

Issue Brief: The Intersection of African Americans and Disability

Key Words:

African Americans/black, [physical] disability, learning disability, socio-economic status, identity

Description:

This issue brief is focusing on how disability is treated in the black community. It covers social stigma surrounding disability, identity development as a member of the disabled and of the African American community, the problems with misdiagnosis of learning disability in the black community, and the continued effects of that misdiagnosis.

Key Points:

- The intersection between African Americans and Disability is complex because of the social stigma in the black community surrounding disability as well as the reality of the lack of accommodations for African Americans with disabilities in comparison with other ethnic groups.
- Stigma surrounding mental illness in the black community can lead to disabled persons not getting services they need.
- Developing the dual identity of being African American as well as disabled is essential to cognitive development and success in the work place and job opportunities.
- The misdiagnosis of learning disability in black youth and overrepresentation of black youth in special education is a problem area.
- This overrepresentation has many adverse effects including cycles of poverty and lack of political participation continuing through a lack of access to the quality education needed for upward mobility.

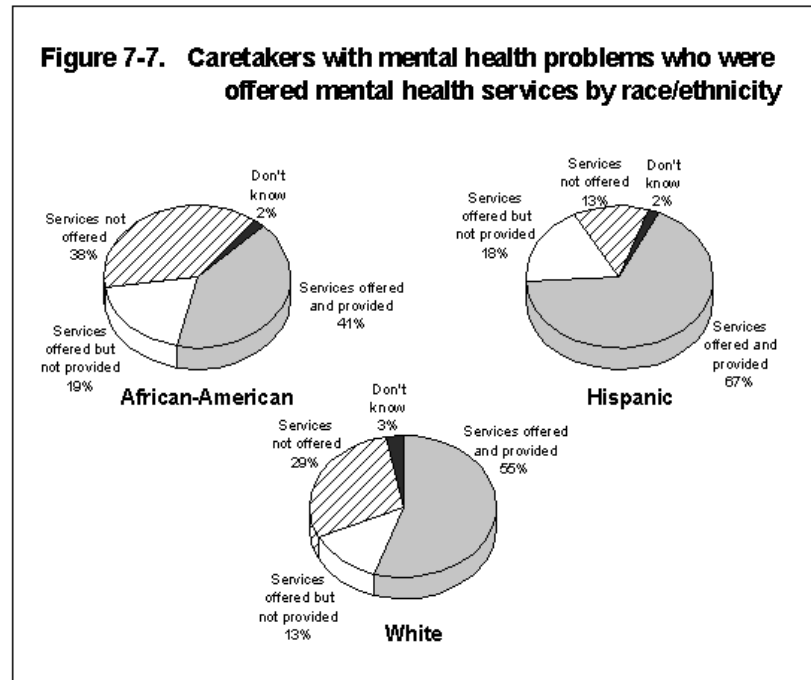
Issue Brief:

Disability is a complex issue in minority communities since it represents a cross cutting cleavage between two areas of discrimination and difference in the allocation of necessary resources in American society. Being labeled as disabled as well as minority has the doubly negative effect of making the scarce resources of job opportunities and economic advancement even more unattainable. This is especially applicable in the area of learning disability (where there is an overrepresentation among African Americans of low socio-economic status) and its diagnosis or misdiagnosis, and the repercussions of this diagnosis for African Americans. There are several layers to the issue that need to be understood in order to try to start effectively dealing with it.



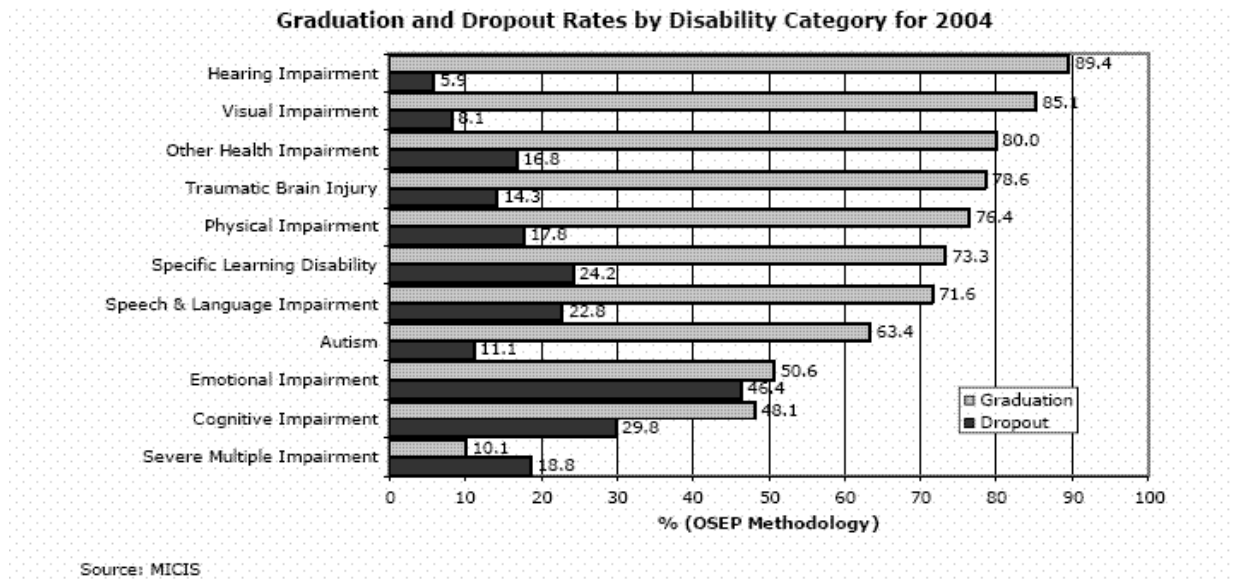
<http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupCulturalAid.asp?LRID=201>

The ostensible view of a disability, but especially mental disability, as a weakness that should be hidden if possible in the African-American community may very well stem from disability being used to bar blacks from necessary resources for a decent quality of life. Any sort of perceived weakness could be the difference in one obtaining a job or one's family starving, and since the job opportunities were (and continue to be though to a lesser degree) extremely scarce there was high competition that made it necessary to always be the best possible candidate. It leads to an interesting treatment of disability on the whole in the African-American community. In the article "Overcoming Barriers Faced by African-American Families with a Family Member with Mental Illness" published in the *National Council on Family Relations*, we see that according to the study the authors performed, for problems within the black community about mental illness/disability "cited beliefs and attitudes range from somewhat generalized caregiver fears of the mental health system and the experience of social stigma to specific cultural beliefs about the nature of mental illness and caregivers' fear that the consumer will become dependent upon them." (Biegal et. al. p.7)



African American caretakers are less likely to receive mental health services than their white and Hispanic counterparts <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/97natstudy/raceethn.htm>

In the article “Racial and Disability Identity: Implications for the Career Counseling of African Americans With Disability” published in the *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin*, the authors write that “at a basic level, the intersection of racial identity and disability identity would comprise four levels” made up of combinations of high and low levels of development of racial and disability identities. A person who has a highly developed sense of racial and disability identity will have more access to “internal resources (e.g., factual and procedural knowledge) and external resources (e.g., networks, accommodations, legislation) for successful career participation”. This is complicated however by the fact that disabilities often go undiagnosed or not treated properly in lower income African-American communities so that identity development is stifled and so are the job opportunities that accompany them.



Specific Learning Disability is the 3rd highest area of dropout among high school students and it disproportionately affects low income African American youth as well as Latino and American Indian Youth.

<http://www.tapartnership.org/content/education/faq/schoolBased01.php>

As mentioned previously, the misdiagnosis and overrepresentation of learning disability in black youth is large problem area because education is one of the pathways used for continued disenfranchisement of minority groups. The lack of access to quality education has a direct link to income levels, which has a strong correlation to voter turnout and the phenomena of the groups who need the most help from the political system being the least likely to participate through voting (perhaps since many cannot see the effects of importance of their vote through policy change). In the article “Church Attendance, Social Capital, and Black Voter Participation” the authors explain that “given the disproportionate number of African Americans situated in the lower-socioeconomic strata, human capital theory would lead us to posit low levels of political participation by blacks when compared to other groups who fall in higher economic categories.” (Liu et. al. p 1) It is plain to see that diagnosis of mental disability (whether it is valid or not) will affect class placement, rigor of work, access to materials type of instruction, and access to higher education and all of these things affect a person’s ability to develop human, social, and political capital. These in turn affect a person’s ability to participate in the political machine and we can see the strong chain of action between disenfranchisement and disability.

Works Cited and General References:

Biegel, David E., Jeffrey A. Johnsen and Robert Shafran. “Overcoming Barriers Faced by African-American Families with a Family Member with Mental Illness.” *Family Relations*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Apr., 1997), pp. 163-178. Published by: [National Council on Family Relations](http://www.nationalcouncilonfamilyrelations.org) Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/585040>

- Harley, Debra A., and Elias Mpopu. "Racial and Disability Identity: Implications for the Career Counseling of African Americans With Disability." *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin* October 2006 50: 14-23, doi:10.1177/00343552060500010301. Web. 17 Apr. 2012
- Liu, Baodong, Sharon D. Wright Austin, and Byron D'Andrá Orey. "Church Attendance, Social Capital, And Black Voting Participation." *Social Science Quarterly* 90.3 (2009): 576-592. *Social Sciences Full Text (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 11 Mar. 2012.
- McClain, Paula D., and Joseph Stewart Jr. "Can We All Get Along?" Westview, 2010. Print.
- "Our Colored Population." *African Repository and Colonial Journal (1825-1849)* 1843: 266-. *American Periodicals*. Web. 18 Apr. 2012 .

Relevant Websites:

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/stereotype-threat/>

<http://www.tapartnership.org>

http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/frc_afrc.htm