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Introduction: Black Males Are Dying—
An Overview of the Crises Facing
American African Males

Black males are portrayed . . . in a limited number of roles,
most of them deviant, dangerous, and dysfunctional. . . . This
constant barrage of predominantly disturbing images inevita-
bly contributes to the public's negative stereotypes of black
men, particularly of those who are perceived as young, hos-
tile, and impulsive. Clearly, the message says: If they enter-
tain you, enjoy them (at a safe distance); if they serve you,
patronize them (and don't forget to leave a tip); if they
threaten you, avoid them (don't ride the subway). Thus, young
black males are stereotyped by the five "d's": dumb, deprived,
dangerous, deviant, and disturbed. There is no room in this
picture for comprehension, caring, or compassion of the plight
of these young black men.

—Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, 1988, p.3

Education is considered to be the most accessible means for achiev-
ing social, political, economic, and cultural liberation in the United
States. This traditionalist view accepts that public schools are ve-
hicles of democracy and social and individual mobility. Educators

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and lay persons alike believe that the nature of public schools is the major mechanism for development of a democratic and egalitarian society. Historically, however, public schools in the United States have not contributed to the achievement of liberation for American Africans or for other minority populations. Rather than serve as vehicles for liberation for American African males and other people of color, public schools serve, at best, as agencies of social, economic, political, and cultural reproduction. As Henry Giroux (1988) asserts:

> Public schooling offers limited individual mobility to members of the working class and other oppressed groups, but it is a powerful instrument for the reproduction of capitalist relations of production and the dominant legitimating ideologies of the ruling group. (p. xx)

The reproduction of the proletariat and other oppressed groups by way of public schooling is clearly illustrated through an analysis of national poverty rates. From the following statistics, the American African adage "The more things change, the more they remain the same" accurately describes the reality of public schooling for many American Africans and well demonstrates the reproductive nature of public schools.

> Inadequate preparation in unequal schools and continued racial prejudice have trapped more than a third of African Americans in a cycle of poverty and a quality of life comparable to the Third World countries. (*State of Black America*, 1992, p. 142)

Data reported by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (1986) show that American African children generally fall below grade level as early as elementary school, and the gap rapidly increases as they get older. American African children are tracked into slow learner groups at disproportionate rates, and they are three times as likely as their American European counterparts to be placed into classes for the educable mentally retarded, the behaviorally disturbed, and the emotionally impaired. Conversely, Black youth are half as likely to be placed in classes for gifted and talented students. Furthermore, they are often encouraged by

school staff to employ courses of study that are less academically rigorous and less challenging and which tend to leave them trapped in general or vocational tracks much more often than American European students.

Shockingly, only 20 percent of American African eleventh graders could perform complex reading tasks as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, while 53 percent of American European eleventh graders performed the task (Irvine, 1990). Although much improvement has been shown in reading and math in the past ten years, American African youth still score well below the national norm. In 1987, for instance, American African youth averaged ninety-nine points lower on the math section and seventy-nine points lower on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test than their American European counterparts (Irvine, 1990).

Compared to American Europeans, American African students are twice as likely to drop out of high school and are suspended three times as often (Irvine, 1990). Although high-school graduation rates have improved and the American African population eligible for college has grown over the past twenty years, their rates of college entrance and completion have fallen since 1975 (College Entrance Examination Board, 1985). In fact, though overall dropout rates among American Africans have indeed declined, an alarming 15 percent of American Africans in the age group 16–24 had not graduated but were out of school in 1988, thereby expanding a virtually unemployable population (*State of Black America*, 1992). Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that 21 percent of all 18–19-year-old and 25 percent of all 20–21-year-old American African youth had not completed nor were presently enrolled in high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 1981).

By virtually every measurable academic indicator, American African youth face a most heinous future in the traditional public schools. Yet, throughout the nation, American African youth and other minorities have no choice but to enroll in these systems which were designed to fail them. Because of educational failure, Black American youth face high rates of drug use, homicide, teenage pregnancy, crime, poverty, and unemployment. For instance, the National Urban League reported in 1992 that poverty rates for American Africans are the highest among any group in the United States. Lamentable statistics from 1988 suggest that 9.43 million

American Africans (31.6 percent) live below the poverty line. This percentage represents a ratio that has not changed since 1969, and one that is nearly two-and-a-half times the national average and more than three-and-a-half times that of American Europeans (*The State of Black America*, 1992).

Rather than serve as a vehicle to promote liberation, public schools have become structured support systems assuring social, political, cultural, and economic inequality for American Africans. Report after report painfully describes the inefficiency of traditional public schools in the United States.

In city after city, in virtually every "hood," you could well continue illustrating the tragic, endemic, and epidemic annihilation of American African males. In fact, volumes could be written about such atrocities. However, I am most interested in knowing where to go from here. The larger question is this: What is to be done about societal, political, economic, and cultural forces paralyzing the intellectual, economic, and cultural growth of the American African male?

School and community people believe change in traditional education for Black males is the most likely means by which to prepare them for world citizenship and liberation. Prior to engaging in the arguments for and against the all-male academies, it may be helpful to entertain recent critiques for mass schooling and views of public education. McNeil (1986) postulates that public schools have evolved historically as organizations serving basically two potentially conflicting purposes: (1) to educate citizens and (2) to process them into roles for economic production. To achieve the first goal, schools supply students with information and learning skills. However, because the intellects and skills levels of youth develop in ways that cannot be predetermined, the results are unpredictable. Secondly, schools process youth through stratified steps leading to predictable, marketable credentials for the workplace. The steps, and some of the outcomes, can be managed and controlled. Therefore, the school was organized to be in conflict with itself from the outset. This familiar line of argument is presented in both the deschooling tradition of Ivan Illich, which views organized schools as innately oppressive, and in some Marxist critiques of the public school as an agent of capital. McNeil sees public schools as conflicting institutions. Lawrence Cremin well illustrates this as he reminds us:

> Schooling—like education in general—never liberates without at the same time limiting. It never empowers without at the same time constraining. It never frees without at the same time socializing. The question is not whether one or the other is occurring in isolation, but what the balance is, and to what end, and in light of what alternatives. (p. 132)

This analysis of the contradictory nature of American education leads to three critical questions regarding the education of Black males: (1) How do alternative education schools and programs designed for American African males "liberate"? (2) How do they "limit"? And (3) if the paramount goal for these schools and programs is to empower and to free the American African male, how, at the same time, might they render him a victim of "constraint" and "socialization"? Although this work analyzes alternative schools and programs designed for American African males in urban environments from the vantage point of schooling and power, it should be understood that the critical issues confronting American Africans in the inner city are many of the same problems facing Black males in rural and suburban communities as well. Thus, this view of education provides a useful dialectical context for understanding schooling for *all* American African males.