

Can Young Black Men Be Saved?



Our Board of Economists examines the lost potential of African American males and develops a prescription to improve their fortunes

BEFORE DAVID MUHAMMAD graduated from elementary school, he was well on his way to becoming a statistic. Living with his divorced mother in one of the poorer sections of Oakland, California, Muhammad observed his two older brothers succumb to the drug trade.

"I saw how dysfunctional my brother's drug use was," says Muhammad. "The first time I realized my other brother was selling drugs was through a collect call from the county jail. Later, that example was the path I followed."

By the time he was 14, Muhammad had received a first-class education from the streets. He ran away from home and began dealing drugs. At 16, he was charged with attempted murder over a disagreement about money. "The charges were later dropped, but the seriousness of the prison time I was facing began to make me think a little bit," he recalls.

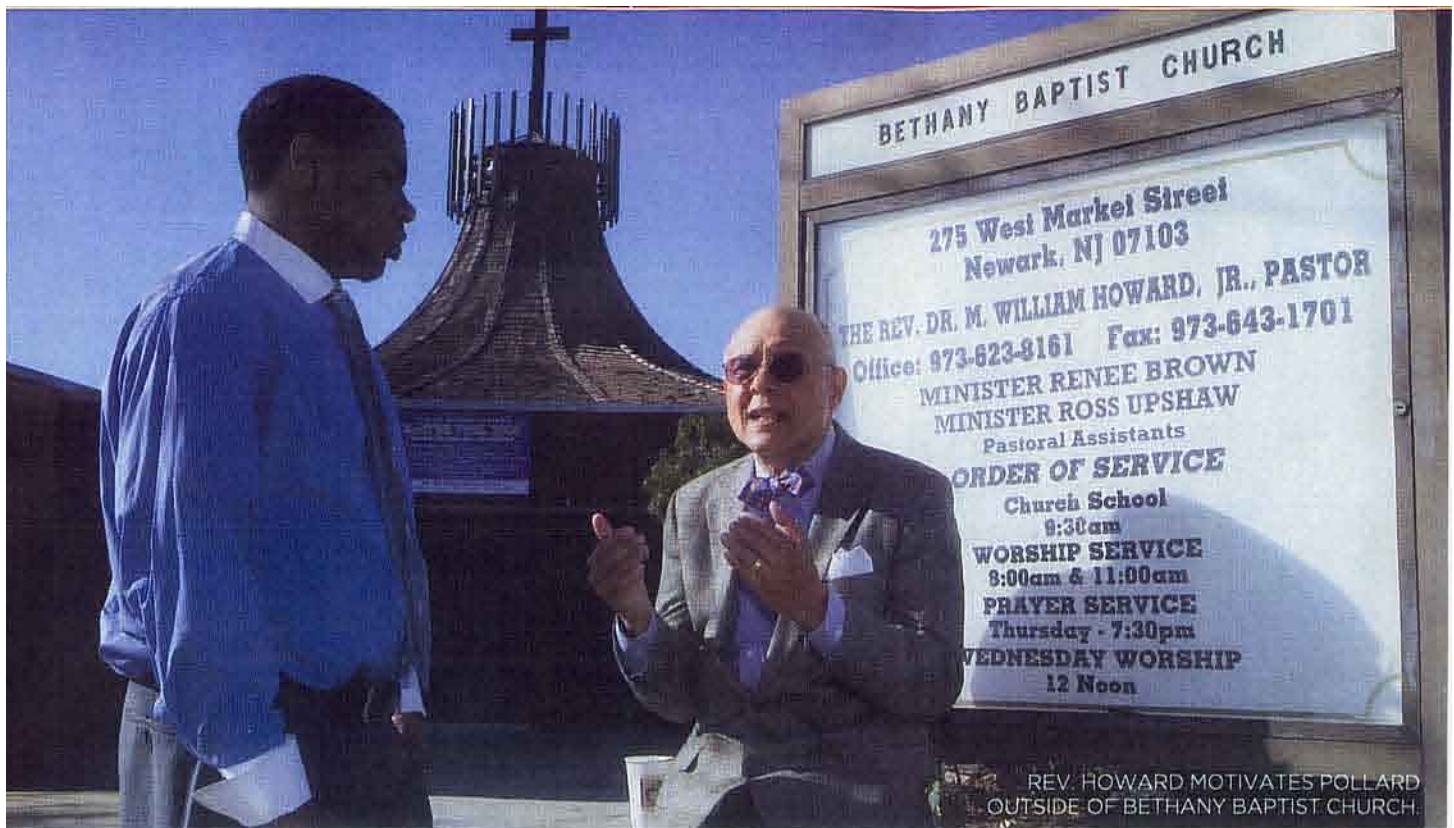
In high school, his black studies teacher took an interest in him, becoming Muhammad's first positive African American male role model. Through his teacher's mentorship and the influence of several coaches who encouraged him to improve his grades and play varsity football, Muhammad developed an interest in his own educational growth. Later, he joined the Omega

Boys Club of Oakland, which he says helped put his life in perspective. "I went from having a 0.6 grade point average in the 10th grade to a 3.8 grade point average in the 12th grade," he says. The Omega Boys Club paid for Muhammad's college education at Howard University. Today, he reciprocates that generosity by steering a new generation of young black men who are at-risk.

Muhammad, 33, is executive director of The Mentoring Center, a nonprofit organization committed to helping high-risk youth, including disadvantaged and formerly incarcerated black males in the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area striving to transform their lives. Each day Muhammad and his staff struggle to reach black youth who are being consumed by what he calls a "culture of death largely promoted by hip-hop and legitimized by corporations that control hip-hop and modern media."

Composed of seven programs, The Mentoring Center promotes an intensive, curriculum-based group mentoring process that shares information and knowledge, builds rapport and relationships, and provides resources to more than 400 youth of color. The four- to six-month "transformative mentoring" system focuses on changing the mentality that gives rise to destructive behavior among black men. The program also assists young people in finding empowering ►

By Matthew S. Scott



REV. HOWARD MOTIVATES POLLARD OUTSIDE OF BETHANY BAPTIST CHURCH.

answers to three key questions: Who are you? How do you see yourself? What is your life's purpose?

The program has enjoyed remarkable success. Over the past three years, The Mentoring Center has doubled the number of young people who receive its services. Records show 20% of the formerly incarcerated youth who participate in its programs return to the juvenile justice system, compared to a recidivism rate of 75% in California and 66% nationally. Several participants are attending college—six are currently enrolled in four-year universities, and another 15 are in community colleges.

Muhammad exemplifies the increasingly rare black man who turns his life around and is committed to giving back to his community. The reality of life for large numbers of young black men is bleak. When one calculates the pejorative effects of poor schools, rampant unemployment, racism, parental neglect, and the perpetuation of negative cultural messages, the magnitude of the problem becomes clear. Black males are lagging behind men and women of all ethnicities in this country, and the destabilizing effects on the black community and the rising economic costs to the nation can no longer be ignored. A call to arms is in order.

The **BLACK ENTERPRISE** Board of Economists met in March to develop solutions to end this downward spiral. Our panel included Andrew F. Brimmer, former member of the Federal Reserve Board and head of a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm that bears his name; Margaret C. Simms, interim president for the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; Bernard E. Anderson, Whitney M. Young Jr. Professor of Management, The Wharton School; Thomas D. Boston, professor of economics at Georgia Institute of Technology; Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League; Charles A. Sheffield, founder and partner of Carthage Capital Group and chairman of the 21st Century Foundation, the leading black philanthropic organization funding grassroots efforts that specifically address the problems of black males; and Kevin Powell, hip-hop historian and Democrat-

ic candidate for Congress. The group concluded that individual initiative and public policy is needed to attack this complex problem.

Given the evidence—and the underlying causes—pinpointing effective solutions will be daunting. The statistics have reached near pandemic proportions. Several reports released at the start of 2006 highlighted a litany of corrosive trends: 50% of all black males drop out of high school; 72% of black male high school dropouts were unemployed in 2004; and by the time they reach their mid-30s, 60% of black male high school dropouts had spent some time in jail. "Society pays in numerous ways when the potential of these men is left untapped, including paying exorbitant costs for social safety nets and crime deterrents," says Timothy D. Goler, co-author of *Untapped Potential: African American Males in Northeast Ohio*. When black males are unable to find and sustain adequate legal employment, Goler maintains, they don't pay income taxes and are unable to support their families. This, in turn, deprives communities of much-needed funds, weakens local economies, and contributes to the breakdown of the nuclear family.

The disproportionate incarceration rate of black men has created a cycle of desperation and hopelessness that is crippling the black community. Brimmer, who has studied this issue, says these men become virtually unemployable. Many of today's jobs require a clean record due to terrorism-related security concerns. This, compounded by the ever-present specter of institutional racism, handicaps their chances of re-entering society as productive citizens. This indignity and demoralization results in feelings of disconnection and financial disenfranchisement, which often leads many to seek illegal sources of income. Thus begins the perpetuation of a vicious cycle. An increase in single-parent, female-headed households reinforces the likelihood of more black youth subsisting in inner-city poverty, while floundering within substandard educational systems. As a result, casualties multiply in tandem with the growth of dropout, unemployment, and incarceration rates. ▶



MUHAMMAD, TYEHIMBA, AND SCALES DISCUSS HOW THEY CAN ASSIST OTHER BLACK MALES WHO ARE LESS FORTUNATE.

In light of this dire scenario, our board devised eight solutions that should be enacted now:

CREATE A PHILANTHROPIC NETWORK

The 21st Century Foundation's Sheffield believes it's time for African Americans to use their dollars to help solve the community's problems. He suggests that blacks build a strong network of philanthropic organizations, which would fund nonprofit groups geared toward addressing a multitude of issues, most specifically the challenges of black males. This network would be financed through "civic tithing," meaning African Americans would perceive philanthropic giving in the same way they view church contributions.

This could begin the process of channeling black dollars into effective programs that benefit black males. In fact, the foundation finances The Mentoring Center and similar programs, and has produced a report, *Community Returns: Investing in Black Men and Boys*, which encourages collective community action to help black males advance. (See blackenterprise.com for organizations with programs that assist black males.)

INCREASE MENTORING AND JOB SHADOWING OPPORTUNITIES

Thomas Boston says black professionals and entrepreneurs must take the lead in providing opportunities for young people. Mentoring and job shadowing are critical in giving black males exposure to various career options.

The style of mentoring is also important. Cheo Tyehimba, director of Oakland-based Forwardever Media Center, runs a workshop and journalism media training program for ex-offender youth who are mandated to receive writing assistance. Tyehimba's program services young men from Muhammad's Mentoring Center and regular high school students. The combination of disadvantaged and ex-offender youth learning alongside honor

students creates an effective peer-to-peer mentoring dynamic. "We've found that when you have some young men within the same generation," says Tyehimba, "and for whatever reason, some found a way to be successful and productive, the others pick up on it."

At Muhammad's Mentoring Center, four or five mentors are responsible for a group of 20 and practice a more "in-your-face" approach, which involves information sharing, relationship building, and providing resources.

Jacquinn Scales appreciates the heavy-handed mentoring delivered by Muhammad and his staff. Scales, 23, served four years as a juvenile offender in the California Youth Authority system and successfully completed The Mentoring Center's Transition Program. Now he is studying journalism at Contra Costa College in San Pablo, California, and plans to transfer in 2008 to a historically black university such as Morehouse College in Atlanta. "The Mentoring Center program was excellent," says Scales, "because every day the Youth Authority staff and officers used to make me feel like I was nothing. But here, the Transition Program brings out a lot of my abilities and skills."

Scales says now he'll always look at himself in a positive light, especially after beating out students from Stanford, the University of California Berkeley, and Cal State East Bay in a writing competition to win an internship at the *Oakland Tribune*. His relationships with the program counselors, and Muhammad in particular, have been the most rewarding part of his experience. "Muhammad has really been like a father-figure for me," says Scales, whose parents are deceased. "He can relate to me a lot because he was once a troubled youth as well. He also majored in journalism at Howard, so he gave me advice on how I can become a successful journalism major."

RESTORE SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

Public policy could play a major role in helping young black ►



B.E. BOARD OF ECONOMISTS MEMBERS: POWELL, BOSTON, BRIMMER, SIMMS, ANDERSON, SHEFFIELD, AND MORIAL.

males stay on the right track if legislators could be persuaded to restore the summer youth jobs programs of the 1970s. Such programs would provide young blacks with a source of income and critical job skills.

Bernard Anderson says black organizations and elected officials should advocate for the restoration of the summer youth employment program as part of the nation's employment and training budget. Specifically, he suggests that the Congressional Black Caucus take the lead on authoring such legislation. "Place the responsibility within the U.S. Department of Labor to fund it through the secretary's discretionary authority," says Anderson. "In that way, African American organizations like The National Urban League and the NAACP can influence who gets the money to carry out those programs."

ACTIVELY CAMPAIGN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND SCHOOL REFORM

The National Urban League's Marc Morial urges the adoption of a radical public policy initiative: mandatory universal early childhood education. He advocates a standardized program that would help all children become academically competitive and acclimated with the learning process before they enter kindergarten. "It requires a national effort," says Morial. "We have to disabuse ourselves of the notion that we can solve this problem if the first formal education experience is in kindergarten or first grade. It won't work because too many kids are already behind at that point."

The board agreed, emphasizing that children will continue to fail unless parents take an active role in changing the school system. "It is not enough to pick up and drop off your kids at school," says Simms. "You have to be engaged in how the school system treats all kids and how available resources are being spent." What are the first steps? Parents must participate in the Parent-Teacher Association as well as recruit school board candidates and vote in elections.

ATTACK PUBLIC POLICIES THAT HAVE AN ADVERSE EFFECT ON BLACK MALES

Simms also believes African Americans must fight to change public policies that disproportionately punish black males. She says policies such as "zero tolerance in schools," in which students are suspended for violating school rules, may seem like a good idea but eventually force minority children out of the school system because it doesn't address the cause of their behavioral problems. She also maintains that the government elimination of certain programs creates a crisis for resource-deprived communities. For example, Simms says, "the declining support for mental health programs forces juvenile offenders into criminal institutions as opposed to supporting institutions."

Simms also contends that the three strikes sentencing laws, the crack versus powder cocaine sentencing guidelines and mandatory minimums are particularly ruinous for black males because of racial profiling.

Grassroots efforts, she says, to overturn these types of policies must happen at all levels. The Congressional Black Caucus could be instrumental in drafting federal guidelines that are not biased against black males, and community groups must mobilize and approach city officials and their state legislatures to abolish such measures.

COLLABORATE WITH OTHER GROUPS WITH COMMON INTERESTS

Due to the limited resources of lower-middle-class black communities, collaborating with like-minded organizations, agencies, and politicians is imperative. "They may not be organizations you would collaborate with all the time on all issues," argues Simms, "but where you can find common interests and secure allies, you get more support."

Rev. Bill Howard of Newark, New Jersey-based Bethany Baptist Church formed a successful collaboration to diminish gang activity in his community. The church leadership decided to ▶

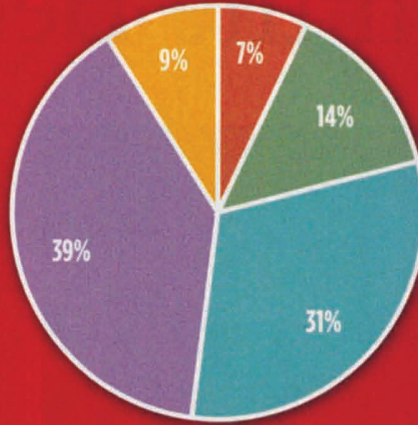
Saving the African American Male

BE Readers Sound Off

In two online polls, **BLACK ENTERPRISE** asked visitors about the plight of African American males. In the first poll, 27% of the 3,216 respondents felt lack of educational achievement was most to blame, while 25% cited lack of self-esteem.

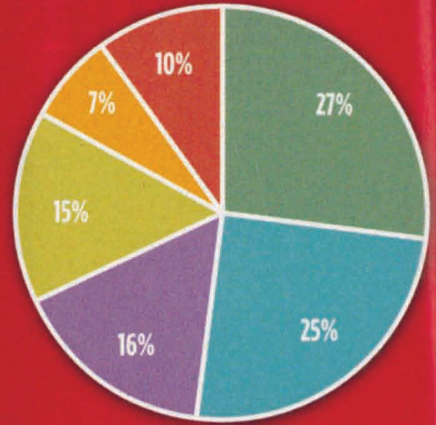
In the second poll, 39% of the 4,043 respondents said the best way to address low achievement was through mentoring programs; 31% felt creating specialized African American schools was the best solution.

What's the best way to address the crisis among African American males?



- Provide more college scholarships
- Create and promote job training programs
- Create specialized elementary and intermediate schools
- Promote mentoring programs
- Educate young men on the consequences of illegal activity

What is the biggest barrier to achievement among African American males?



- Inadequate education
- Self-esteem
- Hip-hop culture/social issues
- Negative stereotypes/racism
- Involvement in unlawful activity
- Other

adopt the Essex Residential Community Home, a juvenile justice center where incarcerated teenagers are sent as they approach the end of their sentences. In this setting, the young men receive life-skills coaching to prepare them to re-enter mainstream society. Howard created the Uth Turn (pronounced Youth Turn) program, which he says is "dedicated to assisting young people in turning their lives around."

After some political networking, Howard's Bethany Baptist Church launched the program in September 2004 with strong financial support from the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission and state Attorney General Peter Harvey. "We coach them on setting goals, time-management skills, math, and writing tutoring, socialization for work (appropriate dress, how to deal with supervision at work), and dealing with family situations," says Howard. "We have also taken them to museums, musical events, and brought in speakers to help them understand different dimensions of life."

If the progress of Jonathan Pollard, 20, is any indication, the Uth Turn program certainly deserves support. Pollard, originally from Irvington, New Jersey, was a member of the Crips and served two and a half years for armed robbery before entering the program a year ago. He used Uth Turn's tutoring services to complete his high school education and improve his communication skills. Pollard showed so much promise that he was hired as a part-time counselor and receives financial assistance from Bethany to attend Essex Community College. His long-term goal: attend law school at Rutgers University and pursue a career in the corrections field.

CREATE A NATIONAL BLACK COALITION TO ADDRESS BLACK ISSUES

Kevin Powell advocates starting a national dialogue among major black organizations to discuss the black male crisis. The conversation has already begun with the 21st Century Foundation, NAACP, and The National Urban League holding informal talks about funding programs that support young black males.

In 2004, Powell began his "State of Black Men in America" 10-city tour. It helped fuel discussions among political and grassroots leaders and has given rise to Powell's latest proposal: "The Black Male in America: A National Conversation," a conference in which Powell will rally the support of a coalition of black businesses, communities, and philanthropic leaders to tackle the problem.

Brimmer has a broader vision: the creation of The National Council for Political and Economic Progress of African Americans, a new organization charged with developing an overall strategy to advance black Americans. Charter members would include the National Urban League, the NAACP, The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and the Leon Sullivan Foundation. "I believe existing self-help organizations working through the council could be urged to adopt specific goals that they advocate and take steps to achieve those goals," Brimmer says.

Regardless of the strategy, the board believes action must be taken now. Although the traditional black leadership will lend their voices to this effort, the advancement of black men will ultimately rest with the energy, ideas, and financial muscle of the black professional and entrepreneurial classes.

BE