

Early Childhood Education and the African American Child:

**A Look at the Impact of Early Education on the
Reduction of Violent Crime among African-American Youth**



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Introduction

Over the course of the past few years, Chicago has seen its murder rate soar to record highs. The recent death of Hadiya Pendleton garnered national attention, and has brought much needed awareness to the plight of African American children as they struggle to survive in crime ridden communities. Dodging bullets has become a daily routine among children who live in the city's worst neighborhoods. While the vast majority of the rampant gun violence remains isolated to mainly two areas of Chicago, the south and west side communities, it is no coincidence that these problems continue to plague poor communities, which are often heavily populated with minorities. It is also no coincidence that these same communities have some of the worst school systems in the country. This paper will highlight the fact that there is a direct link between the violence that has a stronghold on the less affluent African American inner-city community, and that the primary culprit is a cycle of poor education that perpetuates an incessant gravitation towards gang violence, specifically within the African American male community. This paper will further illustrate that an investment in early childhood education in the primary years of a child, specifically ages 4 to 6, would help to drastically reduce violence among African American males in their teenage years.

Link Between Low Education Standards and Crime

Every school day, nearly 7,000 students become dropouts. Annually, this equates to about 1.2 million students who will not graduate from high school with their peers as scheduled. Without a high school diploma, these individuals will be far more likely to spend their lives periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or cycling in and out of the prison system than their graduate counterparts. (Diplomas Count).

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The average high school dropout can expect to earn an annual income of \$20,241, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (PDF). This is approximately \$10,386 less than the typical high school graduate, and \$36,424 less than someone with a bachelor's degree. Of course, simply finding a job is also much more of a challenge for dropouts. While the national unemployment rate stood at 8.1 percent in August, joblessness among those without a high school degree measured 12 percent. Among college graduates, it was 4.1 percent (unemployment rate). The challenges hardly end there, particularly among young dropouts. Among those between the ages of 18 and 24, dropouts were more than twice as likely as college graduates to live in poverty according to the Department of Education. Dropouts experienced a poverty rate of 30.8 percent, while those with at least a bachelor's degree had a poverty rate of 13.5 percent (education statistics).

Among dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24, incarceration rates were a whopping 63 times higher than among college graduates, according to a study by researchers at Northeastern University (dropping out). For men in each race-ethnic group, incarceration rates were highest among high school dropouts. Among the nation's male high school dropouts, however, institutionalization rates were considerably higher among young Black men than they were among members of the other three major race-ethnic groups. Approximately 23 out of every 100 young Black male adults were institutionalized versus only 6 to 7 of every 100 Asians, Hispanics, and Whites (N.E study). Thus, the statistics show a positive link between a lack of education, and increased incarceration rates, especially among African American males.

Chicago Public School Study

Chicago Public Schools, for the most part, have abandoned poverty-stricken neighborhoods in favor of spending its resources on schools in upper income areas. This is

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evident by the fact that nearly all of the recently closed schools in the city of Chicago were in predominantly impoverished minority neighborhoods. This approach is questionable if the desired goal is to lift people out of generations of poverty.

During the 1990's, the Illinois General Assembly approved a plan called Renaissance 2010. This plan, which was heavily supported by Mayor Daley, served as an effort to improve the worst schools in the city by revamping them into new charter schools. However, this plan seems to have done more to aid in the re-gentrification of specific areas of the city, rather than lift people out of poverty. Additionally, there is mounting evidence that schools in predominantly minority and poor neighborhoods are the schools that are targeted for closing and transformation. Initially, it seemed as if the CPS and City Hall were bringing about positive change by transforming poor performing schools in impoverished neighborhood into high performing charter schools. However, there seems to be a pattern that when a charter school is introduced into a neighborhood the result is re-gentrification of the neighborhood rather than improving the academic experience for the children of current residents. More often than not, the increased property values and resulting increase in property taxation result in the relocation of the poor to areas with lower taxes, as more middle class families move into the area.

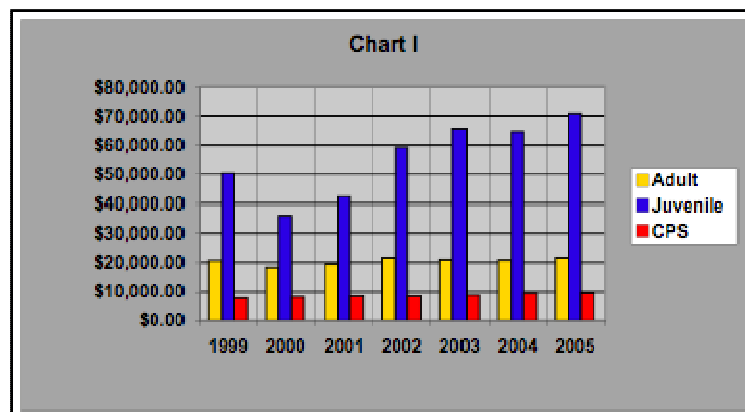
In North Lawndale for example, CPS closed Collins High School as part of Renaissance 2010 and is creating three charter schools within the confines of the same structure; however, most of the current students are going to be bussed to a lower performing school in Little Village. This transition of virtually all Black students to an almost entirely Latino school has very serious ramifications with respect to heightened racial tensions and gang problems for the students attending schools in the new area. Furthermore, the school in Little Village is a lower

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performing than Collins High School; therefore, the probability that this shift will have a positive impact on the affected students is questionable.

Some Statistics:

- As of 2000 approximately 57% of all adult residents of North Lawndale are under the control of the criminal justice system. This takes into account individuals serving time in County Jail, Illinois Department of Corrections, and individuals serving out their sentence on either probation or parole. (Source: Arrests and Incarceration in North Lawndale Drugs, Crime, and Consequences, Oct. 2002)
- Close to 95% of the residents in the North Lawndale community are African American with a median income of less than \$20,000. (Source: Community of Hope: Economic Revitalization Plan for North Lawndale, 2007)
- North Lawndale's unemployment rate is 13%. (Source: Community of Hope: Economic Revitalization Plan for North Lawndale, 2007). The actual rate is probably much higher because after 6 months individuals fall off the roles of the unemployed and are no longer counted.



* Sources: CPS data comes from the Illinois State Board of Election. Illinois Department of Corrections data comes from their annual reports 1999-2005.

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The above referenced chart details the amount of money CPS spends per child on educating a child for a year including administrative costs. The blue and yellow bars detail the amount of money spent by the Illinois Department of Corrections to incarcerate an adult and juvenile in their facilities per year. As the chart reflects, there is a disproportionate level of financial resources being used to educate children relative to the level of financial resources being used to fund incarceration. However, if educational programs, and more specifically early childhood education programs, were funded at more appropriate levels, there is no question that this would result in an overall reduction in violence among inner city Black youth.

Early Childhood Education Programs

The Head Start Program is the nation's premier school readiness program for children in poverty. Since its inception in May of 1965, it has provided voluntary, comprehensive education, social and emotional development and physical and mental health services for three- and four-year-olds, as well as parent involvement efforts. In 1994, the Early Head Start Program was created to provide comprehensive child development and family strengthening services for babies and toddlers (birth to age three). While the goal of high-quality pre-school programs is to ensure school readiness for all young learners, early learning programs also have long-term benefits. Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to higher education than their peers who did not attend preschool. They are also less likely to require special education services or repeat a grade in school. Students who attend preschool programs are also less likely to become teenage parents and dependent on welfare.

Additionally, children who attend preschool are less prone to commit violent crimes as teenagers or adults. In fact, a recent study by the University of Minnesota, showed that children

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who participate in a high-quality preschool program had lower rates of incarceration and substance abuse than their peers who were not enrolled in a similar program. Further research reveals that when at-risk children are left out of quality pre-kindergarten programs, they are five times more likely to become criminals by age 27 than their childhood counterparts who attended a quality pre-kindergarten program. However, despite all of these positive attributes, preschool programs, such as the Head Start program, are so grossly under-funded that only about half of the eligible impoverished three- and four-year-old child population can actively take advantage of them. Furthermore, due to the recent economic downturn experienced by our economy, less than five percent of the eligible infant and toddler population are able to take advantage of the Early Head Start program.

In 2009-2010, state funding for early education programs nationwide fell by nearly \$30 million from the previous school year. As a result, many children are missing out on early learning opportunities that will positively impact their lives. Additionally, research indicates that approximately 45% of American students are not “school ready” by the time they enter kindergarten. However, studies suggest that school readiness would not be as much of an issue if early education, such as preschool, had been provided between the critical ages of 3 and 4.

Benefits of Early Childhood Education in the African American Community

There is no question that early childhood education programs have a positive impact on the lives of children; however, the significant impact of early childhood education programs among poor minority children cannot be ignored. The Chicago Longitudinal Study, a multi-decade study on the impact of early childhood education on poor minority children, highlights the fact that minority children who participated in an early childhood program beginning at the age of 3 showed higher levels of educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and job skills as

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well as lower rates of substance abuse, felony arrest, and incarceration than their non-program participant counterparts. The study, which focused on the educational and social development of a same-age cohort of low-income, minority children (93% African American), found very even more positive results among male participants and children of high school dropouts.

Among the early childhood program participants, 9% more completed high school, and for male children involved in the study, approximately 19% more males completed high school when compared to their counterparts who had not participated in an early childhood program. Additionally, approximately 20% more of the participants tracked in the Chicago Longitudinal Study achieved moderate or higher level of socioeconomic status than those who had not participated in an early childhood program. However, even greater benefits were noted among program participants with respect to drug abuse, felony arrest, and incarceration. Among program participants, 28% fewer abused drugs and alcohol, and 21% fewer males abused drugs and alcohol. Additionally, 22% fewer had a felony arrest, and the difference was 45% for children of high school dropouts. And lastly, but most significantly, 28% fewer had experienced incarceration or jail when compared with individuals who did not have the benefit of an early childhood program at age 3. The Chicago Longitudinal Study also underscored the importance of preschool education for ages 4 through 6. Among preschool program participants, 18% more achieved moderate or higher level of socioeconomic status, 55% more achieved on-time high school graduation, and 36% fewer had been arrested for violent crimes when compared to individuals who did not attend a preschool program.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study clearly shows that early childhood education helps to provide the solid foundation necessary to excel later in life, especially for impoverished minority groups. Additionally, the study shows that early childhood education and preschool leads to a

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higher level of school readiness and better overall school performance, and ultimately a better quality of life with respect to educational attainment, improved socioeconomic status. But most importantly, the Chicago Longitudinal Study provides clear evidence that early childhood education substantially reduces the likelihood of an individual engaging in violent crimes, especially among African American males. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the long lasting effects of sustained, school-based early education, which represents an excellent return on investment where early childhood education is concerned.

College Readiness

While the Chicago Longitudinal Study highlights the success of a cohort of students over a nearly 30 year period, it cannot be ignored that the number of Black students on college campuses, and especially in the Ivy League, is nothing remarkable. African Americans continue to be outnumbered by other minority groups on college campuses. In 2012, only 45% of low-income students met the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in English, 30% in reading, 21% in mathematics, and 13% in science. It is not surprising that for many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, learning gaps appear in early childhood. However, for low-income African-American males, the issue is further exasperated by low expectations and single-parent households. When elementary and high school teachers as well as school administrators lower their expectations with respect to the poor minority student population, academic progress can be hard to achieve. Furthermore, because of the prevalence of single-parent run households among minorities, most African American male children don't know what success looks like. What tends to occur among the African American male population is the emergence of two extremes: either the child decides to do just enough to get by or the child falls into the rare gifted student group.

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Quality early childhood education programs have shown evidence of having a positive effect on the college education careers of poor minority youth, specifically male children. However, the problem continues to be that most poor minority children either do not attend or do not have access to quality early childhood and preschool education. In an effort to help resolve the issue of access, President Obama has partnered with states to provide funding for increased access to much needed early childhood education programs. These investments, which are made in partnership with states and fully paid for in the President's budget, will help close America's school readiness gap and ensure that America's children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. Currently, about 24,263 children in Illinois from birth to age three are served by the Child Care and Development Block Grant. However, through the additional investments being made in Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, even more children will have access to high quality early care and education. It is believed that these programs will provide increased access to poverty stricken minority children, which will allow them to cultivate the necessary skills earlier in their educational careers so that they can be on a clear path to college, a good job and ultimately, the middle class.

Conclusion

The statistics provide a clear picture: Early childhood education programs provide the necessary foundation needed to overcome violence in the African American community. Numerous studies have shown that when a child has the benefit of an early childhood education, their academic career thrives. Government has two choices: It can either continue to spend millions of dollars building prisons or it can make an investment in early education programs that will provide a solid foundation for the cultivation of life-long learners and thinkers. Early childhood education, specifically in the younger years, can have a positive, long-term impact on

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the lives of African American children. However, historically, government has been slow to fund these much needed programs at the level necessary for all poor families to take full advantage of the positive aspects that early childhood education provides. This trend must be corrected so that the Black community can be placed on the path of recovery from the pattern of violence that has decimated the Black community, especially where young Black males are concerned.

While it can be argued that early childhood education is not the only factor that contributes to the success of a child, it cannot be ignored that early childhood education is an important centerpiece of a well-balanced educational plan. While family and community both play huge roles in shaping the core values of a child, early childhood education programs, when embraced as an important cornerstone of the community, serve to teach children real life skills of how to work together and help uplift others. The foundation that early childhood education provides for children who participate in available programs equips them with the best skills necessary for performing well in school, staying out of trouble, and ultimately pursuing higher education to improve their overall quality of life. As such, early childhood education in this country can no longer remain merely an option; it must become a permanent reality of modern day society.

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Contribution Breakdown

Introduction: Both contributed

Link Between Low Education Standards and Crime: Jarrett Adams

Chicago Public School Study: Jarrett Adams

Some Statistics: Jarrett Adams

Early Childhood Education Programs: Demetria Brown

Benefits of Early Childhood Education in the African American Community: Demetria
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College Readiness: Demetria Brown

Conclusion: Both contributed