

## Toward a Fruitful Policy Discourse about Less Educated Young Men

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Over the past decade low-income women, especially minorities and single mothers, have made significant strides in entering the labor market, in large part due to welfare reform policies, educational incentives and work support initiatives, such as childcare assistance.

But low-income men have not fared as well. While the 1990s ushered in an overall increase in employment rates, and employment rates among young white and Hispanic males fluctuated slightly from eighty plus percent between 1979 and 1999, the rates for their black counterparts decreased from 60 percent in 1979 to 50 percent in 1999.

A new book titled *Black Males Left Behind*, published by the Urban Institute and edited by Ronald M. Mincy, Columbia University, explores this crisis among young black men. The book summarizes work done for the Mott Foundation sponsored Extending Opportunities Project (EOP) on how young, less educated black men fared in the economic boom of the 1990s.

Hillard Pouncy, Visiting Lecturer of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, contributed a chapter titled "Toward a Fruitful Policy Discourse about Less Educated Young Men", that reviews current political and policy barriers to helping young men, and demonstrates why new research is needed to alleviate such obstacles.

*"...if less educated young men could change their skin color or their ethnicity, their employment and incarceration issues would be reduced but not eliminated. If, however, their educational levels went beyond high school, issues of incarceration and unemployment would essentially 'vanish.'"*

### THE STUDY

Pouncy contends that while there is a growing crisis of incarceration rates and low employment among young black men, the problem is not entirely race-based. Citing work by Bruce Western, a Princeton sociologist, he asserts that if less educated young men could change their skin color or their ethnicity, their employment and incarceration issues would be reduced but not eliminated. If, however, their educational levels went beyond high school, issues of incarceration and unemployment would essentially "vanish," according to Pouncy.

The study's author analyzes data from the 1979 Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). The NLSY79, conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor, surveys 12,686 young men and women nationwide between the ages 14-22 years old. Individuals were interviewed annually through 1994 and have since been interviewed on a biennial basis.

The survey tracks individuals' labor force activities and includes data on start and stop dates for each job held since the last interview, periods in which individuals are still looking for work, or are out of the labor force. Data allows for measures of actual labor market experience, tenure with a specific employer, and employer mobility.

Pouncy uses the data to look at education levels and rates of incarceration among young white, Hispanic and black males, and the extent to which this population earned money from secondary markets such as illegal activities.

### FINDINGS

The author notes that the incarceration rate is higher among young black males versus their white and Hispanic counterparts. As such, he asserts young black males as a group are "guilty by association," and are perceived as a risk among employers, whether they have a criminal record or not.

Pouncy asserts that until legislators see evidence that programs that assist young low income males result in an increase in

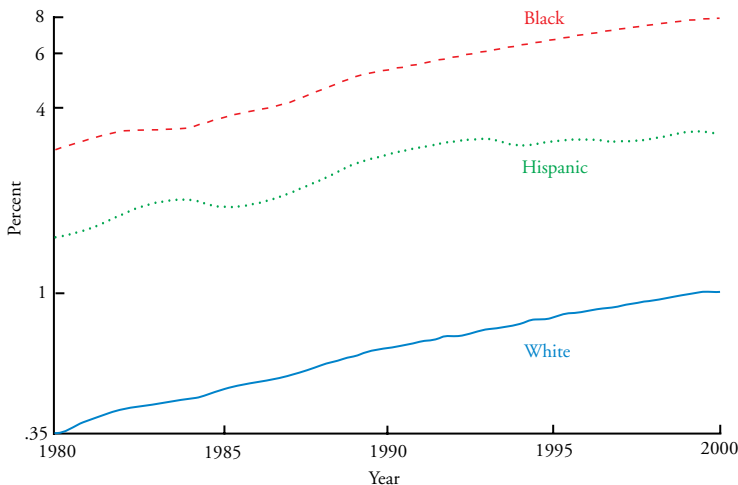
employment, policy initiatives to assist this population will remain stagnant. Hence a catch-22 policy situation emerges, in which the investments necessary to produce evidence about useful programs and policies are stymied by lack of evidence.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Pouncy argues that in order to break the cycle, politicians and policymakers need to be presented with research that demonstrates the link between the employment of less educated men, child support, marriage and welfare reform. Policy makers will then be in a stronger position to persuade influential opinion leaders in Congress and elsewhere with arguments that such investments are part of a larger strategy to alleviate poverty and stabilize families. The author states that Democratic and Republican politicians enmeshed in this dilemma can educate key influencers on their political flanks as researchers unearth new facts about how, when, and why investments in young, low income men pays off.

Pouncy contends that the lack of bona fide employment assistance programs for young black men is due to widespread resistance from both the left and the right. The right contends that previous employment assistance programs with this population have failed, thus making further investments unwise. Welfare rights activist on the left, on the other hand, view employment assistance for low-income males as a threat to programs for less educated mothers.

**INCARCERATION RATE OF MEN AGE 18-65 BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, 1980-2000**



Source: Western, Kleykamp, and Rosefeld (2003).

Pouncy notes with surprise that \$150 million appropriated annually for healthy marriage and fatherhood programs buried deep within the recently passed Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 may provide a breakthrough for this logjam. In providing funds for both women and men to support and care for their children, the U.S. Congress has opened a door through which the federal government can become more instrumental in addressing some of the issues facing disadvantaged men. In addition, he notes that required evaluations of these programs may provide the type of evidence that will help end the current policy dilemma affecting young, disadvantaged men.

In addition, the author underscores the importance of research in answering the following questions: First, do less educated young black men have a strong work ethic/ values and a preference for “masculine” jobs,” which some researchers say are factors for the employment stability of this population? Next, do these men lack information about “good jobs” in traditionally male occupations that researchers have argued are available? Third, are employers who offer these “good jobs” in traditionally male occupations willing to hire young men who are perceived as likely criminals? If so, why aren’t they currently hiring less educated young black men?

Finally, Pouncy comments that in the short term the public shall soon find out whether the marriage and responsible fatherhood provisions of the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act or policies like them will contribute to the fruitful policy discourse about less educated men which he seeks. It is, he says, the new \$150 million dollar question.

A copy of the policy brief can be found at : [http://www.wws.princeton.edu/policybriefs/pouncy\\_discourse.pdf](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/policybriefs/pouncy_discourse.pdf)

A copy of the book in which the chapter was published may be ordered at: <http://www.uiupress.org/order.cfm?pubid=211263>

The website for the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs: <http://www.wws.princeton.edu>

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