

The New York Times

March 20, 2006

Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn

By ERIK ECKHOLM

BALTIMORE — Black men in the United States face a far more dire situation than is portrayed by common employment and education statistics, a flurry of new scholarly studies warn, and it has worsened in recent years even as an economic boom and a welfare overhaul have brought gains to black women and other groups.

Focusing more closely than ever on the life patterns of young black men, the new studies, by experts at Columbia, Princeton, Harvard and other institutions, show that the huge pool of poorly educated black men are becoming ever more disconnected from the mainstream society, and to a far greater degree than comparable white or Hispanic men.

Especially in the country's inner cities, the studies show, finishing high school is the exception, legal work is scarcer than ever and prison is almost routine, with incarceration rates climbing for blacks even as urban crime rates have declined.

Although the problems afflicting poor black men have been known for decades, the new data paint a more extensive and sobering picture of the challenges they face.

"There's something very different happening with young black men, and it's something we can no longer ignore," said Ronald B. Mincy, professor of social work at Columbia University and editor of "Black Males Left Behind" (Urban Institute Press, 2006).

"Over the last two decades, the economy did great," Mr. Mincy said, "and low-skilled women, helped by public policy, latched onto it. But young black men were falling farther back."

Many of the new studies go beyond the traditional approaches to looking at the plight of black men, especially when it comes to determining the scope of joblessness. For example, official unemployment rates can be misleading because they do not include those not seeking work or incarcerated.

"If you look at the numbers, the 1990's was a bad decade for young black men, even though it had the best labor market in 30 years," said Harry J. Holzer, an economist at Georgetown University and co-author, with Peter Edelman and Paul Offner, of "Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men" (Urban Institute Press, 2006).

In response to the worsening situation for young black men, a growing number of programs are placing as much importance on teaching life skills — like parenting, conflict resolution and character building — as they are on teaching job skills.

These were among the recent findings:

¶ The share of young black men without jobs has climbed relentlessly, with only a slight pause during the economic peak of the late 1990's. In 2000, 65 percent of black male high school dropouts in their 20's were jobless — that is, unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated. By 2004, the share had grown to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of white and 19 percent of Hispanic dropouts. Even when high school graduates were included, half of black men in their 20's were jobless in 2004, up from 46 percent in 2000.

¶ Incarceration rates climbed in the 1990's and reached historic highs in the past few years. In 1995, 16 percent of black men in their 20's who did not attend college were in jail or prison; by 2004, 21 percent were incarcerated. By their mid-30's, 6 in 10 black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison.

¶ In the inner cities, more than half of all black men do not finish high school.

None of the litany of problems that young black men face was news to a group of men from the airless neighborhoods of Baltimore who recently described their experiences.

One of them, Curtis E. Brannon, told a story so commonplace it hardly bears notice here. He quit school in 10th grade to sell drugs, fathered four children with three mothers, and spent several stretches in jail for drug possession, parole violations and other crimes.

"I was with the street life, but now I feel like I've got to get myself together," Mr. Brannon said recently in the row-house flat he shares with his girlfriend and four children. "You get tired of incarceration."

Mr. Brannon, 28, said he planned to look for work, perhaps as a mover, and he noted optimistically that he had not been locked up in six months.

A group of men, including Mr. Brannon, gathered at the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development, one of several private agencies trying to help men build character along with workplace skills.

The clients readily admit to their own bad choices but say they also fight a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

"It hurts to get that boot in the face all the time," said Steve Diggs, 34. "I've had a lot of charges but only a few convictions," he said of his criminal record.

Mr. Diggs is now trying to strike out on his own, developing a party space for rentals, but he needs help with business skills.

"I don't understand," said William Baker, 47. "If a man wants to change, why won't society give him a chance to prove he's a changed person?" Mr. Baker has a lot of record to overcome, he admits, not least his recent 15-year stay in the state penitentiary for armed robbery.

Mr. Baker led a visitor down the Pennsylvania Avenue strip he wants to escape — past idlers, addicts and hustlers, storefront churches and fortresslike liquor stores — and described a life that seemed inevitable.

He sold marijuana for his parents, he said, left school in the sixth grade and later dealt heroin and cocaine. He was for decades addicted to heroin, he said, easily keeping the habit during three terms in prison. But during his last long stay, he also studied hard to get a G.E.D. and an associate's degree.

Now out for 18 months, Mr. Baker is living in a home for recovering drug addicts. He is working a \$10-an-hour warehouse job while he ponders how to make a living from his real passion, drawing and graphic arts.

"I don't want to be a criminal at 50," Mr. Baker said.

According to census data, there are about five million black men ages 20 to 39 in the United States.

Terrible schools, absent parents, racism, the decline in blue collar jobs and a subculture that glorifies swagger over work have all been cited as causes of the deepening ruin of black youths. Scholars — and the young men themselves — agree that all of these issues must be addressed.

Joseph T. Jones, director of the fatherhood and work skills center here, puts the breakdown of families at the core.

"Many of these men grew up fatherless, and they never had good role models," said Mr. Jones, who overcame addiction and prison time. "No one around them knows how to navigate the mainstream society."

All the negative trends are associated with poor schooling, studies have shown, and progress has been slight in recent years. Federal data tend to understate dropout rates among the poor, in part because imprisoned youths are not counted.

Closer studies reveal that in inner cities across the country, more than half of all black men still do not finish high school, said Gary Orfield, an education expert at Harvard and editor of "Dropouts in America" (Harvard Education Press, 2004).

"We're pumping out boys with no honest alternative," Mr. Orfield said in an interview, "and of course their neighborhoods offer many other alternatives."

Dropout rates for Hispanic youths are as bad or worse but are not associated with nearly as much unemployment or crime, the data show.

With the shift from factory jobs, unskilled workers of all races have lost ground, but none more so than blacks. By 2004, 50 percent of black men in their 20's who lacked a college education were jobless, as were 72 percent of high school dropouts, according to data compiled by Bruce Western, a sociologist at Princeton and author of the forthcoming book "Punishment and Inequality in America" (Russell Sage Press). These are more than double the rates for white and Hispanic men.

Mr. Holzer of Georgetown and his co-authors cite two factors that have curbed black employment in particular.

First, the high rate of incarceration and attendant flood of former offenders into neighborhoods have become major impediments. Men with criminal records tend to be shunned by employers, and young blacks with clean records suffer by association, studies have found.

Arrests of black men climbed steeply during the crack epidemic of the 1980's, but since then the political shift toward harsher punishments, more than any trends in crime, has accounted for the continued growth in the prison population, Mr. Western said.

By their mid-30's, 30 percent of black men with no more than a high school education have served time in prison, and 60 percent of dropouts have, Mr. Western said.

Among black dropouts in their late 20's, more are in prison on a given day — 34 percent — than are working — 30 percent — according to an analysis of 2000 census data by Steven Raphael of the University of California, Berkeley.

The second special factor is related to an otherwise successful policy: the stricter enforcement of child support. Improved collection of money from absent fathers has been a pillar of welfare overhaul. But the system can leave young men feeling overwhelmed with debt and deter them from seeking legal work, since a large share of any earnings could be seized.

About half of all black men in their late 20's and early 30's who did not go to college are noncustodial fathers, according to Mr. Holzer.

From the fathers' viewpoint, support obligations "amount to a tax on earnings," he said.

Some fathers give up, while others find casual work. "The work is sporadic, not the kind that leads to advancement or provides unemployment insurance," Mr. Holzer said. "It's nothing like having a real job."

The recent studies identified a range of government programs and experiments, especially education and training efforts like the Job Corps, that had shown success and could be scaled up.

Scholars call for intensive new efforts to give children a better start, including support for parents and extra schooling for children.

They call for teaching skills to prisoners and helping them re-enter society more productively, and for less automatic incarceration of minor offenders.

In a society where higher education is vital to economic success, Mr. Mincy of Columbia said, programs to help more men enter and succeed in college may hold promise. But he lamented the dearth of policies and resources to aid single men.

"We spent \$50 billion in efforts that produced the turnaround for poor women," Mr. Mincy said. "We are not even beginning to think about the men's problem on similar orders of magnitude."