

African-American Men, Higher Education, and the Negative Effects
of Poverty

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Introduction

In the pursuit of fiscal stability, many Americans seek degrees that would qualify them for positions that would allow for a certain level of comfort in the future. By striving to attain this monetary success, different groups within the American population have moved their way up the socioeconomic ladder, but this does not hold true for African-Americans. More specifically, in terms of education, African-American men are not achieving on the same level as their White counterparts. This trend not only leaves African-American men without the opportunity for much upward mobility, it also serves as an obstacle for the advancement of the African-American community as a whole. For the purpose of identification, African-American was to be considered any person born in the United States and having a parent of African descent.

However, due to the ambiguity of some of the studies used, there are times where statistics may include men from other backgrounds.

However, even with a potential for some skew in the data, the numbers still illustrate a discouraging trend in the education of African-American men. There are numerous obstacles weighing down the potential of African-American men, and the results of these obstacles are a pattern of poverty and incarceration as opposed to graduation. In addition to this painful trend, there are more African-American men incarcerated than any other group of men in America, leading to the growth in the number of single-parent homes and unwed African-American mothers. The trend of low college enrollment is tied into all of these issues, and many more that have led African-American men to be the least represented demographic in colleges and universities around the nation.

Problem & Magnitude

Prison-College Comparison

When considering the decline in the number of African-American men in college and university, one of the first questions that must be considered is where are African-American men, if not in college? Statistically, most of these men will end up in prison, if not in university. The proportion of African-American men in prison is significantly higher than that of White or Hispanic Americans, which directly detracts from the number of African-American men able to enroll in colleges and universities. The steady decrease of African-American men in college, coupled with the increase in numbers entering the prison system, results in a lack of future opportunity for these young African-American men.

Trends reflected by the statistics and demographics of the American prison system paint a bleak picture for young men of any race, but for African-American men, the image seems even more hopeless:

In 2004 persons in their twenties accounted for 40% of convicted felons, which was double their percentage of the adult population (18%). The average age of persons convicted of a felony in State courts in 2004 was 32 years. Men accounted for a larger percentage of persons convicted of a felony (82%), compared to their percentage of the adult population (49%). Whites were 82% of adults in the U.S. population, compared to 59% of persons convicted of a felony. Blacks were 12% of the adult population, but 38% of convicted felons.¹

These numbers illustrate a trend that may result from an increase in crime, a toughening of the judicial and sentencing process, or even overt racism. Whatever the cause, the trend seems

¹ U.S. Department of Justice. "U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin" July 2007.

particularly dire for young African-American men. The statistic above attests to the large number of young men in America entering the system and then examines the number of all inmates along race lines. This illustrates the large number of African-American men confined to the system, but does not cross-examine the variables. However, when age, race, and gender are examined simultaneously, the trend is still very visible, and highlights the problem that faces young African-American men:

The impact of the criminal justice system on Black male adults in the 20-to-29 year age group was examined.... It was found that 23% of Black men studied were in prison, on probation, or parole on any given day; in comparison, 6.2% of White males studied were under criminal justice control. Rates for Hispanic males fell between those for Black and White males at 10.4%.²

The results of this 1990 study show that young African-American men are more than twice as likely to end up in the criminal justice system than young Hispanic American men, and nearly four times more likely than White-American men of the same age group. The 20-29 year age group encompasses the ages where young Americans are most likely to complete their undergraduate degrees, and where a large number seek higher degrees. Another, more recent, study illustrated a worsening of this trend 12 years later: "Nearly one in three (32 percent) black males in the age group 20-29 is under some form of criminal justice supervision on any given day."³ This 2002 study continues to state: "The black male born in 1991 has a 29 percent chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life. The figure for white males is 4 percent, and

² Mauer, Marc. "Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem." *Sentencing Project, Washington, DC*. February 1990.

³ Harris, Othello; R. Robin Miller. *Impacts of Incarceration on the African American Family*. Transaction Books. 2002.

for Hispanics, 16 percent.”⁴ This statistic shows that the likelihood of African-American men to enter into the prison system, in comparison to their White counterparts, has worsened significantly. Instead of being four times more likely than White-American men of the same age, they are twelve times more likely. This means that the African-American children born just one year after the first study are illustrating the impact of prison systems on African-American men. The children of the generation incarcerated at 20 in 1990 are doing worse in terms of incarceration rates, so much to point where one-third of African-American men is almost ineligible to attend college.

The study performed in 1990 goes on to report the actual numbers of young African-American men in prison in comparison to the number in college: “The number of young Black men under control of the criminal justice system was 609,690, which was greater than the total number of Black men of all ages enrolled in college (436,000) as of 1986.”⁵ This 200,000 person discrepancy does not bode well for the future of African-American men in education, especially when the total population of African-Americans in the United States. In 2002, African-Americans made up 12 percent of the entire American population, yet they made up 46 percent of prison inmates.⁶ For male inmates alone, the number worsens, as indicated by a study conducted by Stanford University: “At the end of 2006, the prison population was 42 percent black, 40 percent white, and 16 percent Hispanic.”⁷ The majority of the prison system is comprised of a group of people who make up only one-tenth of the entire population. This trend

⁴ Harris, Othello; R. Robin Miller. *Impacts of Incarceration on the African American Family*. Transaction Books. 2002.

⁵ Mauer, Marc. “Young Black Men and the Criminal Justice System: A Growing National Problem.” *Sentencing Project, Washington, DC*. February 1990.

⁶ Harris, Othello; R. Robin Miller. *Impacts of Incarceration on the African American Family*. Transaction Books. 2002.

⁷ Hoover Institute. *Facts on Policy: Prison Demographics*.

<http://www.hoover.org/research/factsonpolicy/facts/16615876.html>

shows no sign of ending in the near future, and if the numbers continue at their current rate, the percentage of African-American men in prison will increase, continuing to drain the number of men available to attend university.

Social Impact

In addition to the problem of prisons and incarceration, African-American men also impact the numbers of graduates and the resulting problems that come from dropping out of school. These problems manifest themselves culturally, socially, and within the context of the family. Culturally, African-American men must contend with a history of injustice and mistreatment based on the color of their skin. And while the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s made great strides in the direction of equality, African-Americans are still faced with the trials of racism, both overt and institutionalized. Some of the behavior that leads African-American men into prison may be seen as a reaction to the racism they perceive from various sources, resulting in lowered expectations, both from within the group and from society as a whole, resulting in many problems, most visibly in lower graduation rates. These low graduation rates do nothing to curb the dropout rates among younger African-American students who see dropping out as a common occurrence.

While the graduation rate in America is not 100% for any group, there is a significant difference between the rate of White-American students and African-American students: “The national graduation rate for the class of 1998 was 71%. For white students the rate was 78%, while it was 56% for African-American students and 54% for Latino students.”⁸ Both African-American and Latino (or Hispanic) numbers are close, when viewed in conjunction with the

⁸ Greene, J.P. “High School Graduation Rates in the United States (Revised).” *Center for Civic Innovation at The Manhattan Institute*. April 2002.

numbers of African-American and Hispanic men entering the prison system, the impact on African-American communities is greater:

In spite of the need to complete high school or to attend some postsecondary institution, statistics indicate that educational attainment is not a reality for some African-American students, especially African-American males. According to national statistics, approximately 22.4% of African-American males ages 20 to 24 leave school before earning a high school diploma. Furthermore, only 18.4% of African-American males ages 25-29 hold a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2000).⁹

These graduation rates do vary by location, but the national graduation rate still shows great discrepancy between African-Americans and White-Americans. Many urban centers suffer from both terrible graduation rates and rampant poverty. In the areas where African-Americans are concentrated, there tend to be significant differences between dropout rates when compared to other White areas that may surround the more impoverished city. An example of this trend comes from Montgomery County and Baltimore City. Both of these areas are located within the state of Maryland, but they differ drastically.

Montgomery County is the fourth richest county in the country, with a median household income of \$82,971.¹⁰ This affluent county is located right outside of Washington, DC, had a population of about 931,000 in 2007, with 67.2% classifying as White and 16.8% as "Black."¹¹ Montgomery County also has one of the most successful school systems in the United States,

⁹ Bailey, Deryl F. "Preparing African-American Males for Postsecondary Options." *The Journal of Men's Studies*. Fall 2003.

¹⁰ CNN.com. "America's richest and poorest places."
http://money.cnn.com/2005/08/30/pf/city_county_rankings/index.htm.

¹¹ US Census Bureau. State and County Quickfacts.
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/24/24031.html>.

with a graduation rate of 81.5% in 2006.¹² However, Baltimore City, located less than thirty minutes away is a completely different situation. The fifth poorest county in the nation,¹³ Baltimore City is made up of 32.5% White and 64.0% Black residents.¹⁴ In addition, Baltimore City has the second worst graduation rate, with 38.5% of students graduating in 2006.¹⁵

There is an undoubted connection between socioeconomic status and graduation rates of American students of all races. This means that poor White children graduate at a worse rate than affluent White children. But, the African-American community, which is disproportionately inflicted with poverty, suffers from this even more, as reflected in the significantly lower graduation rate in Baltimore City when compared to Montgomery County. The surrounding Baltimore County, with affluent communities like Towson, has a significantly better graduation rate, and a significantly Whiter demographic.¹⁶ In addition, there is a mere \$2,000 difference between the average amount of money spent per child between the two school systems, yet one has a graduation rate nearly twice that of the other.¹⁷ These trends seem to point to some discrimination within the education system, with minority groups always coming out with the worst results across the board.

Yet, there is no guaranteed lower rate of graduation based solely on minority status. On the contrary, studies have shown that Asian Americans do not show this same pattern, even though they experienced different forms of discrimination in the United States:

¹² USA Today. "Big-city schools struggle with graduation rates."

http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2006-06-20-dropout-rates_x.htm

¹³ "Richest and poorest places."

¹⁴ US Census Bureau.

¹⁵ "Big-city schools struggle."

¹⁶ US Census Bureau.

¹⁷ Montgomery County Public Schools. <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/about/>

At the national level, we find dramatic disparities in the performance of individual racial-ethnic groups, with Whites and Asians graduating at much higher rates than historically disadvantaged minority groups. Graduation rates for White and Asian students far exceed the national average, completing high school at rates of 75 and 77 percent respectively. By contrast, graduation rates for American Indian, Hispanic, and Black students barely break the fifty-fifty mark, ranging from just above 50 to only 53 percent.¹⁸

As shown, Asian American students graduate at a rate close to that of their White classmates, but Hispanic and African-American students still struggle to beat 50-50 odds. This difference clearly shows lingering effects of longstanding discrimination against groups that were more harshly subjugated in the Americas. Asian Americans, like other cultural groups have shown to be more likely to succeed in the United States. In *The Ethnic Myth*, Stephen Steinberg describes how certain groups, such as African-Americans, do not succeed in American society as easily as Jewish, Italian, or Irish, or Asian groups, and while he does not insinuate that there are inherent problems within African-American people, he does believe that the difference between immigrating to the United States with an established financial safety-net makes a significant difference in potential success.¹⁹ Therefore, a continued absence from higher education has the potential to continue to lead to more social and cultural problems for future generations, just as it has done in the past.

A deficit in education amongst one particular group of individuals only perpetuates the trend for future generations. For African-American families, this trend has resulted in continued economic problems for families and predominantly African-American communities. This trend

¹⁸ Swanson, Christopher B. "Who Graduates? Who Doesn't? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001." *Education Policy Center, The Urban Institute*. February 2004.

¹⁹ Steinberg, Stephen. *The Ethnic Myth*. Beacon Press: Boston, 2001.

has also led to a nearly inescapable lifestyle unless something in the cycle is fixed. And while the trend seems to be unavoidable for men, African-American women have steadily increased their numbers at colleges and universities, so much so that they have substantially risen above their male counterparts.

Gender Difference

This problem is unique because it does not seem to affect African-American women in the same way that it affects men. African-American women have not fallen into the same trend as African-American men. In fact, African-American women have increased their numbers in colleges and universities at a rate that has increased substantially in the recent past. This increase has come so quickly that within the span of two years, African-American women passed African-American men as the top earners of bachelors degrees within the African-American community, both in percentage and number (Figures 1 and 2).

This trend is being caused by a combination of two separate trends. The first of the two is the decrease in the number of African-American men entering college, and the other is the increase in the number of African American women choosing to attend college. Without the combination of both phenomena, the trends would not be as exaggerated. The first half of this dual trend has been steady for a few decades now:

Between 1965 and 1984 the male percentage of all African-American enrollments dropped only slightly from 45.9 percent to 44.9 percent. But since 1984 black male enrollments in relation to black women dropped by 7.6 percentage points. In 1997 black men accounted for only 37.3 percent of all African-American enrollments.²⁰

²⁰ Cross, Theodore; Robert Bruce Slater. "The Alarming Decline in the Academic Performance of African-American Men." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Spring 2000.

In fact, the trend of African-American men has been cited as being more responsible for the passing number of African-American women in higher education than an increase in the number of African-American women entering colleges and universities:

Recently, the enrollment of women generally – and Black women in particular – in postsecondary institutions has risen dramatically. In fact, Black women now outnumber Black men in college by roughly two to one. It is important to note, however, that this discrepancy owes more to the declines in rates of Black male college attendance than to Black female gains.²¹

If this source is correct in its analysis of the problem, then the continued increase in the number of African-American men entering the prison system will do nothing but eventually wipe out the number of African-American men in prison. The coupling of these two problems, in addition to the increase in the number of women entering institutions of higher education, means that at some point in the future, African-American women will be the sole earners of degrees within the African-American community. The correlation between the number of African-American men in prison and the number in college or university has become a cause for concern, and the actual numbers are more shocking than the mere knowledge that the trend exists:

...based on figures which disclosed by the Census Bureau, reveal that during this time, 747,000 African American women in this age group were in college while only 9,000 were in jail/prison. However, the numbers for their male counterparts claimed that only 480,000 young men were in college, while 180,000 were in jail or prison...²²

More than one half of the number of African-American men that are in college are in prison at the same time. In addition, of the number given, there are more than 300,000 more African-

²¹ Allen, Walter R. "The Color of Success: African-American College Student Outcomes at Predominantly White and Historically Black Public Colleges and Universities." *Harvard Educational Review*. February 1992.

²² G., Ayanna. *Why Do More Black Women Attend College Than Black Men?*
http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/691287/why_do_more_black_women_attend_college.html?cat=4

American women in college than African-American men, but there are twenty times more African-American men in prison than African-American women.

This trend is not secluded by region or school type either. As Figures 3 and 4 illustrate, African-American women have surpassed African-American men in achieving professional degrees, and have also increased the gap between the genders at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Figure 3 shows that African-American women have outnumbered African-American men at HBCUs since the 1970s, but the surge in female enrollment propelled African-American women substantially ahead of the men. The number of African-American men that enrolled did increase over time, but the rate has yet to catch up to the rate of growth for African-American women.

This imbalance does more than simply make African-American male faces scarce on college campuses; it has been linked to the decline in marriage for college-educated African-

American women:

Moreover, he added that the nationwide gap between college-educated black males and females is especially pertinent because black females are the least likely of any demographic to marry outside of their race. According to 2000 U.S. Census data, of the 4,097,000 black women who are married, 108,000 are married to a spouse outside of their race. . . Therefore, if there are not enough college-educated black males, college-educated black females simply will not marry, Hutchinson said.²³

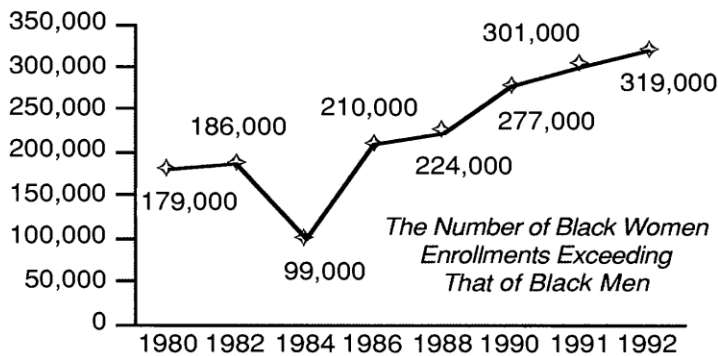
This trend does nothing but limit the opportunities for African-American families, especially for college-educated African-American women. This trend in marriage has not manifested itself in the society as a whole, yet the number of women attending university has exceeded the number

²³ Edwards, Victoria, Michael Kan. "Black students have largest gender gap." The Michigan Daily: Feb. 3, 2005. <http://www.michigandaily.com/content/black-students-have-largest-gender-gap>.

of men in the United States across racial groups (Figures 5 &6). The lack of marriageable partners leaves both college-educated and non-college-educated African-American women alone, and has the potential to perpetuate the cycle of poverty for generations to come, which, in turn, leads to a continued lack of African-American men in higher education.

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The Number of Black Women in Higher Education Exceeds the Number of Black Men by a Large and Growing Margin

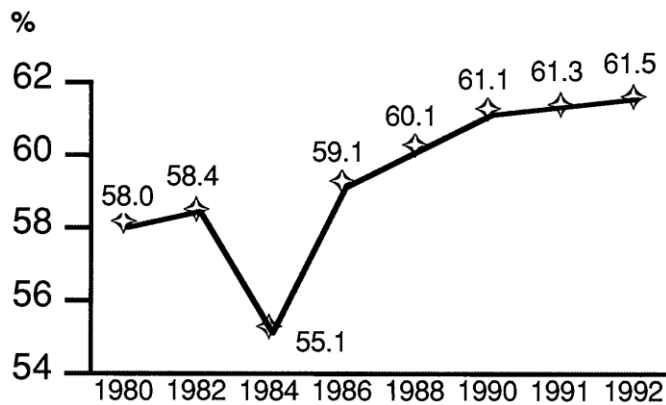


Source: U.S. Department of Education

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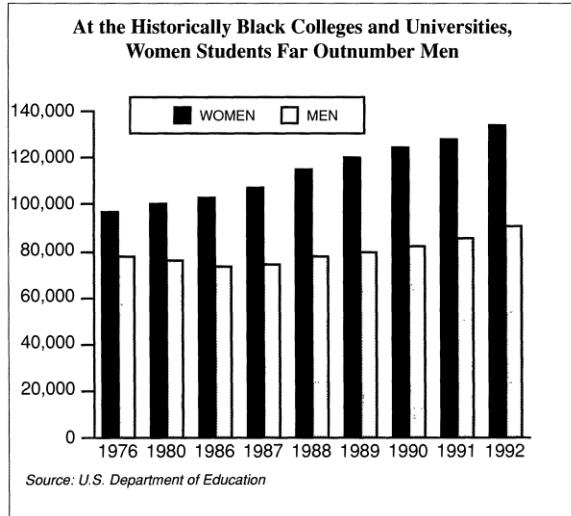
Percentage of All Black College Students Who Are Women



Source: U.S. Department of Education

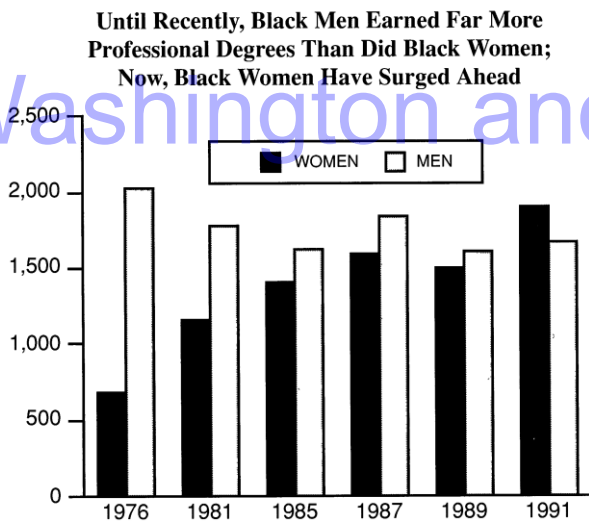
Figure 2

²⁴ Slater, Robert Bruce. "The Growing Gender Gap in Black Higher Education." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Spring 1994: No. 3.



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Figure 3

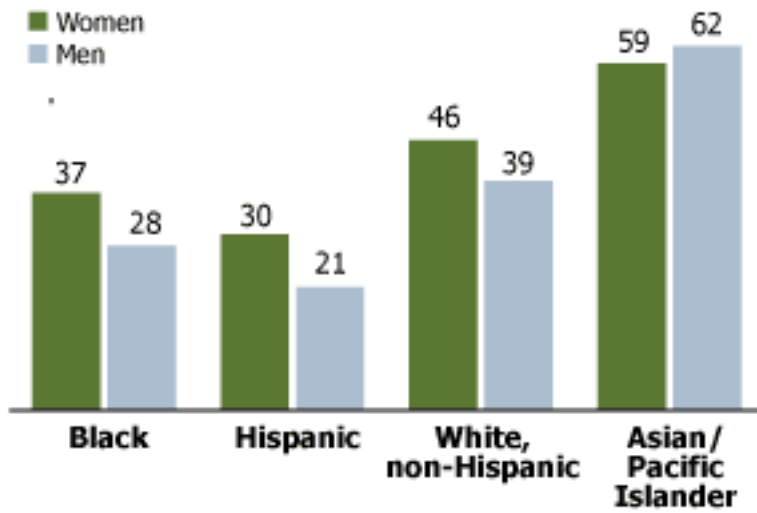


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Figure 4

²⁵ Slater, Robert Bruce. "The Growing Gender Gap in Black Higher Education." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Spring 1994: No. 3.

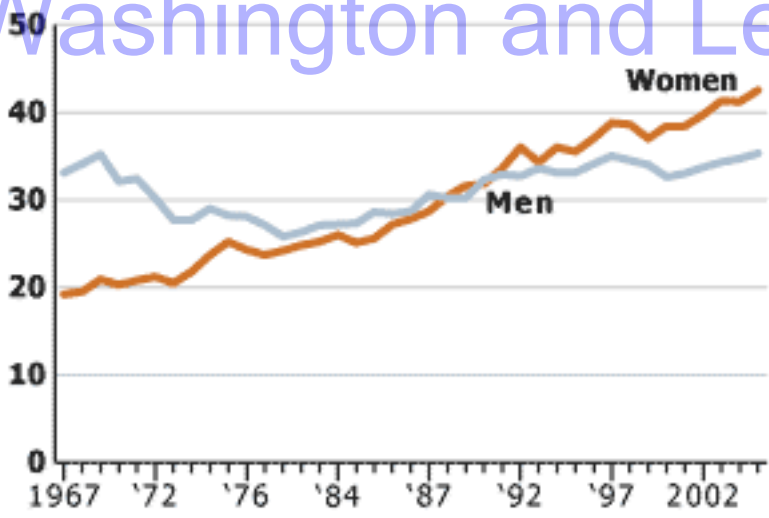
²⁶ Slater, Robert Bruce. "The Growing Gender Gap in Black Higher Education." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Spring 1994: No. 3.



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Figure 5

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Figure 6

²⁷ <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/CrossoverinFemaleMaleCollegeEnrollmentRates.aspx>

²⁸ <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/CrossoverinFemaleMaleCollegeEnrollmentRates.aspx>

Causes

If incarceration, social issues, and the gender gap between African-American women and men are the problems caused by a lack of African-American men in higher education, the causes also need to be examined. Of the many things that could cause these problems, there are two that stand out from the rest, and can easily be traced back to the problem of African-American men in higher education.

Education System

One of the first things that need examination when searching for the cause for why African-American men are not enrolling at institutions of higher education is the education system itself. In order to find problems within the system as a whole, the system should be examined from the point where students are attempting to enter college to the first time children come in contact with the education system. This retroactive progression highlights problems as they are seen from older to younger students.

Some may assume that the lowered rate of African-American men in higher education results from students not applying to college or university, but a published article from The Manhattan Institute presents a different angle on the issue:

There is very little difference between the number of students who graduate from high school college-ready and the number of students who enroll in college for the first time. This indicates that there is not a large pool of students who have the skills necessary to attend college but do not do so because of lack of funds or other non-academic factors.²⁹

²⁹ Greene, J.P. "Public High School Graduation and College-Readiness Rates: 1991 – 2002." *Center for Civic Innovation at The Manhattan Institute*. February 2005.

This study alludes to the fact that those who are prepared for college apply. If this is the case, then why are African-American men not prepared for college? This question may be answered in a few ways. One of the major aspects is the fact that the education system is skewed in such a way that keeps those at certain achievement levels at that level, and also keeps those below a certain level at that sub-par level. This has been proven over time as those who are impoverished have barely made strides toward the elimination of their poverty, even as more policies are created to do just that. This is reflected in the education system itself, with those who are educated passing on this opportunity to their children, and almost exclusively for their children alone.

Scholarships and affirmative action have attempted to even out the playing field for minority groups over the years, but this works only so well within a group before the problem itself must be corrected. A study done by William G. Bowen illustrates this problem:

Overall, college enrollment rates have increased markedly for all economic, racial, and ethnic groups over the last 30 years. Increases in real income, student aid, and the returns to college education to produce this welcome result. Yet, in the words of the College Board's most recent report: "...An individual's chances of entering...college remains closely correlated with family background. Only 54 percent of high school graduates from the lowest income quartile enroll in college, compared to 82 percent of those with incomes above \$86,000 [the top quartile]." The College Board data also show that this gap in enrollment rates narrowed, but only very slightly, between 1970 and 2002.³⁰

A "narrow" gap over three decades does not reflect much improvement for those who are in the lower quartile. This shows a connection between poverty, academic preparedness, ethnicity, and college enrollment. For groups who are secluded to certain areas, like Baltimore City,

³⁰ Bowen, William G. "The Quest for Equity: 'Class' (Socio-Economic Status) In American Higher Education." *The Thomas Jefferson Foundation Distinguished Lecture Series*. April 2004.

oftentimes, socioeconomic struggle and race are synonymous. However, impoverishment should not be enough to limit the academic potential of a given group. Therefore, African-American men, regardless of family history, should have the same opportunity as the children his age in a more affluent suburb if both attend a public school.

However, this is not the case, as shown in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*:

On the basis of a large sample of White and minority students followed from kindergarten through Grade 12, the analysis revealed a strong relationship between mathematics and reading achievement in K–3 and graduation from high school. The non-significant interactions indicated that these relationships held for White and minority students and for higher and lower SES students alike.³¹

In this study student performance is tracked from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, where there is a definite correlation visible between the achievements of certain groups in comparison to others when socioeconomic status is taken into consideration. Because minority students, including African-American students, make up the majority of those in the lowest socioeconomic strata, they are disproportionately affected by this lower achievement, which are connected back to the institutions that serve certain groups. It does not seem surprising then, that areas such as Baltimore City, where there is a minority-majority and poverty is a common occurrence, the school system has a graduation rate below forty percent. The chances, then, that there are problems with Baltimore City elementary schools is high and can be assumed lower than the neighboring suburbs, even though they are both run through the state.

However, there have been programs put into place to assist children from less affluent areas in a better position to compete with their classmates who may come from a stronger

³¹ Boyd-Zaharias, Jayne; Jeremy D. Finn; Susan B. Gerber. “Small Classes in the Early Grades, Academic Achievement, and Graduating from High School.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 2005.

academic background. One such program is Head Start. Head Start's self-defined mission states that Head Start is "a national program that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children and families."³² Programs like Head Start, therefore, seek to assist children in need with achieving their potential through health and education promotion. Head Start and programs like it target a group in need, and does so at an age where their work will be more beneficial. However, their work may be in vain when the children move on to another level of education:

The Perry Preschool Project and most Head Start programs in the evaluation were of limited intensity (see Zigler & Styfco, 1994). Although beginning at an early age (3 or 4 years), the Perry program lasted for 2 years, and most Head Start programs lasted for 1 or, at most, 2 years. Neither program engaged pupils for the full day; the Perry intervention involved about 2.5 hours of school time daily, and typical Head Start programs involve about 3.5 hours of class time, 4 or 5 days per week. When students leave programs such as Perry, CPC, or Head Start, they often enter half-day kindergartens targeted to non-accelerated children. It comes as little surprise that early advantages are lost after several years in these settings.³³

The education system, in effect, reverses the benefits that the children in the Head Start program enter with, leaving them to lose any advantage they had gained through the hard work put forth by those working in, and creating, early education programs. Without a sustained level of attention and challenge, the children placed in early education programs, who often come from areas of poverty, are left to enter a school system that is sub-par in comparison to their peers in more affluent areas.

³² US Dept. of Health and Human Services. About the Office of Head Start. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/index.html#mission>.

³³ Ibid.

For families who seek to give their children a better chance at success by entering them into early education programs do not always gain because the education system is flawed. As a result children, and disproportionately, African-American children, are left to suffer the consequences of a faulty education system. However, the problem of the education system still seems to point back to one source: poverty.

Poverty

As previously stated, African-Americans are disproportionately represented amongst those in America below the poverty line. This leads to numerous problems, including health-wise and in terms of mobility, but also overwhelmingly in terms of education. For African-Americans, then, poverty lies behind many problems, and is difficult to eradicate because it is not a one-dimensional issue, but encompasses numerous different aspects of life. For African-American men who do not attend college or university, the major problem with poverty stems from the family and how the family structure is established. This includes growing up in and starting more single-parent families where children do not have the benefit of having both parents in the home.

For African-American men and women, the two-fold problem begins with childhood, where they are most likely out of any racial demographic to be born to a single-parent home:

The percentage of births to single women varies across race. In 1995, 20 percent of all births to Asian and Pacific Islanders were to single women, compared to 25 percent for white women; 41 percent for women of Hispanic origin; 57 percent for Native American, Eskimo, and Aleut women; and 70 percent for African-American families.³⁴

³⁴ *Single-Parent Families - Demographic Trends*. <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1574/Single-Parent-Families-Demographic-Trends.html>

These statistics show a very important trend. Just as the White and Asian American children were more likely to attend college or university, they also have the lowest percentage of single-mother births in the nation. African-American and Hispanic-American women are near the bottom, also aligning with the earlier statistic. And while being born into a single parent household does not guarantee that a child will live in poverty, it does increase the chances that the child will experience poverty at some point in their childhood. From the statistics, these children seem to be directly affected by the combination of single-motherhood, poor school systems, and poverty.

This trend of single-motherhood in the African-American community not only results in families where poverty is more likely, but in behavior that perpetuates the continuation of this trend. The two tables below (Tables 1 & 2³⁵) illustrate the connectedness of poverty, education, and single parenthood. The charts show that the children with the greatest likelihood of living in a single parent household at some point before the age of 18 are African-American boys, with the girls not too far behind. In addition, these are the children who are more likely to have their single parent working while they are still young. The most striking of the statistics, however, is the fact that the children whose parents are the most likely to have lived the longest in a single-parent household are the same children who have been shown to be more likely to end up in prison and out of college: African-American men.

Yet, single-parent households are not detrimental through economics alone. In a recent study, it was shown that single African-American mothers have displayed a pattern of treating

³⁵ Krein, Sheila Fitzgerald, Andrea H. Beller. "Educational Attainment of Children From Single-Parent Families: Differences by Exposure, Gender, and Race." *Demography*. May 1988: Volume 25, No. 2.

their children differently by gender, often to the detriment of both male and female children. For their daughters:

...it is very common (and perhaps understandable) that single mothers are better at guiding their little girls onto the path that leads them to becoming productive young women. This is because they too, were little girls, perhaps themselves raised with only a mother's help. Helping a young lady deal with distractions or issues at school is sometimes easier to do than with males. Without a male in the household after which to model a son, the challenge to raise young men may be that much more difficult. This isn't to say that single black mothers don't advise (and encourage) their sons to attend college or do well in school. However, in their approach they may be failing to emphasize how doing well in school will afford them a vast number of opportunities once they've grow up.³⁶

And for their sons:

Single mothers raising boys are sometimes more lenient on their sons than their daughters. This may be because some mothers claim that raising girls is more difficult than raising boys. Because they find that training girls in grooming, dressing, and other life lessons is a bit tedious, they may assume that boys need less "attending to." As a result, their growing boys may have more freedom (and subsequently less structure) than the little girls they're raising. Less structure frequently means less discipline. And discipline is a necessity where it regards higher education.³⁷

These two excerpts illustrate how the behavior of a child's mother may influence their decision-making in the future, especially in relation to education. For single African-American mothers, training young daughters to take care of themselves is necessary because they could end up as a single African-American mother as well. Like the article mentions, it does seem more understandable that African-American mothers would more readily identify with their daughters

³⁶ G., Ayanna. *Why Do More Black Women Attend College Than Black Men?*
http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/691287/why_do_more_black_women_attend_college.html?cat=4

³⁷ "Why Do More Black Women Attend College?"

than their sons, but this does not mean that they should leave their sons without strict guidance. This differentiation of treatment makes the discrepancy between African-American men and women's differences in college enrollment: if young African-American girls are told more often that they must be responsible, they are more likely to strive for a college-education than their brothers.

While the treatment of parents may explain the discrepancy in gender of college-enrollment within the African-American community, segregated communities help point to the discrepancy in the quality of education and low graduation rates. These types of communities not only limit the mobility of the impoverished, but they lead to school systems like Baltimore City, where graduation rates leave more young students unqualified to enter college or university than those who would be able to do so. This trend of segregation then transfers to the behavior of children who attend schools where there are children of different races. The resulting separation does nothing to put an end to the segregation the children experience at home, and can lead to lowered performance in an effort to remain one with the "group," as seen in an article by Nobuo K. Shimahara.

In a 1983 study, Nobuo K. Shimahara found that there was significant polarization between African-American and White students at a particular high school. Polarization is defined as "a separation caused by race-oriented forces that lead students into homogeneous associations," and for this particular study, Shimahara focused on the polarization between African-American and White students alone.³⁸ The students participated in polarizing behavior so much so that the teachers and administration felt that it was normal and "natural" segregation

³⁸ Shimahara, Nobuo K. "Polarized Socialization in an Urban High School." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. Summer, 1983: Volume 14, No.2. pp. 109-130. p. 109.

that should be left alone.³⁹ This behavior was observed to be so internalized that students believed that segregation between honors and non-honors classes aligning with the neighborhoods each group of children lived in was a normal thing that could not be avoided.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, the children that made up the non-honors classes came from areas in near the high school that were considered lower to working-class, with the honors students residing in the more affluent suburbs.

The segregation caused by poverty and reflected in school systems compounds the problems that are being caused by the affects of poverty on the African-American family. Summed up statistically, the African-American male has an exponentially more complicated struggle to college enrollment than any other demographic group in the United States, with every obstacle almost inexorably related back to the issue of poverty. The haunting cycle of poverty that continues to torment African-American men has become something of an epidemic for the group as a whole, needing solutions that address the various sources of trouble for the African-American male in the search of a college education.

³⁹ “Polarized Socialization.”

⁴⁰ “Polarized Socialization.”

Table 1

Table 1. Characteristics of Young Adults Who Lived in Single-Parent Families by Race and Gender

Characteristic	White		Black	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Average no. yrs. spent in single-parent family to age 18	5.1	5.2	8.0	8.1
% living in single-parent family during: ^a				
Preschool	51.5	40.1	66.2	63.4
Elementary school	54.5	59.9	64.8	72.3
High school	53.0	61.9	63.4	64.4
Average no. yrs. in single-parent family during:				
Preschool (5.5 yrs.)	3.0	2.8	3.3	3.3
Elementary school (8.0 yrs.)	3.9	3.7	5.2	5.1
High school (4.5 yrs.)	2.8	3.0	3.8	3.7
No. in sample living in single-parent family	132	147	142	202

^a Individuals could do so during more than one period.

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Table 2. Means of Selected Characteristics of Young Adults by Race and Gender

Characteristic	White				Black			
	Men		Women		Men		Women	
	All	Single-parent family	All	Single-parent family	All	Single-parent family	All	Single-parent family
Age in 1980 ^a	30.3	30.6	29.0	29.0	30.6	31.0	29.4	29.8
No. of yrs. of school completed at age 26	13.5	12.9	12.9	12.4	12.1	11.4	12.0	11.8
No. of siblings	3.0	3.2	3.1	3.3	4.7	4.4	5.3	4.8
% lived in South	31.6	30.3	29.9	34.0	74.2	72.5	69.0	69.3
% mother ever worked 6 or more mos. during child's first 18 yrs.	66.9	75.8	71.2	88.4	88.7	90.1	85.1	87.1
Yrs. of school completed by mother	10.9	10.4	11.1	10.2	9.2	9.1	8.9	9.2
% know father's education	86.0	53.8	85.4	47.6	61.0	38.7	63.5	36.6
Yrs. of school completed by father ^b	11.0	11.1	11.3	10.8	7.7	7.9	7.4	7.6
Total family income during high school (\$) ^c	10,065	8,289	9,777	7,742	4,853	4,050	4,597	4,052
Sample size	797	132	938	147	318	142	491	202

^a Young men were ages 28–38 in 1980; young women were 26–36.

^b Mean based on the smaller samples that know father's education.

^c Income figures are available only for the young men who were 14–18 years old and young women who were 12–18 years old in 1966; sample sizes are 575, 95, 693, 120, 228, 99, 372, and 148, respectively.

Table 2

Solutions

The solutions needed to correct the trend of imprisonment and elevated high school dropout rates must be structured in such a way that would benefit African-American men as much as possible. This must include educational, social, and economic reform on a national level with support from all regions of the country. These types of solutions should seek to elevate the capability of African-American men to the point where they would be able to feasibly provide for themselves and their families without compromising their human rights with institutionalized racism or classism.

Education Policy

Education policy should seek to assist those who need the most assistance the quickest. This would mean surveying school systems and attempting to improve those with the lowest graduation rates and highest dropout rates, which would include some minority-majority areas such as Baltimore City. The reform in education policy should seek to do three things: create an educational standard for all American public schools; hire qualified teachers; improve the classroom environment.

The first steps toward developing an education standard for all fifty states would have to involve a national survey of test scores. From there, the material of the tests and exams should be monitored and made to conform certain standards. This does not mean that all of the tests must be identical, but there should be a common level of education that is achieved by all American students. If the level is determined to be the current minimum for graduation, there should be some examination as to why so many students in high school are not up to grade in

reading and math scores. Once the base level has been determined for school systems, there should be a move toward establishing a standard of spending per child in each school system. For school systems that need major overhauls, there should be more money to spend to correct the damages that were allowed to continue for years without repair. This means that there may be school systems where the median income is significantly lower than the national average, but the spending per child in schools is higher than the national average. Also, moderators should ensure that as much of the money is going directly to classroom development with this funding as possible. The main goal of this aspect is to create a minimum from which students would be able to find a career that paid well enough to keep them above the poverty line.

After the standard for education is developed, there should be a serious move toward the education of teachers, both in terms of teaching material and relating to the students. This means that the school systems that need teachers, and would often seem to be the least desirable location for a new teacher, are the locations where the best teachers need to be placed. This does not mean forcing instructors into a specific neighborhood against their will, but providing incentive to them that would encourage more qualified teachers to venture into these so-called “bad neighborhoods.” As it stands, programs such as Teach for America lure more teachers into these school systems as a way to buffer resumes when they may not be prepared for such a responsibility. The teachers that enter these school systems need intense training in poverty, as experienced by Teach for America workers, but also need strong backgrounds in education, so that a classroom of children who have been constantly told that they will never succeed are not faced with a teacher who just arrived from an affluent and one-dimensional background.

The final, briefest, and most important, overhaul needed in American public school systems is a change in the school environment. This means that school systems that span many

different socioeconomic strata should seek to provide an unbiased approach to education, looking to accept students from any economic background into even the most difficult of classes. A move in this direction would encourage administration to push students where they have simply been allowed to “fit in with a group” in order to feel welcome within the walls of the school.

Role Models

In addition to the change in the education system, there should be a significant improvement in the number and quality of role models for young African-American males. For African-American boys, many times the only role models available are athletes, musicians, and entertainers. The portrayal of African-Americans in the news and media leave much to be desired in the way of education. Programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters allow for some role models for some children, but there needs to be more of a social responsibility within the African-American community in the direction of guidance for youth. In order to portray a better image of what children can aspire to achieve within reason, there need to be more examples of successful African-Americans, especially men.

The benefit of successful role models in the community can be seen in numerous ways, but most recently in the election of President Barack Hussein Obama. With the election of President Obama, Newsweek released an article documenting a rise in the test scores of African-American students across the nation. In a mere four days, social scientists believe that President Obama made a significant impact in reversing some of the “stereotyping threat” posed to

African-American children who are about to take a test.⁴¹ This “stereotyping threat” is described as the anxiety that causes children to perform poorly on an exam when reminded of a particular negative stereotype about a demographic they fit into, such as race. The quick improvement of one successful African-American illustrates the possibilities available to the African-American community if there were one successful person in each family, household, or classroom.

Poverty/Welfare Policy

Finally, and most importantly, there needs to be a reform on welfare policy and the cycle of poverty. The changes should strive to accomplish one major goal: making work pay. With the creation of a living wage available for all Americans, many African-American homes, even those with just one parent, would be able to move above the poverty line. Establishing a “living wage” would mean implementing the proper policies that would create a minimum wage large enough for a family to live from. This should not be adjusted to accompany a two-parent household because that would assume that a household will have two parents. For many African-American families, this is not the case, nor should it be a requirement for survival.

By establishing a living wage, single mothers would be able to provide for their families in a way where they might possibly afford a private school, or the SAT prep class that would give their child the leading edge. It may also afford the family the ability to move away from a school system that is not as nice or well-staffed as a neighboring school system. With this type of policy, families would not have to worry as much about how to provide for their families, and African-American men may be better able to provide for their families without having to turn to

⁴¹ Newsweek. “Lab Notes: An ‘Obama Effect’ on Blacks’ Test Scores?”
<http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/labnotes/archive/2009/01/23/an-obama-effect-on-blacks-test-scores.aspx>

illegal activities that will most likely result in their imprisonment, once again continuing the cycle of poverty.

Conclusion

The many problems and obstacles that face African-American men in the United States are expressed in a number of issues that plague the African-American community: incarceration, poverty, low marriage rate, single-parent households, dropout rates, and low college enrollment numbers. All of these problems are interconnected, weaving a web that seems impenetrable without the proper tools or guidance. These tools must come from both within the African-American community and American society at large. With improvements for this group, the entire society will benefit, and become closer to the full potential we harbor.

Without this progress, and without this effort, the African-American community in the United States will become permanently impoverished, continuing on a road of struggle that arrives at a dead end. The culmination of Dr. King's dream should not end in such a way, and the first step to correcting this obstacle in uniting against a common foe: poverty.

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