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The challenges of My Brother's Keeper

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INTRODUCTION

On February 27, 2014, President Barack Obama unveiled My Brother's Keeper, a White House initiative whose purpose is to combat the difficult social conditions facing minority boys and young men in the United States. The effort, as currently conceived, will be challenging. Statistics on the conditions of minority boys and young men are grim and familiar. Minority boys and young men are less likely to learn to read and perform math at an early age and are more likely to be punished and expelled from school than other students. They are less likely to graduate from high school and are more likely to be unemployed and underemployed and are far more likely to become trapped in the criminal justice system. And young black men, in particular, are more likely to be the perpetrators of violent crimes as well as victims, especially in the case of murder. Forty-three percent of all murder victims in 2011 were black men, who make up only six percent of the general population.[1]

As one recent demographic analysis reveals, the social and economic barriers that young black men face has had devastating consequences. There are, as the study estimates, about a million and a half black men who have "disappeared" in communities across the country, missing either through premature death from disease or murder or from being locked away in jails and prisons.[2] Their absence in society leaves communities void of potential spouses, partners, fathers, sons, uncles, cousins, family surrogates, workers, and engaged citizens that make up the fabric of economically stable and socially viable communities. And their absence and the barriers they face place an economic cost on communities of color and the nation. As the White House estimates, by closing the educational achievement gap between white men and men of color

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The aim of My Brother's Keeper is to provide "pathways to success" that can reverse negative trends. These pathways involve supporting mentoring programs, internships, and apprenticeships through the support of nonprofit organizations, foundations, businesses, and corporations. The initiative has raised more than $300 million dollars from the private sector. My Brother's Keeper is also using executive action to lend support to helping all underachieving students meet milestones at various stages of their lives that will, hopefully, help minority boys by increasing their high school and college graduation rates, providing steady employment, and decreasing their involvement in criminal activity. For instance, the Department of Education and the Justice Department are focusing existing resources to address the education gap and criminal justice reform through demonstration projects, targeted funding, grant-making, and request for budget increases for expanding programs in early education, secondary education, and in correctional facilities.

THE CONTINUOUS CRISIS OF BLACK MALES

My Brother's Keeper is the latest in a decades long effort to respond to the social crisis facing black boys and young men in the United States. This response has taken the form of social action, government action, and, most recently, philanthropy. In 1965, the Office of Planning and Research in the United States Department of Labor released a report, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, which noted the growth of black female-headed households with children. Known more popularly as the Moynihan Report—named for its author, the future Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who wrote the report as an undersecretary in Lyndon B. Johnson's Labor Department—the study noted that a quarter of black children were born to mothers who were not married. Today, over three-quarters of black children are born to mothers who are not married. (And today about a quarter of white children are born to mothers who are not married).

Moynihan's thesis was that black families were becoming increasingly matriarchal in structure rather than patriarchal, a situation "which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on the great many Negro women as well." This explanation, which unfairly cast blame on poor and working-class black women for being partly responsible for the social conditions of black men, is still debated today.

Since the Moynihan report, proclamations about the crisis facing black men have continued. In 1983, Ebony devoted a special issue to the plight of black men. The magazine noted that black men had lower labor participation rates, higher unemployment rates, increasing rates of suicide, and lower life expectancy than white men, and black women. Indeed the crisis had deepened so much that "it is fashionable to say that the black male is on the list of endangered species."[4] And in 1995, hundreds of thousands of black men assembled on the national mall in Washington, D.C. for the million-man march, which emphasized the need for black men to atone for their mistreatment of women, reconcile broken family relationships, and become personally responsible for their actions. (Barack Obama, who was then running for state senator in Illinois, attended the march.)

Since 1989, when the first government-sponsored commission on the status of black males was created in Ohio, there have been more than two-dozen similar commissions founded across the country devoted to the concerns of black males. They cover all regions and encompass communities with small to large black populations. There

are, or have existed, black male commissions or taskforces in the northeast (Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania), South (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, Texas), Midwest (Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota), and West (Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, Washington), and the District of Columbia. Many of these commissions are defunct or perform few activities, and those that are active receive little state funding.[5]

Over the years these commissions have generally focused on five policy areas—criminal justice, health, education, employment, and strengthening families. With a few exceptions, state commissions tend to focus on public service rather than recommending explicit legislative or executive action. For instance, the Indiana Commission on the Social Status of Black Males, which was established in 1993, was created to study the social conditions of black males, develop strategies to remedy adversities, and make recommendations to improve the status of black men in the state. In fiscal year 2015-2016 the commission has a budget of $135,431. As part of its goal to address the health disparities of black men, the Indiana Commission sponsored the Indiana Black Barbershop Health Initiative where blood pressure and diabetes screenings were taken for 800 participants at fifty-four barbershops in fourteen cities throughout the state. The Indiana commission has also partnered with nonprofit groups to sponsor a variety of workshops for black men on the importance of fatherhood, effective parenting strategies, and custodial parenting and child support.[6] Other state commissions serve as sites of advocacy for issues facing black men and boys in their state legislatures.

In Connecticut, for instance, the state's Commission on African American Affairs, which was created in 1997 as a result of recommendations from the Connecticut African-American Male Task Force, has provided testimony on several bills regarding education, criminal justice, and health equity, issues that disproportionally affect black boys and men. It recently supported the passage of a bill that would enable ex-offenders who have gone through rehabilitation process to be granted a "certificate of rehabilitation" by the Board of Pardons and Paroles or the Support Services Division of the Judicial Branch. The idea is for ex-offenders to use certificates to assist in gaining employment, which is a greater challenge for black ex-offenders than white ex-offenders.[7] But despite the number of state commissions and the modest, at best, initiatives that they have taken on over the decades, they have not been able to reverse the negative trends or weaken the barriers that minority boys and young men face in American society.

FIGHTING RACIAL STEREOTYPES BY REINFORCING THEM

Part of the battle is challenging some misconceptions about the shortcomings of black men, which have become a part of the negative public discourse. As the impetus behind the My Brother's Keeper initiative, President Obama views himself as mentor-in-chief. He has often used his own example as a young adult male experiencing challenges and his ascendency to the presidency as a story to inspire minority boys and young men growing up in difficult circumstances. The president has used the bully pulpit—both as a presidential candidate and president—to talk about what he believes are the behavioral shortcomings of young black men—particularly black fathers—and how their negative behaviors contribute to their own demise and the demise of their children, particularly boys.

Beginning with a major speech he gave on Father's Day while a candidate for the Democratic Party nomination in 2008, Obama singled out black fathers for failing to raise their children. Black families have become weakened, he noted, because, "Too many fathers are M.I.A., too many fathers are AWOL, missing from too many lives and too many homes, acting like boys instead of men." As president, Obama has continued to sound that theme. In 2013, during a speech in Chicago on urban violence, the president argued that a primary cause for gun violence in black

communities were absent fathers and the lack of marriage. “There’s no more important ingredient for success, nothing that would be more important for us in reducing violence than strong, stable families—which means that we should do more to promote marriage and fatherhood.” And in a commencement speech at Morehouse College the same year, Obama told the graduates of the all-male and predominately black school that they had “no excuses” for not succeeding. “Nobody cares how tough your upbringing was,” he told the graduates. “Nobody cares if you suffered some discrimination.” Like previous generations of African Americans, these black male college graduates would “have to work twice as hard as anyone else if you want to get by,” the president noted. And during the unveiling of the My Brother’s Keeper initiative at the White House in 2014, Obama told minority boys in the audience that they need to “step up and seize the opportunity for their own lives,” that there can be “no excuses” for them not succeeding.

Contrary to stereotypes, these data indicate that although three quarters of black children are born to unwed women, it does not mean that black men are less engaged in raising their children or less supportive of the idea that they should financially support their children. In many cases, they are more so.

But much of rhetoric about the lack of responsibility does not match reality, and indeed it reinforces existing stereotypes about black men, particularly as fathers. Previous studies have shown that black fathers not only are active in the lives of their children but their engagement is equal to or is greater than white and Latino fathers. Analysis of data collected by the Centers for Disease Control on the childrearing activities of fathers shows that black fathers with children under the age of five living with their children (whether they are married or not) were more likely or just as likely to regularly feed or eat meals with their children (78 percent compared to 74 percent of white fathers and 64 percent of Latino fathers), bathe, diaper, or dress their children daily (70 percent compared to 60 percent of white fathers and 45 percent of Latino fathers), play with their children daily (82 percent compared to 83 percent of white fathers and 74 percent of Latino fathers), and read to their children daily (35 percent compared to 30 percent of white fathers and 22 percent of Latino fathers).

And for children of school age—five to 18 years old—black fathers who live with their children (again, whether they are married or not) are just as likely or more likely to eat meals with their children daily (62 percent compared to 64 percent of white fathers and 71 percent of Latino fathers), take their children to or from daily activities (27 percent compared to 20 percent of white fathers and 23 percent of Latino fathers), talk to their children about daily activities (67 percent compared to 67 percent of white fathers and 63 percent of Latino fathers), or help with or check to see if their children finished homework (40 percent compared to 28 percent of white fathers and 29 percent of Latino fathers).[8]

And though fathers not living with their children are substantially less involved in childrearing than those fathers living with their children, black fathers not living with their children are generally more involved than white and Latino fathers in similar living situations. Black fathers also show a greater desire to financially provide for their children. A survey from the Pew Research Center reveals that black fathers are more likely to believe than white fathers that it is “extremely important” for fathers to provide income for their children (52 percent versus 40 percent).[9] Contrary to stereotypes, these data indicate that although three quarters of black children are born to unwed women, it does not mean that black men are less engaged in raising their children or less supportive of the idea that they should financially support their children. In many cases, they are more so. An underlying assumption about fatherhood,

which has been at the center of debates about the "breakdown" of black families at least since the Moynihan Report, is that the only way to be a committed father is to be a married father. Unmarried black fathers, whether they live or don't live with their children, are stereotyped not to be active in their children's life. Because of the institutional barriers that particularly exist for poor and working-class minority fathers—incarceration and its social consequences, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, state laws that criminalize fathers for non-payment of child support—many are likely to experience difficulties in meeting financial obligations for their children despite contributing in various other ways to childrearing.

Indeed, blacks perceive the "disappearance" of black men as a bigger barrier to marriage than personal flaws. In a 2006 survey by the Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University 70 percent of black men and 69 percent of black women agreed that the "big reason" for black low marriage rates is that "too many young black men are in prison or have been killed." Less than half of black men or black women thought other reasons were to blame. Some thought that a big reason for the low marriage rate was because black men feel that they cannot support a family financially (49 percent and 48 percent) or that black men are less likely to value marriage (42 percent and 40 percent). Others thought black women are reluctant to marry men who have less education than they do (44 percent and 42 percent).[10]

Instead of seeing marriage and fatherhood as a solution to the problems facing black boys and young men, policies should be created that support poor and working-class unmarried parents—both male and female—who may lack the financial resources affluent families have to provide for their children.

AGGRESSIVE NEED TO DISMANTLE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The internships, mentoring programs, and apprenticeships that are part of My Brother's Keeper can assist young minority boys and young men to learn the soft skills needed for the work place. But more importantly, the programs can nurture the development of higher-status social networks—which are weak in poor and working-class communities of color—that are important in acquiring future educational and job opportunities. As research has shown, one reason that inner-city blacks have less success in acquiring jobs is that they lack the information networks that are valuable in securing employment. But this aspect of My Brother's Keeper will only benefit a few who are fortunate enough to be part of the initiative. The incremental policy changes, program demonstrations, and requests for additional funding for existing government programs merely tweak around the edges of what has been a long-standing crisis that has only grown over the decades.

While professional-enhancing programs can divert a few minority youth on the margins to alternative pathways to success, the enormous barriers that they face and the deep inequalities that exist—particularly in an era of growing inequality, lagging mobility, and mass incarceration—requires far more aggressive approaches to reverse the fortunes of minority boys and young men, girls and women. Rooting out the hidden laws and practices that

perpetuate disadvantages they encounter in schools, the criminal justice system, and employment opportunities should be at the forefront of change.

One area of reform, for instance, should be focused on expanding educational opportunities for prisoners and ex-offenders and breaking down barriers that prevent ex-offenders from successfully obtaining employment. On the federal level, the Obama administration has proposed a modest program called "Second Chances Pell Pilot," whose aim is to restore Pell grant eligibility to federal and state prisoners. Studies have shown that inmates who received education while incarcerated have a 13 percent greater chance of attainting employment after being released from prison. If successful, the Second Chance Pell program, and others like it, should be expanded.

But there is much to be done on the state level. State laws that restrict ex-offenders from obtaining occupational licenses also hamper the employment prospects of ex-offenders, which, along with other discriminatory practices against ex-offenders, contribute to the high recidivism rate. In Delaware, for example, felons who wish to become accountants, chiropractors, and architects can be denied licenses to practice. In Illinois, there are at least fifty-seven professional and occupational statues that may prohibit ex-offenders from getting licenses, ranging in fields as diverse as roofing, interior designing, and boxing. And Michigan, Texas, and Georgia restrict ex-offenders from obtaining a barber license, a traditional occupational niche for young black men in poor and working-class black communities.

Other practices, like employers asking individuals to check whether they have a criminal record when filling out job applications, eliminates ex-offenders from being considered for jobs from the start of the hiring process. Efforts to pass legislation on the local and state levels to "ban the box" that asks about past criminal behavior on job applications would also work toward providing job opportunities for ex-felons. These hidden practices—which on their face are not racially or gender specific but produce unequal outcomes for young minority men and women of color —prevent second chances and makes it difficult for ex-offenders to economically contribute to the families they left behind.

CONCLUSION

Dismantling practices that marginalize poor and working-class minority youth will require intense public engagement, and a change in rhetoric. My Brother's Keeper, if it has not started to do so already, should assist in invigorating the dormant state commissions on the status of black males and collaborate with commissions that are already engaged. Many of the policy changes that My Brother's Keeper hope to address—such as educational reform and criminal justice reform— will have to be tackled on the local and state level. State commissions could serve as catalyst for advocating the "ban the box" campaigns around the country and altering

> [T]he rhetoric on the purported failures of black fathers and black men by President Obama and others help to perpetuate racial stereotypes about black fatherhood that are not true. The rhetoric draws attention away from deep structural issues that continue to plague poor and working-class youth as they navigate failing schools, a rapacious criminal justice system, and a society where upward mobility is becoming a challenge for all but the affluent.

the restrictions placed on ex-offenders from obtaining state-regulated occupational licenses, among other policy issues.

Additionally, the rhetoric on the purported failures of black fathers and black men by President Obama and others help to perpetuate racial stereotypes about black fatherhood that are not true. The rhetoric draws attention away from deep structural issues that continue to plague poor and working-class youth as they navigate failing schools, a rapacious criminal justice system, and a society where upward mobility is becoming a challenge for all but the affluent. As the first My Brother's Keeper Task Force Report notes, racial stereotypes about the worthlessness of black men can be debilitating. The reports note that many young minority men are "doing the right thing" but many nonetheless internalize "parts of the negative narrative" about boys and young men of color.

My Brother's Keeper's modest, targeted investments in human capital development and the emphasis of character building and behavior-altering strategies will fall short unless major policy changes that disrupt the barriers placed before poor and working-class minority youth are made. If they remain the same, existing laws and practices that perpetuate the conditions that poor and working-class minority youth face will end up counteracting the good works that the My Brother's Keeper initiative is trying to accomplish.

ENDNOTES

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