

Executive Summary

The Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents was charged with the identification of factors that contribute to the healthy development of African American children and adolescents. Scholarship has largely ignored the relevance of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors, nuances, and competencies, particularly as they relate to resilience and strength of African American youth. The field of psychology's preoccupation with disparity data in terms of economic conditions, mother-headed households, academic underachievement, and involvement with the criminal justice system fails to inform about attitudes, behaviors, and processes that contribute to the strength and resilience of African American children and adolescents. Meaningful consideration of the strength and protective components of resilience among African American youth should take into account their cultural integrity as well as their unique experience as an involuntary ethnic minority in the United States. Continued cultural oppression places all African American youth, including well resourced youth, at some degree of risk for pervasive, yet subtle, forms of racialized discrimination and oppression.

Understanding resilience and strength among African American youth requires first acknowledging their experience in the United States and recognizing the continuing legacy of oppression and discrimination that affects their daily lives. The intent of this report is to provide a more balanced perspective on African American children and

adolescents by highlighting strengths and protective competencies that have largely been ignored to date. We also hope to provide the next generation of researchers, policymakers, and programmers with a useful lens through which to view African American youth.

In doing so, we acknowledge the existence of risks and models that highlight risk and protective factor interactions. However, in this report, discussion of risk is limited. We contend that the risks African American youth face derive from proximal concerns, such as underresourced schools, family disruption, or negative peer influences. These risks are related to, and further exacerbated by, the experience of pervasive racism that informs, for example, racial profiling, low expectations, or institutional barriers (e.g., Spencer et al., 2006; Weinstein, 2002). When African American children are subject to excessive institutional reactivity to their behavior as might arise during negative encounters with teachers, principals, or police officers, then drawing on protective factors within themselves (e.g., emotion regulation and problem-solving skills) and within families and communities (e.g., parents as advocates) becomes crucial to their health and well-being. The strength and protective components of resilience are the focus of this report.

While effort was made throughout the report to acknowledge the within-group variations that exist in African American communities (e.g., socioeconomic status, region of country), it is important to note that the focus

of this report is U.S.-born African American children and adolescents only. While the immigrant and foreign-born Black population in the U.S. is significant and continues to increase, the task force recognizes the historical and cultural differences of those who emigrated and are U.S. immigrants. Specifically, the legacy of colonialism impacts each group differently. Thus, foreign-born Blacks may have a different perspective on this country's history of oppression and associated youth outcomes. An in-depth and comprehensive reporting of such noteworthy variations across Black groups is beyond the scope of the current report.

Similarly, we acknowledge the significant biracial youth population that exists in the United States; however, we also recognize that mixed families and the raising of biracial children raise unique concerns and challenges—for example, European American relatives' concerns about the loss of privilege, and African American relatives' concerns about the privileges of biracial children over their African American (especially darker-skinned) relatives. An in-depth and comprehensive review that considers the unique experiences of biracial youth is beyond the scope of this report. For the purposes of this report, review and discussion are limited to U.S.-born African American children and adolescents.

The content of this report is based on available research involving African American middle-childhood (5–11 year-old) and adolescent (12–21-year-old) samples. Despite skewed and/or limited coverage of African American youth, we sought to include research findings on African American youth across all socioeconomic status (SES) and geographic areas. We reviewed several databases that provide fairly comprehensive coverage of the social sciences, education, and biomedical literatures on U.S. populations of persons of African descent: PsycINFO, ERIC, and MEDLINE (via PubMed). The following databases were also used to identify relevant, funded studies (both current and recently concluded): National Institutes of Health (NIH), Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects (CRISP), and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

TOWARD A PORTRAIT OF RESILIENCE

Resilience as currently understood is a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, and society). Over time, models of resilience have become more ecologically focused, reflecting a generally understood and accepted principle that youth develop in context and that the consideration of context is fundamental to any serious effort to understand development and experience. Some contemporary researchers have begun to present more ecological models that conceptualize resilience as a process embedded in multiple layers (e.g., individual, environmental, sociohistorical) of experience. There has increasingly been an incorporation of the individual's feelings and perceptions of his or her experience, as well as an understanding of how multiple factors in the environment contribute to risks and protective factors. However, not systematically incorporated within the ecological framing of resilience is the explicit inclusion of factors that specifically encompass the racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences of African American youth. The incorporation of these factors is important in understanding and promoting strength, health, and well-being among African American youth.

With this in mind, we propose a portrait of resilience (informed by Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003), or optimal functioning, for African American youth. This portrait of resilience encompasses four themes to guide the interpretation of the research and offer new directions for future scholarship:

Critical mindedness helps protect against experiences of discrimination and facilitates a critique of existing social conditions.

Active engagement includes agentic behavior in school, at home, and with peers, such that children and adolescents proactively and positively impact their environment. Impact on settings, however, must be executed effectively, and flexibility becomes essential.

Flexibility promotes adaptation to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical situational

demands and can include bicultural competence or fluency across multiple cultural contexts that youth must traverse.

Communalism includes the importance of social bonds and social duties, reflects a fundamental sense of interdependence and primacy of collective well-being, and offers the drive for connection and promotion within and across diverse groups.

For African American children and adolescents to develop into individuals actively engaged in optimal personal and collective development, they must be placed “at promise” as opposed to “at risk” (Boykin, 2000) in order to become contributing members of their families, schools, communities, and the broader society. In this way, they will emerge as agents for meaningful and sustainable positive change within a participatory democratic framework and will thrive.

We have considered multiple levels of influence on individual development and examined the linkages between experiences of adversity, adaptive responses to these experiences, and long-term outcomes. In doing so, we focused on five widely recognized domains for child development within this framework, including how certain domain-specific factors—traditionally considered risk factors—can be reconceptualized as adaptive or protective processes:

- Identity development
- Emotional development
- Social development
- Cognitive development
- Physical health and development

Although the report is organized in this manner, we recognize the integrated nature of resilience components, processes, and outcomes.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Positive gendered racial identities are essential to the personal and collective well-being of African American youth. African American children and adolescents must develop a

positive sense of self in a society that often devalues them through negative stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations of others (Cross, 1995). Negative racial identity in African Americans has been theoretically linked to low self-esteem, problems with psychological adjustment, low school achievement, school drop out, teenage pregnancy, gang involvement, eating disorders, drug abuse, and involvement in crime (Cross, 1991; Poussaint, 1990). Identity for African Americans is not an individual or autonomous sense of functioning as is often reflected in European American culture but includes the intersection of multiple identity factors, particularly race and gender.

Positive identity is an extended sense of self embedded within the African American collective (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001), and this African American sense of self is a protective factor related to identity development. Although research has begun to explore the influence of racial identity as a buffer for oppression, it lags in assessing the process through which this may occur (i.e., the ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of society).

Research has identified racial socialization as a contextual protective factor. Socialization influences children’s racial identity and self-concept (Alejandro-Wright, 1999), beliefs about the way the world works, repertoire of strategies and skills for coping with and navigating racism, and inter- and intraracial relationships and interactions (Coard & Sellers, 2005). African American parents are instrumental in transmitting values, beliefs, and ideas about lifestyles based on cultural knowledge of the adult tasks and competencies needed for appropriate functioning in society (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). Although the socialization messages of both mothers and fathers benefit the child, research (e.g., Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990) has suggested that more optimal outcomes occur when both parents engage in the racial socialization process. African American children and adolescents who learn that others have negative perspectives on African Americans but who have these messages mediated by parents, peers, and other important adults are less likely to have negative outcomes and more likely to be resilient in adverse conditions.

Research has only begun to explore other identity factors for African American children and adolescents, includ-

ing gender, sexual orientation, and ability status. To have a more complete picture of resilience, psychology needs to develop a new conceptual framework for understanding multiple identities and their influence on functioning and development. Training and coaching of children and youth on the integration of multiple identities must promote social relationships. More research needs to explore all areas of identity development and its relation to critical consciousness and resilience.

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Children who are emotionally well-regulated generally display a positive mood, are optimistic, and demonstrate empathy and prosocial behavior with peers (Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). *Emotional knowledge*—the ability to understand emotions—is related to social and behavioral outcomes (Izard et al., 2001) and is an important component of emotional regulation, expression, regulation, and perspective taking. As children move through their developmental tasks, the role of cultural factors cannot be ignored. An examination of the cultural expression of emotion (i.e., emotional strengths of African American children, including spirituality, cooperation, respect for others, a sense of humor; Lambert et al., 2005) and expressive individualism (Boykin & Toms, 1985) is critical to understanding emotional development and its relationship to resilience and strength in African American children and adolescents.

Emotional competence requires a strong and positive sense of self-efficacy so that children believe they can meet the demands around them when trying to work with others—especially relevant for African American youth who must learn to succeed academically despite their overrepresentation in underresourced schools, get along with peers despite the presence of institutional racism, and develop meaningful relations with others despite society's view that African American children are not as worthy as their non-African American peers. Rather than being distracted with perceived threats and self-defeating attitudes, African American youth with well-developed emotional competence are able to mobilize resources, learn new information, acquire new insights, or develop their talents despite negative messages from society to the contrary.

African American youth need to develop *emotional regulation* (i.e., balanced and appropriate emotional expression for particular situations and circumstances). This is particularly salient given the potential for African American youth to be judged as hostile or excessively reactionary. Positive and optimal emotional regulation includes being critically minded in emotionally tense settings. Flexibility across circumstances is critical for emotional regulation, as is engagement, which in the case of emotional development prevents social withdrawal and isolation through anxiety and depression. The collective culture and socialization experiences will help to buffer African American children and youth from harmful forms of emotional expression.

Family factors are extremely important in emotional development. Research on emotional self-regulation in African American children has demonstrated similar findings with other ethnic samples, showing that, for the most part, the better (i.e., the more positive, supportive, educational) the parent-child relationship, the more able the child is to develop effective emotional regulation (Kliewer et al., 2004; Little & Carter, 2005). Neighborhood and community influences also serve as protective factors for emotional development. High-quality, stable neighborhoods and schools (e.g., resource rich, supportive, non-violent) are important contributors to the well-being of African American youth (Kowaleski-James & Dunifon, 2006).

In addition, programs that foster the growth of empathy in African American youth (e.g., the Aban Aya Youth Project; Jagers, Morgan-Lopez, Howard, Browne, & Flay, 2007), promote racial socialization as a method for reducing anger and aggression (e.g., Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth; Stevenson, 2002), improve aspects of parenting associated with the early development of conduct problems, and promote social and cultural competence in early-school-age children (e.g., Black Parenting Strengths and Strategies; Coard, Foy-Watson, Zimmer, & Wallace, 2007) have shown promise.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The need for successful negotiation of social interactions and the development of optimal functioning are particularly important for the development of African American children regardless of their socioeconomic background and

neighborhood context. Central to the resilience of African American children and youth are individual characteristics such as empathy and religiosity (e.g., personal beliefs in God or a higher power, church attendance). Concern for others and a sense of a higher purpose may help children and youth become engaged leaders and advocates for their community.

African American children and adolescents, like other youth, benefit from close relationships with and monitoring by caregivers, two factors which, within the context of family, prevent problem behaviors and promote competence (Sale, Sambrano, Springer, & Turner, 2003; Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003). African American caregivers have evidenced culturally specific parenting practices (e.g., racial socialization), which can be conceptualized as parental strengths that foster children's social development (Hughes et al., 2006).

In school, the social processes between teachers and students and among peers are important for setting behavioral norms and expectations that promote cooperative engagement in school. Promising protective factors in social resilience are related to teacher practices (e.g., "warm demanders" [Vasquez, 1988] and "compassionate disciplinarians" [Irvine, 2002]), the behavioral norms of the classroom, and the atmosphere of the school as a whole. African American students' social development may also depend on the influence of peers in the classroom, and research on peer norms, peer affiliation in schools, reduced aggression, and increased cooperation is emerging.

Community context is critically important to the well-being of African American youth. High-quality child care, after-school programs, and faith-based institutions are protective resources (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Shinn & Toohey, 2003), as are preventive intervention programs. Such programs need to be developmentally and culturally appropriate, address multiple health-compromising behaviors, offer services, sustain intervention over time, and include a school focus with family, peer, and community components (e.g., Kellam & Langevin, 2003; Kreuter, Lukwago, Bucholtz, Clark, & Sanders-Thompson, 2002). The most exemplary programs harness cultural and community processes already occurring in African American communities to effect outcomes and enhance participant recruitment and retention.

Promising areas for future research include prosocial attitudes and behaviors, flexible behavioral repertoires, critical mindedness, and active engagement in collective efforts for positive change. It will be important to conduct ecologically sensitive research on individual characteristics and protective factors that promote their optimal social development.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive skills are one of the most important markers of child and adolescent development, and it is highly unlikely that children with underdeveloped educational and cognitive skills will be successful. Resilience in cognitive functioning is the expected expression of ability in intellectual, language, academic, and vocational skill, despite exposure to developmental risk factors. For African American children to be resilient, they must develop self-motivation for critical thinking, engage with academic material, demonstrate flexible thinking, and give their expertise back to the community. It is imperative that African American youth demonstrate competence in fundamental academic skills and in higher order information-processing skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, problem solving).

Key to the process of developing cognitive skills—consistent with expectations for all children and adolescents—is the environment in which African American youth are reared and the unique individual qualities each child brings to bear on his or her environment. Because we live in a racially conscious society that tends to oppress as opposed to uplift, African American youth are especially vulnerable to that which injustice provides: the suboptimal development of the very skills that are critical for their prosperity. Despite these hardships, African American youth do display resilience, and research is just beginning to examine how this occurs.

Research has suggested that such individual characteristics as academic self-efficacy or the child's belief in his or her academic competence operate as protective factors for African American children at risk for poor cognitive performance (Bandura, 1986). Academic self-efficacy may affect children's choice of activities, the amount of effort they commit to meeting a goal, and their persistence on tasks. Some evidence has supported the idea that academic self-efficacy is particularly important for African

Americans' high academic achievement. Research has also established the relation between self-esteem and academic outcomes for African American children, but exclusive focus on any one factor likely masks the complex associations of self-identity, including racial identity and adaptive cognitive functioning.

Parental involvement in the educational process is a significant predictor of academic achievement for African American children (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1999). Other family characteristics are also predictive of school functioning. In Clark's (1983) analysis of low-income African American families, those children achieving academically had parents who were warm, monitored their children's time, and set standards for academic behavior. Parents who possess and practice attitudes, goals, and behaviors directed toward academic achievement are crucial to fostering positive school outcomes for their children. Contrary to the notion that harsh parenting styles are beneficial to children growing up in urban, low-income settings, research has associated harsh parenting styles with poor academic achievement (Shumow et al., 1999).

African Americans are disproportionately represented in low-income populations. The relation between low SES and academic and cognitive outcomes (i.e., children from wealthy families demonstrate greater academic success than those from low-income families), however, is not straightforward or always strong. Research in this area has moved beyond simply documenting poor outcomes to investigating the process by which financial limitations operate to influence cognitive success. Parental involvement, parent-child relations, and the qualities of the home environment appear to be key mechanisms in the influence of SES on cognitive outcomes (Shumow et al., 1999).

Although a sense of school belonging is important for all students, it may be especially important for African American students, who are more likely to feel estranged in school environments where values and beliefs are discordant with their own (Ford, 1993). Although most children experience some stress (e.g., lower grades) when they transition to middle school and high school, African American children are at greater risk for school failure than their European American counterparts and feel more disconnected when the culture of the school environment is dissimilar from their own (Ford, 1992).

Teachers' discriminatory attitudes and their relationships with African American students pose risk for poor cognitive outcomes (Richman, Bovelsky, Kroovand, Vacca, & West, 1997). Studies have shown that African American children exposed to teachers who displayed sincere concern for their academic success demonstrated better cognitive outcomes (Steele, 1992).

Research indicates that African Americans, among other cultural groups, advocate more of a communal orientation than an individualistic one, and this has stimulated significant research into the role of the communal perspective on learning in school. The associated empirical work has been consistent in demonstrating that African American students learn more and prefer learning contexts that support the expression of a communal orientation (Dill & Boykin, 2000). Because positive ethnic identification is also related to academic achievement, research continues to investigate ways to infuse Africultural themes into the classroom as a means of improving academic outcomes.

By developing the necessary skills for critical and flexible thinking and problem solving and by engaging with academic material, African American children will be better suited to meet societal challenges. Examining the process by which this occurs and developing testable models of the relations between protective factors and outcomes are essential to sustaining and increasing the capacity of African American youths to negotiate societal discrimination. By taking both a universal and a culture-specific approach to explaining cognitive resilience, the field can provide research and services that will meet the needs of African American youth and increase their capacity to be resilient.

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Like youth from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, African American youth who are in good physical health are more likely to experience positive mental health, fewer behavioral and social difficulties, and sharper or more responsive cognitive functioning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2000a). In the context of both positive and adverse outcomes, social determinants of health such as poverty and access to quality health care have had a unique impact on African Americans (Giles & Liburd, 2007). Moderating the effects of contextual factors are, among other considerations, SES at an individual and

community level and access to and quality of health care and information (Marmot, 2005; McLoyd, 1998). An important literature has emerged describing the independent and cumulative effect on health of factors such as social inequality, social cohesion, and educational parity (e.g., Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006).

A wide range of health conditions, including obesity, poor oral health, asthma, violent injury, sickle cell anemia, pediatric diabetes, and HIV/AIDS, disproportionately affect African American youth. In this report we address the first four conditions, emphasizing the need to better understand and incorporate physical health and development in the effort to promote resilience in African American children and adolescents.

Childhood obesity is a serious public health problem. Current rates are higher among African American and Hispanic youth (Ogden, Carroll, & Flegal, 2003) than European American youth, especially among African American girls and adolescents (Shaibi, Ball, & Goran, 2006). Although a number of health maladies result from obesity in youth (e.g., pediatric diabetes, hypertension), one of the more pronounced impacts has been on psychological health, specifically in the form of depression (Pi-Sunyer, 1999). The African American community has begun to address obesity and its comorbid conditions in a number of ways, focusing on two important protective factors for childhood obesity: diet and physical activity. For example, a number of churches have developed and promoted cookbooks supportive of traditional recipes that use ingredients that promote good health. Likewise, a number of churches now offer athletic activities for youth congregants or dance ministries as a way to promote physical activity.

Significant disparities exist between poor children and their more affluent peers in terms of oral health, as reflected in regular dental care and the presence of early periodontal disease (U.S. DHHS, 2000b). Poor African American youth, for example, are significantly less likely than their middle-class peers to see a dentist prior to starting kinder-

garten, resulting in an increased risk for periodontal disease, which has implications for diabetes and cardiovascular disease. There is strong evidence for strategies that promote oral health in children, including school-based sealant-delivery programs and community-based water fluoridation.

Asthma is a chronic respiratory illness associated with familial, socioeconomic, psychological, and ecological factors. The African American community has begun to address respiratory disease and the adverse conditions that promote its occurrence through organized efforts to combat environmental racism manifest in the proximity of landfills and dumps to African American communities (see Braveman, 2006). Other efforts include educating the caregivers (e.g., parents, teachers, and coaches) of African American youth about the early warning signs of respiratory ailment, thereby allowing early intervention and reducing the likelihood of hospitalization and school absenteeism.

Interpersonal violence has exacted a tremendous toll on African American youth in terms of shortened life expectancy, physical disability, physical injury, and comorbid psychological injury. A number of programs have touted positive and sustainable effects in the reduction of interpersonal violence, and a number of government agencies (e.g., Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Departments of Education and Justice) have highlighted a number of best-practice programs. Programs such as multisystemic therapy have begun to acknowledge the importance of understanding and incorporating cultural frames of reference.

Limited research examining resilience within the African American community reflects its health and strength. This report aims to provide a more balanced and holistic perspective on African American children and adolescents. Although the extant research has significant gaps in definition and theory that limit an understanding of resilience, especially as it relates to African American youth, this body of research provides an important foundation upon which to build. While the discourse on resilience contained in this report follows a domain-specific structure

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for readability, we acknowledge and maintain that resilience is a holistic developmental process and consists of interdependent dimensions—that is, domains of functioning that are interwoven and develop simultaneously.

Early health education and positive role modeling are central to a young person's ability to make critical choices regarding his or her physical health. As young people get older, they become increasingly responsible for lifestyle (e.g., diet, problem-solving) choices. Youth who view resilient physical health as an important facet of communal health and empowerment are likely to manifest optimal functioning in other areas of their lives (i.e., cognitive, social, emotional). Caregivers and institutions that influence the development of African American youngsters must support, encourage, and model the elements proposed as central to their optimal functioning or resilience.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of studies and reports that focus on African American children and adolescents examine risk factors and their association with negative outcomes. Given the societal realities that exist (e.g., racism, discrimination, prejudice), African American youth face challenges that can compromise their health and well-being. Yet most studies omit race, ethnicity, and culture altogether or attempt to “control” for variables related to culture and SES. To do so is misleading, as culture and related variables are embedded in potential mediators, moderators, and outcomes.

Constructs such as positive family environment and social support are not the domain of any particular gender, age, or ethnic group and exist to some extent for all groups of children. These constructs are shared across racial and ethnic groups, but their expression may be culturally defined. Research has shown that diverse cultural groups have different ways of enhancing positive outcomes for their children (Johnson-Powell & Yamamoto, 1997). What is needed is a balanced approach that accepts the limitations of past perspectives and acknowledges the role of contemporary society, social policy, and history in the development of African Americans in the United States. The complexity outlined in recent theories demonstrates a desire—albeit ambitious—to describe children in the various contexts in which they live. As with most theoretical discussions, the problem lies in a lack of consistency in the use of terms and the definition of constructs.

African American youth will need resilience to navigate future challenges. It is important that collective efforts continue to foster and further develop identified “protective mechanisms.” Identifying and promoting strength and resilience among African American youth merit the consideration of educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to ensure the success of African American youth in the 21st century.

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