

Odds are longer for black men

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percent of those who had finished high school. Also, among dropouts in their late 20s, more are in prison (34 percent) than working (30 percent).

These numbers did not surprise Keith Cradle, program coordinator for the Male Involvement Program, a male enrichment program sponsored by the Mecklenburg County Health Department.

"We come across that all day," he said.

Cradle believes the problem stems with the way young people are taught to deal with conflicts. He said they are not learning anger management skills at home, and are coming up with ideas of how they are going to deal with situations in their lives.

"They really don't care," Cradle said. "When they go out there with that attitude, they will go out and do something (destructive)."

Corey Baker blames the breakdown in the family unit for many of the problems facing young people today, along with a lack of options available to them.

"A lot of kids, they don't have a lot to look forward to," he said.

Many are reluctant to go to school and get a good education, fearing rejection by their peers, said Baker, a substance abuse counselor. Girls often tell him that if given a choice, they would rather date a "thug" than someone who is pursuing an education and living a less dangerous lifestyle.

"And a guy thinks, 'if I wanna get a girl, that's the kind of lifestyle I gotta lead,'" Baker said. "And by the time they reach ninth or 10th grade, they're ready to quit school."

Baker cited local statistics that said that 66 percent of black males drop out of school, which mirrors the national statistics for inner-city black males. According to the 2000 Census, 22 percent of African Americans over age 25 living in the Charlotte area, did not graduate high school.

Lure of the streets

High school dropouts from

unstable families, of course, are not the only ones vulnerable to taking a path to a life of crime and hopelessness.

Dale McKinnon grew up in Lumberton, raised by his grandparents, who he said took him to church and made sure he attended school and graduated. However, it was what he saw outside the home and on the streets that influenced him most. Most of the people he associated with drank alcohol and smoked marijuana, so he did the same, beginning at age 12. Years later, McKinnon started using, then selling, cocaine and crack.

"I had jewelry, clothes, everything I wanted," McKinnon said, including a Lexus. "A lot came with that, though. I always had to watch my back."

Eventually McKinnon started using crack, lost his possessions, and served time in prison on several drug-related felony charges.

Baker said he did not take school seriously when he was growing up, since his primary focus was on basketball. He was considered one of the best point guards in the nation, and was the first in his family to graduate high school.

He was influenced by the streets, because even though he went to the Boys and Girls Club, when he left there and went outside, "I had to be true to the game." He hung out with older boys and did what they did, which eventually led to drug use, robbery and homelessness, even being expelled from two colleges due to his behavior.

Much work to be done

Cradle said there are questions that need to be asked after reading the statistics about black men.

"We need to ask what are we going to do? Are we gonna step out and do what needs to be done?"

The program Cradle heads, the Male Involvement Program, is designed to help men ages 17-29 in socialization and job skills and creating a positive lifestyle, with an emphasis on personal development. Sessions last approximately four months, and conclude with a graduation ceremony. Cradle says the program tracks graduates and the progress they make after leaving, and he gives employment references.

Cradle said what he notices about graduates of the program is the sense of accomplishment they have upon graduating. Cradle said the program is there for those who want it, and he asks the participants from the beginning, "Who wants to be here?"

McKinnon, 40, said a willingness to change his life is what led to him walking away from his former drug-dealing and abusing lifestyle. He said on his last trip to jail, he began reading the Bible, and recalled many of the values and principles he had been taught as a child. Upon his release from jail, he entered a drug rehabilitation program, and a counselor found a place for him to go upon completion of the program, the Charlotte Rescue Mission.

The Charlotte Rescue Mission is a Christian-based residential facility that provides drug rehabilitation for homeless addicts, based on a 12-step program. According to Charles Sosnik, marketing and communications director, and the Rev. Tony Marciano, executive director, there are many reasons why people become drug-addicted and homeless, but the mission serves to treat the addiction and teach its clients a different way of living.

McKinnon raised his eyebrows when told of the statistics in the Times article, but believes those who want to change their lives for the better can do so. He completed the drug rehabilitation program at the mission, as well as a vocational program there. He has been drug-free

for nearly four years, and currently works as the kitchen supervisor and chef at the mission. He attends Central Piedmont Community College and has a 4.0 average, working toward a degree in heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

"God is still working things out," McKinnon said.

Baker, 35, also cited spiritu-

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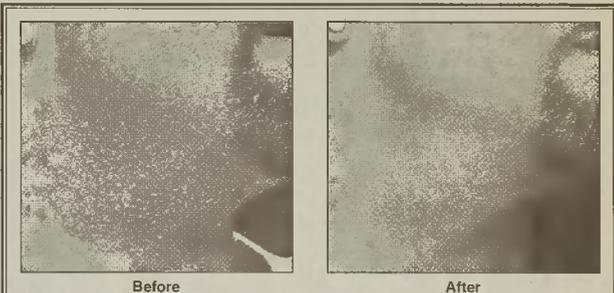
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Corrections

Last week's Post incorrectly identified a photo of Miss Winston-Salem State University 2006-07. Stephanie Robinson succeeded Tiffany Richmond, who relinquished the crown after her grade point average dropped below 2.5.



Robinson

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