



sharing child and youth development knowledge
volume 29, number 3
2016

Social Policy Report

Development of Boys and Young Men of Color: Implications of Developmental Science for My Brother's Keeper Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Boys and men of color (BMOC) are at significant risks for poor outcomes across multiple domains including education, health, and financial well-being with little promise of improvement in the near future. Out of concern for this situation, President Obama instituted the My Brother's Keeper Initiative (MBKI) to enlist the combined resources of federal, state, and local governments as well as human services, philanthropy, and business sectors. This *Social Policy Report* describes MBKI and summarizes ideas gleaned from developmental science that may be useful in efforts to reach the MBKI goals of school readiness, competent reading by third grade, high school and college completion, successful entry into the work force, and reduction of violence. Policy recommendations are offered along with suggestions for research that might involve developmental scientists in this effort.

Author's Note

We would like to thank members of the Boys of Color Research Collaborative for their insightful comments and helpful suggestions for improving this report especially Iheoma Iruka, Emilie Smith, Natasha Cabrera, Aline Hitti, and Sheila Davis.

Social Policy Report

Volume 29, Number 3 | 2016

ISSN 1075-7031

www.srcd.org/publications/social-policy-report

Social Policy Report
is published four times a year by the
Society for Research in
Child Development.

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From the Editor

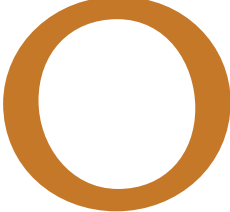
In an imaginary egalitarian society devoid of a history of bondage and economic struggles, the color of one's skin, the cut of one's hair, or the phrases in one's language might make little difference. But, in 21ST century America we have constant reminders that such differences exist and are associated with heightened concerns about the welfare of individuals of color, and especially boys and young men. An abiding belief in American society is in the ideal that everyone should have a fair chance at success in life, regardless of origin, upbringing, race, gender, or ethnicity. A primary reflection of this value is in President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative, which has the purpose of activating and coordinating federal, state, and private efforts that may improve the life outcomes of boys and young men of color (BMOC). In this report, the authors describe this ambitious initiative and draw from developmental science to elaborate on several feature elements. They identify six key milestones, which could be thought of as rungs on a "ladder of opportunity" for BMOC. An obvious question is, why not girls and women too? The authors of this report acknowledge that issues related to both genders are important, but boys and young men of color are consistently at the highest risk for the poorest life outcomes (e.g., incarceration, shorter life expectancy, poverty). The authors discuss six features of the initiative designed to promote more positive outcomes and highlight the contributions that developmental science may make to each. They provide policy recommendations that may be drawn from the literature and highlight directions for future research.

In her commentary, Dr. Williams also emphasizes the critical issues facing many BMOC and discusses issues of gender and context that influence life outcomes. She acknowledges the importance of the recommendations offered by the committee and further hones the questions related to each that might be asked. Following a similar theme in noting the positive features of this report in his commentary, Dr. Cunningham notes that the rungs on the ladder of opportunity are quite wide, particularly as children move from "achieving reading competence at 3RD grade" to "graduating from high school." During those formative school years, issues such as identity formation are heavily influenced and have a primary effect on later life outcomes. Importantly, he proposes that developmental science has much to offer in understanding these issues, that future research should be rooted in a strong theoretical framework, and that such theory may need to be based on new innovative research methods that are now available.

Together, this report and these two fine commentaries highlight a major issue existing in America today, describe a potentially important and powerful new initiative, and extend the thinking about how developmental science may contribute to the national dialogue and policy formation.

—Samuel L. Odom (Issue Editor)
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Development of Boys and Young Men of Color: Implications of Developmental Science for My Brother's Keeper Initiative

n almost every indicator of well-being, the vulnerability of boys and young men of color (BMOC) is unmistakable. On negative indicators such as poor health, academic deficits, unemployment, and incarceration, they are over-represented. Conversely, on positive indicators, their presence is barely registered (Barbarin, 2010). In a bold move to draw attention to and to address this problem, President Barack Obama issued a Presidential Memo on February 27, 2014 entitled "Creating and Expanding Ladders of Opportunity for Boys and Young Men of Color." This memo established a high level presidential commission to gather information, propose policies, and implement programs to place more BMOC on a positive developmental trajectory. The memo acknowledged that federal efforts alone in the form of funding, policies, and programs would not be sufficient to improve the conditions of BMOC. Therefore, the memo called for a broad mobilization of local, state, and federal governments together with the business sector, philanthropists, human services organizations, and communities. This *Social Policy Report* (SPR) is a response to the challenge of the My Brother's Keeper Initiative (MBKI): first, by spreading word of the Initiative among developmental scientists in the hope of eliciting a broader response and second, by selectively highlighting insights from developmental science that might be useful to the broad coalition of governments and private sectors embracing the goals of MBKI. This report is an open invitation to developmental scientists

to join this effort through research and by translating existing knowledge to inform the efforts of public and private organizations responding to the President's call.

Background

Demographers project that by 2050, the U.S. population will reflect a demographic shift, wherein persons of color will become the largest percentage of U.S. citizens (Frey, 2014). Germane to our report is the projection that the United States will witness immediate change in the population shift of youth as early as 2018 when children of color will become the majority of youth ages 18 years and younger (Frey, 2014). This changing population pattern calls for ways to develop the talents of BMOC as a way to increase U.S. ability to compete effectively in a

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global market (Wagner & Benavente-McEnergy, 2006). BMOC represent a significant pool of talent that is under-utilized and at present, one in which too

few investments have been made. According to the U.S. 2010 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), there are over 22 million BMOC under the age of 20. Included in this definition of BMOC are African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian boys and young men. The largest group consists of Latino males at 9.9 million of whom 2.8 million are under the age of 5. There are about 7.4 million African American males under the age of 20 of whom about 1.8 million are under the age of 5. There are about 2.6 million Asian American males under the age of 20 of whom about .6 million are under the age of 5. Native

Table 1. Boys of Color in the United States by Age

	Under 5 years old	5-19 years old	Total under 20 years old
Latinos	2,831,000	7,028,000	9,859,000
African Americans	1,853,325	5,563,840	7,417,165
Asian Americans	689,452	1,919,287	2,608,739
Native Americans	286,135	831,587	1,117,722

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

Americans represent the smallest portion at about 1.1 million of whom about .27 million are under the age of 5 (see Table 1).

My Brother's Keeper Initiative

The Presidential Memo of February 2014 that launched the My Brother's Keeper Initiative also created the My Brother's Keeper Federal Task Force to coordinate federal involvement in the work of the Initiative. In its first report to the President, the Task Force documented numerous challenges and conditions BMOC face in education, economics, employment, health, and criminal justice (President's Task Force, 2014). Examples of the challenges underscored in the report include the following:

- Many BMOC grow up in impoverished households and in communities with disproportionately high concentrations of poverty.
- BMOC disproportionately attend high poverty, low performing schools with inexperienced teachers and fewer opportunities to enroll in advanced courses.
- BMOC experience harsher penalties for infractions of rules than Whites and they are less likely to be given a second chance.
- BMOC are more likely than Whites to live in communities with high rates of crime and are more likely to be victims of violence and to have negative encounters with police. They drop out of high school at high rates, experience high rates of teen unemployment, and are often caught up in the criminal justice system.
- Because BMOC enter adulthood with weak employment skills, their prospects for employment are limited to lower wage jobs and they suffer most during economic downturns.

- From childhood through adulthood, BMOC have high rates of preventable chronic diseases and are less likely to be treated early for learning or emotional difficulties.

These patterns are a cause for concern because they significantly impact men's prospects for financial self-sufficiency, health, and well-being over the life course. Moreover, these conditions ripple through family and community, tamping down the likelihood of men of color's full and productive engagement in family and civic life thus affecting future generations. The need for a broad response to concerns about BMOC is driven in part by recognition of how critical this population is and increasingly will be to the nation's prosperity.

The Task Force was established to mobilize efforts of federal executive agencies and to engage state and local governments and the private sector. It was explicitly charged to go beyond enumeration of problems to identify and support sustainable programs and reform policies where necessary. Its programmatic and policy initiatives focused on improving outcomes at several key developmental points aimed at school readiness, competent reading, high school graduation, postsecondary training, and employment. In addition, it targeted change in community life, specifically in terms of a reduction of violence and re-integration of men released from incarceration. The priority goals or foci of the MBKI were articulated in the form of developmental milestones that can also serve as measurable indicators of progress in achieving its goals. These milestones are:

1. Entering school ready to learn
2. Reading at grade level by third grade
3. Graduating from high school ready for college and career
4. Completing postsecondary education or training

5. Successfully entering the workforce
6. Reducing violence and providing a second chance

Although concerns about early learning gaps, reading competence, high school graduation, access to postsecondary education, employment, and the experience of violence by BMOC are not new, focusing on these key issues represents a feasible way to direct resources where they are most likely to make a difference. The complexity and intransigence of these issues, however, require sustained multi-pronged interventions appropriate to each stage of development. The Task Force's plan calls for it to improve life outcomes of BMOC by a) providing incentives to learn about and to do what works, b) supporting cradle to college and career interventions, and c) emphasizing programs that recognize the importance of parents and other caring adults to the outcome of BMOC. MBKI aims to "highlight and build on what works inside and outside of government for improving expected life outcomes of young people and removing barriers to their success" (President's Task Force, 2014, p. 4). Within the federal government, every executive agency has been charged to address these issues. Point persons have been identified to spearhead agency efforts and be responsible for coordinating with other agencies.

From the outset the Task Force recognized that this effort will not be accomplished by the federal government alone or within the term of a single president. Success in reaching MBKI's stated goals clearly depends on collaboration of the federal government with state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector. To support the efforts of state, local, and private actors, the White House has convened a series of consultative meetings that brought together state and local government leaders, human service organizations, and experts to describe their programs and share best practices. In addition, the White House and the Task Force reached out to the research community to hear about the state of evidence related to best practices to inform the selection of programs and practices and to guide policy development.

Organization of This Report

This report is organized around five of the six MBKI goals. These goals represent four milestones (school readiness, third grade literacy, high school and college graduation) and violence exposure that have been the subject of much developmental research. Consequently, developmental research can offer a fuller and more conclusive

account of the mechanisms and contexts that influence attainment of milestones and factors militating against the experience and effects of violence in the lives of BMOC. Discussion of each goal begins by presenting information on the nature and extent of the challenges faced by BMOC. This information is followed by a discussion of factors that might make a difference and promote positive development of BMOC with respect to preparation for school entry, early reading mastery, educational attainment, and reducing the adverse impact of violence.

MBKI Goal 1: Achieving School Readiness

Self-regulation of attention, emotions, and behavior appears to be the most common impediment to school readiness of boys of color (BOC). Self-regulation is important not only for an individual's sense of well-being but also because of its relation to social competence and academic achievement (Bub, McCartney, & Willett, 2007). In the years leading up to school entry, when parents and teachers are asked about their concerns, they tend more often to identify issues with BOC regulation of attention and behavior than with cognitive functioning and learning. This is evident in the reports made by teachers using the ABLE screener on 4-year-old African American and Latino children enrolled in Head Start and state funded pre-K located in a large urban city in the Midwest and in a rural county in the South (Barbarin, 2007). The results disaggregated by gender and by site show that teachers express serious concern for close to 20% of BOC and at twice the rate of concern for girls (see Table 2). The most common concern is opposition or non-compliance in the form of failing to follow instructions and ignoring rules.

Another concern for many boys is their high level of restlessness and inattention, as well as deficits in social skills, particularly the ability to get along with other children. These data suggest high rates of concern for BOC with respect to non-cognitive skills, namely regulation of attention and behavior. African American and Latino boys as young as 2 showed evidence of self-regulatory problems and difficulties cooperating with peers, and they were more likely to be frustrated about completing a task than were girls (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). Limitations of non-cognitive skills constitute a significant drag on the potential for later success (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001) and in the case of BOC to benefit from instruction. Achieving a degree of mastery in these domains increases a child's prospects for academic success and social adjustment in the school setting (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Eggum, 2010).

Table 2. Adjustment Difficulties Identified in a Universal Mental Health Screening of Boys and Girls of Color Enrolled in Head Start Programs Reported by Teachers Using the ABLE

	Boys		Girls	
	Large City in the Midwest (N = 3806)	Rural County in the Deep South (N = 431)	Large City in the Midwest (N = 3821)	Rural County in the Deep South (N = 381)
Disobeys, Ignores Rules	15.9%	11.4%	7.3%	5.4%
Inattention	11.7%	11.8%	7.7%	4.2%
Over Active, Restless	6.8%	4.9%	1.8%	1.0%
Impulsive	5.1%	5.9%	4.0%	1.5%
Temper Tantrums	4.3%	5.1%	1.6%	2.2%
Fighting	2.6%	6.7%	1.1%	2.7%
Sadness	3.4%	1.0%	3.8%	1.2%
Poor Speech	2.6%	4.7%	2.4%	3.2%
Cries Easily	8.3%	%	3.2%	%
At Least 1 Serious Challenging Behavior	19.8%	17.0%	11.1%	9.0%

Source: Barbarin, 2007.

When socioeconomic status is controlled, racial/ethnic differences in cognitive functioning are not significant at the beginning of kindergarten (Garcia & Weiss, 2015). This suggests that at least at the start of school there is more reason for concern about BOC's non-cognitive, socio-emotional adjustment than about differences in their capacities to master cognitive tasks in school. The risks to BOC from concerns about their self-regulation of behavior is reflected in the disproportionate number of African American boys suspended or expelled across their time in school beginning as early as preschool (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). For this reason the problems attributed to BOC with respect to self-regulation, justifiably or not, represent the main impediment to their academic progress. How much of this concern about self-regulation is due to stigmatization of BOC (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006) and how much is due to gender differences in temperament, brain development, and social maturation is unclear (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2006; Else-Quest, Hyde, Goldsmith, & Van Hulle, 2006).

Most boys possess the cognitive abilities to meet the academic demands of kindergarten but significant questions remain about the capacity of a substantial number of BOC to meet expectations for self-regulatory skills. How do we account for these non-cognitive and self-regulatory impediments to school readiness? More importantly, what are the protective factors that permit the majority of BOC

to acquire these skills? The answers to these questions are most likely found in the variations of BOC's early experiences in family functioning, in qualities of the out-of-home care they receive, and in the person-environment fit of BOC and the typical kindergarten classroom.

Gender, Poverty, and Brain Development

Skeptics about the heightened risks for BOC question why girls of color are not similarly affected. Responses to that skepticism revolve around assertions that boys have greater environmental sensitivity than girls (Bertrand & Pan, 2013). In other words, boys are more responsive to and sensitive to variations in their physical and social environments. When the environment is favorable, they flourish more than girls; when the environment is toxic, they struggle more than girls. Moreover, boys as a group evidence small but meaningful differences from girls with respect to brain development particularly in the pre-frontal cortex, which plays a role in self-regulation and executive function. These structures in the brain tend to mature more slowly for boys than girls. Differences in brain maturation are likely implicated in the well-documented higher rates of difficulties boys have with regulation of behavior and attention.

Poverty and economic disadvantage may exacerbate the gender differences and help explain why BOC more often face challenges in attaining self-regulation of behavior and emotions. BOC are disproportionately poor

and subject to stressors and trauma associated with high concentrations of poverty. Higher exposure to toxic stress can have a significant impact on brain development, which in turn influences emotional expressiveness and regulation of behavior. In their review of studies of the relation between poverty and brain development, Hackman and Farah (2009) specifically focused on the prefrontal cortex and temporal lobe, which are involved in mood, emotion regulation, and executive function. They proposed that this region of the brain is very sensitive to adverse environmental factors associated with poverty, such as extraordinary life events and emotional stress, the metals problem (i.e., too much exposure to lead, too little consumption of iron), nutritional deficiencies, and inadequate medical care. As a result of these environmental factors children growing up in poverty may suffer decrements in the development of the prefrontal cortex early in life (Farah et al., 2006). For BOC, exposure to high levels of chronic stress and trauma may be more taxing to their already constrained ability to self-regulate, thus accounting for higher rates of dysregulated emotions and behavior (Barbarin, 2006).

Families: A Resource in Promoting School Readiness.

Families and experiences in family life are an underappreciated resource for increasing school readiness. Because children spend so much of their early lives at home, families and the quality of the settings they provide exert important influences on the early development of school readiness. Since much of the initial concerns expressed by parents and teachers are related to BOC's mastery of self-regulatory skills in the domains of attention and behavior, the role of family in promoting these skills is critical to understand. There is growing evidence suggesting that parent-child relationships and parental practices can foster self-regulation. Specifically, families characterized by caregivers who are supportive and who have a positive, responsive, and emotionally close relationship with children tend to foster self-regulation in children (Sulik, Blair, Mills-Koonce, Berry, Greenberg, & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2015). In addition, positive non-coercive forms of discipline and child behavior management are associated with higher levels of self-regulation of behavior and emotions. Explanations of gender differences revolve around findings that mothers and female caregivers tend to be more distant emotionally, spend less time in childcare activities, and spank sons more than daughters. Moreover, specific practices such as explaining and expanding in active dialogue with children

are associated with better self-regulation in BOC (Barbarin & Jean-Baptiste, 2013). Some of these practices do not come naturally, especially in distressed families. However, given the motivation of families to do the best for their children, many families can learn to incorporate these practices into their parenting toolbox.

What families do to promote readiness and the settings they create to support it are shaped by their beliefs about what constitutes readiness skills and how to instill them. One of the factors limiting family impact is a lack of consensus on the part of teachers and policy makers on the competencies BOC need to be school ready (Barbarin et al., 2008). Families focus on one set of outcomes that is adaptive for their sons, teachers on another, and educational policy makers on still another. Consequently, parents may cultivate an array of skills and transmit knowledge that may not exactly match those expected by schools. For example, parents may consider it sufficient to transmit general knowledge about self, family, and the environment, teach the alphabet and numbers, and convey values such as self-sufficiency and standing up for oneself in the face of danger in the community when family is not around to protect them. Cognitively, parents understand the value of nominal knowledge (e.g., letters, numbers, counting) but may not see the utility of higher order or inferential thinking. In their examination of family members' and teachers' perception of school readiness, Barbarin et al. (2008) found that two thirds of parents of 4-year-olds enrolled in public pre-K cited nominal knowledge as a principal indicator of readiness. Parents of children of color gave primacy to specific nominal knowledge such as the alphabets, colors, counting to 10, knowing their addresses, and writing their names. Almost none cited inferential or higher order thinking (e.g., drawing conclusions, anticipating the next object in a series) as an indicator of school readiness. In contrast, teachers emphasized qualities that make for order in the group setting such as conformity with classroom rules and routines, paying attention, following instructions, persistence, and getting along with others.

Although many states are moving toward conceptualizing school readiness in terms of a child's academic and social skills, some critics question the focus on child competencies especially when they are imposed as preconditions for school entry. Some observers have argued that school readiness should be interpreted as a quality of the school, not of the child (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). For proponents of this position, readiness is a quality of the school not the child and focuses on what skills a child

brings, not those which they lack (Graue, 1993). By this way of thinking, schools need to be ready to educate each child who has reached the state mandated age without regard to the specific child's knowledge, experiences, development, and level of maturity.

Readiness needs to be considered not just a function of children's competencies but also of families, schools, and communities. Accordingly, the readiness gap for BOC can be viewed as a consequence of the differences in the socialization goals parents have based on their understanding of what their children need and the evolving expectations of schools. A clear dilemma is how to create a flow of information between home and school that will permit families and schools to bridge that gap. Parents may be assisted in their roles as first teachers with efforts to clarify expectations of the child upon school entry. Schools in turn may become more effective in leveling the playing field for children of diverse backgrounds by learning about the cultural and social contexts that shape parents' goals for their children's early learning, and valuing and building upon the competencies children bring to school as a consequence of their socialization experiences at home.

MBKI Goal 2: Achieving Reading Competence by Third Grade

Nature and Extent that BOC Struggle with Reading Proficiency

Gaps in knowledge and cognitive competencies are not the most critical impediments to the school readiness of BOC when they enter pre-school programs. Indeed, as a group, they are not significantly behind other children in the knowledge they bring, and few doubts are expressed about their cognitive capacities to learn. However, by the third grade problems of behavior and social adjustment to school have morphed into serious concerns about academic performance. By third grade BOC perform significantly below the expected level in reading and mathematics.

Though BOC possess the foundational ability to become proficient at reading by third grade, most do not. Gender differences in reading occur for every ethnic/racial group. This is true from the end of third grade until at least the end of high school. Girls score higher than boys on assessments of reading proficiency such as the ones conducted as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Although these assessments do not present a rosy picture for any group, among boys, ethnic/racial differences are stark and startling. Only 10% of low-income African American boys attain reading proficiency by the fourth grade. Non-poor African American boys do not fare much better, with only 26% attaining proficiency, for an

overall rate of 14% proficiency. The rate for Latino and Native American boys is slightly better at 18% for both groups. This compares to a rate of 42% for Whites overall. Non-poor Whites attain a proficiency rate of 49% which in turn is lower than the 59% rate for Asian boys.

Improving BOC Proficiency in Reading by Third Grade

To become a competent reader by the third grade requires acquisition of a set of behavioral, social, emotional, and cognitive competencies that begins soon after birth. Even though acquisition of reading competence is often assumed by parents to begin with their efforts to teach letters of the alphabet, problems can arise early in life. Over the past 30 years developmental scientists have made impressive strides in delineating the neural, cognitive, and motor processes underlying the development and competent performance of reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Reading development begins

in infancy with the development of joint attention in which infants share interest (through their gaze) in objects or activities with parents. From birth to age three phonological development involves increased awareness of and ability to discriminate different sounds. Skilled reading involves the integration of multiple skills and access to knowledge about sounds, words, and the world

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in general (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). The component skills include the ability to manipulate the sounds in syllables and words, associate sounds to letters, decode printed letter symbols with speed and accuracy, and comprehend what is read.

Because progression toward competent reading begins in infancy, the role of family in promoting reading is critical. Stark differences in the reading competence of boys and girls may arise from different practices families employ depending on the sex of the child. Across racial/ethnic groups, families tend to make fewer investments in the literacy development of boys (Baker & Milligan, 2013). Families are more likely to read to girls than boys. They provide more books in the home for girls and more often enroll them in extracurricular activities. These differences in investments may in part result from boys' indifferent or resistant response to such investments. They may not respond enthusiastically to family members' attempts to read to and with them or to pick up books to read on their own. They may show disinterest overtly or be unable to sustain attention sufficiently to take advantage of family members' efforts to engage them.

Even modest efforts such as talking to and with boys and exploring with them aspects of the world in which they express interest or show curiosity can pay rich dividends in terms of expanding boys' vocabulary and knowledge of the world. It can also extend to creation of games around learning of letter names and sounds, joint reading beginning with picture books and graduating to books with narratives that boys want to read about (Beals, DeTemple, & Dickinson, 1994; Neuman, 1999; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Parents of color often employ culturally consonant strategies such as singing, oral story telling, playing word games, rhyming, alliteration, blending sounds into words and segmenting words into syllables and sounds. There is growing evidence that these approaches to engaging boys can effectively contribute to their literacy development (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). There is also evidence that using number words in daily discourse and playing math games that build number sense (e.g., Chutes and Ladders) contributes to reading competence as well (Ramani & Siegler, 2008; Saracho & Spodek, 2010). Learning activities that involve interactions between family members and BOC can be made enjoyable, improve reading, and help form a close emotional bond that may help with development of self-regulation. These activities are more likely to be taken up by boys if they start with their interests and are approached as a joyful experience rather than as an onerous task.

MBKI Goal 3: High School Completion

Education is key to preparing individuals to make contributions to society and to achieve a better quality of life. Even in the face of modest progress, educational achievement gaps between White children and children of color continue to expand. We preface this discussion by noting that studies of academic disparities of males of color primarily reflect the plight of African American and Latino males, with limited attention given to Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Asian Americans. Too little is known about these disparities. They warrant greater attention along with research that identifies sources of resiliency across the age span, including early childhood.

Formative Experiences and Development

Males of color are more likely to be exposed to numerous adversities early in life that create obstacles for educational advancement. For example, relative to non-Hispanic White males, males of color are more often "labeled" as having learning disabilities, diagnosed with attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, screened for serious emotional and behavioral disorders, and overrepresented in special education (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). School professionals who screen for behavior problems and decide on special education placements often inadvertently facilitate tracking boys into special programs that focus on behavior management, leaving boys without the foundation in literacy and mathematics they need to be successful in later grades. The resulting negative school experiences compromise students' of color academic performance and aspiration for their futures (Murry, Block, & Liu, in press). Above and beyond these cumulative experiences that begin in early childhood are school context factors affecting BOC that are more unique to the adolescent years and are therefore more proximally related to high school completion.

Disparate Discipline

Disparities in school disciplinary practices loom large as an impediment to the school success of BOC. African American and Latino males are more likely than the norm to receive detentions, suspensions, expulsions, and to be assigned to alternative schools or special education classes as a consequence of being labeled problem students (Losen, 2011). In middle school, for example, African American males are three times more likely and

Latino males 1.5 times more likely than White males to be suspended from school (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Racial disparities in the discipline gap are mirroring the well-documented disparities in the achievement gap (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). And by all indicators, African American boys are the most disproportionate targets of suspension.

Racial disparity in school discipline practices, such as school suspension, affects the MBKI goal of high school completion. Rather than deterring misconduct, school suspensions appear to predict higher rates of subsequent misbehavior among those suspended and school dropout, a known risk factor for involvement in delinquent activity (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Suspended students lose valuable instructional time—a day, a few days, or 10 or more days depending on the offense and particular school policies—thus decreasing their opportunity to learn. Some have argued that prolonged suspensions are actually a violation of students' civil rights (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

Recently there has been a growing concern about the involvement of law enforcement and the juvenile justice system in school disciplinary strategies. That involvement has been called the *school-to-prison pipeline* to capture a process by which schools that enforce harsh discipline contribute to the flow of BOC into the justice system and to the criminalization of school misbehavior. Not surprisingly, in almost all of the school districts where arrest data have been analyzed, African American boys are disproportionately referred to police for school infractions (Kim et al., 2010).

Experiences of Discrimination

Disparate and coercive discipline may contribute to boys of color feeling that they are treated unfairly by school officials because of their race (and gender). A growing literature has documented that experiences of racial discrimination are part of the everyday experiences of adolescents of color and that these experiences can take their toll on the mental, physical, and academic health of youth (see Benner & Graham, 2013). Perceptions of unfair treatment by teachers and administrators can be exacerbated by boys' encounters with racial stereotypes that associate being a Black male with aggressiveness, violence, and dangerousness (Jones, Dovidio, & Vietze, 2014). For African American adolescents in particular, boys report more discrimination by teachers than girls and the impact of these experiences on subsequent motivation and achievement is greater (e.g., Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008). More gen-

erally, perceived discrimination undermines BOC's sense of academic efficacy and compromises their sense of belonging in educational settings (Harper, 2006; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Some have characterized this as the students being "pushed out of school," as evidenced by increased absenteeism, social isolation, academic deterioration, avoidance, and eventually withdrawal from school. Negative school experiences may also encourage other maladaptive coping such as substance use (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012).

Several scholars (Murry, Berkel, Brody, Miller, & Chen, 2009; Ogbu, 1994, 1997) have noted that negative school experiences can facilitate incidences of academic self-presentation among educationally competent youth, who may camouflage their academic ability, appearing to be educationally incompetent despite having abilities to do well and succeed in school. This maladaptive coping behavior may be manifested in several ways, including reluctance to take notes in class and insufficient time allocated to study or complete class assignments, which are often met with low or failing grades (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004). In one set of studies on social preferences, Graham and colleagues documented that African American and Latino middle school boys, but not White males, reported that they admired and looked up to boys of their ethnic group who did not work hard in school and who tended to violate school rules, suggesting that these males were distancing themselves from academic behaviors valued by the larger society (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Taylor & Graham, 2007). African American boys who endorsed these anti-achievement values also perceived more societal barriers to success. We suggest that coping with negative stereotypes about one's race and experiencing unfair discipline as well as other forms of discrimination, can lead to a cluster of beliefs about agency and efficacy (*Can I do it? Do I want to do it?*) that can undermine achievement strivings during those critical middle school and high school years.

Promoting Academic Success of BOC

The educational crisis facing BOC has long-term consequences not only for them but for future generations. While these problems are serious and the challenges they point to are difficult, they are not insurmountable when schools are committed to improving the school environment and the experiences BOC have in them. Barbarin, Chinn, and Wright (2014) have outlined a formula by which schools can create auspicious environments that will lead to better academic performance and higher

graduation rates. The first step is to implement school discipline practices that are perceived as fair by students. Good relationships among teachers, students, and families can go a long way in smoothing over the inevitable difficulties that arise in high schools with youth who are still finding their way. Consequently, nurturing positive relationships of school staff with students and their families is critical. Schools must afford more opportunities for teachers to have positive contacts that promote emotional bonds with students and that open up the possibility of effective partnerships with parents. Instruction in high schools must employ well-established principles of adult education in which content is made relevant and in which the process involves students actively engaged with the information or concepts and socially interactive with one another.

Peers are an important determinant of student attitudes about schools and their experiences in schools. Peers can help by reinforcing values around following school rules and striving academically or they can promote attitudes that run counter to school success. Schools must intervene in the peer group to foster a peer culture in which academic competence is valued.

A significant portion of students struggle with emotional difficulties related to traumatic experiences that often go unrecognized. Problem behaviors at school, even opposition, anger, fighting, and emotional outbursts may be a symptom of mental health issues that are misinterpreted and treated as discipline problems. Schools are coming to rely on law enforcement to deal with problems that should be seen as teaching and learning opportunities or a cry for help. Schools need to acknowledge that some problem behaviors are the sequelae of trauma and that mental health service in one form or another is an appropriate response. Finally, schools must actively combat negative cultural stereotypes about BMOC, particularly those that portray boys as threatening and incapable of academic excellence and benefitting from rigorous instruction. Of relevance to this issue is the work of Bentley-Edwards, Thomas, and Stevenson (2013), which

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provides a way to confront these issues through racial socialization and addressing racial stress to build resiliency.

MBKI Goal 4: Postsecondary Training

Although the efforts to remediate high school environments and increase high school graduation rates are important, training beyond high school is becoming increasingly important for individuals to acquire skills needed in future labor markets. Available data from national educational statistics revealed that males of color are underrepresented in postsecondary education. For example, in 2013 only 26% of African Americans, 24% of Native American and Pacific Islanders, and 18% of Latinos had obtained an associate degree or higher compared to 44% of White males (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). Compared to White and Asian males and females across all racial/ethnic populations, males of color have less access to col-

lege, are more likely to drop out of high school, and are less likely to complete college (Caperton, 2010). While youth of color are affected by racial disparities in education, the perils of African American and Latino males are more evident in all critical educational transition points: high school completion, college enrollment, associate and undergraduate degree completion, and overall educational attainment. When males of color do enter postsecondary education, they have lower college completion rates compared to females and to White males in the U.S. For example, two-thirds of *all* African American men who enter college fail to graduate within six years (Harper, 2012). The failure to improve the educational outcomes of youth of color has been characterized as “placing our nation at risk of falling short in a world that is being reshaped by the knowledge-based global economy” (Wagner & Benavente-McEnery, 2006, p. 6).

The MBKI underscores this reality and the need to identify factors and processes that encourage males of color to pursue higher education. The following section summarizes studies that have identified factors associated

with the successful pursuit of postsecondary education by male students of color, a phenomenon characterized as “flipping the script” by highlighting BOC student assets (Noguera, 2003).

Family Agency and Academic Resilience

Growing up in families that encourage and articulate norms regarding school performance and expectations about postsecondary training are significant predictors of college entrance among males of color, particularly African Americans (Harper, 2012; Perna, 2000). Specifically, college-attending male students of color also characterize their families as aggressively seeking opportunities and educational resources to ensure that they did well in school and view their family as a primary source of support (Perna & Titus, 2005). Both African American and Latino students often nominated their parents as the greatest influence in their decision to attend college and greatest source of help in choosing which college to attend. Extended family members who had attended college and high school teachers are also viewed as a positive influence on college attendance (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004). Guidance counselors, on the other hand, have been described as more harmful than helpful, often discouraging students from pursuing postsecondary education or steering them toward less selective colleges or vocational training schools (Bryant, 2015).

College and University Environment

Students of color who fare well in college report having been mentored by teachers who believed in them, viewed them as academically competent, encouraged them to enroll in advance placement courses in high school, and facilitated placement in programs for gifted and academically talented students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Opportunities for early exposure to postsecondary education programs, such as attending summer programs on college and university campuses, also heightens academic aspirations and expectations to attend college. Such experiences reduce anxiety about college life and provide reassurances by knowing what to expect and what would be required to succeed (Gullatt & Jan, 2003).

HBCU vs. PWCU. Emotional support and acceptance appear to be critical in MOC thriving in higher education. Males of color, African Americans specifically, fare better in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) than their counterparts in predominately White colleges and universities (PWCU). Differential adjustment is attributed

to a more positive, supportive climate at HBCUs that reinforced racial pride, high student-centered priorities, and lower levels of racial tension on campus. Males of color who attend PWCUs tended to fare well when they were able to enter the college through summer bridge programs. Starting their first year 6-8 weeks prior to the semester beginning allowed for easier adjustment to college life. This early start afforded students ample time to transition between high school and college, become acquainted with the college environment, identify and access resources, and interact with faculty and administrators, including same race peers who can serve as mentors, before the large population of White students emerged on campus. These programs may be of particular benefit to first-generation students who tend to experience more difficulty transitioning into college compared to those who are not first in their family to go to college (Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004).

Peer Support. Support, joint study groups, and mentoring from same race peers, particularly in PWCU, are effective in facilitating involvement and engagement in campus activities for males of color. Engagement in academic-related activities outside of the classroom increases the likelihood that young men of color will develop a sense of belonging and provides opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with individuals, administrators, faculty, and leaders of student organizations. These connections expand social networks and access to resources and opportunities that are often not easily accessible to males of color, such as competitive jobs, internships, study abroad programs, and admission to flagship graduate and professional schools (Harper & Quaye, 2007).

MBKI Goal 6: Reducing Violence and Providing a Second Chance

As in other areas of life, BMOC face extensive and multiple inequities in exposure to violence as perpetrator or victim, in involvement with the criminal justice system, and in harsher sentencing at first contact (Dellums Commission, 2006). In fact, it may be that the risks to health and well-being from violence and criminal justice involvement are greater and more harmful than from any other aspect of the lives of BMOC (Liberman & Fontaine, 2015). While a summary of these well documented inequalities is useful as a reminder, much is to be gained by recognizing that the problems contributing to these inequities are

multi-layered and intersectional (Campbell, Vogel, & Williams, 2015), meaning that BMOC are subject to multiple risk-elevating factors and these emanate from the macro to the micro levels.

Violence Exposure, Morbidity, and Mortality

The homicide rate for African American men is 16.4 times and for Latino males 5.1 times that of non-Hispanic White men. African American men are 10.1 times and Latino men 3.3 times more likely to die from a firearm than non-Hispanic Whites. African American children are 8 times more likely and Latino children are 7.4 times more likely to have someone close to them murdered than non-Hispanic White children (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005). The rate of death due to domestic abuse is 4.4 times greater for African Americans and 1.6 times greater for Latinos than for non-Hispanic Whites, while the domestic violence rate for African Americans is about twice the rate for others. African American youth are about twice as likely as other groups to witness domestic violence and are 2.5 times as likely to be victims of child abuse and neglect. In one study focused on California, among children investigated for maltreatment, African American children had the highest rate of criminally mandated custody, followed by Latino children (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000).

African American men are 5.5 times more likely and Latino men are 2.9 times more likely than non-Hispanic White men to be incarcerated. This equates to 1 in 3 African American and 1 in 6 Latino males who will be imprisoned at some point (compared to 1 in 17 non-Hispanic White men; Bonczar, 2003). Disparities are also noted in the rates at which incarceration increased. African American men experienced the largest proportionate increase in imprisonment in the past 30 years; Latino men experienced the second highest. These rates also translate to African American children having a ninefold greater likelihood and Latino children a threefold greater likelihood of having a parent incarcerated than non-Hispanic Whites (Travis, McBride, & Solomon, 2005). Overall, BMOC are exposed to more violence, are more likely to be victims of violence, and are more likely to be perpetrators of violence than other demographic groups including women of color. Accordingly, BMOC have elevated rates of involvement with the criminal justice system and this has an exceptionally harmful impact on their life course and the lives of their partners, children, and communities.

Biased Treatment at Each Stage of Criminal Justice Contact

In addition, these differences occur within an overall ecology of disparate opportunity and procedural management when encountering state and federal criminal justice systems, whether as the accused or the victim (Lieberman & Fontaine, 2015). These include differential profiling and likelihood of surveillance by police and differential use of force by police (Eith & Durose, 2011; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). These differences reflect implicit biases associating race with violence and hostility as well as overt racism. Greater likelihood of official processing, of more severe charges, and of differential punishment for similar crimes (e.g., sentencing differences for similar offenses more common among poorer and persons of color) all increase the likelihood of severe penalties and incarceration and are implicated in elevated rates of repeat offending (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009). These include, among other inequities, that BOC are more likely to be tried in adult court where prosecutors have discretion (Bortner, Zatz, & Hawkins, 2000). This cascade of differential treatment extends beyond effects on criminal justice involvement to impose extensive consequences on educational attainment, employment, and success in personal and social relationships (Kirk & Sampson, 2013; Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Guckenburg, 2010).

Contributors to Violence Exposure and Criminal Justice Involvement for BMOC

A comprehensive summary of factors accounting for exposure to violence, engagement in violence, delinquency, and criminal justice inequities is beyond the scope of this report and are available elsewhere (Elliott & Tolan, 1999; Moffitt & the Klaus-Grawe 2012 Think Tank, 2013; Tolan, in press). Residing in communities with high prevalence of violence or gang activity is understandably associated with violence exposure but also impairs school and employment opportunities (Piquero, 2008; Swaner et al., 2011). Campbell, Vogel, and Williams (2015) present a sophisticated analysis that links overall and race specific crime rates, racial composition of states, political ideology, and other secular trends to the mass incarceration that has occurred in the United States over the past three decades. These authors cogently discuss its differential impact on men of color. For example, they note that increased incarceration rates occur when two independent trends co-occur: the crime rate increases and the proportion of African Americans in the population increases. They suggest within a

history of racial animus and intolerance, the combination of overall higher rates of violent crime and increase in proportion of minority citizens, politicians respond with rhetoric espousing tough sentencing policies. Communities enact practices of massive incarceration that disproportionately ensnare and harm BMOC.

While not inclusive of all the potential contributors, this analysis provides needed attention to the convergence of multiple influences within a historical-political framework

and tests quantitatively what is often supported by anecdotes, testimony, and rhetoric. Additionally, this analysis points to the importance of recognizing these historical and political systems that develop and perpetuate criminal justice orientations that disproportionately affect BMOC. Moreover, in such recognition are signs about what can reduce disproportionality, how BMOC can cope to minimize threat of involvement in the criminal justice system, and consideration of solutions other than person-focused, personal-failure, and punishment-based approaches.

BMOC experience the highest violence victimization rates in this country. This goes unnoticed or is dismissed because their victimization is seen as caused by their own criminal behavior and violence (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Another factor may be the reluctance as part of male identity to admit or recognize theirs as a victim experience or connect those experiences to their own later aggressive behavior. Sered (2104) reports on focus group studies in which BMOC acknowledge experiences such as being mugged, robbed, or attacked but do not identify themselves as having been a victim (Stevenson, 2004). Consequently, they do not avail themselves of services and are less likely to benefit from victim advocacy and services.

Violence exposure in general and community violence can have substantial mental health impacts such as depression, aggression, and post-traumatic stress (Tolan, in press). The need of BMOC for assistance as victims even if exhibited or admitted may not be recognized or appreciated by service providers, as the criminal status carries a connotation of being undeserving of care. Moreover, when their victim status is recognized, service providers may assume that mental health care is the primary

need. In contrast, BMOC may see educational and vocational opportunity as more critical than mental health or social services to their well-being. Access to services for mental health, educational, or vocational needs are quite limited. Hesitation to identify as a victim converging with the mismatch of services to felt need places BMOCs

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with criminal justice involvement in a difficult position to escape failure status (Dellums Commission, 2006). Bringing recognition among BMOC and among criminal justice policy makers and those involved in operating that system is important to focus efforts on potentially critical factors that can deter, prevent, and minimize engagement in the criminal justice system.

Actions to Reduce Inequalities in Criminal Justice

Just as there are multiple contributors to the inequalities in violence and crime involvement of boys of color there are multiple opportunities and avenues for reducing (with the goal of eliminating) these disparities. Some of these represent application of the legal regulations and procedures that then would minimize unfair over-inclusion of boys of color in the criminal justice system and with greater engagement and retention if involved. These include requiring police, prosecutors, judges, and criminal justice administrators to follow the same procedures with the same standards regardless of ethnicity or gender. The goal could also be achieved by reducing discretion that can be a conduit for bias while increasing education about how biases promote disparities and how personal biases, recognized or not, lead to failure of equal treatment. Attention to racial bias (implicit and explicit) including historical bases and attention to the situations specific to policing and legal processing also shows promise (Plant & Peruche, 2005). In addition, among the evidence of positive benefits of community policing (when properly and fully implemented) are improved community-police relations and familiarity and crime prevention orientation for police. It seems likely

that such practices could also reduce bias, disparities, and harm imposed on BMOCs.

At the same time, direct substantial attention to the economic and social inequities and injustices that feed criminal justice involvement of BMOCs and that filter through to affect lower opportunities to reside in safe communities, attend effective schools, and develop with needed support and protection are likely to carry the greater impact. Among these the most immediate and essential is to restore to juvenile justice the pillar of opportunity to recover from youthful mistakes and to engage more in truth and reconciliation oriented justice proceedings, formally and informally. Both would lead to lower rates of criminal behavior and lower repeat offending while likely lessening exposure to biased processing. At the same time, there are emerging programs of asset building, of critical consciousness building, of racial pride and socialization, and of coping skills based on personal capability utilization that show promise for creating resilience against succumbing to risk factors disproportionately affecting BMOC and enabling young men of color means toward greater likelihood of successful development even in the face of inequities (see Gaylord-Harden, Pierre, Clark, Tolan, & Barbarin, in press, for several examples). Positive youth development programs in the community can help by providing guidance and mentoring as well as an outlet for productive activity within a violence free environment (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Fashola, 2003).

Recommendations

Despite continued concern about the widening academic disparities among BMOC, there is a need to move beyond documenting the sobering statistics to a call for proactive action, which will require a comprehensive agenda that involves educators, researchers, policymakers, public officials, private/business sectors, families, and communities of color. Investing in this population and improving the educational outcomes of BMOC may benefit the United States domestically and internationally by addressing the impending workforce crisis, as well as increasing the presence of males of color as spouses, fathers, educators, community leaders, and role models for younger men of color. To achieve the lofty goals of MBKI, the following recommendations are offered:

1. **Improve school readiness** in the domain of self-regulation through support programs for parents who live in distressing situations. Provide opportunities to reflect on

parent-child relations with an emphasis on building strong parent-child bonds, and increasing opportunities for parent-child conversations. These programs should also focus on higher order thinking and learning that go beyond replicable knowledge, promote use of positive child management strategies such as warm limit setting, explaining and elaborating, and developing guidance for parents and early childhood providers for selecting software and games promoting emergent literacy and early numeracy skills.

2. **Refocus efforts to improve reading** by concentrating on competent reading by the end of first grade. This is an early benchmark that signals whether a child will become a proficient reader by third grade. For children who are not performing well in reading by the end of first grade, efforts to establish reading competence should be redoubled.
3. **Improve teacher preparation.** Teacher and instructional quality are well-recognized issues affecting the academic success of BMOC who often attend low performing schools with high concentrations of poor and ethnic minority children. In many instances, novice teachers are assigned to these schools (Peske & Haycock, 2006). This contributes to low college readiness among students of color.
4. **Expand free access to K-12 education.** The universal free access to K-12 education should be expanded to include up to 4 years of college. High costs, low affordability, and lack of assistance impede BMOC's access to higher education. Innovative policies to reduce financial burden and stress on students of color are needed. Financial aid packages are often not enough to meet the costs associated with attending the institution and covering cost of living expenses. For many students of color, loan forgiveness policies may not only encourage them to seek postsecondary education but increase the likelihood of educational completion and career success.
5. **Develop role models.** In light of the concern about the need to provide positive role

models for BMOC and to address the teacher of color workforce need, innovative policies that encourage males of color to consider teaching careers as part of a loan forgiveness program should be considered.

6. **Encourage school districts to re-think their discipline policies.** We recommend increasing the use of “truth and reconciliation” or “restorative justice” discipline practices in secondary schools that can promote personal responsibility and restitution rather than only emphasizing criminal justice procedures. There also must be adequate training of professional staff (e.g., teachers, counselors, school administrators) in the appropriate use of these practices.
7. **Review and revise juvenile justice and criminal justice procedures** and punishments for hidden and overt bias that imperils BMOC (e.g., waiver of juveniles to the adult court, how unemployment and income are treated in regard to parental rights, sentencing punishment for crack vs. powdered cocaine). The education of decision makers in the justice system and of police officers who often represent the first point of contact should include training in unconscious racial biases and ways to mitigate their effects. Just because biases are activated outside of conscious awareness does not mean that they cannot be changed. A growing empirical literature on reducing implicit racial bias can provide guidelines for this new training (see Lai et al., 2014).

Directions for Future Research: Opportunities for Developmental Scientists

In addition to tracking the converging basis for disproportionate risk of boys of color in regard to violence and criminal involvement, there is need for more research and for systematic review of the research on how boys of color cope with violence exposure, avoid delinquency, and succeed if involved with the criminal justice system (Gaylord-Harden et al., in press).

Given the paucity of national data on college enrollment and completion, there is an urgent need for nationally funded longitudinal studies to document the

educational patterns of racial/minority students, males in particular, to not only provide greater insights on the low college entrance and completion rates of males of color but also studies of those who have successfully completed college. In addition, research studies that move beyond posing questions about failure and low educational attainment are needed, wherein greater consideration is given to explaining *how* and *why* males of color are academically and professionally successful (e.g., Iruka, Winn, & Harradine, 2014). Because development does not occur in a vacuum, there is a need to consider ways in which multiple systems that are structurally and functionally integrated and embedded in history and sociocultural systems, including educational, public policy, governmental, and economic systems, affect the developmental trajectories of males of color. In this regard, comprehensive evaluations of colleges and universities where males of color have succeeded academically are warranted. Such information can guide and inform the design of academically driven preventive interventions and policies to increase the pool of postsecondary educated males of color in the U.S.

The topic of this *Social Policy Report* is boys and young men of color. We acknowledge that our focus has been on African American and, to a lesser extent, Latino BMOC. In part that emphasis reflects the state of the literature. Native Americans are seriously under-studied in the developmental and social science literatures and research on Asian Americans has disproportionately focused on East Asians (e.g., Chinese, Korean) with relatively less attention to the unique challenges that boys and young men might be facing. In the first section of this report we called attention to the growing demographic changes in the population of the United States, which is well on its way to becoming a multiracial/multiethnic society without a clear numerical majority racial/ethnic group. This rapidly changing racial landscape provides unique opportunities for developmental scientists who seek to better understand the experiences of BMOC in multiple racial and ethnic groups. Taking up such opportunities can contribute new knowledge about the impact of immigration on BMOC across multiple domains, heterogeneity within racial/ethnic groups that differ in the historical and cultural forces that brought them to this country, and the intersection between race/ethnicity, gender, and immigrant history.

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Commentary

Building “Ladders of Opportunity” for Boys and Young Men of Color Requires Attention to Gender, Race, and Racism

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Barbarin, Murry, Tolan, and Graham’s focus on boys and young men of color (BMOC) comes at a critical time: the police shooting epidemic of young Black men can no longer be overlooked, and masses of Americans are demanding those in positions of power prove that Black Lives Matter; recent rhetoric about young Latino males, who may be perceived as immigrants regardless of their citizenship status, paints them as “criminals” and “rapists” (Lee, 2015); and young men of Middle Eastern or Western Asian descent are under heightened scrutiny amidst fears of terrorism. The collective narrative about BMOC is singular and overwhelmingly negative; it masks their incredible diversity and talent and constrains opportunities for positive developmental trajectories. As developmental scientists, we have the capacity to leverage our research findings to rewrite the deficit-oriented narrative for BMOC into one in which thriving, contribution, possibility, and engagement is the expectation, not the exception.

At the present moment we are also embarking upon the 20th an-

niversary of the seminal theoretical work of Garcia Coll and colleagues, who, in 1996, expressed “a strong collective concern with the absence of appropriate conceptual models or frameworks for conducting research that addresses the diversity and strengths of minority populations” (p. 1891). In their Integrative Model, they implored the research community to consider social position factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class, gender) contributing to the maintenance of social hierarchies; the mediation of these factors through the mechanisms of racism, prejudice, and discrimination; and the contribution of these social mechanisms to segregation, which in turn shapes promotive or inhibitive contexts for the positive development of minority children.

In 2014 the My Brother’s Keeper Initiative (MBKI) was established to create and expand “ladders of opportunity for boys and young men of color” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2014); however, the federal-level policy and the milestone-specific recommendations provided in the one-year progress report (My Brother’s Keeper Task Force, 2015) are largely lacking

in specific attention to three critical areas highlighted by Garcia Coll et al. (1996): gender, racial/ethnic culture, and racism. Indeed, while the original Presidential Memorandum (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2014) *only* mentioned boys and young men of color, more recent reports have attenuated the focus on boys and race, referring instead to “*all* youth, *including* boys and young men of color” or “boys and young men of color *and other young people*.”

Barbarin and colleagues’ report is commendable in this regard; in each of the target areas they identify issues that may be especially relevant for BMOC. If we are serious about making positive progress for BMOC, then as a research community we need to use our science to inform policies that are gender-responsive and race-conscious and that have the potential to make some headway in the dismantling of institutional racism.

Being more attentive to gender does not mean that the needs of boys of color are more important or pressing than the needs of girls of color; instead, we must identify if, when, and how gender operates at the intersection of race, class,

and other social position variables in order to understand experiences that may (or may not) be unique for BMOC. Similarly, being more conscious of race/ethnicity creates an opportunity to understand it as a cultural-developmental context and critical developmental asset (Williams, Anderson, Francois, Hussain, & Tolan, 2014), and it requires a consideration of within-group diversity (Williams & Deutsch, 2015). Finally, inattention to structural racism will only serve to maintain the status quo, where some BMOC will continue to be perceived as threats (e.g., Black boys and young men), while others will remain completely invisible (e.g., Native American boys and young men).

The seven recommendations provided by Barbarin and colleagues are a critical starting point for outlining a research agenda that attends to the needs of BMOC. However, each of these can be honed even further through the consideration of additional questions about the role of gender, race/ethnicity, and/or racism. For instance:

- If, as evidence suggests, boys may have greater sensitivity to their early environments compared to girls (e.g., Bertrand & Pan, 2013), how do we use this to improve parenting interventions (i.e., focus on gender responsiveness)?
- How can specific, culturally-grounded strengths, like oral narrative skills among African American (Gardner-Neblett, Pungello, & Iruka, 2012) and Native American children

(Zepeda, 1995), serve as opportunities to improve reading interventions for boys of color (BOC)?

- Will “integration of race matters into routine curricula that guide classroom practices; interpersonal interactions, and academic and behavioral supports” (Bentley-Edwards, Thomas, & Stevenson, 2013, p. 123) enhance educational outcomes of BOC? How might this vary within and across BOC’s racial/ethnic groups?
- Do race-conscious higher educational institutional policies and practices effectively address the gender-specific needs of BMOC from all underrepresented racial/ethnic groups?
- What kinds of school settings are effective in promoting the retention of male teachers and administrators of color, and what practices contribute to their attrition rates from educational careers (Bristol, 2015)?
- Are restorative justice approaches to discipline effective in reducing factors leading to educators’ differential *perceptions* of infractions by BOC, or might they only help to change the *consequences* of

disciplinary sanctions? Does this vary across educational levels (e.g., pre-K, elementary, secondary)?

- What, if any, trainings are effective in interrupting the implicit biases among law enforcement officials that dehumanize and adultify BOC (especially Black boys; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014) and, as a result, facilitate violence against BOC?

Ultimately, beyond good, theoretically-grounded science (Huston, 2005), meaningful and effective policy change will be driven by public will. So we must ask ourselves, how do we use our research to create public will to change the course of development for BMOC? Part of this involves a continued population of developmental science with findings that illuminate the positive development of BMOC, placing more emphasis on understanding “adaptation and adjustment rather than maladjustment and adversity” (Cabrera, 2013). It also involves partnering with localities and organizations that are already doing great work with and for BMOC (e.g., Grimes, Morris, & Dholaia, 2015). Indeed, the “place-based state and local” initiatives were among the few in the MBKI one-year report that reflected an intentional focus on gender and race. Finally, we must listen closely to, honor, and learn from the impassioned voices of BMOC engaged in local and national social movements and ask ourselves how we can support, advocate for, and responsibly interpret their simple request to matter.

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Commentary

Are There Missing Steps of the Proposed “Ladders of Opportunity” for Boys and Young Males of Color? Implications for Intersectionality

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The *Social Policy Report, Development of Boys and Young Men of Color: Implications of Developmental Science for My Brother's Keeper Initiative*, is a welcomed read for the developmental science community. The authors and the Boys of Color Research Collaborative lay out clear recommendations that are based on developmental science and best known practices. My comments offer to compliment the report and emphasize areas for further clarification and enhancement. I must admit that I am familiar with the Boys of Color Research Collaborative. The group met at Tulane University, and I attended the research meetings. However, I was not involved in the drafting or writing of this report. Thus, my commentary is based on my read of the *Social Policy Report* only.

The themes addressed in the report are responses to President Barack Obama's Presidential Memo on February 27, 2014 entitled: *Creating and expanding ladders of opportunities for boys and young men of color*. The authors of the report did an excellent job of explaining the initiative and chal-

lenging the broader developmental science community to take up the recommendations put forth by the President. I would go even further to challenge the developmental science community to be especially astute to developmental phenomena when addressing the President's “Ladders of Opportunity.” Specifically, the second decade of life needs more attention in the challenge. The importance of early- and middle-childhood experiences is well documented. These areas should not be ignored. However, early-, middle-, and late-adolescent experiences are foundational for healthy adult functioning. As posited by classic theorizing by Erik Erikson (1968), the adolescent years are crucial for addressing unmet challenges from childhood as well as providing a foundation for young adulthood. For males of color, questions associated with identity formation are key. How do young males develop a sense of their own racial/ethnic identity? How are these identity processes associated with their early experiences and future behaviors/attitudes? For example, in addressing the My Brother's Keeper Initiative (MBKI), the developmental milestones are clearly articulated.

But between milestones 2 (reading at grade level by third grade) and 3 (graduating from high school ready for college and career) lies an important aspect of adolescence: identity formation. The importance of identity formation for adolescents of color has been well articulated by scholars working with diverse samples (for reviews see Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). However, more specificity for males of color is needed. Racial identity must be linked with gender issues for males. For example, how are the intersections of young males' racial/ethnic and gender identities associated with how they experience childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood or emerging adulthood?

Understanding of these intersections is especially important as early adolescent males of color transition to late adolescence. For example, in examining male friendships of diverse racial backgrounds, Way and colleagues (Rogers, Scott, & Way, 2015; Way, 2011) report that early adolescent male friendships are rich with care and mutual understanding; however, these same males become more stoic in emotional expression as they become later

adolescents. They posit that male identity development may intersect with gender identity to produce males who desire the early adolescent friendship styles, but they do not allow themselves to be as open to these expressive styles because of perceived challenges from their respective community interactions.

The authors of the report emphasize the importance of families, schools, and communities as socializing agents. This emphasis needs to also incorporate male notions of identity and experimentation with masculine ideologies. Racial and ethnic specific patterns have been highlighted by several scholars. For example, Santos and Updegraff (2014) point out that Mexican-origin adolescents' physical appearance may influence how participants embrace their ethnic identity or not. Specifically, they found a stronger positive association of one's ethnic identity for adolescents who had a more Latino appearance than adolescents who did not. Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, and Davis (2002) report that African American males who were physically large for their age were expected to behave with more adult-like characteristics, which was challenging in some urban communities where adult African American men are not positively received. These examples highlight the point of understanding gender and ethnic/racial experiences. The examples also highlight the need to address contextual issues.

The report includes great examples of how contextual experiences impact the experiences of males of color. School experiences are highlighted throughout and specifically for the adolescent years (e.g., Benner & Graham, 2013; Murry, Block, & Liu, in press). I would add

that both school and community experiences need to be simultaneously examined. For example, research examples that have combined examinations of school and community experiences have highlighted that both ecological contexts are important, but the experiences that males of color have within their respective communities outweigh the experiences that they have in school and family environments (see Cunningham, 1999; Cunningham, Swanson, & Hayes, 2013; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003).

The section of the report that highlights promoting academic success of boys of color is extremely important and should be highlighted more. Too often, males of color are portrayed with reports of negative outcomes and behaviors. The positive experiences associated with males of color are less seen in the literature. For example, studies and reports of African American males in gifted academic environments need more attention. Developmental scientists need to be at the forefront of explaining what is working so that examples and prevention programs can be put in place for students with challenges. For example, Ford and colleagues (Ford, 2014; Stambaugh & Ford, 2015) emphasize the experiences of boys of color in gifted education and how their specific challenges with discrimination impact their academic engagement. Furthermore, Ford and Moore (2013) suggest that a social justice model is needed to correct some of the experiences of males of color being ignored for participation in gifted education or portrayed negatively in urban schools. That is, inclusion criteria must be inclusive of the experiences associated with males of color such as cultural styles of learning.

Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) point out that students' cultural styles of learning should be viewed as "repertoires of practices" versus "individual traits." Thus, assessments are based on a series of observations and a collection of materials and not solely on individual exams or observations. In doing so, more inclusive criteria are used for understanding the group experiences of males of color and are set forth at a system level and not merely by individuals.

So, where do we begin? I agree with the authors of the report about the importance of early education experiences. They are critical in setting the foundation for adolescent and young adult success. I add, however, that adolescents need "booster shots" to reinforce these early childhood experiences. Reinforcement during adolescence is critically important as the positive contributions of early childhood education and family contributions can be challenged with adolescent experiences within their communities and schools.

A systematic review of the extant literature for success patterns for boys and men of color is needed as well. More examples of successful experiences within and across racial/ethnic groups are needed. For instance, immigrant boys and young men of color who are also language minorities may have to have specific prevention and/or intervention programs associated with language brokering. As Szalacha, Marks, Lamarre, and Garcia Coll (2005) highlight, academic success on standardized exams may not be as high for language minority children, but they excel later in adolescence. Additionally, Fuligni, Kiang, Witkow, and Baldelomar (2008) highlight that self-identification changes as chil-

dren and adolescents grow and experience the world. Thus, how boys and young men of color self-identity may interact with their understanding of themselves and their perceptions of their experiences.

Adolescent males of color who are also sexual minorities are virtually absent in the literature. The few available examples highlight how sexual minority racial and ethnic adolescent males are marginalized in regards to the school curricula (Chambers & McCready, 2011; McCready, 2004, 2010) and identity processes (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). More information is needed to understand how multiple minority statuses interact for boys and young men of color.

Finally, all of the research and translational work with boys and young men of color needs to be grounded in a theoretical framework that considers the experiences of boys and young men of color from both their unique and generalizable experiences. For example, Spencer's (1995, 2006) phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) is a conceptual template that is helpful in understanding human development in general and the experiences of males of color, specifically. In using a PVEST perspective, Spencer and colleagues highlight how males' school adjustment is associated with their racial and gender background (Spencer, 1999). Specifically, Spencer highlights how the "fit" between the school environment and learning context impacts how African American males adjust and cope with school experiences. Using a PVEST perspective, Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, and Seaton (2004) highlight the need to understand normative developmental processes for males of color along with under-

standing the experiences that males have within their contexts. Their examples are especially important for examining risk and resilient pathways. PVEST is human development theory for all groups and genders. Its value is the emphasis on human developmental processes. This point is needed and should be highlighted with work on boys and young men of color too. While there are specific statistics, experiences, and behaviors associated with these males, we need to not forget that they grow and have developmental milestones like all children and adolescents. A major key consideration is that developmental science undergirds policies set forth for this group. The report begins this process, and we must challenge our colleagues in other disciplines and perspectives to include a human developmental perspective along with specifics for each of our fields and professions.

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