



Understanding the Environmental Contexts of Boys and Young Men of Color

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Far too often, when the research and policy communities take on the topic of boys and young men of color, it is to describe in depressing detail how these young males contribute to their own poor outcomes. Complex realities, institutional challenges, and underlying circumstances are reduced to individualized behaviors. In addition, research and policy often fail to explore the many cases where boys and young men are thriving despite challenging circumstances or to examine the roots of these successes.

This essay provides a framework for understanding the various settings (often unseen or unacknowledged) that influence the lives of boys and young men of color. To fully understand how to improve outcomes for this group, it is important to first appreciate the environmental contexts that shape how they experience the world. These settings can either support or constrain their development and well-being as they mature into manhood. And though most boys and young men do have the power to make their own decisions, we—as adults and as a society—are responsible for the choice sets and consequences they face.

While the focus here on boys and young men of color is fully intentional, it is not meant to imply that the needs of girls and young women of color do not deserve considered attention as well. Many of the conditions they face are similar to those of their young male counterparts. Girls and young women of color grow up in the same families, live in the same neighborhoods, and attend the same schools. However, their

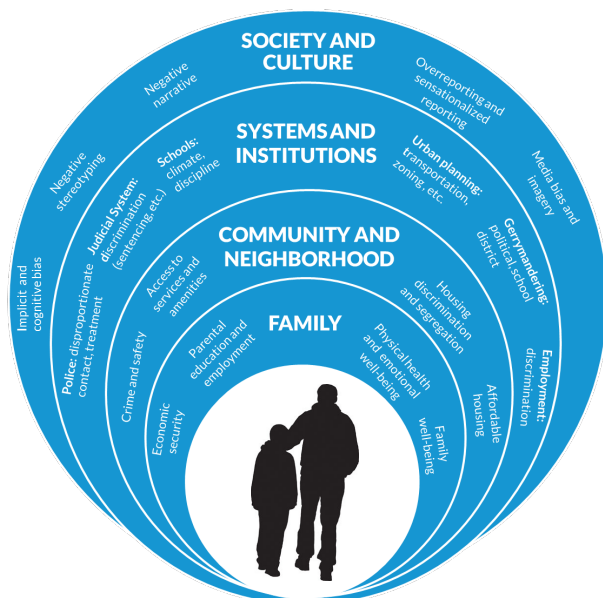
treatment and experiences within these environments can vary in profound and unexpected ways. This variation is enough to merit separate and specific consideration. There should be room enough in our policy discourse to examine in their full complexity the challenges each group faces, and to create tailored policy approaches as necessary.

This essay does not offer solutions. It provides a context for future research and analysis, in hopes that it will examine the lives and circumstances of boys and young men of color using more complex and nuanced perspectives. In particular, we should not accept current institutional and systemic realities as a necessarily positive or neutral status quo. Doing so implicitly treats the problems experienced by boys and young men of color as entirely of their own making and ignores the role of societal norms, systems, and institutions in contributing to poor circumstances. To change the current conversation, we must critically examine our own perspectives on what actually drives outcomes for boys and young men of color.

Boys and Young Men of Color and Nested Environments

The environments in which children grow up profoundly shape their socio-emotional health and development and set the stage for future success. The field of developmental psychology has long noted the importance of different levels of environmental influence on child and adolescent growth. These environments create nested ecological spheres, each one influencing a child's development in unique ways, as well as interacting with each other to compound or mitigate those impacts.¹ The most prominent environments affecting boys and young men of color highlighted here are:

1. prevailing mainstream sociocultural contexts, which shape how they are perceived and treated as a group;
2. institutions and systems, which frame their opportunity set;
3. community and neighborhood environments, which shape their daily lives and interactions; and
4. family settings, which (should) confer security, stability, and general well-being.



Though these different environments are intertwined and certainly influence each other, when we look at them as a monolith, we miss important details about what each environment contributes and therefore pose incomplete remedies. To get a complete picture, it is important to examine each layer as a separate factor as well as its influence on other environmental contexts.

Ideally, these environments should serve as layers of nurturing and protective influences as young children progress and mature into adulthood. However, if these domains are lacking necessary supports—or worse, if children and young adults are exposed to dysfunctional dynamics in these environments—they potentially suffer both immediate damage and serious adverse long-term consequences.

Unfortunately, boys and young men of color disproportionately suffer in each of these domains. They must confront negative societal perceptions, disparate treatment within systems and institutions, and sometimes damaging neighborhood environments, and family instability. Breaking the chain of harmful impacts in these layered environments requires changes to societal, institutional, community, and family policy and practice.

If we truly value the potential contributions of boys and young men of color to our nation—and, more fundamentally, their intrinsic importance as fellow human beings—we must address our own roles in creating these problems. We must do this before more generations of boys and young men of color begin to doubt that society sees their worth, before they lose faith in the fairness of our laws, before they disengage and fall behind in school, and before they make poor decisions (with outsized consequences) that might diminish or even destroy their life chances.

While it may sound alarmist to those unfamiliar with the lives of boys and young men of color, countless youth of color must run a gauntlet of environments that are stacked against them on their paths to manhood. Many do not make it without incurring significant emotional or even physical damage that is often unrecognized or overlooked. Even in their earliest, most innocent years, young boys of color of **all** classes are faced with surmounting the burdens of negative societal perceptions, dangerous media imagery, structural disadvantage, and biased treatment solely because of their gender and race or ethnicity. Those who are also low-income or poor have these harms compounded by the challenge of living in tough neighborhoods and often with weakened family supports. Neighborhood distress and weak family supports are more prevalent among poor families of color than among whites at similar income levels. Poverty adds even more disadvantages.

These young boys carry a heavy load as they navigate the road to adulthood—a road on which their sense of self is still nascent and key decision making skills are not yet fully formed. Far too often, they must make complex and difficult choices before they are fully emotionally equipped to handle them. And while many boys and young men of color grow up to create successful lives for themselves, they would undoubtedly get much farther without so many obstacles on their paths.

A growing body of evidence finds that early negative experiences such as exposure to trauma, chronic (or toxic) stress, and social disadvantage can cause real emotional harm with long-term consequences—and can sometimes trigger aggressive acting out (Mitchell et al. 2014; National

Scientific Council on the Developing Child [2005] 2014; Thompson 2014). This evidence is not to excuse any problematic behaviors that **some** boys and young men of color display. But to properly address these issues, we must first understand the context in which they occur. In addition to harming their own life chances, bad outcomes for boys and young men of color create cycles of damage within their communities, with their families, and with their offspring. However, by focusing on the individualized actions of boys and young men, we are reduced to treating the symptoms without addressing the sources of the problems.

A full recognition of the damaging forces at work should enable us to confront them with purpose. Mindfulness of the ways that we as a broader society and the institutions we create perpetuate disadvantage and inequity and limit opportunity should rid us of the notion that opportunities for real impact do not exist. In fact, recognizing this possibility should provide the key to undoing the many negative societal forces that weigh on the lives of boys and young men of color. Turning this situation around will require the participation of multiple actors throughout society, strong political will, and sustained and thoughtful commitment. This will be a generation-long struggle, but it is within our powers. It is our obligation—it should be our mission.

The Societal and Cultural Context

To truly confront the challenges facing boys and young men of color, it is imperative that we address the negative narratives and imagery that surround them from their earliest years and that influence how they are perceived and treated. For many and complex reasons, these children and young men lag behind their white peers on almost all measures of well-being and progress at each stage of maturation. However, their struggles are often framed as solely individually driven or as part of a warped “urban culture” or “culture of poverty,” instead of being seen as symptoms of larger societal and systemic problems. Some behaviors are logical adaptations to specific environments that are not transferable to (or understood by) the larger cultural context.

Part of the difficulty of unpacking and making clear the complex barriers that boys and men of color face is separating the many causal pathways that often lead to their lesser outcomes. Instead, we tend to fall back on pervasive stereotypes that young black and brown boys are naturally prone to failure, disruption, and violence. This stereotyping harms not only boys and men of color; the ingrained prejudices, destructive narratives, and suggestive media imagery have an insidious impact on all of us. They quietly warp our thinking and build in implicit bias, often without our awareness. These biases influence not only our perceptions, but also our behaviors toward boys and men of color (Entman 2006). These reactions can be as mundane as locking car doors when they walk by, to job discrimination, to the widespread “hyperpolicing” that ends in the incarceration (and even death) of far too many young men of color.

Deeply embedded in American history and culture are long-standing and pernicious narratives about men of color. In this, the United States’ difficult history of racial and ethnic prejudice and oppression plays an outsized role, providing the dark and ever-present subtext for how we perceive,

talk about, and treat people of color—especially males. These narratives cast them as dangerous and threatening characters—impulsive, hyper-masculine, and impervious to societal norms. This is especially the case the darker the skin tone. When men of color are not perceived as dangerous, they are often emasculated—cast as irresponsible loafers looking for a handout. These damaging narratives not only perpetuate negative perceptions and keep them ingrained in the culture, they also blind us to roles that US institutions and policies have played—and continue to play—in creating circumstances under which boys and men of color either fail to thrive or, worse, are actively harmed.

While the legal architecture of intentional racial and ethnic discrimination is largely dismantled, its impact still ripples through to current generations. US society congratulates itself for its triumph over a “turbulent” racial past and lays the full weight of the legacy effects on those who can’t make it under the current “meritocratic” system. Any racial or ethnic differences in outcomes are attributed to individual failings. This convenient turn of logic allows for people’s fear and rejection of, and hostility toward, boys and men of color to persist.

None of this is to imply that boys and men of color never engage in negative or unlawful behavior. However, the manner in which this behavior is reported often gives the impression that it is normative. Extreme behaviors on the part of white boys and men are assumed to be aberrances, and careful attention is paid to the individual circumstances and pathologies. The uneven (sometimes distorted) reporting and lack of balanced imagery of boys and young men of color drives the stereotyping—feeding fear, prejudice, and discrimination. It is imperative to address our negative stereotypes and attitudes in order to understand and confront the challenges facing boys and young men of color—and society’s part in exacerbating them.

It is particularly problematic that this stereotyping—and consequent differential treatment—begins in early boyhood. This sets up boys and young men of color as unworthy of the nurturing necessary for the healthy development of all children and adolescents. The insistence on viewing them as problems and future delinquents is damaging to them as individuals and to society as a whole. These challenges confront boys and young men of color regardless of social class. Being middle class and even affluent does not necessarily shield boys and men of color from experiences of racial and ethnic prejudice, such as “driving while black—or brown—or immigrant.” Higher socioeconomic standing does not shield young men of color from “extra” surveillance in “good neighborhoods” (that just might be their own), or lowered expectations and evaluations in schools and the workplace, or outright job discrimination.

For all boys and young men of color, the subtle and not-so-subtle stereotyping and subsequent treatment constrain their choices and can inhibit well-being and sense of self-worth. For all boys and young men of color, prevailing stereotypes dictate proscribed behaviors in order to avoid immediately being perceived as inferior—or, worse, dangerous and threatening. When boys and young men of color do step out of bounds, the repercussions are often severe and life-altering. The disproportionately punitive approach to dealing with boys and young men of color creates a vicious cycle, as data on the higher prevalence of negative outcomes is used to further pathologize this population and renew existing destructive narratives. This feeds our implicit or unconscious biases toward boys and young men of color in ways we are often unaware.

Being routinely misunderstood and treated with suspicion and hostility causes damage and personal pain in countless children and adolescents. This mistreatment also deprives boys and young men of color of the support needed for normal child and adolescent development. When the above result in developmental and emotional difficulties, some may act out in dangerous, destructive, or unlawful ways. Their stories—because they fit an existing cultural narrative—then resonate and are seen as confirming “what we know” about the population. At the other end of the spectrum, boys and young men of color who succeed are positioned either as exceptions or exceptional, or as proof that racism and prejudice do not exist. These narratives all get in the way of constructive dialogue about improving outcomes for this population.

Boys and young men of color grow up in a world that sends constant messages that they are dangerous, threatening, and unintelligent—and therefore unworthy of the nurturing so necessary for the healthy development of every child, regardless of color. This negative focus clouds our ability to see many of the exogenous factors that affect their lives, well-being, and development. It also affects our ability to see them as children deserving of protection—or adolescents still developing their identities and needing patient guidance. Recent research shows black boys as young as 10 are viewed as older than they actually are. They are also perceived to be less innocent than white boys (Goff et al. 2014). This same study also found that at age 13, black boys are viewed as adults and fully responsible for their actions. In contrast, previous research has shown that white boys are often viewed as less responsible for their actions into their twenties (Kimmel 2008)—a more appropriate response that is in keeping with newer research on maturity and adolescent brain development.

An emerging and growing body of work on adolescent brain development reveals that for all youth, impulse control and decisionmaking skills are not fully formed until the mid-twenties. In fact, the very brain plasticity necessary for adolescent development can lead to poor decisionmaking and risky behavior (Giedd 2009; Reyna and Farley 2006). However, adolescent males of color are not afforded the normal development trajectory by society.

During childhood and adolescence, testing boundaries and challenging authority are normal and necessary aspects of human development. Unfortunately, boys and men of color are often not allowed the privilege of having their missteps considered in a forgiving light. Viewed from a more appropriate (and compassionate) child development and trauma-informed perspective, we can reframe our thinking about boys and young men of color as needing the care and support of adults who seek to safeguard them in the protection of childhood as appropriate.

This new understanding can be the beginning of a multipronged effort (media outlets, pop-culture drivers, policy community, research community, etc.) to end the harmful narrative that shapes how we view and talk about boys and young men of color—and how we subsequently respond to and treat this group. It is imperative that we restore the sanctity of childhood for boys and young men of color; without this, we rob them of something precious and irretrievable.

The System and Institutional Context

In addition to living in a sociocultural environment that too often views them as latent—if not active—threats, boys and young men of color suffer disproportionately from institutional mechanisms and policies that systematically put them at a disadvantage. Complex government policies and institutional practices—both intentional and unintentional—interact to create a tangle of barriers that make successful transition to adulthood exceedingly difficult, especially for boys and young men of color who grow up in vulnerable circumstances. In nearly every system that has an impact on boys and young men of color, rules and practices conspire to create poor or diminished outcomes. These outcomes do not necessarily result from conscious individual decisions or even deliberate institutional choices. Often the rules or policies that lead to disparate impacts are the result of legacy decisions or responses to symptoms instead of underlying societal problems. These systems—each generating its own disadvantages—intertwine and build on each other to produce racialized outcomes in economic opportunity and well-being (powell 2009).

Because racially disparate outcomes are not necessarily the result of conscious decisions, it is crucial to examine how policies and practices within and across institutions reinforce disadvantage—regardless of intent. Policies or program that may be neutral in design may not be neutral in effect (powell 2009). Because “structures have long half-lives” (powell 2013, 39), we may not see that current outcomes are the direct result of past decisions that may not have been color-blind. Ignoring this allows older decisions and thinking to persist in present-day effects. Even if a particular institution is not responsible for outcomes, it can take responsibility for correcting the impact.

To address problems in these systems, it is first essential to understand that residential segregation helped establish and still perpetuates the underlying dynamics by which people of color—especially boys and young men—experience diminished outcomes. The inequality that stems from the geographic segregation of people by race and ethnicity is reinforced through a political system that finances and delivers many public services based on residential location. This system yields differential treatment by race and income that is then justified by political boundaries. Disparities in local services are attributed to the natural result of family choices in housing location, a conclusion that conveniently forgets that both explicit government policies and private housing practices set up racial segregation in the first place. While the blatant housing discrimination of the past has greatly diminished, recent paired testing research has found that real estate agents and rental housing providers recommend and show fewer available homes and apartments to people of color than equally qualified whites (Turner et al. 2013). Further, such current policies as exclusionary zoning continue to preclude the access of lower-income households (and consequently, a disproportionate share of households of color) from communities that offer the greatest opportunities.

Four institutional systems in which boys and young men of color face substantial barriers and which profoundly affect their life courses are education, employment and economic opportunity, social services, and justice. Changes to key mechanisms and policies within each of these systems could reform how they interact with boys and men of color to minimize harms and create positive outcomes.

Education System Barriers

School social composition and school resources matter profoundly to student outcomes, above and beyond individual characteristics of poverty or minority status (Borman and Dowling 2010; Darling-Hammond and Post 2000). While socioeconomic and racial residential segregation have laid a foundation for the underresourcing of high-needs schools, many aspects of how school systems and individual school leadership operate profoundly deepen the problem. Students in high-needs schools are more likely to experience higher levels of family instability and neighborhood distress—placing a tremendous load on schools and systems that predominantly serve students of color. Unfortunately, policy and regulatory responses to these strains often exacerbate the situation.

Among the most important resource deficiencies facing many minority serving schools are high student-teacher ratios and a shortage of highly qualified teachers (US Department of Education 2014c). In addition, these schools tend to have fewer specialized courses. This includes both insufficient classes to help students who are having difficulty and, at the other end of the spectrum, a paucity of advanced courses to help prepare students to take on the demands of a college curriculum (US Department of Education 2014a). Compounding this problem is inadequate access to resources—especially technological resources—that would help teachers with their work. Quite simply, many minority-serving schools fail to provide sufficiently effective instruction and rigorous offerings that support students' acquisition of core skills in elementary school or their successful transition from the vulnerable middle-school grades to high school and post-high school.

Socioemotional development and classroom comportment—and their relationship to teachers' perceptions of academic competence—are issues for boys regardless of color (Cornwell, Mustard, and Van Parys 2013). For boys and young men of color, this concern is magnified. Many teachers are unaware of, or untrained in recognizing and managing, the socioemotional health issues to which many boys and young men of color from challenging circumstances are prone. These issues can manifest early on as restlessness and disruptive behavior, and later as absenteeism and truancy. Without adequate counseling and supportive services, schools often adopt punitive and counterproductive discipline policies in response to misbehavior.

In addition, from very young ages, boys of color are more likely to be tracked into special education classes or misdiagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (McNeil, Capage, and Bennett 2002), setting them on a wrongheaded remedial education path. The under- and over-identification of boys of color within special education have had important implications for boys' learning opportunities; in many cases, they have had the exact opposite effect of what special education law intended. Many of these students are not appropriately screened or identified for learning disabilities, and they have behavioral challenges that are poorly managed in both disciplinary and academic outcomes. As a consequence they are denied a full array of high-quality academic and extracurricular options. Many drivers of these adverse outcomes are reflections of perverse financial and incentive structures built into the special education program itself (Aron and Loprest 2012).

The totality of these policies only serves to further alienate these boys and young men—leading to disengagement and, sometimes, dropping out (Noguera 2003). Worse, disproportionate suspension and expulsion policies and school referrals to the juvenile justice system fuel the school-to-prison pipeline as idle and disconnected young men engage in risky behavior (US Department of Education 2014b).

In addition to system- and school-level challenges, problems exist at the class level. Some teachers unwittingly contribute to the problem with questionable and ineffective classroom practices. Emerging evidence reveals implicit teacher bias against students of color in the classroom (Tenenbaum and Ruck 2007). Often without being aware, teachers may act out their ingrained prejudices about boys and young men of color, resulting in lowered expectations for performance and therefore teaching style. Even worse, these biases can contribute to the more punitive treatment of young boys of color because teachers find them troublesome or threatening (Skiba et al. 2002).

Economic Opportunity System Barriers

Young men of color face many employment barriers that exacerbate the skill shortfalls that often result from attending substandard schools. Social science research has long documented how segregated housing patterns—with people of color clustered in poor and low-income neighborhoods within central cities, inner-ring suburbs, or Native reservations with few job opportunities—have created serious employment barriers. In many cases, low- and middle-skill jobs have left these neighborhoods and moved to the suburbs (or other countries). American Indians living on reservations may be the most isolated, experiencing both geographic isolation from significant employment opportunities and social isolation from job networks. Latino men have more connections to jobs than black or Native men, but these networks typically extend only to the low-wage labor market (Spaulding et al. 2015).

Obtaining employment is especially challenging when people of color are less welcome in neighborhoods where good jobs exist. Among the specific barriers and boys of men of color face are greater difficulties in learning about these jobs and an absence of networks of people to give references. Also, the lack of proximity and access to job centers can be problematic. Mass transit is often less available in high-minority neighborhoods—a serious constraint on employment opportunities. Early acquisition of skills and work experience are crucial for later success in the job market. So, if young men of color miss out at an early age, they can be disadvantaged throughout their lives.

In addition, outright discrimination continues to play a role in the employment of young men of color and their ability to gain work experience. Paired-testing studies have found that young black and Hispanic men applying for entry-level jobs face discrimination throughout the job application process. They are less likely than similarly qualified whites to be invited to apply, interviewed, or offered a position (Turner, Fix, and Struyk 1991). More recent studies of hiring discrimination confirm that young men of color face continuing barriers to employment. For example, résumés with white-sounding names are 50 percent more likely than those with black-sounding names to generate callbacks from employers. Moreover, having better credentials significantly improves the rate of callbacks for the résumés with white-sounding names, but not for the résumés with black-sounding names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). A paired-testing study focused on the interaction of race and criminal records

found that in the absence of any criminal record, the chance of getting called back by a prospective employer is lower for Hispanic job applicants than for equally qualified whites, and even lower for blacks. Further, black applicants with clean records got callbacks or job offers about as often as white applicants with felony convictions (Pager 2003; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009).

Social Services System Barriers

For all its gaps and weaknesses, the US system of social welfare is largely centered around providing benefits to children. For this reason, most safety-net programs end up targeting single mothers, who overwhelmingly have custody of children. As a result, men are often excluded from receiving assistance. In addition, as a part of the system's "work-first" agenda, most means-tested programs try to discourage able-bodied working-age adults from receiving benefits. While promoting employment is a laudable goal, the system provides insufficient incentives to encourage and support work. Worse, some of its provisions actually discourage formal employment—especially for young men.

One of this nation's most successful antipoverty and work-promoting programs—the earned income tax credit, which ties benefits to earnings—is limited for noncustodial parents who work (Rodriguez 2013). In addition, unnecessarily punitive child-support policies can actively discourage employment for many low-wage fathers (Boggess, Price, and Rodriguez 2014, 12–14). Obviously, fathers have both a legal and moral obligation to financially support their offspring, and the system should pursue deadbeats. However, the child support enforcement system can create seriously perverse incentives at the low-wage end of the system. The system does not adequately account for the intermittency of low-wage work (Boggess, Price, and Rodriguez 2014, 9, 17). The arrears that can build up often make work in the "informal" economy more advantageous. Further, many public housing and voucher programs restrict men not directly related to the leaseholder from residing in their properties. This policy not only removes a source of stability for many young men, it also discourages stable family formation, as many of these men are the fathers of children residing there.

Justice System Barriers

Of the systems examined here, the justice system arguably has the most destructive relationship with boys and men of color of all ages. The fact that interactions with this system begin at very early ages is particularly alarming. Partly owing to their residence in segregated, high-crime neighborhoods, boys and men of color are subject to greater surveillance. This surveillance can create a self-fulfilling prophecy as these interactions result in higher rates of getting caught for minor offenses and plays into higher rates of criminal justice involvement. This extra surveillance also corrupts the dynamic between boys and men of color and law enforcement. In many low-income neighborhoods, police officers are viewed as antagonistic occupying forces, not as problem solvers and peace keepers. The difficult circumstances in which many boys and young men of color grow up are only compounded by the often demeaning and hostile treatment of authorities. Law enforcement behaviors and interactions with young men of color often undermine the perceived legitimacy of its authority. Basic harassment and disparate treatment for low-level offenses—or manufactured offenses (stop and frisk practices)—only

exacerbate the problem. Far too often, the police fail to deescalate tense situations with youth of color, leading to excessive force, unnecessary arrests, and sometimes death.

When actual offenses occur, the justice system penalizes young men of color more harshly (Alexander 2010). The problem is exacerbated by a juvenile justice system that often tracks young offenders into the adult system instead of meting out age-appropriate, individualized remedies. Not only does this practice not reduce crime (McGowan et al. 2008), research suggests that juveniles tried as adults are more likely to commit future crimes than those who remain in the juvenile system (Loughran et al. 2009; Nagin 1998; Nagin, Cullen, and Johnson 2009). In fact, research shows that involvement in either the juvenile justice or criminal justice system increases the chances of further justice-system involvement (Lieberman, Kirk, and Kim 2014). Further, the sentencing guidelines from the War on Drugs disproportionately treat the offenses of black and brown men far more severely than those of white men (e.g., punishment for crack versus powdered cocaine). In addition, mandatory minimum sentences unduly punish some, sending them to jail for extended periods for nonviolent offenses.

The collateral consequences of incarceration are steep. Criminal convictions further undermine the life chances of young men by interfering with school completion. Criminal records make it difficult for young men to be employed upon release; some types of employment are cut off permanently. The fact that many of these young men also build up nearly insurmountable child-support debt while in prison makes the barrier to employment that much higher; any wages they might earn after release are subject to immediate garnishment. Further, the rising use of probation and parole “user fees” to cover state budget gaps impose severe costs on low-income people convicted of crime and can seriously undermine stable reentry (Bannon, Nagrecha, and Diller 2010).

The Neighborhood and Community Context

Children and their families do not live in vacuums. Children grow up in neighborhoods—environments that shape their daily lives and can either enhance or undermine their ability to navigate the world and acquire the skills essential for healthy development. Neighborhoods also affect parents’ ability to provide important foundational needs for their children, such as financial stability and safe, secure, and nurturing environments.

Communities are the conduits through which institutional and structural marginalization are meted out. Moreover, neighborhood segregation can make institutional and system marginalization invisible and ingrained; racially and ethnically charged decisions from the past play themselves out here. Where we live affects our exposure to crime and violence, access to jobs, and quality of services (from both public- and private-sector institutions)—most important, schools. In addition, neighborhoods are hubs for peer influences and social and career networks that can support or weaken child and family well-being.

Boys and young men of color disproportionately grow up in communities that fail to provide the protections granted to many of their peers. These communities include severely distressed central-city neighborhoods, chronically poor rural areas, and Native American reservations, which have some of the

highest rates of poverty and distress in the nation. The extreme level of racial segregation affects all people of color, not just the poor. Even middle-class, predominantly minority neighborhoods are generally worse off than white neighborhoods with comparable income levels: minority neighborhoods have lower house price appreciation, fewer neighborhood amenities, lower-performing schools, and higher crime rates (Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Pattillo 2005). Lenders have been less willing to invest in predominantly minority communities (Oliver and Shapiro 1997) or have offered predatory loans and loan terms that strip wealth from minority homeowners rather than help them build wealth (Calem, Gillen, and Wachter 2004; Engel and McCoy 2008). Consequently, house values—and property tax revenues—typically lag in predominantly minority communities, limiting the capacity of local government to deliver high-quality public services. And public-sector agencies have a history of neglecting or underserving minority communities.

When neighborhoods are economically distressed, these disparities become even starker. Almost 4 million poor children—most of them children of color—are growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods.² In fact, 9 out of 10 poor children living in high-poverty neighborhoods are children of color.³ Poor whites, by and large, do not live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. While whites may face material deprivation, their neighborhoods give them greater access to well-functioning institutions and safer environments. Conditions in distressed neighborhoods significantly undermine children's life chances and increase their risk of remaining poor as adults (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2008). Studies have found evidence of damage at every stage of life. Preschool children living in low-income neighborhoods exhibit more aggressive behavior when interacting with others. Young people in high-poverty neighborhoods are less successful in school than their counterparts from more affluent communities; they earn lower grades, are more likely to drop out, and are less likely to go to college. Further, children exposed to violence experience physical, mental, and emotional trauma, which can lead to difficulties with attachment, anxiety and depression, behavioral problems, and perpetration of violence (Boivin et al. 2012; Buka et al. 2001; Kilpatrick, Saunders, and Smith 2003).

Given their environmental conditions, boys and young men of color require additional support and nurturing to stay on track, but insufficient resources currently exist. Exposure to neighborhood violence, concentrated poverty, substandard schools, and toxic levels of stress are all far more common for this population. As a society, we fail to recognize that some behaviors boys and young men of color express are in fact age and context appropriate. These negative behaviors are often logical responses to navigating the difficult terrain of tough urban neighborhoods. However, these same “adaptive” behaviors can undercut success in the classroom and relations with authority figures. Our system's one-dimensional view of the behavior (or merely demeanor) of boys and young men of color leads to disproportionate and punitive reactions to normal responses to their environments. This in turn leads to increased school suspensions, expulsions, and exposure to the criminal justice system.

Emerging evidence suggests that living in a high-poverty neighborhood undermines some outcomes across generations. For example, children whose parents grew up in poor neighborhoods score dramatically worse on reading and problem-solving tests than those whose parents grew up in nonpoor neighborhoods, other things being equal (Sharkey 2013). The impact of tough neighborhoods on boys

and men of color is particularly profound. One striking example is the research showing concentrated disadvantage strongly predicts later incarceration. Making this problem even more intractable is that these same communities disproportionately receive the convicted felons once they are released from prison (Sampson and Loeffler 2010)—often stripped of voting rights, disqualified from receiving many state licenses, and far less employable because of their criminal records. The large numbers of unemployed and disenfranchised men destabilize the community and further the cycle of disengagement and consequent recidivism.

In addition to the human toll imposed by concentrated poverty, what makes racially segregated neighborhoods an even more compelling policy priority is that these communities did not get this way on their own. Both the private housing market and federal and local governments created these neighborhoods through discriminatory lending policies and explicit housing and urban redevelopment policies. While the legal framework that created these neighborhoods has been largely dismantled, we have been left with a structure that is now maintained through political fragmentation, exclusionary zoning, fractured transportation networks, and growth policies that privilege suburbs over central cities. As a consequence, unequal neighborhoods, barriers to housing access, and subsequent disparities in community health have become part of the invisible institutional system that deprives people of color of full societal opportunities. To improve the life outcomes for families of color—which account for most of those living in severely distressed neighborhoods—policies, programs, and interventions must explicitly target the neighborhood conditions most damaging to family well-being and children’s healthy development.

The Family Context

The family context into which children are born shapes every aspect of their lives. The relative strength or weakness of a family can transmit advantage or disadvantage—providing essential protection and supports or inflicting stress and emotional trauma. Over the past several decades, research from multiple fields has produced critical insights into the conditions that support or undermine healthy child and adolescent development. These findings affirm the importance of a strong and healthy start for lifelong physical and socioemotional health (Halfon and Hochstein 2002; Hertzman and Bertrand 2007; NRC and IOM 2009). The family should provide the foundation for a stable and nurturing environment in which a child can thrive. Strong families can buffer children from a multitude of societal harms, while weak family and parental supports can create their own damage and magnify harms from other environmental contexts.

That nearly 40 percent of boys and young men of color grow up without their fathers at home—and some with fathers largely absent from their lives—has a profound negative impact on their development and well-being (Balcom 1998). Black and Native American children are disproportionately affected by father absence. Of course, father presence in the home is not always a good thing—especially when there has been domestic violence. However, on the whole, children benefit when they can build strong bonds with both their parents. A host of research demonstrates that children whose fathers are involved have better academic success, reduced delinquency, and reduced substance abuse (Amato and

Gilbreth 1999; Carlson 2006; Cooksey and Fondell 1996; Furstenberg et. al. 1990; Hair et al. 2008; Lamb 2004). In addition, greater father involvement is associated with reduced poverty, better maternal and child health, and reduced teen pregnancy (Matthews, Curtin, and MacDorman 1998; Teachman 2004).⁴ As of 2009, nearly three-quarters of black children were born outside marriage, and 53 percent lived without their fathers; for Latinos, these numbers were 53 and 31 percent, respectively (Acs 2013). Far too often, this absence is because of incarceration.

A wide body of research has generated new insights into child development and the time frame for full maturation. We now better appreciate how crucial maternal health and stress levels are to the well-being of the developing fetus—including implications for later life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [2005] 2014). In addition, there is a growing understanding of the complexity and importance of brain development in the first three years of life. At this age, parental interaction and cognitive stimulation are vital for vocabulary acquisition and later learning. At the other end of the child development continuum, recent research on adolescent brain development challenges current assumptions about when a person reaches emotional maturity and is fully cognizant of the implications of his or her actions. At this stage—which lasts to approximately age 24–25—parental and caring adult guidance are still needed to patiently shepherd these emerging adults through crucial life-forming decisions (Giedd 2009; Reyna and Farley 2006).

Regardless of social, economic, or cultural circumstances, the essential and foundational needs of children include responsive caregiving, safe and secure environments, adequate and appropriate nutrition, and health-promoting behaviors and habits. The primary responsibility of families in general, and parents in particular, is to provide these most basic needs. Sufficient human capital, financial resources, time investments, and psychological resources all determine a family's ability to provide these developmental requirements. Family structure—especially father absence—play a large role in how well these needs are met.

Employment Resources

Parents of boys and young men of color tend to have lower levels of both college and high school completion. This affects not only their ability to obtain well-paying and stable employment, but also their capacity to help with schoolwork and generally advocate for their children's education. This disparity is especially evident among parents with limited English proficiency. Partly because of these lower education levels, the parents of boys and men of color have less or weak employment—leading to lower incomes overall and less employment stability.

Financial Resources

The research consensus points to the strong influence of family economic resources on healthy child development (NRC and IOM 2009). Boys and young men of color are subject to inordinate environmental threats from which the family structure—even in the best of circumstances—may not be able to fully shield them. Middle-class families with solid education and employment histories provide some degree of protection, but they do not make boys and young men of color impervious to other

environmental factors. However, these families are far better equipped to create a home life that insulates boys and young men—for at least part of the day—and fortifies them with a healthy self-concept that equips them to confront challenges in other environmental layers.

Because they are disproportionately low-income or poor, many families of boys and men of color struggle to meet their foundational needs and protect them from external damage. These families are more likely than white families to lack essential resources and must deal with the same tough environments as their children. Many parents of vulnerable children grew up in similarly difficult circumstances and are still coping with the effects of the inadequate supports they received during their own formative years. This problem is, at its core, multigenerational. While many low-income poor and boys and young men of color grow up in loving families, because of their economic circumstances, they may be unable to equip their children with the necessary skills and information to successfully navigate the world.

Time Resources

Low-income and poor parents who are employed also tend to have limited quality time to spend with their children, often because of the long hours, long commutes to job centers, and intermittent work schedules (with limited sick and holiday pay) typified by low-wage work. These problems are further magnified when only one parent is present to provide the caregiving.

Psychological Resources

Growing evidence demonstrates that children are better off when they live with both their parents—when they are in permanent and healthy relationships (Sawhill 2014). Boys and men of color are also more likely to be born to teen parents—putting this group in a particularly vulnerable situation, as their parents have not finished maturing themselves.

Because they are more likely to be low-income or poor, the parents of boys and men of color are also more likely to have poor socioemotional health—especially the mothers at or near birth. Research has found that maternal depression is more common among poor and near-poor mothers⁵ and can slow down children’s brain development, affecting their ability to learn and their later physical and mental health (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [2005] 2014). Further, depression and stress are associated with less responsive caregiving, which has long-lasting effects on the developing brain both through attachment and progress of biological systems (Lupien et al. 2000). Obviously, this finding has massive implications for child-rearing.

Role of the Research Community

The ways we in the research community define and frame our work can often perpetuate harmful stereotypes and narratives surrounding boys and young men of color. In neglecting to provide appropriate context, our research and analyses often fail to address systemic drivers of poor outcomes for people of color. Further, our research design and analytic methods often do not fully capture the complexity of an issue. By focusing solely on individual- or family-level variables—perhaps because those are the only data readily available—we attribute outcomes to individual (or individual group) causes rather than consider environmental, institutional, or political factors that may be much more important to understanding and addressing a given social or economic problem. In this way, the research community often contributes to limited, inaccurate, or distorted narratives.

As responsible researchers, we need to be more attentive to the questions we ask, whom we ask, what data we collect and use, how we interpret our data, and what conclusions we draw. We also need to think about what aspects of problems we choose to focus on (and why), what sources we find credible, and what institutional structures and societal norms we take for granted.

Though we are skilled at producing facts and figures and tables and charts, what we often lack are perspective and understanding. We must ingrain in our work an awareness of how contexts, environments, and social structures shape the lives of boys and young men of color. Failing to do so not only privileges the status quo, but also produces incomplete evidence that reinforces prejudice and misunderstanding.

Finally, a more holistic picture requires spanning a wide body of research disciplines, many of which are currently siloed. We must acknowledge how disciplinary distinctions shape our thinking. These biases blind us to broader perspectives that are critical to understanding the dynamics shaping boys and young men of color's lives. By failing to do this, we risk diminishing our credibility and relevance in this profoundly important conversation.

Conclusions

To tackle the problems faced by boys and men of color at the root, we as a nation must reorient our thinking about the impacts of each environmental layer in order to remove barriers and create opportunities that allow these children and young men to succeed and thrive. We must also examine the influence of the implicit biases that operate within each of these contexts and how they influence our perceptions of boys and young men of color and how we treat them. These implicit (or unconscious) biases “not only affect our perceptions, but our policies and institutional arrangements” (powell 2013, 41). As a society, our actions and inactions contribute to an overburdened social supports network, failing minority-serving schools, and a system of policing and incarceration run amok. Most important, we must attend to the severe human toll we impose on millions of boys and young men whose lives are systematically diminished without our even being fully aware of what is getting in their way. They lose out and the country loses out on their talent and promise.

This nation's challenges around race, ethnicity, and gender are deep-rooted and complex. A further complicating factor is that the dynamics of fear, prejudice, and animus often operate in ways of which

we are unaware. Excising these malignancies from our national consciousness, as well as our laws, policies, and individual actions will not be simple or quick. In some cases, we can point to a clear need for changes to policies and practices that systematically disadvantage specific groups. Other areas necessitate a deeper examination of the processes and phenomena that lead to differential outcomes. All of it requires a willingness to be open to reflection and self-examination. We must be willing to say and hear difficult and uncomfortable things and allow for awkwardness and mistakes. While there might not be agreement, we must allow conflicting ideas and opinions to be expressed with sincerity, thoughtfulness, and civility.

We are already a diverse society—and growing more so every day. This will not change, so we must. Not having the answers (yet) is no reason not to undertake this effort. We won't always get it right, but we can learn as we proceed. Failing to do this allows ugliness from our nation's past to pervade our present and our future.

As a relatively young nation, we have made tremendous and admirable strides in correcting past wrongs and incorporating different races and genders as full members. None of this has happened without struggle. To continue moving forward in a way that lives up to this nation's promise, we must do our part to advance this unfinished work with a determination to consciously and deliberately craft our E Pluribus Unum.

Notes

1. This framework pulls from the ecological perspective developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (197), which is widely accepted in the field of developmental psychology.
2. High-poverty neighborhoods are defined here as census tracts with poverty rates above 30 percent. This rate is a widely used proxy for serious neighborhood disinvestment and distress. See Ellen and Turner (1997) and Turner and Rawlings (2009) for reviews of the research literature on neighborhood effects.
3. Data from the American Community Survey, 2007–11.
4. See also “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2011,” table C8 (Poverty Status, Food Stamp Receipt, and Public Assistance for Children under 18 Years by Selected Characteristics: 2011), US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2011.html>
5. Twenty-five percent of poor mothers of 9-month-old babies are severely or moderately depressed, compared with approximately 17 percent of near-poor mothers and just over 10 percent of nonpoor mothers (Center on the Developing Child 2009, 2).

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