Real Solutions for Black Americans

By: Michael Tennant – November 21, 2013

Despite decades of government interventions ostensibly designed to improve the plight of people of color, a significant percentage of black Americans remains mired in poverty, joblessness, welfare dependence, and hopelessness. By many measures — crime, illegitimacy, and unemployment rates, to name just a few — blacks are worse off now than they were before government began "helping" them. (See "Do Progressive Policies Hurt Black Americans?")

Anyone suggesting, therefore, that the myriad problems facing blacks — and, to a lesser but increasing extent, whites — can be solved by more of the same failed policies either is willfully ignorant of the results of those policies or simply refuses to accept the facts that are staring him in the face.

What, then, is to be done? Clearly, a radical rethinking of America's approach to improving the lives of blacks is in order.

Education

There is no question that poverty is a huge problem for black Americans, and one of the best ways to escape poverty is to get a good education, something that has become increasingly difficult for poor blacks to do.

"If I were the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and I wanted to sabotage any opportunity for black academic excellence, I could not think of a better means for doing so than the public education establishment in most of our cities," George Mason University economics professor Walter E. Williams has stated on numerous occasions.

Dominated by teachers' unions, top-heavy with bureaucracy, and driven by an ideology that deems *Heather Has Two Mommies* and "climate change" more worthy of precious classroom time than the "three R's," today's public school system isn't just lousy; it's perverse.

Add in the poor discipline in most urban schools, and it's no surprise that blacks generally perform poorly in school. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that the average black 12th-grader scores at the same level as the average white seventh- or eighth-grader on standardized tests — and that's assuming the black student makes it to 12th grade. In reality, nearly half of blacks drop out of school. Those who do finish high school often get accepted to colleges and universities under affirmative action programs that virtually ensure their failure by admitting them to institutions

where they cannot compete. (See "Affirmative Action Assumptions")

How do we get schools to perform up to expectations so that blacks will stand a good chance of success?

"One of the most important things is that people become aware of the education problem," Williams, a black man who grew up in a Philadelphia housing project, said in an interview with *The New American*. Blacks, in particular, are getting a "grossly fraudulent education," he charged, yet most parents — both black and white — seem to be completely oblivious to the failure of the schools.

If Americans were truly aware of the depths to which the public school system has sunk, Williams argued, they would demand changes to it. The biggest change that he believes is needed is the introduction of greater competition into the system, which is dominated by the government-school near-monopoly.

The Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, a black man who spent his formative years on a plantation in the Jim Crow South, agrees. "We've got to bring competition" to the educational system, Peterson, founder and president of the Los Angeles-based Brotherhood Organization of a New Destiny (BOND), told *The New American*. "We must bring that in if we want to see the public schools change at all. Otherwise, they're not going to change."

Peterson called for "more homeschool, private Christian schools, or private schools" — educational settings that, in general, produce better-educated students at lower costs.

He and Williams both recommended various school-choice initiatives as ways to introduce competition and enable parents to explore these other options without having to pay twice — once for public schools that they aren't using and again for the schools that they are. (While well-intended, these initiatives must be carefully considered because some, such as vouchers, carry with them the potential for government control of private schools.) The problem, Peterson noted, is that those favoring such policies face an uphill battle against entrenched interests: teachers' unions, liberal politicians, and self-appointed black leaders, many of whom, like President Barack Obama, send their own children to private schools.

Of course, the ideal would be to abolish public schools completely and let the free market supply an abundance of educational options to parents at affordable prices just as it supplies so many other necessities. This would benefit blacks at least as much as whites, for as Williams observed in a 1999 appearance at the Independent Institute:

If you look for black academic excellence, in poor neighborhoods, you see it in black owned and operated schools such as Marva Collins School in Cincinnati and Chicago... , the Marcus Garvey School … in the so-called troubled section of Los Angeles. I've been to the schools I have just mentioned. I have walked through every single classroom and those kids, the black kids at those schools from poor and low

and moderate income families, many female headed households, 85 percent of those kids at each of those schools read at or above, sometimes six years above, grade level....

How is this academic excellence achieved in these schools? The kids come to school sober. They have left their knives and guns at home. [It's] quiet. The kids are in their seat actually looking at the teacher. It's no magic.

For those who fear that shuttering government schools would plunge America into a dark age of illiteracy, let it be known that in the 1850s, prior to the era of widespread public schooling and compulsory education laws, the literacy rate in the United States was over 90 percent. Today it stands at 86 percent, with 21 percent of adults reading below a fifth-grade level and 19 percent of high-school graduates unable to read at all.

As long as public schools are with us, however, there are things that can be done to improve them.

Number one on the list is to abolish the U.S. Department of Education and all other federal education programs, all of which are unconstitutional and a waste of taxpayers' money. They also centralize control of schooling in Washington, where such horrors as the No Child Left Behind Act, Common Core, and student data-mining can be foisted on the populace. (See the August 19, 2013, "Common Core" issue of *The New American*.)

Second, states, colleges and universities, and local school districts should require much more of teachers. Education majors have the lowest entrance-exam scores of all majors in college. Meanwhile, according to the American Enterprise Institute, they generally breeze through college with little effort because of grade inflation and receive overwhelmingly positive evaluations from school administrators once they enter the workforce. States and universities need to demand more rigorous teacher preparation; university administrators should crack down on grade inflation in education departments; and local school districts must perform honest evaluations of teacher performance based on actual classroom results.

Third, schools should enforce strict discipline; students need order and structure to learn. A 2004 study by the nonpartisan organization Public Agenda found that "student discipline and behavior problems are pervasive" in public schools, particularly in urban and impoverished areas, which often have high concentrations of blacks. Here, too, getting the feds out of schools would be of benefit: Obama issued an executive order in 2012 establishing a new bureaucracy to ensure that schools are disciplining students of various racial groups in proportion to each group's size rather than its misbehavior.

Finally, get rid of affirmative action at the college and university level. Black students need to be admitted to schools where they belong on the basis of their preparation and aptitude. Were this the case, many more blacks would graduate than currently do.

Jobs and Entrepreneurship

Even more than schooling, simply getting steady employment is a reasonable guarantor of escaping poverty. "Only 2.6 percent of full-time workers are poor. The 'working poor' are a small minority of the poor population. Even part-time work makes a significant difference. Only 15 percent of part-time workers are poor, compared with 23.9 percent of adults who do not work," the Cato Institute found in 2012.

For those receiving poor educations, getting work at an early age is especially important, said Williams. "Early work experiences," he elaborated, teach youths "things like … you come to work on time, you respect the supervisors, you dress in a certain way." Moreover, when they're "going to rotten schools in the first place," he added, "the only way that they're going to learn something that will make them a more valuable worker in the future is through on-the-job training."

But how can a black teenager with little education and no skills get paying work? His marketable skills are not worth very much to a prospective employer because he cannot produce much, yet the law requires the employer to pay every employee at least $7.25 an hour. Add in other mandated costs such as Social Security and unemployment compensation, and the minimum legal wage comes to $10 or more an hour.

"You put yourself in the place of an employer, and you say, well, it costs him $10 an hour no matter whom he hires," Williams explained. "Does it make sense for him to hire the worker who is so unfortunate so as to have skills that will only enable him to produce $4 worth of value per hour? Most employers will see that as a losing economic proposition and not hire that person."

Repealing the minimum wage and other labor laws that discourage the employment of low-skilled workers would make it possible for many blacks to get their first jobs, where they can gain skills that will enable them to move up to higher-paying jobs and out of poverty.

Another way to encourage employment is to remove barriers to starting and expanding businesses. Governments at all levels have erected a multitude of such barriers, from licensing laws to permit requirements to environmental impact assessments. Even something as simple as cutting hair or giving manicures requires permission from the government — often obtained at considerable expense.

Driving a taxicab, for example, might be a good job for a young man with few marketable skills, but good luck finding such a job. Most major cities severely restrict the number of cabs on the road, and they absolutely forbid anyone to transport passengers at anything less than the city's minimum fares. In New York City, for instance, every cab on the road must have a medallion issued by the city. Because the supply of medallions is so small relative to the demand for taxi services, the medallions can be very expensive to obtain. As Laurence Vance observed in *Future of Freedom*, "These systems discriminate against anyone who is seeking to get into the taxi business but who lacks the necessary tens or in some cases hundreds of thousands of dollars."

In San Francisco, another liberal mecca, Juliet Pries had to spend two years and hundreds of thousands of dollars just to open up an ice cream parlor. "Ms. Pries said she had to endure months of runaround and pay a lawyer to determine whether her location (a former grocery, vacant for years) was eligible to become a restaurant," the *New York Times* reported. "There were permit fees of $20,000; a demand that she create a detailed map of all existing area businesses (the city didn't have one); and an $11,000 charge just to turn on the water."

"Even after she acceded to all the city's demands," the paper added, "her paperwork sat unprocessed for months." All this time "she still had to pay rent and other costs, going deeper into debt each passing month without knowing for sure if she would ever be allowed to open."

Under such conditions, it is amazing that anyone bothers opening up businesses in many locales. Meanwhile, existing businesses in high-tax, high-regulation states such as California and New York are fleeing to low-tax, low-regulation states such as Texas — and taking jobs with them.

Eliminating the many barriers to opening and expanding businesses would go a long way toward stimulating economic growth and lifting blacks out of poverty. Just ask Hong Kong.

As John Stossel reported on ABC's *20/20* some years ago, that tiny island, with no natural resources and a population density 20 times that of resource-rich India, went from being as poor as India to being "amazingly rich" in just a few short decades. How?

"They had the one key ingredient: freedom," Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman told Stossel.

Stossel was able to open his own business in Hong Kong in just one day by filling out a single form that was instantly approved. In India, on the other hand, "You fill out form after form after form, and then you wait … and wait … for days or years, while the bureaucrats debate the merits of your application," Stossel said.

"It's all well-intended: rules to make sure the food's clean, the building's safe. But the result is that so many good ideas die — die as forms bundled and stacked on shelves already cluttered with bundles from other people who are waiting."

The lesson for black (and white) Americans?

"We need the government out of our lives, really, as much as possible," said Peterson. "Let the free market reign."

Welfare

Of course, even in the most prosperous society, there will always be those in need of a helping hand

from time to time. People lose jobs, become disabled, or incur necessary expenses that they simply cannot meet. How should they be helped?

Clearly, the current welfare system, which discourages honest work and encourages irresponsibility, needs to go. And though liberals would argue that anyone who would cut so much as a dime from government transfer programs is a heartless bean counter, Williams says it's the only compassionate thing to do:

I think that the way we treat poor people — we would not treat our own loved ones that way. That is, not many people would say, you know, their 16-year-old daughter makes a mistake and gets pregnant, and the family says, "Okay, here's $500. Come back next week, same time, same place, sit on your a**, watch TV, and we'll give you another $500. And if you have more kids, you make another mistake, you get $700." Anybody we cared about, we would not do that to them.

With millions depending on government handouts, "you can't just end it just like that," Peterson averred. "It would be too much of a shock to them, and they will start a riot." (See Greece for a prime example of this phenomenon.) Instead, he suggested giving welfare recipients a definite deadline after which there will be no more handouts and, in the meantime, making them work for their welfare checks.

One of the ways the private sector could aid in a transition away from the welfare state — and even now can help blacks get off welfare — is to teach people skills that will enable them to get good jobs and to lead responsible, independent lives. Peterson's BOND Leadership Academy for Boys is an excellent example of just such a program. (Like all of BOND's efforts, it is funded entirely by private donations, not taxpayer dollars.)

"At BOND Academy … we're teaching these boys a trade so when they finish high school, if they don't want to go to college, they don't have to," Peterson explained. "They know a trade, they can work with their hands, they'll be able to get a job and keep a roof over their heads, food on the table, educate their families."

What's more, "we're teaching these young black males … how to be responsible, to read and write and work hard and save their money and understand how life works." After nearly 50 years of welfare dependence, he argued, many "black adults need the same thing. They have to be taught now like little children because so many years have gone by where they have not been taught." But if there were no welfare, how would people in need get by?

In the 2012 book *After the Welfare State* — whose title suggests what should be obvious to all, namely that the welfare state is doomed, so we might as well start figuring out how to get along without it — Tom Palmer wrote:

Apologists for the welfare state want us to believe that before the welfare state, there was no provision for those in need, no medical care, no education, no provision for old age, "no welfare." That is not the

case. In fact, in many cases the welfare state simply took over institutions and arrangements that had been created by voluntary associations, and then proceeded to claim credit for them.

In the case of welfare institutions, prior to their displacement by the welfare state, there was a remarkable proliferation of voluntary institutions to help people to deal with the problems of life, from the need for medical care during times of misfortune to a friendly hand up when life had gotten one down. Historians have documented the remarkable story of the "friendly societies" that provided such "mutual aid" before the welfare state crushed them. Such societies provided social solidarity, insurance against misfortune, moral support, and much more, all on a voluntary basis.

In the United States, "only churches rivaled fraternal societies as institutional providers of social welfare before the advent of the welfare state," David Beito noted in another chapter of the book. "In 1920, about eighteen million Americans belonged to fraternal societies, i.e., nearly 30 percent of all adults over age twenty."

Fraternal societies were especially important to immigrants and perhaps even more so to blacks, who were forced to found their own societies since they were generally excluded from those run by whites. As a result, in some cities in the early 20th century, more blacks had life insurance (provided by fraternal orders and other private societies) than native whites, who themselves lagged behind immigrant groups.

"As a social welfare provider," Beito penned, "the fraternal insurance society was not a panacea but, in the context of the time, it did a credible job of fulfilling the needs of members and their families." Moreover, because the society's assistance to members was based on intimate knowledge gained during members' many social interactions, the society was able to know who genuinely needed help and to prevent frivolous claims. The society offered members a route to independence and self-reliance, not permanent dependence.

Government policies seem to be largely at the root of the decline of fraternal societies that began in the 1930s. The Great Depression and the accompanying rise of the welfare state, combined with (in Beito's words) "legal or coercive impediments which constrained fraternal societies from effectively countering new private and governmental competitors," dealt blows to societies from which they could not recover.

If the welfare state and the many restrictive laws were repealed, therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that Americans of all colors and socioeconomic backgrounds would again find voluntary, noncoercive means to survive in difficult times. They might even return to the old-time virtues of thrift, hard work, and self-reliance, making relief much less necessary.

Still, given how many people depend on government handouts these days, the question haunts one's mind: If welfare were abolished, would there be sufficient charity to help those truly in need?

"Without a doubt," Peterson maintained. "This is a great country, it's a giving country, and the churches

were there before the government took over, nonprofits were there before the government took over, and they will be there when the government is gone."

Crime

Blacks are disproportionately both perpetrators and victims of crime. Besides the toll it takes on individuals, the high crime rate in many black neighborhoods retards economic growth in those areas. Who, after all, wants to open a business where it is likely to be vandalized or robbed? Thus, in addition to removing legal impediments to black entrepreneurship, something must be done to make black neighborhoods safe for both individuals and businesses. But what?

In order to answer that question, one must first discern just why crime rates in black neighborhoods are so high.

"It's a complex puzzle," Baylor University professor Byron Johnson told *The New American*. Many of the problems discussed above — poverty, unemployment, poor schooling — play into it, he said. Black teens who drop out of school, for instance, are often running around unsupervised all day long with no one but their peers to guide them.

Another factor often goes unexamined: the loss of Christian faith among black males. The black church, even more so than its white counterpart, is dominated by women, "with men accounting for more than 50 percent of the unchurched Black population," according to Donald Barbera's 2003 book *Black and Not Baptist*.

Although Johnson argued that church attendance isn't the only measure of faith, he added, "I can't imagine that it's not part of the problem that we see." There is a "strong correlation" between faith and criminal behavior, said the author of *More God, Less Crime*. "Religiosity … is inversely related to crime and delinquency."

For blacks, "the majority of those males who do attend church are over 50 or under 15," Barbera wrote. That period between the ages of 15 and 50 is, of course, prime time for committing crime. It's no coincidence, therefore, that Johnson discovered in the course of interviewing numerous prisoners that "they grew up in the church, and then as they entered their teen years, their mothers weren't quite able to drag them to church anymore."

On the other hand, he remarked, "If kids are raised in the church and they stay in the church — even if they come from disadvantaged neighborhoods, they grow up in the projects, but their mom makes sure that they're in church — they're significantly less likely to get arrested and they're significantly less likely to get incarcerated."

Thus, one solution to the crime problem in black neighborhoods is to get more people attending church — not an easy thing to do in an age when Christianity is denigrated in schools, government, and the

media and when there are so many other ways to occupy one's time on Sunday morning. Johnson believes many black churches don't even realize how significant their role in the community is. Perhaps if they did, they would be a bit bolder about reaching out to their neighbors, which in turn might fill more pews.

Another major contributor to crime among blacks is the disintegration of the black family, as evidenced by the fact that 73 percent of black babies are born to unwed mothers, and 66 percent of black children either live in a single-parent family or with neither parent. With black marriage rates at all-time lows and illegitimacy rates at all-time highs, it's no surprise that many of the prisoners Johnson has interviewed never had "an older male role-model figure." In fact, he recalled with a degree of sadness, "a lot of these guys get acquainted with their fathers in prison, and I've interviewed fathers and sons. I've even interviewed father, son, and grandfather before, together for the first time in prison."

Lacking fathers, black boys throw in with gangs in which "going to prison" is "almost a rite of passage," and living past the age of 25 is unexpected, he said.

Mentoring young blacks, especially those with one or both parents behind bars, may be one of the best ways to prevent them from turning to crime as they get older, Johnson asserted. He described one such program that he helped start in Philadelphia in 2000. Amachi, from the Nigerian Ibo word meaning "Who knows but what God has brought us through this child," pairs up children of prisoners with mentors through Big Brothers Big Sisters and black churches. "That proved to be a big deal because people thought, you know, you won't even be able to get people to step up to mentor these kids, but they did step up in big numbers," said Johnson. Today there are 250 such programs in 48 states in partnership with 6,000 churches. And while it may be too early to tell just how successful Amachi is in the long run, it surely can't hurt to have mentored over 100,000 kids who might otherwise have been left to their own devices.

Johnson believes mentoring is also a key ingredient in reducing prison recidivism. While there's much to be said for a religious conversion in prison, most of the time that simply isn't enough, he averred. Inmates "need a mentor," he argued, especially since many of them grew up fatherless. What's more, they need mentoring after they get out of prison.

"I think most guys when they're in prison, when they get out they want to do the right thing, and they indicate they want to do the right thing, and they intend to do the right thing. But there are obstacles that they confront when they get out," Johnson said. "And if they don't have someone to be accountable to, it can make the difference in someone spiraling out of control and all of a sudden, there's a relapse and they're incarcerated within three weeks of being released from prison."

Johnson cited the Houston, Texas, Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) as an example of precisely the type of in- and post-prison mentoring he thinks needs to occur. PEP, a faith-based organization that works with many secular partners, pairs inmates with business executives to develop business plans for the inmates' post-prison lives. "They're helping these guys not only get jobs, they're helping some of

them start their own businesses," Johnson explained.

The program, which started in 2004, is having great success, he maintained. "The employment rate [among ex-convicts in PEP] is better than it is for 'free world' folk."

"This is an idea that I think has real potential all across the country," he said. "If you can get guys making good money with good jobs, they're now paying taxes, they're paying child support, they're not committing crimes. The benefit to society is very, very significant."

Family

Despite their different backgrounds and perspectives, one thing on which all three men interviewed for this article agreed is that many of the problems facing the black community could be solved if only the black family could be restored. But how did we get to the point where, as sociologist Andrew Cherlin observed, "a black child was more likely to grow up living with both parents during the days of slavery than he or she is today"?

"Fifty years or so ago," Peterson asserted, "the government came in and told black Americans, 'We're gonna take care of you. You can't make it because of racism. It has held you back. But you can't have a father in the home.' And so black Americans, many said yes to that, and they took the fathers out of the home, the government became the daddy, and the corrupt black leadership became the leader of the people."

As a result, generations of blacks have become trapped in a cycle of fatherlessness and dependence — and the hopelessness that accompanies these conditions. In this they differ little from their ancestors on the plantations of the Old South, where masters broke up families to prevent them from developing loyalties to one another (rather than their masters) and slaves had nothing except that which their masters gave them. On the "new plantation," as former presidential candidate Herman Cain termed it in the 2012 film *Runaway Slave*, Uncle Sam is the master who gives today's nominally free blacks just enough to get by so that they can continue to work for their master by voting for those politicians who promise to give them more of other people's earnings.

Reducing or eliminating the very generous transfer programs that have replaced fathers with welfare checks would be a good first step toward restoring the black family, yet it will take more than just a change in the source of income to turn around a culture in which single-parenthood is the norm.

"There's no government policy that can halt the breakdown of the black family," said Williams.

That means it's up to private institutions to turn the tide, and most prominent among those institutions is the church. As the website of the National Black Church Initiative (NBCI) puts it, "The Black Church has the ultimate responsibility to the family — if the Black family fails so does the Church."

NBCI, a coalition of 34,000 black churches, is in the midst of a 10-year program whose aim is "strengthening the African American family by repairing the damage created by unmarried parents, weak moral standards, and years of neglecting to address this truly pressing societal issue." NBCI hopes to establish Black Family Institutes across the United States to educate people about the need to develop strong families with married parents and to warn them of cultural and political threats to the family. As part of this plan, NBCI is addressing many other problems faced by the black community, particularly men, including low church attendance, dropping out of school, unemployment, and incarceration.

BOND, too, is doing its part to restore the black family. Its motto, in fact, is "rebuilding the family by rebuilding the man." The organization works to develop character in young black males so that they will grow up to be responsible husbands and fathers.

Is There Hope?

Black Americans do indeed face many daunting challenges — challenges the public sector, under the sway of progressives, has both failed to solve and often contributed to. The obstacles to a prosperous, orderly black community that is fully integrated into the mainstream of American society are great — but are they insurmountable?

"Black people as a group have made the greatest progress over some of the highest hurdles in the shortest period of time than any other racial group in the history of mankind," Williams said. "It speaks to the intestinal fortitude of a people to be able to make this great journey from 1865 to the present period, and similarly it speaks very well of a nation in which these kind of gains were possible."

The obvious implication: If blacks could overcome the many obstacles placed in their path in the last 148 years, there's no reason they can't surmount the ones they face today. But things are going to have to change for that to happen because for a large segment of the black population, such progress "will remain elusive under the status quo," he maintained.

"There has to be," he said, "a moral reawakening in our country."

Peterson likewise believes the problem is not solely a matter of public policy. In fact, he's "100-percent sure it's spiritual." Does this mean all hope is lost, particularly given Peterson's less-than-sanguine view of most black churches, which he characterized as "weak"?

"You know, when I look at it with my physical eyes, it makes me want to give up because it seems as though it's already over. But because I believe in God and I believe that those who believe in him, we have the power to change things … I have hope," he said. "I believe that the change is going to come. I think the tough times [ahead] are going to make those who believe in God stronger, and in that strength and willingness to endure, I believe things will change. I really do."