
INTRODUCTION

“ YOU KNOW, WHEN TRAYVON MARTIN WAS FIRST SHOT I SAID THAT THIS COULD HAVE BEEN MY SON. ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING THAT IS TRAYVON MARTIN COULD HAVE BEEN ME 35 YEARS AGO....

THERE ARE VERY FEW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN IN THIS COUNTRY WHO HAVEN'T HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING FOLLOWED WHEN THEY WERE SHOPPING IN A DEPARTMENT STORE. THAT INCLUDES ME. THERE ARE VERY FEW AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN WHO HAVEN'T HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF WALKING ACROSS THE STREET AND HEARING THE LOCKS CLICK ON THE DOORS OF CARS...THERE ARE VERY FEW AFRICAN-AMERICANS WHO HAVEN'T HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF GETTING ON AN ELEVATOR AND A WOMAN CLUTCHING HER PURSE NERVOUSLY AND HOLDING HER BREATH UNTIL SHE HAD A CHANCE TO GET OFF. THAT HAPPENS OFTEN...

WE NEED TO SPEND SOME TIME IN THINKING ABOUT HOW DO WE BOLSTER AND REINFORCE OUR AFRICAN-AMERICAN BOYS...IS THERE MORE THAT WE CAN DO TO GIVE THEM THE SENSE THAT THEIR COUNTRY CARES ABOUT THEM AND VALUES THEM AND IS WILLING TO INVEST IN THEM? ”

BARACK OBAMA

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

JULY 19, 2013



Photo: Lance Cpl. Michael J. Ayotte, USMC

The preceding remarks could have been made by almost any black man in America. That they were made by the President of the United States, one of the most powerful men in the world, vividly underscores the reality of being black and male in America.

The shooting of Trayvon Martin and the President's subsequent reflections brought renewed attention to what Shawn Dove of Open Society Foundations calls "America's unfinished business." Dove and others in philanthropy as well as the nonprofit sector have long been answering Obama's call to action, as they work to improve life outcomes for black men and boys. Their premise is that while nearly every indicator of economic, social, and physical well-being finds black males at the bottom, the status of black males is simply the miner's canary: "Their distress is the first sign of danger that threatens us all...These problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk."¹

Emmett Carson, president of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, elaborates more fully on this concept and explains why a focus on supporting black men and boys is not just a "black issue," but one that is in the national interest: "If you want America to remain great, if you want America to remain globally competitive, if you want an America which continues to innovate and have exciting job opportunities so the next generation will be better off than the last, if that's the America you want, we can no longer afford for people of color in general, black men and boys in particular, to have the life outcomes that they do."

Rhetoric aside, ultimately it will take political will, financial commitments, and boots on the ground to increase opportunities for black men and boys and ensure that they are full and active participants in a democratic society. Indeed, recent developments—including the high-profile commitments by George Soros and Michael Bloomberg, the launch of the Institute for Black Male Achievement, and My Brother's Keeper,

a new White House initiative for young men of color—point to an emerging and "vibrant field that is learning, building, and moving."²

With that in mind, the Open Society Foundations commissioned the Foundation Center to take stock of the current state of the field of black male achievement and to provide insights on how to advance field-building efforts and ensure sustainability over time to achieve tangible results. Building on past research by the Ford Foundation and Frontline Solutions, as well as the 2012 report *Where Do We Go From Here? Philanthropic Support for Black Men and Boys*, this report scans the landscape of organizations doing this work and identifies key steps for strengthening the field of black male achievement.

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Emmett Carson, president and CEO, Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Based on interviews with 50 philanthropic, nonprofit, government, academic, and business leaders, we examine questions such as: What is promising in the field? Where are the current gaps? What opportunities are there to address these gaps and strengthen the field? What will be required to take the work to scale and achieve desired impacts? And, importantly, what does success look like? There are areas of broad agreement as well as some divergent views, but the collective wisdom of these thought leaders can help guide the black male achievement field in its next steps.

THE FIELD OF BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT

In *Building to Last: Field Building as Philanthropic Strategy*, Lucy Bernholz and her co-authors define a field as “a multidisciplinary area of specialized practice that engages diverse stakeholders.”³ Bernholz outlines six design principles for field building: 1) recognize the philanthropic opportunity; 2) establish a research base; 3) prioritize sets of actors and networks; 4) develop and adopt the right standards; 5) build a network infrastructure; and 6) share knowledge.

Looking at the work on black male achievement—defined as efforts to promote positive life outcomes for black men and boys—some of these elements are in place; others are just beginning to take shape. By using the term “field,” we recognize the diverse, multidisciplinary, cross-sector work taking place, while realizing that the work embodies aspects not only of field building, but also of network building and movement building.

Some of this work is population-focused, centering explicitly on black males, or more broadly, boys and men of color. Other work is issue-based, such as efforts related to school discipline reform and reduction of gun violence, issues that disproportionately impact black males. Still other efforts are place-based. While the boundaries of this work may seem hazy, there are clear synergies among those working to advance black male achievement.

BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT AND BOYS AND MEN OF COLOR

Some organizations focus their work explicitly on black males, while others use the broader umbrella of boys and men of color. Those that focus on black men and boys believe that intentionality translates into more effective approaches that, in turn, are more likely to yield desired outcomes. For example, interventions designed for African-American males may not work well with other groups, and vice versa. A deep understanding of cultural nuances can result in better outcomes for all groups.

Those using a boys and men of color frame argue for greater inclusion, noting the common challenges males of color face. In addition, a boys and men of color frame may be more politically viable and strategic. Still others point to their local context. In California, for example, the rich mix of Latino, African-American, and Southeast Asian communities can make it difficult for programs to have a singular focus on any particular group.

Most, though not all, of our interviewees believed that a both-and approach is most pragmatic; even with a boys and men of color lens, it is possible to acknowledge race-specific experiences. For example, disaggregating data by race/ethnicity and gender allows organizations to see the impact of their interventions on specific populations. Marc Philpart, who leads PolicyLink’s black male achievement team and also supports its boys and men of color work, notes, “There is value-add to the field if you can marry both approaches. We need to understand and address the specific experiences of certain groups and also practice solidarity that helps us further our shared goals.”

Whether the work focuses on black males or males of color more broadly, many assert that both are ultimately about embracing racial equity and equal opportunities for all. Such a lens emphasizes changing systems to increase access to opportunity, rather than solving the “problems” of individual black men.

In this report, where possible, we focus on work that centers explicitly on black males. However, we also include the perspectives of those who use a boys and men of color frame, recognizing the important intersections and common goals of both areas of work.

“ There is a value-add to the field if you can marry both approaches. ”

Marc Philpart, associate director, PolicyLink