On Campus

Still Left Behind

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The economic boom of the 1990s benefited nearly every segment of American society: employment rates and earnings among the poor increased, and even large numbers of young single mothers rose out of poverty, assisted by $50 billion spent on job training programs, earning subsidies, and other efforts to decrease welfare rolls.

But black men, especially in cities, did not share in the spoils, according to a new collection of research papers edited by Ronald Mincy entitled Black Males Left Behind (Urban Institute, 2006). Mincy, the Maurice V. Russell Professor of Social Policy and Social Work Practice at Columbia's School of Social Work, reports in his own research in the book that during the 1990s employment rates and real wages declined steadily for African American men ages 18 to 24 who didn't attend college. Today, almost 50 percent of black men in this age group who have not gone to college are unemployed. The trend coincides with rising incarceration rates and contradicts a long-held belief of many policymakers and social researchers: that sustained economic growth would improve the lives of poor African American men.

Widespread unemployment and underemployment among young black men, according to Black Males Left Behind, results from a decline in public funding for job training programs directed at men; the movement of blue-collar jobs out of cities, where many African Americans live; employers' disinclination to hire those with criminal records; a lack of participation among black men in on-the-job training; and strict child support laws that often push absentee fathers below the poverty line and discourage them from working altogether.

Also, many black men are reluctant to take low-wage jobs, according to the book, which features contributions from 17 social researchers, including prominent economists Rebecca M. Blank and Harry J. Holzer. "The data indicate that black men and immigrant men don't compete for the same jobs, except maybe in construction and in California," Mincy says. "Immigrant men take low-wage jobs that black males

wouldn’t take anyway because [black families] are accustomed to a higher standard of living, bolstered by their greater access to welfare. They can’t live with dignity off of the low wages those jobs offer.”

Partly as a result of their employment struggles, young black men rank near the bottom of all standard measures sociologists use to gauge social engagement, such as rates of marriage and the ability to support their children, the book finds. Only 10 percent of young black fathers who don’t attend college live with their children, for instance, and just 39 percent of all black children live with two parents.

Policymakers could help address these problems, according to the research, by increasing funds for job training programs targeted specifically at young men and for social services that improve their marriage and relationship skills.

“We need to do the same thing for less-skilled men that we do for less-skilled women: require and enable them to work and to support their families,” Mincy says. “There is no civic organization in the country whose sole focus is on helping young, less-educated men and boys. As a consequence, we go from decade to decade discovering some new crisis about African American men. We need to build the infrastructure to support research, policy, and practice around the needs of African American men.”



Guide to school abbreviations

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