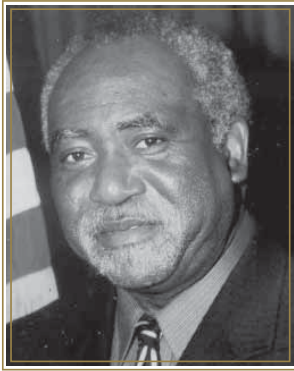


# YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AT THE CROSSROADS

by Representative Danny K. Davis



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Whether it is just a happy coincidence or inevitable destiny that this issue of FOCUS, published on the heels of Senator Barack Obama's address to the nation on race, is devoted to assessing the prospects for America's youth – especially young African American males – it is, nevertheless, timely and fortuitous. It is long past time that the crisis facing young African American males receives a level of attention proportionate to its urgency.

Statistics gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Urban League, and studies by leading universities, including Columbia, Princeton and Harvard, confirm that young African American males are more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be imprisoned, more likely to be victims of homicide, more likely to have dropped out of school, more likely to have fathered a child out of wedlock, more likely to have been placed in a class for students with learning disabilities, more likely to have been suspended from school, and more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS.

Significant remnants of the legacy of slavery and social, economic and political discrimination still pervade American society today. They are especially notable

and visible in the criminal justice system where seven times as many African Americans than whites are in prison. Overall, it is clear that young black males must deal with a complex set of obstacles in school, at work and in the community. What is much less clear is how best to erase these obstacles.

I believe that there are two key features in responding to this epochal challenge. First is clearly identifying and removing or minimizing the obstacles and second is empowering those facing the obstacles to successfully confront them. Let me offer the recently passed Second Chance Act as a case study.

The U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice, said in November of 2000 that "[t]here are virtually no systematic, comprehensive approaches to dealing with reintegrating ex-offenders." The problem of successfully reintegrating ex-offenders back into normal life is one of the major issues facing low-income and minority communities throughout the nation.

It is a serious public safety issue that requires serious public attention. While 5 percent of the world's population lives in the United States, 25 percent of the world's prison population are in United States' jails and prisons. Nationally, the Justice Department reports that there are now over 2 million people in state and federal prisons, more than a threefold increase since 1980.

In America, the poor and people of color are more likely to be incarcerated. Fifty-three percent of people warehoused in our nation's prisons earned less than \$10,000 a year prior to incarceration. Studies indicate that the median education level of released prisoners is 11th grade. In addition, three-fourths of those reentering prison have a history of substance abuse. Not surprisingly, 16 percent suffer from mental illness.

As our nation's prison population

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## REMEMBERING DR. KING

While the 40th anniversary of the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. evokes deeply troubling memories, it also serves as an important milestone in assessing the progress this nation has made and how far we must yet go to transform America.

For many people, the passing of four decades has not diminished the memory of how difficult and uncertain those times were. In my hometown of Orangeburg, South Carolina, the tragic and untimely death of Dr. King intensified the sense of despair and unease that many of us already felt after the February 8, 1968, shooting by law enforcement officers of three unarmed students, including my high school classmate Delano Middleton, during a protest at South Carolina State College against a segregated bowling alley. This became known as the Orangeburg Massacre.

In those dark days we wondered, how would the dream survive without Dr. King to lead us toward the Promised Land?

But history records that sadness and anxiety gave way to determination and action. Dr. King's spirit continued to guide the movement as African Americans began to concentrate on the everyday task of translating hard won rights into representation and influence in our system of governance. Today, we honor Dr. King for his bequest of a legacy and a dream that did not die with him, but rather has served as a lodestar for all that has been accomplished since the tragic day of his assassination.

We also recognize there is much to be done – just as Dr. King did when, in the wake of historic gains in civil and voting rights, he sought to direct our attention to the need for fundamental changes in the political and economic life of the nation, so that justice could truly prevail and opportunity could flow to every American. On this day and in his memory, let us commemorate Dr. King's vision and, at the same time, invigorate ourselves with resolve and forbearance to make his dream a reality from sea to shining sea.

Ralph B. Everett

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explodes and prison operating costs skyrocket, little is done to prepare these adults for re-entry. There is a shortage of vocational, educational and substance abuse programs in prison. According to the Sentencing Project, more than 100,000 prisoners are being released each year without any form of community correctional supervision.

This year, more than 600,000 people will leave prison and return to neighborhoods across the country. According to the Justice Department, 62 percent of those released from state prisons will be rearrested within three years, and 40 percent will be re-incarcerated, including many for technical violations of parole. Ex-offenders who are truly interested in reintegrating back into community life – interested in finding employment and taking care of themselves and their families, locating housing, going to school – oftentimes have no place to go. There are very few second chances.

Neighborhoods across the nation are absorbing the economic and social costs of reintegrating hundreds of thousands of ex-offenders back into society each year. As we seek ways to seriously reduce crime and recidivism by providing opportunities for these individuals to become self-sufficient, learn a trade, develop a skill, go to school, and get a job, not only are we helping them, but we are in reality helping all of America. Individuals ought to be able to develop to the extent that when they leave a correctional facility they are in better shape than they were when they first entered the facility.

The Second Chance Act authorizes \$165 million each year to fund pilot projects to provide education and drug treatment in prison and assistance with housing, employment and family issues after release. These dollars will be leveraged in some cases with matching grants from state and local governments. Participating state and local governments will establish re-entry task forces with key stakeholders and state and local re-entry courts, similar to those established for non-violent drug offenders, to monitor ex-offenders and provide access to re-entry services and programs.

In the end, however, it is not about the relatively modest sum of money. It is about forcing our society to take a hard look at what's going on. We are engaged in a self-destructive cycle of mass imprisonment which is destroying our youth, undermining our communities and consuming limited resources. The signing of the Second Chance Act signals the beginning of a serious reexamination of the social and economic underpinnings of what some have described as a prison-industrial complex.

Members of the Congressional Black Caucus and other legislators, community activists, ex-offenders and an extraordinary array of organizations committed to seeking justice and equality came together in a multi-year process to identify critical issues and responses and to press for meaningful legislative reforms. We found that young people, especially young African Americans, were eager to participate and take on leadership. That's not unique. According to the Pew-funded National Civic and Political Health Survey, young African Americans are the most politically engaged racial/ethnic group. The survey also found that those who participate are better informed. A Joint Center survey conducted last year in cooperation with the AARP yielded similar findings.

Today's young activists have the advantage of standing on the shoulders of giants. Standing at the edge of a crossroads of history, they can see deep into the future and discern where they want our nation to go. The path ahead, like the road behind, will be neither straight nor easy. What seems certain is that with the energy and determination of a new generation, this year we have the potential to choose a new direction. Having chosen that direction, the energy and determination of this generation will help determine if we will continue steadfastly along that path or allow the pressures of the past to cause us to lose our way once again. □

*Danny K. Davis served on the Chicago City Council and Cook County Board of Commissioners before his election to Congress in 1994. Prior to seeking public office he was an educator, community organizer, and health planner/administrator.*

## REMEMBERING ROBERT F. KENNEDY

On the night of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, campaigning for the Democratic nomination for president, was scheduled to speak at a rally in Indianapolis. After learning of Dr. King's assassination, he threw away his prepared text and spoke briefly and extemporaneously to the crowd of more than 4,000, most of whom were not yet aware of the tragedy in Memphis.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. "I am only going to talk to you just for a minute or so this evening because...I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world. Dr. Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight."

Pausing to allow the crowd to recover from its shock, Kennedy continued:

"Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice...and he died because of that effort...For those of you who are black and tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act...I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed...by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States...to understand, to go beyond these...difficult times.

"My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: 'In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.'"

Two months later, Senator Kennedy was dead, victim of an assassin's bullet. Coming in the wake of Dr. King's assassination, the despair of the moment was almost unbearable.

We've come a long way since that terrible spring 40 years ago, but we still have so far to go. Perhaps the best way to honor Senator Kennedy's life is to remember and heed his concluding words on that dark night in early April 1968:

"Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of men and to make gentle the life of the world."

Michael R. Wenger