

Where are all the men?

As I am just completing my first year as CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee, this is a question I get asked almost every day. When I look at the list of approved Littles in our program waiting on a Big, I wonder myself: where are all the male volunteers?

First, let me tell you who needs the mentoring right now. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee has successfully identified and approved 375 kids between the ages of 6 and 17, of whom 298 have been waiting for more than a month to be matched with a mentor. Of all the waiting children, 293 are boys. Of those children, 196 are African-American.

That means that 78 percent of our children who need a mentor are boys and 67 percent of our boys who need a mentor are African-American.

We just launched an advertising and publicity campaign to recruit African-American males as mentors. Here's what we are up against.

Incarceration rates for black men are climbing, even as crime rates go down. Half of all black males in their 20s are jobless. If those young men didn't finish high school, that number climbs to 72 percent. Six out of 10 black males who dropped out of high school spent time in prison before the age of 30. On any given day, there are more black dropouts in their 20s who are in jail than at work.

And here's what we know about the risks of those kids who have a parent who is incarcerated. They are 70 percent more likely to go to jail than graduate from high school. That's not an abstract statistic. Seventy-two children on our waiting list have an incarcerated parent. They are part of our Amachi program, targeting those children that face the greatest risk of being lost.

So, where are all the male mentors? Too many are behind bars. Too many are jobless. A whole generation of would-be mentors lost to our community. Lost to our kids who need a mentor now.

Who will step forward and take a chance at breaking the cycle of need that causes the overwhelming numbers of young black men who end up in jail or jobless. Anyone can be the difference in helping a child realize a future brighter than the one they thought possible. Like it or not, those young men in prison or out of work are their mentors, right now. They need better.

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