

The issue and history of illiteracy among african americans

[History](#), [African American](#)



The Issue And History Of Illiteracy Among African Americans Becca White Writing 123 Instructor Sydney Darby 27 May 2008 Illiteracy is a growing issue in America. The U. S. Department of Education funded the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) in 1992 that estimates over 90 million Americans fall well below an eight grade literacy level (Rome, 2004, pp. 84). Nowhere is this tragedy more prevalent than among the impoverished African Americans. Illiteracy has always been higher among African Americans now the gap is growing even wider due to a verity of reasons.

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey (2003), the number one deterrent to becoming a criminal is having the ability to read past the eighth grade, and the number one preventive for an inmate becoming a repeat offender is to educate in literacy past the eighth grade level. " Today, the definition of literacy is based on what is called functional literacy. That is, someone is literate if they are able to function properly within society," (Roman, 2004, pp. 81).

This definition can cover a variety of skills not only reading and writing but also the skills required to process general information from one's surroundings (Roman, 2004, pp. 81). To truly begin to understand the issues surrounding illiteracy among African Americans you have to go back to the beginning. America saw 7. 7 million slaves imported from Africa between 1492-1820 more than half the imports of slaves took place from 1700-1800 (Foner, 2006, pp. 112). By the 1830's laws were in place to make the education of slaves illegal, thus only 10% of slaves were literate (Foner, 2006, pp. 48). At the time slavery ended only about 10% of the African

American population could read and do sums - A vitally important ability in a Jim Crow society. Jim Crowism came to embody the laws, customs, and policies of segregation (Foner, 2006, pp. 310), but more importantly the postcivil war 'separate but not equal' mentality. The phrase from Brent Staples (2006) article, 'Why Slave-Era Barriers to Black Literacy Still Matter,' caught my attention as he wrote, "literacy was a form of social capital that could be passed from one generation to the next. While post Civil War America moved toward the 1880's laws were passed in the South making it legal to arrest any unemployed African American and the penalties for petty crimes were vastly increased the punishment all were sentenced to labor camps (Foner, 2006, pp. 557). Labor camps it appears were created for forced labor pools; this is also the first large influx of African Americans into the penal system. African Americans were barred from Unions, participation in Democracy, and from skilled employment.

Further more men and women were desperately poor and unaffected by the laws regulating hours and conditions that labor was under (Foner, 2006, pp. 645). On the eve of World War I, 90% of African Americans still lived in the South, barred from all but the most menial, unskilled, labor and paid the lowest wages. Many African American women had to work outside the home in order to help the family survive (Foner, 2006, pp. 650). During WWI mass migration of more than 1 million African Americans took place out of the South and into the Northern ghettos of New York, Detroit, Chicago, Buffalo, and Trenton (Foner, 2006, pp. 85). Industrialization, thousands of jobs had opened in the North and many African Americans were looking for a chance at living wages, for their children to go to school, and escape the constant

fear of lynching (Foner, 2006, pp. 685). The last to enter the workforce of the industrialized jobs they were the first to lose them as the economy slumped. Now instead of being confined in the deep Southern countryside the impoverished African Americans were in ghettos across America's industrialized cities.

The 1980's witnessed the deindustrialization of Northern cities as thousands of African Americans lost jobs as factories closed across the Nation. The national unemployment rate of 1981 was 8.9% but African Americans exceeded more than 20% of the total unemployment due in part to the inability to transition over to more technical jobs due to poorer education. The eighties saw African American males fall further than any other group in terms of wages and jobs (Foner, 2006, pp. 920).

The eighties also saw the War on Drugs begin with new sentencing laws making prison sentences longer and harsher for possession of much smaller quantities of crack and cocaine (Foner, 2006, pp. 951). With the waning of the crack epidemic, crime rates dropped across the country however prison population are still on the rise (Foner, 2006, pp. 951). In 2000, over 2 million men were in prison with approximately 4.2 million more on parole, or probation, convict labor is now in use again in several States (Foner, 2006, pp. 951).

Among prison inmates, African American men make up more than 70%, and represents only 6% of the total US population. The common thread is most of the black inmates cannot read, they also are less educated than their fathers had been (Nealy, 2008, pp. 21). It is estimated that as much as 70% of

inmates are illiterate, and that 40-70% have not finished a GED or high school program (Drakeford, 2002, pp. 139). The cost according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2001) was \$22, 632 per inmate per year or \$62.01 per day. The total population under correctional supervision includes more than 7 million people, or about 3. percent of all US adults (Western, 2007, pp. 512). Research has shown that literacy is directly linked to lower crime rates, and that intensive education programs implemented in prisons drastically lowered recidivism rates of inmates after release (Drakeford, 2002, pp. 139). The cost of incarceration is on the rise along with prison populations it seems that Nationally we are drawing ever closer to a crisis point where the issues of illiteracy among the African Americas especially will need to be addressed and handled appropriately.

In all the research and history I covered that goes into the issue of illiteracy what has yet to address is why illiteracy is such a persistent issue among the African American males. The closest explanation comes not from a research paper but from an article by Orlando Patterson (2006), titled ' A Poverty of the Mind,' where the author claims in interviews with young African Americans the heart of the issue lies in the " cool-posed culture" of the young males trying to live a life of parties, drugs, hanging with the homies, sexual relations, and just trying to looking cool becomes a way of life (pp. A). This is only a partial explanation but in searching through studies statistics, and the history of illiteracy among African Americans I've found the issue is as tangled as my balls of yarn. Illiteracy is an issue among African Americans especially prevalent among the prison population. Literacy is a key to unlocking the door to a crime free life for ex-cons. As to illiteracy being the

cause of higher crime rates of that I have not seen any evidence for or against even though studies and research point to illiteracy being a strong indicator to future criminal activity it is not an absolute.

Whether the issue of illiteracy will begin to be addressed in K-12 grade, or once a young man has become incarcerated is questionable. It appears that no matter what the answer the solutions will require support from all areas of the community in order to be successful in addressing the issue in its entirety. References Drakeford, W. (2002). The Impact of an Intensive Program to Increase the Literacy Skills of Youth Confined to Juvenile Corrections. *Journal of Correctional Education*, Vol. 53 Issue 4, p139-144, 6p. Retrieved April 17, 2008. from <http://web.ebscohost.com> Foner, E. (2006). *Give ME Liberty! An American History*.

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