My Sister’s Keeper: The Importance of Addressing African-American Girls’ Opportunity Gaps

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I – Introduction

With the increase of violence in many inner cities, the dialogue on how to impact the lives of today’s youth has intensified. President Obama launched the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and to ensure that all young people can reach their full potential.¹ The MBK initiative is a joint effort between the White House Administration and the philanthropic and private sectors that will connect young people to mentoring, support networks, and the skills needed to go to college or find jobs and work their way into the middle class.² The Presidential Memorandum on MBK specified that unlocking the full potential of boys and young men of color will benefit not only them, but all Americans.³ The need for gender-specific initiatives is understandable; however, the exclusion of girls, especially Black girls, gives the impression that they do not face similar opportunity gaps. In this paper, I will examine the reasons Black girls need to be included in the narrative of improving the long-term outcomes and abilities of young people.

II – Context of the Discussion

In order to frame the discussion, it is important to understand the contributing factors that have led to the creation of initiatives for boys and young men of color. The MBK initiative provided statistics that guided the development of the program.

² Id.
• 23.2 percent of Hispanics, 25.8 percent of Black, and 27 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIAN) live in poverty, compared to 11.6 percent of White Americans.4

• Black, American Indian, and Hispanic children are between six and nine times more likely than White children to live in areas of concentrated poverty.5

• Roughly, two-thirds of Black and one-third of Hispanic children live with only one parent.6

• Significant high school dropout rates – as high as 50 percent in some school districts – including boys and young men from certain Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander populations.7

• During the summer months (June-August) of 2013, 17 percent of Black teenage boys (ages 16-19) and 28 percent of Hispanic teenage boys were employed, compare to 34 percent of White teenage boys.8

• While only 6 percent of the overall population, Black males accounted for 43 percent of murder victims in 2011. Among youth ages 10 to 24, homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males and also among the leading causes of death of Hispanics, and AIANs.9

• In 2012, Black males were six times more likely to be imprisoned than White males. Hispanic males were two and half time more likely.10

In order to address these factors, MBK has identified six building blocks for success across key life stages.11

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 change

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5 Id.
6 Id.
7 Id.
8 Id.
9 Id.
10 Id.
11 Id.
The recommendations for each building block take a scholarly approach to addressing the risk factors by establishing national indicators of life outcomes, encouraging data collection for currently invisible populations, and rewarding outcome-focused approaches.¹²

The MBK statistics are compelling and definitely justify the urgency to address the risks faced by boys and young men of color. However, some of the statistics relate to Black children as a whole providing implications for Black girls. There are also similar statistics for Black girls related to the achievement gap, school suspensions, and involvement with the criminal justice system, which also warrant a call to action for Black girls. The issues faced by Black girls may need to be addressed differently than the solutions provided for Black boys; therefore, it would also be beneficial to establish national indicators of life outcomes and encourage data collection on issues related to Black girls. These efforts will assist in validating the need for interventions and encourage the development of solutions.

The remaining sections of the paper will highlight statistics and research advancing the argument that Black girls need to be included in the conversation on improving the long-term outcomes and abilities of young people.

III – Achievement Gap

Achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant.¹³ Each year the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) releases The Nation’s Report Card, which informs the public about the academic achievement of elementary and secondary students in the

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United States. The data in *The Nation’s Report Card* is used to determine whether any change in the achievement gap is some indication of either the success or failure of the No Child Left Behind Act and other efforts in local, state, or federal education systems.

The achievement gap between white and black students has been well-documented in the United States for the past few decades. According to the *The Nation’s Report Card*, white-black gaps in mathematics and reading did not change significantly from 2011 to 2013, but there was some narrowing of racial/ethnic score gaps compared to the first assessment year. Even though there was some narrowing of the racial/ethnic score gaps, white students scored an average of 26 points higher than black students in mathematics and reading on the fourth grade NAEP tests. For fourth grade females, white females scored an average of 24 points higher than black females in math and an average of 25 points higher than black females in reading on the NAEP tests.

In order to understand the disparity between white and black students, the demographics of the students must be reviewed. In the *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*, the National Center for Education Statistics provides statistics on the living arrangement, poverty level, and parental education of children in the United States. These demographic criteria are documented factors that contribute to the achievement gap between white and black students.

In 2007, about 73.9 million children under 18 years old resided in the United States. Of these children, 66 percent lived with married parents, 25 percent lived with a female parent with

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15 Id.
16 Id.
17 Id.
19 Id.
20 Id.
no spouse present, 7 percent lived with a male parent with no spouse present, and 2 percent lived in other arrangements.\textsuperscript{21} Across all racial/ethnic groups shown except Blacks and American Indians/Alaska Natives, the majority of children under 18 years old lived with married parents – about 83 percent of all Asian children and 75 percent of White children.\textsuperscript{22} However, a higher percentage of Black children lived with a female parent with no spouse present (56 percent) than did American Indian/Alaska Native children (38 percent).\textsuperscript{23}

Research suggests that living in poverty in the early childhood years leads to lower rates of school completion and growing up in poverty affects a child’s physical health and working memory.\textsuperscript{24} In 2007, 18 percent of children under the age of 18 were living in poverty.\textsuperscript{25} The percentage of these children living in poverty ranged from 5 to 52 percent depending on race/ethnicity and living arrangement.\textsuperscript{26} The percentages of children who were living in poverty were higher for Black children (34 percent) than for White children (10 percent).\textsuperscript{27} In general, across racial/ethnic groups, a higher percentage of children living with a female parent with no spouse present were living in poverty than children living with a male parent with no spouse present.\textsuperscript{28}

Studies have also found that low-socioeconomic status (SES) children scored about 1.3 standard deviations lower than high-SES children in their kindergarten-entry reading and math skills and nearly two-thirds of a standard deviation lower in teacher rating of attention skills.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{22} Id.
\textsuperscript{23} Id.
\textsuperscript{24} Id.
\textsuperscript{25} Id.
\textsuperscript{26} Id.
\textsuperscript{27} Id.
\textsuperscript{28} Id.
Low-SES children were also one-fourth of a standard deviation worse in terms of teacher-reported antisocial behavior.\textsuperscript{30} None of these gaps shrank over the course of elementary school, and in the case of the antisocial behavior, the SES-based gap doubled.\textsuperscript{31}

Research also suggests a link between parental education levels and child outcome such as educational experience, attainment, and academic achievement.\textsuperscript{32} In 2008, the percentages of Asian and White children who had parents with at least a bachelor’s degree were higher than the percentages of children of other races/ethnicities who had parents with at least a bachelor’s degree.\textsuperscript{33}

Even though the statistics are not delineated by gender, the data infers that the socioeconomic condition, living arrangement, and the level of parental education are contributing factors in the achievement gap for Black girls. The good news is that interventions, such as early childhood education, can assist in reducing the achievement gap.\textsuperscript{34} However, the data confirms that Black girls are in need of initiatives geared toward unlocking their potential and should continue to be a part of the conversation.

\textbf{IV – School Suspensions and the School-to-Prison Pipeline}

According to a study by the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions start early.\textsuperscript{35} Black children represent 18 percent of the preschool enrollment, but 48 percent of preschool children receiving more than

\begin{itemize}
\item Id.
\item Id.
\item Id.
\end{itemize}
one out-of-school suspension.\textsuperscript{36} Black students represent 16 percent of the student population, but 32-42 percent of students suspended or expelled.\textsuperscript{37} While boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12 percent) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys.\textsuperscript{38}

The statistics highlight the racial disparities in school disciplining policies. Zero tolerance disciplinary policies have resulted in an increase number of children being suspended for relatively minor disciplinary infractions turning schools into inhospitable environments that fail to promote either school safety or academic success.\textsuperscript{39} The end result of these punitive policies is a school-to-prison pipeline.\textsuperscript{40} School-to-prison pipeline refers to the collection of policies, practices, and prevailing consciousness that facilitate both the criminalization of educational environments and the process by which this criminalization results in the incarceration of youth and young adults.\textsuperscript{41} Research has shown that arrests in school represent a direct route into the school-to-prison pipeline, but out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools also push students out of school and closer to a future in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.\textsuperscript{42}

Numerous studies have examined components of the school-to-prison pipeline, but the literature is limited as it focuses on males.\textsuperscript{43} The absence of intersectional and comparative analysis facilitates the development of assumptive responses to Black girls who are

\begin{itemize}
\item Id.
\item Id.
\item Id.
\end{itemize}
disproportionately impacted by the relationships between the education and correctional institutions.\(^{44}\) The primary shortcoming of the pipeline analogy is the assumption that by addressing a pipeline, we will affect the conditions of Black males and females alike.\(^{45}\) However, assuming that the pathways to incarceration for Black females are identical to that of males has failed to curtail the use of exclusionary discipline on Black females.\(^{46}\)

Research has also shown that a direct trajectory may not be as constant for Black females as it is for Black males.\(^{47}\) Like their male counterparts, Black females who are dissuaded from completing high school may participate in the underground economy (e.g. illegal activity, drug trade) and become involved in the justice system.\(^{48}\) However, research suggests that Black females who avoid both of these outcomes may drop out of school, increase their risk of teenage pregnancy and/or become financially dependent on males who participate in the underground economy.\(^{49}\) For Black girls who are disconnected or alienated from school, there are multiple conditions such as poor relationships with mothers, substance abuse, mental health disorders and other conditions that converge to affect their increased vulnerability to become commodities of, or participants in, the underground economy, or as intimate partners of males and females who participate in the underground economy – which may eventually lead to their incarceration.\(^{50}\)

The data confirms that Black girls are in crisis as it relates to school discipline policies and their potential entry into the criminal justice system. Therefore, we cannot focus exclusively on the plights of Black boys with the hope that the work will translate into invention efforts intended to bring Black girl out of crisis.

\(^{45}\) Id.
\(^{46}\) Id.
\(^{47}\) Id.
\(^{48}\) Id.
\(^{49}\) Id.
\(^{50}\) Id.
V – Involvement in the Criminal Justice System

As discussed previously, the school-to-prison pipeline is a pathway for Black females’ entry into the criminal justice system. The overall rate of incarceration has declined for Black women over the last decade, but this does not mean that Black women are not attached to the penal system like Black men.\textsuperscript{51} According to the report “Incarcerated Women” by the Sentencing Project, the lifetime likelihood of imprisonment for women is 1 in 56.\textsuperscript{52} However, Black women have a 1 in 19 chance of becoming incarcerated compared with 1 in 45 for Latina women, and 1 in 118 for White women.\textsuperscript{53} In 2011, Black women were incarcerated at 2.5 times the rate of White women.\textsuperscript{54}

Women were particularly affected by the policies of the “war on drugs.”\textsuperscript{55} As law enforcement increased targeting of drug law violators and as sentences for drug offenses became more severe, drug offenders came to represent a growing share of the incarceration population, with the proportion of women in prison for drug crimes exceeding that of men.\textsuperscript{56} The advent of mandatory sentencing policies imposed a harsh burden on women offenders, also described as the “girlfriend” problem.\textsuperscript{57} Since the only means of avoiding mandatory penalty is generally to cooperate with the prosecution by providing information on higher-ups in the drug trade, women who have a partner who is a drug seller may be aiding the seller, but have relatively little

\textsuperscript{53} Id.
\textsuperscript{54} Id.
\textsuperscript{55} Id.
\textsuperscript{56} Id.
\textsuperscript{57} Id.
information to trade in exchange for a more lenient sentence.\textsuperscript{58} In contrast, the “boyfriend” drug seller is likely to be in a better position to offer information, and so may receive less prison time for his offense than does the less culpable woman.\textsuperscript{59} In 2000, this was true for Black women as drug related violations accounted for 37 percent of the incarceration offenses.\textsuperscript{60}

The data shows that African-American woman have a more complicated relationship to prison than other groups because of the role that their race, socioeconomic status, gender, and status as crime victims play in their criminality.\textsuperscript{61} Overwhelming, women are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses.\textsuperscript{62} However, for Black women in 2009, violent crimes accounted for almost 43 percent of their incarceration offenses.\textsuperscript{63} Law enforcement practices, particularly related to the drug war, targeted black neighborhoods, and limited access to drug treatment and alternatives resulted in incarceration for low-income women.\textsuperscript{64}

Even though the rate of incarceration has declined for Black women, they are still incarcerated at higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, the type of crimes committed tends to be more violent in comparison to other women. The research and data confirms that Black women interactions with the criminal justice system are troubling. Therefore, research and interventions could aid in addressing the problem.

\textsuperscript{59} Id.
\textsuperscript{60} Id.
\textsuperscript{62} Id.
\textsuperscript{64} Id.
VI – Conclusion

MBK and other initiatives focused on boys and young men of color acknowledge that racial disparities exist and something needs to be done about them. This recognition and call to action is critical, but there are underlying assumptions with the focus on just Black boys that need to be addressed. The first assumption is Black girls are doing fine. The research and data show that the same risk factors impacting Black boys are also impacting Black girls. Therefore, it is imperative that we include Black girls in the conversation when adopting approaches that empower children to succeed through key life stages. The second assumption is rooted in the idea that if we help the boys, then the situation of the girls will get better. This is also not completely accurate as research studies show that for certain issues gender-specific research and evaluations need to occur. Finally, bettering the lives of Black boys does not justify being silent on the lives of Black girls. The research and statistics show that this approach could be detrimental to the lives of Black girls.