“We must take a leap of faith, place trust in these young people, and believe that if we provide them with the right opportunities, they will respond and become productive citizens. We have to be brave.”

-Victor M. Rios
ABOUT MY BROTHERS KEEPER:

In February 2014, following the death of Trayvon Martin, President Barack Obama launched the My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative to address persistent opportunity gaps facing boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential. The My Brother’s Keeper Community Challenge seeks to inspire community leaders, and encourage their commitment to ensuring all young people can succeed.

Through this initiative, the Administration is joining with cities and towns, businesses, and foundations who are taking important steps to connect young people to mentoring, support networks, and the skills they need to find a good job or go to college and work their way into the middle class. MBK is focused on six milestones:

**Getting a Healthy Start and Entering School Ready to Learn**
All children should have a healthy start and enter school ready – cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally.

**Reading at Grade Level by Third Grade**
All children should be reading at grade level by age 8 – the age at which reading to learn becomes essential.

**Graduating from High School Ready for College and Career**
All youth should receive a quality high school education and graduate with the skills and tools needed to advance to postsecondary education or training.

**Completing Postsecondary Education or Training**
Every American should have the option to attend postsecondary education and receive the education and training needed for the quality jobs of today and tomorrow.

**Successfully Entering the Workforce**
Anyone who wants a job should be able to get a job that allows them to support themselves and their families.

**Keeping Kids on Track and Giving Them Second Chances**
All youth and young adults should be safe from violent crime; and individuals who are confined should receive the education, training, and treatment they need for a second chance.
ABOUT MY BROTHERS KEEPER - ROCKFORD (815 MBK):

On November 14, 2014, at a convening hosted by Rockford Housing Authority CEO Ron Clewer and the City of Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey, a group of leaders accepted the My Brother’s Keeper Community Challenge and formed the “815 MBK Action Team.” The team developed a purpose statement:

“To help as many boys and young men of color get on track and stay on track. It is our desire to provide the tools and support that they need to think more broadly about their future. We want to build on initiatives and programs that already work. MBK Rockford wants to fill in gaps where needed, and be used as a bridge for initiatives, programs and organizations to work together ultimately.”

The group hit the ground running. During the following months, 815 MBK conducted a series of events in various locations throughout the city – including having focus groups with stakeholders, bringing community members together to have “real talk” on important issues, and pulling together programming to help families get connected to mentorship resources. At these events, concerned parents, teachers, city youth, community leaders and officials convened to share their thoughts and feelings about the challenges facing boys and men of color in the City of Rockford. Volunteers took notes and collected feedback from attendees during these events. This feedback has been organized and presented in the following report.
EXAMPLES OF 815MBK PROGRAMMING

Friday, November 14, 2014
1:30 pm to 4:30 pm
Discovery Center
Kresge Hall

POP-IN MENTORSHIP!
There is a great opportunity for YOU to "pop-in" in engage young men at Kennedy Middle School!

Staff is asking for volunteers to stop in during critical times of the school day on Tuesdays and Thursdays to shoot hoops, play chess or just sit and talk! Times are:
- 11:55a-12:10p
- 12:50p-1:05p
- 1:45p-2:00p

For more information, contact:
JENNY KEEFER
815.654.4880
Facebook.com/MBKRockford

815 Summer Fun List

MBK-Rockford created this list to help you find summer events that include food, music and games that the whole family can enjoy!**

- **Bookerfest** - Booker Washington Center
  July 17 5p-9p, July 18 10a-9p, July 19 2p-8p
- **Divine Divas Saturdays in the Park** - Andrews Park
  July 18, August 15, & Sept 19 12p-6p
- **Live@Levings Talent Show & Concert** Levings Park
  July 19, July 26, & August 9 3p-7p
- **Positive Reflections Youth Showcase** - Blackhawk Park
  August 1 2p-6p
- **Domingos en el Parque** - Levings Park. Aug 2 3p-7p
- **National Night Out** - Fairgrounds Park
  August 4 5p-8p
- **Back to School Backpack Giveaway** - Patriot's Gateway, St. Elizabeth CC, Washington Park CC, Wantz Park, Blackhawk (5 locations). August 8 11a-2p
- **NCNW Black Family Reunion** - Ellis Elementary School. August 15 10a-8p
- **Get in the Game** - Blackhawk Park. August 22 12-6p

**This list has been compiled for information sharing purposes only. MBK-Rockford is not connected to any of the events listed.**

For more info visit facebook.com/MBKRockford
**My Brother’s Keeper - Rockford Presents**

**MENTORSHIP JAM!**

A Resource Fair Bringing Many Different Mentorship Programs together in one place!

- Parents can learn more & sign their children up for programs they like
- Adults interested in becoming mentors can connect with programs on site
- Information will be available for those looking to start their own program

*The Millennium Center*
220 S. Madison St
Thursday November 19
6 - 7:30pm

For more info:
Matthew Simpson mattsimpson100@gmail.com
Deryk Hayes dhayes@rockfordha.org

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**Participants Wanted!**

Are you between the ages of 18 and 24 and need help with education or employment?

**Services Include:**
- One-on-one mentoring
- Cash incentives
- High School Equivalency classes at multiple locations
- Childcare while attending classes
- After-school tutoring for those enrolled in high school
- Career Readiness
- Career Assessment testing
- Job search and college enrollment

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**My Brothers Keeper-Rockford Presents:**

**REAL TALK MBK**

A series of town hall meetings, bringing the community together to have REAL TALK on issues affecting boys and men of color

*Topic:*
*The Family*
Wednesday July 22
6-7:30pm
Blackhawk Courts
338 15th Ave, Rockford, IL

For more info:
Matthew Simpson matts simpson100@gmail.com
Deryk Hayes dhayes@rockfordha.org

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**815 Summer Fun List '16**

MBK-Rockford created this list to help you find summer events that include food, music and games that the whole family can enjoy!**

- **Domingos en el Parque** - Leving's Park
  June 26, July 24, August 21. 3p - 8p
- **United Way Strong Neighborhoods Block Parties**
  June 30 at Cameron Ave & Idlewood Terr, July 7 at Creekview Rd & E. Lawn Dr, July 14 at 1233 Revelle Ave, July 21 at 908 8th Ave. Each event is 12p - 2p
- **100 Strong Summer 3-on-3 Bball** - Washington Park
  Every Tuesday, 6p - 8p
- **Live@Levings Talent Show/Concert** - Leving's Park
  July 3, 10 & 17, August 9. 3p-7p
- **Bookerfest & Black Family Reunion** - Booker
  July 15 5p-10p, July 16 10a-10p, July 17. 2p-7p
- **Divine Divas Saturdays in the Park** - Andrews Park
  July 16, August 20, & Sept 17. 12p-6p
- **National Night Out** - Keye-Mallquist Park
  August 2. 5p-8p
- **A Mother’s Prayer Peace Rally** - 1015 W. Jefferson
  August 6, 11a

**This list has been compiled for information sharing purposes only. MBK-Rockford is not connected to any of the events listed.**

For more info visit facebook.com/MBKRockford
ABOUT ROCKFORD:

Located less than 100 miles northwest of Chicago, Rockford, IL is home to approximately 150,251 people. Once a bustling metropolitan area, Rockford has suffered socially and economically in recent years. The decline of manufacturing has, along with the loss of job opportunities and increased residential segregation in the city, have influenced many of the social and economic problems that the city is currently challenged with. Following reports by several major publications including Forbes Magazine that placed Rockford among the nation’s most dangerous (rel. to crime rate), “most miserable,” and least educated, the city has gained some level of notoriety over the last decade. However, the panics and stigma that have engulfed the city are not entirely unfounded. A more recent study that used measures of family life, education, health, affordability, among others, placed the City of Rockford as #149 out of 162 in their list of “2016’s Best & Worst Cities for Illinois Families.”

According to FBI crime statistics, Rockford has the highest rate of violent crime outside of Chicago, with the city reporting 1,374 incidents for every 100,000 residents. Additionally, and paralleling the out-migration patterns that have increased throughout the Midwest, Rockford has experienced the largest population decline in the State of Illinois (NIU Center for Governmental Studies 2016). Yet, while politicians and civilians alike continue to engage in discourses over the city’s dilapidation, they have only more recently targeted some of the issues that plague the city.

Constituting over a third of Rockford’s total population, the City of Rockford has a sizable Black and Latino population. About 20 percent of the city’s residents identify as Black or African-American and 16 percent identify as being of Hispanic or Latino origin. The city has an unemployment rate of 6.2 percent and is significantly higher than the national unemployment rate of 4.9 percent. A recent study found that while the city’s economic conditions affect everyone, the city’s Black population has been hit the hardest. Of the 201 metro areas examined in the study, the median income of $22,651 among Black households in Rockford was found to be lower than in all but 10 other cities and significantly lower than the $51,264 median income among white households. Even more astounding, 28.9 percent of the city’s Black working population is unemployed, a larger share than in any other city in the country. The poverty rate among the city’s Black residents is 43.1 percent, over four times the city’s white poverty rate. While these inequalities do not necessarily cause crime, they facilitate many of the conditions under which success becomes difficult to achieve, especially for boys and men of color.
IN THIS REPORT:

President Obama has outlined six milestones that can be used to guide the work of supporting boys and men of color to stay on track (mentioned above). At the first 815 MBK convening, attendees determined that Rockford’s action team should focus on the milestones related to two areas - education and crime & safety.

The report begins with an overview of demographic and statistical information about the City of Rockford as it relates to boys and men of color. In the Primary Areas of Concern section, major themes related to education and crime & safety were discussed. This covers the more frequently mentioned concerns captured from attendees of 815 MBK events. Following this is Quick Facts, a brief presentation of literature that supports themes that were found in feedback from our engagement efforts. Suggestions for Improvement are then offered from three perspectives:

- Family – Parents, siblings, close and extended family members, fictive kin, mentors
- Community – churches, community organizations/nonprofits, Fraternal/social clubs
- Public – City Leaders, Public schools, Police

The report will end with a Conclusion, followed by Acknowledgements and information about the authors.

Methods of Data Collection

Much of the data collected for this report was through direct contact with boys and men of color, as well as stakeholders interested in their well-being. We held this to be the best method of data collection because we wish to understand the lived reality of these individuals and how ‘we’ as a community may better serve them. 815 MBK also conducted a thorough review of the literature related to the issues that affect boys and men of color. Most of the literature that was used to create this report was peer-reviewed and came from reliable sources such as academic journals. 815 MBK also reviewed and used information from national policy and advocacy organizations, professional membership networks, direct service programs, and others currently working on issues affecting boys and young men of color.
PRIMARY AREAS OF CONCERN:

EDUCATION

As shared during the focus groups, community summits, and workshops, the participants expressed a number of concerns with regard to educational barriers.

1. A number of participants, especially the youth, expressed a desire to have more educational opportunities that take into account their unique ethnic and racial background. Additional concerns related to this include:

   — Negative perceptions and labeling of people of color, especially stereotypes criminalizing and stigmatizing boys and men of color. During a community summit, one adult participant expressed: “People of color are viewed as being up to no good when the sun goes down.”

   — Issues related to self-Image and feelings of societal isolation of boys and men of color. One participant said: “Police and white people do not know how to relate to people of color.” Thus, many boys of color are often left feeling misunderstood or worse, “like criminals.”

   — The need for more visible Black and Latino professionals within schools. One adult participant suggested: “allowing POC professionals into classes and having them to present relevant presentations.”

2. Many summit attendees also emphasized the need for programs and resources that would enable them to better reintegrate back to school or some other form of schooling (e.g. if they had dropped out or had been out of school for a prolonged period of time). This included a lengthy discussion of second chances, summarized below:

   — The idea that “there are no throw away people” was expressed continuously by community residents. Additionally, re-entry services (being given opportunities to correct wrong doing and grow from failure) was important within the community.

   — Issues related to access to useful educational and workforce networks were also common topics of discussion. There were comments about a need for “true and authentic” support.

   — Many participants mentioned a lack of knowledge in finding resources. People expressed feelings of frustration and confusion in trying to understand what resources are available and how to connect with them.

3. At a focus group of parents with children in public school, an individual stated that they felt students aren’t getting pushed to go to college. This statement paralleled many others that called for early exposure to higher education and career skills that would broaden the range of viable opportunities for boys and men of color. Additional concerns related to this include:
— The overall theme of lack of (programmatic) investment in boys and men of color that would allow them to have more extracurricular, career, or employment opportunities.

— The lack of meaningful opportunities made available to boys and men of color. While any job can be seen as a valuable opportunity, the community expressed a need for higher paying and more rewarding endeavors, especially for young people returning from college.

— Deficits in leadership willing to place an importance on these issues.

**Quick Facts:**

These findings were validated as risk factors that researchers, advocates, and policy experts believe to be the most pressing issues for boys and young men of color. Below are a few key points:

Males of color face more punitive punishments for school rule infractions and are far more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system. Lack of teacher preparation, insufficient training in classroom management and culturally competent practices, and racial stereotyping are cited as primary factors driving this phenomenon.

Middle- and high school-aged males of color exhibit many early warning signs of dropping out of school, and yet fail to receive the services needed to keep them in school.

High school-aged males of color have limited exposure to career opportunities through work experiences, internships, apprenticeships, and other work-oriented activities.

Males of color who are not in school have limited access to mentors, advocates, or counselors to help them get back on track with their education and/or employment training.
Suggestions for Improvement:

Family:

— Continue to engage in effective communication with school teachers, principals, and officials to address any and all concerns related to your child’s education.

— Continue to work at home with your children to ensure that they are exercising and practicing basic and critical thinking skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic.

— Continue to be effective listeners towards the boy and men of color to provide valuable support.

Community:

— Promote school discipline approaches that address behavioral problems without pushing students out of schools.

— Continue discussions related to identity, self-image, and worth.

— Provide easier and more readily available access to mentors, as well as educational and employment networks and opportunities.

— Offer cultural sensitivity and diversity workshops to community members including teachers that will ultimately allow for more effective classroom practices.

Public:

— Create an early warning system using readily available school data to identify boys of color in middle or high school who show early signs of struggle and potential high school dropout.

— Support national policy efforts to address the unintended consequences of police in schools and an over-reliance on harmful disciplinary measures.

— Provide support to organizations working to create greater access to labor market opportunities for minorities as a result of local economic development.

— Support efforts that will help youth involved with the justice system to successfully access and navigate employment, as well as attain some form of education.

— Provide incentives to leadership in the local workforce system to prioritize creating paths to work opportunities for young men of color that offer higher wages and a meaningful career trajectory.
CRIME & SAFETY

Another issue discussed at 815 MBK was crime and safety. However, it is important to note that while crime is something that is certainly not unique to communities of color, it has been expressed as a major concern affecting the community of Rockford. The concerns discussed that are related to crime, violence, and safety are the following:

1. Lack of meaningful extracurricular activities and safe spaces where boys and men can be safe and out of harm’s way. Additional concerns related to this include:
   — Many expressed that there is “hardly anything for young people to do.”
   — A need for more proximal (to their community) places to host activities such as basketball or game nights.
   — Many also expressed a need for safe spaces wherein boys and men of color can talk and discuss topics related to manhood.

2. A number of factors related to the immediate causes of violence were discussed by participants:
   — Issues with the availability of firearms and drugs in the community.
   — Proper supervision of youth was found to be a key issue related to safety. Participants said that “some parents don’t want or because of work…can’t watch their own kids.”
   — The use of social media has increased incidents of retaliatory violence. Event attendees expressed concern with young people using social media the “wrong way.”
3. Many expressed no meaningful resources or programs that actively intervene or are involved in violence prevention: “We need more involvement and neighborhood watches in our communities.”

4. Community relations with the police and the “code of silence” or fear of retaliatory violence for calling the police. Participants held that “some people don’t talk out of fear.”

**Quick Facts:**

In Michelle Alexander’s seminal work, “The New Jim Crow,”¹ she finds that the current era of mass incarceration has disproportionately affected communities of color:

*People of color represent 60 percent of those incarcerated.*

*One in eight black men in their twenties are locked up on any given day, 75 percent of people in state prison for drug conviction are people of color although blacks and whites see and use drugs at roughly the same rate.*

According to the CDC, homicide was the leading cause of death for black men between the ages of 15 and 34 in 2013.³

Black Americans are 2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by police officers (Center for Policing Equity 2016). Incidents of police use of lethal force disproportionately involve black men and boys, as in recent high-profile incidents in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City. Failures to indict the involved police officers are taken by many as indicating that the legal system routinely devalues the lives of African Americans.

An increase in youth “cyber-banging” or online disputes that result in violence.³

Linguistic and cultural differences in the Latino community places them at risk of victimization and criminalization.⁴ Additionally, the era of mass deportation and criminalization of immigrants creates additional barriers for this population.

**Suggestions for Improvement:**

**Family:**

— Continue to actively monitor your child’s social media activity. Regularly discuss the role of social media in your child’s life.

— Continue to engage with quality support programs, and stay connected to trusted community leaders and mentors.

— Reduce or closely monitor firearms in the household.

— Continue to be effective listeners, communicating with your child on a broad range of topics from healthy relationships to conflict resolution.
Community:

— Provide safe spaces and places that are monitored by community adults where youth can congregate and be protected.

— Regularly engage in discussions of social media.

— Support the implementation of additional after school programs and activities to keep youth engaged and occupied.

— Establish community watch programs that incorporate all community members.

— Support mentorship programs.

— Provide services and resources that allow non-English speaking parents to remain connected and engaged.

Public:

— Fund trauma centers and professionals that can assist youth affected by community violence.

— Provide post-release programs that allow recently released boys and men of color with opportunities to gain employment and attain their education.

— Create incentives for businesses that hire and support boys and men of color.

— Continue community policing strategies and more community-based solutions to crime.

— Offer officer training related to cultural sensitivity and diversity.

— Increase officer accountability to improve trust and cooperation from the community.
CONCLUSION:

The information in this report should be used to inform efforts to support boys and men of color. As programs are designed and efforts are initiated, feedback that has been included in this report should be seriously considered. These findings are very much in line with findings identified by other organizations such as United Way of Rock River Valley, The Wabongo Leadership Council, Dept. of Justice Diagnostic Center, and Transform Rockford.

We are encouraged by the fact that there are many individuals and organizations pushing for progress and working to affect positive change on issues affecting boys and men of color - particularly in regards to Education and Crime & Safety. It will be important to make sure that boys and men of color are involved in these efforts at all times. Only then will we see progress be sustained.

Our community is not without its challenges, but we believe that with proactive effort and true collaboration, we can have the impact needed to ensure every boy and man of color in Rockford, IL can realize his potential and achieve success.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This report is intended to reflect the perspective of the people of Rockford, IL. We would like to thank all community members, fraternities and sororities, motorcycle clubs, fraternal organizations and church groups that attended 815 MBK events and shared thoughts and opinions. In addition, this report and the work of the action team would not have been possible without the following individuals and organizations:

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KFACT

Community Education and Development Center

Mentor Program

Pilgrim Baptist Church My Brother’s Keeper Program

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DJ Rated AG Entertainment

Alvin C. Jacobs Photography

United Way of Rock River Valley

YMCA of Rock River Valley

Rockford Public School District 205

Rockford Park District

(* = members of the 815 MBK action team)
REFERENCES:


“Real Talk MBK” - Crime & Safety Town Hall. June 11, 2015


ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

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Rodrigo Dominguez-Martinez is a graduate student in the department of sociology at Northern Illinois University. Born in Pomona, California but raised on the West side of Rockford, Illinois. Rodrigo is a graduate of Rockford’s Environmental Science Academy (RESA) and Guilford High School. In 2016, he was awarded the Jeffrey Lunsford fellowship from Northern Illinois University. His broad research interests include criminology, urban communities, race & ethnicity, and Latino/a sociology. Additionally, he is a frequent community volunteer and works with at-promise youth. He is currently in the process of completing a Master’s thesis that explores the inverse relationship between crime and immigration in Latino neighborhoods.

Matthew J. Simpson
www.about.me/mattsimpson100

A Rockford native, Simpson graduated Cum Laude from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale in 2010 with a Bachelor of Science in Business Economics and Finance. In 2013, he earned a Master of Public Administration with a concentration in Leadership and Public Management. Simpson is a development professional, with experience working in economic development and community development. He spent two years as the Business Development Specialist at the Rockford Area Economic Development Council, and later worked as Community Development Manager for the Rockford Housing Authority. Simpson has received a number of awards for his efforts as a leader and activist in the community, including the Rockford Chamber of Commerce’s “20 People You Should Know” award (2014) and Soul News Networks “25 Black Leaders to Watch” (2015). Today, he works as Neighborhood Impact Manager with United Way of Rock River Valley, advancing the organization’s “Strong Neighborhoods” efforts.