Reconnecting Young Black Men: What Policies Would Help?
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The term "disconnected youth" refers to young people who have been out of school and out of work for considerable periods of time – like a year or more. They are not temporarily "idle" but are fully disconnected from the mainstream worlds of schooling and work. They may be incarcerated or on parole or probation; they might be aging out of foster care or still attached to their nuclear families. But, overwhelmingly, they come from low-income families and often grow up in poor and relatively segregated neighborhoods.

Of all racial and gender groups, young black men are by far the most likely to become "disconnected" from school and work. In the year 2000 – when the labor market was very tight – over 17 percent of all young black men between the ages of 16 and 24 were disconnected, while the comparable percentages for other race/gender groups were much lower. Indeed, this figure implies that *one out of every six young black men was disconnected from both school and work at that time*.[1]

Employment, education and incarceration rates across different racial and gender groups tell a similar story. For instance, employment rates among less-educated young black men (ages 16 through 24) who were not enrolled in school and not institutionalized were barely over 50 percent at the end of the 1990s – nearly 30 percentage points below the employment rates of young whites and Latinos with comparable characteristics. These gaps grew even larger during the labor market downturn that began in 2001. According to recent data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), over 30 percent of young black men drop out of high school – a higher rate than is observed for any other group; by some estimates, the dropout rates among inner-city youth are much higher than that. And roughly 12 percent of all black men between the ages of 16 and 34 are incarcerated on any day – while roughly twice that number are on parole or probation. It is also expected that nearly one out of every three young black men will spend some time behind bars in their lifetimes. On all of these dimensions, the gaps between young black men and other groups have widened over the past few decades.[2]

What accounts for the uniquely high tendency of young black men to disconnect from school and from work, and why is this tendency actually worsening over time? What sets of policies might help reverse these trends, by preventing further disconnection among young black men and helping to "reconnect" those who have already dropped away from school and work?

Causes of the Problem: Jobs, Schools, Families and "Culture"

The employment rates of young black men have been dropping steadily since the 1960's, even though family incomes and educational attainment were rising markedly for blacks (relative to whites) at least during the earlier part of this period. Rising expectations of

earnings, and perhaps some growing unwillingness to accept menial low-wage employment, might account for some of this trend, but cannot explain the steady downward trend in employment over this entire period for young black men.

What is clear is that the decline in employment for this group has largely coincided with a dramatic decline in the labor market opportunities of all less-educated men – i.e., those with a high school diploma or less. The earnings of all less-educated men, adjusted for inflation, have either stagnated or declined over much of the past 30 years; and they certainly have fallen behind relative to the earnings of more-educated workers and even les-educated women. The disappearance of good-paying blue-collar jobs in manufacturing and other industries has certainly contributed to this problem, and looms especially large in some regions (like the Midwest). In response to stagnating wages, employment and labor force activity among all groups of less-educated young men have declined somewhat.[3]

But why have the declines been far greater among young black men than other groups? The most likely explanation is that *young black men now face greater barriers in gaining access to better-paying jobs than do those of any other group*. To the extent that better-paying jobs remain, they simply require high levels of education and basic skills than they did in the past. And, while racial gaps in schooling and achievement (as measured by test scores) have narrowed somewhat over time, they remain disturbingly high. Gaps between blacks and whites in high school completion, college attendance, and college completion (either at the 2-year or 4-year level) have barely budged in the past 20 years. While test score gaps narrowed somewhat during the 1980's, they widened a bit during the 1990's. Very high rates of racial and economic segregation in schools and neighborhoods no doubt help perpetuate these gaps, though they open up and develop well before most children set foot in kindergarten.[4]

Even relative to Hispanics, the test scores of blacks continue to lag, though they are more likely to graduate from high school. But employment rates among immigrants with much lower educational attainment and language skills are much higher than those of native-born young black men. This likely occurs because the immigrants are more willing to accept low-wage jobs in much of the service sector, and also because employers prefer them and actively recruit them into many key sectors – including construction and some parts of manufacturing. And black women with skills and educational attainment comparable to their black male counterparts gain higher rates of employment than do the men in many parts of the service sector (particularly health services, child and elder care, retail trade, and related sectors), once again reflecting their own greater tendency to apply for such jobs as well as greater employer aversion to the men.[5]

Skills and education aside, young black men continue to face a number of barriers to gaining access to good jobs. These include: 1) Ongoing discrimination by employers; 2) Weakening informal networks; and 3) Ongoing "spatial mismatch" between where jobs are growing in number (usually in downtown areas of central cities or the higher-income and outlying suburbs) v. where most blacks still live (in segregated urban neighborhoods or lower-income suburbs).

Employer aversion to hiring black men, especially in service jobs in smaller establishments with mostly white customers, has been amply documented in a number of studies. In recent years, this aversion is greatest when employers suspect (rightly or wrongly) that the men in question might have criminal records. The informal networks through which less-educated young men have historically found jobs continue to weaken, as older black men have continued to leave the workforce. And the continuing spatial imbalances reinforce gaps not only in information about jobs but also in transportation and physical access.[6]

But can these job market factors really explain why young black boys – especially in their adolescent or teen years – often disconnect from school, and never even enter the mainstream labor market in a sustained way? Some commentators (like Bill Cosby, Juan Williams, John McWhorter and Orlando Patterson) have recently focused more attention on the *choices* made by young black men and women, rather than on the opportunities they face. Low rates of marriage, high rates of teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock childbearing, and participation in crime at early ages all suggest a lack of personal responsibility, and participation in an oppositional *culture*, to many of these critics.[7]

Indeed, these critics have a point. Young people growing up in single-parent families have worse education and employment outcomes along every dimension, even after adjusting for the lower incomes of their parents. The single mothers themselves also have lower educational attainment and earnings, though this is at least partly due to their own tendencies to come from poorer families. By some accounts, the pressure to avoid "acting white" deters many lower-income black boys from seriously pursuing academics in middle and high school. And, once they engage in illegal activity and become incarcerated, their lifetime employment chances seriously diminish.

On the other hand, it is also clear that the disappearance of mainstream economic opportunity for less-educated young black men and the growth of counterproductive behaviors and "disconnection" have gone hand in hand. While many factors have contributed to falling marriage rates in different communities over time, there is little doubt that declining employment opportunities (and rising incarceration) among men have contributed to its decline in the African-American community. And the rising tendency of young men to commit crime during the 1980's was certainly related to the disappearance of good-paying legal jobs, and the rise of good-paying illegal jobs (at least in the short term) in the crack trade. While the crack trade waned in the 1990's, and the terrible costs of violence and incarceration associated with it became more apparent, many young black men in low-income communities have been left without models of successful employment and marriage among their fathers, older brothers and older friends.[8] In short, young men disconnect from school and work when their options for success in the mainstream world seem to dissipate.

The failure of black men to benefit more from the enormous labor market boom of the 1990s is also troubling. While young black women were pouring into the job market during that decade – being "pulled" in by a tight labor market and growing supports for

the working poor (like expanding child care benefits and a growing Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income working families) and "pushed" by welfare reform – young black men continued to drop out of the labor market.

Why did this occur? Following the dramatic rise in incarceration rates during the 1980s and early 1990s, ever-growing fractions (perhaps up to 30 percent) of young black men now have criminal records. They face great employer reluctance to give them job offers. Indeed, employers are less likely to hire young black men than white men, and those with criminal records compared to those without them; thus, black men with criminal records are much less likely than others to gain job offers, especially in sectors where state laws prohibit the hiring of offenders. The poor skills and work experience, mental health problems and substance abuse that often hamper these men worsen their problems; and their poor labor market opportunities often lead to high job turnover rates and little retention, even when they become hired.[9]

But, in addition, many young black men are non-custodial fathers with steep child support orders. And, if they have been incarcerated, it is likely that they are in "arrears," or in debt on their child support payments. Those in arrears are likely to face "tax rates" as high as 65 percent on their meager earnings; and, in many cases, the money may not be "passed through" to their children, further weakening their incentives to pay. As a result, many young men out of prison tend to disappear into the "underground economy," where they do not face exorbitant tax rates and where at least some tend to support their children informally, though perhaps sporadically in many cases.

In some, large fractions of young black men have criminal records and child support orders, which limit their job prospects and reduce their own incentives to remain attached to the formal labor market. At the same time, younger boys in their adolescents and teens face an economy with weaker schooling and fewer connections to the job market that give them access to good jobs. Absent some clearer mechanisms that provide hope of success and incentives to remain attached to the mainstream world of work, many opt out early, and "disconnect" from both school and work. By giving up on their chances of success in these worlds, many are doomed to become non-custodial and unmarried fathers, and to run afoul of the law, as well.

What to Do: A Comprehensive Range of Policies

To reverse the negative trends in education and employment that afflict young black men, we need a comprehensive set of efforts that will improve their skills and early employment and prevent disconnection from school and work. Such a set of policies will tend to focus on schools and local communities, but will also demand responsible behavior among young men while augmenting their opportunities. For those still facing the prospects of mostly low-wage employment, their work incentives need to be strengthened. And, for young men who have become incarcerated and are also noncustodial fathers, the barriers they face to stable employment need to be reduced while their incentives to work and pay support are strengthened as well.

Improve Skills/Employment and Prevent Disconnection of Youth

Since the gaps in test scores between white and minority children open up very early in life – to a large extent, before they even set foot in kindergarten – the need for high-quality early childhood and pre-kindergarten programs is clear. Intensive interventions for very young children should be more available to the poor, as well as universally available pre-K for those aged 3 and 4 (with sliding fees based on income). Continued pressure on schools to improve the achievement of all children in the K-12 grades should remain, though also with special efforts to recruit and retain better teachers and with other supports for teacher development in these schools.[10]

Since "disconnection" is most likely to occur in the adolescent and early teen years, it is in these age groups that newer efforts for young boys should be focused. Programs that provide "positive youth development," and especially those that been rigorously evaluated and appear to be cost-effective, should be greatly expanded at the middle school level. These programs include "Big Brother/Big Sister" programs and other mentoring efforts for young people. A variety of comprehensive "dropout prevention" programs, like the Quantum Opportunities model, need to be studied and further developed as well.

At the high school level, young people continue to need sustained relationships with adults and positive role models, as well as clear pathways to success in post-secondary education as well as the labor market. High-quality options for career and technical education (CTE), as provided through apprenticeships/internships and Career Academies, need to be expanded. These should not be seen as substitutes for strong academic training, but as complements to more academic approaches. The Career Academies, in particular, provide occupational training and early work experience that supplement good academic instruction. In the rigorous MDRC evaluations, those who attended the Academies did not attend college at lower rates than those in the control groups; but they did have higher employment and earnings, for at least 4 years beyond high school.

Thus, the best examples of career education open further doors to success, without shutting pathways to college. As Baby Boomers will be retiring in the coming decades and many good-paying jobs open up in construction, transportation, the maintenance and repair occupations and other areas, improving the access of younger black men to these jobs through appropriate combinations of career-oriented education and early work experience will become even more important.

Access to post-secondary training must also rise for young black men; and their chances of completing college degree programs that they start (at either the 2-year or 4-year level) must rise as well. This will require a combination of improved financial assistance, through expanded Pell grants and state-level "merit scholarship" programs; and other supports and services, such as remedial efforts and counseling. More transparency and simplicity in the student grant and loans processes will help as well. A greater provision of on-site child care along with more flexible curricula might better enable students with

parental responsibilities from attending and completing their courses of study.[11] For those obtaining certificates rather than full degrees, the links between courses of study and local employment options need to be strengthened as well, perhaps with the assistance of "intermediaries" in key economic sectors (like construction, health care, etc.) that can work with both employers and workers to build skills and supports for lower-income young workers.

Of course, for young men "at risk" of failure or who have already failed (by dropping out and perhaps getting in trouble with the law), a range of "second-chance" options must be more readily available. Programs like the Job Corps, the Youth Service and Conservation Corps and Youth Build appear successful at raising subsequent employment while preventing further incarceration. Newer programs, like the National Guard "ChalleNGe" program, look very promising as well. These should be funded at much higher levels than currently. Alternative charter schools that seek to "recapture" high school dropouts and return them to the classroom – often on community college campuses and other nontraditional sites – deserve more exploration and support as well.

In all of these efforts, there is a real need to develop comprehensive sets of approaches at the community level. Without this, many young men will simply "fall through the cracks," and never have access to supportive arrangements that might actually be available. The most compelling private effort to date to develop a comprehensive range of supports and services for youth at the local level is the Harlem Children's Zone, developed by Geoffrey Canada with extensive foundation support. On a somewhat larger basis, the "After School Matters" program in Chicago offers an appealing model that might ultimately spread across low-income neighborhoods in the entire city. Finally, the 36 "Youth Opportunity" sites funded by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2000 and 2001 marked the first federal effort to support the development of comprehensive community-level programming for low-income youth. These efforts deserve expansion and replication in other communities, with continuing public and private support.[12]

Improve Incentives in Low-Wage Work and Reduce Barriers

The New Hope Demonstration Project in Milwaukee during the 1990's demonstrated that employment and other behaviors can be improved among low-income young men if their low wages in the labor market are supplemented with a range of benefits (as well as guaranteed public service jobs). While a dramatic expansion of health care, parental and pension benefits can only occur through a much broader political agenda than the one we present here, at least some improvements in the work incentives facing low-wage men must be considered now.

For those who will continue to face the prospect of low-wage work, what can be done to improve their incentives to take these jobs? Higher minimum wages would help, for one. Federal efforts to raise the federal minimum wage to $7.25 over a 2-year period will raise the earnings prospects of low-wage workers without dramatically lowering employers' incentives to hire these workers. And many states will likely continue to raise their own minimum wage levels, regardless of what the federal government does in this area.

But these low-wage jobs need to be further supplemented by benefits like the Earned Income Tax Credit. The EITC has been widely credited with helping to draw millions of low-earnings single mothers into the labor market in the 1990s; by providing a refundable tax credit that raises low earnings by up to 40% at its peak, the EITC raises incentives to work substantially in low-wage jobs.[13]

But, currently, the EITC provides maximum benefits to families with two or more children, and usually it is only families headed by single mothers that qualify (based on income). Those with just one child receive a much reduced subsidy, while childless adults – including noncustodial fathers – can receive a "childless" credit worth only about $400 per year.

The EITC available to childless adults could be expanded in two ways: 1) Noncustodial fathers who are paying their current child support orders can get some benefit, as they do now in the state of New York; or 2) Childless adults more broadly between certain ages (say 21 to 40) can receive an enhanced benefit. Marriage penalties in such a system would have to be addressed, as would various administrative difficulties. But, for fairly modest expenditures, these could be dealt with.[14]

And, for those young men whose labor market activity is curtailed by their having criminal records, child support orders (or arrearages), and often both, what can be done to reduce the barriers they face and improve their attachments to work?

Those with criminal records could benefit from a much wider range of supports before and at the time of release, to deal with a variety of personal needs and to strengthen ties to the workplace. The "Second Chance Act" currently under consideration in Congress would provide funding for some such supports. The activities of "intermediaries" here are crucial, since the tasks of securing employment, housing and even proper identification (not to mention getting mental health and substance abuse treatment for those who need it) are daunting to those just released from prison on their own. Some intermediaries, like the Center for Employment Opportunity (CEO) in New York, provide each program participant with a paid "transitional job" for several months; the benefits of this approach are currently being evaluated. Work-related activities should begin even before release, to better prepare offenders for a private-sector labor market much different than what they have been recently accustomed to. Indeed, mandatory work release programs that provide employment requirements as well as supports should be tried and expanded, where successful.[15]

But state policies also need to play a more positive role. The Legal Action Center (2004) has documented, on a state-by-state basis, the many legal prohibitions against occupational licensure and employment that have been enacted in recent years. States should consider whether these barriers ultimately serve the public interest, if they reduce employment options to offenders and raise recidivism rates. The states should also consider whether their current rates of incarceration, especially for non-violent criminal

offenses, go beyond what is optimally needed to deter criminal activity and incapacitate criminals.

When it comes to low-income non-custodial fathers, a similar combination of better programs and policies is needed. States need to develop "arrearage management" options that allow the non-custodial fathers to gradually pay off arrears, without so heavily punishing those who would work and pay on their current orders. More money needs to be "passed through" to low-income families, which would help the families and also raise incentives of fathers to pay. "Fatherhood" efforts that combine labor market assistance with parenting supports might pay off.

Conclusion

Since many forces have contributed to the collapse of employment among lower-income young black men, no single policy remedy will turn the situation around. However, a comprehensive effort to improve skills and early labor market contacts, support positive youth development in communities, improve incentives to take low-wage jobs, and especially to reduce barriers and improve incentives for ex-offenders and non-custodial fathers would no doubt help. The tragedy of wasted human potential among these young men, and the enormous costs imposed on families, communities, and the nation as a whole by their low employment and huge rates of incarceration, suggest that we can do far better than we have to date.

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[1] See Edelman et al. (2006). Comparable numbers for young white and Latino men are 4 percent and 12 percent, respectively.

[2] See Holzer et al. (2005) for evidence on employment rates, and Mishel and Roy (2006) for discussion of high school dropout rates among young whites and minorities. Data on incarceration rates among young black men and other demographic groups are widely available at the website of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

[3] See Bound and Freeman (1992), Bound and Holzer (1993) and Juhn (1992).

[4] See Edelman et al. (2006); Besharov (2005); and Fryer and Levitt (2004).

[5] See Holzer (1996).

[6] See Holzer (2001).

[7] See McWhorter (2006) or Williams (2006).

[8] See Wilson (1996) for a general discussion about how joblessness affects personal behaviors and choices, such as marriage and crime. See Freeman (1999) for evidence on how participation in crime is affected by job market prospects; Blau et al. (200) and Moffitt (2001) on the impacts of male earnings opportunities on female headship of families; and Fryer et al. (2004) on the effects of the crack epidemic.

[9] See Pager (2003), Holzer et al. (2004), and Travis (2003).

[10] See Ludwig and Sawhill (2007) and Bendor et al. (2007) for discussions of pre-K programs and K-12 reforms respectively.

[11] See Bendor et al. (2007).

[12] See Edelman et al. (2006), especially Chapters 3 and 4.

[13] See Blank and Schmidt (2001) or Meyer and Rosenbaum (2001).

[14] See Edelman et al. (2006), Chapter 5 or Berlin (2007).

[15] See Mead (2007).