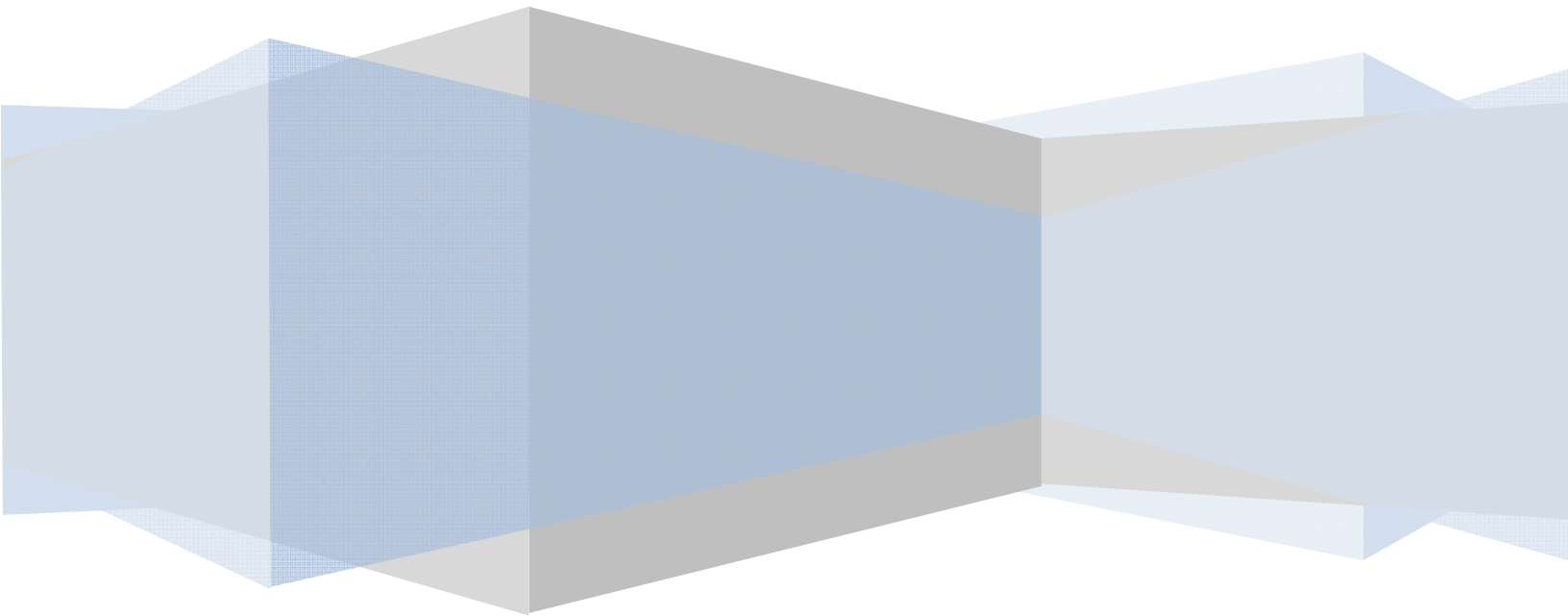


# DRUG USE AND THE BLACK AMERICAN MALE:

*An Observation through a DuBoisian Double Consciousness Lens*

James H. Costen, Jr.

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## Introduction

Examining the race, class, and gender intersection in the United States of America, we find (among other tristful facts) that the young Black male's exposure to the criminal justice system is early, extensive, intensive, and recidivistic. We do hear the stories of transition from various adversities from time to time, but significant enough are the numbers of the Black males opting out of mainstream society by opting out of education. For the Black male that graduates from high school, their approach to college is with higher self confidence than Black females (seventy percent male, sixty-five percent female); however, the Black male/Black female college attendance gap continues to widen (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado 2005). As a result, the Black male's future for upward mobility shows progressively dismal. The news broadcasts are riddled with horrors, not imagined, not entertaining, and basically, parental discretion should be advised. These stories are so close to us that we can experience them through nearly all of our senses.

Historically, we see where the White American has stifled groups in the USA by orchestrating stratifying designs that have permeated most institutions. This process of "othering" is disheartening as some groups are kept up and some groups are kept down (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). Schwalbe, et.al. go on to discuss the creation of identity codes that make it difficult or impossible for the "other" to actualize – the premise behind White male dominance. The intent of this paper is to examine the deeply embedded and perpetuated systems of social inequality and racism in the USA that continue to fill the sails of many Black American males with winds that blow them toward the criminal justice system. According to the statistics provided by the criminal justice system, the

use of drugs and drug-involved behaviors are leading causes for disproportionately high incarceration rates for Black males. DuBois' concept of double consciousness provides an effective theoretical lens through which we can examine fatalistic drug-use behavior of the Black American male.

### **The Statistics**

In order to show the fatalistic nature of drug-use behavior, we will examine statistics provided by the criminal justice system. According to West and Sabol (2009), Bureau of Justice Statisticians, there were 1,610,584 adult inmates under state or federal jurisdiction at mid-year 2008. Of that population, 40.24 percent are incarcerated in the South region, and 92.81 percent are male. For this study, it is paramount to include the juvenile inmate population. When we do, our prison population increases by 700,616 to 2,311,200.

There are evidences that Black American males are disproportionately represented in the prison system. Of the 2.3 million of the prison population mentioned above, 39.54 percent are Black, 34.92 percent are White, and 19.92 are Hispanic. Further analyses of this data show the Black male population to be higher than any other group between the ages of 18 and 39. This statistic is crucial when we look at how this affects employment and age-range productivity; however, when we look at the inmate population per 100,000 U.S. residents, the number of Black male inmates is higher in all age categories. The overall inmate population estimate for Black male per 100,000 U.S. residents for mid-year 2008 was 4,777 compared to 1,760 for Hispanic men and 727 for White men.

Of Georgia's inmate population, 69.60 percent report either "Drug Only," "Alcohol Only," or "Drugs and Alcohol" histories. We find evidence of intergenerational substance abuse

in data, where in 2004, 13.9 percent of state and 10 percent of federal inmates report having parents/guardians with “Both Alcohol and Drug” histories. Statistics also show that 56.2 percent (642,500 of 1,143,400 - 2004 population) reported being either dependent on or abusing drugs twelve months prior to admission. In fact, of that same 2004 population, 17 percent of state and 18 percent of federal inmates report that their current crime was committed to get money for drugs. Grade ten is the median grade level attained by males incarcerated in the State of Georgia which supports the above-mentioned claims about education. These statistics show that there is a significant USA population addicted or abusive with drugs, majority of them do not receive treatment, and majority of those that do not receive treatment cite the inability to afford treatment as their reason for not receiving treatment. Therefore, they go on to bitter ends – the prison population in the United States of America is unusually large, abusive with illegal drugs, disproportionately Black, male, and under educated.

### **Some History**

The African knew the fecund structure of his family/community life, their contribution in the development of the world’s basic survival tools, and their proud connection to this heritage. As they raced from those seeking them for pecuniary gain, much of this connection melted away. They, and centuries of agriculture, medicine, astrology, worship, the arts, architecture, and political systems were poured onto unfamiliar turf, into unfamiliar social systems, given unfamiliar (non-African) names in unfamiliar ceremonies (Fanon 1967, Costen 1993). We have to acknowledge the many centuries of the African’s fruitful existence (and its dismantling) to feel the depth and breadth of the “damage” done to this precious cargo. The ceremonial beating of the drums stopped, and in this silence, they were forced to unlearn all that they knew – in their

beatings, they were forced to learn what could not have made much sense to them. If we were facing an ocean of degradation, we would find the African in early America nested in the hadal zone!

### **Black Male Drug Use Behavior through a DuBoisian Double Consciousness Lens**

DuBois (1903) writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face (3).

DuBois (1899) learns from his data collected for *The Philadelphia Negro* that economic exclusion constrains the Black American making it harder to “retain ambition and self-respect”(285). There is a widespread feeling that “the Negro is something less than American and ought not to be much more than what he is” (284). Posited as an entry to “success” in our society, it could be argued that our systems of education have been somewhat a system of disempowerment for the Black male. Through the processes of imposing negative images, the Black male (now dehumanized) can easily be exploited – reduced to attitudes, trends, and statistics (Said 1979). Being that the prison population is disproportionately Black and male, one can infer that these systems of racial stratification and disempowerment have been effective.

In seeking a vocation, Royster (2003) found in her study that White and Black men could receive the same training, yet in seeking employment, Whites were 1) about three times more likely than Blacks to have favorable “training-to-work” experiences; 2) able to make stable trajectories within their vocations and/or able to successfully switch fields while Blacks were often forced to abandon their original trades. She also found it inaccurate to blame Black men for their labor difficulties being that hers and many other social scientists see racism continue to limit life chances of “moderately educated” Black males (185). Stereotyping of Black males has been consistent over the years, particularly as it relates to hiring and mobility. Because of poor life chances and a yearning to provide for self and/or family, many Black males are opting for illegal wage earnings (Anderson 1999, Royster 2003). Some succeed in selling, but sadly some do not – they die, they continue fatalistic drug-use behavior, and/or they become hopelessly addicted (Anderson 1999).

The aforementioned lends itself to an interesting discussion on double consciousness. There is the power of racist stereotyping and division on the Black male’s life and thought (Stewart 1983, Dickson 1992 and Balfour 1998). After unsuccessful attempts to negotiate two cultural identities, the alienated lifestyle becomes antisocial, addictive, exploitive, confrontational, and risky. DuBois believed that these latter behaviors would be characterized as the evidences of one’s incomplete self (Goodwin and Scimecca 2006). The other consciousness is the expression of spirit – possibly birthed not of the Bible but from Africa (Kelley 2002). DuBois would argue here that beside the obvious reaction (in deviance) to the powers and influences of racism, their second “gifted” sight has much to offer a society (DuBois 1903:3) so inundated in its materialism (Dickson 1992 and Blum 2007).

For the Black male drug user, there is an attempt to avoid the pains of not being able to experience the “American Dream” because of dehumanizing and alienating ideologies. DuBois’ theory of double consciousness proffers resolution for the drug user as they find *guided* reconciliation (a merging of double self) in order to become better and truer. Serendipitously, society gains from a population that was once written off.

### **Analysis**

What is interesting about the concept of double consciousness is the fact that, even though the African male brought to America and many Black American males today have been, and are being, subjected to demoralizing treatment and characterization, we still see evidence of what DuBois (1903) termed “attempts to attain self-conscious manhood” (3). He and other Black American males achieved and are achieving despite the blatant disrespect for what they offer society – best illustrated in DuBois’ life. Redding (1961) suggests that DuBois’ concept of double consciousness penned in *Souls of Black Folk* opened doors for all Black Americans – even those (or possibly, especially those) opting to achieve, against the odds, silently detached from the perils of racism (Redding 1961).

DuBois would view today’s high, disproportionately Black male, drug-using, incarceration rates to be a result of covert White supremacy that has replaced the blatant political incorrectness that we witnessed before the Civil Rights Movement (Boothe 2007). He understood the Black American need to develop economically, politically, culturally, and morally; therefore, his approach for amelioration would be for the Black male to acknowledge his robust African history alongside his robust history here. Against the wails of oppression in the USA as a backdrop, DuBois would offer himself as an impactful example that these systems

alone do not have to completely stifle growth. With the statistics of the drug-using Black male as a backdrop, DuBois would reiterate urgency for social change toward a better human existence in the USA.

Blight (1990) calls this change “humanism and cultural pluralism” (3). This change would obviously represent an upward nudge for the Black in the USA, but it is change that would serendipitously serve the USA wholly. Césaire (1972) posits that the colonizer experiences a transformation to something less human as they view and treat others as something less human. Black (2007) concurs and even suggests that, Whites have “not realized they are incomplete or dehumanized themselves because their whole language and outlook tricks them into thinking they are normal and healthy” (399). DuBois would suggest that the vantage point held by the Black male is a position that could leverage this magnatuginous social change better than non-Blacks.

Perhaps DuBois underestimated the recalcitrance of racism. What has physically, emotionally, and mentally enslaved the Black in the USA is not news anymore. It is not terribly difficult to embrace the concept of shamelessly merging Blackness and Americanness, but this merging has not yet become seamless. There is awareness today that classical literature includes works of Mbiti, Aristophanes, and Woodson – classical music includes works of Masekela, Bach, and Monk – classical dance includes works of Adowa and Ailey. People of color in the USA are still people of color in the USA; however, many people of color that migrate to the USA today do so without compromising cultural ties. Connectedness to Africa for the Black connected to the USA slave trade is still problematic.



## Conclusion

DuBois effectively reiterated earlier theories regarding societal trends and how they can affect groups and individuals. He focused on one particular group of people (the Black in the USA) and went on to encourage discourse on how structural inequality and racial discrimination can enfeeble individual members of this group. Although he did not coin the phrase “double consciousness,” he used it to shed light on the impact racist social stressors made on the lives of the Black living in the USA. Many would, understandingly, argue that the horrors witnessed in Black America today is by their own hands. The literature reviewed supports the argument that systems of social inequality initiated and nurtured by White supremacy ideologies are stout and disenfranchising to the Black male. The literature also suggests that blatant expressions of these ideologies have now become covert. Nevertheless, the healthy development of many Black males is thwarted by this disenfranchisement and so is his ability self actualize – evident in fatalistic drug-use behaviors.

Consequently, the prison population in the United States of America is unusually large, abusive with illegal drugs, disproportionately Black, male, and under educated. Paradoxically, the incarcerated drug-using Black male is clearly grappling with his creativity, independence, spontaneity and reality, but they are in a good place, any higher expression of drug-use fatalism is death – his or someone else’s by his hands. In an attempt to suggest a more sociological approach to this particular social ill, DuBois’ concept of double consciousness has been applied.

Consistent with known successful treatment and/or rehabilitation from drug abuse/addiction is DuBois’ idea that the merging of two consciousnesses creates a better self and wholeness. The Black male steeping in antagonism between his sense of self and imposed

contempt lunges for what has been determined to be self destructive drug-using behaviors.

DuBois encourages an unlearning of negative images of self that has been constructed by racist ideologies and aimed squarely between the Black males' eyes. He also encourages a learning of truths about self and his connection to centuries of empowering African and African-in-America history.

Due to how many Black males in the USA interpret and value the world, they set out to self medicate. Their drugs of choice is not random – they are ones that do the job – alleviate emotional pains of hopelessness, alienation and low self-esteem (Rokach 2005). Landing in the prison system is, perhaps, the “bottoming out” that is most often necessary before processes toward recovery can occur. It is at this point of vulnerability where the drug user is best approached about the possibilities of recovery. DuBois would seize this opportunity to proffer to the man in this state hope and self worth.

Another key component in the processes of recovery from drug use and abuse is ability for the messenger to identify with those whom they are attempting to assist. If W.E.B. DuBois himself were charged with ensuring successful community reentry for the drug involved offender; 1) the concept of double consciousness would be employed, and 2) the deliverer of this service would be one who has himself merged consciousnesses. He would also encourage that this changed man maintain a subsequent existence insistent on being all that he can be in order to deliver the message to the next man. Idealistically, these processes would decrease the incarceration rates of the Black male while offering depth in scholarship on the perils of racist oppression. Some scholars argue, as discussed in this paper, that even the oppressor would get in touch with their unhealthy self consciousness.

Worth mentioning, W.E.B. DuBois penned “On Being Crazy” that ran in the July 23 issue of *The Crisis* (Lewis 2000). This particular piece shows how staunch and courageous he was in the face of his own experience with racist adversity. This particular piece held the racist mirror in front of the “cultured [W] hites who read *The Crisis*” (85), and this particular piece picked at the sores still fresh for many Black Americans in 1923. After reviewing scholarship about addiction being a mental illness, one can satirically make a connection here.

This paper does little to address the USA drug quagmire; however, it has been my intent to shed light on the possibilities of discussing sociological solutions and political leveraging. From the review of the literature, we can see that there is a correlation between processes of marginalization the social stressors of inequality and stratification and those embracing fatalistic drug-use behaviors. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to tap the public sociological sub-discipline in order to promote movement toward making political headway on this matter. Fatalistic drug use behavior is an issue that obviously affects the USA as a whole, but the statistics show an alarming and tristful effect on the Black American male. The science of sociology lends itself to providing trends and statistical data without much prescribing; however, sociology and its anomolous character can be viewed as the perfect vehicle upon which remedies for social ills and social movements should ride.

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The criminal stereotype of blacks in the US is an ethnic stereotype according to which African Americans, and African American males in particular, are dangerous criminals. The origin of this stereotype is that as a demographic they are proportionally over-represented in the numbers of those that are arrested for committing crimes: for example, according to official FBI statistics, in 2015 51.1% of people arrested for homicide were African American, even though African American people account only for The 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that nearly 21 million Americans have a substance use disorder but only a fraction receive treatment. For the report, the federal government used the definitions of substance use disorders as they are explained in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. People are considered to have a substance use disorder if, for example, they have strong urges to use a substance or can't control their use of it, or if their use impairs them in social situations or leads to risky behavior. The report also said that an estimated 27.1 million people in the U.S. used an illegal drug in the past month. Substance abuse in African American males leads to higher mortality rates, high rates of alcohol-related problems, more likely to be victims of crimes, and HIV/AIDS. African Americans comprised only 14% of the U.S. population but comprised 38% of the jail population. However, the recent increase in marijuana use and the non-medical use of prescription type drugs among black adolescents highlight the need for treatment programs and prevention strategies (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2011).