

# African American Quality of Life: Implications for Public Management and Social Policy

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In 1899 W.E.B. DuBois published *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. The renowned sociologist Elijah Anderson (1996) described this book as an unrecognized, yet classic work in the social science literature. Notably, DuBois adeptly utilized the confluence of urban ethnography, social history, and descriptive statistics to investigate and describe the living conditions for 40,000 African American or “Negro” residents of the city’s seventh ward at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The objective of his resulting scholarship was “to lay before the public such a body of information as may be a safe guide for all efforts toward the solution of the many Negro problems of a great city” (DuBois 1996, 1).

The National Urban League, with its annual publication that highlights the current state of black America, has followed the trail Dubois’ scholarship blazed.<sup>2</sup> The equality index included within the organization’s most recent publications of the *State of Black America* serves as a barometer to gauge five conditions—economic, educational, health, social justice, and civic engagement—that directly affect the African American community within the United States.<sup>3</sup> According to the 2007 *State of Black America*, the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this article, I use the terms *African American* and *black* interchangeably to refer to individuals of African descent.

<sup>2</sup> Others have also followed the trail of DuBois’ scholarship. In particular, in 1987 Farley and Allen published *The Color Line and Quality of Life*, in which they utilized 1980 census data to examine what transpired at the intersection of race and opportunities or outcomes for black and white Americans. Specifically, they compared demographic, social, and economic characteristics of blacks and whites to discover to what extent racial identity influenced their opportunities and outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> The National Urban League has been publishing its *State of Black America* for more than 30 years. Beginning in 2004, the report included an equality index, a statistical measurement that highlights the disparities or equality gaps that exist between black and white Americans across five different categories: economics, education, health, social justice and civic engagement. These categories, which are comprised of specific sub-categories extrapolated from the most recently

economic, educational, health, social justice, and civic engagement statuses of blacks, as compared to white Americans, were 57%, 79%, 78%, 66%, and 1.05%, respectively. At the aggregate level, the equality index put the status of African Americans at 73.3% of whites, a minimal improvement from the 73% score in 2006 (National Urban League 2007). These findings offer important public policy and public management implications in the areas of housing, education, health, criminal justice, and community development.

With a similar general aim as DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro* and the National Urban League's *State of Black America*, this special issue, exploring select facets that can affect the quality of life for contemporary African Americans, was birthed during the Brothers of the Academy Institute's Think Tank for African-American Progress.<sup>4</sup> This gathering of scholars from across the United States was held on the campus of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia in October 2006. Like the think tank's theme, "Black Scholars and the Study of Black Folks: Setting Interdisciplinary Research and Policy Agendas for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," the objective of this body of work is to advance not only our understanding of those conditions affecting segments of the African American community, but, equally, the social policy and public management efforts needed to effectively address those conditions. Toward these ends, two questions encase this special issue:

1. What public policy improvements are needed to address specific issues affecting the quality of African American life?
2. What are the implications for the public policymaking process, public management, and/or the practitioner community?

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this issue is *quality of life*. Quality of life is an interdisciplinary concept that explores the degree to which individuals or groups enjoy the important possibilities of their lives based on three life domains:

1. *Being*, inclusive of its physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions
2. *Belonging*, inclusive of its physical, social, and community or communal dimensions
3. *Becoming*, inclusive of its practical, leisure, and growth dimensions

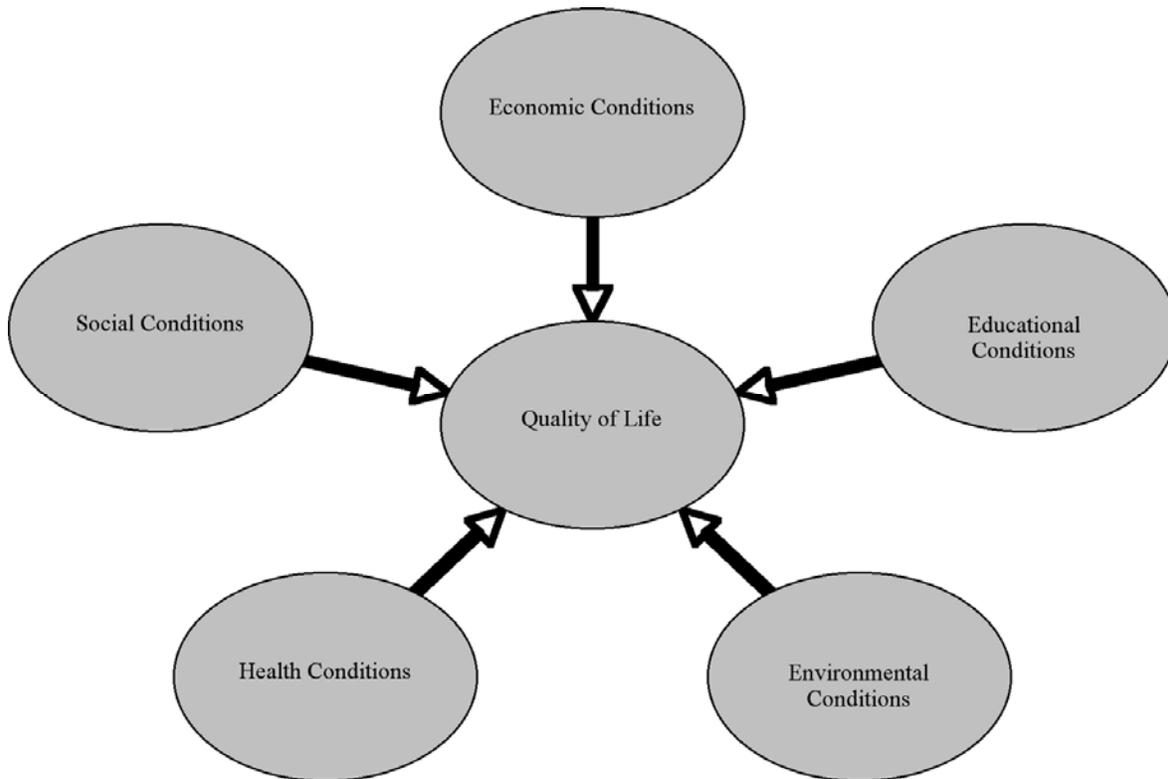
In essence, quality of life is a concept that is associated with subjective (or individual) and collective (or community) well-being and is the by-product of the interplay among social, health, educational, economic and environmental conditions which affect human and social development (Baldwin, Godfrey, and Propper 1990). Hence, at the individual or subjective level, quality of life is about the good life, while at the community or collective level, it is about the good society. As such, quality of life highlights the relationship between commodities, characteristics, and utilities by linking the universe of things with the universe of people (Culyer 1990). Moreover, such descriptions demonstrate its centrality in social science research and highlight its

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available data, are weighted to produce an overall equality index to represent the status of African Americans in comparison to whites in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Brothers of the Academy Institute seeks to foster collegial relationships across a community of scholars towards the "production of high quality, publishable research and scholarship that focuses upon improving African and African-American peoples, schools, and communities" (<http://www.brothersoftheacademy.org/>).

significance regarding public policy, particularly the development of social policy, and public management in achieving this standard (Phillips 2006).



**FIGURE 1.** Conditions impacting the quality of life.

### Overview of the Special Issue

The objective of this special issue is to examine some of the factors that affect the quality of African American life at the subjective (or individual) and collective (or community) levels using an interdisciplinary approach. To this end, the issue's areas of focus include criminal justice; education (at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels); housing (inclusive of neighborhood effects); and public health policy (see Figure 2). As such, it draws upon different methodological approaches and leverages the contributions of scholars from diverse backgrounds, including African American studies, education, public health, social work, and sociology.

Public health and the criminal justice system figure prominently in the first two articles. Gant and Gant's "Impact of Poverty, Sex Ratios, and Marital Status on HIV Infection Rates among African American Women in Mississippi," uses data from the 2000 U.S. Census and the Mississippi Department of Health's STD/HIV Division to examine the impact of poverty, sex ratios, and family configuration or marital status on HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) infection rates among African American women in Mississippi. Their findings highlight that the relationship between poverty and HIV/AIDS among African Americans is not as invariant and inevitable as current research suggests. They conclude with a set of pertinent recommendations for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners.

The second article, Richardson's "Contextualizing Juvenile Re-entry for Young African American Males: From Prison Yard to Schoolyard," focuses on the criminal justice system in general and the juvenile justice system in particular. Richardson couples a national overview of juvenile re-entry for African American males with a more contextual analysis of re-entry for young African American males in Chicago. He concludes by noting the need for additional research to enhance our understanding of the social, economic, educational, and public health implications of re-entry for young African American males, as well as the development and implementation of new, non-traditional approaches to programming that address the social problems that impact this population. He particularly calls attention to the need to (1) better address the educational neglect and labor market marginalization African American male juvenile offenders encounter; (2) create more community-based behavioral healthcare interventions to address long-term mental health/behavioral problems; and (3) foster revolutionary thinking, research, and programming to address early violent deaths and their impact on the public health of young African American males returning from juvenile detention.

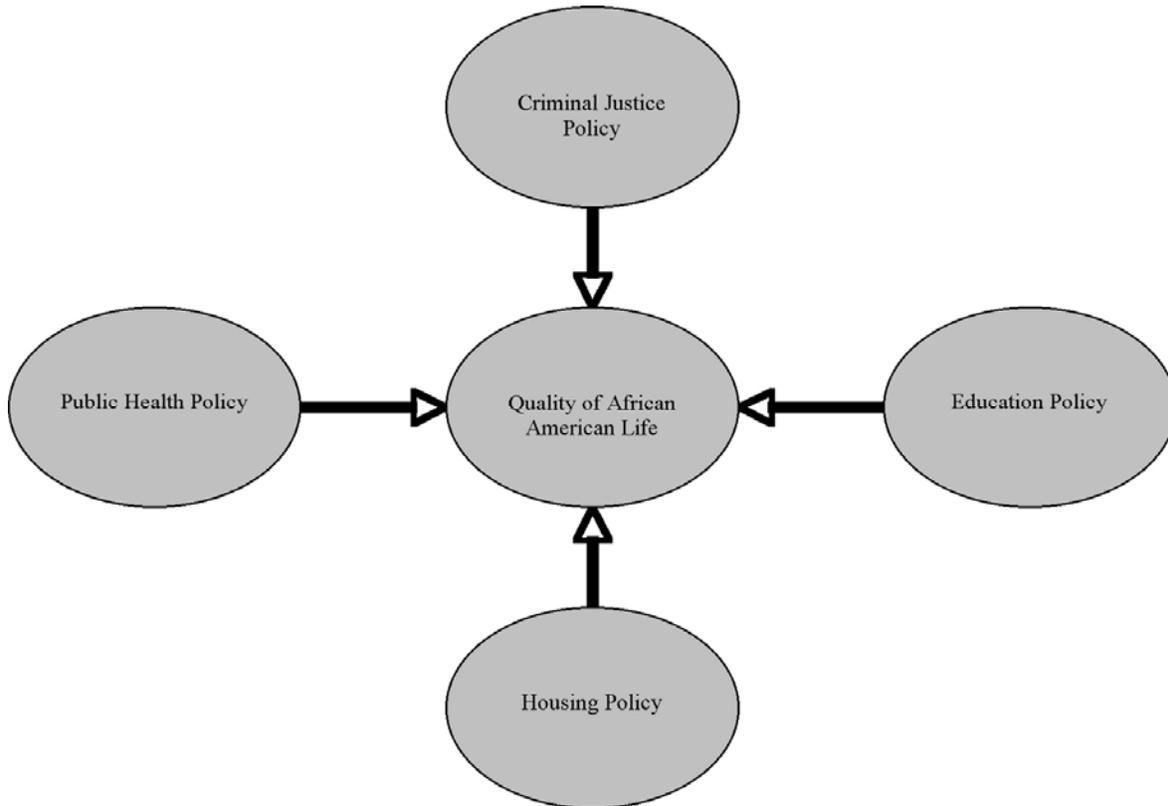
The issue begins its foray into education with Milner and Williams' "Analyzing Education Policy and Reform with Attention to Race and Socio-Economic Status." Miller and Williams analyze education policy and reform efforts, paying particular attention to the roles that race and socio-economic status play in policies and practices impacting and contributing to the P-12 educational experiences of African American students. They offer recommendations for enhancing the recruitment, retention, and development of this population, as well as implementing systemic changes to increase funding, develop stronger teacher education programs, and fortify policy-to-practice and practice-to-policy connections.

Tuitt and Carter's "Negotiating Atmospheric Threats and Racial Assaults in Predominantly White Educational Institutions" follows Milner and William's analysis with an exploration of the question, "Under what conditions does learning and the task of achieving academically become racialized for African American students at the secondary and post-secondary levels in predominately white institutions?" Drawing upon their research, they offer a theoretical analysis of how high-achieving black students in secondary and post-secondary learning environments experience and negotiate stereotype threats and racial micro-aggressions in predominantly white institutions. Moreover, they note the related implications for enhancing educational research, practice, and policies for the academic advancement of all black students.

Housing is the final area explored in this special issue. In their pilot study, "Supportive Housing: Implications for its Efficacy as Intervention with Special Needs Low-Income African Americans," Collard and Larkin investigate the efficacy of supportive housing—a concept that combines affordable housing with social services—as an intervention strategy to assist low-income, African American single mothers in recovery with relapse prevention and the acquisition of life skills. Their findings offer important implications for continued policy investments in this program and contemporary social work practice.

Related to Collard and Larkin's investigation of the efficacy of supportive housing, the final article, Johnson's "Who Benefits from Concentrated Affluence? A Synthesis of Neighborhood Effects Considering Race, Gender, and Education Outcomes" uses hierarchical linear models to synthesize the findings of forty sample estimates to

ascertain the significance and magnitude of neighborhood affluence effects on education outcomes according to race and gender. Johnson's findings of "benefit gaps" in regard to race and gender underscore the important implications for urban and education policies which seek to create economically heterogeneous settings as a remedy for persistent inequalities in educational opportunity and achievement.



**FIGURE 2.** Foci of special issue: Factors affecting the quality of African American life.

### **The Challenge of Looking to the Past, Present, and Future**

This special issue is an effort to continue advancing our understanding of some of the many factors that have impacted and continue to impact the quality of African American life. It is also meant to inspire the efforts of students, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike. Like DuBois' *The Philadelphia Negro*, I hope that this collection of work will serve as an impetus and guide for more research and action towards examining, understanding, and eradicating the various factors that may impede or limit the total actualization of the *being*, *becoming*, and *belonging* dimensions of some individual African Americans and segments of the African American community. In closing, I draw upon the Latin phrase *respice, adspice, prospice*: As students, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners we must continue to look to the past, the present, and the future.

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Juan Gilbert, Jared Llorens, and Leon Caldwell, who served as sounding boards when this issue was conceived. It is because of their respective contributions that the Latin phrase *e pluribus unum* has been realized: one thematic special issue from many disciplinary and methodological perspectives. I also would like to commend this journal for its commitment to the social well-being of diverse populations and for providing a forum and outlet for scholarly research that addresses diverse issues.

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