

A Strength-based Approach to Working with African-American Youth in Poverty

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Abstract

The issue of poverty and African-American youth has gained national attention and has in some cases created additional racial division through policy implications and laws that affect youth in today's society (Fagan, Forst, & Vivona, 1987). It is imperative that the political agenda include a strength-based sociological perspective that moves beyond that of the psychology of the child. Much has been discussed about the issues faced by the African-American youth and the entire family system. Providing a more positive strength base approach to understanding this population and addressing social and behavior issues will work to alleviate the negative perception of this group.

Keywords: African-American youth, juvenile justice, poverty, social welfare, social policy, single parenting, school dropout

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Poverty, a social phenomenon dating back to the early 1600s, has been analyzed by many researchers (Quadagno, 1994). Poverty is the state of being poor or indigent with the inability to provide financially for basic needs (i.e. food, clothing, and shelter) for one's self or family. The etiology of poverty has been a highly conspicuous issue for years and been debated by researchers and sociological experts (Gil, 1981; Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991; Karger & Stoesz, 1990; Mead, 1991; Ryan, 1976). Research has investigated the construct of poverty and its impact on the lives of individuals and society. However, the growing concern for the increase in African-American males high school dropout rates, premature deaths due to gun violence as well as the increased pipeline of African-American Males from school to prison has spark the debate of how much poverty impact the lives of African-American youth. Some Conservatives maintain that poverty originates in the dysfunctional, dependent behaviors of poor people rather than in their lack of opportunity (Mead, 1991). This conservative theory is founded in an interpretation of human problems as rooted in personal shortcomings (Gil, 1981). This paradigm focuses on the deviance of individuals and leads to hostile policies toward the poor, especially the juveniles in correctional institutions throughout the United States (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991; Lipsky, 1984; Ryan, 1976).

Numerous research findings explain the relationship between poverty and African-American youth. Research scientists argue that the causal and effectual variables most linked to poverty in the African-American community (e.g., social injustice, racial inequality, racial profiling, single parenting, communal support depletion, demographic changes, diminutive economic conditions, and changes in government spending on social welfare programs) are related to rebellion in these youth (Sawhill, 1992; Fosset & Perloff, 1995).

However, Webster's definition of rebellion as the inclination to resist authority, to act in or show disobedience, or to feel or exhibit anger or revulsion is a better explanation of rebellion as it relates to poor African-American youth. Using this definition, the article will seek to explain how the consequences of poverty encourage African-American youth to become frustrated in academic, community, and family settings, thus cumulating into more pervasive and prolong issues such as criminal involvement, school problems and substance use and abuse.

A thorough literature review of poverty and its impact on African-American youth crime and high school dropout rates yielded surprisingly little attention given to the psychosocial impact poverty has on African-American youth, ultimately resulting in rebellious behaviors. Many researchers and scholars have continued to evaluate the issues faced by African-American youth through a Eurocentric lens that contends that the youth are pathological and dangerous to self and society, which may further alienate this population and contribute to harsh policies and laws that disenfranchise African-American youth.

This article will evaluate a broader sociological perspective to explain how poverty affects youth in the African-American community, incorporating both personal and interpersonal paradigms that conceptualize frustration in African-American youth. This approach to addressing and alleviating the issue of poverty for African-American youth will be guided by the Strength Perspective, which posits that in the most difficult of situations, individuals have strengths, abilities and talents that may contribute to recapturing the positive aspects of their lives.

Overview of African Americans in Poverty

Regardless of the jargon used to explain the cause of African-American youth disillusion, poverty continues to be a constant and harsh reality for African-American youth and their families. The U.S. Census Bureau data showed an increase in the poverty rate from 14.3 percent (43.6 million people) in 2009 to 15.1

percent (46.2 million people) in 2010 (DeNavas, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). There was no significant difference in the poverty rate from 2010 and 2012 with a slight decrease from 15.1 percent to 15.0 percent (DeNavas, Proctor & Smith, 2013). According to Rank and Hirschl (1999), by age 35 nearly one-third of the U.S. population will have experienced a minimum of one year in poverty. By age 65, more than half of all Americans will have spent one year below the poverty line. By age 85, two-thirds will have spent one year below the poverty line. In 2010 over 15 percent of the population fell below the threshold of \$22,314 for a family of four (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). Based on the aforementioned findings, many Americans of various racial backgrounds will have experienced poverty by adulthood.

From 1967 to 2012, African Americans have consistently had the lowest median household income than other races with \$33,321 compared to \$39,005 for Hispanics, \$57,009 for Whites not Hispanic, and \$68,636 for Asians. The median income of all races is \$51,017 (DeNava, Proctor, & Smith, 2013). More alarming, Rank and Hirschl's (1999) findings indicate that African Americans represent a majority of those individuals who live in poverty in America. The percentage of African-Americans in poverty remain higher than Hispanics, Asians, and Whites with African-Americans at 13.5 percent compared to the 10.9 percent of Hispanics, 5.8 percent of Asians, and 4.3 percent of Whites (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). These figures should also be taken into account the total number of people representing each group, as Whites remain the majority having the highest number represented in the U.S. population. In the number of people in poverty Whites, not Hispanic exceed the other races.

Blank (1997) found that African Americans were more likely to be touched by poverty and more likely to be exposed to poverty for substantially longer periods. Specifically, his study concluded that 67% of whites who live below the poverty level or experience poverty do not live in poverty for more than 3 years, whereas only 30% of all African-Americans live three years or fewer in poverty. During a 3-year period from 2009 to 2011, only 3.5 percent of the population was living in poverty for the entire 36 months (DeNavas, Proctor, & Smith, 2013). Devine and Wright (1993) found that race was a powerful factor in increasing the probability of experiencing poverty, particularly long-term poverty. For African Americans who reach age 75, a startling 91% will have been touched by the experience of poverty, according to Rank and Hirschl (1999).

The phenomenon of race and poverty has occurred most visibly and consistently in north-central and northeastern cities. Despite economic growth and maintenance, minorities continue to experience chronic levels of poverty (Gorey & Vena, 1995). As the gap between the wealthiest and poorest Americans widened during the last decade, so too did the black-white socioeconomic gap (Rank, 1994). For example, the richest African-American socioeconomic population's status relative to the white population diminished by approximately 20% (Gorey, 1994).

Children in most poor American families experience the reality of living in impoverished environments, which ultimately leads to defense mechanisms that may result in unhealthy responses to societal norms. Poor children, particularly African-American youth, adapt to the culture of poverty and take on the cultural norms that allow them to survive and function in debilitating environments that are riddled with hopelessness, drugs, violence, and oftentimes hopelessness. . As a result, the African-American youth verbally, physically, and emotionally protest as they observe a disorganized living environment which offers very little hope for the future (Cohen et al., 1994). The rebellious behavior signifies anger and disorganization of the youth, which in many circumstances force the youth to join unhealthy social networks that may involve gangs, crime and drugs.

The Culture of Poverty

The *culture of poverty* thesis originated with the cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959). After studying families in slum communities, Lewis claimed to uncover a distinct set of psychological traits possessed by poor families, along with a strong orientation toward the present. Significantly, Lewis (1959) did not view the culture of poverty as the cause of poverty per se but saw the development of these traits as an adaptation to impoverished conditions. However, one of the key elements of his work was the impact of socialization on the younger generation of the poor, specifically African-American youth. Indeed, Lewis (1969) notes that by the time poor children are age 6 or 7 who resides in high poverty areas; they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture, which may be the sincere desire to survive in their environment.

Lewis went on to posit that poverty was a product of the structural inequality inherent in capitalism. Although Lewis's subjects were generally racial and ethnic groups that qualify as minorities in the United States, he did not associate the culture of poverty with non-whites or with ethnic whites. Discussions of poverty in the popular media and the political arena often overlook the role of social structures and the non-role of race/ethnicity. It is important to note, that researchers typically insinuate that culture is the cause of poverty and focus on the cultural norms among minority groups, African-American in particular (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Nightingale, 1993).

Another interesting theme in understanding poverty as a culture is the rules that are acceptable within the culture itself. A number of writers emphasize that early and accepted sexual activities outside of marriage, combined with the declining importance of stability and marriage, leads to an overwhelming number of impoverished families throughout America and reinforces poverty cultures for the youth who learn to survive and adapt to their environment (Popenoe, 1996). Although the media portrays poverty cultures as slums—disorganized and deviant in nature—and as majority African-American and Hispanic, research findings indicate that regardless of race, poor persons do not possess deviant value systems. They generally make judgments and decisions about surviving in the here and now, as opposed to their white counterparts, who may possess long-range goals due to having optimistic outlooks on life as a result of not having to deal with oppressive societal structures (Fainstein, 1995).

Single Parenthood, Teen Pregnancy, and the Impact on Poverty

The female single parent head of household phenomenon continues to be a contributing factor to poverty (Single Parent Families, 1992). The fact that women represent the majority of the impoverished population is common knowledge in America. Women earn less than men do; consequently, female-headed families have a lower earning potential than two-parent male headed families (Danziger & Danziger, 1993). In 2010, Mather (2010) of the Population Reference Bureau reported that in the U.S. there were 24 percent of children living in a single-mother household. Of these households, African-Americans had the second highest percent of 48.8 percent following Hispanics (Mather, 2010). As a result, many African-American children are forced to live in impoverished environments that contribute to dysfunctional and maladaptive behaviors. How a child is raised has a profound impact on her development due to the impressionable stage of life involving development of a life philosophy, awareness of social obligations, self-worth and self-identity (Fine, 1991).

Children have paid an enormous price regarding the phenomenon of poverty (Jones & Rebecca, 1993). Lack of adequate housing, parental involvement, community support, and academic awareness contribute to the growing problems faced by African-American youth. Children reared in a poverty-stricken environment are at a higher risk for criminal justice and mental health involvement versus children reared in middle-income to high-income families.

According to the U.S. House of Representatives (1992), children who fall into the aforementioned group will be poor throughout most of the early years of their childhood, and only 7% will escape poverty altogether. More than two out of three African-American children in female-headed households are poor and the poverty rate is five times the rate for children in two-parent families (Bureau of the Census, 1992). About 80% of the residents of high-poverty urban areas in the United States are headed by minority single female parents and the figure is over 90% in some larger metropolitan areas. African Americans alone account for 50% of residents of high-poverty urban areas nationally and between 80% and 90% of the population in some of the largest urban ghettos such as Detroit and Chicago (Jargowsky, 1997). Research findings indicate that since 1993, single-parent families are increasingly becoming the norm in poverty-stricken environments, where single women head 8 million households, while 1.5 million are headed by single men (Single Parent Families, 1992).

African-American youth in some urban areas shared a common theme about survival. They have a low probability of surviving to age 45, whereas their white counterparts' life expectancy exceeds age 65 (Geronimus, Bound, & Waidmann, 1996). The issues of homicide and community violence contribute to the drastic reduction in life expectancy for the African-American youth, especially African-American males.

Additional statistics reveal that there is a 63% suicide rate among children in single female-headed households. There is a 70% teen pregnancy rate and a 71% rate of chemical and substance abuse by children. Furthermore, 80% of adult inmates are from single female parent households and 90% of homeless and runaway children come from poverty-stricken environments headed by single female parents, which further indicate the profound impact poverty has on the quality life of youth, especially African-American youth.

According to Cohen et al. (1994), single female parents are more likely to live in poverty-stricken environments that are run down and generally unsafe. The broken window theory suggests that the appearance of the living environment provides messages of how individual behavior is tolerated. Several studies support the idea that physical environment and living conditions influence behavior, including a study on littering that indicated that people are more likely to litter in environments that are already filled with litter (Reno et al., 1993).

A disorderly physical environment is a sign of neglect and may result in toleration of usually prohibited behaviors. Furthermore, deteriorated conditions also provide situational opportunities and relay messages for high-risk behaviors (Cohen et al., 1994). Reduction in service areas and an increase in abandoned buildings and deteriorated communities allow urban areas to become staging grounds for the violence we have come to associate with urban neighborhoods, and for severe public health problems including crack and HIV/AIDS epidemics and the reemergence of tuberculosis (Fosset & Perloff, 1995). African-American children living in the aforementioned environment are much more likely to have poor health conditions compared to two-parent families or white children who live in affluent families and neighborhoods (Montgomery et al., 1996).

Educational and Psychological Effects of Poverty of African-American Youth

Poverty has been contributing factor in causing chronic stress having an adverse effect on children's academic outcomes. This has been found to be especially evident during early childhood from 6- 12 years of age. These effects have been linked to children's inability to learn effectively due to problems with concentration and memory (NCES, 2010). In 2008, the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) (2010) reported students living in low-income families have a greater rate of dropping out of school than children living in higher income families. Students in low-income families had an 8.7 percent dropout rate compared to 2.0 percent of children living in higher income families. According to Weis (1991), only 25%

of young women who drop out of school return to obtain their GED. Whether a dropout or graduate, African-American females are two to three times more likely to live in poverty than white females and four times more likely than white males (Weis, 1991). Additional statistics from Weis (1991) reveal that 37% of females drop out of school due to family concerns as opposed to 5% of males. Of those 37% of females, 31% state that they left to get married and 23% stated that they left because they were pregnant.

Consistently in the research findings, students were more likely to leave school if they were residing in low-income housing, had multiple siblings, their mother was also a high school dropout, and/or their father worked a low wage job (Weis, 1991). Poverty was a central theme in the literature when exploring academic performance and the profile of high school dropouts (Schreiber, 1967).

Children who live in poverty-stricken environments have to overcome barriers that often lead to stereotypical and prejudiced assumptions from school personnel. According to Joseph (1996), students who live in poverty—particularly African-American children—are at a higher risk of being placed in non-college track curriculums that are designed to manage their behavior. According to Polk and Schafer (1972), this approach to placing students can create alienation and lead to frustration for the student. The students act out by demonstrating disruptive behaviors in the classroom setting, vandalism, and uncontrolled violence as a consequence of this pent-up frustration.

This rationale becomes a double jeopardy for the African-American youth. Not only does the child become resistant and protest against authority, she begins to lag behind in academics. According to McBay (1992), African-American children lag behind white children in reading, writing, mathematics, and science as early as the third grade. When African-American youth are placed in non-challenging or non-college tracks, the gap increases to about 4 years by the junior year in high school.

The relationship of socioeconomic factors to mental health has long been discussed as an issue facing minorities, specifically African-American children (Johnson, 1997; Pelton, 1978; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). African-American families are represented disproportionately for rates of poverty. The statistic of single female parenthood ultimately results in poor living conditions for African-American youth (Hollings-Worth, 1998).

The ecological and psychological results of living in poverty have been well documented by researchers. According to Crane (1991), Durkin et al. (1994), Gorey (1995), Gorey et al. (1990), Corey and Vena (1994, 1995), Marmot et al. (1987), Polednak (1991), and Taylor and Covington (1993), individuals living in poverty are two to five times more likely to experience mental and physical health issues than those who live in more well-to-do areas. In 1992, 21.8% of the children in America lived in poverty (U.S. House of Representatives, 1993). In 1998, nearly 20% of the children 3 to 17 years of age had at least one developmental, learning, or behavioral disorder (Zill & Schoenborn, 1990) and from 1976 to 1986, the rates of child abuse and neglect tripled (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Findings have shown many children living in poverty have greater risks of behavioral problems such as impulsiveness, poor interpersonal relationships with their peers, aggression, Attention-Hyperactivity Deficient Disorder (ADHD), and Conduct Disorder (APA, 2013).

Poverty has been associated with a variety of adverse conditions which Shonkoff and Garner (2012) refer to as “toxic stressors” such as homelessness, hunger, incarcerated or absent parent, domestic violence and drug abuse. These stressors can be contributing factors to chronic stress and mental issues causing symptoms of depression. Depression has also been linked to alcohol consumption (Grant, 1997). Although African-American youth have the lowest rates of drinking alcohol, national surveys reveal heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems between the ages of 18 to 29 for African-American males are at high rates (SAMHSA, 2009). Alcohol-related diseases for African-American are higher than the general population

(Kochanek, Murphy, Scott, & Anderson, 2004) and the fourth leading cause of death in ages 12-20 (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2006).

Child neglect and abuse, teenage pregnancy, crime victimization and perpetration, dropping out of high school, substandard housing conditions, depression, anxiety and fear, illicit substance abuse, infant mortality, AIDS, some cancers, hypertension, and frailty among elders are constant throughout the lifespan of African-American people living in poverty (Greenstein & Barancik, 1990; Shinn & Gillespie, 1994; Stoesz & Karger, 1993; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1992). The correlation between poverty and single-female parenthood and child maltreatment has been discussed extensively by researchers (Johnson, 1997; Pelton, 1978, 1988; Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996). Data from health examinations throughout the country show that the children in poor single female-parented families experience a disproportionate burden of health problems, a high risk of severe illness and chronic conditions, and more limitation of activity than children in more affluent, intact families (Newacheck & Jameson, 1994).

In a study conducted by Brody and his colleagues (2002) examining the competence and psychological adjustment among African American children, the results supported that educational attainment and family resources were more likely to use competence-promoting parenting practices. Youth who are raised in orderly communities or environments may have a lower need for drugs, casual sex, and associated affection, as they may already feel that people care about them. It has been documented that people—especially children—who live in well-maintained neighborhoods may be more likely to seek routine health care and treatment for symptoms promptly (Cohen, Spear, et al., 1994).

The mental impact experienced by children of poverty is enormous. Research has revealed startling statistics that have gained the attention of politicians, educators, parents, the juvenile justice system, and communities at large. The Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program has increased nearly 300% in the past two decades. This program provides income support for low-income people with mental, developmental, or physical disabilities (Social Security, 1994). The child and adolescent SSI program expanded from 297,000 participants in 1989 to 900,000 in 1994. The public outcry is a valid concern given the realities of the status of children in the United States.

Increased Juvenile Crime and Differential Treatment of African-American Youth

In the late 1990, there were a paradigm shift in the perception of juvenile crime and the treatment of juvenile offenders. There appeared to be a loss of faith and genuine support of and investment in traditional rehabilitative efforts. The -publics cry for safer communities has politicized the issues pertaining to youthful offenders and created a dramatic shift in juvenile justice philosophy (Risler et al., 1998). The shift has moved to the political right. Juvenile offenders are increasingly viewed in the frame of the adult offender, with consequences to match, such as stiffer sentencing, and juvenile criminal cases being tried in adult courts.

The juvenile justice system has been saturated with offenders who commit serious and violent crimes. In 1994, 2.7 million youth were arrested in the United States, which comprised 19% of the total arrests for that year (Snyder et al., 1996). The homicide rate among male offenders between the ages of 15 and 19 increased by 82% from 1984 to 1994, with upward trends over the past decade. Youth offenders accounted for 10% of murder arrests, 14% of forcible rape arrests, and 13% of aggravated assault arrests (Snyder et al., 1996). By 1991, there were 100,000 juveniles in correctional institutions, which is twice the number of juveniles incarcerated in 1965 when the population of adolescents was 6.5 million (Donegan, 1996). As a result of the extraordinary increase in juvenile crimes as well as the increase of high profile crimes committed by juveniles, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S.

Department of Justice recommended that juveniles charged with serious offenses, with lengthy records, or those considered unreceptive to treatment be transferred to criminal adult court (Snyder et al., 1996).

Researchers are concerned with the inconsistency and discrimination evident in the decision-making process of judicial waivers, describing them as “arbitrary, capricious, and discriminatory” (Hamparian et al., 1982). Researchers estimate that, nationwide, 39% of the youth waived to adult court are African-American. Fagan, Forst, and Vivona (1987) explored the disproportionate effect any transfer of juveniles to criminal court would have on minority youth due to the race differential in crime control policies, as evidenced by the increased proportion of minority youth in juvenile detention.

Recent research findings suggest that the disproportionate representation of African-American youth in the population of juveniles who are charged as adults is a significant issue with legislation because, although blacks represent 33% and whites represent 64% of children between ages 12 and 17, blacks represent 82% of the juveniles charged as adults while whites represent only 17%. The overwhelming results of many research studies have revealed that minority groups are over-represented in the juvenile justice system, and studies conclude that the rate of disparity for these youth increases as the system becomes more punitive (Pope & Feyerherm, 1993).

Strength Perspective: A Remedy to Alleviate Poverty for African-American Youth

There are numerous programs and services that work to alleviate the issue of youth poverty. However, many are not founded in a philosophical framework that accounts for the totality of the person in the situation, including family, community, and social and economic environments, and looks at challenges as opportunities for growth. The Strength Perspective strives to meet the needs of those components and ultimately affect the entire social structure of society and reinforce productive communities, Rapp CA, & Goscha RJ (2011).

The theory that undergirds the Strength Perspective is a radical departure from traditional social work theory and practice. It views people as unique individuals who not only have the capacity to change, but who possess the inner resources and strengths to make a difference in their lives. However, it is the clinician’s responsibility to work in collaboration with the client, client system, and community to identify the various strengths that lie within to bring about fundamental change, Saleebey, D. (2009).

The Strength Perspective paradigm has its roots in two theoretical philosophies: liberation and empowerment. It evolved out of the movement that views human behavior not as a deviant form of the standard European-American behavior, but views maladaptive behavior as an opportunity for choice, growth, action, commitment, and learning of new and innovative ways of doing and overcoming. This philosophy would reduce turmoil within the community and challenge culture-of-poverty theories due to the fact that each individual and family would be viewed as capable, resourceful, and experts of their own life story. This approach creates bridges and allows for collaboration and openness to learn about the African-American youth who live in poverty-stricken environments and managed to survive and in many cases to overcome their conditions.

This philosophy is the opposite of historical philosophy and the rigid thoughts of modern psychology of individuals, groups, and communities. From early writings and research conducted by social scientists, more noticeably Sigmund Freud, spirituality, religion, and interconnectedness are associated with illusions that ultimately lead to irrational thinking, inflexibility, intolerance, and emotional disturbance (Ellis, 1980; Baldwin, 1985). As a result, Eurocentric philosophies dominate policies and laws that affect African Americans, specifically African-American youth (Jansson, 1997). The Strength Perspective has its foundation in the core principle belief that everyone has strengths and resources within.

The Strength Perspective gives balance and purpose to humankind and is a radical departure from the mindset that has traditionally viewed African Americans, especially youth who live in poverty, as deviant and dangerous. Looking at the daily lives, obstacles, and tasks that lie before this disenfranchised group will not only enlighten the social welfare and juvenile justice systems, but it will assist in forming the political debate that drives policy.

Conclusion

The issue of poverty and African-American youth has gained national attention and has in some cases created additional racial division through policy implications and laws that affect youth in today's society (Fagan, Forst, & Vivona, 1987). It is imperative that the political agenda include a strength-based sociological perspective that moves beyond that of the psychology of the child.

With this in mind, mental health professionals must continue to advocate for the poor children and families, specifically African-American youth who are being incarcerated at a rate that is three times that of their counterpart white youth (Houghtalin & Mays, 1991). The focus of rebellion must be addressed in order to better understand and intervene with African-American youth. This component has proven to be a vital part of understanding and interpreting behaviors of African-American youth. This social phenomenon would lend credence to better understand the response of African-American children as well as to provide programs and services that address anger management, abandonment, and other issues that lead African-American youth to feel hopeless and rebel against authority.

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