BACKGROUND PAPER
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Men and Communities: African American Males and the Well-Being of Children, Families, and Neighborhoods

JAMES B. HYMAN

DELLUMS COMMISSION

BETTER HEALTH THROUGH STRONGER COMMUNITIES: PUBLIC POLICY REFORM TO EXPAND LIFE PATHS OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

THE DELLUMS COMMISSION
Better Health Through Stronger Communities: Public Policy Reform to Expand Life Paths of Young Men of Color

MEN AND COMMUNITIES: AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AND THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND NEIGHBORHOODS

James B. Hyman

JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES
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PREFACE

The following report was inspired by a conversation I had with Ralph Smith, vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in December of 2001. He confessed to being troubled by a nagging suspicion and concern that men, who are a largely overlooked constituency in anti-poverty policy, were nonetheless an important ingredient in determining relative levels of well-being or distress in the nation's poor communities. The question he raised was whether and to what extent the status, condition, and/or behavior of men acted as an important independent variable influencing the well-being of children, families, neighborhoods, and entire communities.

When Ralph asked me if I would be willing to devise a way to consider this issue, I was both flattered and scared to death. After all, the question as I understood it—How do men influence the well-being of communities?—was huge. What do we mean by "well-being?" What are the limits of "community?" And what is it about men that we should look at? Their status in terms of social policies and programs? Their condition (e.g., the situations in which they find themselves)? Or their behaviors? And how can we capture the myriad ways in which men interact with communities in order to examine their influence? I was tempted to take a pass on the offer of grant support to pursue it.

For two years now, I have been exploring this question. I began in 2002 with a cross-country tour, visiting with several dozen researchers, policy analysts, and program operators who were focusing on issues related to men in education, employment, marriage, teen pregnancy, child support, fatherhood and families, incarceration, and many other areas. They are acknowledged with respect and my deepest gratitude elsewhere in this report. The largest single thing I learned from them was that a great many people shared Ralph's concern that who men are, how they fare, and what they do should be of great concern to everyone interested in improving child, family, and neighborhood conditions and outcomes in poor communities.

What follows is an attempt to bring the issue of "male well-being impacts" into sharp relief. In the following pages, the case is made that men *do* indeed matter, and a framework is presented that formulates an approach for considering how their well-being impacts occur. This framework enables us to explore factors that affect how men *themselves* develop, and to examine the implications of that development—and of men's subsequent behaviors—for the process by which child, family, neighborhood, and community well-being outcomes may be affected.

This report focuses on well-being outcomes in urban, poor, and minority communities, particularly African American communities. Throughout this discussion, the analysis will be applied to black men. That said, much of the proposed framework can be applied to men in general, although admittedly, references to culture and race will need to be modified to consider the identity and experience of other groups of men in the context of their community identities, histories, and cultures.

It is the hope of the author that this report helps to make a very large, complex, and potentially unwieldy social issue more transparent and understandable, both to audiences interested in understanding this question and, beyond them, to those who view men as an entry point for investing in communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As an African American male who grew up in the challenging environment of a distressed city, Camden, New Jersey, I am grateful for the opportunity I was given to think and write about black men. In a way, this report is about me, about my brother, and about many other brothers and our respective communities—how we shape them and how they, in turn, shape us and others who follow us. So, in many ways, what follows is deeply personal because, in presenting the data on how men influence the well-being of children, families, and neighborhoods, I see real people—faces of persons I knew, and people with names and with life stories that would vivify the statistics I report. Deeply personal, indeed.

So it is with utmost sincerity that I express my heartfelt gratitude to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for giving life to this kind of effort, and particularly to Ralph Smith for honoring me with the challenge of attempting its pursuit. To Paula Dressel, who became my project officer at the foundation, I also want to say "thank you"—your careful and sensitive coaching was greatly appreciated.

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ABOUT THE JOINT CENTER HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE

The mission of the Joint Center Health Policy Institute (HPI) is to ignite a "Fair Health" movement that gives people of color the inalienable right to equal opportunity for healthy lives. HPI's goal is to help communities of color identify short-and long-term policy objectives and related activities in key areas. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is a national, nonprofit research and public policy institution. Founded in 1970 by black intellectuals and professionals to provide training and technical assistance to newly elected black officials, the Joint Center is recognized today as one of the nation's premier think tanks on a broad range of public policy issues of concern to African Americans and other communities of color.

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INTRODUCTION

For reasons perhaps too numerous to mention, poverty in the U.S. became more long term, more spatially concentrated, more intergenerational, and, as a consequence, more insidious and intractable in the last half of the 20th century. Although we have had a long history with individual pauperism and family poverty in the United States, the specter of increasingly concentrated and increasingly inescapable "community poverty" in our country is a relatively recent development for which we are ill-prepared.

Prior to the Social Security Act of 1935, states and communities had responded to the challenges of poverty in relatively primitive ways, using a variety of approaches including stockades, forced labor, imprisonment, and alms and settlement houses—all of which reflected a punitive approach to what was largely viewed as the result of shiftlessness. Even the more enlightened poverty provisions of the Social Security Act were nonetheless founded on a rather narrow vision of widowed mothers with children. Despite many expansions over the years, our national welfare and anti-poverty policies and programs have remained focused on individual women with children and are either neutral or downright hostile toward males. In her 2003 report, *Invisible Men: The Poverty of Demonization and Marginalization*, Linda Mills suggests that the reason for this is that able-bodied but destitute men are the poster children of the "undeserving poor."[1]

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the threat to American society posed by concentrated and persistent "community poverty" extends well beyond its consequences for individual poor children and families, and may require us to rethink our strategies and our points of entry. Indeed, many observers now argue that the needs of entire communities of children and families must become the focus of our interventions, and that our strategies need to begin a wide search for entry points that can have multiplier effects extending beyond individual recipients.[2]

This paper focuses on one such potential entry point—men, a particular segment of the broader community—to ask whether we can better understand the extent to which, in what ways, and through what mechanisms the condition, behavior, and/or circumstances of men affect the well-being of poor communities (taken as the sum of the well-being of their children, families, and neighborhoods). To explore these issues, this paper probes questions such as: What do we expect men to do by way of contributing to their children, families, and neighborhoods? Are there ways to understand why men may or may not do the things that we expect? And how do the choices that men make with respect to these expectations affect community well-being?

[1] Mills 2003.

[2] Expanding efforts in community building as an approach to community improvement and change are examples of how anti-poverty strategies are evolving toward community-wide impacts.

I. A SENSITIVE TOPIC

Before we begin this discussion, it must be acknowledged that this is a sensitive topic and, for some readers, perhaps even an explosive one. There are at least two areas of objection to this report that might be raised. First, for some readers, any focus on the contributions of men is inherently ill-conceived. They may argue, for instance, that times have changed, as have the values, images, expectations, and behaviors that condition our perceptions of gender roles in our society. True enough. Gender politics in the U.S. have evolved considerably since their early manifestations in the Women's Suffrage Movement of the 1790s. We have even developed a relatively new vocabulary with words such as "Gays," "Bisexuals," "Transsexuals," "Metro-Sexuals," "Hetero-Flexibles," and others, which help to vivify and define some of the more recent directions of our gender discourse—a discourse that is every bit as sensitive for its partisans as is the question of race for peoples of color. In this context, then, it is certain that any discussion of the community roles, contributions, and impacts of men will likely gain adherents as well as detractors whose kudos or objections will emanate from this gender debate and from the gender ideology with which they feel most comfortable.

Second, questions may come from certain audiences within the African American community itself. Race is one of the most volatile issues in our society and, as a consequence, one of the most difficult to discuss. A recent example is comedian Bill Cosby's May 17, 2004, speech to 2,000 audience members at a NAACP celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Cosby sparked a major controversy in the African American community by unleashing a blistering critique of parents and neighborhoods in poor black communities for failing their children:[3]

> "People marched and were hit in the face with rocks to get an education, and now we've got these knuckleheads walking around… The lower economic people are not holding up their end of the deal. These people are not parenting."[4]

Blacks are distrustful of discussions of race with the majority culture, particularly given perceptions of an increasingly hostile policy environment in government and the unflattering coverage of the African American community in the nation's print and broadcast media. Clearly, any discourse about black men is as much about race as it is about gender. Therefore, before proceeding, I wish to address a few of the issues and concerns that some may raise.

Many who read this paper may fault it for not delving deeper into the histories of black families and/or communities,[5] particularly in terms of tracing the pernicious toll that slavery in America took on black men.[6] Others may take issue with this paper for not speaking more extensively to the impacts of "structural discrimination" in government policies[7] —particularly in welfare and housing, for example—that have marginalized black men and discouraged family formation. Still others might object to a perceived failure to paint a broader picture of life in black communities as the context for exploring the issue of men's contributions. These are all fair criticisms. At the same time, however, these topics are all quite large in themselves and each has been the subject of extensive writing.

Given these issues, it is important to be clear about what this paper is and what it is not. This paper will not attempt to present a comprehensive model of the African American family or community. Nor will it attempt to reconcile competing theories and/or ideologies about how we, as a black community, or how we, as a nation, got to this place. Instead, the paper acknowledges that all of these issues and considerations are real and worthy of discussion. But the focus of this paper is confined the consideration of how black men influence the well-being of children, families and neighborhoods. As the paper proceeds, it is the hope of the author that readers will see value in the formulations presented here and, as a result, accept these limitations and find them justifiable.

[3] Many thanks to Hamil R. Harris, staff writer with the *Washington Post*, for sharing his notes on the speech.

[4] CNN.com 2004.

[5] For example, see Franklin 1997; Billingsley 1992.

[6] For example, see Booker 2000.

[7] See Hill 1997.

II. BACKGROUND

For at least the last millennium, the western cultures and societies from which America derives its norms have been dominated and defined by their male populations. For the most part, men have been the leaders, the protectors, the providers, the law givers, the inventors, and the principal judges and referees of life and conduct in these societies. Consequently, it has been the "fortunes," behaviors, and beliefs of men that have defined the well-being of these communities.

As stated, in the 21st century, changes in gender politics, evolving social roles, and heightened gender awareness have worked to redefine these human societies in ways that have allowed women to be better integrated into formerly male roles and functions. Today, "a woman's place" is no longer restricted to home and family maintenance and nurturing. Still, however, even our most socially advanced human societies remain dominated by men in ways not dissimilar to our historical western traditions and experience.

The question addressed in this paper is whether and in what ways males, particularly men of color, influence community life—specifically defined as the well-being of children, families, and neighborhoods—in poor, disadvantaged, and minority communities. It should be noted, however, that none of the following discussion is intended to denigrate the role and participation of women in these communities. Indeed, it is the female population that carries a disproportionate burden of child rearing, child support, and neighborhood stability in the communities about which this paper is concerned. The intent here is to acknowledge and honor their role even as we investigate how males contribute to the well-being of their children, families, and neighborhoods.

To aid in these explorations, a model has been constructed that aims to explain the processes through which the impact of men on their communities occurs. This author believes that the model may offer a tool through which that impact might be better understood and forecast. But before proceeding, this paper must address a fundamental question that, to this point, has been taken for granted.

III. COMMUNITY WELL-BEING: Do Men Even Matter?

Forgiving for the moment the demands of procreation as currently practiced, we can ask the question: how important *are* men? What reason is there to believe that men, as an entry point, offer the kind of multiplier quality that is important to addressing community-level poverty? How important *are* the choices and behaviors of men to the well-being of children, families, and neighborhoods? Consider the following research findings.

When men and women marry, they do better for themselves and for their families and children. Married couples build more wealth on average than do otherwise similar singles or cohabitating couples, even after controlling for income differentials.[8] For the past several decades, however, marriage rates have been declining for all groups in the U.S. This collapse of marriage is the principal correlate of child poverty and a host of other social ills in the United States.[9] Eighty percent of child poverty in the United States occurs among children of broken or never-married families.[10]

The decline in marriage rates is particularly acute among African Americans. In 1960, for instance, 80 percent of black women and 66 percent of black men ages 20 to 34 had married at least once. By 1990, these figures were 46 percent and 38 percent, respectively. As a result, black births to unmarried women increased during the period from 38 percent in 1970, to 55 percent in 1980, and then to 61 percent by 1988. These changes in family structure link the decline in black marriage rates to rising black poverty rates, particularly among black children.[11] Why is this a *male* issue?

When men do well economically, they are more likely to see themselves and be seen as viable marriage partners, particularly among African Americans. One popular explanation for the disproportionate decline in marriage rates among blacks is the economic condition of black men; decades of decline in black male employment rates have created a shrinking pool of acceptable marriage partners for black women.[12] This employment decline is believed to be largely the result of forces beyond the control of men—namely, structural changes in the U.S. economy.[13] But the higher rates of incarceration and mortality among prime

[8] Institute for American Values 2002.

[9] Rector 2001.

[10] Rector 2001.

[11] Wood 1995.

[12] Wilson 1987.

[13] See Welch 1990; Bound and Freeman 1992; Holzer and Offner 2002; Alexis 1988.

marriage-age black men clearly indicate that the behavior of black men themselves also contributes to the shrinking number of marriage partners by removing candidates from the community so they are not even physically available in the marriage market. These phenomena work to exacerbate a demographic disadvantage: a lower ratio of men to women among blacks compared with whites.[14] To make matters worse, in addition to lower marriage rates, African Americans have higher divorce and separation rates and lower remarriage rates than whites.[15]

When men pursue an education, they are better positioned to be successful as citizens, husbands, and fathers. Unfortunately, blacks are leading the national data on the educational implosion of American men. Since the mid-1980s, there has been an increasing gender gap in the awarding of baccalaureate degrees, particularly with respect to black men. In 2002, 57 percent of earned bachelor's degrees were awarded to women. Among Hispanics, three degrees were awarded to women for every two awarded to men. For African Americans, women recipients outnumbered men by a still larger margin of two to one. In fact, in 2002, about two-thirds of all applicants, and 70 percent of all students enrolled at Historically Black Colleges, were women. Responding to these data, Christina Sommers of the American Enterprise Institute asked: "What does it mean in the long run that we have females who are significantly more literate, significantly more educated than their male counterparts? It is likely to create a lot of social problems. This does not bode well for anyone."[16]

When men acknowledge paternity and accept their fatherhood roles, children and families do better. Father absence is a major force behind many of the attention-grabbing issues that dominate the news, such as crime and delinquency; premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock births; deteriorating educational achievement; depression and substance abuse; and alienation among teenagers.[17] By contrast, there is increasing evidence that a father's presence, his care giving, his influence on the child's social competence and academic achievement, his cooperation in parenting with a child's mother, his healthy living example, and his material contribution are major contributors to children's emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being.[18]

Unfortunately, African American children are at particular risk of father absence compared with other groups of children. In 2002, Asian and Pacific Islander children were the most likely to live in two-parent families (82 percent), followed by non-Hispanic white children at 77 percent. Black children were the least likely to live in two-parent homes (39 percent). Moreover, eight percent of all black children lived with neither parent, compared with five percent of Hispanic children and only three percent of white and Asian and Pacific Islander children.[19]

Lower rates of paternity establishment are a contributing factor to father absence. Data from the National Survey of American Families, compiled from the nation's 77 largest cities (cities with greater than 200,000 in population) between 1998 and 2000, used the race of the mother to estimate racial differences in the rates at which paternity had been established. (Ninety percent of the sample was comprised of same-race couples.) The data indicated that paternity establishment rates were: 75 percent for whites, 71 percent for Hispanics, and 66 percent for blacks.[20]

Some researchers fear what these dismaying figures may suggest about fathering attitudes among upcoming generations of black men. For example, in what sociologist Elijah Anderson calls the "street culture" of the inner cities, men's glorification of casual and even predatory sex, completely divorced from responsible fatherhood, now constitutes the core of what Anderson refers to as the "sex code" of young minority males.[21]

When men are sexually irresponsible, young girls often pay the price in teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. In the United States today, one-third of all children are now born to unmarried parents. Moreover, half of all first out-of-wedlock births are to women under the age of twenty.[22] Data suggest that the problem of teen pregnancy is less a concern for the behavior of girls and *boys* than it is for the behavior of girls and *men*. On average, the fathering partner of a pregnant teen is two to three years older than the young woman. In 1988, for instance, two-thirds of the children born to females in their teens were fathered by men in their twenties[23] —51 percent by men ages 20 to 24 and another 11 percent by men ages 25 to 29.[24] Indeed, the sexual

[14] Population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau for 1998 show that women, at 51.6 percent, account for more than half the U.S. population. See Rarley and Bianchi 1987.

[15] Dickson 1993.

[16] Fletcher 2002.

[17] Popenoe 1996.

[18] National Center for Fathers and Families 2001.

[19] Child Trends Data Bank 2003.

[20] Data taken from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study were provided by telephone by Lenna Nepomnyaschi of Columbia University on February 6, 2004.

[21] Blankenhorn 1995. Also see Anderson 1990.

[22] Sawhill 2001.

[23] Sonenstein et. al. 1997.

[24] Landry and Forrest 1995.

behavior and reproductive health of this particular male age group (20-24) can have significant impacts on communities since these young men tend to have sex more often and use condoms less often than any other age group, and have the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases.[25]

The good news on teen pregnancy, however, is that births to black teenage girls (ages 15 to 19) have declined faster than among other teenaged groups over the past decade. In 1991, black girls (at 118.2 births per 1,000 teens) were bearing children at higher rates than anyone else and at twice the national teen rate (61.8 per 1,000). By 2002, however, the rate of teen births to blacks had declined by 42 percent. Still, at its current level of 63.3 births per 1,000 teens, child births to black teenaged girls continue to exceed those for all others except Hispanics (at 83.4).[26]

When men engage in crime and violence, entire communities can be affected. It may seem obvious to some, but it is important to note here that men are the primary perpetrators of crime and violence in human communities. In the United States, for instance, men accounted for 78 percent of all arrests in 1998.[27] American black men are leading these "perp" statistics, and low-income, urban, and black communities are paying the heaviest price.[28] Black Americans are more likely than whites to be victimized by violent crimes—rape, robbery, and assault—and households headed by blacks have higher victimization rates for all household crimes than those headed by whites. Moreover, and contrary to popular belief, those who are most frequently victimized are themselves young black men.[29]

But high neighborhood crime rates exact a toll beyond the harm that they inflict on individual victims. Entire communities suffer as insurance rates on homes, autos, and businesses rise. The increased likelihood of property crime raises the cost of capital in low-income neighborhoods and often leads to "red-lining," predatory lending, and community disinvestment.

Thus, it may be argued that the black males who foster black-on-black crime may pose the most immediate and insidious threat to the well-being of the children, families, and communities about which this paper is concerned by causing damage, harm, and loss to members of these communities; acting as a major "drag weight" to community improvement and development efforts; and contributing to a growing counter-culture that eschews mainstream American values regarding work and achievement.

When black men participate in the sale and distribution of illegal drugs, they put themselves at an even greater risk than other participating groups of men. The use of incarceration as a weapon in the war against drugs has disproportionately affected African American men. Black men are overrepresented in U.S. prisons, both relative to their proportion of the population and relative to their rates of committing drug offenses. Blacks constituted 62.6 percent of all drug offenders admitted to state prisons in 1996, and in one-third of the states, blacks comprised more than 75 percent of all drug admissions.[30]

Blacks are incarcerated on drug charges at dramatically higher rates than whites. At the same time, drug offenses account for a much greater proportion of blacks sent to prison than they do for whites. For example, in 1996, the rate of drug admissions to state prison for black men (482 per 100,000 population) was 13 times greater than the rate for white men (36 admissions per 100,000).[31] In fact, by 1996, over half (56 percent) of all inmates in state prison for substance offenses were black.[32]

But the difference in the drug arrest rates of whites and blacks is far greater than blacks' relative representation among drug users.[33] Indeed, a complex intersection of societal pressures for crime abatement, law enforcement policies and practices, social conditions in distressed neighborhoods, and structural issues in the drug markets themselves combine in ways that put African American males at disproportionately greater risk than their white counterparts of being arrested, convicted, and incarcerated for a drug or alcohol offense. Again, this is true regardless of the fact that there is no evidence of differences in the rates at which blacks and whites use illicit drugs.

The high and disproportionate number of blacks who are sent to prison should be a cause for national concern regardless of the crime for which they are convicted. What may be most troubling, however, is that this high rate of incarceration is propelled by nonviolent drug offenses. In other words, but for the war on drugs, the extent of black incarceration would be significantly lower. Drug offenses

[25] In 1998, the gonorrhea rate was 575 per 100,000 among men ages 20-24 compared with a rate of 355 among men ages 15-19. See Sonenstein 2000.

[26] Martin et. al. 2003.

[27] See Green and Snell 2000.

[28] Rennison 2002.

[29] Bryce 1977.

[30] Human Rights Watch 2000.

[31] Human Rights Watch 2000: Table 14.

[32] National Center on Addictions and Substance Abuse 1998.

[33] Blumstein 1993: 3.

accounted for nearly two out of five (38 percent) of all black admissions. Only 27 percent of black admissions to prison were for crimes of violence.[34]

When men are incarcerated, the community pays twice. Incarceration of black men poses an ironic double jeopardy in which, in the name of public safety, poor and black individuals and communities get victimized twice—once when the men are taken out of the community and then again when they are returned.

Criminal behavior is neither condoned nor excused here; the harm it does in and to poor communities has already been amply demonstrated. It is nonetheless true, however, that law enforcement policies are being applied in ways that extract too many men from poor neighborhoods (using disproportionately harsh, discriminatory, and extended sentences), thereby compounding the community costs of criminal behavior. For example, in 1996, one out of every 14 adult black men was behind bars.[35] While blacks comprised only 11 percent of the population in that year, they constituted 46 percent of all state inmates, 30 percent of all federal inmates, and 42 percent of all jail inmates.[36] Moreover, data indicate that, by 2000, these men, on average, remained confined between 25 and 35 percent longer than they did 10 years before.[37]

The consequences for the children, families, and communities left behind are substantial. In 1999, more than half of the nation's prison inmates were parents of children who were under 18 years of age. For the black community, this meant that one out of every 14 African American children had a parent in state or federal prison. (The national rate is only one in fifty.) Sixty percent of prison inmates were housed in facilities located more than 100 miles from their homes and, as a consequence, 57 percent reported no contact with their children after sentencing.[38] Thus, among other costs to communities, incarceration exacerbates the already high incidence of father absence in poor neighborhoods.

[34] Human Rights Watch 2000: Table 14.

[35] This compares to one in every 34 adult Hispanic men, and one in every 125 white men. See Travis, Solomon, and Waul 2001.

[36] In 1996, whites comprised 76 percent of the U.S. population, but represented 35 percent of state inmates, 38 percent of federal inmates, and 39 percent of jail inmates. Hispanics, comprising nine percent of the population, represented 16 percent, 28 percent, and 17 percent of state, federal, and jail inmates, respectively. See Blumstein 1993.

[37] Data on time served are not available by race, but data show that, between 1990 and 1999, average time served for all inmates rose from 28 months to 34 months (25 percent), while time served for drug related offenses, which make up 25 percent of black incarcerations, increased from 20 months to 27 months (35 percent). See Hughes et. al. 2001.

[38] Travis et. al. 2001.

When men return from incarceration, communities pay a second toll. The flow of men out of state and federal prisons is occurring at a rate that exceeds 11,000 each week. These men reenter their neighborhoods even less well-adapted to community life than before they were removed. They have no skills or jobs, and are foisted on the largess of family and friends—many of whom may have few resources and harbor mixed feelings about their release—for sustenance.

In addition, with their release comes additional jeopardy. Two-thirds of these ex-offenders are expected to be rearrested within three years of release—half of them for re-offending—committing additional crimes in and against their home communities (the other half of these re-arrests are for various parole violations). A second level of threat is the potential collateral damage of their poor health. For example, in 1997, 25 percent of the U.S. population living with HIV or AIDS, one-third living with hepatitis C, and 38 percent living with tuberculosis had been released from a correctional facility that year. Eighteen percent of the prison population was infected with hepatitis C and seven percent had a tuberculosis infection. In 1999, almost one-third of all incident cases of early syphilis in the city of Chicago were diagnosed at the Cook County Jail. A study of California parolees reported that 85 percent were chronic substance abusers, 70-90 percent were unemployed, 50 percent were functionally illiterate, 18 percent had psychiatric problems, and 10 percent were homeless.[39]

Less obvious is the insidious impact that the prison experience has on community culture and on the worldview of the community's children and youth. The increasing numbers of young black men who are receiving their post-secondary education from the nation's prisons and jails may be reaching a "tipping point" for distressed communities—one that may result in irreversible declines in the well-being of their poor children, families, and neighborhoods. Increases in incarceration may at some point themselves become an engine for crime and community disinvestment by further eroding community social structures, such as strong families, workforce participation, social networks and social capital, and positive male role models. The following data illustrate why this is a concern.

- One out of every 14 black children has a parent currently in state or federal prison
- One out of three African American men are either in custody, on probation, or on parole

[39] Travis et. al. 2001.

- There are more black men in U.S. prisons than in U.S. colleges and universities

Indeed, some observers believe that the exchange of young men between the neighborhoods and the prisons has caused the negative culture of prison to migrate back into the community. Thus, increasingly, the values of young males in poor neighborhoods are subscribing to the notions that strength and the fear of strength—violence and the fear of violence—should govern much of human behavior.

Summation

It should be clear from all of the foregoing that the fortunes, behaviors, and conditions of men do, indeed, play important roles in determining the well-being of human societies. And, in the context of the distressed urban, poor, and minority communities about which this paper is concerned, they have serious consequences for the well-being of all who live there. Again, this fact does not demean the importance of the influence of women in these communities. The crux of this investigation rests on answering the question: What happens to community well-being when important roles assigned to one gender—in this case males—are either not well-performed or are not performed at all?

Given the discussion thus far, it would be all too easy to conclude that what we need to do to increase community well-being is to find a way to get black men to "act right." Indeed, that would be all too easy, all too simple, and all very wrong.

It should be clear, for instance, that much of what has been described as the *fortunes* and *conditions* of black men are not unique to them. Indeed, black men are only a part of the broader "social saga" of similarly poor American men in general. The difficulty for black communities, however, is that black men are either leading many of the negative trends that are affecting men in general or are trailing other groups of men in reaching conditions, opportunities, and states of achievement that can support their positive well-being and that of their children, families, and communities.

To explain why this is true, this paper will soon delve more deeply into the dynamics of race, culture, class, and power in the U.S., and into other "structural impediments" to the well-being *of black males themselves*. That said, however, this paper will also examine the *behaviors* of black men and, in particular, the array of "choices" that black men make that determine whether they surmount or succumb to these structural impediments and trends. The difficulty in all of this, however, is that the relevant variables are interwoven, simultaneous, and interdependent. Education; income and earnings; marriage, fatherhood and family formation; crime and incarceration; and child, youth, and community development are all linked. And the degree to which poor/negative numerical values on these variables are the causes or the consequences of poor/negative well-being outcomes in distressed communities is a "chicken or the egg" question that may be less important to *answer* than it is to *map*.

Therefore, the overarching task here is to find a way to approach the question of male impacts so that we can better understand the connections among these variables and other important dynamics, and their place in determining the extent to which, the manners in which, and the mechanisms through which men affect the well-being of poor communities. Taking all of the preceding into account, we can clearly see that modeling the impacts of black males on community well-being is a daunting task. Nonetheless, the remainder of this paper attempts to shed light on this issue through a framework designed to allow us to probe these dynamics more systematically.

IV. MODELING THE IMPACTS OF BLACK MALES ON COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

The principal challenge in understanding these impacts is crafting a plausible framework to answer the question: How do the condition, behaviors, and/or circumstances of men affect the well-being of poor urban communities (taken as the sum of the well-being of their children, families, and neighborhoods)? Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of this framework. As shown in the figure, there are six sections—referred to as "Nodes"—labeled A through F. Each of these nodes represents a principal component of the framework.

Overview

To establish a benchmark for analysis, this exploration of how males affect community well-being begins with the question: What does our society expect from them? To the extent that we can agree on a set of prescribed male roles, we can base the model and analysis on what research has revealed about: (1) variables that influence whether and/or how well these roles are being performed by men in minority communities; and (2) the consequences of their performance for community well-being.

The framework illustrated in Figure 1 begins at Node A by postulating a set of three primary roles prescribed for males in our society—worker, family supporter, and civic participant—on which most people would probably agree. At Node B, the framework shows a range of exogenous variables, influences, and dynamics that are largely beyond men's control and that can influence whether and/or how well these roles are performed. This section is intended to reflect the idea that at least some portion of the status and condition of men may be contextual. One can think of the influences at Node B as constituting an ecology that may, to some degree, either sustain men in these roles or, alternatively, handicap them.

Node C introduces the decisions and choices that men make—behaviors that are *within* their control—and the implications of those choices for the condition in which men find themselves. In contrast to Node B, Node C is intended to capture the unique contribution that men *themselves* make to their condition irrespective of the ecological supports or pressures that may be cited at Node B. In particular, here the model focuses on the extent to which these choices are positive ones that will promote the accumulation of personal assets or whether they are negative decisions that may lead to personal disinvestment.

At Node D, the framework begins to consider the impact of men on the well-being of children, families, and neighborhoods. At this point in the model, well-being issues such as those discussed in Section III of this paper—i.e., research findings on the status and behavior of men and their implications for others—may be re-examined. The difference here, however, is that the model places these issues in a context so that they can be considered in light of the opportunity structure that men face.

At Node E, the framework recognizes that the various impacts on children, families, and neighborhoods aggregate to influence the development and well-being of entire communities. It is important to emphasize that males are not the only determinants of well-being, as arrayed at Nodes D and E. Indeed, children, families, and neighborhoods are each themselves responding to larger ecological environments of which male influences are only a part. Nodes D and E are intended to capture only the unique contribution that men make to child, family, and neighborhood outcomes.

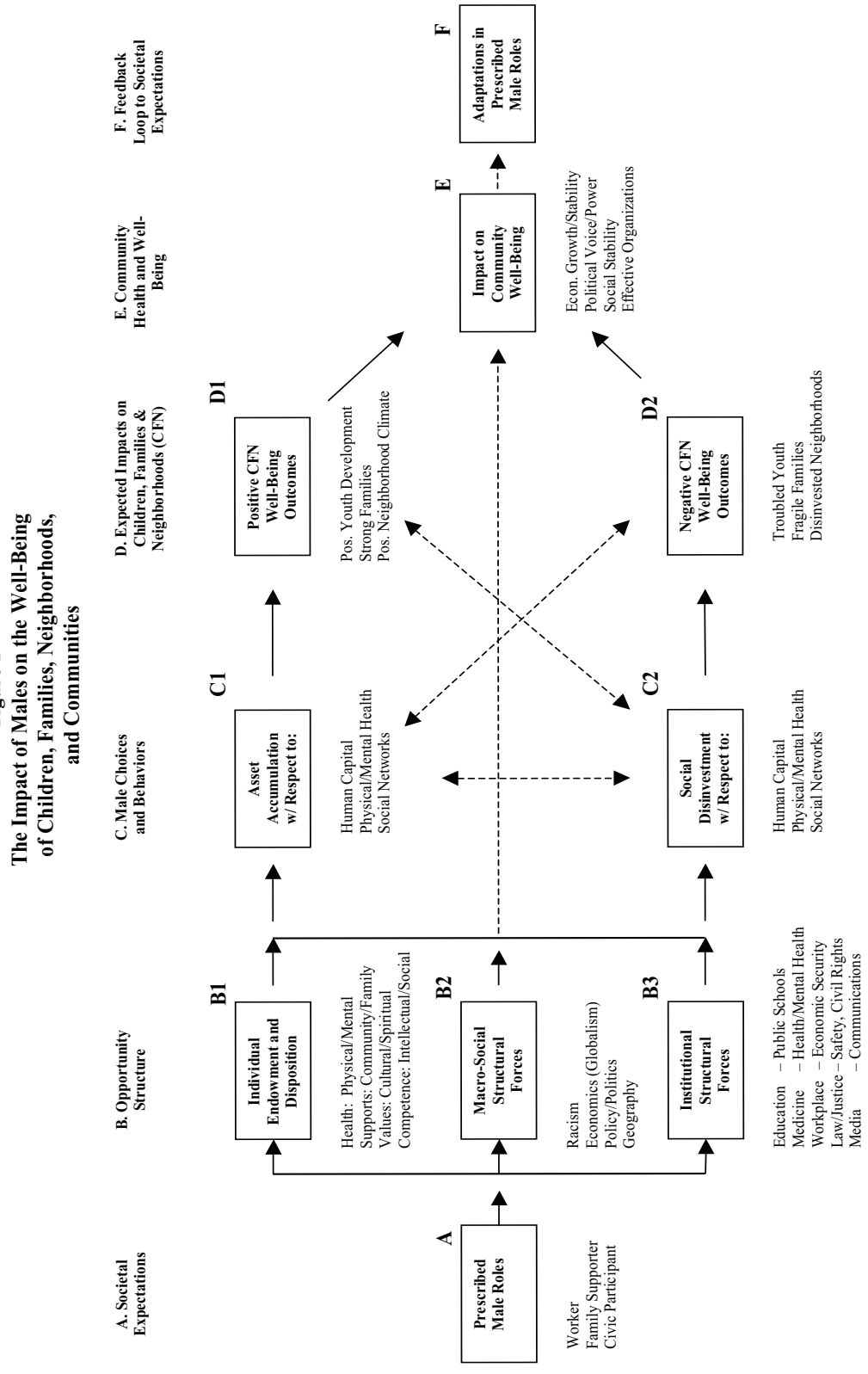
Finally, at Node F, the framework recognizes that the development and condition of the community itself will influence community/societal expectations over time, including expectations for its men. And it is through such adaptations that the male contribution to a downward spiral into long-term and intergenerational community poverty can occur. For instance, if the "quality" of the community, as the immediate ecological environment for black men, were to continually deteriorate, it is logical to speculate that the community's expectations for acceptable male roles and the "standards" for their performance will themselves erode over time.

As an example, pregnancies among unwed women in the U.S., and particularly among teens in the black community, have lost the stigma that they once carried as recently as the 1950s and 1960s. The expectation at that time was that the father of the child would marry the mother and support her and the baby. The data reported earlier in this paper, however, demonstrate that community expectations have since changed.

Summation

In essence, then, the framework begins by considering the primary roles that men should be expected to play in their communities. Next, it explores factors—some exogenous and others that lie within men's control—that influence whether men develop to perform these expected roles well, poorly, or not at all. From there, the framework considers the consequences of their performance of these roles for children, families, and neighborhoods. And finally, the various impacts are aggregated in order to allow speculation about the health and well-being of the entire community fabric and what that, in turn, suggests about future expectations, future male performance, and future community outcomes.

Figure 1
The Impact of Males on the Well-Being of Children, Families, Neighborhoods, and Communities



V. THE ANALYSIS

Figure 1 is an attempt to bring this complicated, recursive set of interlocking issues, forces, behaviors, and consequences into sharper relief in order to inform discussions about men and public policy, and about men as an entry point for community-level improvement and change. The description of the framework thus far, however, presents only a broad understanding of the challenges posed as we consider these issues. Below, the framework is deconstructed to provide a more in-depth understanding of its component parts and their significance for programmatic and policy interventions.

Node A: Prescribed Male Roles – Men as Workers, Family Supporters, and Civic Participants

Undoubtedly, there are myriad words and phrases that could be used to describe the various community roles ascribed to men in our contemporary society. Indeed, many such descriptors were suggested in the opening paragraphs of this paper. Selecting just a few of them and construing them as *principal* community roles is both difficult and subject to argument. At Node A, "worker, family supporter, and civic participant" were chosen based on the rationale explained below.

Men as Workers

The notion of men as workers is fundamental to human experience. One could argue that so are the notions of men as hunters and gatherers, or men as warriors. What was sought in this formulation, however, were role specifications that were enduring, encompassing, and not specific to a particular context. Not every man in contemporary society is expected to be a hunter, gatherer, or warrior. But the role of worker is one that has historically been expected of men and, in context, can subsume the roles of hunter, gatherer, warrior, and many other productive "working" roles that men may play.

As an alternative, terms such as "laborer" or "provider" could have been chosen; however, these and other terms have specific implications that constrain rather than broaden our scope. This paper uses the term "worker" to refer to being employed in a positive and productive enterprise from which one gains access to income.

Men as Family Supporters

Specifying a prescribed family role in the model is also challenging because of the need to clarify the meaning of "family." For instance, the traditional configuration of families in industrialized nations is a household with two resident, married parents and their biological children. In these families, the male is normally cast as the breadwinner and head of the family, while the female functions as commander of the household. But this largely European model of a "nuclear" family, with males at the head, is less relevant to the traditions that have shaped African American households.

In a recent article, Sudarkasa draws a distinction between the nuclear family that is organized around "conjugal" (marital) ties and African family traditions that are based on "consanguinial" (blood relational) ties.[40] In the former, as described above, the terms "household" and "family" are often interchanged, referring to a relatively small group living under the same roof. West African families, by contrast, were traditionally organized around male or female lineages and the various households were formed into compounds. In this arrangement, elders of the lineage were the heads of the family and the authority of this elder-dominated, extended family structure superceded the rule of households.

Thus, an important question here, which is implicit throughout this discussion, is one of context; in specifying the roles that men are expected to play in families, it is necessary to stipulate who is doing the expecting (i.e., what context is generating the expectations). Sudarkasa's work suggests that the terms "family" and "household" are usually both more expansive and inclusionary in the African American community. Households in this context can include any configuration of extended family members in addition to the parents and children that make up nuclear families. As such, any attempt to analyze male family roles in the black community must allow for the possibility that many families may be more modeled after these African traditions than European traditions.

Given the foregoing, the term "family head" was avoided in the framework's description of the prescribed male role for families. The term "family supporter" is used instead because it is inclusive of male family heads, while allowing for other manifestations of male contribution to family that are also legitimated in African American cultural contexts. The intent is to convey the expectation of men as contributors whose economic, emotional, and moral input—in partnership with women—supports the stability and healthy development of children and households throughout an extended family. And, rather than playing these family roles exclusively as "family heads," black men can be expected to play these roles as husbands, fathers, uncles, brothers, cousins, and, in some instances, friends of the family.

[40] Sudarkasa 1997.

Men as Civic Participants

Still another male role, common in western experience, is that of men as civic leaders. As stated earlier, they have been the formal leaders, the protectors, the law givers, and the arbiters of community life. This role specification is not included to indicate that men should continue to play the dominant roles in community leadership. To the contrary, the concern here is merely that they participate in community life in positive and responsible ways—engaging in the discourse on community well-being, contributing to neighborhood upkeep, and helping to moderate the social environment—as opposed to presenting themselves as civic liabilities through guns, gangs, drugs, and other violent, criminal, or disruptive behavior. Positive role models of adult male civic participation send important messages to young men and boys that can act as an important counterweight to the "code of the streets."[41]

Summation

These, then, are the three principal roles that this paper considers to be prescribed for men in their communities. They are the starting points in the framework for understanding the community well-being impacts of men. Readers may well disagree with these intuitions as not being the *most basic* societal expectations or they may even question whether these expectations continue to exist *at all* in our contemporary American culture. Either would be a fair reservation. Expected or not, however, these roles remain vitally important to the overall health of communities and their residents. Moreover, this specification of workers, family supporters, and civic participants maps well into the major considerations regarding the well-being of individuals, families, and neighborhoods, respectively.

Node B: Opportunity Structure of Individual Gifts and Macro-Social and Institutional Forces

The framework for male well-being impacts moves on from the specification of roles to an exploration of factors that may condition and affect whether and/or how well those roles are actually performed. Node B suggests that some portion of male role performance is the result of the character and competence of men themselves (Figure 1, B1). These attributes are labeled Individual Endowment and Disposition. In addition, however, another component of male performance stems from environmental factors—in particular, Macro-Social Structural Forces (Figure 1, B2) and Institutional Structural Forces (Figure 1, B3).

To understand how men contribute to the well-being of communities, it is necessary to first know something about the men themselves. Indeed, expectations for any particular male will depend in large part on his personal makeup—a set of attributes that comprise his **individual endowment and disposition** (at Node B1). Individual endowment and disposition refer to attributes such as character, self-esteem, worldview, aspirations, motivations, temperament, and a variety of other descriptors that constitute a man's personal set of gifts and characteristics. The framework asserts that this set of attributes is a function of four main influences, as follows.

Primary among these influences are **family and community support systems**. They are the immediate ecological environments whose resources are used to provide the nurturing, norms, and networks needed for a positive social orientation. Also important is the **values orientation of men with respect to their cultural practices and spiritual beliefs**. These values are the lenses that help men define who they are in relationship to the larger world—i.e., their responsibilities both *to themselves* and *to and for others*—and they provide a framework that helps to guide choices and distinguish between one's views of right and wrong. **Intellectual and social competence** are important to this analysis as indicators of one's effectiveness in dealing with one's environment—the extent to which individual men possess and can deploy appropriate tools and skills needed to meet particular challenges and achieve desired ends. Lastly, **mental and physical health** represent important influences because they can act either as supports or as constraints in this system of attributes.

The assumption made here, then, is that, other things being equal, the more positive the personal makeup, the more likely the individual is to make positive contributions to his community. And, of course, that assumption renders the inverse true as well—a less positive makeup makes a positive contribution less likely. The implication is that, left to their own devices, men will likely contribute to community well-being "in proportion" to these positive attributes. And, were the world that simple, male-centered community interventions could focus squarely on enhancing these positive aspects of their competence and character.

But the world is not so simple, especially not for black men or for African American communities. Indeed, there are structural forces at work in the U.S.—both at the level of the national social milieu and at the level of major people-serving institutions—that intervene to erect barriers to the attainment of positive attributes and that, as a consequence, "condition" whether and how well black men perform.

[41] Anderson 1994: 81-94; see also Anderson 1990.

Macro-social structural forces are an example. Macro-social structural forces refer to the larger structural dynamics that underlie the socio-political reality of American society. Shown at Node B2 in the framework diagram, these forces include such things as racism; the changing and increasingly global economy; local, state, and national politics and their articulations in public policies; and local geographies. These are all environmental influences that are, at least in the short term, beyond the control of individuals, families, neighborhoods, communities, or, in most instances, even states.

For example, the specter of **racism** in the United States is pervasive throughout our society at every level of human interface, from national politics and elections to local retail interactions and job applications. Sometimes, racism manifests itself in overt ways that produce obvious and immediate insult and injury, while other times, it appears in subtle and/or even invisible ways where the injured party may be only vaguely or not at all aware that something has occurred. These latter manifestations of racism are particularly insidious. In fact, race preference is so engrained in the American psyche that racist infringements can occur in ways that even their perpetrators would not, in good conscience, recognize or acknowledge. Examples are racial stereotypes that lower expectations for the academic performance of black students or that result in profiling policies in law enforcement.

Without a doubt, racial discrimination functions in every institution in American society in ways that affect the fortunes and opportunities of peoples of color. Some research has even suggested that the U.S. has such a rich history of antagonistic relations between races that the nation has developed a "racialized social system" wherein our society allocates differential economic, political, social, and psychological rewards to groups along racial lines.[42]

On another front, sectoral and structural shifts in the **American economy** over the last half of the 20th century have been well documented, as have their impacts on the supply and demand for skilled versus unskilled and entry-level labor. Increases in automation, declines in manufacturing, the rise in the services and technology sectors, suburbanization, and the more recent exporting of jobs and production have worked together over time to narrow the employment and earnings prospects and opportunities of all lower-skilled and working-class job seekers.

But for African American men who, in addition to facing racial stereotypes, have lower rates of school completion, lower educational attainment, fewer referral networks, and reduced proximity and geographic access to centers of employment, the cards are stacked to make the employment and earnings game hard to win.

It is difficult to imagine how one might change this in the short term. Why? In part, because **American politics and policies** are driven by groups who possess power—and power begets influence in American society. Power derives from a variety of sources. For instance, large voting blocks, such as American seniors, wield enormous power with regard to matters of retirement, social security, and health care. Teachers' unions and other organized labor groups have used the leverage of voting numbers and financial resources to amplify their voices. Large corporate interests such as those of the auto, oil, logging, utilities, pharmaceutical, and insurance industries exercise great influence on tax, environmental, and other policy matters that affect their interests. Even American Latinos are beginning to find their national political voice after their recent emergence as the nation's largest minority community.

But, the evidence for blacks suggests that the African American community, despite its numbers and its concentrations in vote-rich urban areas, either has no power or has not figured out how to wield it effectively. What *is* that evidence? The past two decades or so have seen state and national policies shift in ways that are particularly inhospitable to African Americans and their communities. Attacks on affirmative action programs; punitive welfare legislation (and the continuation of policies that discourage marriage and family formation); and get-tough-on-crime campaigns and discriminatory drug laws (which have caused a more than 1000 percent rise in the number of men—a majority of whom are black—incarcerated for drug offenses since 1980)[43] are among many policy developments that seem insensitive to their impacts on black families, neighborhoods, and communities.

Additionally, because of de facto segregation, the burdens of race bias and political and economic disenfranchisement also combine to create a **geographic disadvantage**. Blacks are the only racial group in the United States that has experienced significant and systematic residential segregation (ghettoization).[44] The ongoing isolation of poor blacks in distinct precincts and wards within urban places deepens and intensifies the potential for insidious, unconscious, and

[42] Bonilla-Silva 1996.

[43] King and Mauer 2002.

[44] See Massey and Denton 1993.

invisible discrimination. In fact, because of this geographic segregation, any and every decision by government or by business that has spatial implications (e.g. zoning, plant locations, transportation and other public works, sewage and waste disposal, redistricting) can and often does have important implications for the well-being of poor minority communities.

Indeed, an in-depth look into the current distributional consequences of geographic isolation might suggest that a deliberate conspiracy is at work in America. Examples include the distribution of public services, including police and fire protection; the quality of neighborhood schools; access to regional transportation; proximity to job markets; the solvency (and hence availability) of hospitals and health services; access to financial institutions; and access to retail outlets and even to grocery stores—all of which can and often do vary by location within American cities and towns. It is usually the poor and minority neighborhoods and residents who are least well served and least well positioned to take advantage of these community services and amenities.

These macro-level structural forces are powerful, systemic, and, for the most part, elusive to manipulation. They combine to set the larger environmental conditions that black men face as they grow up as children, develop as youth, and eventually take on the trappings of adult life and responsibility. The point here is to suggest that, from the start and regardless of their personal makeup, black men are at a systemic disadvantage in the quest to acquire positive community-supportive attributes. That disadvantage is exacerbated and further reinforced by our major people-serving institutions, both public and private.

Institutional structural forces form another set of environmental influences that can affect male performance of expected roles. At the level of local environments, residents heavily depend on an infrastructure of local institutions to deliver an array of services and supports that are critical to their health and vitality and to that of their children, families, and neighborhoods. The framework depicts these institutions at Node B3. Here—at the intersection of minority communities and their community institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, work places, law enforcement)—the proverbial rubber meets the road. Whether by design or by default, these institutions replicate and reinforce macro-social biases in ways that make them operational—for better or for worse—in the fates, fortunes, and futures of communities. Consequently, these places often become the battlegrounds for redistributing resources, power, and opportunity.

As a first example, let us consider **education**. For the past decade or so, America has been abandoning its infatuation with school desegregation, returning to its roots in neighborhood schools. Still, the national record of blacks and education is characterized by lower academic achievement and test scores, a black/white achievement gap, higher dropout rates, and lower post-secondary matriculation. The record is particularly severe for black men. It is difficult to know how this portrait can be changed. Part of the challenge of improving these educational outcomes is structural. For example, demographic research would easily support notions that poor minorities are caught in a cycle of poor achievement—namely, that low personal income begets poor housing, begets poor communities, begets low property tax receipts, begets poor schools, begets poor skills, begets low-wage jobs, begets low personal income, begets poor housing, and so on and so on.

This cycle is not necessarily inescapable. In fact, there are many young people of color—black men included—who defy these dynamics and do quite well. This author is among them. But educational data clearly suggest that the cards are stacked in ways that predict lesser results for many African American children, especially African American boys.

Structural forces in **medicine** are another important issue for black men. Hospitals and health care are critical pieces of local infrastructure on which communities depend. Here, too, black men are at particular risk. To begin with, their health prognosis is not very good. A recent report from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation suggests:

> While some in society are enjoying a healthy retirement, African-American men, on average, are dying before they reach Social Security retirement age. From birth, a black male on average seems fated to a life so unhealthy that a white man can only imagine it. He will die before just about anyone else, man or woman, of any race. Compared to a white man, there's a far greater chance he is a time bomb of diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, heart disease, drug abuse or AIDS. Yet the prospects are even better that he will be murdered, most likely shot, before he dies of preventable disease… If you're a black man, expect to die almost seven years sooner (at age 67.6) than a white man (at age 74.5).[45]

There are many factors that contribute to this high risk. Access to health care is one; three out of every 10 black men are uninsured.[46] Use of health services is another;

[45] W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2002.

[46] W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2002.

young men of color ages 15 to 24 are less likely to make doctor visits than whites. Quality of services is yet another; young men of color tend to seek care only during times of emergency and mostly through hospital emergency wards and clinics.

But, as inferred above, environments and neighborhood locations are the major contributors. A 1995 study found that black males are becoming ill and are dying prematurely because of factors in their environments. In addition to the high toll of homicide, they have a 37 percent higher risk of occupationally induced disease that carries a 20 percent higher risk of mortality than their white counterparts. Seventy-five percent of the hazardous waste sites noted by this study were located in predominantly black communities.[47]

Finally, institutions that serve poor and minority communities often tend to be in poor health themselves—under-funded, undercapitalized public hospitals and clinics provide a high proportion of an area's indigent care. Thus, all other things equal, even the community contributions of *high-performing* black males will fail to reach their full potential because of their shorter expected life spans.

On still another front, employment problems abound in the black community because of continued discrimination and changes in the nature and location of **work places**—all of which reduce opportunities for African Americans generally, and for men in particular, to secure and maintain themselves in stable, well-paying, family-supporting jobs. A recent study shows that the employment and labor force participation of young black men declined during the 1980s and 1990s—for black men with diplomas as well as for dropouts, teens, and young adults ages 20-24.[48]

Why? One reason is that discrimination in employment is real. In a 1990 study, the Urban Institute sent teams of African Americans and whites with matched sets of educational backgrounds, experiences, and demeanors to apply for the same jobs in Washington, D.C., and Chicago. The results were distressing. The white men were three times as likely as the black men both to advance in the hiring process (20 percent versus seven percent) and to receive employment offers (15 percent versus five percent).[49]

Moreover, virtually all observers agree that the ongoing structural transformation of the U.S. economy—from a relatively closed system with a substantial number of well-paid unionized manufacturing jobs requiring little formal education, to a transnational mode of production characterized domestically by weakened unions, highly automated manufacturing, and growing educational and training requirements for well-paid service sector jobs—has not helped employment prospects for urban black men.[50] But, in addition to this "skills mismatch," some observers allege that there is also a "spatial mismatch" whereby central city blacks confront informational, transportation, and bias hurdles that prevent them from filling the entry-level service and manufacturing job openings for which they might be qualified but that are now concentrated in the suburbs and non-metropolitan areas.

Institutions of **law and justice** represent still another structural component of the opportunity landscape. It is important to note that law and justice are not synonymous. The function of law in human societies is to promote and preserve order. Laws are rules that prescribe a "code of ethics or behavior"[51] that governs our interactions. Justice, on the other hand, is defined as "moral or absolute rightness," or alternatively as "fair treatment and due reward in accordance with honor, standards, or law."[52] Herein lies the potential for conflicts with communities of color.

Whether established by fiat or through public debate, our rules and preferences for human behavior do not need to be moral, right, or fair to become law. Laws can, indeed, be inequitable and unjust as matters of principle. Moreover, the enforcement of law is left largely to the discretion of local authorities and can be applied in discriminatory ways regardless of its justness.

The United States has a long history of both enforcement of unjust laws and inequitable application of the law to the detriment of African Americans and their communities. This history has left a powerful legacy of suspicion, distrust, and, in some quarters of the black community, disrespect for and even hostility toward authorities. For example, the current debate over racial profiling and recent highly publicized incidents of police brutality against blacks in Los Angeles, CA, Prince Georges County, MD, and Cincinnati, OH, clearly demonstrate for many that, across the nation, laws of this country are still unjust and inequitably applied—that the authorities' main function is to suppress rather than to serve minority communities. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies has put it this way:

[47] Staples 1995.

[48] Holzer and Offner 2002.

[49] Struyk et. al. 1991.

[50] Skinner 1995.

[51] *The American Heritage Dictionary*: *Office Edition*, New Dell ed., s.v. "law."

[52] *The American Heritage Dictionary*: *Office Edition,* New Dell ed., s.v. "justice."

> Seen through the eyes of minorities, and especially black youth, the policeman represents everything socially and institutionally denied them. He is the immediate and most visible agent of a society responsible for their deplorable condition… Other minorities likewise agree that today's police function is designed to patrol rather than protect the barrios, ghettos and other enclaves where this nation's minorities live.[53]

Such perceptions are further strengthened by recent research that documents racial bias in the use of capital punishment and the application of anti-drug laws. African American communities are increasingly sensitive to the alarming numbers of black men who are revolving in and out of prisons and jails—and what this large-scale removal and recycling is doing to the long-term prospects of their neighborhoods. The net result for many in the black community is an uneasy ambivalence about how, when, and under what circumstances to trust, call on, and/or even cooperate with police on matters of community safety.[54]

Communications about African Americans and particularly messages carried by the **American media** also have power to influence the opportunity structure for black men—sometimes positively, other times not. On the benign side of the images, America continues her long-standing traditions of "cultural vampirism," feeding on and extracting portions of contemporary black culture, style, and manner, and absorbing them into her mainstream. And there is no quelling her appetite for the new in language, music, dance, and dress. Commercial advertisements of products needing an "urban edge" (e.g., sporting apparel, fast foods, cleaning products, and repair services) are rife with African American imagery. Black men (and women) in sports and entertainment are among the nation's most sought-after and highest-paid celebrity icons.

The overwhelming preponderance of black imagery in the media, however, is not about imitation and flattery. The rise in violence, crime, and incarceration in the black community has been broadcast—and often even advertised—by the national media for several decades. An impression often left by the coverage is that black men, as a class, are dangerous people and that black communities are prolific breeding grounds for scofflaws and predators. The portrayal of men of color, particularly blacks, as criminal, un-heroic, and even buffoonish has a long tradition on both the stage and the screen.

How important and pervasive are such impressions? Consider 1988, when the image of Willie Horton appeared on TV and on campaign posters all over the nation to help galvanize support for George Herbert Walker Bush's presidential candidacy against his liberal democrat opponent, then Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.[55] The use of this image was, without a doubt, a deliberate attempt to link fear of blacks and fear of crime as a strategy for attacking liberal ideologies. It was the most dramatic image that emerged during the 1988 presidential election. In fact, many observers would argue that it was one of the major factors that helped Bush win the election. It was a low blow with national reach that was deeply resented in the African American community. Indeed, in 1989, the ad's creator, conservative political strategist Lee Atwater, was forced to withdraw as a candidate for a trustee position on the board of Howard University, the nation's first Historically Black College or University, because of mass student protests.

Readers should not draw the conclusion that the media-sponsored defamation of black men and the black community are akin to "white on black" crime. Today, African Americans, funded by corporate media interests, are willingly complicit in undermining the image and culture of black communities. For example, as recently as the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, some black men were still paying with their lives to defend themselves against the demeaning and dehumanizing *N*-word. But popular black media, especially rap music, has for the last decade given the world a free pass. And the Gangsta' rap genre has proven it can be particularly unsavory. A recent inter-coastal feud that ended in murder appeared to be a rap version of the Hatfields and McCoys.[56]

Worse yet are the ongoing cultural messages that are sent to children and youth, particularly those about young black women, who are casually treated like fresh meat and/or confused with female canines. (One recent incident was

[53] Bryce 1977.

[54] In a recent study in Los Angeles, CA, black residents gave police lower approval ratings (for both their job performance and their demeanors) than did whites, Latinos, and Asians. Even more interesting, neighborhoods with the highest violent crime rates gave police lower approval ratings than did other neighborhoods. See National Institute for Justice 2003.

[55] Willie Horton was a black man who was in prison in Massachusetts for committing a murder in 1975 in the commission of a robbery. He was given a life sentence without parole. Eleven years later, in June 1986, when Dukakis was governor, Horton was released with a weekend pass as part of a prison furlough program that Dukakis had supported. He failed to return and, on April 3, 1987, viciously murdered a white couple in Oxon Hill, MD.

[56] In 1996, an apparent personal and musical feud erupted between gangsta' rappers Tupac Shakur on the East Coast and Biggee Smallz, a.k.a. Notorious B.I.G., a.k.a. Christopher Wallace on the West Coast. On September 16, 1996, Tupac was shot in a drive-by while in Las Vegas, NV, and died six days later. On March 9, 1997, Biggee was shot and killed while sitting in his car in Los Angeles. Media speculation was that it was a revenge killing for Tupac's death.

so egregious that women at the historically black Spelman College made national headlines with their protests.[57])

The bottom line is that easy money, gratuitous sex, and indiscriminant violence are both the values being promoted *to the black community* and the characterizations being made *about the black community*.

Summation

Node B in the framework works as a kind of "sobriety test," offering a check on our tendency to oversimplify social analyses in search of ready solutions. As suggested earlier, a surface-only view might lead to the conclusion that the persistent and worsening poverty of distressed black communities has its origins in the behavior of black men. And, therefore, if we could only get them to "do right," we could turn it all around—again, all too easy, all too simple, and all very wrong.

The opportunity structure facing black men can present major impediments to their own positive self-development and, as a consequence, severely handicap their chances of successfully performing as we—the society—might like them to. In the framework presented in this paper, this opportunity structure is the ecological context in which men make decisions and choices that influence how they behave. Some combination of their individual characters and competencies will combine with their awareness and interpretations of, as well as their reactions to, the structural forces and barriers outlined above, resulting in a kind of "perceptive stew" that helps them to define their view of and approach to the world.

The influences at Node B are not necessarily determinative, however. Negative influences in the environment do not automatically predict negative male choices and community outcomes. These influences can be mitigated by an individual's level of resiliency—the ability of persons to persevere through and bounce back from adverse events and conditions. It is indeed possible for men with strong endowments to succeed even where the ecology may be inhospitable to them and to the successful performance of their roles. This is discussed in more detail later in this paper's examination of strategies.

[57] In spring of 2004, rapper Nelly was scheduled to partner with Spelman College on a campus bone marrow drive. As reported in the *Washington Post*: "Three weeks before the event, he released a new video, 'Tip Drill,' which shows black women as half-naked, oversexed, and mindless objects. In one scene a man swipes a credit card between a woman's buttocks." Upon hearing that some of the students planned to confront him about the video, Nelly backed out of the event. See Milloy 2004.

In summary, the choices and decisions that black men make and the things that they actually do are what we usually observe as we lament their condition. Node B offers us a way to look deeper and to recognize that attempting to change certain behaviors without addressing their antecedent origins in the larger environment is not a promising strategy.

Node C: Male Choices and Behaviors

Node C focuses on the development of black men themselves. With the opportunity structure as the ecological context, we can examine three aspects of men's development that are important to their well-being and to their performance in contributing to the well-being of others. The factors chosen for the framework are: individual human capital, physical and mental health, and social networks. As with other variables included in this framework, readers may well challenge this specification. These choices and their rationale are discussed in detail below.

In his influential book on **human capital**, Gary Becker defines investments in human capital as "activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people."[58] Examples of such investments include schooling, on-the-job training, medical care, migration, and information gathering. Becker speculates that the economists' focus on human capital is motivated by a realization that growth in *physical capital*—the tangible assets of societies—explains a relatively small part of the growth in income of most countries. Thus began the search for ways to consider the contributions of people and technology. Today, human capital is widely recognized as a major contributor to individual (and societal) well-being. Highly educated and skilled persons almost always tend to earn more than others.[59]

The focus on **physical and mental health** is intended to highlight the importance of the physical and mental stability and well-being of black men—as another set of variables over which they exert some control—to their community well-being impacts. Some aspects of physical and mental health might also be subsumed as part of human capital investments. For instance, some negative aspects of black male health (e.g., high rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and heart disease) are driven by the environment. Choices that men make in areas of diet, nutrition, exercise, and check-ups to prevent these afflictions can be thought of as investments in their human capital.

[58] Becker 1964: 1.

[59] Becker 1964: 2.

There are other aspects of physical and mental health, however—particularly those that relate to public health—which clearly fall outside the human capital domain. Given the threats of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, decisions and choices regarding drug use and sexual health and behavior are clear examples. Associational choices—e.g., decisions to "run" with a dangerous crowd—can have also serious consequences. Even choices concerning where men decide to "hang out" can have bad physical and mental health outcomes. Indeed, having the "wrong friends" or being at the wrong place at the wrong time can present health consequences.

Related to all of this is the question of **social networks**. Here this paper is specifically interested in the system of relationships that surround individual men—family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances who contribute to their well-being. Social capital is the term that is often used to recognize the asset value of these relationships. As defined in earlier writing by this author, social capital is *an asset representing actionable resources that are contained in, and accessible through, a system of relationships.*[60]

With very few exceptions, individuals bring resources to relationships, such as time, skills, knowledge, contacts, and connections that may have value to their relationship partners. The choices that men make about whom to include in their social circles make a difference in the quantity and the quality of the relationship resources that they can command. These resources are believed to emerge in at least two ways: immediately, through the *bonded relationships* that men have forged with family and close friends; and secondarily, through *bridged relationships* to unfamiliar persons with whom their family and friends may link through other social circles.

Social capital is an asset that grows rather then diminishes with use because it is usually exchanged between persons in ways that create open-ended reciprocal expectations. The bottom line is that the friendships and other associational choices that men make in their social lives can and do—for better or for worse—make a contribution to male well-being.

[60] Hyman 2002. It is important to be clear that social capital is an asset that can also manifest itself in negative ways. Organized crime, street gangs, and the Ku Klux Klan are examples. From a community perspective, however, it would be interesting to speculate about whether negative social capital may be better than none at all insofar as the potential to redirect negative forms of social organization to positive purposes might be better than a socially disorganized community. For instance, it may be that even depleted, crime-ridden neighborhoods have the capacity for positive action if means can be found to redirect whatever organizational energies might exist there.

Summation

At Node C, human capital, physical and mental health, and social networks represent the primary areas of men's development about which this paper is concerned. The framework suggests that Node C is where men get to exert some control over their lives through the choices and decisions that they make and the paths to which those choices lead. The critical question, then, is whether men make choices and decisions that enhance their positive developments (e.g., school completion, post-secondary education, responsible sexual behavior, abstinence from drug and alcohol use, and gang avoidance) in these three areas. To the extent that their choices *are* positive ones, it is expected that those decisions will lead, in turn, to an accumulation of assets that can be deployed to the benefit of their children, families, and neighborhoods. On the other hand, poor choices (e.g., dropping out of school, gratuitous sex, drug and alcohol abuse, and involvement with gangs, guns, and crime) are means of disinvesting in one's future and reducing one's potential to contribute to positive community outcomes. Worse yet, such choices can lead to inflicting harm on the community and to becoming a liability to one's children, family, and neighborhood.

The framework presented in this paper recognizes, however, that this development process is likely to be a "mixed bag" of good and perhaps not-so-good choices and behaviors. Black men who attend college, but who may also smoke marijuana, drink and drive, or engage in unprotected sex with multiple partners, for example, are clearly mixing good and bad choices. Likewise, men who may have dropped out of school but who nonetheless practice monogamy and attempt to keep a job and avoid the street life are also making a combination of positive and perhaps not-so-positive decisions. The critical point to consider in any individual case, then, is the net result of these choices. Indeed, since men's development is ongoing, it may be more appropriate to think about the net *trajectory* of male choices rather than focus on these choices one at a time.

Node D: Expected Impacts

The question of whether men even matter was introduced early in this report, and the evidence presented suggests that they do indeed. Here we may focus on how we *expect* them to matter by connecting the discussion of their development through Nodes A, B, and C of the framework with three distinct well-being outcomes for children, families, and communities: positive youth development, strong families, and positive community climate (e.g., vital and safe neighborhoods). Again, as before, it is important to share the rationale for these choices of indicators.

A fundamental concern for the health of communities is the condition of their young people. Their life trajectories presage the communities' *future* health and well-being. The choice of **positive youth development** as an indicator here is intended to refer to the development of children *and* youth. The youth development field generally views youth as spanning the period from adolescence to young adulthood. Some have even specified age ranges from as young as 10 to as old as 25. Rather than debating an age range, this paper focuses on dependents or wards from birth to the "age" of adult independence.

Part of the concern for youth development takes us back to Node B1 of the framework, where individual endowment and disposition are discussed as important components of the opportunity structure for men. The support systems, value orientations, competence, and mental and physical health outlined as components of Node B1 are all derived in some part from a community experience. In other words, neighborhoods (including men) and families (including fathers) are a support system that greatly contributes to a child's sense of his culture, as well as to the formation of values and the promotion of functional competence. The behaviors of men are an important ingredient in these support processes. Thus, while the opportunity structures that men face are largely beyond their *individual* control, it is also true that these structures—especially the components at B1—are defined within that community context and are therefore subject to *community* influence. And within that community environment, men can have deliberate influence over the development of young people.

This suggests that part of the concern about male impacts on youth development is somewhat circular in that the cumulative influence that black men have in shaping the elements at B1, in turn, becomes part of the opportunity structure to which other men—the next cohort—react as *they* develop. This further suggests that when male behaviors negatively affect the community, they may, at some point, contribute to an irretrievable downward spiral of continuing poor outcomes. For example, the constant cycling and recycling of African American men between neighborhoods and prisons may give rise to what some researchers see as a "tipping point" phenomenon, where increasing the community's exposure to the prison experience can promote an "oppositional culture" and dysfunctional value systems among at-risk youth and especially young black males.

Youth development is affected even more directly by men's behavior and the immediate examples that they set—for children, young boys, *and* girls—as fathers, husbands, workers, mentors, and community citizens. When men perform well in these and other roles, they set high positive standards for what young boys should aspire to, as well as for what the larger community should expect of them. Young girls, on the other hand, can "raise the bar" for what they expect of male behavior and what constitutes healthy relationships with boys and with men. One of the many outcomes that should result is healthy family formation.

The contribution of men to the creation of **strong families** is also central to this investigation of community well-being impacts. Here too, however, it is important to clarify what is meant by "strong families." In the earlier discussion, a distinction was drawn between western notions of nuclear families and the extended family traditions of the slaves who came from West Africa and the Caribbean. In truth, however, the concept of family is even more complex than the earlier discussion would suggest. It is changing from the western ideal of a heterosexual married couple and their biological children to include additional configurations of living arrangements and home support structures. Increasing numbers of step-families, fragile, female-headed and father-absent families, inter-generational child-rearing families, as well as newer configurations of families involving same-sex domestic partnerships, have different implications for the male well-being contribution. Thus, this discussion of family strength needs to be clarified in the context of these various forms. The following definition of a strong family was solicited from Fathers and Families, Inc.[61]

> "A strong family usually has at least two adults regularly involved in the children's everyday lives. These two adults are preferably, but not necessarily, the biological parents of the children. The two adults preferably, but not necessarily, are married to each other and reside in the same household; but divorced, separated, or never-married parents can also create a strong family, albeit a bi-nuclear one. The children must have formed attachments (in the clinical sense) to the two adults, and the adults must in turn be attached to the children, and must be committed to their welfare. While the involvement of more than two adults, as in an extended family or community, usually strengthens the family, it cannot adequately replace the two central parental figures."

This definition is acceptable as a good beginning. Its shortcoming for the purposes of this paper is its focus on family composition rather than on family traits. To

[61] Thanks to Ned Holstein, president of Fathers and Families, Inc. (3 February 2004).

expand the formulation, Child Trends was also consulted. According to Child Trends, the search to identify *particular* family strengths has tended to center on a set of "family relationships or family processes that support and protect families and family members, especially during times of adversity and change."[62] Accordingly, Child Trends has used the following five measures as indicators of family strength.

Positive Parental Mental Health: Studies have shown a relationship between poor parental mental health—particularly that of mothers—to poor adjustment in children.[63]

Household Routines: The regular performance of family routines is also an important family strength. Families that are well-organized and in which members adhere to regular roles tend to raise children who do well in school and have greater self-control.[64]

Time Use: Shared time spent on child and parent activities is important because it is intrinsically pleasing and helps to educate and socialize children.

Communication and Praise: Positive communication characterized by warm and respectful two-way parent-child exchanges is also associated with child well-being. In addition, it can assist parents in their attempts to maintain an ongoing influence in a child's life.

Monitoring, Supervision, and Involvement: When combined with encouragement and praise, parental supervision, in the form of awareness and monitoring of adolescent's schoolwork and social life, can promote better grades, socially acceptable behaviors, and socially positive actions.

To this list of child-centered indicators, other more general measures of family well-being may be added, such as a stable, healthy, and mutually supportive relationship among household adults, and family economic self-sufficiency.

Whatever the exact formulation, it appears that the male contribution to strong families might be summed up in two ways: the extent to which men behave as (1) *strong parental influences* (strong and engaged fathers, guardians, or other surrogates, who relate to their children in ways cited above); and (2) *contributing family partners* (strong supporters/contributors to the economic, social, and emotional health of households).

Node D is also concerned with the health of neighborhoods, particularly whether and how men contribute to the **neighborhood climate** (e.g., neighborhood vitality and safety). The implicit distinction between neighborhoods and communities is purposeful. Neighborhoods are here considered to be the geographic boundaries within which we expect to see more intimate aggregations of families and households—a collection of neighbors—who live near each other and have the potential for social exchange. "Communities," on the other hand, refer to larger aggregations—combinations of neighborhoods along with the institutions that serve them.

The framework focuses on neighborhoods (at Node D) because they are the immediate environments for child rearing and family functioning. They are also the places where people are more likely to know one another and to relate to a shared geographic identity as their home, and hence more likely to have an awareness of and be affected by issues and events that arise or occur there. It is through this shared awareness and sense of place that men, as individuals or as a group, influence the area's climate and contribute to residents' feelings about whether they live in a good or bad neighborhood.

As with family strength, there are no formal definitions of what constitutes a good neighborhood.[65] Common sense, however, suggests a few indicators. For instance, we might expect a good neighborhood to be a place with: low rates of crime, especially street crime and violence; high rates of employment and home ownership; a stable resident population with low levels of transience; low levels of refuse, graffiti, and abandoned and/or vandalized buildings and cars; low incidences of idle, loitering men and/or out-of-school youth; and high levels of social interaction and evidence of resident organization and involvement in neighborhood affairs. The focus of the framework, then, is to examine the extent to which and how men influence the directions of these and other indicators.

Summation

At Node D, answers to our questions about how black men affect the well-being of children, families, and neighborhoods begin to take shape—again, seeing those impacts as a function of the roles that they are expected to play, the opportunity structures that they face, and the choices, decisions, and behaviors in which they engage. At this point,

[62] Moore et. al. 2002.

[63] Moore et. al. 2002: 3; also see Ehrle and Moore 1999.

[64] Moore et. al. 2002: 3.

[65] In spite of excellent work of the Urban Institute's Neighborhood Indicators Project, which sensitized many to the value of collecting, maintaining, and analyzing community-level data as an important component of community interventions, no paradigm has arisen that defines what constitutes a good neighborhood.

it is possible to speculate about how well or how poorly we might expect them to perform in the specified roles. Accordingly, the framework suggests that, to the extent that black men emerge from prior nodes with positive attitudes and assets, on balance, we should expect them to make positive contributions to child, family, and neighborhood outcomes. Conversely, where the process has led them to a net disinvestment in themselves, we should expect lesser outcomes all around.

It is important to note, however, that the impacts need not be uniform in either direction. Men's behaviors will not necessarily be entirely positive or negative regardless of how they emerge from the processes outlined above. A man's good performance at home does not preclude his causing harm in the streets. Equally plausible are instances of men with honorable public profiles who may nonetheless be abusive to wives and/or children at home. So, again, analysis should focus on the *balance* of male impacts.

Node E: Community Health and Well-Being

At Node E, as a result of all of the foregoing, it is finally possible to speculate about how black men influence the well-being of urban, poor, and distressed communities. This is no simple matter. Some portions of who black men are and what black men do are conditioned by forces outside of them, while other portions of who black men are and what they do are a direct result of their choices, decisions, and behaviors. Which portions are which, and in what measure, is unknowable. Nevertheless, men do proceed with their community lives and their community interactions with this mix of intentionality and circumstance in ways that affect others for better or for worse. So, how do we respond to the community impact question?

As previously stated, this paper treats community health as the sum of the well-being of a community's children, families, and neighborhoods. Consequently, answering this question becomes a matter of collecting observations on the well-being indicators used in each of these realms. For instance, if, on average, a community's men are supporting the positive development of their children and youth, participating in and contributing to strong families, and engaging in activities to foster positive, safe, and vital neighborhood climates, then their communities will likely be healthy places that can grow and thrive. The polar opposites, of course, are places characterized by troubled youth, fragile, dependent, and dysfunctional families, and disinvested neighborhoods, which presage community conditions that exhibit more of the same.

Again, many factors, in addition to the behaviors of men, will influence the community's health and future. The framework and discussion presented here attempt to hold those factors constant in order to explore the unique male contribution to this future. That said, the framework suggests that the well-being impacts and outcomes that we observe for children, families, and neighborhoods all come together to define aspects of the larger community's well-being. Indicators of community health are here defined as levels of economic growth and stability, political voice and power, social stability, and strong and effective institutions. Each is addressed below.

Communities with reputations as "good places to live" usually demonstrate higher-than-average levels of **economic growth and stability** within their regions. Indicators might include higher levels of education, employment, and earnings, appreciating property values for homes and business, and, as a result, stable and sufficient tax collections. These same places will also be more likely to effectively exercise their **political voice and power** through higher levels of social organization and resident civic engagement. Moreover, they will likely exhibit a high degree of **social stability** by virtue of higher levels of homeownership and lower levels of transience and crime. We might also expect to find **stronger institutions and community organizations** providing a range of services from education and health care to recreational services and volunteer opportunities.

The male impact on these community-level indicators should mirror those for children, families, and neighborhoods. In general, we should expect to see a positive relationship between positive and pro-social male decision making and behavior, and positive impacts and outcomes for children, families, neighborhoods, and communities. We should also expect that the opposite results will obtain where men, on balance, make decisions and choices that lead to disinvestment and anti-social behaviors.

What we cannot say, however, is what "on balance" means. Measurement is the problem. There is no metric or index that can be calibrated to yield readings of relative well-being or distress. For example, when we observe that one in every 14 black men were incarcerated in 1996, we know, without question, that this statistic is troubling and unacceptably high. But, until we can devise means of measuring community well-being, we cannot say how much damage it portends in our community. Likewise, we are unable to equate a lower rate of incarceration with a particular level of community improvement.

Node F: Feedback to Societal Expectations

This paper began its exploration of male impacts by examining the roles that our society expects men to play in their communities, and, having now progressed through most of the framework, we can see that the communities are *themselves* a part of defining those expectations. This should bode well for communities that are already functioning well. But for those that are not, this can be troubling. The challenge facing *them* is the potential for erosion in both their expectations of men and in the standards for male behavior.

For example, one of the roles specified in the framework is that of worker. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, however, the unemployment rate in 2002 for African American men ages 16 and over stood at 10.7 percent and a whopping 17.1 percent for those who were never married. There is evidence that these figures were even higher for men between the ages of 16 to 25.[66] Given these data, one can only wonder whether and/or for how long residents of poor black communities will really expect that their young men, particularly unmarried men, will be able to secure jobs. The danger is that, at some point and in some neighborhoods, unemployment may become the expectation rather than the exception for young black men.

The point here is that the expectations of communities are grounded in their experience. To the extent that male joblessness or, worse yet, imprisonment, increasingly become the norm in poor neighborhoods, expectations for jobs, income, and careers may be dampened. These lowered community expectations will, in turn, be integrated into the opportunity structure, where they become part of the reality perceived by even younger cohorts of developing children and youth, especially boys and young men. Thus, the health and well-being of communities can be viewed as both a cause and an effect of male decisions, behaviors, and impacts. Herein lies an example of the danger and the propensity of a continuing cycle of poverty and poor outcomes.

An employment example was chosen to make a point, but the potential for erosion in other male roles —as a result of conditions in distressed communities—could have just as easily been demonstrated. Such observations only serve to emphasize how important it is to focus on community-level poverty and to look for entry points, such as men, that can offer multiplier effects of the sort suggested here.

[66] The unemployment rate for black men ages 25 and over was 8.0 percent, and 11.7 percent for black men ages 25 and over who had never been married. This indicates that rates in the 16 to 25 age range were significantly higher than the data on black men ages 16 and over suggest. See U.S. Department of Labor 2003: Table 24.

VI. LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this paper has been to explore how men contribute to the well-being of children, families, neighborhoods, and communities. In particular, and in light of an increasing concern for rising community-level poverty, it has focused on African American men and on poor and distressed urban communities of color. The goal has been to demonstrate the ways in which men may matter in determining the health and futures of these communities, and to determine whether men, as an entry point for social intervention, may offer the kind of multiplier benefit that may be important to achieving synergistic impacts in community improvement efforts.

This exploration has been pursued through the use of a framework constructed to model the process by which it was hypothesized that these impacts occur. The intent of the framework, as diagrammed in Figure 1, has been to provide a conceptual map that vivifies these dynamics and processes in ways that make them more understandable to interested audiences. At this point, we may now ask: What have we learned and what does it mean?

What have we learned?

A central lesson is that men do matter; how men develop and what they subsequently do can have substantial implications for and impacts on both their lives and those of others. Secondly, and with the help of the framework, we can see that the issues surrounding how men develop, what they do, and the consequences of their behavior for others is highly complex, multifaceted, interlinked, interdependent, simultaneous, and recursive. This observation helps affirm the value of men as a synergistic, multiplier entry point.

A third important realization is that to focus solely on the behaviors of men, as the entry point for community change strategies, is both oversimplified and inadequate. Unless the current dynamics of the male opportunity structure are improved, the personal development of black men and their subsequent contributions to community well-being will continue to be hampered and constrained. Finally, this paper has raised the stakes on this issue by demonstrating the potential that exists for poor male outcomes and negative male behaviors to contribute to a continuing downward spiral in community outcomes if they are left unabated.

Implications: What does it mean?

What does all of this tell us? First, it tells us that focusing some of our attention and resources on devising male-centered interventions would be worth our time and effort. In fact, it may be the case that we fail at our own peril. Whatever the case, what is needed at this point is additional guidance about *what to do*.

The framework suggests that male well-being impacts are driven by male behaviors—that it is the ramifications of what men *do* that influences the well-being of children, families, and neighborhoods. But again, rather than focusing our attention on controlling or preventing certain harmful behaviors, our resources might be better spent on altering the antecedent conditions that foster those behaviors—in the framework presented here, the opportunity structure.

Indeed, the nation's anti-poverty policy has traditionally focused on changing aspects of the opportunity structure. But current and past interventions tend to be focused only on the bottom half of Figure 1. For instance, school reforms, health insurance, employment training, legal services, and a host of other interventions are aimed at "fixing" institutional biases and deficiencies that bear on these community well-being processes. Many other programs and projects (i.e., dropout prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, substance abuse and gang interventions) are intended to remediate disinvestments and/or redress poor outcomes. In essence, therefore, much of the effort currently being made to improve community outcomes pursues a strategy of remediation and treatment—a largely corrective set of interventions borne out of either a deficit orientation or a focus on institutional inequities.

What we may need to do, by contrast, is focus on the top half of the diagram. Doing so implies a greater emphasis on positive interventions and prevention. Intervening in the opportunity structure in ways that help to build positive character and competence, for instance, would be an important priority in such efforts. Ethnocentric schools and curricula could play a pivotal role in promoting positive cultural and value orientations for black children generally and for young men and boys in particular. Fostering positive peer groups within in- and out-of-school clubs and activities could help put young people on a path to establishing and maintaining positive social networks. Increasing opportunities for hands-on, skill-building, experiential learning could help enhance their human capital endowments. Many other suggestions could be made along these same lines.

The central point here is to stress that prevention strategies targeted at black children and youth—particularly males—at Nodes B (Opportunity Structure) and C (Asset Accumulation) are potentially powerful and high-payoff strategies, particularly for improving the impact of black men on children, families, and communities. This does not suggest that we should ignore the impacts that *do*, in fact, occur at Nodes D and E. As noted earlier, outcomes could potentially worsen in places where poor impacts are allowed to persist. What this paper does suggest is that there is already a vast network of agencies, programs, and services whose efforts are targeted at addressing these very issues, and that *new efforts* might be launched—and new resources concentrated—in the directions outlined above.

VII. AN EMERGING INTERVENTION STRATEGY

To this point, this paper's discussion of male well-being impacts has been largely conceptual. The framework presented here served to tease out important dynamics that affect how black men develop; that influence their decisions, choices, and behaviors; and that determine their impacts on the well-being of the children, families, and neighborhoods in their communities. This discussion has led to the conclusion that intervening in the opportunity structure that men face may be a promising strategy for investing in their development in ways that have positive "downstream" consequences for their communities. The specific recommendation put forth is to primarily focus on the influences, listed at B1, that seem to contribute to the individual endowment and disposition of black men.

Investing in Male "Endowments:" a Rationale

The focus on black male endowment is largely a pragmatic one. For instance, the macro-social structural forces, shown at B2 (globalism, racism, political realignments, and geography), are largely beyond our control and perhaps beyond anyone's control. Communities where black men live and develop have no levers to pull that will allow them to influence these forces in any meaningful way. Intervention in these realms is therefore not an option for them.

As suggested earlier, reforms attempting to affect the institutional structural forces, at B3, have been the focus of debate for decades during which time the decline of poor communities has continued. This is not to suggest that these efforts have been ill-directed or ineffective. It does, however, suggest that they have been inadequate.

Educational reform provides an example. Since the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools, public education has made many attempts to root out inequality and improve outcomes for poor and minority children. Curricular reforms, finance reforms, and charter schools are but a few examples. Still, public education in the United States struggles with higher minority dropout rates and black/white achievement differentials. Why do these problems persist?

Institutional reforms assume a great deal about the needs, aspirations, orientations, and motivations of the populations that they are intended to benefit and they generally do so without the benefit of consultations with those very populations. Thus, one explanation for the persistence of these problems may be that institutions lack the capacity to fully appreciate the challenges that these populations face. Another explanation may be that the population's needs and challenges, even when understood, lie outside the abilities of institutions to affect. Regardless, it is likely that these debates on school and other institutional reforms will continue (as they should) but that the decline will continue as well unless a new focus is established.

It is instructive to note, for instance, that the history of slavery in the U.S. is replete with stories of African slaves who ran the risks of injury, being sold off, or even death in order to learn to read (often the Bible). In fact, education has always been praised in and by black communities as the great equalizer. What accounts for lagging achievement of so many poor minority youth and young adults? Institutional inequities or inadequacies cannot be the entire problem and, hence, their amelioration cannot be the entire solution.

Community Strengthening as the Key

What may be needed to enhance the yield from institutional interventions is a complementary focus on the populations themselves. We need to invest in the personal endowments of individual black men to equip them with the positive aspirations, motivations, and self concepts that will allow them to maximize the benefits of institutional offerings (reformed or otherwise). Such investments can only be made in the context of communities. Indeed, the influences listed at B1 that make up individual endowment and disposition —physical/mental health, community and family supports, spiritual and cultural values, and intellectual and social competence—lie within the realm of community influences. Moreover, communal efforts to engender them are naturally and perfectly consonant with black family and community traditions and experiences. Indeed, future intervention strategies should focus on how to strengthen distressed neighborhood environments so that they can better support their families and young people in general and enhance the individual endowments of young men in particular.

The consanguineal family structures of West Africa can offer guidance about what this might mean. The compounds in which these African families were arranged could often be quite large. For instance, Sudarkasa suggests:

> A compound might house 30 or 40 people, or its residents could number in the hundreds. Royal compounds might have thousands of members.[67]

[67] Sudarkasa 1997: 16.

Thus, in some instances in West Africa, a "neighborhood" could easily consist of one family and, conversely, a single family could be the entire neighborhood. One can easily imagine the potential for inter-household communication, cooperation, and supports in such arrangements. This is the epitome of the village that raises the child—an intimate arrangement of persons connected to each other by a shared identity, a shared heritage and culture, a shared interest in mutual support, and a shared sense of responsibility for the health and well-being of the neighborhood/family. These are all characteristics that could conceivably be fostered in low-income African American neighborhoods—perhaps as collections of contiguous families—to support individual households and the healthy development of (particularly male) children, youth, and young adults.

In summary, investments intended to affect the impacts of men on the well-being of children, families, and distressed black communities should focus on improving the opportunity structure for black males by strengthening individual endowments of black boys, youth, and young adults. Such efforts must be made at the level of neighborhoods and should be aimed at increasing the amount of neighborhood supports for the healthy development of African American men and boys. These supports from family and the community can instill positive and pro-social values that draw on cultural and/or spiritual traditions, engender social and intellectual competence, and contribute to their mental and physical health.

CONCLUSION

Many observers who were consulted in the preparation of this paper might vigorously argue for an additional recommendation. They would argue that the macro-social forces outlined at Node B2 are the most challenging and long-term impediments to improving the opportunity structures for low-skilled men generally, and that, among them, racism is the single most important variable affecting the condition, development, and behavior of African American men in particular. Hence, they would argue that racism in the U.S. is the greatest determinant of the influence that black men have on the well-being of their children, families, and neighborhoods. The author does not disagree. Finding practicable policy and programmatic vehicles to remedy or perhaps neutralize the impacts of racism would clearly alter the opportunity structure for blacks in ways that could offer immeasurable well-being consequences. Unfortunately, this has not been achieved to date.

Others would argue that employment and earnings are the most pivotal areas for intervening on male well-being impacts. They would convincingly argue that poverty is first and foremost defined by a lack of individual and household income, and that the collateral consequences of potential crime and social and cultural decay are secondary effects. But again, an infrastructure does exist to address these questions. Therefore, the quest here should perhaps be to find approaches that improve the track record of existing employment agencies, programs, and services.

Again, the purpose of this paper is to offer an approach for considering the question of how African American men affect the well-being of urban, poor, and distressed communities, and the well-being of their children, families, and neighborhoods. It is the author's hope that the foregoing discussion has accomplished that task and provided an understandable framework and useful lessons and recommendations. The primary purpose, however, has been to provide a tool for the consideration of others and they are welcome to use this formulation in order to arrive at their own conclusions about investment strategies and entry points aimed at influencing the impacts of men on community well-being.

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