

How to halt the pre-K to prison trend for African-American youth

April 12 2010

April 12, 2010—A disturbing thirty year trend has resulted in a disproportionate number of incarcerated African-American male youths in U.S. prisons. A new study from the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* shows that the conditions that contribute to this high representation (sixty percent of all incarcerated youth) begin early in life, and is often exacerbated by their experiences in school.

It's projected that by 2029, prisons will house almost 30,000 of the 600,000 four-year olds now living in America. The solution to this problem lies within families, schools and communities. Study author Oscar A. Barbarin, III, Ph.D. identifies specific practices needed in order to turn this situation around. Parents, as a child's first teacher, can do a lot by engaging with them through talking, listening, and offering challenging new experiences.

Schools can begin by acknowledging the unique challenges facing African-American males, developing strong relationships with their families, and by using teaching practices that incorporate motor skills and movement, which comes naturally to young males. Classrooms can be reformed to provide more engaging and accepting environments for boys. Barbarin says, "Communities play a significant role too. Coalitions, churches, and community groups can provide male mentors, especially when the child lacks a significant male presence at home."

Barbarin argues that these measures can add to a feeling of acceptance, connectedness, responsibility and loyalty within their families and

communities, and counteract certain traumas and challenges experienced early in life. He shows that evidence of these academic and social challenges is already apparent at the [kindergarten](#) level.

According to Barbarin, African-American males come to school with fewer skills than their Caucasian or female counterparts at this age, who are more inclined to have more developed language, literacy and self-regulation skills. Boys' limitations are often not properly recognized or addressed as they progress through school. This is exacerbated by behavioural issues, as well as racial segregation within schools. Barbarin's findings expose large gaps in the American educational system, and highlight a systemic underachievement level among African-American males.

Barbarin agrees that programs such as Head Start, Boys and Girls Clubs, and state-funded early childhood programs have tried to augment these issues. However, Barbarin recommends that a simple principle of the three Xs, "Expose, Explain, Expand," can go a long way to engaging children, and encourage pride in the child's heritage, as well as a caring, responsible, and ethical philosophy.

Barbarin says, "Once the juveniles enter the justice system, the repeat offender rate is sixty percent. This research calls for optimism in spite of a vicious downward cycle experienced by many young males, which marginalizes them at school, at work, at home and in their communities."

More information: "Halting African American Boys' Progression from Pre-K to Prison." Oscar A. Barbarin. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*; Published Online: April 9, 2010. ([DOI:10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01009.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01009.x))

Provided by Wiley

Citation: How to halt the pre-K to prison trend for African-American youth (2010, April 12)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-04-halt-pre-k-prison-trend-african-american.html>

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