



BlackEconomics.org

“A Better ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ Program”

On February 27, 2014, President Barack Obama announced the initiation of a “My Brother’s Keeper” (MBK) program, which will spend \$350 million over the next five years to improve educational, social, and economic outcomes for boys and young men of color.

While the president can be applauded for finally taking specific action on a clear and present problem in the American society, it is too little too late.

Consider that there are boys and young men of color in each state of the union that require some form of assistance. Thinking in averages, the \$350 million would be spent at the rate of about \$1.4 million each year for each of the 50 states over the next five years.

What can \$1.4 million do? Not very much. By the time some type of coordination function is established, and office facilities are acquired in key cities in each state and a few personnel are hired to operate the program, the \$1.4 million will have evaporated. When considering how far \$1.4 million goes, consider that it is relatively easy to find single-family homes that are valued at \$1.4 million in almost every city in the nation.

Given the president’s emphasis on “doing what we know works” means that top-flight (well-educated and expensive) professionals must be hired to operate the programs that are identified. It is highly likely that many of these highly-trained professions will be White. Therefore, Black and Hispanic populations are not likely to benefit much even in the form of employment from MBK.

Speaking of “doing what we know works,” I request that you turn your attention to two important facts.

First, Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman’s research on human development shows in convincing fashion that the key ages for Black male success are zero-to-five. If the appropriate circumstances are not introduced into the environment of Black males during that period, especially those in urban poor and female-headed households, then chances are reduced considerably for Black males to learn to read at or above grade level during their educational careers, graduate from high school, and attend college. Intervention during later years is not nearly as effective.

Second, Professors Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison conducted ground-breaking research that was published during 2012 on the effect of television viewing on the self-esteem of preadolescent children. They found that, given the biased roles that are presented on television, Black male and

Black and White female children experience a diminution of their self-esteem when they observe television. White male children actually experience a rise in self-esteem from watching TV.

Common sense tells us that low self-esteem will have a negative effect on one's ability to learn and function properly in society?

For good measure, I'll throw in my own 2009 published research on "Black Unemployment and Infotainment," which shows that television programs that contain adverse stereotypical images of Black Americans contribute to widening the Black-White unemployment rate gap. As you know, the Black unemployment rate is generally twice that for Whites.

Clearly, research has shown that to be effective in ensuring Black males grow up to be law-abiding and socially and economically contributing citizens, intervention must occur early. In addition, the production and consumption of media that contains adverse stereotypical images of Black Americans causes harm to the young and old alike.

Therefore, MBK's focus on young men of color may be misplaced; mainly because the available \$350 million to be spent on MBK is insufficient to create appropriate environments for Black males during ages in which intervention is most effective.

Consequently, the money may be better spent on a campaign to transform the portrayal of people of color in the media. The elimination of adverse stereotypical images of people of color in the media would change White's perception of people of color, which is half the battle. The other half of the battle is that people of color's perception of themselves would be altered. On a combined basis, these changes in perception would alter behavior all around and transform outcomes in the nation over time.

If we are to use the available MBK funds wisely on efforts that we know can work and that are likely to have the most impact, then it seems reasonable to take on the media with \$350 million than to try to directly affect the lives of millions of boys and young men of color.

After due consideration, and given the limited funds that are available, we may all come to realize that it is better to implement an MBK program with a media focus than to implement the type of MBK program that the president has outlined.

B.B. Robinson

02/28/2014

--###--