

Don't color them bad

By Kiara Harris-Mendel, California Black Media | Posted: Thursday, August 28, 2014 4:24 pm

At the tender age of 16, Beron Thompkins is well into the second act of an already-eventful life.

As is the case with too many black male teenagers, Thompkins is over-familiar with the criminal justice system. His rap sheet is littered with accusations of serious crimes like burglary and grand theft, but his intimate knowledge of society's penchant for harshly disciplining young African-Americans can be traced to a place where virtually all children have been: public school.

His experiences include a three-week suspension for "willful defiance" — a catch-all term that critics say is broad, ill-defined and used primarily to all-but-criminalize young men of color when they exhibit what is arguably normal adolescent behavior. As he tells it, Thompkins' lengthy suspension followed an exceedingly avoidable dispute with his teacher over whether he was disrupting class or merely asking a classmate to borrow a pencil.

Today, Thompkins is a home-schooled participant in the Social Justice Learning Institute — a Los Angeles-based organization, brought to his attention by a probation officer, which focuses on educational and wellness equality for boys and men of color. He recently completed a five-week internship program (highlighted by several days spent on the UCLA campus learning about healthcare careers), and was among hundreds of young people who descended on the State Capitol earlier this month to share their experiences with legislators on Youth Advocacy Day.

"I don't go to that school [any] more," said Thompkins. "It wasn't good for me. They have a police substation right on campus and the probation department office is right next to the principal's office."

On that same day, the Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color conducted its annual hearing on how well — or not — state agencies are, as the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color puts it, "implementing policy recommendations outlined in the Select Committee's 2012 action plan to advance outcomes in health, education, employment, juvenile justice and youth development for California's boys and young men of color." It is a document watched closely by advocates across the state, with local boys and men of color campaigns formed in Stockton, Sacramento, Santa Ana, Coachella, Salinas, Oakland, Fresno and Los Angeles.

Organized by the alliance, students rallied on the Capitol steps, demanding an end to the use of willful defiance as a school disciplinary standard, and calling on lawmakers and the governor's office to take meaningful action to eliminate clear racial disparities.

During the Select Committee hearing, presentation after presentation highlighted barriers to opportunity experienced by boys and men of color:

- African-American youth are 4.5 times more likely (and Latinos youth 2.3 times more likely) than white youth to be detained for identical offenses.
- African-American youth with no prior offenses are far more likely than white youth with similar histories to be incarcerated on the same charges. Specifically, they are nine times as likely to be incarcerated for crimes against persons; four times as likely for property crimes; seven times as likely for public order offenses; and 48 times as likely for drug offenses.
- About half of white teenagers arrested on a drug charge go home without being formally charged. Only a quarter of black teens catch a similar break.
- Despite the fact that white youth are more than a third more likely to sell drugs than are African-American youth, black youth are twice as likely to be arrested on charges of drug sales. Nearly half (48 percent) of all juveniles incarcerated on drug charges are black, while blacks make up 17 percent of the juvenile population.
- When charges are filed, white teenagers are more likely to be placed on probation, while black youth are more likely to be placed behind bars. According to research from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, when white and black youth with similar histories are charged with the same offenses, black youth are six times more likely to be incarcerated in public institutions. Latino youths are three times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated under similar circumstances.
- Unequal treatment determines how deeply a young person will penetrate into the system. African-American children comprise 17 percent of the overall youth population, 30 percent of those arrested and 62 percent of those prosecuted in the adult criminal system. Latino youth are 43 percent more likely than white youth to wind up in the adult system.

“We have heard a lot about disparate outcomes for boys and men of color across our systems and disciplines, but nowhere can you see this more than in our criminal justice system,” Bill Crout, division director of the Corrections Planning and Programs Unit of the California Board of State and Community Corrections, said in his testimony to the committee. “The differential treatment young people of color face from an early age contributes to a particularly insidious cycle. The general public sees only the statistics and the faces on the evening news. The differential treatment that drives the statistics, however, is rarely reported.”

In front of a standing-room-only crowd, Select Committee Chairman Steven Bradford, the Democratic assemblyman from Gardena, said tangible strides have been made toward reducing, if not eliminating those injustices. Out of 30 pieces of legislation introduced by the committee, more than a dozen have already been signed into law — resulting in improved opportunities for boys and men of color.

Bradford also announced that an interagency board would be established to improve outcomes for boys and men of color in the areas of health, education, employment, juvenile justice and youth development.

The task force would also identify and prioritize bills aligned with the recommendations.

“The work we are doing in this committee has reached the highest levels of our government,” Bradford said. “I was recently invited to the White House along with Dr. Ross to share the work of this committee.”

Dr. Robert K. Ross, president and CEO of the California Endowment, praised the leadership of the Select Committee for its role in helping to dismantle the school-to-prison superhighway, elevating the importance of boys and men of color across the state and contributing new policies that can make a difference. School suspensions, for example, have fallen 28 percent since 2011-12.

“People are watching what we are doing,” Ross testified. “This includes President Obama, who recently launched My Brother’s Keeper, an initiative to boost the fortunes of young black and Latino men. The White House and others are looking to California for leadership.”