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Against the Wall

Poor, Young, Black, and Male

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Chapter 4

The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males

William Julius Wilson

The economic predicament of black men in the inner city today resembles the situation documented by Elliot Liebow in his classic book *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Street Corner Men.* Liebow wrote *Tally's Corner* in the mid-1960s, yet his arguments concerning the work experiences and family lives of black men in a Washington D.C. ghetto are still applicable to contemporary urban communities. In analyzing the data collected by our research team on poverty and joblessness among black males in inner-city Chicago neighborhoods, I was repeatedly reminded of Liebow's analysis. Liebow was perhaps the first scholar to call attention to the fact that ongoing lack of success in the labor market lowers a man's self-confidence and gives rise to feelings of resignation that frequently result in a temporary, or even permanent, abandonment of the job search. "The most important fact is that a man who is able and willing to work cannot earn enough to support himself, his wife, and one or more children," declared Liebow. "A man's chances for working regularly are good only if he is willing to work for less than he can live on, sometimes not even then" (Liebow 1967, 50–51).

The jobs filled by the low-status black men in Liebow's study were poorly paying, dirty, physically demanding, and uninteresting. They offered neither respect nor opportunity for advancement. Like others in this society, the street corner man viewed such jobs with disdain. "He cannot do otherwise," stated Liebow; "he cannot draw from a job those values which other people do not put into it" (51). Understandably, the work histories of the street corner men were erratic. Menial employment was readily available, and workers drifted from one undesirable job to the next.

The New Urban Poverty

Although the job prospects for low-skilled black men were bleak when Liebow conducted his field research in the early 1960s, they are even

worse today. Indeed, the employment woes of low-skilled black men represent part of what I have called "the new urban poverty." By the new urban poverty, I mean poor, segregated neighborhoods in which substantial proportions of adults are unemployed, have dropped out of the labor force, or never participated in it at all. This jobless poverty today stands in sharp contrast to previous periods when the working poor predominated in urban ghettos. In 1950, for example, a substantial portion of the inner-city adult population was poor, but they held jobs (Wilson 1996). Now many adults are disconnected from the labor market.

When I speak of "joblessness" I am not referring solely to official unemployment. The unemployment rate includes only those workers in the official labor force, that is, those who are actively looking for work. I use the term "jobless" to refer not only to those who are looking for work but also to those who are outside of or have dropped out of the labor market, including millions of adult males who appear in the census statistics but are not recorded in the labor market statistics.

These uncounted males are disproportionately represented in inner-city neighborhoods. For example, take the three neighborhoods that form the historic core of Chicago's Black Belt: Douglas, Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park. In 1950, 69 percent of out-of-school males age fourteen and over who lived in these three neighborhoods worked for pay during a typical week, and in 1960 64 percent of this group were employed. However, by 1990 only 37 percent of out-of-school males age sixteen or over in these neighborhoods held jobs during a typical week. Over the last three decades, low-skilled African American males have encountered increasing difficulty gaining access to jobs—even menial jobs that pay no more than minimum wage. The ranks of idle inner-city men have swelled since 1970, and include a growing proportion of adult males who routinely work in and tolerate low-wage jobs when they are available (Wilson 1996).

The impact of this joblessness is reflected in real earnings, that is, earnings adjusted for inflation. For example, between 2000 and 2004 the average real annual earnings of twenty-four-year-old black males in the bottom quarter of the earnings distribution (the 25th percentile) were only $1,078, compared with $9,623 and $9,843 respectively for their Latino and white male counterparts.[1] For purposes of comparison, in the 75th percentile of the earnings distribution, average annual earnings for twenty-four-year-old black males were $22,000, compared with $22,800 and $30,000 for Latino and white males respectively. The really significant discrepancy is for those in the 25th percentile.

The extremely low annual average earnings for black males at the 25th percentile of the earnings distribution results from the fact that many of

them were jobless during this period, including those who had completely given up looking for work and had virtually no reported income. These men are heavily concentrated in poor inner-city neighborhoods.

Many of these jobless men are high school dropouts. The situation for black male high school dropouts is especially bleak. A recent report by Andrew Sum and his colleagues at Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies reveals that "only 1 of every 3 young black male high school dropouts was able to obtain any type of employment during an average month in 2005" and only 23 percent of these males were able to find full-time employment during an average week. The report appropriately points out that "many of these young men will end up being involved in criminal activity during their late teens and early twenties and then bear the severe economic consequences for convictions and incarceration over the remainder of their working lives" (Sum et al. 2007, 2–3).

Given the severity of unemployment and underemployment, the relatively low proportion of young African American men with higher education has significant social ramifications. There has been a growing gender gap in college degree attainment in recent years, with women exceeding men in the rate of college completion. This discrepancy is particularly acute among African Americans. Black women have significantly higher college completion rates than black men, and the gap has widened steadily over the past 25 years. In 1979, for every 100 bachelor's degrees awarded to black men, 144 were received by black women. In 2003–2004, for every 100 bachelor's degrees granted to black men, 200 were conferred on black women. By contrast, for every 100 bachelor's degrees earned by white and Hispanic men respectively, 131 were earned by white women and 155 by Hispanic women (Sum et al. 2007).

The significant and growing discrepancy in the college attainment rate of black men and black women has important social and economic consequences for the black community as well as the larger society because the economic returns to college investment are very high for black males. Figure 4.1, which provides data on the employment/population ratio—the percentage of young men who were not in school and who were employed in 2005—reveals that there is very little difference in employment rates of black and white college graduates: 88.3 percent for whites and 86.2 percent for blacks. The employment gap widens with lower levels of education. The gap between white and black young males ages sixteen to twenty-four who were not in school in 2005 declined from 20 percentage points for high school dropouts to 16 percent among high school graduates, 8 percent for those completing 1 to 3 years of college, and only 2 percent for four-year college graduates. Education plays a key role in enabling black men to secure employment.

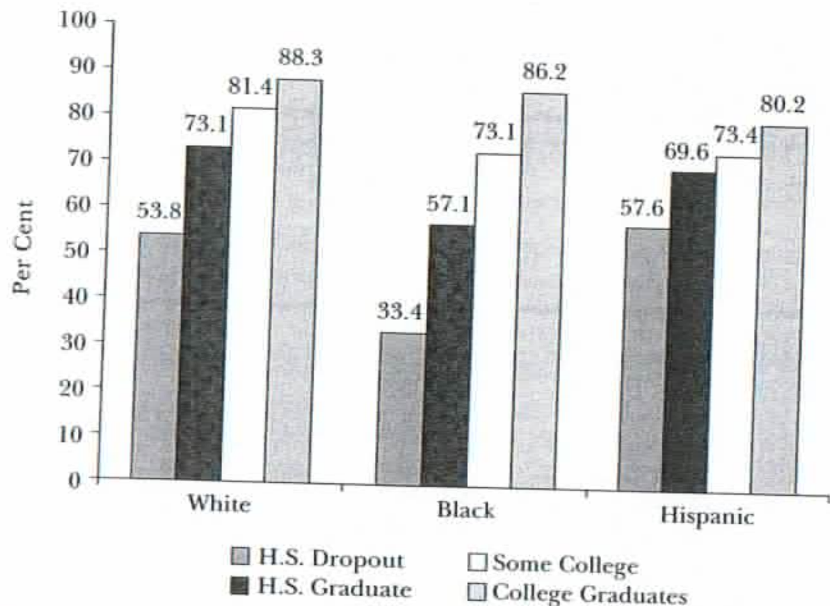

Figure 4.1. Employment/population ratios of non-enrolled sixteen- to-twenty-four-year-old males by educational attainment and race/ethnic group, 2005. Adapted from Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, and Paulo Tobar, "The Educational Attainment of the Nation's Young Black Men and Their Recent Labor Market Experiences: What Can Be Done to Improve Their Future Labor Market and Educational Prospects?" Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, February 2007.

Similarly, the relative size of the gap in annual earnings between black men and all men ages twenty to twenty-nine decreases as the educational attainment of black men rises. The median annual earnings of black male dropouts in 2004–2005 were only equivalent to 15 percent of those of male dropouts in all racial-ethnic groups. However, that figure increased to 64 percent for high school graduates and 96 percent for those with bachelor's degrees. The disparity in the earnings of black and non-black men is much less among high school graduates than among dropouts and almost vanishes among college graduates (Figure 4.2).

Explanations of the Economic Plight of Low-Skilled Black Men

What has caused the deterioration in the employment prospects of low-skilled black males and hence their remarkably lower earnings? I highlight several major factors, both structural and cultural, in explaining

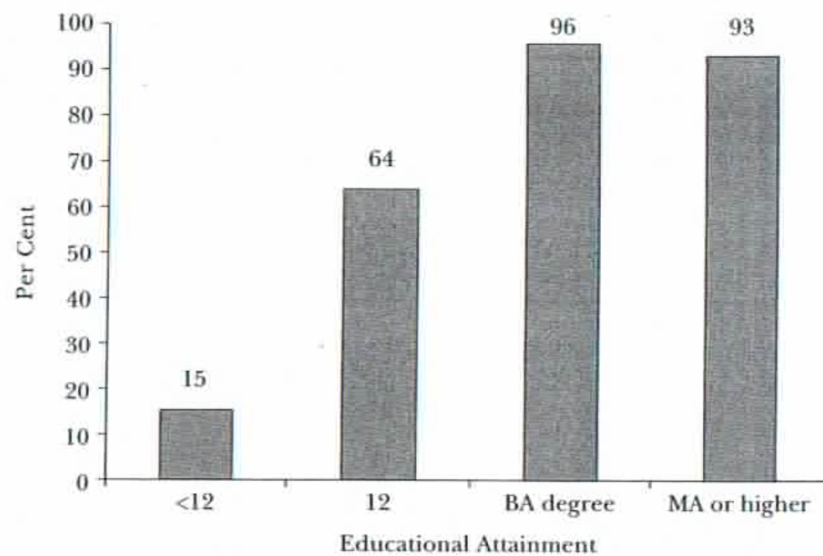

Figure 4.2. Ratio of median annual earnings of twenty- to-twenty-nine-year-old black men to all men by educational attainment, 2004–2005. Adapted from Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, and Paulo Tobar, "The Educational Attainment of the Nation's Young Black Men and Their Recent Labor Market Experiences: What Can Be Done to Improve Their Future Labor Market and Educational Prospects?" Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, February 2007.

this situation. The structural factors include those that are nonracial and are shared more or less by all low-income males, and those that are racial and pertain specifically to black males.

Structural Factors

Although African American men continue to confront racial barriers in the labor market, many inner-city black males have also been victimized by the declining relative demand for low-skilled labor. The propagation of new technologies is displacing untrained workers and rewarding those with specialized, technical training, while the globalization of the economy is increasingly pitting low-skilled workers in the United States against their counterparts around the world, including laborers in Third World countries such as China, India, and Bangladesh. Because of the decreasing relative demand for low-skilled labor, workers face the growing threat of wage declines and job displacement (Katz 1996; Schwartzman 1997).

Over the past several decades, black males have experienced sharp job losses in the manufacturing sector. While Hispanics have suffered the largest loss in manufacturing jobs over the long term, more recent losses have been worse among African Americans. According to John Schmitt and Ben Zipperer of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, the proportion of black workers who are employed in manufacturing decreased from 23.9 percent in 1979 to 10.1 percent in 2006. Whites experienced slightly smaller drops (from 23.5 to 11.9 percent), while Hispanics experienced a larger decline (from 30.2 percent to 11.9 percent). However, since 1996 black declines in manufacturing (from 16.0 to 10.1 percent) slightly exceeded those of whites (from 16.5 to 11.5 percent) and Hispanics (from 18.1 to 12.6 percent). The dwindling proportion of African American workers in manufacturing is important because manufacturing jobs, especially those in the auto industry, have been a significant source of better-paid employment for black Americans since World War II (Schmitt and Zipperer 2007).

The declining proportion of black workers in manufacturing parallels their decreasing involvement in unions. From 1983 to 2006 the proportion of all African American workers who were either in unions or represented by a union at their employment site dropped considerably from 31.7 percent to 16.0 percent (Schmitt and Zipperer 2007). This reduction (down 15.7 percentage points) was greater than that for whites (down 8.9 percentage points) and Hispanics (down 13.5 percentage points). The lack of union representation renders workers more vulnerable in the workplace, especially to cuts in wages and benefits.

Labor markets today are mainly regional, and long commutes in automobiles are common. Most ghetto residents cannot afford an automobile and have to rely on public transit systems that make the connection between inner-city neighborhoods and suburban job locations difficult and time-consuming, or even impossible. For example, research conducted in the Chicago ghetto areas revealed that only 19 percent of residents have access to an automobile. To make matters worse, many inner-city residents lack information or knowledge about suburban job opportunities. In isolated inner-city neighborhoods, the breakdown of the informal job information network aggravates the problem of the spatial mismatch between workplace and residence (Wilson 1996).

The heavy child support payments now required of noncustodial parents under federal law present a daunting problem, as Harry Holzer and his colleagues remind us. Such payments represent an employment tax of 36 percent of a worker's wages, and if the noncustodial father is in arrears, the federal law allows states to deduct as much as 65 percent of his wages. Many of those who face this higher tax are ex-offenders whose delinquent child support payments accumulated while they were

in prison. High child support payments function as a disincentive to remain in the formal labor market and an incentive to move into the casual or informal labor market (Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2003).

For inner-city black male workers, the problems created by these nonracial factors have been aggravated by employers' negative attitudes. This racial factor affects black males especially seriously. Interviews of a representative sample of Chicago-area employers conducted by my research team in the late 1980s revealed that a substantial majority of employers considered inner-city black males to be uneducated, uncooperative, unstable, or dishonest (Wilson 1996).[2] For example, a suburban drug store manager commented:

> It's unfortunate but, in my business I think overall [black men] tend to be known to be dishonest. I think that's too bad but that's the image they have.
>
> *Interviewer:* So you think it's an image problem?
>
> *Respondent:* An image problem of being dishonest men and lazy. They're known to be lazy. They are [laughs]. I hate to tell you, but. . . . It's all an image though. Whether they are or not, I don't know, but, it's an image that is perceived.
>
> *Interviewer:* I see. How do you think that image was developed?
>
> *Respondent:* Go look in the jails [laughs].

The president of an inner-city manufacturing firm expressed a different reservation about employing black males from certain ghetto neighborhoods:

> If somebody gave me their address, uh, Cabrini Green I might unavoidably have some concerns.
>
> *Interviewer:* What would your concerns be?
>
> *Respondent:* That the poor guy probably would be frequently unable to get to work and . . . I probably would watch him more carefully even if it wasn't fair, than I would with somebody else. I know what I should do though is recognize that here's a guy that is trying to get out of his situation and probably will work harder than somebody else who's already out of there and he might be the best one around here. But I think I would have to struggle accepting that premise at the beginning.

Because of the prevalence of such attitudes, the lack of access to informal job networks is a notable problem for black males. The importance of knowing someone who knows the boss is suggested by another employer's comments to our interviewer:

> All of a sudden, they take a look at a guy, and unless he's got an in, the reason why I hired this black kid the last time is cause my neighbor said to me, yeah I used him for a few [days], he's good, and I said, you know what, I'm going to take a chance. But it was a recommendation. But other than that, I've got a walk-in, and, who knows? And I think that for the most part, a guy sees a black man, he's a bit hesitant.

These attitudes are classic examples of what social scientists call statistical discrimination: employers make generalizations about inner-city black male workers and reach decisions based on those assumptions without reviewing the qualifications of an individual applicant. The net effect is that many inner-city black male applicants are never given the opportunity to prove their qualifications. Although some of these men eschew entry-level jobs because of the poor working conditions and low wages, many others would readily accept such employment. Statistical discrimination, although involving elements of class bias against poor urban workers, is clearly a racially biased practice. Far more inner-city black males are effectively screened out of employment than Hispanic or white males applying for the same jobs.

Unfortunately, the restructuring of the economy has compounded the negative effects of employers' attitudes toward inner-city black males. Today, most of the new jobs for workers with limited education and experience are in the service sector, which includes jobs that tend to be held by women, such as waitstaff, sales clerks, and nurse's aides. Indeed, "employment rates of young black women now exceed those of young black men, even though many of these women must also care for children" (Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2003). The shift to service jobs has resulted in a greater demand for workers who can effectively serve and relate to the consumer. Many employers in our study felt that, unlike women and immigrants (who have recently expanded the labor pool for service-sector jobs), inner-city black males lack these qualities. Instead, low-skilled black males are perceived as dangerous or threatening. In the past, all that men had to demonstrate was a strong back and muscles for heavy lifting and physical labor in a factory, at a construction site, or on an assembly line. They did not have to interact with customers. Today, they have to search for work in the service sector, and employers are less likely to hire them because they have to come into contact with the public. Consequently, black male job-seekers face rising rates of rejection.

The difficulties experienced by low-skilled black males in the labor market are even greater for those who have prison records. The ranks of ex-offenders have increased significantly over the past several decades. Indeed, rates of incarceration have soared even during periods when the crime rate has declined. Finding employment has become exceedingly difficult for poor black males for many reasons, but the problem is even worse for those with prison records. According to one estimate, as many as 30 percent of all civilian young adult black males ages sixteen to thirty-four are ex-offenders; a significant proportion of them are high-school dropouts with prison records. Becky Pettit and Bruce Western estimate that "among [black] male high school dropouts the risk of imprisonment had increased to 60 percent, establishing incarceration

as a normal stopping point on the route to midlife" (2004). Their high incarceration rates are closely connected to their high jobless rates. It is a vicious cycle. Initial joblessness prompts illegal money-making activities that result in incarceration, which then leads to even more intractable joblessness.

The Role of Culture

Forced to turn to the low-wage service sector for employment, inner-city black males, a significant proportion of whom are ex-offenders, have to compete with the growing number of female and immigrant workers. Often they are unsuccessful. The more these men complain or manifest their job dissatisfaction, the less attractive they seem to employers. They therefore encounter greater discrimination when they search for employment. Since the feelings many inner-city black males express about their jobs and job prospects reflect their plummeting position in a changing economy, it is important to link attitudinal and other cultural traits with the opportunity structure (Wilson 1996).

According to my colleague Orlando Patterson, not enough attention is given to the cultural dimension of urban black men's employment problems. Patterson argues that "a deep seated dogma . . . has prevailed in the social science and policy circles since the mid-1960s: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group's cultural attributes—its distinctive attitudes, values and predispositions, and the resulting behavior of its members—and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing." He asks, "Why do so many young unemployed black men have children—several of them—which they have no resources or intention to support? And why . . . do they murder each other at nine times the rate of white youths?" Why do young black males turn their backs on low-wage jobs that immigrants are happy to fill? (Patterson 2006). Referring to research conducted by Roger Waldinger (1996), Patterson states that these jobs enabled the chronically unemployed to enter the labor market and to acquire basic work skills that they later used to secure better jobs, but that the takers were mostly immigrants.

Patterson also refers to anecdotal evidence collected several years ago by one of his students, who visited her former high school to discover why "almost all the black girls graduated and went to college whereas nearly all the black boys either failed to graduate or did not go on to college." Her distressing finding was that all the black boys were fully aware of the consequences of failing to graduate from high school and go on to college; they told her indignantly, "we're not stupid!" So, Patterson asks, "why were they flunking out?" The candid answer that these young

men gave to his former student was their preference for what Patterson called the "cool-pose culture" of young black men, which they found too fulfilling to give up.[3] "For these young men, it was almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture" (Patterson 2006).

Patterson maintains that this culture blatantly promotes the most anomalous and counterproductive models of behavior in urban lower-class neighborhoods, featuring "gangsta-rap," predatory sexuality, and irresponsible paternity. "It is reasonable to conclude," he states, "that among a large number of urban, Afro-American lower-class young men, these models are now fully normative and that men act in accordance with them whenever they can" (2000, 217). For example, Patterson argues that male pride has increasingly become defined in terms of the impregnation of women. This orientation is not unique to the current generation of young black males, he notes. Several decades ago the sociologist Lee Rainwater (1969) uncovered a similar pattern. A majority of the inner-city young black male respondents he interviewed stated that they were indifferent to the fact that their girlfriends were pregnant; some even expressed pride because getting a girl pregnant proves that you are a man! The fact that Elijah Anderson and others discovered identical patterns (Anderson 1990; Majors and Billson 1992; Nightingale 1993) decades later suggests a process of cultural transmission within black communities (Patterson 2000).

Patterson maintains that social scientists have shied away from cultural explanations because of the widespread belief that such explanations inherently blame the victim, that a focus on internal behavioral factors leads to the conclusion that the poor are responsible for their own poverty and social problems, rather than assigning causality to the nefarious and deleterious aspects of the environment. He contends that this view, which has often been put forth by conservatives, is "utterly bogus." To hold an individual responsible for his behavior is not to rule out any consideration of the environmental factors that may have evoked the questionable behavior to begin with. "Many victims of child abuse end up behaving in self-destructive ways," he argues, so "to point out the link between their behavior and the destructive acts is in no way to deny the causal role of their earlier victimization and the need to address it" (2006). Likewise, he contends, a cultural explanation of black male self-destructiveness not only speaks to the immediate relationship between their attitudes and behavior and the undesirable outcomes, but it also examines their brutalized past, perhaps over generations, to investigate the origins and changing nature of these attitudes. Patterson maintains that we cannot understand "the high rates of homicide,

predatory sexuality and irresponsible fathering" of young black males without a deep examination of African Americans' collective historical experience.

Although I believe that Patterson tends to downplay the importance of immediate socioeconomic factors that are currently affecting black males' life chances, I fully concur with his view that cultural explanations should be part of any attempt to account for such behavior and outcomes. When we speak of cultural attributes we are referring to distinctive values, norms, attitudes, and predispositions held by a group, and the behavior of a group's members that stem from such attributes.

Not only is it exceedingly difficult to determine the relative importance of cultural and structural factors in explaining the situation and actions of young black males, but I firmly believe that to attempt to analyze them separately, rather than examining how they interact, is a serious mistake. If we are going to consider social and economic factors that over time contributed to the development of certain cultural traits and behavior patterns, we also have to give serious attention to the immediate effects of structural conditions. Social structures and cultures combine and interact to shape attitudes and behavior in a myriad of complex ways. A few examples illustrate this process.

Patterson contends that low-skilled black males do not pursue menial jobs that immigrants readily accept. However, he fails to discuss developments that were uncovered in our ethnographic research in Chicago: that many young black males, who now have to compete with women and immigrants in the low-wage service sector, have experienced repeated failures in their job search, have given up hope, and no longer even bother to look for work.[4] This defeatism was due in no small measure to employers' negative attitudes and actions toward low-skilled black males. Repeated failure results in resignation and the development of cultural attitudes that discourage the pursuit of steady employment in the formal labor market.

Furthermore, it is difficult to account for the higher dropout rate and lower academic achievement of black males in comparison with black females without taking into account the negative experiences of young black males in the labor market, even those who have graduated from high school. Black males are far less likely than black females to see a strong relationship between their schooling and post-school employment. I believe that the evolution of "cool-pose culture" is partly a response to that feeling of discouragement and sense of futility.

The relative lack of commitment to fatherhood among many inner-city men is a cultural problem that may have its origins in past experiences over the generations, but it is also related to more immediate restrictions on opportunities. Many inner-city fathers today, even those

who are not typically street corner men, have low self-efficacy when it comes to fatherhood, whether they are willing to admit it or not. Included among the norms of fatherhood is the obligation to provide adequate and consistent material support. Continuing lack of success in the labor market reduces the ability of many inner-city men to support their children adequately, which in turn lowers their self-confidence as providers and creates antagonistic relations with the mothers of their children. Convenient rationalizations emerge, shared and reinforced by the men in these constricted economic situations, which reject the institution of marriage in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, their self-esteem. The outcome is a failure to meet the societal norms of fatherhood that is even more widespread than reported by Liebow in 1967.

I strongly concur with Orlando Patterson that an adequate cultural explanation of young black male self-destructiveness must explore the origins and changing nature of attitudes that go back for generations, even centuries. Such analyses are complex and difficult. For example, Kathryn Neckerman provides a historical perspective to explain why so many black youngsters and their parents lose faith in the public schools. She shows in her book, *Schools Betrayed* (2007), that a century ago, when African American children in most northern cities attended schools alongside white children, the problems commonly associated with inner-city schools were not nearly as pervasive as they are today. She carefully documents how and why these schools came to serve black children so much more poorly than their white counterparts. Focusing on Chicago public schools between 1900 and 1960, Neckerman compares the circumstances of blacks and white immigrants—groups that had similarly little wealth and status yet received vastly different benefits from their educations. Their divergent educational outcomes, she contends, were the result of decisions made systematically by Chicago officials to deal with the increasing African American migration to the city by segregating schools and denying equal resources to African American students. Those decisions reinforced inequality in the schools over time. Ultimately, these policies and practices eroded the schools' legitimacy in the lower-class black community and dampened aspirations for education. "The roots of classroom alienation, antagonism, and disorder can be found in school policy decisions made long before the problems of inner-city schools attracted public attention," Neckerman concludes. "These policies struck at the foundations of authority and engagement, making it much more difficult for inner-city teachers to gain student cooperation in learning. The district's history of segregation and inequality undermined school legitimacy in the eyes of its black students; as a result, inner-city teachers struggled to gain cooperation from children and parents, who had little reason to trust the

school" (2007, 74). We need more studies like this to fully understand the current cultural dynamics in inner-city neighborhoods.

Finally, Patterson argues that while culture "partly determines behavior, it also enables people to change behavior" (2006). He states that culture provides a frame for individuals to understand their world. By ignoring culture or only investigating it at a superficial level, as a set of styles or performances, social scientists miss an opportunity to reframe attitudes in a way that promotes desirable behavior and outcomes. I concur. However, reframing attitudes is often difficult without accompanying programs to address structural inequities. For example, I argue that programs focusing on the cultural problems pertaining to fatherhood, including attitudes concerning paternity, without confronting the broader and more fundamental issues of restricted economic opportunities have limited prospects of success. In my view, the most effective fatherhood programs in the inner city will be those that address attitudes, norms, and behaviors in combination with local and national attempts to improve job opportunities. Only then will fathers have a realistic chance to care for their children adequately and envision a better life for themselves.

Social Policies and Programs

What social policies and programs are most likely to improve the employment prospects of young low-skilled black males, including those with prison records, and could be instituted alongside activities intended to change self-destructive attitudes?

First, programs such as the Job Corps and Youth Build should be expanded to help young people who are unemployed and in need of training and assistance in locating and securing jobs. Skilled training programs, similar to STRIVE and Project Quest, which include instruction in both soft (or "people") skills and hard (or technical) skills and job placement, should also be expanded. Restoring funding for job training under the Workforce Investment Act would be helpful in this regard, as would providing more funds to increase job placement and transportation programs, such as America Works, in inner-city neighborhoods (Giloth 2003).

We should review ways to relieve the work disincentives associated with mandatory child support payments. I agree with Harry Holzer and his colleagues that various forms of "arrearage forgiveness" ought to be considered, especially for men who fell far behind in child support payments while spending time in prison (Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2003).

Transition programs should be created to facilitate the successful reentry of incarcerated men into society. These programs might include

a period of soft and hard skills training and job counseling prior to the prisoner's release and job placement assistance upon release.

Since joblessness is closely associated with incarceration, ideally we want programs to improve the employment prospects of young men before they commit crimes. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 42 percent of black youths who had not enrolled in college had jobs in October after graduating from high school in June, compared with 69 percent of their white counterparts. The figures for black youngsters in inner-city neighborhoods, especially black males, are even lower.

Accordingly, I think that it is vitally important to promote school-to-work transitions in inner-city neighborhoods through internships and apprenticeships, especially for high school seniors. Successful school-to-work programs will depend on the cooperation of employers, who should be encouraged by political leaders to create internship and apprenticeship opportunities for secondary-level students. The Career Academies programs, which increased the post-school earnings of the young men who participated, should be widely publicized in efforts to generate support for such initiatives.

Nearly 2,500 high schools have career academies, which have three distinguishing features: an organizational structure featuring a school-within-a-school; curricula that combine academic and occupational courses organized around a career theme; and partnerships with employers. The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) recently evaluated this program using a random assignment design and found that school academies had substantial long-term effects on the earnings of young men, especially minority men. These programs included summer and after-school jobs provided by employers, which enabled these young men to gain work experience. Such programs should be widely publicized and expanded, especially in poor communities of color.

Finally, the City University of New York (CUNY) recently instituted a program called the Black Male Initiative to increase enrollment in college. This program could become a model for other universities and colleges around the country. In 2004, campuses in the CUNY system were funded to establish demonstration projects designed to improve both enrollment and college graduation rates of disadvantaged students, particularly black males; to increase opportunities for individuals without a high school diploma to enroll in GED courses oriented toward college preparation; and to provide support for formerly incarcerated individuals to enroll in college. The importance of increasing the educational attainment of black men cannot be overstated; that is why the CUNY Black Male Initiative is so timely and important.

All these programs are modest and realistic and ought to receive the support of policymakers who are concerned about the worsening plight of young black men growing up poor in the inner city. If these structural programs are combined with those dedicated to addressing self-destructive attitudes and norms, programs focused on patterns of behavior will be more effective.

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Chapter 5

Blacklisted: Hiring Discrimination in an Era of Mass Incarceration

Devah Pager

Jerome arrived at a branch of a national restaurant chain in a suburb twenty miles from Milwaukee. He immediately sensed that he was the only black person in the place. An employee hurried over to him, "Can I help you with something?" "I'm here about the job you advertised," he replied. The employee nodded reluctantly and went off to produce an application form. Jerome filled out the form, including information about his criminal background. He was given a math test and a personality test. He was then instructed to wait for the manager to speak with him. The manager came out after about ten minutes, looked over Jerome's application, and frowned when he noticed the criminal history information. Without asking any questions about the context of the conviction, the manager started to lecture: "You can't be screwing up like this at your age. A kid like you can ruin his whole life like this." Jerome began to explain that he had made a mistake and had learned his lesson, but the manager cut him off: "I'll look over your application and call if we have a position for you."

Jerome could have been any one of the hundreds of thousands of young black men released from prison each year who face bleak employment prospects as a result of their race and criminal record. In this case, Jerome happened to be working for me. He was one of four college students I had hired as "testers" for a study of employment discrimination. An articulate, attractive, hard-working young man, Jerome was assigned to apply for entry-level job openings throughout the Milwaukee metropolitan area, presenting a fictitious profile designed to represent a realistic ex-offender. Comparing the outcomes of Jerome's job search to those of three other black and white testers presenting identical qualifications with and without criminal records gives us a direct measure of the effects of race and a criminal record, and of possible interactions between the two, in shaping employment opportunities. In