

*Keywords:* young black men; incarceration; families

# Comment: Young Disadvantaged Men: Reactions from the Perspective of Race

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Despite promising reforms following the civil rights movement of the 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, the progress of black men since the early 1980s has been relatively stagnant. The black-white gaps in high school graduation, earnings, and unemployment have improved little over the past 30 years. On some indicators, black men are doing steadily worse: faced with poor employment prospects, less-educated young black men have become increasingly likely to exit the labor force altogether, with rates of labor force participation declining by 17 percent between 1979 and 2000 (Holzer, Offner, and Sorensen 2005). More troubling, roughly 60 percent of black male high school dropouts will end up in prison by the age of 30, with current rates of incarceration exceeding those of formal employment among this group (Pettit and Western 2004).

A recent and growing line of research recognizes that the poor prospects for low-income black men have consequences that extend well beyond the individuals themselves. These young men's fortunes affect the women they partner with and the children they father. Understanding the problems facing young black men today, then, is an important part of understanding problems facing the black family as a whole.

This insight is not, of course, entirely new. The controversial Moynihan report, written more

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DOI: 10.1177/0002716210393322

than 40 years ago, pays significant attention to the problem of joblessness among young black men and its implications for rising rates of female-headed families (Moynihan 1965, 61–73). The Moynihan report was prescient in its analysis of the problems of disadvantaged black men and women, and yet what Moynihan could not have foreseen was the sharp dismantling of career ladders (Bernhardt et al. 2001); the replacement of steady, well-paying blue-collar jobs with casual, low-wage service work (Meisenheimer 1998); and the rise of mass incarceration (Western 2006). Each of these developments has intensified the barriers to economic self-sufficiency facing young less-educated men, with disproportionate consequences for African Americans.

The articles in this volume address the dilemmas of young disadvantaged men with these forces as their backdrop, examining the experiences of low-income men as workers, partners, and fathers. Each of these articles presents a crisp, lucid overview of the relevant literature, identifying what we know and where we need to learn more. In the following remarks, I offer comments on each of the articles with an emphasis on the specific dilemmas facing black men and their families.

“No Country for Young Men,” by Andrew Sum and colleagues, provides a comprehensive overview of the economic status of young men. The article is full of clear, easy-to-interpret graphs that document the many ways that young men today are falling behind those of a previous generation and the growing inequalities across race and education groups in both economic fortunes and family outcomes. The analyses go beyond previous surveys of this kind to document the early consequences of this most recent Great Recession, which has intensified negative trends already under way.

This article took on a significant charge in providing such an extensive overview. Presumably by design, the authors take a largely descriptive approach, remaining silent on the various forces of supply and demand that may have produced the observed outcomes. Indeed, it would surely require a second article—if not an entire volume—to begin to explain the multitude of factors that have led to the deteriorating labor market outcomes of young non-college-educated men. At the same time, understanding the backdrop for these trends plays an important role in their interpretation. Race differences in the pathways toward human capital accumulation, for example, play an important role in our measurement and analysis of rising inequality. To take one specific case, one of the striking findings in this article is the extent to which high school graduates, not just high school dropouts, have lost ground over the past three decades. Table 5, for example, shows that median real annual earnings of 20- to 29-year-old men between 1979 and 2007 fell by nearly 18 percent for high school dropouts, but close to 29 percent for high school graduates. Other estimates—in labor force participation, for example—also show high school graduates falling steadily behind, with declines in employment to population ratios (15 percent) more similar to those of dropouts (17 percent) than those with some college (10 percent).

Without question, the educational premium now favors college graduates at the expense of those with less schooling. At the same time, there have been important composition shifts among those coded here as high school graduates that may

affect our assessment of their relative status. In particular, these analyses count GED holders among high school graduates, thus conflating the outcomes of those who have completed traditional high school degrees with those who dropped out of high school but received an equivalency certification. The conflation of these two groups may be problematic for several reasons. First, studies of GED holders find that they are far from equivalent to high school graduates: the earnings of GED holders tend to be similar to those of dropouts, suggesting that there is little economic payoff to this particular credential (Cameron and Heckman 1993; Heckman and LaFontaine 2006). Second, the fraction of GED holders has increased over time: about 20 percent of all new high school credentials issued each year are GEDs, relative to only 2 percent in 1960 (Heckman and LaFontaine 2006; Mishel and Roy 2006). The rising prevalence of GED holders makes the comparability of this group especially relevant to assessments of trends over time. Third, the classification of high school completion is especially relevant for understanding the economic status of young black men. Indeed, black male high school completers are twice as likely to hold a GED relative to whites with nominally similar levels of schooling. Many of these young men obtained their GED while in prison (Heckman and LaFontaine 2007; Tyler 2001).<sup>1</sup> Excluding GED holders, trends show that there has been little convergence in high school graduation rates between whites and minorities over the past 35 years (Heckman and LaFontaine 2007). We thus may be overstating the losses experienced by high school graduates but simultaneously overstating the gains made by young black men. As an increasing number of young black men complete their formal schooling within prisons, taking account of any corresponding heterogeneity in outcomes becomes more important. To fully appreciate the extent of young black men's disconnection from the mainstream institutions of school and work, it is important to recognize the alternative pathways by which the credentialing process takes place, including prison GEDs and criminal records.<sup>2</sup>

The prevalence of incarceration among young less-educated black men likewise has implications for our understanding of racial disparities in employment and earnings. Typical labor force estimates, as in the current article, rely on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS). While the CPS provides some of the best labor force indicators, the sample is restricted to noninstitutionalized civilian populations. While these sampling restrictions were not of serious concern in the 1970s and 1980s, today the omission of these groups can create substantial distortions in our labor market estimates, especially in the case of less-educated black men. By 1999, on any given day, more than 10 percent of young white male dropouts and more than 40 percent of young black male high school dropouts were in prison or jail (Pettit and Western 2004). The exclusion of these large populations of low-education young men has important implications for estimates of human capital development and labor market outcomes. Research by Bruce Western and his colleagues suggests that estimates of racial disparities are substantially muted by the exclusion of incarcerated populations: adjusted unemployment rates reveal a 40 percent larger black-white disparity relative to standard labor market estimates (Western and Beckett 1999), and adjusted wage rates for black and white

workers suggest an increase in the black-white earnings gap of up to 60 percent among young men (Western and Pettit 2005).

The “invisible inequality” of excluded populations that is associated with large-scale inequality adds an important dimension to our understanding of labor market indicators, particularly those related to racial disparities. Estimates of human capital formation, employment, and earnings may be overly optimistic in light of the significant population hidden from view.

The article on low-income men as partners does a beautiful job of drawing out important trends from what is only a fairly recent line of inquiry. Tach and Edin’s portrait shows young, low-income men entering into parenthood at extremely early ages and courtship patterns characterized by truncated, often haphazard, pathways leading to parenthood. Family relations are further complicated by the growing incidence of multipartner fertility (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004), thinly stretching resources and investments across multiple contexts and further blurring the norms around responsible partnering and parenting.

Remarkably, despite these radically new configurations, low-income men continue to express relatively traditional values about family formation. The vast majority of these men believe that marriage is the best context in which to raise children, and despite the fact that most of these men become fathers before entering official unions, the majority report a commitment to building stable relationships with the mothers of their children and aspiring to marriage with their partners once certain financial and relationship conditions have been met (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Unfortunately, these aspirational norms are often quite dissimilar from the norms guiding everyday behavior. Tach and Edin document the high levels of instability and uncertainty that characterize these young men and their partnerships. After reviewing the multitude of individual factors that contribute to these men’s unstable outcomes, the authors conclude with a discussion of some of the important unintended consequences of social policies targeting low-income men. By ignoring their role “as fathers, as partners, and as members of fragile and complex families,” these policies may further undermine the precarious social order of family life: for example, household income limits on government transfers may inhibit marriage, and incarceration policies disrupt families.

The regulatory framework under which low-income men and their families operate strikes me as a particularly important focus of study. Indeed, it has now become fairly standard for family researchers to consider the disruptive effects of paternal incarceration (see Comfort 2007; Western 2006; Wildeman 2010). But moving beyond this most extreme intervention, new evidence suggests that levels of punitive surveillance are far greater than we have come to appreciate. Goffman (2009) turns our attention to those young men who have not been convicted of serious crimes, but who, because of child support arrears, court fees, or other minor violations, have warrants out for their arrest. Goffman’s intensive ethnographic account documents the disruptive impact of these policies for the already tenuous social relations in poor communities. Fearing detection, “wanted” men become even less likely to show up for basic responsibilities such as the birth of a child or formal employment, avoiding

regular routines or institutional environments where the police might track them down. The daily realities of getting by, staying out of jail, and staying alive complicate even the most heartfelt aspirations for traditional family life. When these are added to the burden of child support arrears and garnishment of legal pay, sometimes beyond 50 percent of legal wages (Holzer, Offner, and Sorenson 2005), the situation becomes all the more untenable. Social policies intended to discipline unruly young men can thus have perverse effects for the families and communities of which they are a part. This line of research seems especially important, as the development of effective social policies requires an appreciation not only for specific social problems but for the social systems in which those problem behaviors emerge.

In the two articles on low-income men as fathers and parents, by Berger and Langton as well as Carlson and Magnuson, the most striking picture we get is one of complexity. It has become increasingly rare for low-income children, especially African Americans, to grow up in a home with two married parents and only their biological children (Carlson and Magnuson). Parental time and resources are spread across multiple households, often characterized by frequent disruption and poorly defined norms as to how these new family configurations should best be managed.

The two articles cover a lot of ground as to the causes and consequences of father involvement. Beyond those individual attributes reliably associated with father involvement—such as age, race, education, and economic resources—Carlson and Magnuson emphasize the importance of studying families as “systems” rather than focusing on the effects of fathers in isolation. Indeed, aspects of the relationship between father and child (e.g., quantity and quality of father-child interaction and biological versus social relationship) as well as aspects of the relationship between father and mother (e.g., coparenting and gatekeeping) mediate the impact of fathers’ characteristics on child well-being.

Extending the notion of families as “systems,” we might also consider the local context in which the family system operates. Less attention appears to be placed on the community characteristics in which a family is located, but I wondered to what extent the prevailing expectations and experiences of fathers are in part shaped by the social demography of their neighborhoods. The urban inequality literature has well-documented wide variation in the social characteristics of neighborhoods, with the concentration of poverty, joblessness, and single-parent families exerting an independent influence on behaviors of young men and the outcomes of youth (see Sampson 1987; Wilson 1987). Add to this the intense geographic concentration of incarceration, leading to massive population removal of young black men and a churning of residents in and out of communities (Clear 2007). One study finds that high-incarceration neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., contain roughly 60 men per 100 women (Braman 2004, 86). What are the consequences of these extreme conditions for the expectations and experiences of fathers? To what extent do community norms shift as a result of changing social and demographic conditions (Harding 2007)? Tach and Edin cite several studies suggesting a responsiveness of marriage to prevailing local conditions. Might norms about fatherhood be similarly affected by variable or changing community characteristics?

The wide range of individual and relational factors that shape fathers' involvement presents a complex portrait, and one not easily distilled in a few short sound bites. Nevertheless, I found myself wondering whether it might be possible to estimate relative magnitudes for the various pathways, as a way of moving us toward more effective policy intervention. What are the expected effects of raising paternal age by five years, for example, relative to increasing education to a high school degree? What dollar amount in income would it take to compensate for the negative effects of incarceration status (ignoring for the moment that the effect of the latter often runs through the former)? Is there some level at which the quality of father-child interaction can outweigh a shortage of economic resources? Moving beyond a catalog of what matters to *how much* each matters would help us to identify where and how targeted policy interventions might maximize their impact.

Given the nascency of much of this literature, as well as limitations of the existing data, it may be unrealistic to think about generating such precise effect sizes. Nevertheless, as a programmatic goal, this would seem to be a useful exercise for considering which of these factors matter most and which might be amenable to influence through social policy (Isaacs, Sawhill, and Thomas 2009).

The complexity of contemporary family relations represents a challenge for both research and policy, as traditional ways of thinking about, measuring, and intervening into the family system become quickly outdated. At the same time, the accumulation of research in this field has provided certain clear insights that, given sufficient political will, could be the target of effective policy intervention. The primacy of men's economic resources, in particular, emerges in this literature as a central predictor of entry into marriage, involvement with children, and child well-being. Though solving the employment problems of young less-educated men is no simple matter, any cost-benefit analysis of possible interventions should take into account the positive spillover effects for families and children. In considering the specific dilemmas facing low-income black men, the imposing presence of the criminal justice system cannot be overstated. To be sure, poor families and communities have been disproportionately victimized by crime and violence, suggesting that police and court interventions play a much-needed role in restoring and maintaining order. Nevertheless, as research accumulates as to the harmful collateral consequences of our punitive crime policies—for ex-offenders, their families, their children, and their communities—greater attention to possible alternatives is warranted. Particularly in the case of nonviolent drug offenders, who make up a large and growing fraction of the black men admitted to prison each year, evidence suggests that community-based treatment programs represent a far more effective strategy for dealing with the problems of addiction and reducing future recidivism. Given the substantial financial and social costs of incarceration, investments in less expensive and more effective prevention and treatment efforts are worth serious exploration.

Amid the growing flexibility and complexity of the contemporary family, fathers continue to play an integral role. Recognizing the barriers facing young low-income men with respect to achieving stability in employment, marriage, and

their relationships with their children represents an important goal for social policy. The articles in this volume represent an admirable step in this direction.

## Notes

1. According to Heckman and LaFontaine (2007, Web appendix), prison GED recipients now account for more than 10 percent of all GED certificates issued in the United States each year. Among blacks, 21 percent of all GEDs issued in 2005 were obtained in prison.

2. Pager (2007) discusses the ways in which criminal records can be viewed as “negative credentials.” The credential of a criminal record, like educational or professional credentials, constitutes a formal and enduring classification of social status, which can be used to regulate access and opportunity across numerous social, economic, and political domains (see pp. 32–37).

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