

## SECTION VI



## GENDER ISSUES AND DISPARITIES

## SECTION VI: FOCUS AREA - GENDER ISSUES AND DISPARITIES

When describing the overall conditions for the black community, many respondents indicated that Black females and males had specific challenges. There is inadequate data for many critical measures of gender-specific well being; therefore, this section leans heavily on the insight of interviewees and available data.

### Males

When asked to assess the conditions for African Americans in Ohio, some respondents cited the lack of educational achievement for African American males and the inefficient channels available to advance positive outcomes for males. Conversely, another respondent commented that, *“Columbus is an open-minded city as any...Hindrances for African American males are as few here as they are anywhere.”* Questions addressing the strengths, achievements, and opportunities available for African Americans frequently yielded responses that targeted a significant number of males holding important leadership positions in the State of Ohio. Respondents cited the achievements of black males holding leadership positions (i.e., Mayor, Senator, etc.) in cities like Columbus as a noteworthy accomplishment. Other respondents listed the efforts of C.J. Prentiss, Special Education Advisor to Governor Ted Strickland, to close the achievement gap and increase the graduation rates of students with a special focus on African American males as a valuable asset for the State.

Several themes emerged from conversations about what challenges are facing African American males. Key issue areas included educational and employment constraints, health care disparities, and personal development issues, as illustrated by the interview quotes below:

*“Higher education enrollment [is] still lacking for African American males.”*

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*“In Columbus there are more jobs. Traditionally in Ohio there were manufacturing jobs, and they are not there anymore. There are no opportunities in the Northeast and Northwest Ohio. I’m from Northeast Ohio, so I know there are no opportunities.”*

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*“We haven’t had enough conversations on how we build manhood and how we define it. This is one of our biggest challenges. And, not just how we build men collectively but how do we build men individually. This is a very scary thing. We need these conversations and we also need to discuss how we do this for women also.”*

Overwhelmingly, respondents viewed the number of black males entering into the prison system as a major challenge for the African American community. One respondent said that *“this needs to be the primary goal of the Commission of African American Males”* and, as another respondent said, *“it is hard for men with felonies to get out of jail and find employment. How many men are in jail because of drug charges, not violent crimes? ... Even the ‘victimless’ employers just see the criminal record, and that makes it difficult for these people to turn their lives around and become taxpayers.”*

As one respondent noted, *“the cradle to prison pipeline is ominous for black males trapped in poverty.”* As another said, the disproportionate imprisonment of black men and the resultant loss of the father

from the family is *“a challenge for youth...no matter what your race. If there is not that strong base in the family, that poses a big challenge.”* Younger black males are also impacted by the juvenile justice system. As another respondent noted, *“of the kids in the juvenile detention center/court system, 61% of those in the system are black boys, though they are only 11% of the population, and 3% in terms of teenagers. It’s disproportional.”* Respondents also voiced concerns about the number of youth entering into the prison or juvenile system because of factors in the school system. Several research studies have shown that there is a relationship between suspension and expulsion rates leading to youth imprisonment. In Ohio, during the school years of 2000-2007, black students received considerably higher school disciplinary actions (per 100 students) than other racial and ethnic groups.

Research supports respondents’ concerns for the high number of males entering into the prison system. Although blacks in 2007 had the second highest number of individuals in the prison system at 47.4%, whites had the highest number of members currently imprisoned at 49.7%. This number is extremely high considering the proportion of blacks in Ohio (11.5%) compared to whites (85.0%).

Several respondents indicated that the African American Male Initiative is a significant strength for the State of Ohio. One respondent suggests that the initiative should be expanded, *“to assist ex-offenders integrate back into society, especially through work.”*

Some additional responses needed to address the challenges center around the differential treatment between black and white males. As one respondent said,

*“Two black guys and one white guy, all brought up on traffic violations, all three found with drugs, and the white guy got the lesser charge....The prosecutor has to make sure that laws are being fairly applied, and State Attorney General same thing. If you do wrong, you do wrong, but shouldn’t be a greater penalty if you are black.”*

The sentencing disparity between blacks and whites in Ohio has been well documented. An October 2008 investigative report in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* found that *“since 2000, a black person has been 12.7 times more likely than a white person to be sent to a state prison from Cuyahoga County on drug charges.”*<sup>207</sup>

Respondents offered a range of programs or initiatives that may benefit African American males. These included the IMPACT program, the African American Male Initiative, and apprenticeship programs that provide fathers an avenue through which to establish a steady income for their families. *“Fatherhood initiatives to improve children would correct a whole lot of issues.”* One respondent positively reviewed Project Mentor, a program that unites Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Central Ohio and Columbus City Schools in an effort to boost high school graduation rates.

*“I think Project Mentor is a good program. I also think the West Coast has a lot of good programs. Ohio needs to look to the West Coast to model some of their programs. One exceptional program in the West is AVID. The Governor’s program had remarkable results in terms of ninth grade boys moving to tenth grade.”*

## Females

Respondents often called out the challenges of single parenting:

*“the masses are not doing well, especially single, female-headed households. Poverty in this household is a problem because there is one income, and this impacts the development and growth of children and families as a whole.”*

In Ohio, 39% of African American families are headed by single mothers.<sup>208</sup> Many respondents pointed to challenges for these families. As one interviewee explained:

*“Let me give you some background...many black children are born to single mothers. That has to change. I was talking with a young mother recently having trouble with her 14-year-old son. Teenage boys are going to challenge; if there’s no alpha male in the house, they get more challenging to the female head of the house...Those mothers are more likely to live in poverty, in minimum wage jobs, have more than one job, so those children’s opportunities are impacted.”*

Other challenges that black women who have children face are low birth weight babies and high infant mortality rates. Black women have the highest number of low birth weight babies among all racial groups (roughly twice the rate of any other group). Two factors that may contribute to the high number of low birth weights in the African American population are teenage pregnancy and the lack of prenatal care for mothers. Current research results show that Blacks have the second highest number of teenage births (77%) in comparison to whites (31%), Asians (19%), and Latinos (86%). In 2006, Black women were found to have the highest percentage of mothers not receiving prenatal care (5.8%) compared to Latinos (4.2%), Asians (3.0%), and Whites (1.9%).<sup>209</sup> Similarly, black women in 1997 and 2006 had the highest infant mortality rate of all racial groups. Black women were also the only group to show no decrease in infant mortality rates from 1997 to 2006.

These challenging circumstances are exacerbated by Ohio’s gender wage gap. One interviewee said that *“black females are getting jobs, but they are paid disproportionately to male workers.”* This observation is empirically correct: in 2000, Ohio’s African American women earned 87% of what their male counterparts made, earning \$10.00 per hour compared to black men’s median hourly wage of \$11.44.<sup>210</sup>

Some respondents suggested changes to current initiatives and programs in Ohio. As one respondent said,

*“A lot of our people are locked into the old welfare system (TANF). That whole program needs to be restructured to be family- focused so we are not just giving people money and to get a job, but helping the whole family. Children Services and Job and Family Services should be merged to strengthen the family as a unit.”*

Other respondents indicated that it was critical to develop policy support for women and families as well as for males, and that Black women’s leadership capacities were unfairly constrained.

*“There is an African American Male Initiative, in full support, but I also think there needs to be recognition that the children that are the recipients of these programs are being led by women, and they need a lot of support to get the children raised to successful adulthood.”*

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*“Black women are holding up a lot of the family structure within Ohio; it is almost a given that this is what it’s supposed to be.”*

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*"I think it's hard to emerge into a leadership position...if you don't have the right 'image.' If you don't have the right image, despite your confidence and intelligence you are least likely to have a mentor...Politics equals image, and if you don't have the right image, you won't be mentored. A woman won't be mentored to go further because she's a woman. She doesn't fit the right image."*