

**DOCUMENT 3 – LEARNING OBJECTS FOR LESSON 1: Scholarship is a Conversation**

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[U.S.](#)

## Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn

By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#) MARCH 20, 2006

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These were among the recent findings:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

About half of all black men in their late 20's and early 30's who did not go to college are noncustodial fathers, according to Mr. Holzer. From the fathers' viewpoint, support obligations "amount to a tax on earnings," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Poverty of the Mind

By ORLANDO PATTERSON MARCH 26, 2006

Cambridge, Mass. - SEVERAL recent studies have garnered wide attention for reconfirming the tragic disconnection of millions of black youths from the American mainstream. But they also highlighted another crisis: the failure of social scientists to adequately explain the problem, and their inability to come up with any effective strategy to deal with it.

The main cause for this shortcoming is a deep-seated dogma that has prevailed in social science and policy circles since the mid-1960's: 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.

Harry Holzer, an economist at Georgetown University and a co-author of one of the recent studies, typifies this attitude. Joblessness, he feels, is due to largely weak schooling, a lack of reading and math skills at a time when such skills are increasingly required even for blue-collar jobs, and the poverty of black neighborhoods. Unable to find jobs, he claims, black males turn to illegal activities, especially the drug trade and chronic drug use, and often end up in prison. He also criticizes the practice of withholding child-support payments from the wages of absentee fathers who do find jobs, telling *The Times* that to these men, such levies "amount to a tax on earnings."

His conclusions are shared by scholars like Ronald B. Mincy of Columbia, the author of a study called "Black Males Left Behind," and Gary Orfield of Harvard, who asserts that America is "pumping out boys with no honest alternative."

This is all standard explanatory fare. And, as usual, it fails to answer the important questions. Why are young black men doing so poorly in school that they lack basic literacy and math skills? These scholars must know that countless studies by educational experts, going all the way back to the landmark report by James Coleman of Johns Hopkins University in 1966, have found that poor schools, per se, do not explain why after 10 years of education a young man remains illiterate.

Nor have studies explained why, if someone cannot get a job, he turns to crime and drug abuse. One does not imply the other. Joblessness is rampant in Latin America and India, but the mass of the populations does not turn to crime.

And why do so many young unemployed black men have children -- several of them -- which they have no resources or intention to support? And why, finally, do they murder each other at nine times the rate of white youths?

What's most interesting about the recent spate of studies is that analysts seem at last to be recognizing what has long been obvious to anyone who takes culture seriously: socioeconomic factors are of limited

explanatory power. Thus it's doubly depressing that the conclusions they draw and the prescriptions they recommend remain mired in traditional socioeconomic thinking.

What has happened, I think, is that the economic boom years of the 90's and one of the most successful policy initiatives in memory -- welfare reform -- have made it impossible to ignore the effects of culture. The Clinton administration achieved exactly what policy analysts had long said would pull black men out of their torpor: the economy grew at a rapid pace, providing millions of new jobs at all levels. Yet the jobless black youths simply did not turn up to take them. Instead, the opportunity was seized in large part by immigrants -- including many blacks -- mainly from Latin America and the Caribbean.

One oft-repeated excuse for the failure of black Americans to take these jobs -- that they did not offer a living wage -- turned out to be irrelevant. The sociologist Roger Waldinger of the University of California at Los Angeles, for example, has shown that in New York such jobs offered an opportunity to the chronically unemployed to join the market and to acquire basic work skills that they later transferred to better jobs, but that the takers were predominantly immigrants.

Why have academics been so allergic to cultural explanations? Until the recent rise of behavioral economics, most economists have simply not taken non-market forces seriously. But what about the sociologists and other social scientists who ought to have known better? Three gross misconceptions about culture explain the neglect.

First is the pervasive idea that cultural explanations inherently blame the victim; that they focus on internal behavioral factors and, as such, hold people responsible for their poverty, rather than putting the onus on their deprived environment. (It hasn't helped that many conservatives do actually put forth this view.)

But this argument is utterly bogus. To hold someone responsible for his behavior is not to exclude any recognition of the environmental factors that may have induced the problematic behavior in the first place. Many victims of child abuse end up behaving in self-destructive ways; 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.

Likewise, a cultural explanation of black male self-destructiveness addresses not simply the immediate connection between their attitudes and behavior and the undesired outcomes, but explores the origins and changing nature of these attitudes, perhaps over generations, in their brutalized past. It is impossible to understand the predatory sexuality and irresponsible fathering behavior of young black men without going back deep into their collective past.

Second, it is often assumed that cultural explanations are wholly deterministic, leaving no room for human agency. This, too, is nonsense. Modern students of culture have long shown that while it partly determines behavior, it also enables people to change behavior. People use their culture as a frame for understanding their world, and as a resource to do much of what they want. The same cultural patterns can frame different kinds of behavior, and by failing to explore culture at any depth, analysts miss a great opportunity to re-frame attitudes in a way that encourages desirable behavior and outcomes.

Third, it is often assumed that cultural patterns cannot change -- the old "cake of custom" saw. This too is nonsense. Indeed, cultural patterns are often easier to change than the economic factors favored by policy analysts, and American history offers numerous examples.

My favorite is Jim Crow, that deeply entrenched set of cultural and institutional practices built up over four centuries of racist domination and exclusion of blacks by whites in the South. Nothing could have been more cultural than that. And yet America was able to dismantle the entire system within a single generation, so much so that today blacks are now making a historic migratory shift back to the South, which they find more congenial than the North. (At the same time, economic inequality, which the policy analysts love to discuss, has hardened in the South, like the rest of America.)

So what are some of the cultural factors that explain the sorry state of young black men? They aren't always obvious. Sociological investigation has found, in fact, that one popular explanation -- that black children who do well are derided by fellow blacks for "acting white" -- turns out to be largely false, except for those attending a minority of mixed-race schools.

An anecdote helps explain why: Several years ago, one of my students went back to her high school to find out why it was that 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. Distressingly, she found that all the black boys knew the consequences of not graduating and going on to college ("We're not stupid!" they told her indignantly).

SO why were they flunking out? Their candid answer was that what sociologists call the "cool-pose culture" of young black men was simply too gratifying 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, the fact that almost all the superstar athletes and a great many of the nation's best entertainers were black.

Not only was living this subculture immensely fulfilling, the boys said, it also brought them a great deal of respect from white youths. This also explains the otherwise puzzling finding by social psychologists that young black men and women tend to have the highest levels of self-esteem of all ethnic groups, and that their self-image is independent of how badly they were doing in school.

I call this the Dionysian trap for young black men. The important thing to note about the subculture that ensnares them is that it is not disconnected from the mainstream culture. To the contrary, it has powerful support from some of America's largest corporations. Hip-hop, professional basketball and homeboy fashions are as American as cherry pie. Young white Americans are very much into these things, but selectively; they know when it is time to turn off Fifty Cent and get out the SAT prep book.

For young black men, however, that culture is all there is -- or so they think. Sadly, their complete engagement in this part of the American cultural mainstream, which they created and which feeds their pride and self-respect, is a major factor in their disconnection from the socioeconomic mainstream.

Of course, such attitudes explain only a part of the problem. In academia, we need a new, multidisciplinary approach toward understanding what makes young black men behave so self-destructively. Collecting transcripts of their views and rationalizations is a useful first step, but won't help nearly as much as the recent rash of scholars with tape-recorders seem to think. Getting the facts straight is important, but for decades we have been overwhelmed with statistics on black youths, and running more statistical regressions is beginning to approach the point of diminishing returns to knowledge.

The tragedy unfolding in our inner cities is a time-slice of a deep historical process that runs far back through the cataracts and deluge of our racist past. Most black Americans have by now, miraculously,

escaped its consequences. The disconnected fifth languishing in the ghettos is the remains. Too much is at stake for us to fail to understand the plight of these young men. For them, and for the rest of us.

Op-Ed Contributor Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard, is the author of "Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries."

# Diversity Wheel



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