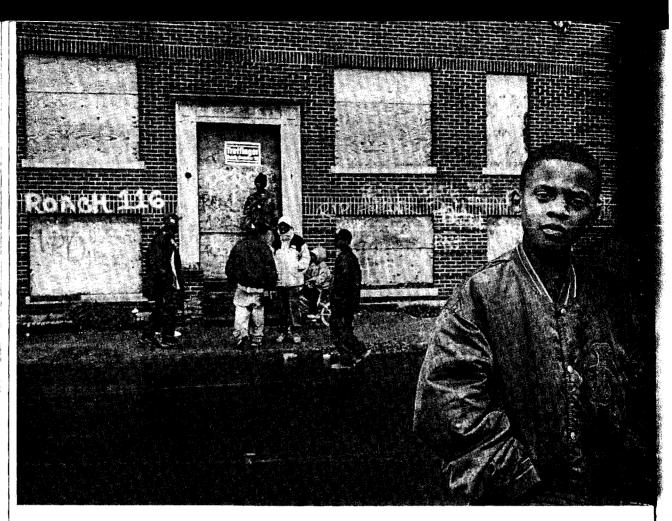# From Punishment *to* Rehabilitation

Empowering African-American Youths

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If we believed everything that was presented to us in the media, there would be no sign of hope for African-American and Latino youths. If we bought into the hype that we are on the verge of being consumed by a generation of "superpredators," there would be no reason to invest in long-term strategies for youth habilitation and development. If we believed that most crimes were committed by youths of color, our capacity for realizing their value to society would be greatly limited. Good thing we have not bought into that hype—or have we?

American criminal justice policy is affected by both the clandestine and the overt connections that have been made between race and culpability. There is no question that sophomoric presentations on the *overrepresentation* of African-American and Latino populations in secure correctional facilities have resulted in dangerous public policy that builds on the perception that *people of color perpetrate most crimes*. In 1996, *most* of the individuals arrested for a violent criminal act were white (54.6 percent). African-American juveniles accounted for virtually all increases in the rate of detention between 1985 and 1994, however. Judges detained 18 percent of white juveniles for drug offenses in 1985 and the same percentage, 18 percent, a decade

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later. By contrast, judges detained 34 percent of all African-American juveniles in 1985, nearly twice the proportion of white youths; their rate of detention increased to 56 percent in 1989, and fell to 44 percent in 1994.[1] Police arrest black youths at much higher rates than they do white juveniles for all crimes of violence, especially for homicide. So when public policy moves in a direction to "crack down" on violence, these policies disproportionately affect youths of color.

This racial disparity can largely be accounted for by the impact of discretionary decisionmaking throughout the juvenile justice process and the manner in which youths of color are criminalized not only by the public but by the officials charged to maintain law and order in this society. A recent study found that in Washington state probation officers consistently portrayed black youths differently from white youths by attributing their crimes to *internal* factors as opposed to external factors that might influence their behavior (i.e., environment). For example, probation officers were more likely to interpret a disrespectful attitude toward the current offense or a court official as proof of that young person's lack of internal restraints against committing future crimes.[2] What these probation officers seem to have dismissed is the impact of the crisis of legitimacy facing law enforcement in communities of color. Large percentages of African-American and Latino communities are distrustful of the justice system, boldly questioning both its philosophies and practices. A 1995 Gallup poll found that 77

percent of African Americans and 45 percent of whites think the criminal justice system treats black people more harshly than whites. A 1995 U.S. Justice Department survey found that only 31 percent of blacks nationwide "expressed a great deal or quite a lot" of confidence in the police, as compared to 65 percent of whites.[3]

There have been many hypotheses to explain the increasing disparity between the arrest rates of communities of color and Caucasian communities in the United States. Among the most cited is that there is a greater police presence in communities of color, leading to a greater likelihood for individuals from these communities to be arrested.[4] Another hypothesis is that the police have actively maintained a history of targeted, racially selective suspicion, operating largely from the assumption that one's race or place of national origin serves as an indicator of increased criminality, thus raising suspicion and arrests among certain communities. Racial profiling, however, is symptomatic of a deeper, systemic infiltration of racism in the American justice system. Most of the courts that have confronted the issue have authorized police to use race in making decisions to question, stop, or detain individuals as long as their reason for doing so is reasonably related to efficient law enforcement, rather than for the purpose of racial harassment.[5]

Fueled largely by the war on drugs, the increased incidence of racial profiling has left communities of color feeling powerless against the systemic racism that criminalizes activities such as driving while black (or brown), walking while black, standing while black—essentially, *being* black (or brown). Racial profiling has allowed officers to stop and question anyone matching any of the nearly forty-seven traits admissible for suspicion of drug trafficking, including:

Arrived late at night
Bought a coach ticket
Traveled with a companion
Arrived early in the morning
Bought a first-class ticket
Acted too nervous
Arrived in the afternoon
Traveled alone
Acted too calm
Was Hispanic
Was a black female
Dressed casually[6]

The trend to commit more children of color to secure detention facilities has created a culture where to have gone to prison is a badge of honor—a rite of passage that has influenced many aspects of hip-hop society, and therefore young African-American popular and economic culture. Detention is used as a solution for addressing the aberrant behavior of our youths, when in fact its only effect is in adversely impacting employment, education, and the healthy development of families and communities.

By contrast, given the recent tragedies in Arkansas, Georgia, and Colorado, when white youths engage in lethal behavior, the public reaction is to ponder the effects of the cycle of violence, examine the root causes of the pain in these children's lives, and look for modes of rehabilitation. The manner in which juvenile crime has been handled by the media displays the sharp contrast between how white youths and youths of color are perceived by the American public. Most significant in this discussion of the media's contribution to the myth that race and culpability are "connected" is the use of language and visual images that associate innate violent behavior with "blackness." Recently, when several teen-aged white males were arrested for the murder of schoolmates and teachers, newspapers and national magazines described the boys as "quintessen-

tially American," using such language as "skinny," "slight," "freckle-faced," and "intelligent but isolated." None of the national coverage referred to these youths as "superpredators," "maggots," or "animals"—language that is often used when the perpetrator of a violent crime of this nature is African American or Latino.[7]

Many young black and Hispanic youths internalize these negative views, causing them to develop the worst aspects of their character. In 1902, the famed author H. C. Cooley coined the term "looking glass self," which means that our idea of who we are is largely determined by the way that others relate to us. Thus, when members of a minority group are treated as inferior or inhumane, it subsequently affects how that minority group views itself. For many inner-city youths, being viewed as useless "predators" has become a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting in murder and incarceration.

Contrary to public policy, healthy rehabilitation cannot occur in detention. The success of our youths depends on our ability to assist them in developing a positive outlook of their contribution to the world. The most effective vehicle for rehabilitation is through community-based, holistic empowerment programs. These programs focus on the major areas of a young person's development.

Holistic empowerment programs have been effective in meeting the needs of high-risk and delinquent youths. One of the keys to this multisystems approach is its emphasis on promoting behavioral change in the youth's natural environment. The structure comprises a net-

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work of community resources and programs that embrace the needs of the youth and his or her family from all angles. According to the Family Services Research Center, "Individuals are nested within a complex of interconnected systems that encompass individual family and extra familial (peer, school) factors; and intervention may be necessary in any one or a combination of these systems."[8] The holistic empowerment model has three major components that work together to address the needs of youths: (1) life skills training, youth development workshops, and counseling; (2) community partnerships; and (3) mentoring.

Life skills training and counseling have shown promising results when used in conjunction with the second and third components, community partnership and mentoring. In addition, workshops focused on issues such as self-awareness and civic competency help youths to begin building a clear understanding of who they are in relation to their individual communities and the larger society. Community organizations like the Youth Empowerment Mission and the Madison Square Boys & Girls Club run sessions that engage youths and teach them through hands-on work. These sessions foster positive self-esteem and teach youths basic leadership skills. For example, the civic competency workshop teaches youths how to respect and value individual civil and human rights. Youths are encouraged to express these rights by participating in the governmental process via activities such as voter registration drives and lobbying efforts. These activities instill the belief that youths can make a difference and that they are an integral part of our society. Accordingly, the life skills training and workshops are essential to the development of youths of color.

The second component, community partnerships, is composed of the active involve-

ment of faith-based institutions (i.e., churches, mosques, etc.), schools, community agencies, law enforcement, social agencies, businesses, cultural programs, and families. These key institutions provide youths with the training ground and support needed to learn how to access community resources. Youths learn life skills necessary to function productively within a community setting. In addition, youths are provided with educational and employment training and opportunities. Faith-based institutions are often the centerpiece of this process. They offer community meeting space, neighborhood cleanups, and community activities. Community businesses also contribute by providing vocational training, summer internships, job placements, and financial support to youth programs.

Members of law enforcement also have a pivotal role in this process. To bridge a positive understanding between youths and the law, officers and court officials provide their services through mentoring, volunteering, and providing workshops that educate youths in the law and their rights as citizens. Cultural community organizations teach youths of color about their rich ancestry. Many of these organizations conduct rites of passage with high-risk youths. Rites of passage ceremonies are particularly strong in helping African-American youths understand their African heritage and their role in the community. Participating in this process is an accomplishment that signifies coming of age.

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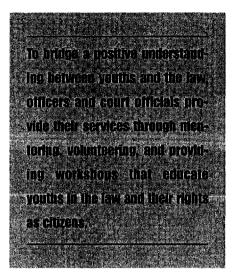
Through community partnerships, solid foundations are formed between institutions and youths. Youths who once were distrustful of society and lacking confidence in their abilities can use these partnerships to come face to face with community leaders, police officers, businesses, and faith-based institutions as partners, not as victims. The Adopt a School Program, which connects schools with businesses, churches, and social agencies, serves as a powerful example of successful community partnerships.

Mentoring has had a significant impact on the lives of African-American youths by providing one-on-one relationships between youths and positive adults. It offers youths access to people who can provide guidance, friendship, and positive role modeling. Studies by the New York Volunteer for Youth Campaign have shown that over 80 percent of the youths involved in mentoring stay out of trouble, do better in school, and have a better outlook on their life.

There is nothing magical about holistic empowerment. With dedication, it can successfully be organized in most communities. For youths exposed to negativity in their community and thereby labeled "criminals," it is a structure that can lead to self-improvement and success. Its objectives are not to set unrealistic aspirations but to assist each youth in setting his or her own goals and in realizing his or her power to face adversity affirmatively and with critical thinking. These can only be accomplished by giving these youths a steady and fair starting ground.

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We cannot afford to continue spinning our wheels while our youths fall through the cracks, nor can we sit idly by while others stereotype and criminalize our youths. Holistic youth empowerment programs offer a comprehensive and powerful remedy by which to cure the plague of violence that is affecting our youths. Through this process, our youths will discover their full potential and become the productive citizens they always could be. The sky should be the limit for our youths, not the criminal justice system.

Notes

1. Barry Feld, *Bad Kids: Race and the Transformation of the Juvenile Court* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 149.

2. George Bridges and Sara Steen, "Racial Disparities in Official Assessments of Juvenile Offenders: Attributional Stereotypes as Mediating Mechanism," *American Sociological Review,* Vol. 63 (August 1998), pp. 554–570.

3. David Cole, *No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the American Criminal Justice System* (New York: New Press, 1999), p. 170.

4. Arthur L. Burnett, "Permeation of Race, National Origin and Gender Issues from Initial Law Enforcement Contact through Sentencing: The Need for Sensitivity, Egalitarianism and Vigilance in the Criminal Justice System, *American Criminal Law Review,* Vol. 31: 1153–1175, 1994.

5. Randall Kennedy, *Race, Crime, and the Law* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), p. 141.

6. Cole, *No Equal Justice,* pp. 48–49.

7. Zachary Dowdy, "Racial Bias in Coverage by Media of Kids Who Kill," *Boston Globe* (1998).

8. Family Services Research Center, *Multisystemic Therapy Using Home-Based Services: A Clinically Effective and Cost-Effective Strategy for Treating Serious Clinical Problems in Youth* (Charleston: Medical University of South Carolina, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, October 1995).