



Fostering Resiliency in African-American School-Age Boys Experiencing Homelessness

Report on literature related to race, gender,
and homelessness



People's Emergency Center

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People's Emergency Center

PEC's mission is to nurture families, strengthen neighborhoods and drive change in West Philadelphia. Through a community of more than 200 housing units and three educational centers offering job training, parenting and early childhood education, and technology programs, PEC seeks to change the life trajectory for the women and children who seek its services and inspire them to aspire to new heights.

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The People’s Emergency Center (PEC) housed 376 young boys and males teens and almost 400 families in fiscal years 2011 through 2013 (July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2013). During this time span, staff noticed that the boys and young men living in PEC’s emergency, transitional, and permanent housing programs were experiencing disproportionate challenges with mental health, academic performance, interaction with authority figures, and positive relationships with adult males. Based on these observations, staff asked the question: *How do messages and perceptions around race and gender affect youth experiencing homelessness, and what can we do to support the needs of African-American male youth living at PEC during critical stages of development?*

PEC is answering this question using multiple methods, including an analysis of PEC internal data; focus groups and interviews with PEC residents; and this report which surveys the literature on race, gender, and housing. This report explores the implications of race, gender, and housing using an ecological framework. An ecological approach examines multiple environments and contexts that affect an individual’s behavior and well-being, including relationships and social supports, institutions and even historical legacy (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Taking an ecological approach is important because it allows us to recognize the influence and impact of local settings and communities on individuals. This report reviews research relevant to race, gender and the experience of homelessness, in order to supplement the focus groups, interviews, and analysis of internal data. The combination of these methods takes into account broader research, local context, and individual feedback in order to identify the specific needs of the young men living at PEC (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Fantuzzo et al., 2012)



To address multiple layers of resiliency and risk within housing status, race and gender, this report explores social support, family, the neighborhood environment, and policy.

This investigation did not find specific research exclusively addressing the needs or experiences of African-American male youth without homes. As a survey of literature related to the experiences of race, gender and housing status for children/youth, this report is not meant to be all inclusive. Readers aware of other documents that should be reviewed can make the author aware by emailing policy@pec-cares.org.

Why is this important? The right to be a child

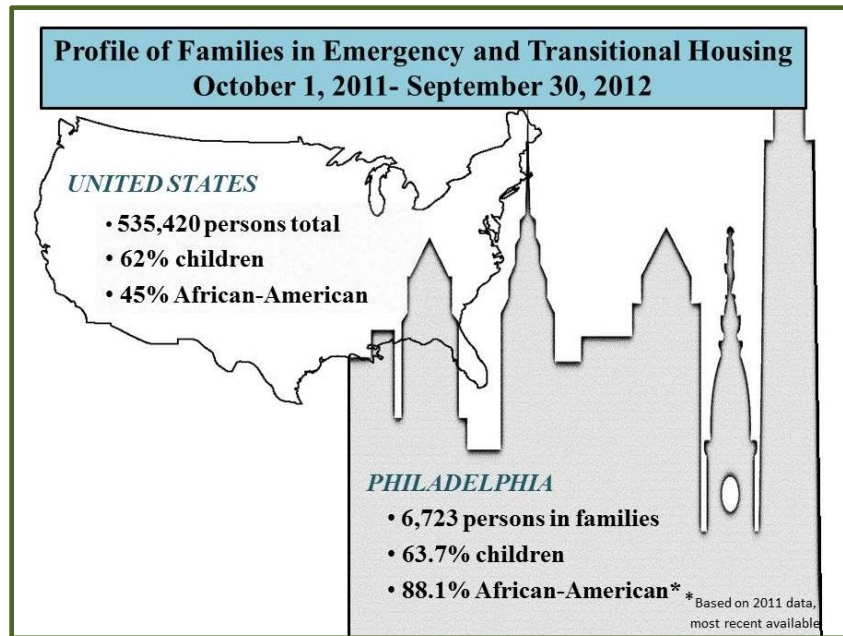
The depth of issues of race, gender, and homelessness are complex, but at the core is a very simple concept: every child has **the right to be a child**. The reality is that for more than 1,800 African-American males living in Philadelphia's emergency and transitional housing systems each year, challenges associated with race, gender, and homelessness are compromising their ability to be a child. This includes their rights to protection from harm, to education, and to play.

All three factors of race, gender, and housing status are associated with childhood risks. Buckner (2008) theorizes that experiences of homelessness and poverty make up a continuum of harmful risks. Exposure to multiple risk experiences, whether they are tied directly to homelessness, to mobility, or to poverty, are what affect childhood outcomes (Buckner, 2008). While this investigation did not find any existing research specifically on African-American male youth experiencing homelessness, this framework suggests that a combination of challenges associated with race, gender, and housing status place African-American males experiencing homelessness at the highest end of the risk continuum.

African-American male youth are at the highest risk, when compared to both white youth and African-American girls, for challenges associated with health (insurance, substance use, life expectancy), criminal involvement (incarceration, victims of crime), and other quality of life indicators (infant mortality rate, academic outcomes) (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Noguera, 2008; Children's Defense Fund, 2007; Cassidy & Stevenson, 2008). African-American males represent 60

percent of incarcerated youth under age 18 and only ten percent of youth in the country (Barbarin, 2010). In a recent study, college students and police officers classified African-American boys as more likely to have committed a crime than white boys, based only at looking at their picture (Goff et al., 2014). More specifically, based on pictures, study participants classified African-American boys suspected of a felony as 4.53 years older than their actual age (Goff et al., 2014). This has direct implications for criminal justice, in that children perceived to be older are more likely to be tried as an adult, and are denied what the authors call the "privilege of innocence" (Goff et al., 2014). This is especially pertinent in Pennsylvania, which leads the nation and the world in the number of juveniles with life sentences in jail (Child Defense Fund, 2007).

The experience of homelessness in childhood, particularly as an infant or a toddler, is associated with a higher likelihood of emergency room visits, mental health symptoms, and developmental delays compared to low-income, housed children (Weintraub, Goldberb, Bassuk and Perloff, 1998; Shinn et al., 2008; Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1990). Additionally, children who experience homelessness as an infant or toddler are more likely to struggle with academic achievement and school engagement (Weintraub, Goldberb, Bassuk and Perloff, 1998; Shinn et al., 2008; Bassuk & Rosenberg,



1990). While researchers have found mixed results on the unique impact of homelessness on child outcomes as compared to low-income, housed children (Buckner, 2008; Coll, Buckner, Brooks, Weinreb, Bassuk, 1998), a recent study (Fantuzzo, Zager, Brumley & Perlman, under review) found that first graders who stayed in an emergency shelter in Philadelphia had experienced risks such as lack of prenatal care, lead toxicity, low maternal education, teen motherhood, and child maltreatment at a higher incidence than their low-income, housed peers.

In 2012, 63.7 percent of the 6,723 persons in families who stayed in emergency or transitional housing were children and youth under age 18 (n=4,073) (Perlman & Willard, 2013a). Nearly 49% of those children are male, according to city reports from 2011, the most recent data available (Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing, 2012). According to data from the City of Philadelphia's Office of Supportive Housing (2012), as well as a population based study conducted in Philadelphia (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010), approximately 90 percent of persons in families in the Philadelphia emergency housing system are African-American. Based on these data, **we can estimate that in 2012, nearly 1,800 African-American boys and young men under age 18 stayed at least one night in emergency or transitional housing in Philadelphia.**

It is essential that we examine the continuum of risk these 1,800 boys and young men face, not only to better understand the challenges, but also to find opportunities to provide support and protect children who are often invisible to service providers. Researchers have identified several protective factors that contribute to closing the racial and gender gap in academic achievement, including learning-related skills (Matthews et al., 2010), school engagement (Fantuzzo et al., 2012), and school attachment (Hughes & Kowk, 2007). The following sections will further explore these opportunities and the factors that influence the lived experience of our children, including socio-economic status (SES), racial and gender discrimination, low quality schools and social supports (Entwisle et al., 2007; Cogburn, Chavous, & Griffin, 2011; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Alexander et al., 1997; Shumow et al., 1999). By finding opportunities to effectively support our boys we can create an environment where they have the opportunity to become healthy young men, while also protecting their **right to be a child** in the meantime.

Socio-emotional development and social support

Every child should have the opportunity to succeed in an environment that is flexible to diverse learning needs. Support around socio-emotional development may be especially important for African-American boys, as one study found that controlling for learning independence, flexible thinking, and attention control in kindergarteners mediated the gender gap in literacy, and reduced the racial black-white literacy gap by half (Matthews et al., 2010). Additionally, socio-emotional skills and development are transactional, influencing and being influenced by a child's everyday interactions and environment (Baker et al., 2012; Matthews et al., 2010). Recognizing the importance of socio-emotional development allows for a more flexible, trauma-informed environment.

Highlights

- The psychological impact of fear and discrimination
- Influence of peer networks: emotional support, vulnerability, powerlessness, and hyper-masculinity

Part of the transactional effect of socio-emotional development and social support, is an individual's perception of their environment and exposure to environmental risks (Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Hall, Cassidy, & Stevenson, 2008; Brody et al., 2006). While each individual may react and internalize environmental factors differently, studies show that environmental factors such as

perceived discrimination, fear, and violence have negative emotional and behavioral impacts on youth, including post-traumatic stress disorder, physical symptoms of sickness, and low self-esteem (Hall, Cassidy & Stevenson, 2008; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010).

Environmental fear can be both physical and psychological, each of which correlate with youth's depressive symptoms and behavior. One study found that the foremost physical fears of African-American adolescents in one low-income, inner city community (fear of dying young, followed by getting AIDS, and getting shot) correlated with depressive symptoms (Hall, Cassidy and Stevenson, 2008). In Philadelphia, 52 percent of black respondents to the Urban ACE survey reported having witnessed violence growing up (Public Health Management Corporation, 2013). Brody and colleagues (2006) found that African-American youth's perceived discrimination had an impact on their conduct behavior and depressive symptoms over a five year period starting in fifth grade, with conduct problems being a particular issue with the boys. Similarly, Cogburn, Chavous, & Griffin (2011) found a positive correlation between perceived discrimination among eighth graders, and low academic performance and depressive symptoms. In the Philadelphia Urban ACE survey, 49.5% of black respondents reported experiencing discrimination based on their race or ethnicity growing up (Public Health Management Corporation, 2013).

Youth experiencing homelessness are also at risk for being impacted by fear and stressful environments. Perlman and Willard (2013) found that teenage youth in Philadelphia (grades 9-12) who had experienced homelessness with their families were more likely to have missed school because they felt unsafe (1.3 times more likely), to have been threatened at school (2.7 times more likely), to have carried a weapon to school (7.7 times more likely), to have been forced to have sex (2.6 times more likely), and to have been hit by a significant other (1.3 times more likely) than students who had not experienced homelessness. Coping with these risks may be especially hard for boys, since research suggests that male students are more likely than girls to be affected by stressful home conditions and have a harder time adjusting behaviorally to the classroom environment (Alexander et al., 1997). When testing for a combined effect of perceived discrimination among eighth graders, Cogburn and colleagues (2011) found that racial discrimination was more influential than gender discrimination on boy's academic achievement.

Peer networks for teens are often portrayed as negative influences. While it is true that social networks are particularly important to adolescents, who seek emotional guidance, financial support and peer acceptance (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011), these networks can provide teens with crucial support. Social support can be particularly important for children in high risk situations, as long-term exposure to fear can lead to a physical stress-system overload which affects a child's behavior and social interactions (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010). Peer networks can have a positive influence on emotional and behavioral outcomes (Brown,

"Many people think that all peer pressure is negative. Peer pressure in and of itself is not negative; only when the peer group is not reinforcing positive values does it become detrimental. It is the fusion of peer pressure, age, and street time that youth become socially aware of the contradictions between what schools teach and the realities of their communities." (Kunjufu, 1990)

2008; Stewart, Stewart, & Simons, 2007), and act to mitigate the effects of perceived discrimination and fear (Brody et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2008). Interestingly in Hall et al.'s (2008) study, the youth that expressed higher levels of fear of lethal calamity also expressed higher levels of kinship support.

Unfortunately, the particular need for peer acceptance during adolescence combined with feelings of powerlessness and hyper-vulnerability, can lead to displays of hyper-

masculinity, such as aggression (Cassidy and Stevenson, 2005). Cassidy and Stevenson (2005) found a positive correlation between self-reported hyper-masculinity and hyper-vulnerability measures among African-American adolescent males, and state that peer reinforcement of these hyper-masculine behaviors can serve as an incentive to act in a hyper-masculine fashion (Cassidy and Stevenson, 2005). This reminds us that behaviors are transactional – being influenced by and influencing the perceptions and expectations around us.

Parenting and Fathers

Stereotypes, myths, and judgments around African-American fathers, and parenting during episodes of homelessness are embedded in society. Parenting practice can refer to both household structure (setting

a reliable bed time, structured family activities, consistency in discipline, etc.), as well as parental expectations (parental beliefs around the child’s achievement and behavior). Similar to their findings on peer support, Brody et al. (2006) found that supportive and nurturing parenting practice mediated the impact of depressive symptoms and conduct behavior for African-American fifth graders over a five year period (Brody et al., 2006). What’s important to acknowledge is that parenting style is influenced not only by personal beliefs, but also by adult’s psychological support, social networks and financial resources (Entwisle et al., 2007).

Highlights

- Importance of parental expectations and engagement
- Gender and racial socialization
- The impact of father involvement and family structure.

The definition of “culturally relevant” parenting is a subjective and sensitive measure which is difficult to capture in a single research study. For example, studies tend to define family as one or two parent homes, without consideration of other caregivers involved in the child’s life, such as grandparents, extended family, neighbors and even fathers. Brown (2008) found in his study that there was a correlation in African-American young adults’ self-reported resiliency, and their perceived social support of not only family, but a “special person” outside of the immediate family. Recognizing varying family structures and parenting approaches may itself provide a more holistic picture of parenting practices, community and social networks within families. The influence of environment and structural limitations on parenting will be further discussed in the section entitled “*The family and neighborhood environment.*”

Parental engagement with school positively correlates with childrens’ academic performance, even off-setting the impact of high-risk neighborhoods (Shumow, Kandell, & Posner, 1999; Hughes & Kowk, 2007). Parental engagement can be influenced however, by resources such as time and money. Hughes and Kowk (2007) found that young children’s academic performance was linked to parents’ engagement with the school, however both low SES parents and African-American parents were less likely to experience a supportive relationship with the teacher and administrators (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). The authors postulate that the racial disparity in home-school relationships could be a result of differences in communication approaches between African-American parents and white teachers (85.7 percent of teachers in their sample were white), in combination with teachers’ racial stereotypes (Hughes & Kowk, 2007).

Parental expectations are also influential to children, including messages surrounding race and gender. Entwisle et al. (2007) found that parental behavior favored girls particularly among families of low SES, who showed gendered expectations around grades, chores, and future goals for their sons and daughters (Entwisle et al., 2007). The same study (2007) found that a gender

achievement gap in reading developed between kindergarten and fifth grade, but only for the students from low-income families (Entwisle et al., 2007).

Racial socialization is also an influential piece of parenting for children's resiliency, depressive symptoms and conduct behavior (Brown, 2008; Brody et al., 2006). The process of racial socialization uses behaviors, direct messages and observation to communicate "discrimination alertness, coping with antagonism, cultural pride reinforcement, cultural legacy appreciation, and mainstream engagement" (Fagan & Stevenson, 2002, p.192; Brown, 2008). While mixed results have been found regarding the impact of racial socialization on young children (Baker et al., 2012; Brody et al., 2006), Caughy and colleagues (2006) found that racial socialization practice was associated with African-American first graders' cognitive abilities, and that it impacted girls and boys differently. Boys were most affected by homes that promoted African culture and tradition when they lived in neighborhoods classified as having high disorder and fear with low social cohesion (Caughy et al., 2006).

Additionally, the nature of parents' racial socialization varied according to the neighborhood environment (Caughy et al., 2006). In neighborhoods with low social capital, the correlation between promoting racial mistrust and children's anxiety and depressive symptoms was stronger, suggesting the importance of social networks (Caughy et al., 2006). To mediate feelings on conflict around perceived discrimination and mistrust around African-American males in particular, Cassidy and Stevenson (2005) suggest creating a "safe" place for youth, so that adults "... may provide these youth with opportunities to discuss how, within their unique worlds, it may be logical - if not necessary and adaptive - for them to feel both mad and sad, fearless and fearful, and powerful and powerless." (p.71)

Fathers in particular are the target of discussions around family structure and child outcomes. Family homeless housing organizations often only have the capacity to house mothers and their children, excluding fathers from their residential and supportive services. This complicates parenting, as fathers become nonresidential by default, and mothers bear the primary parenting responsibility. African-American fathers are often labeled as absent and uninvolved in their children's lives. In his 2011 speech to a church, Philadelphia Mayor, Michael Nutter discussed the issue of youth violence in Philadelphia, stating: "That's part of the problem in the black community - and many other communities, but a particular problem in the black communities. We have too many men making too many babies that they don't want to take care of, and then we end up dealing with your children. We're [the city government] not running a big baby-sitting service." (Nutter, 2011, minute 13:53)

Contrary to this widespread belief, Thomas, Krampe and Newton (2008) replicated previous findings (Salem et al., 1998) when they found that comparing African-American and white nonresidential fathers, African-American fathers visited their children on a more frequent basis. In addition, in single female-headed households, as well as households headed by the mother and a stepfather, African-American children expressed stronger feelings of closeness to their father than white children (Thomas et al., 2008). Similarly, the National Center for Health Statistics recently released a report that found based on four years of interview data that black fathers who live with their children were more likely than white and Hispanic fathers to directly interact with their children doing activities such as collective meals, bathing and dressing their children, and talking about their days (Jones & Mosher, 2013).

Based on findings similar to those of Thomas et al. (2008), Salem and colleagues (1998) challenged the theory that family structure affects children, with a study of African-American ninth graders in

an urban area. While it is widely accepted that being raised by a single mother has a negative effect on children, the authors found that the child-reported quality of the father's relationship (presence of the father, and significance of the father) correlated with emotional and behavior child outcomes regardless of paternal residential status (Salem et al., 1998). Additionally, the quality of the paternal relationships affected boys and girls differently (Salem et al., 1998). The paternal relationship correlated with problem behaviors and psychological well-being in girls, but only conduct behavior in boys (Salem et al., 1998). Also notable, is that negative effects of low father involvement for boys were mediated by parental support and low ratings of family conflict, but not parental monitoring (Salem et al., 1998).

Thullen, Henly, & Hans (2012) found, similar to results of other studies that fathers' levels of involvement in child care, child expenses and decision-making from birth to 2 years old was predicted more by the relationship between the father and the mother, than employment or education level. This research has implications for homeless housing programs that do not house fathers, shedding light on the fact that supporting the quality of parental relationships, whether or not they are residential, could mediate adverse risks for children. Children experiencing homelessness are less likely than their housed peers to have a relationship with their father (76 percent of homeless families versus 44 percent of housed families), or to receive paternal financial support (89 percent of homeless families received no paternal support versus 66 percent of housed families) (Bassuk and Rosenberg, 1990). A more in-depth research review of the factors that contribute to father involvement, and affect child outcomes, would help service providers effectively integrate father friendly services.

The family and neighborhood environment

According to the findings of the Philadelphia Urban ACE Survey, respondents who were male or African-American were more likely to have witnessed violence, and had an adverse neighborhood experience (Public Health Management Corporation, 2013). An

individual's development of emotional and behavioral skills, peer relations, and parenting practice are influenced by his or her surroundings, including familial context and structural environment. Home environments vary according to cultural norms, family heritage and tradition. Authors have found that African-American children's familial socialization experiences can differ between their home environment and the classroom, which is structured around white, middle-class experiences (Bailey and Boykin, 2001; Matthews et al., 2010; Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002). For example, Bailey and Boykin (2001) found that African-American homes in an urban setting often involved high stimulation physical activities in which multiple activities and events were occurring at the same time. Similar to other studies which found that African-American children exhibit more externalizing behavior and value communalistic activities (Matthews et al., 2010), the authors found that African-American third and fourth graders performed better in high variability settings, rather than the low varied and repetitious environments of the typical classroom (Bailey & Boykin, 2001). These results reveal that children whose home environment differs from classroom expectations may enter school at a disadvantage compared to classmates who are already used to that set of norms. Based on these and other similar finds, adaptability skills in a classroom setting, as well as school engagement, may serve as a protective factor for African-American children who are adjusting to an unfamiliar classroom socialization experience (Mendez, Fantuzzo & Cicchetti, 2002; Fantuzzo et al., 2012).

Highlights

- Family-level factors such as maternal education and socio-economic status
- Neighborhood-level factors such as social cohesion and crime

For children living in homeless housing, family interaction and behavior is affected by factors such as lack of control over time and space, observation or monitoring of parenting practice, and lack of privacy (Miller, 2011; Davis, Gelberg, & Suchman, 2012; Perlman, Sheller, Hudson, & Wilson, 2013). Considering the variance in housing conditions, the impact of experiencing homelessness itself can depend on the length of the episode, the number of episodes, and the circumstances within which the episode(s) occur (Miller, 2011). Housing quality (such as environmental exposure, mobility and crowding) and family stress have been associated with children's emotional and academic development (Leventhal and Newman, 2007). The lack of time and material resources associated with homelessness and poverty is also problematic to parenting structure (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010). Homeless housing facilities may have limited access to literacy materials and developmentally-appropriate toys and activities, which are structural limitations that affect the context within which the child functions and develops (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010; David et al., 2012).

[The factors of age, gender, and ethnicity] are...so pervasive in affecting future development that their possible influence routinely needs to be considered . . . all three of these factors, although based on different physical characteristics of that Person, also place that person in a particular environmental niche that defines his or her position and role in society. Recognition of that ambiguity moves us to a change in focus from the developmentally relevant characteristics of the Person to their counterparts in the structure and substance of environmental Contexts as they affect developmental processes and outcomes." (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.1013)

Low maternal education level, as well as a high number of siblings, also positively correlates with lower teacher-reported ratings of "approaches to learning," which includes eagerness to learn, learning independence, flexibility, task persistence and attentiveness (Baker et al., 2012). The education level of mothers experiencing homelessness may be lower in part because of age. Adults in sheltered families (80 percent of whom are women), are younger than the general population, with approximately 22 percent between the ages of 18 and 30 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012). Boys may

be more affected by such factors than girls. In one study with children in Baltimore, the gender gap in high school dropouts became non-significant when the authors controlled for the family context (for example, family stresses such as a major change) and personal resources (for example, parental expectations) that those high schoolers experienced in first grade (Alexander et al., 1997). These findings suggest that when boys are more affected by a stressful home environment, they have a more difficult time behaviorally adjusting to school (Alexander et al., 1997).

Moving outside the context of the immediate structural environment, factors such as socio-economic status (SES) and neighborhood characteristics also influence children. In their study of elementary school students in an urban area, Entwisle et al. (2007) found that male and female students enter the first grade with equivalent test scores, but after the fifth year, low-SES boys were scoring an average of 18 points lower than low-SES girls despite no difference in the higher-SES group. In addition, boys in low-SES families were more likely to be retained, receive an unsatisfactory conduct rating, and to be placed in a lower reading group (Entwisle et al., 2007). Additionally, Baker et al. (2012) found that socio-demographic characteristics, specifically low SES, low maternal education, and children who had more siblings, accounted for 13 percent of variance in African-American male kindergarteners' test scores. Anderson (2008) suggests that persistent and chronic poverty leads to an environment that necessitates other means of survival and financial gain, which are engrained with hierarchical networks and systems of operation outside of the mainstream institutions. Interactions with the neighborhood environment not only correlate with

child outcomes, the connection with outcomes and development also becomes stronger as the child gets older (Shumow, Kandell & Posner, 1999).

Neighborhoods in the United States remain largely segregated and divided along factors of race, socio-economics and education level. Neighborhood disadvantage has been measured by characteristics such as the number of female-headed households, the number of households living in poverty (Stewart, Stewart, & Simons, 2007; Shumow, Kandell, & Posner, 1999), police records (Shumow et al., 1999), the proportion of persons unemployed, and the proportion of persons who were African-American (Stewart et al., 2007). Shumow, Kandell and Posner (1999), found that high-risk neighborhood context (where there was a violent crime every two days on average, and 40 percent of households were female-headed) correlated with low academic performance among low-income fifth grade students, but not third grade students, suggesting an additive correlation. In a similar study Stewart, Stewart and Simons (2007) found that neighborhood disadvantage, lack of social cohesion, lack of school attachment, and low parental education were among the factors that correlated with lower college aspirations among African-American high schoolers. Alternatively, positive peer networks, attachment to school, and parent's higher education served as protective factors (Stewart et al., 2007). It is important to note that while findings between neighborhoods were significant, Stewart et al. (2007) found that 90 percent of the variance in college aspirations among African-American adolescents was *within* neighborhoods. This reminds us to be careful in classifying groups of people based on aggregated data, and reiterates the importance of studying local context and community.

Policies and systems

Anderson (2008) makes the argument that race is so embedded into everyday life that it is problematic to compare developmental and individual outcomes of black and white children due to the vast differences in their lived experience and daily contexts. This lens on United States society recognizes that racism is not an unordinary or deviant structure, but one that is embedded into the common societal order (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This is a central tenant of Critical Race Theory, which offers a framework for addressing the deep systematic and normalized racial politics in our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Howard, 2008). One strategy embedded in Critical Race Theory is counter-storytelling, which encourages dialogue and a platform for persons of color to speak of their experience and perspective without being discredited due to delivery or substance not in line with white dominant culture (Howard, 2008). This is reminiscent of Cassidy and Stevenson's (2005) suggestion to create "safe spaces" for African-American male teens to explore the complexity and contradictions between hyper-masculinity and hyper-vulnerability.

Highlights

- Historical legacy of race
- Federal efforts around race, gender, and family homelessness

Today, the state of housing conditions and organization of neighborhoods is characterized by persistent segregation, and is inseparable from the United States' history of housing policies and racial politics. In their discussion of the ecological model, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), point out that time does not only refer to the succession of individual life events or social relationships, it also places individuals in a context shaped by historical events. Legacies of restrictive federal mortgage policies, deinstitutionalization, and neighborhood segregation are part of today's story of homelessness and the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in poverty and homelessness (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011; Katznelson, 2005; Bullard & Lee, 1994). More recently, the 2007 recession exacerbated the financial inequality between black and white

Americans, which was already apparent by the different types of wealth held by racial groups in the U.S. (Kochhar, Fry & Taylor, 2011; Bullard & Lee, 1994).

The national dialogue on race and gender is happening separately from that on families experiencing homelessness. President Obama recently announced “My Brother’s Keeper,” a federal initiative that brings together businesses, foundations, faith communities, and the media to empower boys and young men of color (Jarrett & Johnson, 2014). As part of this initiative, President Obama created a Task Force of foundations and businesses to formulate a multi-disciplinary approach toward supporting African-American boys and young men (The White House, 2014). On a city level, Mayor Nutter recently re-authorized the Mayor’s Commission of African-American Males. This commission presented recommendations to the city government, which included addressing three areas of support: wellness, achievement and access. These initiatives are the first step to bringing attention to the issue, and organizing key stakeholders to collaborate and provide resources to address them.

Race, gender, and social class located individuals and families in society’s stratification system, and the conditions surrounding these statuses and roles help determine exactly how the slate is filled in. (Alexander et al., 1997, 98)

In 2010, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released the first federal strategic plan to end homelessness. One of the four goals outlined in the report was to prevent and end homelessness among families, children and youth in 10 years (USCIH, 2010). While a national dialogue on the needs of families experiencing homelessness is a

significant step, federal funding is still focused on strategies that are based on research done with individuals experiencing homelessness, not families (Culhane & Kuhn, 1998). These strategies include short-term rental subsidies and permanent housing, but are often not tied directly to supportive services which are essential to long-term solutions for families (Hayes, Zonneville, & Bassuk, 2013).

The next step will be to bring together the national conversations and attention on these issues, to take action and address the needs of children at highest risk. While dialogue is an essential first step to change, the conversation needs to move toward evidence-based action. The government and foundations must commit to funding programs that identify and target the needs of children who are currently invisible in our cities, our schools, and our service organizations. Homeless housing providers must advocate to recognize and address the needs of our children who are tangled in our nation’s web of race, gender, and homelessness.

Where do we go from here?

From the literature above, we can draw out four main points to optimize our service environment:

1. **Adaptability of service environments:** *The adaptability of service environments is essential to providing supportive services to children/youth of varying backgrounds, home environments and lived experiences. This includes:*
 - The ability to address various forms and degrees of trauma that affect development, as well as various structural environments that recognize diverse learning needs and styles. Every child should have the opportunity to succeed in an environment that is supportive and flexible. Learning-related skills (such as problem-solving and learning independence) should be emphasized, as they predict academic achievement for years to come (Mendez et al., 2002; Matthews et al., 2010).
 - More specifically, it may be especially important for young people of color to be a part of spaces where they feel safe to express themselves without fear of being discredited or questioned (Howard, 2008). These spaces can encourage African-American males in particular to feel comfortable being open about the conflicting and confusing emotions they may feel around expectations, behavior and power (Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005).
2. **Serving the whole family:** *Providers could re-examine how they choose to define “family” and how services send messages about what social networks are valued and accepted.*
 - Social networks and supportive relationships with family and peers is an essential element of healthy development. The definition of family could be extended to include: nonresidential fathers, significant others, extended family, godparents, and other adult role models (coaches, neighbors, pastors, etc.).
 - Many homeless housing agencies do not have the capacity to house fathers, but there may still be opportunity to incorporate positive male figures into supportive services. One research study shows that the quality of the paternal relationship has more impact on the child than the father’s residential status (Salem et al., 1998). Additionally, the relationship between the mother and the father may be the strongest predictor of fatherhood involvement (Thullen, Henly, & Hans, 2012). A more in-depth research review of the factors that contribute to father involvement, and affect child outcomes, would help service providers effectively integrate father friendly services. Based on these preliminary findings, there could be an opportunity for service providers to focus on the nature of the paternal relationship in an effective way that is also realistic for the organization’s physical and financial capacity.
3. **Provide context-specific services:** *It is essential that we provide services designed for the needs of the specific population we are serving, as well as the capacity of the organization.*
 - Populations are so often defined by one or two characteristics such as race or gender, without recognizing the many layers that shape lived experience and individualization. As Fantuzzo et al. (2012) emphasize, place neutral and race neutral policies will not lead to effective change.

- Organizational context has an effect on services. As previously discussed, structural limitations affect the environment within which a child receives services. In the case of homelessness, this can translate to limited space for parent-child materials or developmentally appropriate materials (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010). These are important factors to understand and examine when considering the specific needs of the populations we are serving.
4. **The need for partnerships:** *Children can benefit from collaborative partnerships and multiple service providers that play varying roles, and could extend services beyond shelter stays.*
- There will be limitations to any organization to provide holistic support for the many factors that contribute to socio-emotional development, academic outcomes, employment and housing. Temporary homeless housing offers an opportunity to provide meaningful services, but presents structural limitations. Stays in emergency housing are often very short. These short stays do not always provide enough time for staff to create meaningful, stable relationships with the mothers or the children (Miller, 2011).
 - Partnering with organizations that do complementary work such as mentoring, community development, and youth leadership work could be a cost efficient and effective way to provide holistic support for boys living in homeless housing. For example, social service work is a female-dominated industry and partnerships could be used to bring in positive male role models. Additionally, bringing in outside partnerships allows an opportunity for boys to build connections in the community, and expand their social networks.

These recommendations will be only the first step to identifying and addressing the multi-faceted needs of African-American boys living in emergency, transitional, and permanent housing. While this process does not come without its challenges, it is essential that researchers and providers work together to identify the multi-faceted experiences of those we serve not only to better understand the challenges, but also to find opportunities to provide support and protect children who are often invisible to service organizations. Ultimately, our shared goal is to create an environment in which our young men and boys can not only become the men they want to be, but also have the opportunity to just be children in the meantime. It is our responsibility to ensure that every child, has the **right to be a child.**

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