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Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn

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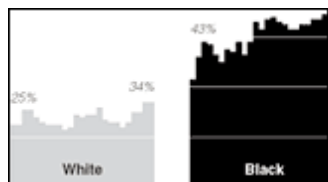
BALTIMORE — Black men in the United States face a far more dire situation than is portrayed by common employment and education statistics, a flurry of new scholarly studies warn, and it has worsened in recent years even as an economic boom and a welfare overhaul have brought gains to black women and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



Ryan Donnell for The New York Times
Curtis E. Brannon of Baltimore with Curtis Jr., one of the four children he has fathered with three mothers. "I was with the street life," Mr. Brannon said, "but now I feel like I've got to get myself together."

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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

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"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."

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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.

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