

Seeking Solutions to



DO BLACK YOUTH NEED WHITE VALUES?

By Khalil G. Muhammad

Recently I showed my college students a YouTube clip of Bill Cosby's and Alvin Poussaint's appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." After hearing Cosby plead for poor blacks to embrace their parenting responsibilities, many of the students said they wished their parents had followed his advice. They regretted that some of their peers had done poorly in school, abused drugs and alcohol and run afoul of the law. These problems, they agreed, might have been avoided with more supervision at home.

They might have been the perfect audience for a Cosby town hall lecture on the dangers of self-destructive values in black America. They might also have been perfect illustrations of the growing "values gap" between poor and middle-class blacks described in a widely cited recent Pew Research Center poll.

Except almost all my students are white.

Cosby and the recent Pew study are the latest in a long finger-wagging tradition of instructing poor blacks to lift themselves up by their bootstraps and reject pathologically "black" values. Today, rap culture is usually presented as Exhibit A, but strains of the same argument have cropped up for more than a century. If blacks would just get their act together, this old story goes, all the social inequalities between them and the rest of society would disappear.

In its coverage of the Pew report findings, National Public Radio asked whether some blacks were lagging be-



hind because they were choosing not to become "closer to whites in their values." Unfortunately, this line of questioning reinforces one of the most persistent myths in America, that white is always right. The myth reflects an enduring double standard based on "white" and "black" explanations for social problems. And it assumes that "white" culture is the gold standard for judging everyone, despite its competing ideologies, its contradictions and its flaws, including racism.

The masquerade began over 100 years ago. Shortly after the end of slavery, sociologists and demographers began presenting research on black failure and struggle as "indisputable" proof of black inferiority. One of the first studies was released in 1896, when the leading race-relations demographer of the period, Frederick L. Hoffman, analyzed census data showing that blacks were doing worse than whites in mortality, health, employ-

ment, education and crime. The problem was not racism, he argued, but "race traits and tendencies."

To him, the civil rights acts of the 1860s and 1870s had leveled the playing field. Blacks should be left to compete against whites on their own and face the inevitable. The black man, he wrote, "has usually but one avenue out of his dilemma — the road to prison or to an early grave."

As segregation took hold, there was a powerful need to minimize the role of racism as a factor in explaining racial disparities. The "Cosby" role at the start of Jim Crow was first played by Booker T. Washington. Counseling blacks to conquer their inferiority, he repudiated civil rights activism in favor of self-help and moral regeneration.

Many whites loved Washington, and his ideas were echoed by liberal social scientists such as the psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who instructed black people to stop sympathizing "with their own criminals" and "accept without whining patheticism and corroding self-pity [their] present situation, prejudice and all."

But when Hall turned his focus on whites, his research on adolescent psychology directly influenced national efforts to protect them from the ravages of industrial capitalism. Drawing on his work, the child welfare activist Jane Addams established Hull House in Chicago at first to help immigrant families adjust to American life and later to save thousands of Chicago's white youth from lives of crime, violence and drug abuse attributed to "modern city conditions." But black children were not generally welcome at Hull House. Addams claimed that similar problems among black youth were due to the race's "belated" moral development, manifested in poor parenting and a lack of "social restraint."

The pioneering black social scientist W.E.B. Du Bois challenged this first generation of white liberals and social scientists, including Hoffman, on the flawed assumptions and racial double standards in their studies and in their practices. But when Du Bois tried to argue that pathology knows no color, he was ignored, criticized and dismissed by his white peers as

an angry black man with, as one sociologist put it, a "chip on his shoulder."

In today's era of hip-hop, Du Bois's warning still goes unheeded. If rap music is so bad, why are white kids its major consumers? And by what value system should we judge the large media companies that publish and distribute hip-hop — or, really, gangsta rap, its most popular and sinister cousin?

Were "white values" on display two years ago when the federal government failed to adequately respond to one of the greatest natural disasters in American history?

If lower-class "black" values are so distinct from those of the rest of America, particularly the "white values" supposedly now embraced by middle- and upper-class blacks, why, according to the Pew report, do less than a third of white Americans graduate from college? Are legions of whites similarly devaluing higher education? Are they "acting black"?

If lower-class black values are so peculiar, why do whites report the same or higher levels of illegal drug use as blacks, as numerous studies show?

Today's liberals still empathize with America's invisible white working poor, who they warn are being "nickel and dimed" to the point of near homelessness. But why the empathy? Isn't their poverty really a function of their choosing to embrace their hidden blackness?

If we insist on explaining racial disparities in terms of black vs. white values, then we need to explain what exactly white values are. When we do, we'll find that whiteness is an inadequate standard by which to judge good black people vs. bad ones.

As my students would tell you, the real white world is as pathological, as respectable and as diverse as the black one.

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What's working: solving truancy

By Globe Staff

Many studies have tied the beginning of youth delinquency, which ultimately leads to violence, to truancy. The reasons students fail to attend school are multifaceted and complex. Causes can occur at the individual, family, school and community levels.

Students may skip school because of school phobia, learning disabilities or difficulty getting along with other students or the teacher.

Families may have chaotic living situations or parents may have poor parenting skills that affect their ability to monitor and encourage their child's school attendance.

Important school factors affecting truancy rates include problems with bullying and teaching methods perceived as boring by students.

Communities that don't feel safe to students traveling to and from school and those that fail to have court procedures that promptly enforce the legal consequences of truant acts are other potential contributing factors.

Because the causes of truancy are numerous and occur in multiple contexts, it's important that solutions to this complex issue employ a variety of strategies that target a number of different influences and work to impact several levels.

The University of Wisconsin

conducted a comprehensive study into several programs that work with youth and published a "what works" guide on youth development. One of the highlighted programs focused on effective truancy. The report listed the following tenants as effective in combating truancy:

- Families, schools and communities need to work together to set rules for school attendance and to enforce the rules quickly and consistently.
- There must be a seamless system in which the adults in a child's life agree on expectations and rules and back each other up.
- There will be higher compliance if all parties perceive rules as fair and fairly enforced. Involving youth, parents and teachers in the development of rules and procedures is one way to achieve consensus on fair rules.
- The consequences for truancy need to be quickly and consistently enforced. To be effective, consequences will need to be carried out for the first instance of truancy and the 40th instance.
- Sanctions for truancy that increase school absence are counterproductive. Out-of-school suspensions or juvenile detention placements that remove students from educational settings are likely to decrease school engagement and make it less likely students will achieve school success when they return. Such strategies

Most common characteristics of Richmond homicides, 2005 and 2006

	Most Common Characteristics 2005	Percent of Known Total	Most Common Characteristics 2006	Percent of Known Total
Victim				
Gender	Male	92.5%	Male	85.7%
Race	African American	75.7%	African American	69.2%
Age (Years)	18 to 24	36.8%	25 to 34	31.0%
Time, Location, Method				
Month	June	25.0%	May, September, October	14.3%
Time of Day	8:00 PM-12:00 AM	30%	8:00 PM-10:00 PM	21.4%
Police Beat	3	32.5%	3	26.2%
Neighborhood	Iron Triangle	25.6%	Iron Triangle	36.7%
Total Homicides	40		42	

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should not be imposed as a response to truancy.

- Each group of adults accountable for monitoring and enforcing school attendance rules needs the tools necessary to do so. For example, parents must actually receive notification of children's absences and they must have access to a responsive school staff member who can answer questions and provide help obtaining needed services. Police who are charged with checking for truant students need information that will enable them to do so effectively.

We might assume that if weaker sanctions don't work, the answer would be to simply use stronger ones. But, in the case of truancy, this hasn't proven to be effective. Experiments in which parents were denied welfare benefits and programs where police were sent to the homes of truant children increased, rather than decreased, the incidence of truancy. Using strong sanctions like secure detention for truant youth makes it harder for students to return to and succeed in formal schooling. As a general rule, incentives (not rules and sanctions) are what is needed to encourage positive behavior. ©

Unmistakable death

A poem by a resident of Alameda County's Juvenile Hall

By Mark, NAM/The Beat Within

People dying left and right
 Women raped in the wretched night
 Children cry and hide under the bed
 Hoping they don't catch a bullet to the head
 I can't even imagine how they feel
 But don't deny what's really real
 People scared to go down the street
 To get some food so their family can eat
 To live in fear with each passing minute
 If we have to kill, I don't want to win it
 Accidents happen, people pass all the time
 Two people die every blink of the eye
 So why must we fight and take our lives
 All he wanted to do was make it home to his wife
 Just because the color of his flesh
 Now he's just a photo on his mother's shelf
 You can't erase what happened or raise the dead
 A kid caught in the crossfire returning home from buying bread
 One to the head, three the chest
 Now six feet underground, maggots infest
 I've seen so many faces consumed by the torment
 Tears mired in the blood's raging current
 How come death only is taken seriously
 Only when it happens to someone close, like family
 Or maybe a friend, but never a stranger
 It makes me sick and fills me with anger. ©



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