Dedication

This book is dedicated to my professor, mentor, colleague, and friend, Dr. Joseph L. White, who has been in my life since 1965. Dr. Joe, I appreciate you taking me under your wing when I was a young man with a head full of dark hair. I am also appreciative of the ongoing and consistent love, support, guidance, nurturing, and direction you have been providing me since that time. I am thankful you are a part of my family.

I recognize the importance of having African descended men in my life over these many years to direct, acknowledge, and reinforce me and my activities. With this small tribute, I want to honor and to thank you.

“keep the faith”

Michael E. Connor, Ph.D.
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Preface

Some years ago, a friend and colleague who was on the program committee of a national conference called to invite me to participate in a panel discussion regarding whether fathers were needed in families. I was initially confused about the topic and inquired as to context for the session. He shared that at a previous meeting a couple of researchers offered the thesis that dads are rather superfluous to families and perhaps families did better without them (i.e., they do not offer anything that mothers cannot provide). Because the presentation had created/generated interest, support, and concern, the organization decided to offer it again at subsequent annual meetings. After some brief interaction, I accepted the invitation and thanked him for the call.

Although I had accepted the invitation, I was confused and concerned that anyone would question the need for paternal involvement/engagement. As the conference approached, I remained confused about the topic but was prepared to share my thoughts and experiences. At the conference, I discussed my work with low-income men along with the results of my workshops with professional men across racial groups. My work suggested the need for more not less paternal engagement.

Two presenters suggested that some children do fine when dads are not present, but their comments seemed to focus on what the mother(s) wanted and her ability to care for her children. Thus, their arguments flowed from an adult vantage point, where there was satisfaction. But, what about children and their needs/desires? Do they want their fathers present? Who in female-headed households models appropriate behaviors for males? Who demonstrates how men who care about women treat them? Who shows males how to become responsible men and fathers? And, why do some women believe they can father children? Do fathers believe that they can mother children?

In the first edition of Black Fathers: An Invisible Presence in America, African descended men shared the important roles fathers played in their lives. These men spoke of the need for father engagement and they wrote about the impact of biological, social/communal, and step fathering. Some
of these men had suffered the impact of misguided social policies that did not encourage or support their fathers’ involvement. The need for and value of consistent and ongoing father engagement were major themes.

In this second edition, we continue the discussion of Black father issues and expand the theory and research base. As in the first volume, the contributors believe it is important that fathers are involved and engaged with their children (sons and daughters) and they note problems associated with fathers’ absence. Although no attempt was made to cover all types of fathers (that is beyond the scope of the book), we did request contributions from nonfathers (fathers-to-be?) who were reared in father-present homes, from “new” fathers who are present in their children’s lives, from long-term fathers, from social/communal fathers, from fathers in the academe, from community activist fathers, from women who discuss fathers, and from retired men who are fathers. We expanded the conversation to include a historical context for some of the issues confronting African descended fathers, the impact of significant health issues on Black fathers, the need for therapeutic interventions to aid in the healing of fathers, the impact of an Afrikan-centered fathering approach, and the need for research that considers systemic problems confronting African American fathers. Additionally, each chapter ends with a conclusion and reflective questions appropriate for group discussion.

The book is divided into three sections. Section I is titled Impact of father engagement and begins with a historical overview of African descended fathers in an attempt to provide a context by which to view these men, their strengths and shortcomings, over the years (Connor, Chapter 1). Achebe Hoskins (Chapter 2) shares his compelling story as a father and communal/social father working with the underserved youth in Oakland, California. Valata Jenkins-Monroe (Chapter 3) discusses her father, who was not present during her early years but chose to enter her life during her adolescence. Gary Cunningham (Chapter 4) expands the discussion and writes about not knowing his father until he was in his middle years. He discusses the importance of mentors. Rashika Rentie (Chapter 5) then shares her research on father–daughter relationships, including the impact of the father’s absence on daughters. She also discusses the nature of kinships in African American families. jelani Mandara, Carolyn Murray, and Toya Joyner (Chapter 6) add to the discussion regarding father absence/presence on the development of gender identity in adolescent males and females. William Allen (Chapter 7) finishes Section I with a description of his work serving adolescents in the foster care system. He notes many of these males will likely become fathers and discusses the need for direction and training to aid them as they grow and develop.

In Section II, titled Father stories, African American men discuss their fathers or becoming a father. Bedford Palmer (Chapter 8) shares the
importance of being reared in a two-parent home and lessons his father taught him as he transitioned to manhood. Ivory Toldson (Chapter 9) writes of communal fathering and the importance of social fathers. He celebrates the birth of his daughter and discusses the interconnectedness of men across generations. Kevin Cokley (Chapter 10), also a “new” dad, shares the impact of his son and the importance of rearing his child in an equalitarian home. Phillip Rosier (Chapter 11) writes about the struggles Black men face with role definitions; that is, he asks the question “Who am I?” He believes the question can be answered by understanding one’s sense of purpose. This purpose focuses on actions, deeds, and contributions to others and to the community. He concludes with a discussion on the roles of fathers/social fathers in providing young men with a sense of purpose. Larry Tucker (Chapter 12) discusses how men are involved in the lives of children. He explores historical backgrounds, cultural implications, barriers to relationships, and myths.

Section III, titled Thoughts and reflections, begins with Gerald Green’s (Chapter 13) reflections on adoptions (both his and his son’s), a loving and supportive mate, and physical health issues. He has lived with cancer since 1995 and recognizes the need for Black men to attend to their health. William Allen, Phillip Rosier, and Larry Tucker (Chapter 14) cover the need for appropriate and sensitive strategies and resources to improve the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions when working with Black men. Hurumia Ahadi/Lionel Mandy (Chapter 15) proposes an Afrikan perspective that is centered in the traditions and cultures of Afrika in learning to become a father. He notes one must be a man before one can be a father. Michael Connor (Chapter 16) finishes the volume with an overview of an intervention model geared toward aiding males to move into their manhood/fatherhood. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and study.

Dr. White and I are appreciative of the reviewers of the volume, A. J. Franklin (Boston College), Frances Goldscheider (Brown University), Daryl Rowe (Pepperdine University), Catherine Tamis-LeMonda (New York University), and Robert Williams (Washington University). We thank them for their time, effort, direction, and support.

Finally, since publication of the first edition of Black Fathers, much has changed in the United States and much has remained the same. It had never occurred to me (like most African descended folks my age) that a Black man would occupy the White House in my lifetime. I am proud of him and I am proud that the country elected him. For the first time in my adult life, I (naively) felt that America would actually move toward its innate greatness and make the effort to attempt to realize its enormous potential. Sadly, the history of racial struggle and progress, followed by resistance, again repeats itself. A group of Euro-Americans rose up
against the President, taking to the airways and highways to remind us that the country has changed little at its core. So, once again, the resilience of African Americans will be challenged. The challenge is not new; we will move through another cycle of struggle, progress, and resistance, and keep on keeping on. And the reality remains: A Black man (and his family) is in the White House! In this man, I see the genius I see in so many of the young people I encounter daily; I see hope for the country’s future; I see resolve and commitment to “do better”; I see the swagger in his confident stride which I see in so many of the youth I am privileged to serve; I see intelligence combined with a thoughtful articulate presence; I see a loving competent father and husband; I see a man who attempts to encourage those around him to work together; and I see a man who embodies that which is good and decent in my fellow humans. For this, I am appreciative of President Barack Obama and say, “God bless you!”

Michael E. Connor, Ph.D.
Father of daughters, Malia and Kanoelani
Grandfather of Oni Masai and Nanea
section one

Impact of father engagement
chapter one

African descended fathers
Historical considerations

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As noted in the first edition of this book, too often both the professional and commercial literature presents African descended fathers as deadbeat, deficient, lacking, uninvolved, uncaring, and absent (Connor & White, 2006). Certainly, these notions are accurate and appropriate for some African American fathers, but they do not tell a complete or accurate story in that African American fathers who are and have been involved/engaged with their children and families (and perhaps other children in their communities) are completely ignored. Additionally, these stereotypes minimize or ignore the circumstances and contexts in which African American fathers make their decisions. Thus, we offered numerous opportunities in which present and engaged fathers shared their stories. These men had a history of being present, involved, engaged, and important in the lives of their sons and daughters, stepchildren, and extended family members, or they shared information regarding their own involved fathers.

This chapter discusses the impact of some of the historical circumstances in which Black fathers made parenting decisions (or, in some cases, had the decision made for them). The actions, conditions, responses, decisions, and behaviors of Black fathers all take place in a social, historical, political, and environmental context. And, as noted above, this context is seldom discussed, provided, or considered when researching, studying, teaching, or developing social policy designed to impact the Black community. As in the African tradition, to understand where one is going, it is important to understand where one has been; that is, it is important to frame one’s presence in relationship to one’s past.

As pertains to effective fathers/fathering, the norms used to determine successful fathering tend to reflect a Eurocentric, middle-class bias emphasizing income and financial provision. By this definition, more privileged men (having benefited from higher education and solid
employment opportunities) are perceived to be “good” fathers (whether or not they spend much time with their children), whereas those with minimal education, skills, and income are perceived as deficient (even if they spend significant time with their children). Societal factors that mitigate against receiving a quality education and thus a solid vocational background are ignored (as are the advantages and privileges afforded some in obtaining a quality education), and the amount of time spent with children seems not to be an important variable. In this chapter a brief overview of the history of African descended men as fathers in the United States is offered. Fathering constraints during the periods of Maafa (the Holocaust of Enslavement), Reconstruction/the Jim Crow era, civil rights–desegregation, the decay of urban communities, and the resultant gang activity and War on Drugs are considered. In this manner, it is hoped to provide a context pertaining to the plight, situation, options, and positions of Black men over the years. Any serious discussion pertaining to meaningful resolution must be in the context of these problems.

**Maafa/enslavement**

The first Africans arrived on the shores of South Carolina in 1526 in Spanish slave ships (Rasbury, 2010). They soon revolted and fled, seeking refuge with Native Americans. Shortly thereafter this early Spanish colony dispersed. Blacks arrived in English America in August 1619, and the first Black child was born in the Virginia colony in 1624.

Some years later, in 1641, slavery was introduced in the Massachusetts colony. The Christian men and women who captured Africans, transported them to America, and developed, enforced, and profited from enslavement were motivated by money, position, power, privilege, and racism. But all was not smooth. The first legal protest against slavery took place in 1644 and the first serious slave conspiracy in 1663. Slave revolts date back to 1708, and they took place routinely across the colonies (Bennett, 1984). Thus,

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1 Interestingly, educated business and professional men who tend to spend little time with their offspring provide us with the idea that it’s not the amount of time that is important, but rather what is being done with the time spent—that is, the quality versus quantity time argument. It is peculiar that an opposite argument is used in justifying the amount of time put into work—that is, unless one puts in a lot of time on the job, one is not considered competent or successful. The process raises the question of how competent anyone is at something one does 10 to 15 minutes a day. Although it is true that high incomes allow one to buy things for one’s children, does material provision alone constitute competent parenting in any society that claims to value children?

2 Karenga (2002) uses the term Maafa to refer to the “Holocaust of Enslavement.” It denotes a direct, purposeful, focused action on the part of Europeans and European Americans, rather than the more benign term slavery, which tends to place the onus of the condition and the resultant problems on the victims rather than the perpetrators.
Chapter one: African descended fathers

although African men arrived in the New World prior to the onset of the peculiar institution, it was the onset and promulgation of enslavement that shapes and contributes to the position and status of Black men, women, and families today (as well as the status and position of White America).

It is under the watch of these Christian folks that the original absentee/deadbeat fathers came to have a devastating impact on African descended fathers and their families. Although laws and statutes regarding parental responsibilities were in place during these colonial times, they did not extend to White men who fathered Black babies. For example, two of the fundamental attributes of “good” dads were that they acknowledged paternity and that they supported the children they fathered (Dayton, 1991). White men who failed to assume the responsibilities of paternity were only considered sinners and criminals if their natal partners were White. These women could subsequently name them as the father of their child(ren), obtain a warrant, and force them into court to be held accountable. Although White fathers were legally responsible for the debts of their children (Pleck, 2004), this responsibility did not extend to their children with non-White mothers: Enslaved Africans had no rights beyond what their masters deemed reasonable. Thus, the original deadbeat dads (i.e., slave masters) have yet to pay their due.

Additionally, profit-motivated slave owners mated and bred African men and women in an attempt to develop stronger, more durable “stock” that could perform more work (much as farmers have done with farm animals for generations). To justify these inhumane actions, Africans were designated as less than human. Other than preparing them to work, there was little expectation that they desired, or were capable of, taking care of their offspring.

As part of the dehumanization of the enslaved Africans, slave owners advanced several myths, including the seemingly irrational notion that African slaves were well taken care of, that they did not mind their position, and that they were “happy-go-lucky,” as evidenced by their singing in the fields while working hard all day. The harsh reality is that being treated as property and being frequently separated from their family and tribesmen caused serious trauma to African men, women, and children. These traumatic experiences were a major cause of sporadic slave revolts. Because of the constant threat of severe punishment and death, African fathers often had little control over themselves, much less their partners or children.

In spite of these harsh conditions, there is good evidence to suggest that many African descended men in the 17th century were actively and directly involved in family life. Genovese (1978), for example, notes that enslaved men were willing to risk punishment in order to keep families together. He indicates that some slave owners were cognizant of this and...
often argued against separation of Black families because slaves worked better when kept together. He also indicates in studying runaway slaves that the importance of family life was second only to the resentment of punishment as reasons for running away. Gutman (1976) writes that large numbers of slave couples lived in long marriages, and most lived in double-headed households. Thus, whereas the owners may not have recognized marriages, enslaved people did.

It is impossible to know how many African children were born as a result of (forced) breeding programs and/or by the impregnation (inter-racial rape) by slave owners at the time of the Emancipation. It is also difficult to determine the impact on the psyche of the Black men and Black fathers to have been so emasculated. But, in the more than 220 years of enslavement (10 to 11 generations), certainly there were major, long-term impacts on African family life. These may have included procreation in the absence of parental bonds or sufficient plans for childrearing, having to care for and raise the children of others (i.e., slave owners) over one’s own children, reenactment of public beatings and humiliations within one’s own family, and in general, becoming dependent on White oppressors for one’s survival.

Reconstruction–Jim Crow era

The period following the “end of slavery” (1863–1877) reflected an attempt to rebuild the social and economic institutions of the South in a manner that, to an extent, included newly “freed” Africans. The efforts were met with resistance and violent opposition toward the newly freed men by the Ku Klux Klan and other White supremacist organizations. With the Compromise of 1877, the U.S. military was withdrawn from the South and gains previously made quickly dissipated. Interestingly, Harris (1976) found that during the years following the Civil War, two-parent households were dominant in the African American community, in spite of the mounting intolerance and hostilities. Black fathers and mothers were attempting to hold their families together under extreme adversarial conditions.

This period predates the major migration of African descended people from the Deep South to what would become the industrialized North. The migration that occurred was primarily from the “border states” to the Northeast and New England states, and cities like Boston and New York. After a few years primarily employed in domestic work such as cooks, maids, and servants, many African Americans returned to the South. Much of this was the result of unanticipated problems they faced as supposedly “freed” people. These included the difficulty men encountered finding work and considerable hostilities from recent immigrants.
arriving from Europe, who were often competing for the same jobs and limited housing (Johnson & Campbell, 1981).

The conquered South was resentful, and with the removal of military support under the Johnson presidency, Blacks were quickly returned to a form of enslavement with Jim Crow laws and practices in place. As relates to Black fathers, the inability to obtain an education, the lack of work, the social controls, and the related ongoing White hostilities continued to take a major toll. Racism was expressed harshly, directly, and with little fear of punishment. Some 5,000 African American citizens (primarily males) were lynched between 1860 and 1890 (they were first castrated, then shot or burned, and then hanged, often in a festive, picnic-style atmosphere). There is no evidence that a single White or group of Whites was ever charged or prosecuted for these horrific crimes. Yet, in this way the societal imperative to control, oppress, and, if necessary, emasculate African males continued.

The “Kansas Exodus” of 1879 was a planned and organized migration of freed people to the Kansas Territory to seek a better way of life. Blacks migrated in large numbers for social, political, and economic gains. Some traveled with their families, others by themselves. But the areas they left and the places they arrived had an uneven ratio of men to women. Some of the Black settlers bought farms or successfully homesteaded, but most were ill-prepared for the harsh Kansas winters. They were also unprepared for the hostilities of Whites, who passed laws that made it difficult for Blacks to own land, or to remain in certain communities after dark (so-called sundowner laws), and that generally limited the political powers of Blacks to govern themselves.

During the early 1900s, African American men, women, and children came north in large numbers seeking a better way of life. This was the Great Migration, which led to the urbanization and industrialization of masses of Blacks. Data suggest that single men, women, families, and married men without their families participated in the movement. Some families were forever torn apart as a result of this movement. Promises and dreams of an independent life off the farm and in the city were enticing. Unfortunately, the dreams became nightmares as only Black women were permitted (domestic) work, while there was nothing for the masses of Black men (Genovese, 1978). Housing and education continued to be problems, and Blacks were (re)settled in large numbers in racially segregated parts of the cities.

The years following World War I were harsh ones for African Americans. Systematic exclusion from all facets of life was pervasive. “Jim Crow” was alive, well, and thriving. Political, economic, educational, and social advances were slow in coming and painfully gained, and African Americans continued to be subject to mob violence: Between 1880 and
1951, 3,437 African Americans were lynched in America, south and north. The country that fought a great war to “make the world safe for democracy” made few and feeble attempts to include African Americans or other people of color in any democratic processes.

By the 1930s, the country was in the midst of a Great Depression. Unemployment of White Americans was at an all-time high (24.9%), and examples abound regarding the devastating impact of this unemployment on White families. Many families broke up as men became despondent and left their families, and newspapers reported rampant homelessness, hunger, and a general lack of hope that led the most desperate to suicide or suicidal attempts. Although American society came to understand the potentially catastrophic impact of widespread poverty on White families, there was little appreciation of how these forces were affecting Black families at the same time. For example, during the 1930s the unemployment rate for Black males in the North was 38.9% and 23.2% for Black females (McMahon, 2009). White America evidenced little understanding, tolerance, compassion, or concern of this on Black fathers’ ability to provide for their families.

By the early 1940s, the country was moving toward a second great war to make the world “safe for democracy.” During the early years of the war, there was less north-to-south migration of Blacks because of the lack of employment possibilities in northern cities and the hostilities encountered. As World War II intensified and White males were increasingly leaving jobs to fight overseas, the demand for Black laborers increased. By 1944, increased hiring triggered historic migrations of Blacks from the mostly rural South to the more industrialized Northeast, Midwest, and Northwest in search of employment opportunities. Black males were usually primary players in these migrations, and this sometimes created uneven sex ratios either in the communities from which they came or those into which they moved. Such displacements not only affected whole communities but often had disruptive effects on individual families and family members within them.

Additionally, when family units migrated, an entirely new set of social problems evolved. In a racially segregated America, there was a shortage of housing (single-family homes) for these newly arriving families. To “solve” the problem, existing single-family houses were converted to tenements, resulting in exorbitant housing costs (and high profits for the absentee owners), overcrowding, and public health problems. (Housing projects were designed and developed to solve these problems!)

* More recently, before the current economic crisis, the unemployment rate for Black males ages 25 to 54 was 21%. Two years into the recession, the rate was 31% (Perlo, 2010).
Prostitution, homicide, drug addiction, juvenile delinquency, and violence ensued (Johnson & Campbell, 1981).

Civil rights–desegregation

The 1950s were a time of heightened tension between the races. As Whites were afforded aid and opportunity in a growing, thriving post-war America, the lack of jobs, poor housing, inadequate educational opportunities, and the lack of political strength continued to frustrate the masses of Blacks. Inferior segregated schools, housing covenants resulting in “de facto” segregation, continued enforcement of Jim Crow laws/practices, and the lack of employment opportunities continued to take a toll on Black America. However, Black family life and family support were initially solid in Black communities throughout the United States. In 1950, 91% of African American homes were dual-headed, and though that percentage had decreased to 67.7% by 1970, 54.2% were still headed by two parents as late as 1980 (Glick, 1997). However, the cumulative effects of poverty, racism, White privilege, and the resultant segregation had exacted an enormous toll.

Clearly, the historical attempts to disrupt Black families and communities have had devastating psychological, sociocultural, and economic effects on African Americans. These especially affected Black males whose traditional roles centered on providing for and protecting their families (McAdoo, 1993). Billingsley (1970) wrote that the majority of Black families were headed by men, most of whom were married to their original wives and who were employed full-time but were unable to pull themselves from poverty. Misguided social policies exacerbated the problems Black males encountered in fulfilling these roles. For example, the growing number of low-income, single Black mothers who sought relief through Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) learned they could lose these “benefits” if a male resided in the home. When this included the father of her child(ren) (who may not have been able to find work or who was underemployed), it increased the likelihood of family disintegration.

Pinkney (1969) wrote that in 1965, 72% of all Black families were composed of husband and wife. He notes, “The economic and social conditions under which Black Americans have lived have led to a disorganized family life … characterized by instability” (pp. 94–95). According to his figures, about one fourth (28%) of U.S. Black families at that time were “disorganized,” and this one fourth is presented as being representative. Moynihan (1965, 1968), in analyzing and comparing Blacks and Whites primarily from the 1960 census data on items such as illegitimacy,

http://www.psypress.com/black-fathers-9780415883672
unemployment, father-absent homes, and welfare dependency, concluded that the problems facing the Black community were primarily due to family disorganization. Moynihan failed to consider the impact of racism and White privilege in his analysis. He also ignored the psychological impact of the elimination of the national African American male leadership of the time, including Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The late 1960s saw the rise and subsequent elimination of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The author believes that this systematic decimation of Black male leadership contributed to the development, growth, and proliferation of urban gangs, which provided disenfranchised Black youth with opportunities for involvement, leadership, and a sense of family and “community,” first in south-central Los Angeles and then across the nation.

Finally, the civil rights movement of 1950s and 1960s, which attempted to outlaw racial discrimination and gain suffrage through acts of non-violent protest and civil disobedience, ushered in the rather short era of affirmative action. In an attempt to “level the playing field” as it relates to education and jobs, Blacks and others who had not been afforded favorable circumstances in which to compete were now offered “equal opportunities.” The goal was to end the programs once the “field was leveled.” The first affirmative action policy was enforced in 1965, but by 1978, many in the White community had organized protests decrying any remedial efforts that potentially disadvantaged Whites, and eventually, these effectively curtailed the policy. Thus, the damage sustained by Blacks and other people of color over 360 years was deemed by a majority of Americans to have been eradicated in a short 13 years!

**Urban deterioration/war on drugs**

As noted earlier, the elimination of Black male leadership left a void felt most keenly in low-income urban communities, but it also destabilized Black families and communities across the country. Young men banded together to create a sense of family for protection, survival, fellowship, support, acceptance, and companionship. The documentary film, *Crips and Bloods—Made in America* (Davis, 2008), provides insights into the growth and influence of urban gangs in the late 1960s through the 1980s in south-central Los Angeles. The film discusses the impact of the lack of a viable family, including the lack of an involved father, plays on youth who gravitate to gangs. It chronicles the introduction of drugs (especially crack cocaine) and the flood of automatic weapons into low-income, inner-city, Black communities and thus sets the stage for the urban war zones that continue to plague cities across the nation. Where adult males/fathers have been eliminated, gangs may function as surrogate families/fathers.
Chapter one: African descended fathers

Unfortunately, without viable, mature, functioning adult males to provide guidance and direction, youth flounder as they seek to find appropriate father images to emulate.

With meager resources, the lack of vocational training, minimal employment skills, and inadequate educations, some youth turn to street crime as a means to make money. These activities, in turn, contribute to the decline of the quality life in urban areas of the cities and ensure that marginally functioning Black youth will become marginally functioning Black adults.

Civil rights attorney Michelle Alexander (2010) argues that although the Jim Crow statutes and laws of the 19th century are no longer enforced and vestiges of those racist practices have largely disappeared from contemporary society, they have been replaced with a new form of Jim Crowism under the guise of the “War on Drugs.”

Alexander (2010) writes, “In each generation, new tactics have been used for achieving the same goals—goals shared by the Founding Fathers. Denying African American citizenship was deemed essential to the formation of the original union” (p. 1). She notes, “An extraordinary percentage of black men in the United States are legally barred from voting. … They are also subject to legalized discrimination in employment, housing, education, public benefits and jury service” (pp. 1–2). According to Alexander, the American racial caste system has not ended but rather has been redesigned under the auspices of the so-called War on Drugs, developed in 1982 during the Reagan administration, before crack cocaine became a negative force/problem in urban centers; men are jailed for possessing small amounts of drugs for their personal use rather than for sale or distribution. Alexander notes that drug abuse is a public health issue rather than a criminal one and that more Whites use drugs than Blacks (a fact not reflected in arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates). She writes that it is an “odd coincidence that an illegal drug crisis suddenly appeared in the black community after—not before—a drug war had been declared” (p. 6).

Thus, the social controls imposed on Black males during the earlier caste system are now evident via mass incarceration and its aftermath—“one in three young African American men is currently under the control of the criminal justice system—in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole” (Alexander, 2010, p. 9). Those labeled criminals are controlled both in and out of prison, in that once released, the former prisoners are subject to discrimination and social exclusion. With a felony conviction, they are forever trapped in a second-class status and subject to discrimination, devoid of the ability to vote, excluded from any jury duty, excluded from holding jobs or taking advantage of educational opportunities, destined to reside in public housing, and subject to ongoing and continuous
control by the system. Thus, Alexander concludes, the racial caste system, which began with the enslavement of Black people, continues to this day with the War on Drugs.*

Comment

Given the historical trauma and continuing societal barriers they face, it is not surprising that some Black fathers have inappropriate notions about children, childrearing, and responsible relationships with the mothers of their children. In many ways, they are continuing the legacy of enslavement. These males tend to seek self-serving physical gratification with no conscious regard or concept as to sexual (adult) responsibility. They have the notion that contraception is their partner’s responsibility and once they “make a baby” they must “step up to the plate” and be accountable. They do not seem to grasp what is involved with responsible child engagement, what it costs to rear a child, the sacrifices, energy, activity, nurturing, and love required to be a father. Thus, in many ways, they function as the “breeders” of earlier times.

However, most of the males with whom I interact seem resistant to this enslavement mentality. Although they may not have planned having children, or anticipated the committed work involved in rearing them, they understand and accept responsibility for their children. Thus, it is inspiring when they demonstrate their effectiveness as loving fathers. As was noted in the first edition of this book, Black fathers, who are meaningfully involved with their children, tend to be ignored. However, it is they who hold the solutions and answers to problems that plague the community. In my work, I often hear from young fathers, who do not reside with their children, complain that the mothers of their kids are “turning my kids against me.” I suggest that although the primary caregiver (usually the mother) might make it difficult for the other caregiver to foster a reasonable relationship with the children, the primary caregiver cannot turn the kid(s) against their father. Only fathers can do that, based on how they act and interact. To illustrate, consider the following situations.

* According to Alexander, the “War on Drugs” was declared when drug usage was at a low and was followed by legislation that ensured long-term incarceration of nonviolent offenders (i.e., the “three strikes law,” which ensured significant time for petty offenses). Because so-called street crime is much easier to detect and prosecute than white-collar crime, Black and Brown males are disproportionately targeted, arrested, charged, and ultimately convicted. Approximately 30% of those arrested are Black or Brown males, and many of these men are fathers. Thus, a large number of children are now “visiting” their fathers’ homes (jail). The future impact of youth seeing their fathers warehoused in such a manner will likely be devastating.
Madu

Madu is a 36-year-old, single male who has a 12-year-old daughter with whom he had little contact during her first 8 years. He chose not to marry the mother of his child and on the night of her birth, after visiting her in the hospital, went to a current girlfriend’s house to “celebrate.” Because he chose not to work, he was unable to support his child and did not help with child care in any meaningful manner—additionally, he seemed to have no idea as to how or what it took to support his child. He apparently believed that loving her would suffice. The child’s mother returned to work shortly after giving birth, getting up early to catch a train to take the child to Madu (he resided with his parents), and then returning to the city to work. After work, she caught the train back to Madu’s parents, retrieved the child, and made the trip home where she would bathe, feed, and care for her baby before going to bed. This was her schedule for the first year of the child’s life. Her living quarters were a small, cold, dark, basement apartment, warmed by one small space heater, and the child was prone to upper respiratory problems.

It is not clear why Madu did not make the effort to meet her halfway, to provide child care at her home, to seek employment himself, or why his parents did not intervene to help him become more responsible. Upon being made aware of the living conditions and the lack of paternal support, her parents invited her and the baby to return to the house where she was reared (some 200 miles away), where she and her baby would each have a room, adequate heat, and food, and her mother would quit working in order to provide child care so that the child’s mother could continue to work. She chose to do this, and over the next three years the child thrived.

Interestingly, Madu had little or no contact with the mother or his baby during the duration of their stay with the maternal grandparents. He seemed unaware of the sacrifices the maternal grandparents made for his child and thus did not consider thanking them for taking in his child. Court action was commenced to establish visitation and child support. When he failed to appear, a default judgment was rendered; however, no child support was paid. At the age of 4, when the child left the grandparents’ home, she was healthy, happy, and articulate, could read at the first-grade level, possessed appropriate physical and social skills, and had been exposed to involved caring males in the way of social fathers.

Although moving within 20 miles of Madu’s parents and establishing monthly contacts with them so that the paternal grandparents would know their grandchild, there was little effort by Madu to form a relationship with his child. Rather, he commenced a campaign of heated discussions with whomever would listen as to how he was being barred from contact with his child. Eventually, he spent some time with his daughter.
when she visited his parents (she was now 9 years old). However, much of his interactions with her centered on talking negatively to her about her mother and maternal grandparents, with whom she continued to have a loving and caring relationship. After a short period of time, the child began to decline visits with her father, indicating she did not appreciate him “badmouthing” the people who had reared her when he was not providing. Now, at the age of 12, the child has declined all but the most meager visits with her father. She seems depressed, unhappy, angry, and sometimes “lost.” Unfortunately (and predictably), Madu’s daughter intends to inform the court that she wants even further reduced time with him. The future is not good as relates to any meaningful father–daughter relationship as she states she looks forward to the time she does not have to see him.

Howard

Howard is a 59-year-old never-married male with two adult children (ages 26 and 32) from a previous long-term relationship. Although he chose not to marry the mother of his two children, he did choose to maintain a relationship with them and their mother. The mother enjoys a long-term successful marriage with a man who seems to enjoy his stepfather role. When asked if he provided for his children, Howard looked incredulous and replied, “Of course, they are my children.” The notion that he would support them financially, emotionally, and socially was a given. He shared that his father, uncles, grandfather, and extended male kin would have seen him as less than a man if he did not provide—it was a given for which there was no option.

He went on to say that his children spent summers with him and his side of the family; he understood the concept of child support and paid on a consistent, regular basis; and he has always maintained a positive relationship with them (both are college graduates and are enjoying professional careers; neither is currently married). Further, while he acknowledged there were some rough times initially with the children’s mother, he was open to input and suggestions and worked diligently to learn, grow, and participate as a father. Using a child-focused approach, he was able to place his shortsighted, selfish immature notions (his words) aside and attend to the needs of his children. As soon as he and the children’s mother learned to focus on what was best for their offspring and put their need to fight aside, they rather easily worked out differences around the children’s needs.

Observing Howard interact with his son and daughter over the years, their loving, respectful relationship is obvious. They openly express themselves to one another (i.e., their love, respect, concerns, needs, future goals,
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relationships, professional lives, etc.). The parents are also respectful of one another and, reflecting about their children, both are appreciative that they chose to stop bickering and learned to focus on their children’s needs.

Lawrence

Lawrence is a 49-year-old divorced father of two adult daughters (now 27 and 24). Both he and the children’s mother remarried; she is currently divorced for the second time. Both children are college graduates; one was married for a short time, and the other is currently engaged. Lawrence sought help when his children were 11 and 8. He was distraught after his wife had informed him that she was bored in the relationship and wanted a divorce. She noted that all he did was work, talk about the kids, and spend time with his side of the family. She indicated that although he was a solid provider and father, she wanted more out of life. She asked him to leave the house so the kids would have some consistency and to continue to support them. She assured him that he would have access to, and visitation with, his daughters.

Lawrence left the house, renting a room from some friends. He faithfully paid child support and contributed to his children’s college fund. Things went smoothly for the first seven months when, for some unknown reason, the mother began withholding the children from visiting with their father or speaking with him on the phone. He was quite distraught, discussed discontinuing the payment of child support, returning to court to fight her, and enlisting the sheriff’s office to accompany him to forcefully obtain the children for his visits. Although he certainly could have taken these actions, he also recognized they may not be best for the children. He was asked if he could be patient, focus on the long term, and follow some directives, the goal of which was to ultimately have a meaningful relationship with his children. He indicated he would try and was advised to get a notebook for each of his daughters and start to write thoughts, comments, and reactions to each of them. He was to date the entries, keep them brief, and write nothing about their mother.*

Thus, he recorded thoughts about missing the children and not being present, about saying good night and good morning to them, about missing or not being included in their special days and events, about not being included at school events, about showing up for his visitations and the

* Consider: One parent “badmouthing” the other to the children has negative outcomes for the “badmouthed;” only if what is being said is true. If not, the “badmouthing” can come back at some point to haunt that parent. If what she is saying to the kids is accurate, he needs to change; if it is not accurate, then he should be himself and when the children are old enough, they will figure it out on their own and take whatever action they see fit.
children not being present (home), and so forth. Additionally, he was asked to continue sending birthday, holiday, and special event cards, gifts, and messages. When they were returned, he was to keep them in one of two containers maintained for each child. And he was advised to continue contributing to his children’s college fund.

There was minimal contact for some years, until Lawrence accidentally encountered his older child at a local shopping mall. She approached him in an angry manner indicating he had lied about her college funds and there was no money in either child’s accounts. Shocked, he did not know what to say and merely asked that she stop by his home over the next couple of days allowing him time to try and figure out what had happened to the money and what they might do to resolve the problem.

As soon as he got home, he made some calls and soon determined all the money had indeed been withdrawn from both accounts by his ex-wife. Several days later, his daughter stopped by, still angry. Rather than listening to her complaints and negative comments, he gave her the box of items he had saved over the years. He asked that she go through the items when she calmed down and make plans to come back to talk. She did take the box, but was rude and disrespectful as she departed.

Apparently after calming down, she went through some of the items and was shocked at what she found. Her mother had been saying negative things about her father for some time, indicating he was no good, did not care about the kids, and was making no effort to be in their lives. Now, the evidence before her suggested this was neither accurate nor truthful. She angrily confronted her mother about having been deceived about her father and withholding her from him. She indicated she wanted to live with him and attempt to develop a relationship. Her mother also acknowledged that she had taken and spent the college money.

Immediately thereafter, she apologized to her father and asked to move in with him so they could come to know one another. In a relatively short period of time, they developed a loving, caring relationship, which continues to this day. And, after moving in with her father, she was able to attend college, with his help. While she maintains a relationship with her mother, she remains concerned as to why her mother created a wedge between the daughters and their father, and as such is no longer fully trusting of her mother. Her younger sister also has a relationship with the father but is not as close to him. The daughters do well together.

* In my work, I have found that some men discontinue attempts to see their children because of the personal pain and agony they experience in attempting to navigate a hostile family court system, maternal gatekeeping activities, inequitable social service procedures, and their personal frames of reference. “Men don’t express hurt and pain; men don’t cry”—thus, these men seem to accept being perceived as absent fathers when in fact they are staying away to minimize their pain and anguish. They are wounded fathers.
Conclusion

Given the history of how African descended males have fared in the United States, what is interesting regarding these three cases is not that Madu has little understanding of what being a man or a father entails; rather, it is fascinating and noteworthy that given the history of Black fathers in the United States, both Lawrence and Howard chose to place their children's needs over their own and were able to act accordingly. Both have maintained consistent and positive relationships with their children, and both of them are happy and satisfied with the relationships. Both indicate that it was often difficult, but they recognize that life in America for Black men has always been difficult. It is likely that Madu's situation would be different if he stopped fighting his daughter's mother, listened to his child, apologized to and thanked those who have had a consistent hand in her rearing, and commenced being a positive force in her life.

Certainly, African and African American males have been subjected to consistent, unwarranted, hostile abuse during the years in the United States. One of the three men presented here made choices that demonstrated a lack of awareness of the impact of his actions on others, including children, mates/mothers, and the community. However, two of them put their children's needs first, and this allowed them to make appropriate adjustments, adjustments that recognized and considered the needs of their children. These fathers are to be acknowledged, commended, and reinforced—they have answers to some of the problems plaguing the community. Additionally, as energy is expended in support of those fathers making poor decisions, it is important not to ignore fathers who are responsible, attentive, and responsible to their children. Any serious remediation attempts must include their solutions. Paraphrasing my colleague and friend, Dr. Thomas Parham (2002) in a keynote address delivered to college students at Cal State, Long Beach, “Mental liberation is needed in any effort to liberate one’s community.” When African descended men know who they are, their true history, their worth, and their abilities, they take care of themselves, their children, and their communities, just as Lawrence and Howard have done and continue to do.

Reflective questions

1. Most funding agencies support social programming at 3- to 5-year cycles. How realistic is it to anticipate this approach will have any meaningful impact on problems that have been several hundred years in the making?
2. The United States presents itself as being a “child-friendly” society. Do you agree or disagree? Discuss your answer in the context of the
historical mistreatment of Black males and their efforts to be good fathers.

3. Given the history, how do you explain/or account for African descended fathers who are involved and engaged with their children and families?

4. What can Madu learn from Lawrence and Howard to develop a meaningful relationship with his daughter?

References

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