

Why Young Black Men Are Endangered

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Editor's Note: A recent study found that young blacks in their 20s and 30s are more likely to be jobless, imprisoned, join gangs, father children out of wedlock and kill other young blacks than young white or Hispanic men. But according New America Media's Associate Editor Earl Ofari Hutchinson, it did not satisfactorily answer the question, why?

LOS ANGELES--New studies by researchers from Columbia, Princeton and Harvard again found that young blacks in their 20s and 30s are more likely to be jobless, tossed in jail, join gangs, father children out of wedlock, kill other young blacks and pillage their communities in far higher numbers than young white or Hispanic men.

The dangling question that the researchers did not satisfactorily answer is why so many young black men have become endangered in America, and just as important, what can be done to reverse it. Discrimination, racial profiling, failing public schools and broken homes are the easy answers that the researchers fingered to explain the crisis. Democrats, for their part, pound President

Bush and say that his fiscal and economic policies have resulted in the loss of millions of jobs during his years in office. His slash-and-burn of job training programs and dearth of tax incentives for the working poor have certainly helped fuel the crisis.

But the crisis among young black men can't be totally blamed on Bush's dubious fiscal and economic policies. During the Clinton era, when the economy was booming, the unemployment rate for young black males was still double and in some parts of the country triple that of white males. At the same time, state and federal cutbacks in job training and skills programs, the brutal competition for low- and semi-skilled service and retail jobs from immigrants and the refusal of many employers to hire those with criminal records have sledge-hammered black communities.

In fact, before the big run-up in black male unemployment in the last few years, the California Assembly Commission on the Status of the African-American Males reported that four out of 10 felons entering California prisons were young black males, and less than half of lower-income black males under 21 lived in two-parent households. The study was done in California, but almost certainly a similar pattern would be found in other poor urban communities nationwide.

It's true that many employers refuse to hire young black males due to racial fears and ignorance. It's also true that many young blacks feed that fear and ignorance by their own actions. The studies made only passing mention of that. The urban riots of the 1990s reinforced white fears that all young black males are inherent drive-by-shooters, gang bangers, drug dealers, are lazy, have foul attitudes, are chronic underachievers and eternal menaces to society.

When some young blacks turned to gangs, guns and drugs and terrorized their communities, that seemed to confirm whites' worst fears. The explosion of gangster rap and the spate of Hollywood violence-themed ghetto films have convinced even more Americans that the thug lifestyle is the black lifestyle. They have ghastly visions of the boys-in-the-hoods heading for their neighborhoods next. No matter whether a young black is a Rhodes scholar, National Science medal winner or junior achievement candidate, they could be tagged as a gangster.

Many young black men reinforce the damaging racial stereotypes by aping and exulting the thuggish bluster and behavior of gangster rappers. This further bolsters the racially tinged suspicion among some employers that all young blacks must be criminal and derelict. That does not and should not excuse job discrimination, however.

Researchers also pointed to the high number of miserably failing inner-city public schools as partly responsible for the slide of young black males. Certainly, poor schools have turned thousands of young black males into educational cripples.

These students are desperately unequipped to handle the rapidly evolving and demanding technical and professional skills needed to compete in the public sector and the business world of the 21st century. They are also far more likely than whites to be expelled or suspended for violations that often times go unreported or unnoticed when white students commit them.

The staggeringly high suspension and expulsion rate of young black males from schools enraged NAACP officials. They announced last year that they would hold hearings on the problem. While school administrators should be called on the carpet for racial double standards in school discipline, bad-behaving students and their parents must also be called on the same carpet. They must work doubly hard to push at-risk students to improve their conduct and their studies.

Civil rights leaders, the Congressional Black Caucus and Congressional Democrats must relentlessly challenge the Bush administration and private industry to create more jobs and training opportunities, support programs for parents and skills-training programs for prisoners to help young black males out of their quagmire. But they must also challenge young black men to take greater responsibility for their own lives and be the achievers they can be, and not statistics and stereotypes.

Page 1 of 1

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