

HOW DO POOR URBAN MEN MAKE A LIVING? What proportion of them have children? How many have been incarcerated? Does having a criminal record affect their employment opportunities? Do low-educated black and Hispanic men pay a “penalty” for their race or ethnicity after controlling for other factors? How many poor men experienced abuse or parental incarceration or witnessed domestic violence in childhood and do these traumatic experiences have lasting effects? Is it possible to prevent high school dropout, increase soft skills, prevent recidivism, and improve poor men’s job prospects? If so, how? This policy brief addresses these questions drawing from presentations at an April 2015 conference on “Urban Men in Poverty: Problems and Solutions” cohosted by the La Follette School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Marquette University Law School. A video recording of the event is available at <http://law.marquette.edu/current-students/urban-men-poverty>.

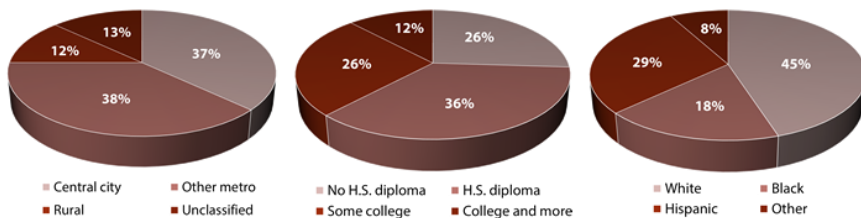
Why Focus on Men?

There are three big reasons to focus on men as part of an examination of poverty and social inequality in the United States. First, most men have children—nearly two-thirds of young low-educated men are fathers and one-third of poor men live with children—and fathers represent an important potential source of family income and financial (and emotional) support for children. Second, since 2000, poor urban men have retreated en masse from employment as median wages for low-skilled workers have dropped and their incarceration rate has shot up. These factors have made them less desirable partners (thus contributing to the high rate of single-mother families and associated child poverty). Third, much research on the 1990s’ welfare reforms focused on poor single women with children, whereas relatively little attention has been paid to disadvantaged men. The plight of urban men with a high school education or less has not been widely documented or discussed, despite their importance to the family and society.

Who Are Poor Urban Men?

As a group, poor men living in cities are disconnected from work, from the safety net, and often from their children. In 2013, nearly half of urban men ages 25 to 64 at or below the poverty line had not worked in the previous year, and more than 60 percent of black men in that age and income group had not worked in the past 12 months. Incarceration looms large in their lives, separating a huge proportion of these men from their families, communities, and society—much more so for blacks than whites.

Most poor men live in urban areas, more than 60% have a high school diploma or less, and almost 50% are black or Hispanic.



Disconnected from Family and Work

Poor urban men are disproportionately men of color with high incarceration rates and low levels of education who are unmarried, noncustodial fathers of children they lack resources to support.

In 2013, more than three-quarters (77%) of all poor men either were not working at all or were working part time less than year round.

Just under 90% of young poor men between ages 18 and 24 in 2013 either were not working at all or were working less than full time, year round.

More than 60% of poor families are headed by an unmarried or cohabiting couple or a single parent.

*Based on presentations by
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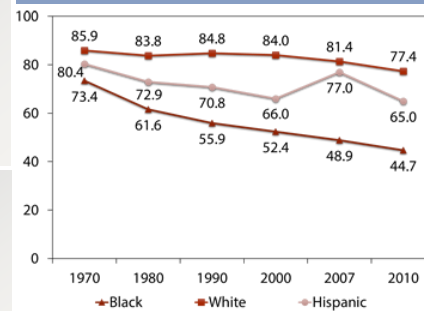
Two Major Trends Affecting Poor Urban Men Falling Employment Rates

Employment rates among all working age urban men with a high school education or less have declined. But low work rates have increased the most among racial and ethnic minorities. (See trends for Milwaukee, WI, in the line graph below.) Those who do work have seen their earnings decline as demand for low-skilled workers has fallen due to technological advances and changes in workplace organization.

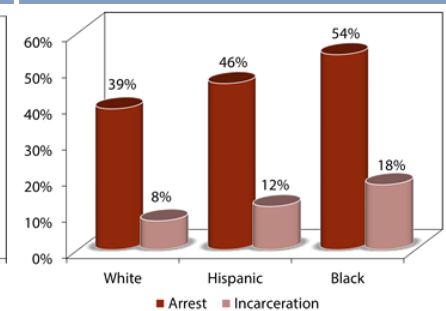
Rising Incarceration Rates

The U.S. prison population has quadrupled since the mid-1970s. Blacks are more than six times more likely to be incarcerated than whites, suggesting that rising imprisonment contributes to racial inequality. Every state in the Union spends more to incarcerate a prisoner per year than it spends to educate a student from kindergarten through college. Researchers found that, in general, the increase in imprisonment of black men is due to sentencing-policy changes for nonviolent drug offenses, not an increase in crime. Crime rates have been falling since the early 1990s. Incarceration has consequences for the individual—such as difficulty finding a job after release—his family, and his community.

Employment rates for all working-age men in Milwaukee, WI, fell from 1970 to 2010, but blacks saw the steepest decline.



Male arrest and incarceration rates from 1997–2011 reveal that about half of black and Hispanic men had been arrested before age 35.



Sources: Employment rates: U.S. Census Bureau Census of Population, 1970-2000 and American Community Survey 2007 and 2010; incarceration rates: 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

Promising Programs to Improve the Life Chances of Poor Urban Men

The first page of this brief focuses on what is known about poor urban men. This page presents promising research to prevent or reverse negative outcomes. Also mentioned is a relatively new line of research that examines how traumatic childhood experiences may have lasting effects on adult health, well-being, and educational and economic attainment.

Keeping Disadvantaged Youth in School and Out of Trouble

The prevention-focused programs below have had positive results in keeping poor urban students in high school and on track either to attend college or start a career.

Intervention	Description	Estimated Impacts
Career Academies	Provide instruction to high school youth in small learning communities and exposure to a particular occupation or sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased young men's earnings by 17% over 8 years Increased rate of independent living with children and a spouse or partner Positively affected marriage and custodial parenting
Small Schools of Choice	Reorganize large high schools into smaller schools where students share similar interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raised graduation rate by almost 10 percentage points Improved college readiness through increased passing rate of the English Regents Examination
Becoming a Man	Teach soft skills to middle and high school students with aim especially of precluding arrest and poor school outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced arrests by about 40% Improved schooling outcomes, including attendance, GPA, and persistence
Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration, Pima Community College, Arizona	Help low-income Latino men enrolled in community college to stay in school, earn more credits, and find financial aid to avoid debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased college retention rate by 4.6% Increased full-time enrollment rate by 13.2 percentage points Increased number of credits earned Increased net financial aid and reduced dependence on loans
Year Up	Provide work experience and intensive mentoring to young adults ages 18 to 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased earnings by 32% (about \$13,000 over the 3 years after program participation) Increased wages by \$2.51 per hour
Sectoral Employment Training	Help young adults ages 18 to 26 gain skills for particular industry sectors that need workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased earnings by 18% (about \$4,500 total over 24 months) Increased probability of working year round by 11 percentage points Increased rate of employment in higher-wage jobs by 13–14 percentage points Increased rate of employment in jobs with benefits by about 10 percentage points
City University of New York Accelerated Study in Associate Programs	Increase retention and graduation of community college students in need of remediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased retention rate by 8–10 percentage points Increased number of credits earned by 25% Increased 2 ½-year graduation rate by nearly 15 percentage points

Reconnecting Men to School or Work & Preventing Recidivism

Although reconnecting disconnected men, such as struggling community college students and exoffenders, is challenging, the programs below have been effective.

Intervention	Description	Estimated Impacts
Job Corps	Provide vocational and academic training to youth ages 16 through 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased General Educational Development (GED) and vocational certificates completion rate Increased short-term earnings by 12%, though this did not persist Provided persistent earnings gains for older youth ages 20 to 24 Reduced criminal activity
National Guard Youth Challenge	Include a wide range of activities designed to prepare high school dropouts for work and adult responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased high school/GED completion rate by 16 percentage points Increased number of college credits earned Increased short-term earnings by 20%
GED Bridge	Prepare high school dropouts for passing the GED (high school equivalency) exam and continuing on to college or training programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased GED test passing rate by 30 percentage points Increased college enrollment rate by 17 percentage points
Parents' Fair Share	Help unemployed noncustodial parents with children receiving public assistance, most of them fathers, find jobs and be more actively involved in their children's lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased employment rate and earnings for the least employable men Increased child support payments
Jobs-Plus	Provide employment assistance for public housing residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased earnings by an average of \$1,300 per year overall Increased earnings of Latino men in Los Angeles by over \$3,000 per year
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Engender personal responsibility through education, training, and counseling of youth and adults with criminal histories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced recidivism rate by between 25% and 30%
Center for Employment Opportunities Transitional Jobs Program	Provide transitional jobs for men released from correctional facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced reincarceration rate in the 3 years after enrollment by 11% Reduced the probability of arrest, conviction, or incarceration by 8% Temporarily increased employment rate, though this did not persist over time

Source: Both tables were adapted from C. Wimer and D. Bloom, *Boosting the Life Chances of Young Men of Color: Evidence from Promising Programs*, New York, NY: MDRC (June 2014). Used with permission.

Emerging Research Is Providing New Insight

In order to better understand the social pathways of men's lives that might inhibit their ability to hold down a job and pay child support, research using a life course perspective to study black men has examined childhood experiences that may have hidden influences later in life. One such study surveyed a sample of working age black men in Milwaukee about their childhood experiences, health status, job history, and incarceration history, and then compared the findings to those of similar studies, one national and the other in St. Louis, Missouri. Comparing each sample's responses to the findings of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study survey, which covers abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, revealed that poor urban black men were 3 to 10 times more likely than the diverse national sample of men to have experienced in childhood verbal abuse or emotional and physical neglect, witnessed domestic violence, or had an incarcerated family member.

