

*Police Perspective*

# Education in an Antisocial Environment: Challenges for a Community Plagued by Outdated Ideas of Victimhood

by Rodney Demery\*

With the rise of reality television shows that portray pastors in prominent roles, we see that members of the clergy remain important cultural guides and leaders in America. Religious leaders have long been social leaders as well, due to their influence on congregations that often extends beyond the walls of their churches. This is especially true among blacks, where the church in many instances is seen as an important part of the community.

Perhaps the best-known religious leader to become a pivotal cultural and social leader was Martin Luther King, Jr., who galvanized the American population for social change that can still be felt today. While the ideas that King espoused have timeless appeal, many other religious leaders who also seek to spur social and civic change have outdated ideas and thoughts that threaten the future of the black community in America. These ideas are so detrimental that they are contributing to delinquency and the high prison populations.

Of course, not all black leaders or members of the clergy are doing this. Some are sharing true messages of change that can advance our families, our communities, and even this nation. But it seems that those who share the outdated and negative ideas are the ones we hear from most often. The leaders who share these outdated views espouse a notion that the black citizen is a victim in this country. When the message is crafted in victimhood, it sets up those who listen to that message to see themselves as victims of “the man,” and as people who see no alternative but to engage in wrongdoing, as they are being

told that they are more likely to end up behind bars simply because of the color of their skin.

And when they do end up behind bars, it’s easy to ascribe that outcome to having been caught up in the racist system, rather than to the individual’s own actions having led to the incarceration. These leaders’ messages remove the personal responsibility from the individual, replacing it with a “blame game” mentality that causes the individual to look to others for answers to his or her plight.

## Blacks as “Victims” Perpetuated as Truth

This mentality promoted by black leadership—often pastors—as well as media, music, and movies, along with some parents, puts youth at an emotional disadvantage. It is an emotional disadvantage because the young people believe what they are being told and begin to see themselves as victims, feeling inferior to others simply because of the color of their skin.

Those in black leadership point to historic firsts that happened decades ago as examples of blacks having to overcome “the man” and “the system” to achieve. They point to George Washington Carver’s discovery of more than 300 uses for the peanut or Dr. Charles Richard Drew’s work pioneering blood plasma separation and invention of the blood bank. While those achievements were important at the time and still have cultural significance, continuing to promote them as examples of victimized blacks overcoming white oppression is handicapping our children.

Promoting those achievements was probably important when blacks were held back because of systemic racial injustices, but to promote them now in that same context is ridiculous. Blacks are not held back by systemic racial injustices. I believe the argument that blacks are being oppressed because of

race today rings false when we realize that we have a black man who is the President of the United States. But it is not a false argument because Barack Obama is President of this country; it is false because blacks are in every branch of government and serve at high levels. We have a black man on the U.S. Supreme Court. We have more than 40 blacks in Congress, including those who represent some of the states often termed “racist.” We have blacks who head major corporations, including Don Thompson, CEO of McDonald’s; Kenneth Chenault, CEO of American Express; and Ursula Burns, CEO of Xerox.

These examples all show that blacks are not being oppressed and that with hard work, determination, and positive decision making, black youth can aspire to achieve the same high goals. The point that black leadership, including those who manage programs for criminal offenders, should bring out, rather than focus on blacks as victims, is to focus on blacks as masters of their own destinies. Helping young black kids see that they can have good lives, successful careers, and positive outcomes can do more to keep black children out of prison than anything else, I believe.

The reality is that with the right education and perseverance, a young black kid’s potential is limitless. Sure, there was a day when a black person could be arrested for using the “whites only” restroom. Now, though, we have blacks who are heads of police departments. There was a time when a black person could be imprisoned for reading. Now, blacks lead colleges and universities. There was a time when blacks could not vote. Now, blacks are sought after by political parties. All of the overt racism condoned through social and governmental action is in the past.

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Now, it is about our present and future. If we are to reclaim black youth from the streets and from prisons, they need to look to the future, not the past. They need to see the possibility of what can be, rather than the distorted view of someone's opinion of today. They need to know intellectually that they can achieve and to feel emotionally that they have the capacity to do so, if only they would apply themselves and strive. In other words, they need to get the message that the future is up to them, not the ghosts of long-dead racist white men.

### **How We See Ourselves**

The reason that this message is important is that the prison population is disproportionately black. And many of

inmates is that a young person can enter prison as simply a kid who made a bad choice and can leave as a hardened, criminal-minded individual.

The problem we are facing is that people come out of prison—and most eventually do—and they are not socialized. They do not know how to function in society, and the likelihood is high that they will end up right back in prison. The correctional facilities should prepare people in a fashion that is more geared toward socialization because otherwise, we are locking up offenders and only compounding the problem. We put them in an environment that encourages antisocial behavior, and we wonder why they come out worse than when they went in.

As a homicide detective, I have seen this outcome in my work. One case imme-

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*Using the skills of attack she learned in prison, she killed an elderly woman, because she wanted to rob the woman of money to buy more drugs.*

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those blacks come from disadvantaged, poor backgrounds, where they did not see the possibility that they could do anything other than become criminals. And so their actions followed their thoughts: They dealt drugs, robbed, killed.

Blacks make up just over 13% of the U.S. population, but black men make up 40% of this country's prison population. That is a serious disparity. And we've got to do something about it. I think change starts with what I have talked about here: our ideas of who we are. We can be victims, or we can be masters of our own destinies.

### **Incarceration as Punishment Misses the Point**

Once a person goes to prison, his life is largely over. It is largely over because our prison system used to be about rehabilitation—helping inmates become better so that they can successfully re-enter society. But now, prison is about punishment; rehabilitation is just a word of a time gone by. What that means for

diately comes to mind: A young woman was arrested for a drug crime. She went in as a nonviolent drug user but came out as a violent criminal. Using the skills of attack she learned in prison, she stabbed and killed an elderly woman, all because she wanted to rob the woman of money to buy more drugs.

There was no rehabilitation of this woman. Instead, she came out of prison even worse than she went in, educated in an antisocial environment.

What if her case had been handled differently? What if she had been treated as someone with a medical condition—an addiction, an illness—that needed to be addressed? What if she had been given the tools to fight her addiction? What if she had been in a supportive environment that taught her coping skills, educated her, and provided resources for her to successfully re-enter society? In other words, what if socialization had been the goal? That elderly woman might still be alive.

### **Families, Communities, and the Nation Are at Stake**

Incarceration leads to deterioration of the family. The mindset of the child that I come into contact with in my work is that of a very young kid who is violent and facing prison time. The father is incarcerated, or the mother is serving a prison sentence for a drug crime. That is usually what happens when the family is torn apart. Drug use and drug sales are a result of that. What I have often seen is that the mother, facing the economic strain of the father being gone, becomes part of the drug trade. She gets arrested and imprisoned. The child has a poor outcome as a result.

The child sees no way out of a life of crime, because that is all he or she has seen. The parents are locked up or absent for some other reason. Community leaders, including religious leaders, paint the black youth as victims of a racist society. The children perceive themselves as victims and begin to believe that the only way they can survive is to act in criminal ways.

And so the cycle continues.

That is the socialization.

And that is why we've got to make two changes. First, our leaders, parents, media organizations, and others must change the narrative. It is not only inappropriate to continue to tell the same old, tired, sad black American story; it is detrimental. To continue to do so would be irresponsible. And, second, for those already involved in the penal system, we've got to change how we view them. We must focus on socialization and not just punishment, if we want to change the outcome when inmates emerge from those prison walls.

Black leadership and parents can convey a new message, rather than simply defend and accept the old one. And black media, music, and movies must do the same. This is in stark contrast to the usual message we receive in so much black media, music, and movies now, where we see preconceived notions and stereotypes perpetuated that in turn become self-fulfilling prophecies in the lives of the young people who consume this fare.

It is time to tell a new story, if we want to see a different ending. ■



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