Growing Up Without Father: The Effects on African American Boys

Approved: Patricia Bromley Date:__10-09-2009_____

Growing Up Without Father: The Effects on African American Boys

A Seminar Paper Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment for the Degree

Master of Science in Education-Adult Education

By

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2009

ABSTRACT

This study examined behaviors of African American male adolescents, resulting from father absence. It further examined the extent to which there is a relation between African American boys' behavior and their status as sons of an absent father. Effects of father absence was approached by researching articles and journals comparing African American males raised in female headed household to African American boys raised in traditional two parent homes. Four major youth pathogens were examined. Juvenile crime/delinquency, teen pregnancy, teen drug abuse and school dropout correlated with fatherlessness more than any other socioeconomic factor. Through the literature review it was concluded that there are several marked distinctions among African American boys growing up without fathers compared to those growing up with fathers. Boys without fathers in the home have a noticeably higher rate of incidence of drug abuse, school dropout, crime and delinquency, and teen pregnancy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

ASSUMPTIONS

DELIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

METHOD OF APPROACH

ANALYSIS OF DATA

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As single parent homes have become more prevalent, the fixation on family structure has disintegrated. Over half of society's African American youth are being raised by one parent, namely the mother. The need for role models and the attempt to substitute them has created an alliance of deviancy with less than ideal older models and more youth living in female headed households and seeking unfit role models (Ancona, 1998). These role models are men who are themselves engaged in deviant, antisocial and often illegal behavior. The support and mentorship established in the traditional homes has been neglected and therefore rejected by these youth. The absence of fathers leads to the misguided notion of non-responsibility for African American adolescents and fosters a youth culture of delinquent behavior. In poor economic times, the affliction of poverty and the absence of family structure become more problematic.

Another negative repercussion of growing up without a suitable father in the home is the increased risk of chemical abuse by African American adolescent males. The absence of the father is generally the main predictor for drug use by black boys (Mandara & Murray, 2006). This is true even when we factor in family socioeconomic status, parental monitoring, friends' drug use and neighborhood crime. Black boys in father-absent homes are not only more likely to use drugs than boys in father present homes, they are also more likely to use drugs than girls in father absent homes (Mandara & Murray, 2006). There were no gender differences when the father was present.

Statement of Problem

The focus in this paper is to determine whether delinquent behaviors of African American male adolescents are a result of father absence. To what extent is there a relation between African Americans boys growing up without fathers and their behavior? Over the past 20 years there has been a steady increase in the number of men who have children but are not actively involved in their children's lives, especially in the African American community (Ancona, 1998). The lifestyle choices of these men contribute to whether they become involved in their child's life. The effects of these lifestyle choices can be seen in the children as adolescents.

Purpose of the Research

The literature that reviews the lifestyle choices of African American men with male children and the negative impact it has on their lives is reported in this paper. There is a relation between African American boys who grow up without a father figure and the boys having a higher crime rate, higher dropout rate, and increased alcohol and drug abuse. Also there is a relationship between African American boys growing up without a father and the likelihood of them getting involved with gangs and growing up in poverty.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to show the effects fatherlessness has on African American sons and to stress the importance of having a father figure in the home. There is a substantial body of research literature documenting the positive benefits fathers bring to the lives of their children. A review of studies on father involvement and child well-being published since 1980

found that 82 % of these studies showed significant associations between positive father involvement and offspring well-being (McLanahan, 1994).

Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It was also assumed that the literature would make recommendations on how to best use the research available.

Delimitations of the Research

The research was conducted through extensive searches of various academic journals utilizing Sage Publications. Key search topics included "fatherlessness and African American boys", "statistics of fatherless African American boys", and "relation between delinquent behavior and fatherless African American boys".

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the history of the effects on African American boys back in the 1980's compared to how it is affecting the African American boys today was conducted. A second review of literature was conducted to compare statistics of African American boys growing up in a two-parent household compared to a single parent home without the father figure being present.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Over half of African American youth are being raised in one-parent, female-headed households (Ancona, 1998). The boys being raised in these female-headed households have a strong need for role models. This natural desire to reach out to older males for guidance has pushed young boys to seek deviant older male role models (Popenoe, 1996). The support and mentorship established in the traditional homes has been neglected and therefore repudiated by these youth. The absence of fathers, and the notion of non-responsibility for African American adolescents misguided and promote of delinquent behavior, especially for African American boys. With a lapse in the economy, the affliction of poverty, illness and absence of family structure become more apparent.

Recent research on African American boys has focused on the elements of parenting and strategies to strengthen those skills. According to the research done in the 1980's, the differences in intelligence were examined as a factor amongst white and black children growing up in different environments (Deutsch & Brown, 1964). Further and more current research seemed to prove that parenting and peers played a significant role in influencing African American boys (Paschall, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 2003).

Risk indicators of parenting practices have placed an emphasis on the effects of mothers to maintain a household while providing a certain amount of stability and normalcy in the home. Researchers argue that father absence is the largest contributor to aggressive and delinquent behavior in these youth (Jackson, 1999).

There have been many attempts at research to establish a theory as to what causes juvenile delinquency, especially of African American boys. Some of the research studies

examined the effects on children coming from broken homes. One study demonstrated a positive relation with aggression and criminal behavior in African American boys (Nicholi, 1983). In another study which deemed sex typed aggression and dependent behaviors a negative or no present father relationship was apparent (Berger, Lieberman & Wolford, 1995). This study attempted to identify aggressive behaviors and delinquent acts in African American boys affected by father absence. It showed that African American boys who are raised in a traditional setting (mother and father) are less aggressive and more inclined to abide by the law and morality of the family compared to those raised by single mothers.

Researchers focusing on the relation between the interpersonal climate of single-mother families and risk for psychopathology in children and adolescents have reported that the quality of the parent-child bond varies with parental status (Zastowny & Lewis, 1989). This research helps explain some of the problems observed among children and adolescents living in mother-headed households (Amato & Rezac, 1994). For example, Brody and Forehand (1993) found that differences in the levels of drug/alcohol use of adolescents living in single-mother and two-parent households were largely attributable to differences in the rate of mother-adolescent conflict and maternal acceptance. Similarly, Feldman, Rubenstein, and Rubin (1998) reported that the relationship between single motherhood and risk for depression was rendered non-significant. Florsheim, Tolan and Gorman-Smith (1998) attempted to clarify if and how differences in the functioning of single-mother and two parent families relate to the occurrence of behavioral problems among inner-city boys (ages 10-15). Data were collected on family relationships, parenting practices, the positive influence of male family members, and the severity of externalizing behavior problems.

Results indicated that: (1) multiple family risk factors contribute to the occurrence of behavior problems; (2) most family risk factors were generalizable to both single-mother and two-parent families; (3) although boys in single-mother families were at greater risk for developing behavior problems than boys in two-parent families, the risks associated with single motherhood were offset by a structured family environment, an effective disciplinary strategy that allowed for some degree of adolescent autonomy, and the positive involvement of a male family member; and (4) not all differences in the functioning of single-mother and two-parent families were associated with problem behavior, underscoring the importance of distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive aspects of single-mother family functioning (Florsheim et al. 1998). According to Florsheim, et al. (1998), there are four major areas where the absence of a father is most significant. The first is a markedly greater incidence of juvenile delinquency displayed in African American homes headed by women.

A study conducted of participants served by the Johns Hopkins Medical Institution sought to evaluate whether there is a higher incidence of depression in African American children who live in paternal absent homes and whether prepubescent African American males who lack paternal presence exhibit more aggression and/or antisocial behaviors than African American males who reside in homes with a paternal figure (Shapiro, 1998). The participants' grades ranged from 5 through 7, with approximately 35% in 4th. All were receiving government assistance and were considered to be low socioeconomic status. Seventy percent of the children in father-absent homes were under the age of 5 when a single female parent headed their households. Fifty-four percent of children whose fathers did not reside in the same house had some degree of contact with their fathers. This study extended the findings for previously published research, which has observed that among African American adolescents, the disruption

of family relationships is inversely related to depression and violent behaviors. However, previous studies have been inconclusive about whether additional risks are borne by younger African American male children from single parent rather than two parent households (Passley, Gerring, & Gerson, 2006).

The information from this study revealed robust differences between prepubescent African American males who reside with a parental figure and those who did not. In contrast to boys who had a parental figure living in their home, boys without father figures reported experiencing more mood problems, more peer conflict and more difficulty experiencing pleasurable activities. Conversely, the males who resided with paternal figures had significantly better personal adjustment than males who did not reside with a paternal figure (Shapiro, 1998).

The data from this study also suggest that the presence of a paternal figure in the household may actually have a positive effect on the emotional state of the prepubescent male, especially in relation to mood, peer conflict, personal adjustment and ability to enjoy developmentally appropriate social and recreational activities. As anticipated, higher levels of aggression and greater acceptance of the use of guns and violence was observed in the group of boys who did not have a paternal figure in their home.

The findings of this study are also supported by data published by the Texas Department of Corrections. Over 85% of youths in prison grew up in fatherless homes (Texas Department of Corrections and Fulton Co. Georgia Jail Populations, 1992). That means that children from single family homes are 9 times as likely to end up in a state operated institution. This number is doubled by the occurrence of African American boys growing up on female-headed households.

Studies focusing on African American boys find that those living without a father in the home are much more likely to get into trouble with the law, get into fights, and have a school-related discipline problem. One study of 948 Black male adolescents Coleman et al. (1989) found that father absence promotes delinquency independently of, and much more strongly than, low socioeconomic status and peer delinquency. It also has found that the main reason father absence promotes delinquency has to do with parenting: Father absent homes have less parental supervision and often fail to effectively instill pro-social attitudes in young black men.

Among the most prominent psychiatrists in recent time was Dr. Karl Menninger who contended that modern youth suffer from disrupted belonging. In earlier times, children were nurtured by extended family, church, and community. Today, many detached youth seek "artificial belongings" by affiliating with other outcast peers. The resulting epidemic of emotional disorders is described by psychiatrist Edward Hallowell (1999) as the "diagnosis of disconnection."

Writing a half century ago in Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang, sociologist Albert Cohen (1955) identified a troubling pattern. Fatherless urban boys were attracted to antisocial gangs. Lacking strong male role models, they embraced a delinquent identity to prove their masculinity. This was also poor training for parenthood, and we are now reaping the effects of generations of absent fathers. A large-scale study of delinquents (Gold & Osgood, 1992) found the majority of these boys had no adult male with a significant role in their lives.

The second major variation in African American males raised in female-headed homes is marked decrease in academic performance in female-headed homes. A study conducted by Rodney and Mupier (1999) looked at the behavioral differences between African American male

adolescents living with biological fathers and those without biological fathers in the home. This study examined a sampling of African American youth from a large cross section of an African American population. Of the youth surveyed in this study 49% of the father-absent adolescents reported that they had repeated at least one grade, whereas only 24% of father present adolescents reported that they had repeated a grade in school. Twenty-two percent of the father-absent adolescents reported that their grades were better than other students in the class, as opposed to 30.4% of the father-present adolescents. Alternatively 73% of the father-absent adolescents reported that their grades were worse that the other students in class, as opposed to 3.6% of father-present adolescents. However, this difference was not statistically significant.

Rodney and Mupier
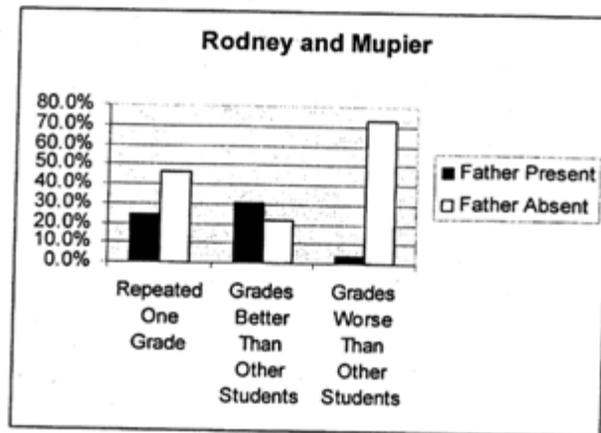
CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The data collected during this review clearly imply that there is a unique set of challenges faced by African American boys growing up without fathers. They often are failing in school and are involved in antisocial behaviors. They also are four times more likely to participate in a juvenile proceeding. One thing the data failed to elucidate is what causes African American boys overall to do more poorly than their counterparts. One could infer that the already present struggles that come with being an African American male are not being helped to be overcome by a present parental figure in the home. Boys who grow up in father-absent homes are more likely than those in father-present homes to have trouble establishing appropriate sex roles and gender identity.

Results and Discussion

Fatherless children are at a dramatically greater risk of drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, suicide, poor educational performance, teen pregnancy, and criminality. For African American boys this is almost tripled compared to boys from families with two natural parents. Teenagers living in single-parent households are more likely to abuse alcohol and at an earlier age compared to children reared in two-parent households. More research needs to be done comparing boys raised in single parent (father headed) homes as compared to female-headed homes. This link needs to be solidified to make the assertion that a broken home where the children are left fatherless is the reason for the adverse behavior, versus being simply a result of living in a home without a functioning family unit.

Although the literature reviewed thoroughly highlighted the multiplicity of problems that can occur when an African American male is raised in a female headed household (with father

absent) , not enough was published to explore the difference in an African American male raised in a male headed household (with mother absent). Also, the influence on boys reared in female headed homes by their other male relatives, such as uncles and grandfathers was not explored. Could strong ties with positive male role models within the extended family reduce some of the negative effects of fatherlessness?

The literature also advocated for regular visits and contact with the African American child's father to reduce the adverse effects of being raised in a female headed home but did not recommended how much or how frequent that contact must be, in order to be most effective.

There is a need or more studies looking at African American boys reared in female headed households as compared to boys of other ethnicities raised in similar conditions, by women alone. A study of this kind would show the effects of female headed homes by taking into account other social influences such as race, ethnicity and personal identity.

Chapter 4: Summary

It is clear that there needs to be a major reform in the United States. More mentor programs need to be implemented to fill the gap left in female-headed homes, especially in the African American community. Boys need to be properly socialized to take on a positive gender identity, which will increase their self-esteem and feelings of worth. This will dramatically reduce teen-age suicide rates among African American boys growing up in single parent (female headed) families.

Conclusions

Fathers are needed. Intact family units are needed to ensure the success of African American boys in school and society. Fathers are needed to ensure emotional and mental health in boys. While it is not impossible for mothers to raise productive, healthy young men who contribute to society this task is made increasingly more difficult with the lack of strong parental influence.

Implications

As the population of African American males in prisons grows across the country more attention should be focused on getting to the origins of a growing dilemma. In the coming years it can be predicted that more monies will be invested in mentoring programs which focus on aiding in the development of positive self-esteem development in African American boys. There will also be more fatherhood initiatives across the country. More and more fathers will be encouraged to set and execute regular visitation schedules with their children. Mothers raising children alone will be encouraged to take on a more authoritative parenting style with their African American boys. There is also a need for more mediation among couples who are not

able to stay together. The mediation will encourage a positive parenting relationship thus making it easier for the father to solidify a place in his child's life.

Dr. Martin Brokenleg of the Vancouver School of theology (2005) calls for treating children as "sacred beings" which is a core value shared by tribal cultures and faith traditions alike. His Circle of Courage model of resilience posits four universal growth needs of all children: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. In the book, "No Disposable Kids" (Brendtro, Ness & Mitchell, 2005), Larry Brendtro introduces the little known story of the worst school violence in history and the process of reclaiming the young boy implicated in that tragedy. The strong message is that even highly troubled youth can turn their lives around, but that society must take action to strengthen families and empower fathers and mothers.

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