



# The Changing of a Macro System: Finding a Social Role for African American Elderly Males

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## President Barack Obama: The Message and the Messenger

President Obama on Sunday May 19, 2013 summoned the graduates of historically black Morehouse College to “transform the way we think about manhood,” urging the young men to avoid the temptation to make excuses and to take responsibility for their families and their communities. Delivering a commencement address at the all-male private liberal arts college in Atlanta, Obama spoke in deeply personal terms about the “special obligation” he feels as a black man to help those left behind. “There but for the grace of God, I might be in their shoes,” Obama said. “I might have been in prison. I might have been unemployed. I might not have been able to support a family and that motivates me.”

The president also reflected on the absence of his father growing up, noting that he was raised by a “heroic single mother,” and urged the young graduates not to shrink from their family responsibilities. “My whole life, I’ve tried to be for Michelle and my girls what my father wasn’t for my mother and me,” Obama said. “I want to break that cycle where a father’s not at home, where a father’s not helping to raise that son and daughter. I want to be a better father, a better husband, a better man.”

In his 32-minute address, Obama was far more personal and reflective than he traditionally has been, especially on matters of racial discrimination. Obama delivered a similar speech three years ago when he addressed the graduates of Hampton University in Virginia, another historically black college. He paid tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., a Morehouse graduate, noting that King’s education there “helped to forge the intellect, the discipline, the compassion, the soul force that would transform America.” Obama added: “Laws and hearts and minds have been changed to the point where someone who looks just like you can somehow come to serve as president of these United States.” Yet Obama acknowledged that “the bitter legacies of slavery and segregation” have not vanished, that discrimination still exists.

“As Morehouse men, many of you know what it’s like to be an outsider, to be marginalized, to feel the sting of discrimination. That’s an experience that a lot of Americans share,” Obama said. Hispanic Americans, Obama lamented, are told to “go back” home while strangers pass judgment on the parenting skills of gay men and lesbians or stare at Muslim Americans with suspicion. Obama said that too many young black men make “bad choices. “Growing up, I made quite a few myself” Obama said. “Sometimes I wrote off my own failings as just another example of the world trying to keep a black man down. I had a tendency to make excuses for me not doing the right thing.” But, the president implored, “We’ve got no time for excuses. “In today’s hyper-connected, hyper-competitive world, with millions of young people from China and India and Brazil, many of whom started with a whole lot less than all of you did, all of them entering the global workforce alongside you, nobody is going to give you anything you haven’t earned,” he said. “Nobody cares how tough your upbringing was. Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination.”

“Moreover,” Obama continued, “you have to remember that whatever you’ve gone through, it pales in comparison to the hardships previous generations endured and if they overcame them, you can overcome them, too” Obama told the graduates that they needed to be role models to the black youth of the nation. As of today, black males have a high crime rate. In today’s world, black males are acting out. Black male’s makeup 40.1 percent of the jail and prison population. According to, Sentencing Project, “in 2010 4 percent of the United States black males were in prison, compared to 1.7 percent Hispanics and .7 percent of white males”. Many black males get involved in the gangs and drugs, for some it becomes all they know especially at a young age.

Black males convicted of drug felonies in the state and court are sentenced to prison majority of the time. Many black males don’t understand the law towards drugs and the amount of trouble that comes from selling or using drug [1]. When people are not familiar with various applicable laws that may explain why many black males are sentenced because of disobeying the strict drug laws.” Our criminal laws, while facially neutral, are enforced in a manner that is massively and pervasively biased. The injustices of the criminal justice system threaten to render irrelevant fifty years of hard fought civil rights progress [2]. According to available information regarding the incarceration of black men, in 2005 545,300 black males were incarcerated in jails or prison between ages 20-39. [3] A high drug and poverty communities tend to have high crime rates. The Bureau of Justice statistic shows that one in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime. Black students represent more than 70 percent of those involved in school related arrests or referrals to law enforcement. According to recent data from the Department of Education, African American students are arrested far more often than their white classmate. High rates of suspensions and expulsions for certain groups – particularly African-Americans, Hispanics, and those with disabilities – are evident in data gathered nationally by the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

Data from 72,000 American public schools in the 2009-10 school year, for example, show that while African-Americans make up 18 percent of the students in this large sample, they account for 46 percent of students suspended more than once, 39 percent of students expelled, and 36 percent of students arrested on campus. White students, by

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contrast; represent 29 percent of multiple suspensions and 33 percent of expulsions – but 51 percent of the students. One of every four African-American public school students in Illinois was suspended at least once for disciplinary reasons during the 2009-10 school years, the highest rate among 47 states examined in a national study [4]. Harsh school punishments, from suspension to arrest, have led to high numbers of youth of color in contact with the juvenile justice system and at an early age. One of every four African-American public school students in Illinois was suspended at least once for disciplinary reasons during the 2009-10 school year, the highest rate among 47 states examined in a national study. According to, Sentencing Project, “African Americans have higher rates of juvenile incarceration and are more likely to be sentenced to adult prison.” A lot of juvenile cases are moved to criminal court. Because of the seriousness of the cases, 58 percent of African American youth are sent to adult prisons.

Many young black males are being arrested, because of the lack of parenting, the community they are being raised in, and peer pressure. But, the number one reason for their actions is the lack of a male influence. Many young men lack the parenting of their father. A man needs to be around and teach them what and what not do. Many young black men reach out for that attention by running to the streets. The men in the streets get into the young men minds and show them the fast money, clothes, and cars. From there the young men lives go downhill, forming barriers that will eventually make it hard for them to get back on track. That is why society today expresses that black men need to take responsibility and raise their kids, especially their sons. The lack of parenting can affect the young men, whereby when they have their own kids they will also lack a sense of responsibility. Some Young black men find it hard to stay out of jail once they go in the first time. They continue to hold in the pain of not having their fathers around, which makes them continue to commit crimes [5].

### LeBron James: Sports Icon

LeBron James supposed biological father name is Anthony McClelland. He is an ex-con uninterested in being a parent. According to LeBron James’ father, “He was a casual sex partner of Gloria Marie James. He got her pregnant at the age of 16. Anthony left once LeBron was born; so his mother raised him. Anthony McClelland was a formal criminal. He was convicted of arson and theft”. Years later Gloria started dating Eddie Jackson. Mr. Jackson was in and out of jail. Regardless of Mr. Jackson actions, LeBron formed a bond with him and looked at him as a father figure. Gloria also had two brothers named Terry and Curt who also stepped in as father figures. Realizing he would be better off with a more stable family environment, Gloria allowed LeBron to move in with the family of Frank Walker, a local youth football coach, who introduced LeBron to basketball when LeBron was nine-years-old [6,7]. As a youth, James played Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball for the Northeast Ohio Shooting Stars. The team enjoyed success on a local and national level, led by James and his friends Sian Cotton, Dru Joyce III, and Willie McGee [8]. Inseparable, they dubbed themselves the “Fab Four” and promised each other they would attend high school together [9]. In a move that stirred local controversy, they chose to attend St. Vincent – St. Mary High School, a largely white private Catholic school, instead of their local public school [10]. James has two children with his high school sweetheart, Savannah Brinson. The first, LeBron James Jr., was born on October 6, 2004, and the second, Bryce Maximus James, on June 14, 2007. They currently reside in Coconut Grove, a Miami suburb, where James bought a three-story mansion overlooking Biscayne Bay for \$9 million. James became

engaged to Brinson on December 31, 2011, proposing to her at a party to celebrate New Year’s Eve and his 27th birthday.

### The Trayvon Martin Case

I quote the Journalist Neil Steinberg; that’s why the Trayvon Martin case puzzled whites when we saw the emotions wrung over it “We are at war’ a black Florida pastor declared. Well, yeah, a war being conducted by other black men, not by white bigots or Hispanic vigilantes. Blacks make up 13 percent of the American population yet constitute 55 percent of the murder victims They’re killed 93 percent of the times by other blacks.....The last time I looked the major problem facing African Americans was not white bigotry—not any more—but enormous zones of poverty crime drug use and despair and dysfunction that rings every city.... What fixes it, Education, jobs, strengthening families, a complete overhaul of the criminal justice system which wasn’t designed as a Gulag to destroy the lives of young black men, but essentially functions that way.... Bigots tried to slur Trayvon Martin into some kind of thug, freely fictionalizing his image. Blacks erred in the other direction, trying make him a saint, an Emmitt Till figure in an when the gross the gross repressive measures that Till suffered has all but vanished. Now racism is much more worked into the entire system, which is rigged against a wide swath of black youth who aren’t killed, but still never have a chance in life. It has nothing to with racial profiling, or Stand Your Ground or Trayvon Martin, something uglier and tougher to confront I’m sorry to be the one who has to say it. Both President Obama and LeBron James represent remarkable narratives of individual achievement when the odds are against you. But can we do at the macro level to promote human development particularly in marginalized communities as cited by the President. The focus of this paper is what the elderly black male population can do in such communities to empower the young and build stable communities shown in Figure 1.

### Social Role for the African American Elderly Males

The literature is replete with an assortment of indictments regarding the designed obsolescence of elderly population of the nation. One pretty much typical text book states the following:

“Our society fears aging more than most other societies do. Our emphasis and youth is illustrated by our dread of getting gray hair and wrinkles or becoming bald and by our being pleased when someone guesses our age to be younger than it actually is. We place a high value on youthful action energy and action. We think that we are doers. But why is there such an emphasis on youth in our society? Industrialization resulted in a demand for laborers who are energetic, agile and strong. Rapid advances in technology and the sciences have made obsolete past knowledge and certain specialized skills.” The African American communities of the nation have been affected in more extreme ways by such trends. One consequence has been a persistent unemployment rate for African Americans at twice that of the White workers. The noted psychologist Eric Erickson postulated that middle adult has a polarization between giving generatively and stagnation and in later adult hood of integrity versus despair. The level of the negative parameters are experienced by Black males are at a much higher level than other male populations in this country. I refer to effect in the model as desperation. The nation has to address the challenges of the development of the black males at all stages to rectify social and economic imbalances. It is not true that a dysfunctional father or grandfather is better than not having either.

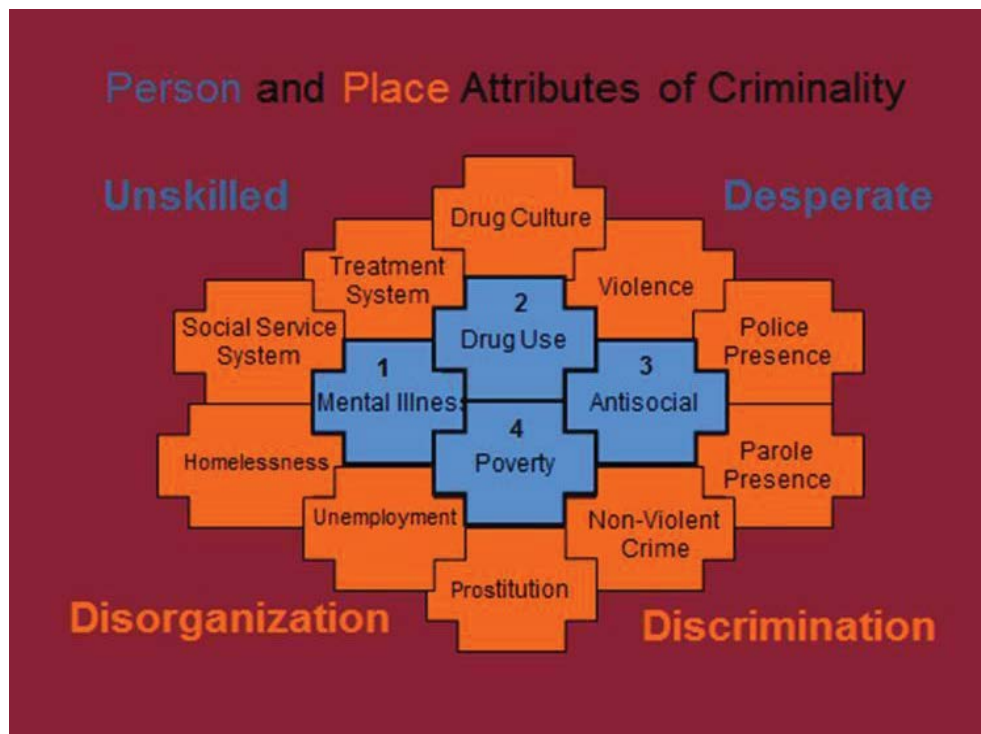


Figure 1: Key factors of distressed communities.

### Solutions to the social problems: Empowering the young can be done through enhancement of the role of elderly African American Males

Electronic monitoring for non-violence offenses with day reporting and other trade and school programs should be utilized. Local business should get tax breaks or grants to higher the individuals in the program. Furthermore, President Obama needs to pass a law giving our young defendants the option of enlisting in the military and doing their probation while in the military. Federal prosecutors will no longer seek “mandatory minimum” sentences for many low-level non-violent drug offenders in a major policy shift aimed at turning around decades of explosive growth in the federal prison population. Too many Americans go to too many prisons for far too long and for no good law enforcement reasons. “While the aggressive enforcement of federal criminal statutes remains necessary, we cannot simply prosecute or incarcerate our way to becoming a safer nation”, Attorney General Holder Under new policy prosecutors would send fewer drug offenders to federal prisons for long terms, opting for drug treatment centers and community service.

The change responds to major goal of civil rights groups, which say long prison sentences have disproportionately hurt low- income communities [11].

But what can elderly black American males do during this period of political, economic and social unrest in the black world and its way of life and the nation itself. After all are they not most of the elderly challenged by societal bias and barriers which affect the elderly regardless of race. The elderly have a meaningless role and are the victims of ageism. The elderly seem to encounter a number of problems in our society: low income and status, an emphasis on youth, health problems, inadequate housing, transportation problems, elder abuse, malnutrition, crime

victimization, emotional problems (particularly depression), and concerns with circumstances surrounding dying [12]. But what about those individuals with sound minds and healthy bodies? There are many who respond to life’s challenges in effective ways. They can be advocates when it comes to advancing social capital. Cities in the U.S with strong families, civic support groups, and a community- service orientation do well on social and economic mobility.

The important role as an advocate for older black males includes the following:

- Identify environmental factors impinging on the quality of the community
- Provide and interpret data to show the urgency for change
- In collaboration with other stakeholders, develop a vision to guide change
- Analyze the sources of political power and social influence within the system
- Develop a step by step plan for implementing the change process
- With allies lobby legislators and other policy makers
- Recognize and deal with resistance
- Assess the effects of advocacy efforts on the system

All of this is done in the contest of the Appreciative Inquiry cycle --based on work by David Cooperrider, Case Western Reserve University, as indicated below. Appreciative Inquiry “4-D” Cycle 71

Discovery

- Our changing world

- Organizational or community Positive Core
- Opportunity context

#### Destiny

- Initiatives
- Pilots
- Improvisation

Working Together to Create a Breakthrough Organizational or Community Design Dream. Articulation of Vision & Future We Want Design

- Principles
- Provocative Propositions
- Ideals

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this not just a story of the relatively high levels of incarceration of African American males at most level of government prisons or jails in the states in which they reside nor the invisibility of old Black males in civic, private and public sector in the various regions of the nation [13]. The overall damaging consequence has been decline of opportunity to improve one's status and a lack of African American social mobility. It also might mean that people in poor neighborhoods end up in a self-reinforcing cycle of under-funded schools, high crime and social breakdown [14-16]. It should not be surprising that places with high African American populations show low mobility for the white population living there as well.

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