The State of African-American Youth in Metropolitan Louisville

A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

THE STATE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH IN METROPOLITAN LOUISVILLE

A Foreword

Two and a half years ago, the Louisville Urban League was awarded $500,000 over five years to embark upon a community-wide campaign, *a Campaign for African-American Achievement.* This campaign, backed by the Lilly Foundation and the National Urban League, has three important goals:

■ Spread the gospel that "Achievement Matters" so that parents, students and community leaders fully understand the importance that our children achieve at high levels;

■ Transform parents into sophisticated consumers of public education, so that they properly support the academic and social development of their youngsters at home, in the community and in school; and,

■ Create a consumer demand for quality education so that educators and policymakers fulfill their obligations to our children.

Since the Campaign's launch in 1999, much has been done to enlist and educate African-American residents, parents and youth about the critical need to improve the academic achievement of African-American youth and thus their opportunities for long-term success and the subsequent success of the entire community. Activities include campaign information sessions, education forums, parent-training sessions, community building efforts, church outreach, as well as new youth programs and recognition events.

While an intense focus remains on reaching African-American youth, their parents and their supporters, another important task remains — the task of communicating to the larger community the compelling need to address the educational gaps that exist between African-American students and their white counterparts. Until we acknowledge this challenge to our community, we will be forever hindered in our attempts to address the widening chasm that divides us.

In 1948, the Louisville Urban League, with the assistance of the National Urban League and researcher and writer J. Harvey Kerns, undertook a study to assess the economic and cultural conditions of the larger African-American community in Louisville. Now, more than 50 years later, the LUL is again attempting to initiate a community dialogue, this time with a focus on youth.

Toward this end, the Louisville Urban League commissioned a study to research the actual trends among African-American youth in Louisville, examining economic status and educational attainment as well as sexual attitudes and rates of crime and violence. Community surveys and focus groups were used to provide a fuller view of how the African-American community views its life here in Louisville, offering real voices and real lives.

This committee, which includes leading researchers and educators in Louisville, has produced a crucial and compelling report that could prove to be a turning point for African-American youth in our community. As director of the Louisville Urban League and as a concerned citizen of Louisville, I would like to thank them for donating countless hours toward this important research and for performing an invaluable community service.

The recommendations for action advanced in this report are extensive, but by no means comprehensive. The recommendations also do not necessarily reflect the views of the Louisville Urban League, or its other community partners. For example, the recommendation to establish a Citizen Review Board is not a concept endorsed by the Urban League at this time and is an issue that members of this organization believe requires more study. However, the main purpose of this report is to raise community awareness, engage a public dialogue and encourage a call for action to address these challenging issues. For that reason, the Urban League, as the commissioner of this study, sought to provide a report that would not be restricted by its own organizational orientation. In this report, as in the Campaign, the Urban League is acting as a convenor and a catalyst to promote dialogue and constructive action to address these issues.

As a reader of this report, we call on you to take an active role — by providing commentary, offering challenges and suggestions and by sharing it with others who need to know. We are asking you to take action on this important issue in our community and, by doing so, to acknowledge that all of our children deserve equal opportunities for success.

Benjamin K. Richmond
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Louisville Urban League

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Executive Summary
Historical Background (Parts I and VI)

The contemporary conditions and patterns of African-American life in Louisville have their origins in—and cannot be understood fully without knowledge of — the realities of local and regional history. Through the ante-bellum period, race relations in the Louisville area were shaped by the institution of slavery and by the presence of Kentucky's only significant concentration of free people of color. African-American "family" structure was particularly fragile. Children were often separated from their parents by sale, flight or death. Enslaved African Americans could not marry legally and, even when one or both natural parents were present, family relationships were inherently "unnatural" since enslaved African Americans had no legal rights to themselves or their children. Females were a majority among local African Americans and one consequence of this unbalanced sex ratio was the presence of numerous one-parent households among both enslaved and free African Americans.

With few African American adults living to middle age, African-American youth represented a significant segment of the African-American population and often assumed adult roles and responsibilities in adolescence. Slavery was first and foremost a labor system — and one that allowed no "unemployment." Thus, work was the most important constant in the lives of young African Americans, free and enslaved, during this early period. Enslaved African-American children were "put to work" very early in their childhood and the vast majority of free African-American households were desperately poor and depended on multiple small incomes.

Louisville had the largest concentration of free people of color in Kentucky and free blacks were the moving forces behind the establishment of the first black churches, schools and fraternal organizations. In these centers, young African Americans could learn leadership and autonomy in the midst of slavery. Enslaved young African Americans could associate with free blacks and learn what freedom, however circumscribed, meant.

After emancipation, the opportunities offered by freedom were limited by the challenges of life in an increasingly segregated and still hostile community. Nevertheless, promoting the welfare of black children was a central community concern. The number of traditional family units increased dramatically. With strong leadership and some white allies, Louisville African Americans pressed for economic opportunities, political rights, and access to quality education. Public schools were established for blacks in October 1870 and (what later became) Central Colored High School opened in October 1873. However, despite these and many other achievements, African Americans remained generally poor and locked firmly in a separate and unequal "place."

Years later, in Negro Youth at the Crossways (1940), Dr. E. Franklin Frazier studied the effects of two generations of segregation on the roughly 27 percent of Louisville's black population under twenty years of age (i.e., 13,195 of 47,158). Frazier concluded that "the social and cultural world of the Negro is isolated in important respects from the larger white world despite its economic dependence upon the latter." Frazier found no young people who were "happy to be segregated", but, within the limits of

segregation, how young African Americans viewed their lives and their prospects was determined to a significant degree by their socio-economic status. As socio-economic status improved, attitudes toward self grew more positive — and the fear of whites decreased. Frazier was impressed with the work of local schools, but disappointed in the lack of social mission among local churches. Furthermore, unemployment was highest among African American youth and, as a consequence, Frazier noted that many young people "turn to criminal and anti-social behavior in order to survive the struggle, while others become accommodated to low types of legitimate employment." Given these difficult conditions, he concluded that, "Negro youth are critical of Negroes and skeptical of their possibilities."

For many young people, the lure of the "streets" led to crime and delinquency. What awaited young African Americans in those streets was a troubling and long-standing relationship between blacks, crime, the police and the courts. As Kerns noted in a 1948 study conducted for the Louisville Urban League, "All evidence, statistical and otherwise, indicates that the problem of delinquency among Negro juveniles is far from being satisfactorily solved. This is without question due largely to environmental factors, employment limitations, in the absence of adequate recreational opportunities." Discriminatory treatment by the local police and justice system compounded existing problems, e.g., a 1947 survey conducted by the Louisville Crime Prevention Bureau reported that African-American youth were arrested in disproportionate numbers and were subject to more severe penalties than were white youth.

During the Great Depression, the goal of African-American struggle, in Louisville and elsewhere, shifted from "making separate as equal as possible" to overthrowing both the principle and the fact of racial segregation. Young African Americans were in the forefront of this struggle, e.g., the demonstrations for public accommodations in the early 1960s, the Open Housing campaign in 1967, the formation of the Black Unity League of Kentucky (BULK) and the demonstrations on the campus of the University of Louisville in 1969. Still, other forces were at work during this same period. Urban Renewal changed the racial geography of Louisville and Jefferson County in the late 1950s and 1960s. At the same time, for a decade and more, African-American unemployment declined and median incomes rose. However, economic gains were unevenly distributed and short-lived. Not surprisingly, long-festering racial tensions erupted in a race riot in West Louisville following an incident of police brutality in May 1968. By the mid-1970s, black unemployment rose and youth unemployment rose even more sharply. While some blacks prospered, the relative economic position of the local African-American community as a whole continued to deteriorate through the 1970s and 1980s — e.g., with mean African-American family income dropping to roughly half of men white family income in the Louisville Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) by 1990.

From one perspective, the Civil Rights era was a time of progress, optimism and unprecedented interracial contact. However, racism did not disappear and, in the post-Civil Rights era, income, education and power "gaps" between the races remained significant. Some long-standing problems grew even more troubling. For example, in 1999, 58.2 percent of all the juvenile males and 52.8 percent of all juvenile females detained in Louisville area were black. Violent crime had become endemic in the most segregated and impoverished African American neighborhoods despite efforts by local government and financial institutions to build low-cost housing and stimulate economic development.

Under segregation, virtually all local African Americans were contained within the same cluster of black neighborhoods, but, with the end of legal segregation, uniform geographic containment was no longer

possible. Many African Americans dispersed to mixed neighborhoods or more affluent enclaves on the fringes of existing black neighborhoods. The economic status of those left behind was ignored a generation ago, leaving a legacy of still unresolved second and third generation problems in the present.

Louisville did not become another "place," but the experience of living in Louisville became a different experience for African-American youth.

Social Characteristics, 1990–2000 (Parts I and II)

Based on recent Census and survey data, it is possible to describe local African-American youth and their contemporary conditions of life empirically. Among the most important facts:

> With respect to sex ratio, the local population "begins" with a male majority, but by young adulthood and thereafter, becomes a population with an ever-larger majority of females.

> Local African-American unemployment stood at 21.7 percent in 1987 and, by 1989, median African-American family income had dropped to only 52 percent of the white median in Louisville and only 43 percent in Jefferson County.

> A large segment of the local black population remained in the lowest of the lower income ranges. In Jefferson County, among youth between 14 and 18, 9.5 percent of white youth and 36.6 percent of black youth live below the poverty line. Among youth between 19 and 24, 12.1 percent of white youth and 37.1 percent of black youth live below the poverty line. City residents are more likely to be poor (compared to black residents of the County) — and black City residents are most likely of all to live in poverty.

> African Americans remain a predominantly urban, rather than suburban, population group — but a group that is gradually moving from the City in increasing numbers. African Americans are also far more likely to be "renters" than "owners", and more less likely to have lived in their current residence for more than two years.

> The combined effects of mediocre education, economic change and recent shifts in the sex ratio of local African Americans have resulted in the rapid and dramatic growth of one-parent households, usually female-headed, usually with children, and usually poor or economically marginal.

> While poverty has the same relationship to delinquency and crime among young African Americans as among any other group — being black dramatically increases the likelihood of close and adverse encounters with police and the criminal justice system.

Survey Research and Focus Groups (Parts II, V and VI)

Surveys and the use of focus groups complemented the more traditional historical and empirical research methods. Several approaches were employed, with the following results.

West Louisville residents (a sample thereof) were surveyed in Fall 2000. Survey respondents reflected the demography of West Louisville neighborhoods quite closely. Respondents expressed general indifference to many of the political issues of the day, e.g., they had little idea of what the City/County merger issues were or the implications for their community. Still, a large majority of respondents expressed strong views regarding the poor quality of services provided to and in their community. While some resented, to a large extent, the recent actions of City of Louisville officials, such resentments did not translate into support for separation from the City. Most respondents placed more confidence in their religious leaders, e.g., Reverend Louis Coleman, than in politicians or organizations.

Other members of the Research Team surveyed several hundred young African Americans in Fall 2000. Youth responded in fairly conventional and predictable terms, e.g., most viewed their neighborhood, their school and themselves in a reasonably positive light, and viewed their future prospects as being relatively bright. Interestingly, where young people lived in the Louisville MSA was the only significant axis along which response patterns seemed to divide. The racial composition of a particular neighborhood did not have any direct effect on the attitudes of black youth. However, young African Americans from neighborhoods that were both "black and poor" viewed neither their circumstances nor their prospects in especially positive terms.

The issue of teen sexuality was explored in depth with two church youth groups, one school group, and one youth group from a community center. Participants talked freely about "temptation," "urges," creative sex play to avoid pregnancy, "oral sex protection" and "same sex relationships." Access to medically accurate information and the ability to communicate with respected adults were deemed extremely important, along with the importance of self-control, the role of values in sexual decision-making and the need for relationships with like-minded partners to strengthen commitments to abstinence. However, the sexual risk-taking of which these groups were aware in their neighborhoods was widespread and troublesome — multiple partners, "pleasing partner" emphasis, dating older men, and beginning sexual activity at age 14 and younger. Focus group comments reinforced local and national research findings that the sexual attitudes of and levels of sexual risk-taking behavior by black youth must be addressed with an organized and informed response from families and the community at large.

Education (Part IV)

Half of all African-American students in Kentucky reside in Jefferson County. Ten years after the passage of KERA, the achievement of Kentucky's children has improved dramatically. However, despite the reforms engendered by the Kentucky Education Reform Act (1990), African American students remain largely segregated within local schools (by tracking and program assignment) and continue to achieve decidedly unequal educational outcomes. For example, there is little difference, by race, between elementary and secondary school attendance patterns and graduation rates. However, local whites remain far more likely to continue their education after high school.

African-American students perform below their white counterparts at nearly every grade level. State findings representing student achievement show that white females achieve the highest performance levels, followed by white males, African-American females and then African-American males.

African-American children make up just over 30 percent of total enrollment in Jefferson County Public Schools, with a disproportionate share of retentions, suspensions, dropouts and exceptional child placements. Over the past five years, three times as many whites as African Americans experienced a successful transition from high school and either attended college, obtained employment, enlisted in the military and/or enrolled in a vocational institution.

After more than fifteen years, the proportion of African-American teachers relative to the proportion of African-American enrollment is barely half of what it should be.

Research studies present possible explanations for these persistent inequalities by race. First, the curriculum used in Kentucky schools is mono-cultural, thus catering to the dominant group. Second, cultural misunderstandings exist between home and school in many districts. Third is the lack of the quality of teachers in the classrooms, especially in the middle schools, where student achievement appears to stall.

African-American Youth and Sexuality (Part VI)

Normal human adolescents, including African-American youth in Louisville, are sexually interested and, all-too-often, sexually active. Black teens in Louisville are no exception.

There has been a steady increase in the percentage of children born to black teens both under 15 and between 18 and 19 years old in Louisville and Jefferson County over the past twenty years. At the same time, the percentage of teen births to black girls between 15-17 declined. These patterns parallel similar declines in the state and nation. Furthermore, the rates of sexually transmitted infections (STI) for black youth are disproportionately high based on population data for Jefferson County. Disproportionately high rates of sexually transmitted infections lead to an expectation of a higher number of reported cases of HIV/AIDS among black adults and youth. One complicating factor is that, according to Family Planning Perspectives (Nov/Dec, 1999), "black men and women are the least likely to have sexual partners outside their racial group. Consequently, the researchers observe, black individuals infected with an STI are likely to spread the infection within their community, but not to other racial or ethnic groups."

Extract of Recommendations

There can be no meaningful and lasting improvement in the lives and life chances of African-American youth unless the larger scale inequalities between African Americans and whites are addressed in this metropolitan area. There is no historical or scientific evidence that these inequalities are "caused" by any innate differences in ability or by any learned differences in culture. In other words, change is possible. However, no constructive action(s) can be conceived or undertaken unless the local community first admits there is a problem, that it is a community problem — not merely an African -American problem. And African Americans must be centrally involved in defining this problem, choosing and implementing corrective strategies, and in assessing the effects of those strategies.

The conditions confronting African-American youth and the problems inherent in those conditions are not new. These problems have persisted and, in some cases, have grown more serious — not because solutions are lacking — but because this community has failed to act on certain specific recommendations advanced, time after time, over the past century and more. The recommendations are not exhaustive, but focus, in abbreviated form, on several of the specific domains in which action is needed urgently.

Education

- Provide a quality education that raises the achievement levels of all students with emphasis on narrowing the gap between the achievement levels of African-American students and other students.
- Systematically eliminate/replace lower lever courses and tracking with more challenging curricula and supporting academic resources for students.
- Insist that all teachers have high expectations for all students and assess teachers accordingly. Promote and encourage the use of effective and innovative instructional strategies throughout the district that ensure culturally relevant and socially responsive teaching in all classrooms.
- Adopt requirements for continuing education in diversity for continuing employees and new hires. Partner with university teacher education programs and sponsor Diversity Institutes for Professional Development and continuing education credit. Provide the pedagogical retooling, management retraining and prejudice reduction workshops necessary to implement these changes.

- Involve African-American parents and community groups.
- Initiate a major and sustained effort to increase the number of educators of color.

Sexual Behavior and Health

- Develop peer education programs and confidential adult-facilitated groups through which to address sexual issues, sexual values, contraception, and the effects of sexually transmitted infections (STI), HIV, and teen pregnancy on the lives of African-American teens.
- Develop educational programs for parents of teens that emphasize how to discuss openly sexual issues, sexual values, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, relationships and family life issues, and to help adult men develop positive communication patterns with teens, especially daughters.

Recreation

- Develop an extensive menu of community-based, age-appropriate recreational and social activity programs for African-American youth throughout the Louisville MSA.

Juvenile Justice, Crime and Delinquency Prevention

- Develop and implement specific initiatives to address juvenile crime, delinquency and drug use. The emphasis should be on justice, prevention and diversion.
- The local community — through its elected civic, business, educational and religious leaders - must support a thorough restructuring of the local police department and criminal justice system. This process must emphasize: on-going diversity training for police and officials of the justice system; accountability standards that "make sense" to all segments of the community; creation of a viable civilian review board; treating juvenile offenders as juveniles; education and work programs for young offenders; and expanded drug education and treatment, as needed.

Community Support Structure

- Develop and implement community-based weekend and after school programs both to promote cultural education and to supplement enrich the quality of instruction received by African American youth in the local public and private schools.
- Develop and implement through local colleges and universities a network of "talent identification" and "talent development" programs for African-American elementary, middle and high school students. These programs would link youth with older students and university faculty and staff — for the purpose of mentoring and preparing youth for higher education.

Youth Employment

- Employ African-American youth, particularly economically disadvantaged youth, to staff the educational programs above along with programs based in community centers, community social service agencies and civil rights organizations, extended school programs, services for seniors and pre-schoolers. The ultimate purpose would be to provide role models, mentoring and alternative sources of income.

Community Commitment and Support

- Implement a modest increase in City/County taxes to create a "Community Fund" to support such initiatives as an investment in the development of the human infrastructure of the local community. Private funds would also be welcomed.

On-Going Research and Monitoring

Continue on-going monitoring and research. Future studies should build on and extend the base established by this preliminary investigation. Such studies should monitor changes in crucial indicators and focus, perhaps, more narrowly; for example, on juvenile crime and justice issues, sexuality, education, employment, poverty and other appropriate topics.