

EUGENE F. RIVERS III



The black rebellion against fatherlessness

By Eugene F. Rivers III | July 9, 2006

BLACK BOSTON, like black America, is in the midst of a moral and cultural crisis. Forty years after the passage of groundbreaking voting and civil rights legislation, blacks face dire conditions that would have been inconceivable to the generation who came of age during that period.

We have a generation of young black people who -- unlike many of their ancestors who came out of slavery and entered the last century with strong backs, discipline, and a thirst for literacy -- are living the thug life and are ill-equipped to secure employment.

The crisis of black America is primarily cultural. The Kulturkampf of black-on-black violence is a direct result of the crisis of fatherlessness in the black community. This is a battle between the forces of cultural and intellectual underachievement and the forces of civility, industry, and virtue, essentially a cultural civil war within the black community.

This cultural decay infects almost all social classes but is especially virulent in the lives of the weakest socioeconomic groups. Consequently, a generation of predominantly poor, black youth is in violent rebellion against fatherlessness and, by logical extension, law and order. This largely unacknowledged crisis is part of a larger international narrative; from Kingston to London from Los Angeles to Chicago, we are witnessing the globalization of "thug life."

The "gangsta talkin'" world view celebrates and promotes black-on-black violence and criminality, through multibillion-dollar media and fashion industry.

This phenomenon, which has grown from the gangsta wing of the hip-hop nation that emerged in the 1970s in American ghettos, has emerged as a powerful symbol of the cultural and political decay of black civil society. In this world, the obligatory "big pimpin'" hyper-masculinity, masquerading as manhood, merely conceals an underlying political impotence.

The National Ten Point Leadership Foundation in Boston and its lead site, the Ella J. Baker House, have been focusing on the issue of the cultural violence among high-risk black youth for a decade. In our field work in the United States, Britain, Canada, and Jamaica, there is a common theme of fatherlessness and a failure of leadership from the black middle and upper class that contributes to gang-related violence in the ghettos.

If black political and religious leaders in Boston are to successfully tackle the cycle of black-on-black gang-related violence as a social and public policy question, they must first address it morally and politically.

Boston's black leadership must formally accept its moral complicity in failing to effectively engage this crisis earlier.

Moral transparency is a prerequisite for any rational public discussion of the delicate topic of race and violent crime in this city.

What then is to be done? The black community must decide to take control of itself -- no excuses.

Black church leaders who are connected to the informal intelligence networks of the streets must directly engage the leaders of youth gangs. Many black churches will not be in a position to participate in this project. The objective of this engagement is to negotiate a new social contract and new rules of engagement on the streets: in other words, a peace treaty.

A key strategy will involve providing concrete economic alternatives to draw in this historically excluded social class. A well-funded project, staffed by the most reliable and skillful youth workers, could attract large numbers of young men into alternative economic projects centered on entertainment and athletics.

Such an initiative would target leaders of youth gangs whose renunciation of crime and violence would have an immediate and substantial effect on the streets. The involvement of gang leaders with such a project would pull many of their followers off the streets.

The present anarchy on the streets of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan will not be geographically contained forever, unless there is effective intervention. Black leadership across the social classes must confront the violence among the children of our community and act decisively to end it.

There is enormous good will in this great city that can be mobilized to help implement the project presented here, or some similar one. But if we fail to act, the larger society is likely to forcefully repress and contain the disorder that our indifference bred.

Eugene F. Rivers III is cofounder of the Boston Ten Point Coalition and pastor of the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester. ■

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