

# **Trends in Black Male Joblessness and Year-Round Idleness: An Employment Crisis Ignored**

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## Introduction

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision on school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>1</sup> Over the past 50 years, Black Americans have made a number of substantive gains in their educational attainment, their access to higher skilled occupations, their real family incomes, and home ownership. Yet, the degree of progress among Black Americans has been highly uneven, and recent assessments of the long term educational and social impacts of *Brown v. Board of Education* have yielded a very mixed set of results.<sup>2</sup> One critical area in which Black progress has been impeded is the employment of Black males in general and young Black males (16-24 year olds) in particular. Unfortunately, the labor market plight of these young African American men and many of their less educated, older counterparts has been largely ignored by most national economic policymakers, both of the nation's major political parties, and, with few exceptions, most of the national media.<sup>3</sup>

This research report is designed to provide an overview and assessment of changes in employment among Black male teens (16-19) and young adults (20-24 years old) over the past 50 years, with a major emphasis on developments from the late 1960s through 2003. Findings for young Black males will be compared to those for young White males and in some instances for young Black women. The long term deterioration in the labor market position of young Black men will be followed by a more detailed overview of year-round, idleness among all Black male

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<sup>1</sup> For contrasting views of the historic importance and long-run educational consequences of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, see:

(i) David Halberstam, "Brown v. Board of Education: What It Means to Every American," *Parade*, April 18, 2004, pp. 4-6; (ii) Derrick Bell, "The Failed Legacy of Boston School Desegregation," *Boston Sunday Globe*, May 16, 2004; (iii) "Speaker Rips 'Brown' as Sadly Irrelevant," *The Northeastern Voice*, May 18, 2004, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> For recent reviews of Black educational, economic, and social progress since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954,

See: (i) Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2004; (ii) Sheryll Cashin, *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream*, Public Affairs, New York, 2004; (iii) Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., *All Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half Century of Brown v. Board of Education*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2004.

A brief review of these three books can be found in the following article:

Samuel G. Freeman, "Still Separate, Still Unequal," *New York Times Book Review*, May 16, 2004, pp. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> Among the exceptions are a series of editorials on young adult labor market problems in the *New York Times* by Bob Herbert and media coverage of a recent report by the Community Service Society of New York on joblessness among New York City males.

See: Mark Levitan, *A Crisis of Black Male Employment: Unemployment and Joblessness in New York City*, Community Service Society, New York City, 2004.

adults (20-64) between 2000 and 2002. The measures of year-round, idleness represent the share of Black males who did not work at any time during the year. Estimates of these year-round, idleness rates for Black men will be compared to those of Asian, Hispanic, and White men in the same age group over the same time period (calendar years 2000 and 2002). Findings on these idleness rates for Black men will be disaggregated for selected age, educational attainment, and geographic subgroups. The final section of the paper will present a series of national, state, and local public policy proposals to boost the immediate and longer-term employment and earnings prospects of Black men, especially those in the 16-24 age group.

### **Historical Trends in Black Male Teen Employment Rates**

There are a variety of measures that can be used to depict the labor force status of any given demographic subgroup of the working-age population (16 and older). In this section of the paper, we rely on the employment/population ratio. The E/P ratio represents the percentage share of a given population subgroup that is employed either at a given point in time or on average during the entire year.<sup>4</sup> The E/P measures that appear in this section are annual averages based on the findings on the monthly Current Population Surveys for selected years over the 1954-2003 period. The E/P ratio is influenced by both the labor force participation rate of a given group and their success in finding employment when they do seek work. The unemployment rate for teens and many young adults can be a misleading measure of their labor market success since many youth withdraw from active labor force participation when jobs become difficult to find. Once they fail to actively search for work, they will no longer be included in the ranks of the unemployed and will lower the unemployment rate, thereby masking the problem. Such jobless youth, however, will lower the E/P ratio for this demographic group, revealing a deteriorating employment situation among them.

Estimates of annual average E/P ratios for Black male teens for selected years from 1954 to 2003 are presented in Chart 1. The year 1954 marked the high-water point for the Black male teen employment rate. During that year, 52 of every 100 Black male teens were working during a typical month, an E/P ratio that was actually 2.4 percentage points above that of White male

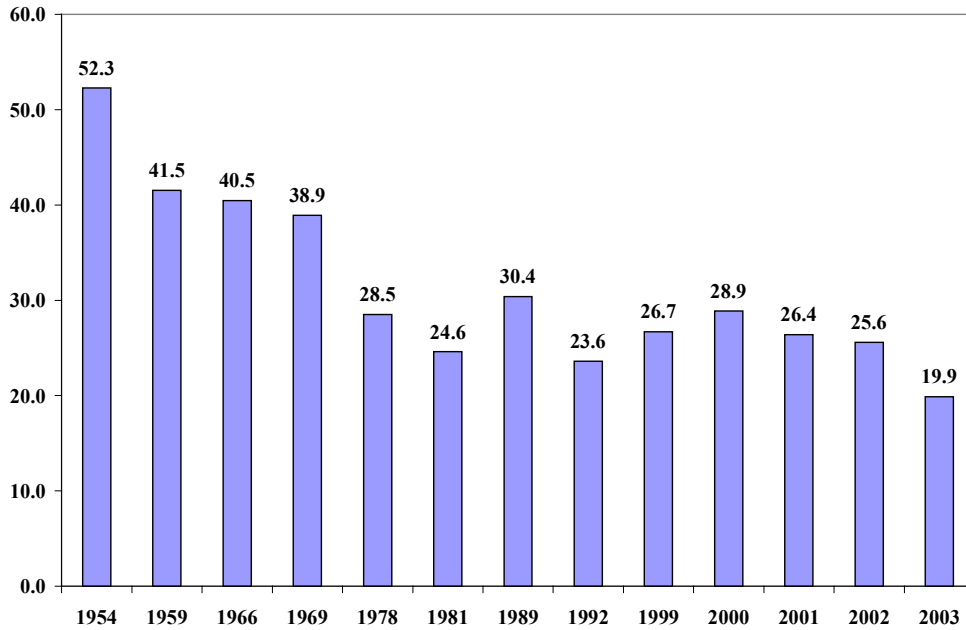
teens (Chart 2). Since 1954, the Black male teen employment rate has been on a secular decline, falling to the low 40 percent range at the end of the 1950s decade, to the 39-40 percent range at the end of the labor market boom years of the 1960s, and to 28-30 percent in the late 1970s, the late 1980s, and the end of the labor market boom in 2000. During the past three years, which were characterized by a national recession and two years of a largely jobless recovery, the E/P ratio of Black male teens has declined to slightly under 20 percent, the lowest E/P ratio for Black male teens in the past 50 years (Chart 1).

It should be noted that employment opportunities for Black male teens continue to be quite cyclically sensitive, rising at an above average pace during periods of strong national job growth and declining unemployment and falling at an above average pace during periods of recession and slow job growth. For example, during the 1981-82 recession, the Black male teen employment rate fell sharply, but by 1989 had risen by seven percentage points above its 1982 rate. The E/P ratio of these Black male teens fell very sharply between 1989 and 1992 but then rose by more than 5 percentage points between 1992 and 2000 due to strong national job growth.

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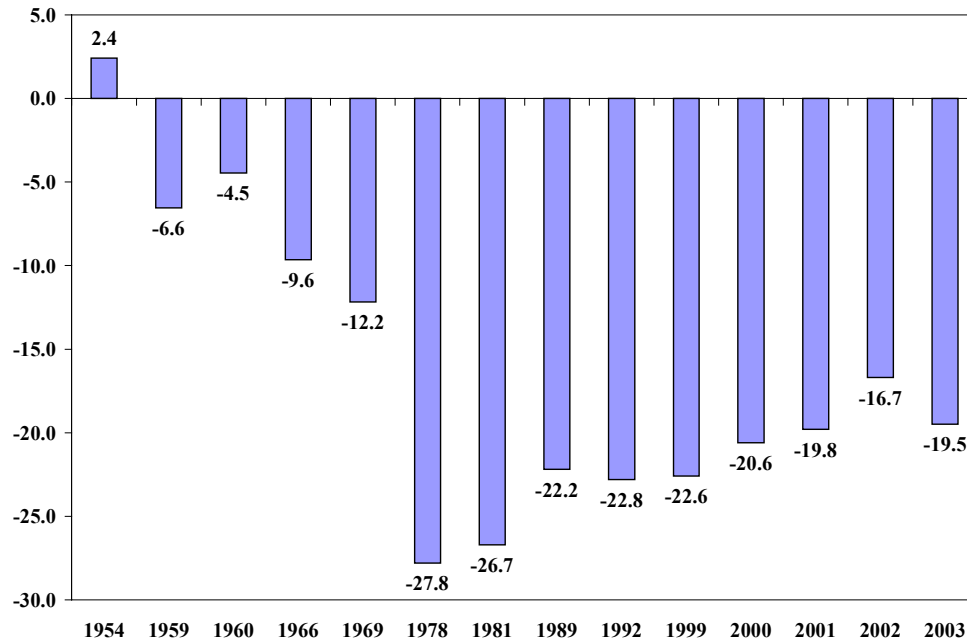
<sup>4</sup> The CPS survey only includes members of the civilian, non-institutional population who reside in households or in selected types of group quarters: college dormitories, sororities, fraternities, and boarding houses. The CPS does not survey inmates of jails or prisons or the homeless population

Chart 1:  
Historical Trends in the Employment/Population Ratios of 16-19 Year Old  
Black Men in the U.S., 1954-2003  
 (Selected Years, in %)



Part of the decline in the Black male teen employment rate over the past 50 years is attributable to rising school enrollment rates including high school and college, which will reduce their E/P ratio due to lower labor force attachment among high school and college students. Yet, Black male teens remain employed at rates well below those of White males despite the fact that White male teens are more likely than their Black counterparts to be enrolled in school. In 1954, at the time of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Black male teens were somewhat more likely to be working than White male teens. By the mid to late 1960s, however, the Black male teen employment rate fell 10 to 12 percentage points below those of White male teens (Chart 2). This White-Black male teen employment gap widened to 27 to 28 percentage points in the late 1970s and has typically remained in the 20 to 23 percentage point range since the late 1980s. In 2003, the Black male teen employment rate was only 19.9%, a historical low for the past 50 years, nearly 20 percentage points below that of White male teens and well below that of Hispanic teens. Only 1 of every 5 Black male teens was employed on a typical month during the past year with even lower employment rates among Black teens residing in low-income families and poverty neighborhoods.

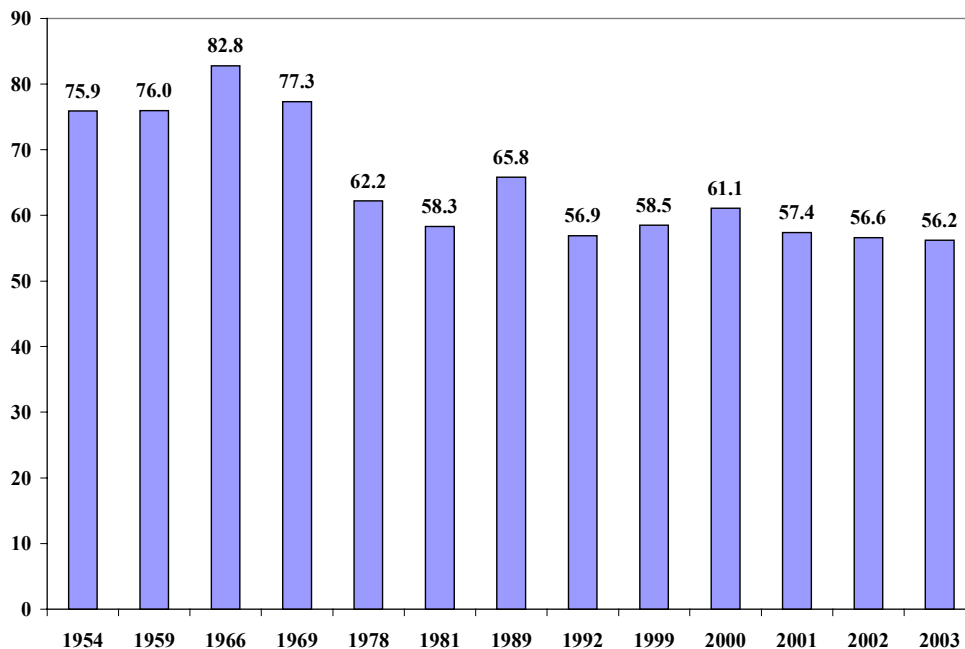
Chart 2:  
Historical Trends in the Gap Between the Employment/Population Ratios of  
Black and White 16-19 Year Old Men in the U.S., 1954-2003  
 (Selected Years, in Percentage Points)



### **Historical Trends in the Employment Rates of 20-24 Year Old Black Males**

Trends in the E/P ratios of 20-24 year old Black males for selected years over the 1954-2003 period are displayed in Chart 3. In 1954, the E/P ratio of these young Black men was just under 76 percent. It would remain there at the end of the 1950s and rise above 80 percent in the labor market boom years of the late 1960s, which were accompanied by the passage of national civil rights legislation aimed at breaking down racial discriminatory barriers in employment. By the late 1970s, however, the E/P ratio of these young Black men had declined to the lows 60's percent range and would fall sharply to 54 percent in the recession year of 1982. Young Black male employment rates, however, rose strongly from 1983 through 1989, peaking at nearly 66% in the latter year, before falling by 9 percentage points by 1992. During the last three years, the E/P ratio of the nation's 20-24 year old Black men has hovered in the 56-57 percent range. This employment rate was nearly 20 percentage points below its level in 1954 and 26 percentage points below its peak values in the mid to late 1960s (Chart 3).

Chart 3:  
Historical Trends in the Employment/Population Ratios of 20-24 Year Old  
Black Men in the U.S., 1954-2003  
 (Selected Years, in %)

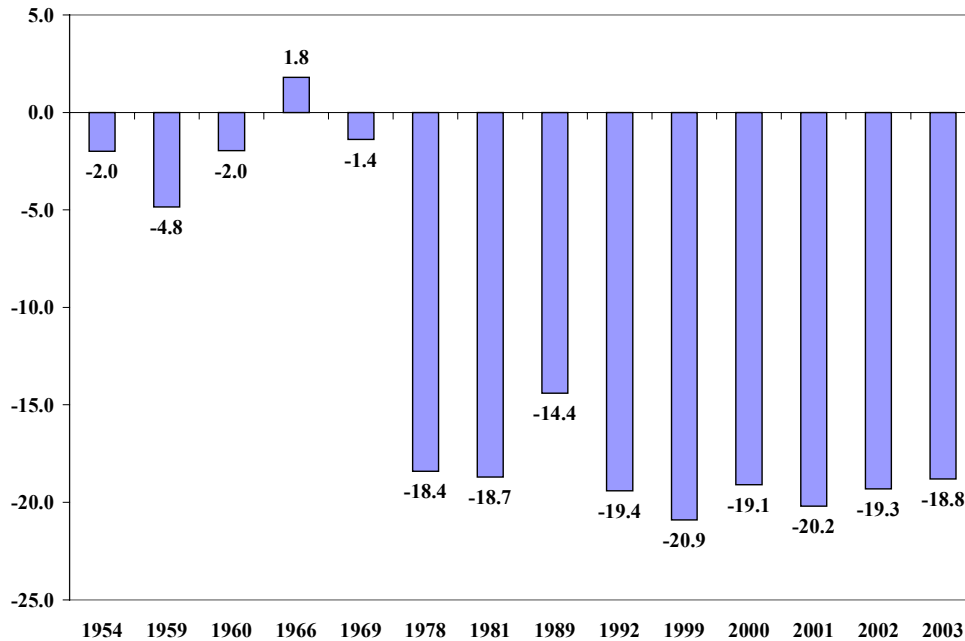


How have these trends in young Black male employment rates compared to those of White males over the past 50 years? Findings in Chart 4 trace changes in the gap between the employment rates of Black and White male 20-24 year olds over the past 50 years. In 1954, the Black male E/P ratio was only two percentage points below that of Whites and remained in the 2 to 4 percentage point range through the remainder of the 1950s. In the labor market boom years of the mid to late 1960s, the E/P rate of young Black male adults achieved parity with that of Whites.<sup>5</sup> By the late 1970s, however, very large gaps had opened up, with the Black E/P ratio falling 17 to 18 percentage points below that of Whites. The strong growth in aggregate job opportunities from 1982 to 1989 helped lower the racial gap to 14 percentage points by the end of the 1980s; however, the gap rose to 19 percentage points during the recessionary environment of the early 1990s and has remained in the 18 to 21 percentage point range over the past decade. The low E/P ratios of young Black men (20-24) actually underestimate the severity of their labor

<sup>5</sup> The E/P ratios for Blacks prior to 1973 are for “all non-Whites” including Asians and American Indians, but the difference between these two estimates for the 1950s and 1960s should have been quite modest, given the small size of the Asian and American Indian populations.

market problems since they exclude those Black men in prison and jails and the homeless, who account for a relatively high share of the Black male population.

Chart 4:  
Historical Trends in the Gap Between the Employment/Population Ratios of  
Black and White 20-24 Year Old Men in the U.S., 1954-2003  
 (Selected Years, in Percentage Points)



On a more positive note, however, there were a number of important gains in the weekly wages of employed Black men relative to those of White men from the mid 1960s through the mid-1980s.<sup>6</sup> In calendar year 2003, the median weekly earnings of full-time employed 16-24 year old Black men were equal to 90% of those of all full-time employed White males in the same age group. Progress in reducing Black/White wage differentials since the early 1960s was, however, offset by a substantial rise in the Black/White employment gap. Some labor market analysts attribute part of the rise in this employment gap to high reservation wages for unemployed Black workers that exceed the market wages being offered to them by employers, thus reducing their employability.

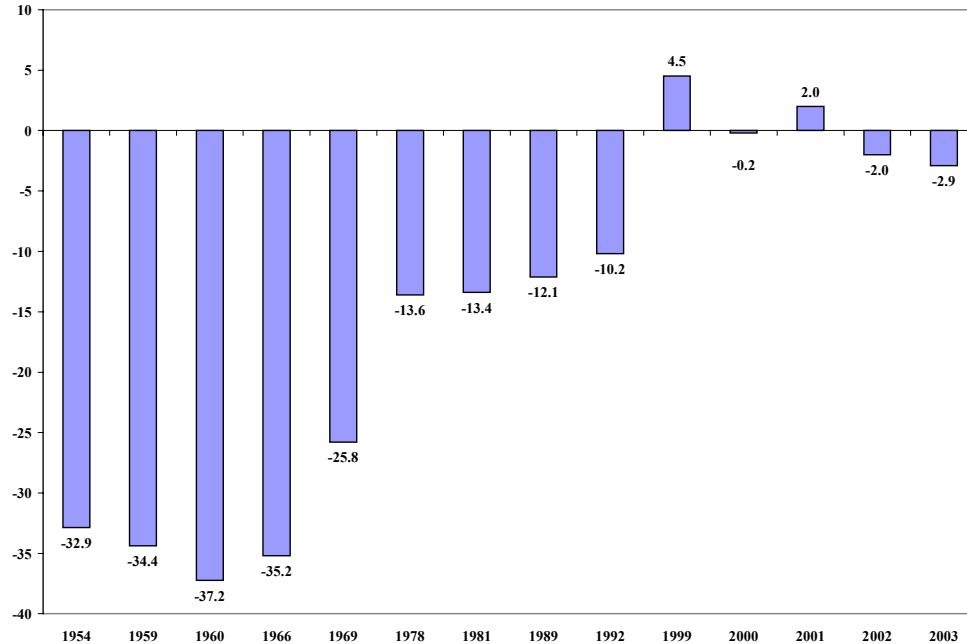
<sup>6</sup> For evidence on this issue, See: Richard B. Freeman and Harry J. Holzer, [op.cit.](#)

The historical trends in the employment rates of young adult Black men (20-24) also can be compared to those for young Black women. In 1954, the E/P ratio of young Black men in the U.S. exceeded that of young Black women by 32 percentage points and the gap would widen to 34 to 37 percentage points by the late 1950s and early 1960s. Since then, however, the female-male employment gap has narrowed steadily and considerably as Black women increased their employment rates while Black men experienced employment rate declines. By 1978, the gap had narrowed to 14 percentage points. By 1989, the gender gap had shrunk to only 12 percentage points. During the 1990s, young Black women continued to experience a further rise in their employment rate as a consequence of improved educational attainment, a surge in available job opportunities in the service and trade industries that employ large numbers of women, and the impacts of welfare reform.<sup>7</sup> By 1999, the E/P ratio for young Black women (20-24 years old) had actually risen 4 percentage points above that of young Black men and was equal to that of Black men in 2000. While job declines in more recent years have pushed the Black female employment rate slightly below that of Black men, the current gap is only in the two percentage point range.

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<sup>7</sup> For a review of the changing employment situation for young Black women in the 1990s, See: (i) Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner, op.cit.; (ii) Katherine Boo, "The Black Gender Gap," in The Real State of the Union, (Editor: Ted Halstead), Basic Books, New York, 2004, pp. 102-108.

Chart 5:  
Historical Trends in the Gap Between the Employment/Population Ratios of  
Blacks 20-24 Year Old Women and Men in the U.S., 1954-2003  
 (Selected Years, in Percentage Points)



What is further important to note is that these strong employment gains among young adult Black women in recent decades took place at a time when more and more Black women also were attending college and obtaining Associate and Bachelor degrees. In recent years, Black women have obtained substantially more Associate and Bachelor degrees than Black men. For example, in the 1999-2000 school year, Black women (of all ages) obtained 188 Associate degrees and 192 Bachelor degrees for every 100 such academic degrees awarded to Black men.<sup>8</sup>

### **Changes in the Employment Rates of 25-29 and 30-34 Year Old Black Men**

The steep deterioration in the employment rates of Black male teens and young adults over the past three years was not confined to them. Older Black men 25-29 and 30-34 years old also experienced above average declines in their employment/population ratios over the 2000-2003 period (See Table 1). For example, among 25-29 year old Black males, the E/P ratio fell from 78 percent in 2000 to only 70 percent in 2003, a relative decline of 10% versus relative

reductions of only 4% for their Hispanic and White counterparts. Among 30-34 year old Black males, the E/P ratio fell from nearly 86 percent to 80 percent, a relative decline of 7% versus only 2 to 3 percent declines for Hispanic and White males over the same three year period. Clearly, Black men from their teens through their mid-30's were far more adversely affected by the recession of 2001 and the jobless recovery of 2002-2003 than their White and Hispanic counterparts.

Table 1:  
Changes in the Employment/Population Ratios of 25-29 and 30-34 Year Old  
Men by Race/Ethnic Group Between 2000 and 2003

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
	2000	2003	Percentage Point Change	Percent Change
<b>25-29 Year Olds</b>				
Black	78.0	70.2	-7.8	-10
Hispanic	91.0	87.2	-3.8	-4
White	90.9	86.9	-4.0	-4
<b>30-34 Year Olds</b>				
Black	85.6	79.7	-5.9	-7
Hispanic	90.2	88.3	-1.9	-2
White	92.4	89.3	-3.1	-3

Source: BLS web site, [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov).

## **Year-Round Idleness Rates Among 20-64 Year Old Black Men: A National Crisis?**

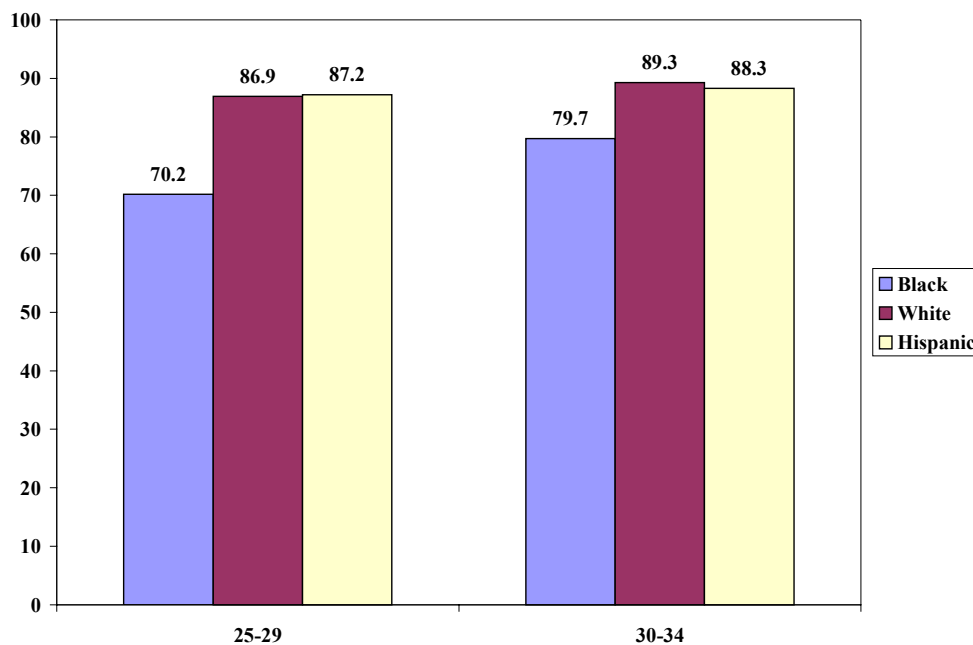
One might argue that the very low employment rates of young Black men in their teens and early 20s will improve as they enter their late 20s and early 30s and begin to settle down in the labor market. It is true that the employment rates of Black men do improve steadily as they enter their late 20s and early 30s; however, they continue to remain well below those of White and most Hispanic males (See Chart 5). For example, the E/P ratio of Black men in 2003 rose from 56 percent for 20-24 year olds to 70 percent for 25-29 year olds and to just under 80 percent

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<sup>8</sup> See: Andrew Sum, Neeta Fogg, and Paul Harrington, The Growing Gender Gaps in College Enrollment and Degree Attainment in the U.S. and their Economic and Social Consequences, Report Prepared for the Business Roundtable, Washington, D.C., January 2003.

for 30-34 year olds. Among 25-29 year old men, however, the E/P ratios in 2003 ranged from 70 percent among Black men to 87 percent among White and Hispanic males, a gap of 17 percentage points (Chart 5). What is most depressing about the low average employment rates of Black men, however, is the high fraction of such men, especially those with limited schooling living in the nation’s central cities and its small urban/rural areas, who are idle all year long.

Chart 5:  
Employment Rates of Black, Hispanic, and White Males 25-29 and  
30-34 Years Old in the U.S., 2003  
(Annual Averages, in %)



A recent New York Times article reporting on research by a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics analyst noted that a rising fraction of 25-54 year old males in the U.S. were idle all year long.<sup>9</sup> While males with no high school diploma were found to be the most likely to be idle, the article did not provide breakouts of these data for race-ethnic or detailed geographic subgroups of males. In the following section, we will examine estimates of idleness rates for 20-64 year old Black, Hispanic, and White males in the U.S. during 2000 and 2002, the latest year for which we

<sup>9</sup> See: Alan B. Krueger, “Economic Scene: A Growing Number of Men Are Not Working, So What Are They Doing,” The New York Times, April 29, 2004, p. 2. These findings are based a recent research paper by Mr. Stewart of the U .S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

have data on the annual work experiences of males in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Estimates of the idleness rates of Black men also will be presented for selected age subgroups, educational attainment groups, and geographic locations (central cities, suburban portions of metropolitan areas, and non-metropolitan areas).

During March of each year, the monthly CPS survey includes a supplement to the standard labor force questionnaire that collects data on the employment experiences, earnings, and incomes of all household members 15 and older in the previous calendar year. The supplement captures information on the number of weeks of paid employment during the prior calendar year, weeks of unemployment, and average hours of work per week. Those individuals who were not employed at any time during the previous calendar year will be referred to as the “year-round idle”.<sup>11</sup>

The “year-round idleness” rate is not the same as the annual average joblessness rate cited in other studies of the labor market, including a recent study of Black male joblessness in New York City.<sup>12</sup> The joblessness rate can be measured on a monthly basis or an annual average basis. The latter measure simply represents the percent of individuals in a given population group (e.g., 16-24 year old Black men) who were not working on an average month during a given year. The “idleness” rate measures the percent of individuals in a given group who did not work at all during a given year. The two measures, however, are typically not the same. For example, suppose that the annual average joblessness rate for a given group of men was estimated to be 50 percent. This joblessness rate could have been produced by a wide variety of different scenarios, ranging from one-half of all men being idle all year (a 50% year-round, idleness rate) to all men working six months each year, implying a 0% year-round, idleness rate. The degree of turnover of the employed during the year will determine the size of the gap between the joblessness and idleness rates.

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<sup>10</sup> Data for calendar year 2003 were collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in March 2004. Results will be released to the general public in the fall of this year.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Krueger has referred to this group of men as exhibiting the “Kramer lifestyle” after the jobless character Kramer on the Seinfeld sitcom.

<sup>12</sup> See: Janny Scott, “Nearly Half of Black Men Found Jobless”, New York Times, February 28, 2004.

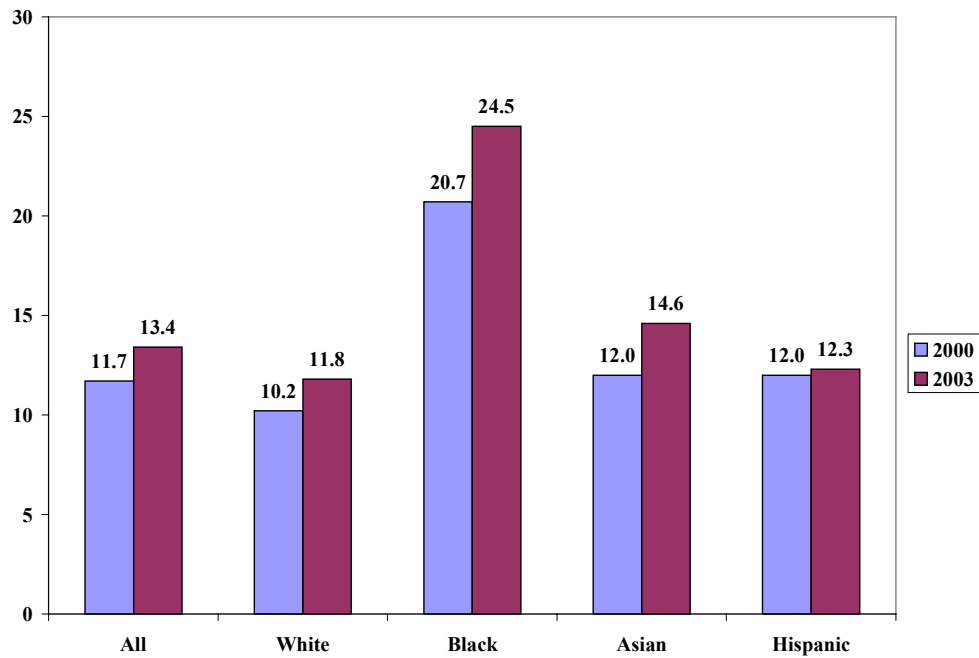
Findings on the share of 20-64 year old men by major race-ethnic group who were idle, year-round in 2000 and 2002 are displayed in Chart 6. During calendar year 2000, slightly under 12 percent of the nation's 20-64 year old men were idle all year long. These idleness rates ranged from a low of 10 percent for White, non-Hispanic males to 12 percent for Asian and Hispanic males to a high of nearly 21 percent for Black males. The idleness rate of 20-64 year old Black men in 2000 was thus, twice as high as it was among White men and 70% higher than it was among Asian and Hispanic men.

During the 2001 recession and the jobless recovery of 2002, when wage and salary employment in the U.S. economy actually declined, the idleness rate of 20-64 year old men increased by nearly two percentage points, rising to 13.4 percent by 2002. Idleness rates increased to some degree among males in each of the four race-ethnic groups, but the rise in idleness was greatest among Black men. By 2002, one of every four Black men in the U.S. was idle all year long. This idleness rate was twice as high as that of White and Hispanic males. It is interesting to note that the Hispanic male idleness rate barely changed during this two year period despite a continued surge in Hispanic immigration. As Janny Scott noted in the February 2004 New York Times article on high Black male joblessness in New York City, one of the forces believed to be influencing the steep decline in Black male job opportunities in New York City is “increased competition with immigrants for low skill jobs”.<sup>13</sup>

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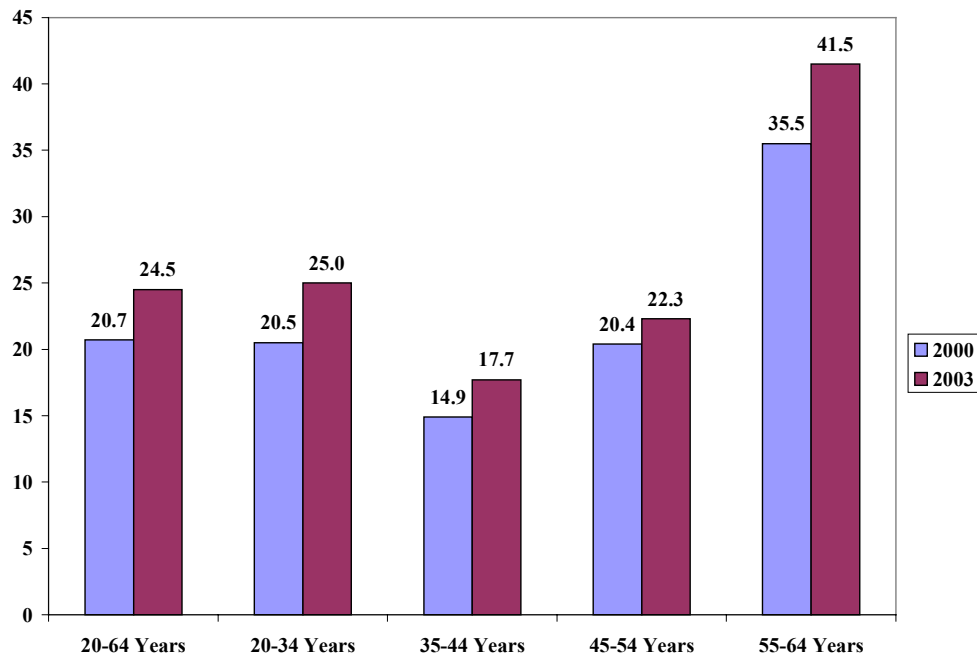
<sup>13</sup> See: Janny Scott, op.cit. Other factors believed to be at work are increased job competition from Black women, the steep loss in manufacturing jobs, especially blue collar positions and a reduced demand for less skilled workers generally.

Chart 6:  
Percent of 20-64 Year Old Men Who Did Not Work by Race-Ethnic Group, 2000 and 2002



Idleness rates for Black males in 2000 and 2002 were calculated for selected age groups. In 2000, these idleness rates varied considerably by age group, ranging from a low of 15 percent for men 35-44 years of age to a high of nearly 36 percent for Black men 55-64. During the following two years, these idleness rates rose in every age group, but were particularly large for Black men under 35 and over 55. In 2002, one of every four young Black males 20-34 years old were idle all year as were nearly 42 of every 100 Black men between the ages of 55-64. A very high share (41%) of these idle Black men were dependent on a variety of cash transfers (SSI disability, workmen’s compensation, unemployment benefits, veterans benefits) to support themselves and their families. Idleness among these men was reducing the real output of the U.S. economy and the tax receipts of federal and state governments, and simultaneously increasing government expenditures to support the economic needs of these men. The economic costs of idleness are borne not only by the men themselves, but also by their families, their communities, and the general taxpaying public.

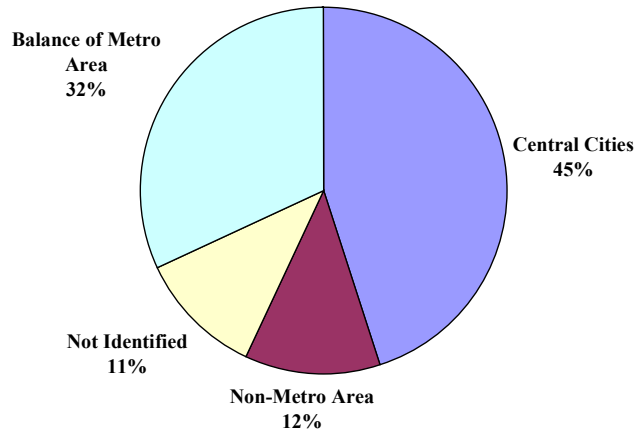
Chart 7:  
Percent of Black Men Who Did Not Work at Any Time  
During the Year by Age Group, 2000 – 2003



### **Idleness Rates of Black Men by Geographic Location and Years of Schooling**

Nationally, the idleness rates of all adult men tend to be highest in the central cities and among men who failed to graduate from high school. To identify patterns in the idleness rates of Black men 20-64, we estimated idleness rates by geographic locations of their residences, their educational attainment, and combinations of geographic location/educational attainment. The CPS household survey classifies respondents by their place of residence into one of the following four geographic categories: central cities, the balance of the metropolitan area (suburbs, small towns), non-metropolitan areas, and “not identified”. The latter category is used by the U.S. Census Bureau for individuals living in areas for whom the CPS sample is small and, thus, an individual could be identified. At the time of the March 2003 CPS survey, Black men were heavily concentrated in the nation’s central cities. At least forty-five of every 100 adult Black men lived in central cities while 32 of every 100 lived in cities and towns in the remainder of a metropolitan area, and 12 percent lived in non-metropolitan areas (Chart 8).

Chart 8:  
The Percentage Distribution of 20-64 Year Old  
Black Men by the Geographic Locations of Their Residences, March 2002

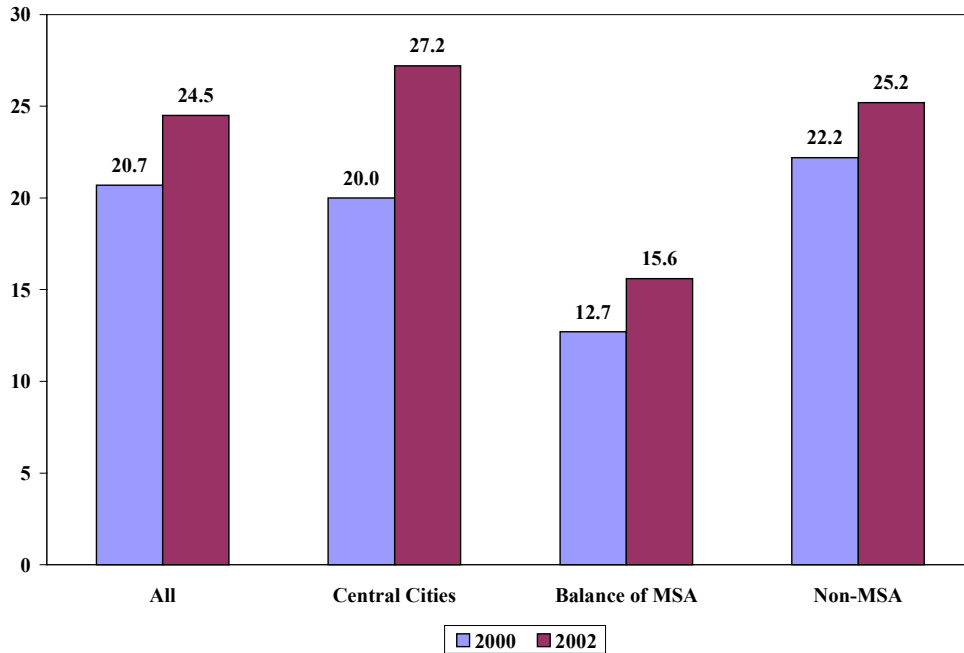


Estimates of the idleness rates of 20-64 year old Black men by geographic area of residence in calendar years 2000 and 2002 are displayed in Table 2 and Chart 8. In 2000, these idleness rates ranged from less than 13% for Black men living in the suburbs/exurbs of metropolitan areas to a high of over 22% for men living in non-metropolitan areas of the country. Between 2000 and 2002, the idleness rates of Black men rose in each of these three geographic areas with the most severe deterioration taking place in the central cities of the nation. During 2002, slightly over 27 percent of adult Black males living in central cities were idle all year round versus only 16% of those living in the balance of metropolitan areas. Over one-fourth of Black men living in the non-metropolitan areas of the nation also were idle all year round.

Table 2:  
Percent of Black Male 20-64 Year Olds living in the U.S.  
Who Did Not Work in 2000 and 2002 by Geographic Area  
 (%)

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Geographic Area	2000	2002	Absolute Change
All	20.7	24.5	3.8
Central Cities	20.0	27.2	7.2
Balance of MSA	12.7	15.6	2.9
Non-MSA	22.2	25.2	3.0

Chart 9:  
Percent of Black Male 20-64 Year Olds Living in the U.S.  
Who Did Not Work in 2000 and 2002 by Geographic Area  
 (%)



The idleness rates of Black men in the nation’s central cities were 60 to 70 percent higher than those of their counterparts in the suburban portions of metropolitan areas in 2000 and 2002. Part of the better employment performance of Black men in the suburbs is attributable to their higher levels of educational attainment. During 2002, 22 percent of Black men in the suburban portions of metropolitan areas had a bachelor’s or higher degree versus only 14 percent of those

in the nation's central cities.<sup>14</sup> Black men in the central cities were more likely than their peers in the suburbs to have left high school without obtaining a regular high school diploma or a GED certificate. Black men in these suburban communities also may have better access to jobs in the fastest growing segments of metropolitan areas and to a better informal network of information on jobs than their peers in central cities, especially in high poverty neighborhoods. Past research evidence on this topic has yielded mixed results.<sup>15</sup> More up-to-date analysis on these issues based on the 2000 Census data would be desirable.

The idleness rates of Black men in 2002 varied quite widely by educational attainment (Chart 10). Forty-four percent of those Black men with no regular high school diploma/GED were idle all year-round in 2002 versus only 26 percent of those with a high school diploma/GED certificate and only 13 percent of those with a bachelor's or higher degree (Chart 10). Black male, high school dropouts were 3.4 times more likely to have been idle in 2002 than their counterparts with a bachelor's or higher degree. As a consequence of their much higher rate of idleness those Black men without diplomas comprise a relatively high share of the idle population. Only 16 percent of these Black men reported that they had no diploma/GED yet they represented 29 percent of the idle. Nearly 7 of every 10 idle Black men in 2002 had no formal schooling beyond high school (Chart 11 and 12). The 44 percent idleness rate among Black male dropouts is staggering yet the nation's political leaders from both political parties and from all sides of the political spectrum have been silent on this issue. As Paul Offner has remarked, "(Black) men are barely on the screen except as deadbeat dads."<sup>16</sup>

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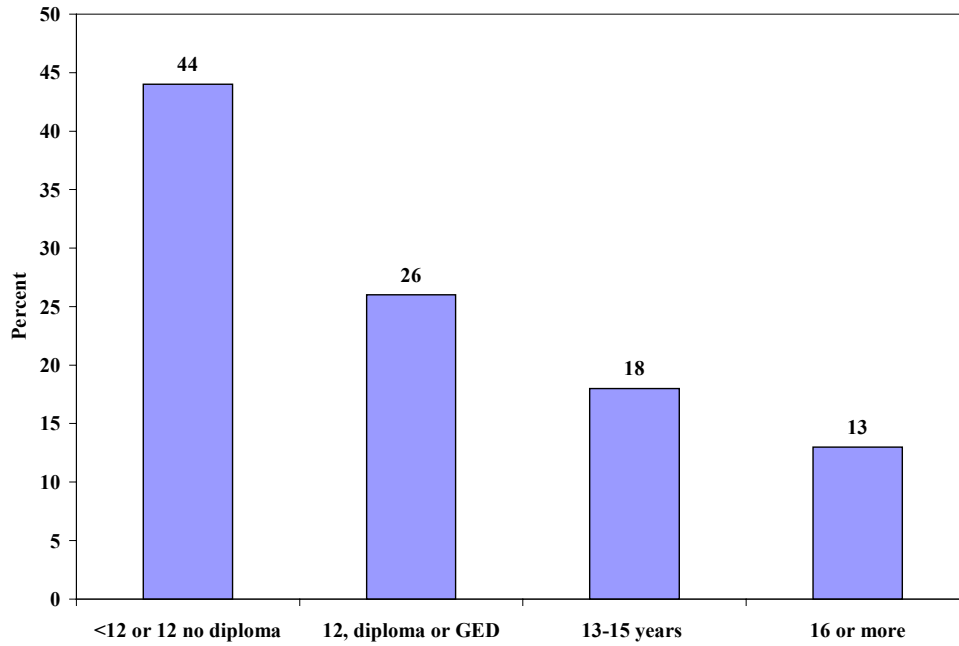
<sup>14</sup> For example,

See: Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, (Editors), The Urban Underclass, Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., 1991.

<sup>15</sup> These "suburban" communities include inner suburbs, some of which are low income, affluent suburbs, the new exurbs, and small town, and rural areas on the edge of these metropolitan areas.

<sup>16</sup> See: Katherine Boo, "The Black Gender Gap," in The Real State of the Union, (Editor: Ted Halstead), Basic Books, New York, 2004, pp. 102-108.

**Chart 10:**  
**Percent of 20-64 Year Old Black Men Who Were Idle Year-Round in 2002 by Educational Attainment**



**Chart 11:**  
**Percent of 20 -64 year old Black Males in U.S. by Educational Attainment, 2002**

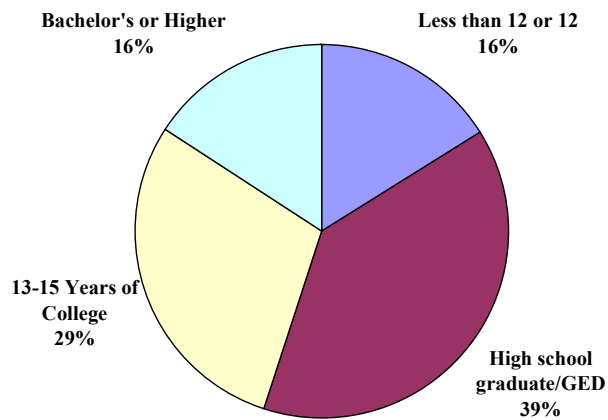
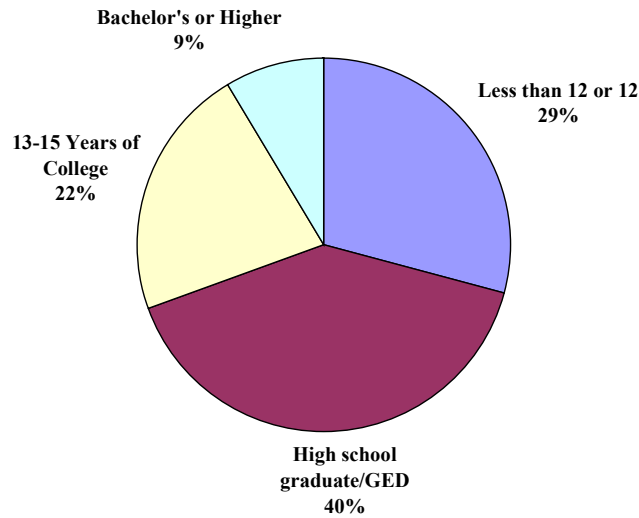


Chart 12:  
Percent of 20 -64 Year old Black Males in the U.S.  
Who Did Not Work in 2002 by Educational Attainment



The idleness rates of 20-64 year old Black men in 2002 by geographic location and educational attainment are displayed in Table 3 and Chart 13. In each of these three geographic areas, the idleness rates of Black men declined continuously with their level of educational attainment. For example, among Black men living in central cities during 2002, year-round idleness rates ranged from a high of over 44 percent for those men lacking a high school diploma, to 29 percent for those with a high school diploma/GED but no college, to a low of 18 percent for those with a bachelor's or higher degree. In all three areas, the idleness rates of male high school dropouts were two and one-half to nearly four times higher than they were among those men with a bachelor's or higher academic degree.

In each of the four educational groups, idleness rates of adult Black men were highest in the central cities and lowest among men living in the balance of metropolitan areas. Even among those men holding a Bachelor's or higher degree, idleness rates ranged from a low of 9% among those living in the balance of metropolitan areas to a high of 18 percent among central city residents (Table 3 and Chart 13). The sources of the employment advantages of Black men living in the suburbs of the nation's metropolitan areas need to be more carefully analyzed. The

recent efforts of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to boost the employment rates of low income adults, primarily single mothers, by providing them with housing vouchers to locate outside of high poverty neighborhoods in central cities have proven disappointing in terms of their short and medium term employment and earnings impacts.<sup>17</sup>

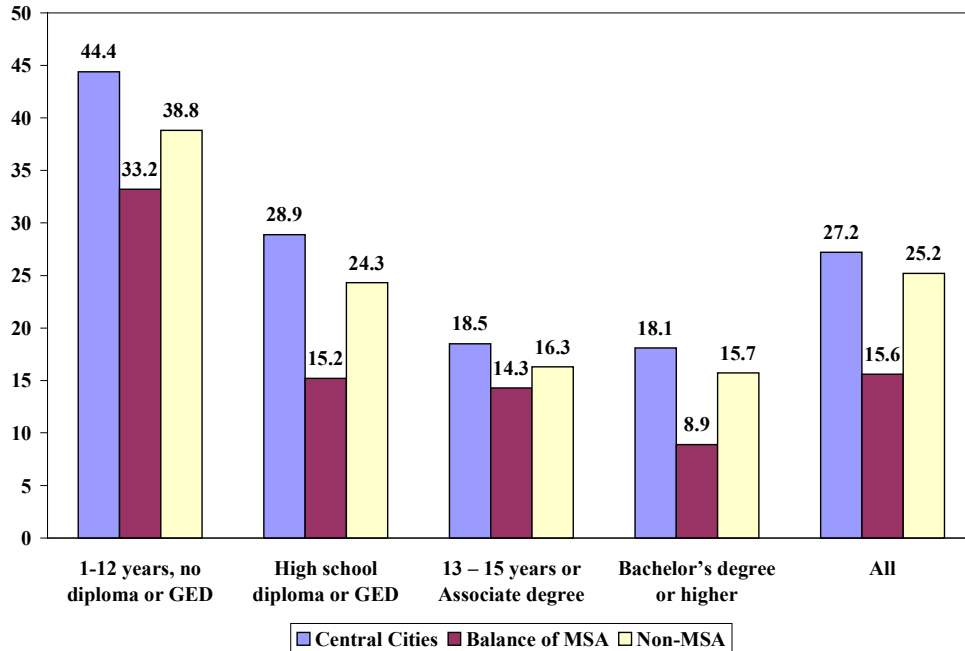
Table 3:  
Percent of Black Male 20-64 Year Olds Living in the U.S.  
Who Did Not Work in 2002 by Educational Attainment and Geographic Area

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Educational Attainment	Central Cities	Balance of Metropolitan Areas	Non-Metropolitan Areas
1-12 years, no diploma or GED	44.4	33.2	38.8
High school diploma or GED, no college	28.9	15.2	24.3
13 – 15 years or Associate degree	18.5	14.3	16.3
Bachelor’s degree or higher	18.1	8.9	15.7
All	27.2	15.6	25.2

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<sup>17</sup> For a review of the medium term employment impacts of these Moving to Opportunity demonstration programs. See: Larry Orr, Judith D. Feins, et.al., Moving to Opportunity: Interim Impacts Evaluation, Abt Associates and National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2003.

Chart 13:  
Percent of Black Male 20-64 Year Olds Living in the  
 U.S. Who Did Not Work in 2002 by Educational Attainment and Geographic Area  
 (%)



### **Whither the Future? Public Policy Actions for Boosting Employment Prospects for Black Men**

The high levels of joblessness and year-round idleness among Black men should be viewed as a major national, state, and local public policy concern. As noted above, however, the economic plight of many Black men and unskilled adult men in general has received very little public policy attention in recent years at the national or state level. Neither political party nor any of the Democratic Presidential candidates have addressed this important labor market issue. The first task in addressing this key labor market challenge should involve sustained efforts to inform national political leaders from both parties as well as many governors and mayors of the current labor market plight of the nation’s Black men. Greater media and public awareness of these issues is also desirable.

Developing effective public policy responses to this growing problem of joblessness and idleness will not be an easy one.<sup>18</sup> There is no one or two simple labor market strategies that will markedly alter the employment situation of Black male adults, especially those with no formal schooling beyond high school. A diverse array of macroeconomic and microeconomic strategies, both short and long term, will likely be need to substantively boost the employment rates of adult Black men, especially younger men (under 25).

First, strong national job growth capable of restoring the nation to the full employment labor market conditions of 1999-2000 is critical to expanding aggregate job opportunities for Black men. The employment/population ratios of Black teens (16-19) and young adults (20-24) are very sensitive to overall labor market conditions, rising at an above average pace when the nation is lowering its overall unemployment rate. For example, between 1993 and 2000, the Black male teen employment rate rose by 5.3 percentage points to just under 29 percent as the nation's unemployment rate declined from 7.0% to 4.0%. The White teen E/P ratio rose by only 2.9 percentage points over the same seven year period. Strong labor market conditions tend to attract more Black men into the labor force, lower their unemployment rate, reduce year-round, idleness, and boost the real weekly earnings of the employed.

Second, there is a need for an expanded set of school-to-career and school-to-work transition programs to boost in-school employment opportunities for the nation's high school students and facilitate their transition into the paid labor market upon graduation. Targetting these resources on many central city and low income rural and inner suburban school systems serving large numbers of Black students would help guarantee that Black men would be served at an above average rate. The employment rates of Black high school students are depressingly low, especially among low income students, and make it more difficult for them to transition smoothly into the labor market upon graduation from high school.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For examples of alternative employment-related proposals, See: (i) Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner, op.cit.; (ii) William Julius Wilson, The Bridge Over the Racial Divide, University of California, Berkeley, 1999; (iii) Richard B. Freeman and Harry J. Holzer, op.cit.

<sup>19</sup> For a review of the in-school employment experiences of high school students in the U.S. and their labor market impacts, See: Andrew Sum, Neeta Fogg, and Garth Mangum, Confronting the Youth Demographic Challenge: The Labor Market Prospects of Out-of-School Young Adults, Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 2000.

Third, out-of-school young Black men, especially those lacking any post-secondary schooling, also experience high rates of joblessness and idleness that reduce their cumulative work experience and wage prospects as they enter their mid-20s. Workforce development programs to address the immediate and longer-term employability needs of out-of-school, young Black and other jobless men need to be expanded, including Job Corps which has proven to be an economically efficient investment.<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, given the severe job deficits of the nation's teens and out-of-school 16-24 year olds who lack a college degree, there is a need for the federal government to boost job opportunities through direct job creation programs that would be implemented through the existing state and local WIA-based workforce development system and by a well designed set of tax credits for employers hiring target groups of young adults similar to the New Jobs Tax Credit of the late 1970s.<sup>21</sup> Since Black men are disproportionately found among the nation's jobless young adult population, a well targeted job creation program should boost their short run employment prospects.

Fifth, long term improvements in the employment and earnings position of adult Black men will require sustained personal and social investments in their literacy and numeracy proficiencies, their non-cognitive skills, and their formal educational attainment. Low literacy and numeracy skills serve as major barriers to their ability to complete more years of schooling, including improvements in their high school graduation rates, their college attendance rates, and college degree attainment rates. The nation's Black men have fallen considerably behind Black women and White men in recent years in obtaining associate, bachelor, and master's degrees. Gender gaps among Blacks in high school graduation rates and college attendance rates are particularly large in many of the nation's large central city school systems.

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<sup>20</sup> See: Sheena McConnell and Steven Glazerman, Job Corps Study: The National Benefits and Costs of Job Corps, Mathematica Policy Research Inc., Washington, D.C., 2002.

<sup>21</sup> See: Andrew Sum, Garth Mangum, and Robert Taggart, The Young, Restless, and Jobless: The Case for A National Jobs Stimulus Program for the Nation's Young Adults, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, 2002.

Sixth, renewed national and local efforts must be made to reduce the incidence of juvenile delinquency and crime among young Black men.<sup>22</sup> Those young men convicted of crimes and incarcerated in jails and prisons experience a host of educational and labor market problems, including fewer years of school completion, higher joblessness rates, and lower wages and annual earnings. Their low rates of employment once released from the criminal justice system increase their risks of recidivism and re-incarceration, further jeopardizing their future chances of employment at respectable wages.

Seventh, greater efforts must be made at the national, state, and local level to reduce the incidence of Black and other men fathering children out-of-wedlock. While teen pregnancy rates have declined sharply in the U.S. over the past decade, the share of all births taking place out-of-wedlock among 16-24 year old women has continued to increase especially among Whites, but remains extraordinarily high among Black women. Young single fathers are increasingly finding themselves subject to child support orders whose payments can absorb a relatively high share of their earnings from employment. Some labor market analysts have argued that the enforcement of child support orders provides economic disincentives for these young non-custodial fathers to seek work especially in the formal labor market where wages paid by employers can be more readily subject to garnishment. These work disincentives can contribute to further increases in joblessness and idleness among young Black men. Strengthening young Black men's employability and earnings could contribute to reductions in joblessness, idleness, crime and out-of-wedlock childbearing. As Katherine Boo has recently argued, there are other important social and developmental advantages as well for young Black children to be raised in two parent families: "But for better or worse, the long term well-being of these (Black) children – and of their country – depends less on their day care than on their fathers."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> For evidence on the role of crime in exacerbating Black men's employment prospects, See: (i) Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner, op.cit.; (ii) Richard B. Freeman, "Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crimes and What Might We Do About It?," The Journal of Economic Perspectives, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> See: Katherine Boo, "The Black Gender Gap," op.cit.