

Reconnecting Young Black Men

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It's high school graduation season across America -- a time of caps, gowns, big parties, and bigger plans.

But many young black males will not be flipping the tassels on their mortarboards or reaping the economic and social rewards of a diploma. Calculations by Christopher Swanson when he was at the Urban Institute show that as few as 43 percent of black males graduate from high school on time.

A recent National Urban League report also exposes the dire education and employment straits of young black men. Only half of black men age 16 to 24 who are out of school are employed at any given time. Thirty to 50 percent of these men will not finish high school. About one-third will spend time in prison before their 35th birthday. Among high school dropouts, the majority will be incarcerated. While young black women have been achieving higher levels of education and higher incomes, black men are doing worse and worse.

Why? For starters, the U.S. economy has morphed into something new. The good blue-collar jobs that men with high school diplomas or less could expect to get a generation ago -- in manufacturing and other sectors -- have either disappeared or pay much less than before. The education and skills required for higher-paying jobs have clearly risen.

Other employment hurdles persist too. Employer discrimination, the disappearance of jobs from the inner cities and older suburbs where many blacks now live and the weakening of the job grapevines in their communities all hurt blacks. Meanwhile, the prospect of getting stuck in low-wage service jobs, which are available, holds little appeal.

Losing hope of making it legitimately in school and work, many young men disconnect from these worlds, often irresponsibly or self-destructively. Too many sell drugs or other contraband and father children out of wedlock.

The illegal ventures further circumscribe young black men's futures. Criminal records make it hard to find or keep jobs, much less advance. Fathers without custody of their kids frequently face huge court-ordered child-support levies on their often-meager earnings -- especially if they owe back payments to a kid's mother or the child-support system. As a result, these dads often resort to pick-up work with no benefits, and those who have criminal records are frequently behind bars again within three to five years.

Is there a way out? In my recent book with Peter Edelman and the late Paul Offner ([Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men](#), Urban Institute Press, 2006), we outline a three-prong strategy: education and training; stronger financial incentives for accepting low-wage jobs; and additional supports for youth offenders and noncustodial fathers.

Effective education and training programs remain our best hope of dissuading young men from disconnecting and engaging in destructive behavior. An effective course of action should begin with high-quality pre-kindergarten programs that help young minority children start school on par with their peers, but the adolescent and teen years remain critical intervention points. Youth development and mentoring programs, career-oriented education and employment in high school, alternative charter schools for potential dropouts, and clear pathways to assorted post-secondary education options can all help these boys keep their eyes on the prize, especially if backed by community-level supports and services when they drop out of school or return home from prison.

Two other systemic changes are key. One is raising the federal minimum wage above its very low current level of \$5.15 per hour. The other is expanding the earned income tax credit -- which now goes mostly to low-income custodial parents of children and has helped draw millions of single mothers into the labor market -- to reward low-income fathers paying child support.

Finally, we need a broader range of services and resources -- both inside and outside prison walls -- to prepare ex-offenders for society and the world of work. And forgiving fathers' considerable debts to the child-support system might inspire them to start afresh, land a job, and begin making regular, on-time child-support payments.

Some of these efforts will require additional public resources, and many will be politically controversial. But the cost to the nation of failing to invest in all its young men is far greater.

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