

The Problem with Black & Brown Boys

Look at what we've done!



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As a man of faith invested in the well-being of African-American and Hispanic boys and young men, I believe that we can solve the epidemic of youth violence across the country. I believe that as a society, we can collectively develop a plan to serve young people in a way that drastically reduces violence, and more specifically homicides that steal the purpose of black and brown boys in large numbers. But the problem with black and brown boys is that society has been indecisive about the root causes of violence. For some, the problem centers around the varied social and systemic issues that have failed our youth – environmental conditions. However, for far too many, there is an implicit belief that something is inherently wrong with black and brown youth. You will rarely hear someone come out and explicitly say that young black and brown boys are born violent, but you just have to listen closely, and you will hear it. When adults say things like *there is something wrong with this generation, why are they so angry...* in my book that equates to a certain level of acceptance that something is inherently wrong with our young men. To identify sustainable solutions to end what should be viewed as a public health crisis, as a society we must get on the same page about the causes of youth violence. For anyone who has embraced the idea that black and brown boys are inherently violent, this is essentially a question for God to answer. If God is no longer perfect in all his creations, then we need to seek answers from heaven. But let us go ahead and dismiss this ridiculous idea because we understand the beauty of every child that God breathes life into. Every child is born with a great purpose and a destiny to positively impact their families, communities, and the world. So, the problem with black and brown boys is not who they are when entering this world, the problem is directly

connected to the environmental conditions that fail to nurture young minds, gifts and hope. There is a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that I live by to replenish my perspective about young people when needed that is forever applicable – *“The Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand, it seeks to change the environmental conditions so the soul will have a chance to survive after it is changed.”* This quote reminds me of how deeply important it is to help young people understand that they were created on purpose for a special purpose. But then we must make sure that the environment that surrounds them helps to reinforce the idea of access to a purposeful life.



The Spirit of Trauma is a Don't Die Young campaign that is proposing a theory that trauma attempts to disconnect black and brown boys from hope. When exploring the issues that lead to youth violence, there is typically some discussion about the role of trauma. Researchers, youth advocates, educators, psychologists, and other practitioners understand that trauma in any form can be deeply distressing for the person impacted. We look at racism, poverty, exposure to violence, poor education, family dysfunction, and others forms of trauma that impact young lives. But do we give black and brown boys the right to be deeply distressed by their circle of trauma that can be consuming – the answer is No! An important aspect of any youth violence prevention plan must include an acceptance that young people have been deeply distressed or deeply discouraged by trauma. Starting with this premise that trauma discourages young people establishes a foundation to build on in serving them. When we find ourselves discouraged or feeling hopeless as human-beings, we find comfort in connecting with something of a spiritual nature. Whether it's connecting with the creator overtly through prayer or more subtly via activities such as meditation, we seek spiritual comfort to protect ourselves emotionally. I do believe in the importance of counseling to address our emotional or mental health, but I believe that our spiritual well-being is paramount. Trauma knows that if it can disconnect us from spiritual comfort, our emotional or mental health can be more easily compromised. So, what we are experiencing with violence among black and brown boys across the United States is a result of environmental conditions causing trauma that plays out in frustration and anger. Feeling

marginalized and disrespected has caused young men to find value in themselves by adopting a mindset that is contrary to who they are. Just imagine the emotional burden of being a spiritual creation and being disconnected from your source of peace that offers optimism and a sense that you were created for something special. Now, the question is how do we move forward in addressing the issues related to young violence among black and brown boys and young men? I would propose that there needs to be a comprehensive national plan that first starts with a heightened trauma-informed perspective about youth. If we continue to be disgruntled with our young men and being even remotely dismissive of their trauma, then there will always be a lack of critical insight in serving them. It's nearly impossible to influence someone towards positive change if they sense an absence of genuine love and optimism for their well-being. Lastly, in addition to addressing the environmental conditions that discourage young people via policy reform and access to important services, we have to figure out how to begin encouraging the souls (thoughts, feelings & emotions) of black and brown boys and young men. If we view youth violence as a public health issue then there needs to be a commitment to information and messages of hope that at the very least conveys to youth that we care. If we accept that trauma can be deeply distressing, then we need to counter this trauma with information and messages that are deeply encouraging.