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The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males*

FROM *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City*

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Reading this essay, you are stepping into a minefield. Fortunately, William Julius Wilson, one of our preeminent sociologists for the past thirty years, has led the way. As a newcomer to sociology you don't know that academic battles have raged, and unkind words and accusations have been hurled, character has been impugned, and friends have become enemies over the question Wilson is addressing: Why are so many Black males overrepresented among school dropouts, the unemployed, the incarcerated, and the unwed fathers in this country? Fortunately, we no longer have to rely on an explanation that "blames the victim" by castigating their "culture of poverty" and lack of personal responsibility. Nor do we have to blame "the system" and treat those in distress as if they are puppets or robots on a downward-sloping treadmill. Wilson knows what he is talking about when he looks closely at the structural barriers to success and the many ways opportunity is denied millions of Black males, including many young Black men today. He also knows about the beliefs and attitudes fostered in the inner city and the accepted practices that keep many men from pursuing possibilities that could change their lives. For so long the odds have been against them.

The economic predicament of low-skilled black men in the inner city has reached catastrophic proportions. Americans may not fully understand the dreadful social and economic circumstances that have moved these black males further and further behind the rest of society, but they often fear black males and perceive that they pose a problem for those who live in the city. Elliot Liebow helped expand our understanding of low-skilled black males when he wrote *Tally's Corner: A Study of Street Corner Men* in the mid-1960s. Since then, researchers have paid more attention to this group.

Although many of Liebow's arguments concerning the work experiences and family lives of black men in a Washington DC ghetto are still applicable to contemporary urban communities, the social and economic predicament of low-skilled black males today, especially their rate of joblessness, has become even more severe. Liebow was perhaps the first scholar to demonstrate that an ongoing lack of success in the labor market (ranging from outright

unemployment to being trapped in menial jobs) leads to a lessening of self-confidence and, eventually, to feelings of resignation that frequently result in temporary, or even permanent, abandonment of looking for work.

Even when Liebow's men were successful in finding work, the jobs they occupied paid little and were dirty, physically demanding, and uninteresting. This work did not foster respect, build status, or offer opportunity for advancement. "The most important fact [in becoming discouraged from look-ing for or keeping a job] 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." Because they held the same ideas about work and reward as other Americans, the street-corner men viewed such jobs disdainfully. "He cannot do otherwise," stated Liebow. "He cannot draw from a job those values which other people do not put into it." Unlike today, menial employment was readily available to these men during the 1960s, and they drifted from one undesirable job to the next.

When I analyzed the data collected from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s by our research team on poverty and joblessness among black males in inner-city Chicago neighborhoods, I was repeatedly reminded of Liebow's book. Although the job prospects for low-skilled black men were bleak when Liebow conducted his field research in the early 1960s, they were even worse in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when even menial jobs in the service sector were difficult for low-skilled black males to find. That situation persists today.

THE ROLE OF 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 other structural factors, such as the decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor. The propagation of new technologies is displacing untrained workers and rewarding those with specialized, technical training, while globalization of the economy is increasingly pitting low-skilled workers in the United States against their counterparts around the world, including laborers in countries such as China, India, and Bangladesh who can be employed for substantially lower wages. This decreasing relative demand in the United States for low-skilled labor means that untrained workers face the growing threat of eroding wages and job displacement.

Over the past several decades, African Americans have experienced sharp job losses in the manufacturing sector. Indeed, as John Schmitt and Ben Zipperer point out, "the share of black workers in manufacturing has actually been falling more rapidly than the overall share of manufacturing employ-ment. From the end of the 1970s through the early 1990s, African Americans were just as likely as workers from other racial and ethnic groups to have

manufacturing jobs. Since the early 1990s, however, black workers have lost considerable ground in manufacturing. By 2007, blacks were about 15 percent less likely than other workers to have a job in manufacturing." 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.

The relative decline of black workers in manufacturing parallels their decreasing involvement in unions. From 1983 to 2007 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 to 15.7 percent. In 2007, African American workers were still more likely to be unionized (15.7 percent) than whites (13.5) and Hispanics (10.8). Nonetheless, this reduction (down 16 percentage points) over that time span was greater than that for whites (down 8.9 percentage points) and Hispanics (down 13.4). The lack of union representation renders workers more vulnerable in the workplace, especially to cuts in wages and benefits.

Because they tend to be educated in poorly performing public schools, low-skilled black males often enter the job market lacking some of the basic tools that would help them confront changes in their employment prospects. Such schools have rigid district bureaucracies, poor morale among teachers and school principals, low expectations for students, and negative ideologies that justify poor student performance. Inner-city schools fall well below more advantaged suburban schools in science and math resources, and they lack teachers with appropriate preparation in these subjects. As a result, students from these schools tend to have poor reading and math skills, important tools for competing in the globalized labor market. Few thoughtful observers of public education would disagree with the view that the poor employment prospects of low-skilled black males are in no small measure related to their public-education experiences.

Their lack of education, which contributes to joblessness, is certainly related to their risk of incarceration. As Bruce Western so brilliantly revealed in his important book *Punishment and Inequality in America*, following the collapse of the low-skilled urban labor markets and the creation of jobless ghettos in our nation's inner cities, incarceration grew among those with the highest rates of joblessness. "By the early 2000s," states Western, "the chances of imprisonment were more closely linked to race and school failure than at any time in the previous twenty years." Between 1979 and 1999, the risk of imprisonment for less educated men nearly doubled. Indeed, a significant proportion of black men who have been in prison are high school dropouts. "Among [black] male high school dropouts the risk of imprisonment [has] increased to 60 percent, establishing incarceration as a normal stopping point on the route to midlife."

However, Western's research also revealed that national cultural shifts in values and attitudes contributed to a political context associated with a

resurgent Republican Party that focused on punitive "solutions" and worsened the plight of low-skilled black men. This more penal approach to crime was reinforced during Bill Clinton's administration. Indeed, rates of incarceration soared even during periods when the overall crime rate had declined. "The growth in violence among the ghetto poor through the 1960s and 1970s stoked fears of white voters and lurked in the rhetoric of law and order," states Western. "Crime, however, did not drive the rise in imprisonment directly, but formed the background for a new style of politics and punishment. As joblessness and low wages became enduring features of the less skilled inner-city economy, the effects of a punitive criminal justice system concentrated on the most disadvantaged." Western estimates that as many as 30 percent of all civilian young adult black males ages sixteen to thirty-four are ex-offenders. In short, cultural shifts in attitudes toward crime and punishment created structural circumstances—a more punitive criminal justice system—that have had a powerful impact on low-skilled black males.

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For inner-city black male workers, the problems created by these structural factors have been aggravated by employers' negative attitudes toward black men as workers. A representative sample of Chicago-area employers by my research team in the late 1980s clearly reveals employer bias against black males. A substantial majority of employers considered inner-city black males to be uneducated, uncooperative, unstable, or dishonest. For example, a suburban drug store manager made the following comment:

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.

The prevalence of such attitudes, combined with the physical and social isolation of minorities living in inner-city areas of concentrated poverty, severely limits the access that poor black men have to informal job networks (the casual networks of people or acquaintances who can pass along information about employment prospects.) This is a notable problem for black males, especially considering that many low-skilled employees first learn about their jobs through an acquaintance or were recommended by someone associated with the company. Research suggests that only a small percentage of low-skilled employees are hired through advertised job openings or cold calls. The importance of knowing someone who knows the boss can be seen 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 themselves. Although some of these men scorn entry-level jobs because of the poor working conditions and low wages, many others would readily accept such employment. And although statistical discrimination contains some elements of class bias against poor, inner-city workers, it is clearly a racially motivated practice. It is a frustrating and disturbing fact that inner-city black males are effectively screened out of employment far more often than their Hispanic or white peers who apply for the same jobs. A number of other studies have documented employer bias against black males. For example, research by Devah Pager revealed that a white applicant with a felony conviction was more likely to receive a callback or job offer than was a black applicant with a clean record.

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Forced to turn to the low-wage service sector for employment, inner-city black males—including a significant number of ex-offenders—have to compete, often unsuccessfully, with a growing number of female and immigrant workers. If these men complain or otherwise manifest their dissatisfaction, they seem even more unattractive to employers and therefore encounter even greater discrimination when they search for employment. Because the feelings that 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 these attitudes and other cultural traits with the opportunity structure— that is, the spectrum of life chances available to them in society at large.

Many people would agree that both the structural factors and the national cultural factors discussed earlier have had a very large impact on the experiences of low-skilled black males. But no such consensus exists with respect to the role of cultural factors that have emerged in inner-city ghetto neighborhoods in shaping and directing the lives of young black men.

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL FACTORS

Throughout this discussion I have suggested that cultural factors must be brought to bear if we are to explain economic and social outcomes for racial groups. The exploration of the cultural dimension must do three things: (1) provide a compelling reason for including cultural factors in a comprehensive discussion of race and poverty, (2) show the relationship between cultural analysis and structural analysis, and (3) determine the extent to which cultural factors operate independently to contribute to or reinforce poverty and racial inequality. However, the evidence for the influence of cultural factors on the social and economic circumstances of low-skilled black males is far less compelling than structural arguments, in part because of a dearth of research in this area.

According to Orlando Patterson of Harvard University, since the mid-1960s a strong bias against cultural explanations for human behavior has led social scientists and policy analysts to ignore different groups' distinctive cultural attributes in favor of an emphasis on structural factors to account for the behavior and social outcomes of its members. So instead of looking at attitudes, norms, values, habits, and worldviews (all indications of cultural orientations), we focus on joblessness, low socioeconomic status, and underperforming public schools—in short, structural factors.

Patterson revisited the role of culture and raised several questions that might be better addressed when cultural elements are considered in conjunction with structural and historical explanations. Patterson 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?" And, he adds, why do young black males turn their backs on low-wage jobs that immigrants are happy to fill? Referring to research conducted by UCLA sociologist Roger Waldinger, Patterson states that such jobs enable the chronically unemployed to enter the labor market and obtain basic work skills that they can later use in securing better jobs. But he also notes that those who accepted the low-paying jobs in Waldinger's study were mostly immigrants.

To help answer his own questions about the behavior of young black men in the ghetto, Patterson refers to anecdotal evidence collected several years ago

by one of his former students. He states that the student 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 of the black boys were fully aware of the consequences of failing to graduate from high school and go on to college. (They indignantly exclaimed, "We're not stupid!"). So, Patterson wonders, why were they flunking out? The candid answer was that these young men gave to his former student was their preference for what some call the "cool-pose culture" of young black men, which they found too fulfilling to give up. "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 maintains that cool-pose culture blatantly promotes the most anomalous models of behavior in urban, lower-class neighborhoods, featuring gangsta rap, predatory sexuality, and irresponsible fathering. "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." For example, Patterson argues that black male pride has become increasingly defined in terms of the impregnation of women. However, this trend is not unique to the current generation of young black males, he notes. Several decades ago the sociologist Lee Rainwater uncovered a similar pattern. Not only did a majority of the inner-city, young black male respondents he interviewed state that they were indifferent to the fact that their girlfriends were pregnant, but some even expressed the proud belief that getting a girl pregnant proves you're a man. The fact that Elijah Anderson and others discovered identical models decades later suggests the possibility of a pattern of cultural transmission—that is, the attitudes and behaviors valorizing a kind of "footloose fatherhood" have been passed down to younger generations. A counterargument—one that does not assume cultural transmission—could also be posed: young black men in roughly similar structural positions in different generations developed similar cultural responses.

Patterson argues that a thoughtful cultural explanation of the self-defeating behavior of poor, young black men could not only speak to the immediate relationship of their attitudes, behavior, and undesirable outcomes, but also examine their brutalized past, perhaps over generations, to investigate the origins and changing nature of these views and practices. Patterson maintains that we cannot understand the behavior of young black men without deeply examining their collective past.

I believe that Patterson tends to downplay the importance of immediate socioeconomic factors: if there is indeed a cool-pose culture, it is reasonable to assume that it is partly related to employment failures and disillusionment with the poorly performing public schools and possibly has its roots in the special social circumstances fostered by pre-1960s legal segregation. But

I fully concur with Patterson's view that cultural explanations that include historical context should be part of our attempt to fully account for behavior that is so contradictory to mainstream ideas of how work and family should fit into a man's life.

In her ethnographic research—that is, work using evidence gathered through field observation and through extended, often repeated, interviews—Katherine Newman reveals that young, low-wage workers in New York City's Harlem neighborhood not only adhere to mainstream values regarding work, but also tend to accept low-skilled, low-wage, often dead-end jobs. In his impressive study of how young, inner-city black men perceive opportunity and mobility in the United States, Alford Young found that although some men associated social mobility with the economic opportunity structure, including race- and class-based discrimination, all of his respondents shared the view that individuals are largely accountable for their failure to advance in society.

The research conducted by my team in Chicago provides only mixed evidence for a subculture of defeatism. Consistent with Liebow's findings in Tally's Corner, the ethnographic research in our study revealed that many young black males had experienced repeated failures in their job search, had given up hope, and therefore no longer bothered to look for work. * * * [O]ur research pointed to negative employer attitudes and actions toward low-skilled black males as powerful influences in this cycle. Our ethnographic research suggested that repeated failure results in resignation and the development of cultural attitudes that discourage the pursuit of steady employment in the formal labor market.

On the other hand, data from our large, random survey of black residents in the inner city revealed that despite the overwhelming joblessness and poverty around them, black residents in ghetto neighborhoods, consistent with the findings of Alford Young, spoke unambiguously in support of basic American values concerning individual initiative. For example, nearly all of the black people we questioned felt that plain hard work is either very important or somewhat important for getting ahead. In addition, in a series of open-ended interviews conducted by members of our research team, participants overwhelmingly endorsed the dominant American belief system concerning poverty. The views of some of these individuals—who lived in some of the most destitute neighborhoods in America—were particularly revealing. A substantial majority agreed that America is a land of opportunity where anybody can get ahead, and that individuals get pretty much what they deserve.

The response of a thirty-four-year-old black male, a resident in a ghetto area of the South Side of Chicago where 29 percent of the population was destitute (i.e., with incomes 75 percent below the poverty line) was typical: "Everybody get pretty much what they deserve because if everybody wants to do better they got to go out there and try. If they don't try, they won't make it." Another black male who was residing in an equally impoverished South Side

neighborhood stated, "For some it's a land of opportunity, but you can't just let opportunity come knock on your door, you just got to go ahead and work for it. You got to go out and get it for yourself." Although their support of this abstract American ideal was not always consistent with their perceptions and descriptions of the social barriers that impeded the social progress of their neighbors and friends, these endorsements stand in strong contrast to the subculture of defeatism. Nonetheless, I should note that there is frequently a gap between what people state in the abstract and what they perceive to be possible for themselves given their own situations. In other words, it should not be surprising if some residents support the abstract American ideal of individual initiative and still feel that they cannot get ahead, because of factors beyond their control.

The inconsistency between what people say in the abstract and what they believe applies to them may be seen in other ways. Jennifer Hochschild's analysis of national survey data reveals that poor blacks tend to acknowledge the importance of discrimination when they respond to national surveys, but they are not likely to feel that it affects them personally. Often, discrimination is the least mentioned factor among other important forces that black people select when asked what determines their chances in life. Thus, among poor blacks, structural factors such as discrimination and declining job opportunities "do not register as major impediments to achieving their goals. Deficient motivation and individual effort do." The emphasis that poor blacks place on the importance of personal attributes over structural factors for success in America should not come as a surprise. As Hochschild astutely points out, "poor African Americans are usually badly educated and not widely traveled, so they are unlikely to see structural patterns underlying individual actions and situations. Thus even if (or because) the American dream fails as a description of American society, it is a highly seductive prescription for succeeding in that society to those who cannot see the underlying flaw." To repeat, the evidence for a subculture of defeatism is mixed. Nonetheless, until more compelling studies are produced, it remains an important hypothesis for research.

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Sandra Smith provides a compelling and nuanced cultural analysis of other factors that contribute to the complex and often difficult world of work inhabited by low-skilled blacks. Smith conducted in-depth interviews with 105 black men and women in Michigan between the ages of twenty and forty who had no more than a high school education so that she could examine the informal personal networks of low-skilled black job holders and job seekers.

Smith's data provide new information to help explain why informal job networks among blacks were less useful in helping job seekers find employment in the formal economy. She found that distrust on the part of black job holders and the defensive individualism typical of black job seekers profoundly affected

the use of job referrals in the search for employment. She points out that the neighborhoods of the black poor are "characterized by chronic poverty and a history of exploitation" and tend to feed the inclination to distrust, "inhibiting the development of mutually beneficial cooperative relationships such as those that facilitate the job-matching process." The cooperation between job seekers and job holders is thwarted by a lack of mutual trust. Thus, low-skilled black job seekers are frequently unable to use their friendships, acquaintances, and family ties—their informal network—to gain employment. Black job holders were reluctant to refer their relatives and friends for jobs because they feared that their own reputations with employers could be jeopardized if the work of the people they recommended was substandard.

CONCLUSION

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The disproportionate number of low-skilled black males in this country is one of the legacies of historical segregation and discrimination. However, aside from the effects of current segregation and discrimination, including those caused by employer bias, I highlighted a number of impersonal economic forces that have contributed to the incredibly high jobless rate of low-skilled black males and their correspondingly low incomes. These forces include the decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor caused by the computer revolution, the globalization of economic activity, the declining manufacturing sector, and the growth of service industries in which most of the new jobs for workers with limited skills and education are concentrated.

I noted that the shift to service industries has created a new set of problems for low-skilled black males because those industries feature jobs that require workers to serve and relate to consumers. Why are such requirements a problem for black men? Simply because employers believe that women and recent immigrants of both genders are better suited than black males, especially those with prison records, for such jobs. This image has been created partly by cultural shifts in national attitudes that reflected concerns about the growth of violence in the ghettos through the 1960s and '70s. In the eyes of many Americans, black males symbolized this violence. Cries for "law and order" resulted in a more punitive criminal justice system and a dramatic increase in black male incarceration.

Cultural arguments have been advanced to explain the social and economic woes of low-skilled black males, but the evidence is mixed. For example, a number of studies have associated black joblessness with high reservation wages, the lowest wages that a worker is willing to accept. Nonetheless, one of the more compelling studies found no significant relationship between the reservation wages of black men and the duration of joblessness. The findings in an important recent study, however, clearly suggest that chronic poverty

and exploitation in poor black neighborhoods tend to feed inclinations to distrust. These cultural traits undermine the development of cooperative relationships that are so vital in informal job networks. Black workers in the inner city tend to be less willing to recommend friends and relatives for jobs that become available. Thus, the structural problem of employer job discrimination and the cultural inclination to distrust combine to severely handicap low-skilled, black male workers, especially those with prison records.

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Uses of the Underclass in America

HERBERT J. GANS

This essay is vintage sociology, taking what everyone thinks they know and turning it on its head. Gans shows how the lives and work of the so-called "undeserving poor" benefit the nonpoor in ways most Americans seldom recognize. "Poverty is good for you," is another way to express Gans's message, "as long as you are not among the poor." This essay also shows how functional analysis, often accused of being conservative, can be a critical perspective.

I. INTRODUCTION

Poverty, like any other social phenomenon, can be analyzed in terms of the causes which initiate and perpetuate it, but once it exists, it can also be studied in terms of the consequences or *functions* which follow. These functions can be both *positive* and *negative*, adaptive and destructive, depending on their nature and the people and interests affected.

Poverty has many negative functions (or dysfunctions), most for the poor themselves, but also for the nonpoor. Among those of most concern to both populations, perhaps the major one is that a small but visible proportion of poor people is involved in activities which threaten their physical safety, for example street crime, or which deviate from important norms claimed to be "mainstream," such as failing to work, bearing children in adolescence and out of wedlock, and being "dependent" on welfare. In times of high unemployment, illegal and even legal immigrants are added to this list for endangering the job opportunities of native-born Americans.

Furthermore, many better-off Americans believe that the number of poor people who behave in these ways is far larger than it actually is. More important, many think that poor people act as they do because of moral shortcomings that express themselves in lawlessness or in the rejection of mainstream norms. Like many other sociologists, however, I argue that the behavior patterns which concern the more fortunate classes are *poverty-related*, because they are, and have historically been, associated with poverty. * * * They are in fact caused by poverty, although a variety of other causes must also be at work since most poor people are not involved in any of these activities.

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