

# ***The Atlanta Journal-Constitution***

## **A forum on manhood misses the mark by miles**

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A group of middle-class black professionals, including doctors, lawyers, teachers, clergy and politicians, gathered more than 500 people at Macon State College on a Saturday in March to have a conversation about manhood.

They chose as topics the criminal justice system, spirituality, mentoring and how to educate black males.

The reporter for The (Macon) Telegraph, Ashley Tusan Joyner, offered an account of the session on "Law & Black Society." In it, Atlanta lawyer Mawuli Mel Davis instructed young men on how to deal with the police. "The Fourth Amendment protects our rights against unreasonable searches and seizures," she quotes him as instructing. "You can always say, 'No, I do not consent to a search.' "

A teacher speaking about educating young black males blamed the system. "The reason they're not graduating is because we're not teaching them to think," Joyner reported him as saying. "We need to find ways to make education more relevant to them."

I readily acknowledge I wasn't there.

But it is shocking to read that given the opportunity to have a conversation about manhood with young males, role models who are successful and accomplished in life chose to talk to them as potential criminals and as victims of an education system that had not found a way to make itself "relevant."

Not addressed, apparently, was manhood, as in fatherhood. Or manhood, as in taking responsibility. Or manhood, as in not treating sexual partners as throwaways without concern for consequence, whether that consequence is a sexually transmitted disease or the creation of human life. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in early March that at least one in four teenage girls nationally has a sexually transmitted disease. Among black teens ages 14-19, it's nearly half.

Another study released last week offers findings that are, in a less tragic sense, further evidence of the need to reorient the conversation. As has been amply reported, 25 percent of white children, 46 percent of Hispanics and 69 percent of blacks are born to unmarried women.

The cost is enormous. When combined with divorce (a rate that's declined slightly in recent years) almost a third of children live in single-parent homes. In 1970, 85.2 percent of children lived with both parents; in 2005, it was 68.3 percent.

Any number of studies have documented the harm to children and the social costs in higher rates of crime, drug abuse, poverty, mental and physical illnesses, educational failures, and other damaging consequences to children deprived of the life-guiding influence of both parents.

Now Benjamin Scafidi, an economist in the J. Whitney Bunting School of Business at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, presents valuable new research on the economic costs.

"We estimate that family fragmentation costs U.S. taxpayers at least \$112 billion each and every year, or more than \$1 trillion each decade," concludes the study, which was done for the Institute for American Values, the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, Georgia Family Council and Families Northwest. Scafidi, a former education policy adviser to Gov. Sonny Perdue, was principal researcher. If public policies encouraging marriage reduced family fragmentation by just 1 percent, the savings to taxpayers would amount to \$1.1 billion yearly, the study finds.

It seems clear that the conversation about what constitutes "manhood" needs to change, especially when the government, the media, opinion leaders and community role models gather young men to help them define it. Manliness is not creating and abandoning babies and the women who bear them. Leah Ward Sears, chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court, is one of the voices stepping up. She is on the board of directors of one of the sponsoring organizations, the Institute for American Values.

"Healthy marriage is not only the best place to raise children, it is the indispensable institution without which all other social reform efforts will fail," she said. "Healthy and intact families are the cradle of thriving societies." Preach that. Teach that. Counsel that.

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