

Capable Guardians

Felton Earls, M.D., HSPH Professor Emeritus of Human Behavior and Development

We, HSPH students and faculty, are living in a nation that is not flourishing. To quote Martin Luther King, “We may have come in different ships, but we are now in the same boat.” American democracy is slipping away; eroding in front of us. The most flagrant instance of this impairment is manifest in the lives of African American boys and men. The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner escalate this crisis from one of everyday complacency to collective outrage.

To participate in the two “listening” events during the week of December 7th was revelatory for me. It means that many of us are awake. “Enough is Enough” makes a moral contribution to HSPH in its 101st year. Now that we have been heard, what intelligence will we demonstrate in responding to the urgency of renovating policing in the African American community and connecting this to the broader issue of race relations and the commons. The goal of advancing the health and well being of the public is stifled in the context of a crippled democracy. Together with public health agents, our police should be capable guardians of society. By vigorously responding to the crisis of African American communities, we improve the lives of all sharing the “same boat.”

There a number of ways our School can seize the moral imperative presented by “Enough.” My own research on collective efficacy is relevant.^{1, 2} I am also impressed with the Philadelphia experiment on community policing³ and the efforts of its investigators, as criminologists, to collaborate with public health authorities.⁴

We know all too well the dire circumstances faced by African boys and

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young men. Excluded, feared, and discriminated against, the solution to improving their chances in this society requires a sustained, heavy investment. And it should be guided by the best research we can do. An example of this is demonstrated in the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) project. MTO is a randomized experiment in which predominantly African American families residing in public housing receive vouchers that subsidize their moving to better neighborhoods. Ongoing analysis examining the impact of relocation shows that it benefits the mental health of girls, but harms boys.⁵ That's right; the mental health of boys is worsened. We do not have a satisfying explanation for this harmful effect, but it clearly underscores the vulnerability of African American boys. The MTO also illustrate the importance of carefully evaluating the most well intentioned programs and policies.

There is a 100-year gap between Emancipation and passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It has been 50 years since that legislation was authorized. Take a look at a 3 minute video to be reminded of this recent history.⁶ Today, events in Ferguson and Staten Island provoke a profound question. What will our democracy look like 50 years from now? Whatever the answer, we can be certain that HSPH's actions or inactions will be part of the outcome.

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