
*Blacks make up **12-13%** of the general population but **37%** of the male incarcerated population (U.S. Department of Justice), and black females are six times more likely to be incarcerated than white females.*

The Bureau of Justice Statistics

Without palpable change over the next generation, **imagine implications** of these findings for the state of our families and communities and for the national and global reputation of our American democracy.

Reducing Risks of Juvenile Delinquency and
Criminal Behaviors in High-Risk Neighborhoods:

Our Social Justice Initiative

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Values for Life Villages:

Promoting Values that Create Safer Communities—Less Delinquency, Fewer Crimes

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WE STARTED OUT BY ASKING CAREGIVERS OF CHILDREN under age five to sit back and relax and try to imagine their children's lives 10 to 15 years down the road. We then presented four systemically structured questions: At that time, how would you like your child to feel deep inside about himself (herself)? About you? About school? About his (her) friends? Typically these questions, administered over the years to large numbers of black and white biological and surrogate male and female parents of low and middle income, evoked emotionally-tinged narratives that could be allocated about 75 percent of the time to one or more of seven categories: *I want my child to be high in love and respect, interpersonal skills, learning orientation, self-confidence, self-persistence, self-esteem, and self-reliance*. Taken together, these seven categories we now refer to as Values for Life⁶.

Having found that Values for Life were affirmed across racial, socioeconomic, gender, and inter-generational lines, we wondered whether these family values were shared with schools and churches—complementary socializing systems. We adjusted our interview format for elementary school teachers (imagine children in your class 10-15 years from now) and pastors-in-training (imagine children in your fellowship 10-15 years from now). We found that the seven values identified by families with children under five were affirmed by teachers and seminarians. We reasoned that values shared among these major socializing systems might carry future implications for community building—and it has.

Next, we generated positive and negative items for each value. For self-persistence, *e.g., maintains focus in face of distractions or seeks out challenging or difficult tasks* were identified for the positive polarity and *fails to complete projects started or short attention span* for the negative polarity. Item sets have been repeatedly revised over the years and subjected to rigorous psychometric evaluation. The result: We now have trial sets of items for each value across the developmental spectrum Pre-K to 12 and beyond, some of these scales being observer- or self-ratings or both.

From the literature, we identified potential antecedents to each identified value. The short of a long story is that we found that 11 antecedent categories patterned in common and distinctive ways with each of our seven values. For self-persistence, *e.g.,* we found in field and lab studies

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⁶ I am grateful to my former Administrative Assistant, Rev. Gwendolyn Harris, who first suggested the name *Values for Life*.

that parents or parent surrogates who were skillful in managing five antecedent behavioral categories—Provides Learning Opportunities, Stimulates Language, Stimulates Inquisitiveness, Stimulates On-Task Behaviors, and Reverses Off-Task Behaviors—tended to have children who tested high in self-persistence. From these studies we identified antecedent behaviors for each of the remaining six values.

Clarifying linkages between antecedent behaviors and valued outcomes was one challenge, and identifying ways and means of helping families, schools, peers, churches, and neighborhoods become accomplished supporters and implementers of identified antecedents was the companion challenge. For this purpose, all Values for Life Interventions are informed by Ajzen's theory of planned behavior, one of the most utilized and best validated theories for understanding and predicting an impressively wide range of individual, social, and systemic behaviors (currently more than 41,000 citations in the professional literature). Using this theory to guide Values for Life (VFL) interventions Pre-K to 12, here's a summary of what we've found:

- Parents of Pre-K to 8 children have been trained successfully in two labs and multiple community settings to increase their children's level of performance on each value;
- Achievement gaps on a nationally standardized test were practically eliminated within eight months of exposure to VFL interventions in a Pre-K urban school setting;
- At the end of the school year, six of seven VFL assessments were significantly higher for Head Start classrooms trained in VFL interventions relative to Head Start classrooms trained in the standard Head Start curriculum;
- On a third grade predominately black low-income sample, there was a 14 point gain in math and 29 point gain in reading proficiencies at the end of the first year of VFL interventions. In a predominately black high poverty secondary charter school, we found a 30.6 point gain in math and 13.5 gain in reading proficiencies following two years of VFL interventions; and
- In samples of public elementary and high school students, *VFL interventions increased daily attendance and reduced tardiness; reduced disciplinary referrals and suspensions; decreased levels of depression, anxiety, stress, and hostility; and reduced proclivities toward juvenile delinquency and teenage pregnancy.*

To our knowledge, Values for Life is the only intervention where local businesses and community organizations have joined families, schools, and faith-based institutions in supporting and celebrating values that together offer promise of diminishing risks of juvenile delinquency and criminal behaviors (as well as teenage pregnancy) in high-risk neighborhoods. Many of these communities, already burdened by negative internal and external perceptions as 'dangerous' or 'immoral' or 'undesirable' or 'bad' places to live, should be provided opportunity to reclaim and actualize what they already value—*love and respect, interpersonal skills, learning orientation, self-confidence, self-persistence, self-esteem, and self-reliance*—a rebranding opportunity of huge significance to the future of places they still call home.

Finally we borrow an analogy from myrmecology—the scientific study of ants—to drive home the importance of neighborhood rebranding. When ant colonies are threatened by deadly fungi, they don't run away but pull together and strengthen one another in successfully defeating this threat to the neighborhood. As schools and families with barbers and beauticians along with churches, organizations, peers, and politicians pull together around shared values that diminish risks of delinquency and crime, we expect that neighborhood rebranding will diminish existential threats fueled ongoingly by culturally toxic labelling.

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