 percent of whites. That rate rises to 82.1 percent when they have college degrees, which is five percentage points above the 77.5 percent participation rate of their white counterparts. But instead of dwelling on the statistics, let me propose some recommendations to not only help black males, but all Americans:

1. Universal early childhood education.

All children in this nation should have a right to comprehensive early childhood education, which, as Head Start proves, is very effective in giving them a leg up when they start school.

2. Greater experimentation with all-male schools, longer school days and mentoring.

All-male schools such as the Eagle Academy and Enterprise School in the New York City area combined with mentoring and longer days help keep young boys focused on education and away from the distractions that could lead them down the wrong paths.

3. More second-chance programs for high school dropouts, ex-offenders.

These programs aim to bring ex-offenders and disadvantaged individuals who are out of school and out of work back into the mainstream. Such programs help steer more Americans, especially those at risk, back on track by providing assistance in getting GEDs, skills training and new jobs.

4. Restore the federal Summer Jobs Program to its previous state.

Federal lawmakers agreed to "reinvent" the federal Summer Jobs Program that had been in place for decades by changing its status from a stand-alone mandatory program to one of 10 optional youth services programs. Under this reform, cities and municipalities have the option of offering the program or not. It resulted in a major scaling back of this successful federal program.

5. Drive home the message that education pays big dividends in the long run.

Parents need to instill into their children the value of education in achieving their dreams and improving their financial security. They must continually talk to their children about how much better off they will be by graduating from high school and college. They must tell them that their opportunities for professional and economic advancement are much greater with a college degree or higher than without.

So what we've presented here is blueprint from which we are urging our nation's leaders to work from. Empowering black men to reach their full potential is the most serious economic and civil rights challenge we face today. Imagine if our nation tapped the full potential of all the black boys languishing in the shadows? It would mean greater prosperity for all.

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