

# Low-Income Men at the Margins

Caught at the Intersection of  
Race, Place, and Poverty

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## **Low-Income Working Families**

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### **About the Series**

A large number of U.S. men of prime working age are neither gainfully employed nor pursuing education or other training, suggesting a potentially significant disconnection from mainstream economic and social life. The Urban Institute, funded by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, convened the Race, Place, and Poverty symposium to better understand the experiences of men who were disengaged or at high risk of disengagement from mainstream economic and social systems. The symposium explored the state of knowledge on disconnected low-income men and discussed effective strategies for improving their well-being.

The five briefs in this series on disconnected low-income men summarize the symposium, provide a geographic and demographic snapshot of low-income men, and examine their education, employment, health, and heightened risk of incarceration and disenfranchisement. A related background paper prepared for the symposium features key themes from ethnographic and other qualitative research.

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The nonpartisan Urban Institute publishes studies, reports, and books on timely topics worthy of public consideration.

# CONTENTS

The Focus on Disconnected Low-Income Men	2
Education	2
Employment	4
Family	7
Criminal Justice System	9
Health	11
Conclusion	13
Notes	15
References	17
About the Authors	23



# LOW-INCOME MEN AT THE MARGINS

The Great Recession significantly increased the number of men struggling with joblessness and under-employment. But for many low-income men, joblessness and its related struggles are chronic concerns regardless of the state of the economy. These are the men whose disconnection from mainstream economic and social structures has made it challenging for them to support themselves and their families, and to participate richly and constructively in mainstream society. This background paper was prepared for a symposium held in fall 2012 to address these issues.

The theme of the symposium was “Race, Place, and Poverty,” a title chosen because it is at the intersection of race and place that poverty and associated issues are magnified. The incidence of poverty is much higher among African Americans and Hispanics than among whites.<sup>1</sup> As this paper outlines, this outcome is closely associated with factors that increase anyone’s likelihood of being low income: low educational attainment, lack of steady employment, a record of incarceration, and poor health. But these barriers are much higher for racial and ethnic minorities, and this stems partly from the fact that they often live in highly impoverished, socioeconomically and ethnically segregated communities that lack good schools, job opportunities, and access to health care (Harding 2009; Small and Newman 2001; Wilson 1996). In addition, many of these communities have high incidences of crime and violence, along with a pattern of policing that sharply increases young men’s encounters with the criminal justice system.

The goal of the symposium was to examine the state of knowledge on disconnected low-income men and generate a conversation about strategies for more beneficial outcomes. We accomplished this by bringing together social service providers and researchers (mostly ethnographers) from across the coun-

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try whose work focuses on low-income men's experiences in five domains: education, employment, family, the criminal justice system, and health. This background paper features key themes from ethnographic and other qualitative research, and it is supplemented by data issue briefs that describe population size, geographic location, and other socio-demographic characteristics of the men and a brief which summarizes discussion that took place at the symposium.

The topics featured are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Our goal for this paper was to motivate conversation and establish a shared foundation grounded in current knowledge. We present the five domains in turn but discuss the overlaps where appropriate. The topics weave together, as they do in men's lives. Separately, education, employment, family, contact with the criminal justice system, and health each have consequences for the other domains, and we highlight some of the rippling effects.

### **The Focus on Disconnected Low-Income Men**

We concentrate on the experiences and challenges of men at the margins between the age of 18 and 44, when most American males are actively engaged in productive activities such as working and building skills, forming and strengthening families, and linking to social institutions. Focusing on this age group, we will not cover childhood, except where it helps shape men's present circumstances. Since men of color often have very divergent outcomes from white men, we spend some time on those disparities.

We define "low-income" broadly. Men are considered low income if they are living in families with income below twice the federal poverty level. For a single adult in 2012, that meant an annual household income of roughly \$23,890 or less. For a family of three, it was less than \$36,960 on average.<sup>2</sup> A second consideration is education level: men with less than a high school degree, a high school degree or GED, or even some college but no degree are included. For ease of exposition, hereafter we refer to this group as "low-income men." "Disconnected" is similarly defined broadly to include low-income men who are not engaged, or at risk of disengaging, from one or more social systems. This may entail fragile connections to employment, estrangement from family, brushes with the criminal justice system, or physical or mental health problems associated with inadequate access to health services or treatment.

Approximately 26 percent of the adult male population in 2008–10, or 29.3 million men, in the United States lived in households with incomes that were less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Roughly 15 million of these low-income men were of prime working age (18 to 44) and did not have a four-year college degree.<sup>3</sup> A disproportionate share were African American and Hispanic. Among all men age 18–44 in the United States, 60 percent were white, 20 percent were Hispanic, and 12 percent were African American. However, among our target demographic, the share of white men dropped to 45 percent, while the Hispanic and African American shares rose to 32 and 16 percent, respectively. Described another way, a higher percentage of all African American and Hispanic men are low income compared with white men. Among prime working-age adult males, 24 percent of white men are low income, compared with 41 percent of African American men and 47 percent of Hispanic men.<sup>4</sup>

### **Education**

Higher educational attainment can be a ticket out of poverty and a pathway to steady lifetime employment. For many low-income men, however, educational experiences are a stumbling block to higher achievement, both academic and professional. These men are less likely to have completed high school or to have pursued postsecondary education. According to American Community Survey estimates from

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2008 to 2010, more than a quarter (28 percent) of low-income men have dropped out of high school, compared with 10 percent of higher-income men (those in families with incomes above 200 percent of the federal poverty level). Notable racial disparities in education among low-income men also exist. Approximately 1 in 4 (26 percent) low-income African American men age 18 to 44 has dropped out of high school, compared with nearly 1 in 5 (17 percent) low-income white men. Low-income Hispanic men have the highest dropout share of all, at 50 percent. The racial gap in dropout rates and the gap between lower- and higher-income households should be cause for concern because of the implications for future well-being. Similarly, the gender gap within groups should be a concern because of the implications for family formation. Children who live in low-income communities often lack access to the good schools that would enable them to achieve educational success, making it more likely that low opportunity will reproduce itself. Young men of color seem especially disadvantaged by the educational institutions to which they have access. Their experiences increase the risk of low functional literacy and high dropout rates (De Anda and Hernandez 2008; Harding 2003; Noguera 1996; Rivera-Batiz 1990).

Hispanic men who are first- or second-generation immigrants are also at risk (Fortuny et al. 2009; Motel 2012). Many first-generation Hispanics have come to the United States with little formal education. Approximately 35 percent have not completed 9th grade, and 25 percent have completed 9th grade but not high school.<sup>5</sup> Even men formally educated in their home countries are not always prepared for the U.S. educational system or its labor market (Batalova and Fix 2011; Fry 2010; Pew Hispanic Center 2009). This is especially true for Hispanic men age 18–25 who immigrated in their late teens: only 6 percent are enrolled in postsecondary education in the United States, compared with 24 percent of men who arrived before age 16 and 35 percent of second-generation immigrants (Batalova and Fix 2011).

### **Enduring Consequences and the Role of Literacy and Language**

Low educational attainment can have lasting consequences, most notably on employment prospects and outcomes. Generally, more education means higher lifetime earnings (Day and Newburger 2002) and more consistent employment (Finn 2006). Low educational attainment poses barriers to employment for a number of reasons. While a high school degree is an important basic credential for many jobs, lack of this credential may also be indicative of low functional literacy or poor English-language skills—issues warranting special consideration among disconnected low-income men. Functional literacy and English-language skills are pressing concerns as the changing labor market continues to require higher skills for jobs that pay a living wage.

**Functional literacy.** Although not the entire story, adult literacy is an important component of racial disparities in earnings (De Anda and Hernandez 2008; Raudenbush and Kasim 1998). The term “functional literacy” encompasses skill sets such as computer-, financial-, civic-, and media-literacy, and it includes a person’s ability to develop knowledge and potential by navigating complex sociopolitical and economic systems and institutions (Ntiri 2009). While economic outcomes such as annual weeks worked and poverty status vary by educational status, these outcomes also vary substantially by literacy rates within a given educational level (Condelli et al. 2010).

As adults, low-income men may have limited opportunity or face other obstacles to furthering education or improving literacy. One impediment is that once low-skilled adults leave school, policymakers and educators lose the primary mechanism (i.e., the school) for identifying and assisting people who need additional support. In addition, men who could benefit from adult literacy instruction often do not attend classes because they either do not know about the resources, underestimate their own literacy needs, are

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not interested, or do not have classes available in their area. For these and other reasons, only a fraction of adults with basic and below-basic literacy levels are enrolled in literacy programs (Condelli et al. 2010).

**English-language skills.** In addition to those who leave the public school system without the requisite educational degree or academic proficiency, immigrants—especially Hispanic immigrants—are often at risk because of their limited English proficiency (Capps and Fortuny 2008; Condelli et al. 2010; Jiménez 2011; Terrazas 2011). Some have had little schooling (sometimes finishing only elementary school) and are literate in neither their home language nor English (Condelli et al. 2010). More than two-thirds of Hispanic immigrant men age 18 and older are not proficient in English, and about a third have not completed 9th grade. Among men with little schooling (less than 9th grade), the proportion who are limited English proficient goes up to 89 percent.<sup>6</sup> A small proportion of immigrants with higher educational degrees also lacks proficiency in English (Capps and Fortuny 2008; Terrazas 2011). For both groups of Hispanic men, those with little education as well as those with degrees, poor English-language skills greatly limit their educational and employment prospects (Condelli et al. 2010; Fry 2010; Terrazas 2011).

While the above synopsis represents only a small sampling of the literature on educational attainment, literacy, and English-language proficiency, it powerfully demonstrates the constellation of risks a weak educational foundation can produce in men's lives and raises important questions for further consideration. Given their educational deficiencies, institutional constraints, and neighborhood barriers, how can disconnected young men advance in society? Can low-income men with less than high school educations find jobs to support themselves, much less a family? And how do race, ethnicity, and geography factor in? Is improved literacy a partial answer? If so, how can literacy be improved among low-income men? There are also unanswered questions concerning the connection between failing schools and the criminal justice system. Have failing schools become de facto pipelines into the criminal justice system for African American and Hispanic boys (Vera Sanchez and Adams 2011)? If so, how do we stop the flow of low-performing minority students into the criminal justice system?

## Employment

Educational disparities have direct and immediate consequences in the labor market, and these disparities tend to be exacerbated during a recession. But for men of color, the employment gap—whether measured by unemployment rates or employment-to-population ratios<sup>7</sup>—remains large in good times and in bad. The unemployment rate among African Americans is twice that of whites; the rate among Hispanics is 1.5 that of whites. Moreover, when employed, African Americans' wages tend to be lower.

In 2012, the annual average unemployment rate for white men age 20 and older was 6.7 percent, while the rate for African American men was 14.0 percent.<sup>8</sup> Among the symposium's target demographic, low-income men age 18–44 with no bachelor's degree, there are vast disparities by race. Tabulations of rates for 2008–10 reveal that Hispanic men in this particular group have the lowest unemployment rate at 14.5 percent while white men are at 21.0 percent. Low-income African American men suffer from the highest rate of unemployment at 34.8 percent. In comparison, the rate for all men age 18–44 during the same period was 10.6 percent.<sup>9</sup> A 2012 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report to Congress indicated that racial differences in employment among less-educated men is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1969, 92.8 percent of white males age 18–65 with no more than a high school diploma worked, compared with 89.9 percent of African American men within the same parameters. By 2009, the employment rates for these two groups had diverged to 76.7 and 60.0 percent, respectively. Employment rates among similar Hispanic men have remained relatively consistent with those of white

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men but have dipped slightly in recent years to 80.1 percent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS] 2012). In addition to the unemployment crisis among African Americans, “bad jobs” are an issue. Much of current public policy is focused on unemployment, but low-wage, dead-end jobs can be equally detrimental—especially when they do not pay living wages (Pitts 2007).

### **Native-Born and Foreign-Born Men**

Foreign-born Hispanic men fare relatively better on some measures of employment: they have higher labor force participation rates than native-born whites and Hispanics, and participation rates are high across all education levels (Pew Hispanic Center 2009; Terrazas 2011). The prerecession unemployment rate for foreign-born Hispanics was also below the average rate for all U.S. workers (native-born Hispanics had higher unemployment rates, per Kochhar 2008). But their high work effort does not translate into living wages and incomes or economic mobility. A large share of Hispanic immigrants is employed in lower-wage jobs and occupations. Hispanics’ job prospects are often limited by lack of English fluency, low job skills, and immigration status (Capps and Fortuny 2008; Hall, Greenman, and Farkas 2010; Terrazas 2011). Foreign-born Hispanics, especially the less-educated young or the undocumented, are also more vulnerable to the business cycle and experience relatively larger job losses during recessions (Orrenius and Zavodny 2009; Papademetriou and Terrazas 2009).

### **Communities Lacking Job Opportunities**

In addition to poor employment outcomes resulting from low educational attainment, men of color are often at a geographic disadvantage, living in communities that lack opportunities for steady and livable-wage employment. This, along with discrimination, contributes to their lower incomes. Qualitative research sheds light on men’s perspectives on geographic location and isolation as well as their perceptions about employment discrimination.

Ethnographers and other qualitative researchers describe strategies men use for economic survival—despite and in light of barriers. Several authors discuss trade-offs that lead some men into the illegal or unregulated economy (Bourgois 1996; Edin and Nelson 2004; Levitt and Venkatesh 2001; Valenzuela 2003). Although a common and supported understanding is that low-skilled work has “disappeared” for many low-income men (Wilson 1996), another interpretation is that the jobs still exist but have gone underground. Scarce formal job opportunities (often aggravated by prior criminal action or drug use) push men into the unregulated economy (Edin and Nelson 2004).

Ethnographers provide guidance for deciphering the decisions men make, documenting men’s social realities, constraints, and perceptions. Outsiders looking in may interpret men’s actions simplistically as representing flawed value systems (e.g., engaging in illegal activities). But often, as Young (1999) concludes, men’s decisions facilitate immediate survival in a resource-poor social environment. Unfortunately, some of these decisions may also handicap men’s chances to advance in mainstream society. Ethnographic research reveals how living in communities in which few neighbors and family members have good-paying jobs can shape how low-income men evaluate their job prospects. A study in inner-city Detroit explored the lives of 26 low-income men age 18–24 who had not been gainfully employed for longer than six months in any given year since they were 16. Perhaps surprisingly, many in the group believed numerous jobs were available to them. However, they felt the jobs neither supplied the requisite wages for raising a family nor provided sufficient challenge or respect for workers. The men were therefore uncommitted to the available job prospects (Young 2006).

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## **Day Labor and Other Informal Work**

Low-income men tend to experience more job insecurity than higher-income men. One group of workers particularly vulnerable to business cycles and general discrimination is day laborers. Day labor, typically informal but also formal, employs mostly immigrant men (especially the lower-skilled, more recent, or undocumented) and other displaced workers. This segment of the nonstandard economy has grown rapidly in the past three decades and has become an important way to secure construction, landscaping, and factory work (Valenzuela 2003). Immigrant day laborers often lack the necessary resources to relocate or return home when the jobs disappear or when cities and counties pass antisolicitation or other measures meant to curb this type of informal employment (Bhimji 2010).

Community isolation and immigration status may not be the only reason some low-income men are less engaged in the formal economy. A paper by Nightingale and Wandner (2011) also identifies government policies that make it less attractive for low-wage workers to move into the formal sector. Garnishment of wages for child support arrears and the need to pay self-employment taxes if working formally can discourage such moves. Differences in network ties are another barrier that may magnify differences seen across communities, particularly communities of color (Royster 2003). This is true in formal employment but in the unregulated economy as well (Edin and Nelson 2004).

## **Evidence and Views on Discrimination**

Scholars and job-seekers alike often wonder about racial discrimination in hiring practices and how racial prejudice affects low-income men of color. One study paired three job seekers—one African American, one Puerto Rican, and one white, with identical job histories and resumes—and had them apply for the same entry-level jobs in New York City. White applicants were twice as likely as African American applicants to be called back or offered a job. Job search outcomes for Puerto Ricans and whites were not statistically different. When white applicants with criminal records applied for jobs, they were as or more likely than African Americans and Hispanic applicants with no criminal histories to be called back or offered a job (Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009). The findings strongly suggest that racial and ethnic discrimination exist in hiring for low-wage jobs.

What do low-income men say about racial discrimination in employment? One study of Buffalo, New York, and Jersey City, New Jersey, examined low-income working class adults' views on the economy during the recessionary periods in the 1980s and early 1990s, and their place within it. Race factored heavily in both African American men's and white men's views of unemployment but in different ways. African American men blamed the economy and particularly racial prejudice. White men also saw race as a culprit, blaming much of their economic troubles on African American men and affirmative action (Weis and Fine 1996). More recent analysis of African American men in Detroit revealed sentiments similar to those of African American men in other locations. In addition to naming insufficient education and transportation as obstacles, the men contended employers often would not hire them because of their race (Young 2006).

## **Mainstream Aspirations despite Barriers**

Although low-income men face employment obstacles and may be drawn to unregulated or illegal work, many have work ethics and aspirations similar to middle- and higher-income workers (Edin and Nelson 2004; Newman 1999; Young 2006). In some respects, strong values and norms may drive men into the

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unregulated economy, especially when their goal is to support children (Edin and Nelson 2004). Many low-income men in the Detroit study cited earlier aspire to have careers and finish their educations (Young 2006).

Research and knowledge about low-income men and employment leave unanswered questions about how to reconcile men's desire for careers and stable incomes with the realities of weak job opportunities, poor employment histories, and discrimination. Further, challenges and solutions concerning immigration status and employment often become political and contentious. So what are the opportunities for low-income men age 18–44 who want to be connected to the workforce but are unable to do so for some of the reasons described above? And how should competing priorities, such as earning enough to take care of children and family versus engaging in legal or regulated work when opportunities are scarce or otherwise unprofitable, be addressed?

## Family

Interactions with family and the responsibilities low-income men hold in households can take many forms. As sons, brothers, cousins, uncles, fathers, husbands, partners, and father figures, low-income men are vital to family life. Men's relationships with children, both within and outside the context of marriage, are a common focus of research on low-income men. Disconnection from family, and children in particular, can be especially harmful to families. We center our discussion of family around topics related to family formation, marriage, and men's perspectives on fatherhood and father involvement. Men in the population of interest have lower marriage rates. However, they are often fathers, sometimes to children from multiple partners. How men relate to their children and the mother(s) of their children is relevant to men's ties to institutions and the job market.

Most low-income men age 18 and older are unmarried. The marriage rate in 2008–10 for low-income men was 39 percent, compared with 62 percent for higher-income men. The never-married rate was 42 versus 25 percent, respectively. For low-income white men, the marriage rate in 2009 was 39 percent; for low-income African American men, it was 25 percent. The marriage rate was higher for low-income Hispanic men: 48 percent. Foreign-born Hispanic men generally had higher marriage rates than native-born Hispanics (57 percent versus 31 percent, respectively, among low-income Hispanics).<sup>10</sup>

Similar to marriage, family structure varies significantly by race, ethnicity, and immigration status. Hispanic children with immigrant parents are more likely to live in two-parent families than white and Hispanic children with native-born parents. Most African American children are born to unmarried parents. Nearly three-quarters (72.8 percent) of African American children were born to unmarried parents in 2009, compared with 29 percent of white children and 53.2 percent of Hispanic children (Martin et al. 2010). The share of nonmarital births has risen for all groups, from 24 percent for African American infants and 3.1 percent for white infants in 1965 (Akerlof and Yellen 1996).

## Understanding Men's Perspectives

Research examines the benefits and costs of marriage and reasons disconnected low-income men, especially, are less attached to the institution. Some research to date dispels popular views about low-income men and marriage—for example, finding that low-income men are not averse to marriage but are less likely to enter into the institution when they are less able to contribute financially (Ahituv and Lerman 2007; Roy 2005).

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Like marriage, men's paternal identity may be strongly shaped by their ability to provide economically for their children (Roy 2006). Sociopolitical factors, including limited jobs, welfare policies deterring cohabitation, and mass incarceration, have affected father involvement (Gadsden, Wortham, and Turner 2003). Still, although less often publicized, some men do provide consistent and stable care for their children (Waller 2002).

Other lessons drawn from ethnographic and other qualitative research are how strongly limited economic opportunities shape the ways men view the socially desirable package of marriage, career, family, and homeownership; and how men interact with their partners around financial matters (Roy 2005). In addition, father involvement is often influenced by men's relationships with their own fathers and responses to the parenting they received (e.g., stable relationship with a father who was present, experiences with a father whose presence was limited, or childhoods with a completely absent father; see Roy 2006).

Several theories address reasons for nonmarital child bearing and limited father involvement. A now-classic theory suggests that employment declines contributed to the increased tendency to rely on sexual prowess and exploitation outside marriage to affirm manhood (Anderson 1989). Revisiting this topic and the notion of culture, other researchers question leading explanations centered around declining employment or, for African American males in particular, cultural patterns rooted in slavery. Small and Newman (2001) argue that there is insufficient evidence for these theories. They call for greater attention to demographic shifts in urban centers, focus beyond the midwestern and northeastern United States, and consideration of urban poverty from a cross-cultural perspective.

Research also highlights the diverse roles men assume and how common perceptions are often limiting and one-sided. Although not as common as single custodial mothers, men also become single custodial parents (Coles 2009; Hamer and Marchioro 2002). However, several factors that do not seem to affect women may limit fathers' opportunities to gain full custody. O'Donnell and colleagues (2005) describe how courts in the child welfare system often view fathers with suspicion and mistrust. Gender bias favoring mothers as the primary caregivers also limits fathers' chances. Further, because fathers tend to be less familiar with social services—which are mainly designed for mothers and children—they are less willing to navigate the confusing bureaucratic child welfare system, and therefore less likely to register for custody of their children.

Regardless of custody, many fathers may be more involved than has been previously documented. Edin, Tach, and Mincy (2009) find higher-than-expected involvement from birth to age 5. Unlike the perception that fathers have children and virtually disappear from the children's lives, Edin and colleagues' research suggests men stay involved but may reduce time spent with children if their relationship with the children's mother changes. Moreover, when a father becomes involved in another (romantic) relationship, his involvement with biological children may decrease. In some cases, assuming the father role with children from a current relationship may substantially reduce men's time and attention toward biological children.

From the vantage point of a child's well-being, while children are not necessarily without a father figure as popular opinion would believe, the father figure in their lives tends to be cyclical rather than stable, which could diminish overall well-being (Edin et al. 2009). This is supported in other work that finds low-income mothers may rely on nonresidential biological fathers, intimate partners, male family

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members, and friends to help their young children when no father figure is present in the household (Richardson 2010; Roy and Burton 2007).

### **Family Life and Government Policies**

Child support enforcement policies and the earned income tax credit (EITC) are two government programs with special implications for low-income men and fathers. Whereas low-income women and children have been the primary targets and beneficiaries of the policies, economists and other scholars see potential for using the policies more effectively to help low-income men as well (Mincy, Lewis, and Han 2006). Proposals such as expanding the EITC so noncustodial fathers (already required to pay child support) may also claim nonresident children on their taxes are intended to increase earnings and encourage employment (Mincy, Klempin, and Schmidt 2011). Qualitative research helps illuminate fathers' perspectives regarding child support enforcement policies (Pate 2009, 2010). Concerning efforts to increase compliance with child support payments, research suggests earnings and payments may increase when low-income parents behind on their child support are provided with case management and employment assistance (Sorensen 2011). Currently, several states operate work-oriented programs geared toward low-income, noncustodial parents.<sup>11</sup> These supports and incentives are designed to increase men's economic support for their children and promote economic advancement for the men themselves.

Research on low income men and their family life shows patterns of disruption and instability, particularly with respect to children. Poor employment prospects and challenges in supporting a household may be critical factors in reducing both marriage and men's presence in children's lives. The research raises important questions about effective strategies for keeping low-income men connected and engaged with families. The great diversity in men's roles and relationships with children (whether biological or unrelated) and the common misperceptions about the type and extent of men's involvement suggest we have more to learn. How might an improved understanding of men's relationships inform approaches that might be taken to increase the likelihood that more fathers (and father figures) play a more integral role in children's lives? To the extent that the connection to family involves marriage, what approaches would encourage and support this type of union among low-income couples? How do employment and education factor into the equation?

### **Criminal Justice System**

For many low-income men, encounters with the criminal justice system are a common feature of neighborhood life. Men may get stopped or questioned by the police, whether they have been engaged in criminal activity or are just "in the wrong place at the wrong time." Police engagement is much higher in communities where men of color live—communities often troubled by violence and crime (Fagan and Davies 2000; Goffman 2009; Holmes 2000).

Heavy police presence has tangible effects on men, whose daily lives are disrupted by threat of arrest (Goffman 2009). The biggest negative effect by far comes from incarceration and the barriers it raises for employment and reintegration into society. For low-income men of color, a spell in jail or prison is more common than it was three decades ago. Among African -American and Hispanic men age 20–34, 11.4 and 3.7 percent, respectively, were behind bars in 2008. Among the African American men in this age group without high school degrees or GEDs, 37.1 percent, or 1 in 3, were incarcerated in 2008 (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). This figure has risen drastically since 1980, when 10.6 percent of African American men without high school degrees were incarcerated. The percentage of white

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males without high school educations behind bars stood at 12 percent in 2008, up from 2.4 percent in 1980. According to a 2004 report by Pettit and Western, African American men born between 1965 and 1969 who dropped out of high school had an approximately 60 percent chance of serving time in prison by 1999. White men born in the same years and with the same educational attainment had only a 14 percent chance.

Hispanic immigrants face an additional threat: that of immigration-related profiling and arrest, which can affect them or their family members, even when they are legal immigrants or born in the United States (Chaudry et al. 2010). Since September 11, 2001, the number of immigrants deported as a result of work-site raids or state and local authorities checking the immigrant status of arrestees (as directed by federal authorities) has grown tremendously (Capps et al. 2011; Kirk et al. 2012). Even for citizens and legal residents, detentions and deportations of relatives that result in family separation and economic hardship and instability also have a far-reaching effect in the communities where immigrants live. Families live in fear of social profiling and discrimination, so they may be less willing to report crimes and cooperate with police in fighting crimes (Chaudry et al. 2010; Kirk et al. 2012).

### **Caught in the Web of the Criminal Justice System**

Involvement with the criminal justice system can have lasting effects in all areas of men's lives. Constant policing and avoidance of jail may undermine already-strained attachments to family, employment, and community (Goffman 2009; Richardson forthcoming). Some 2.7 million children younger than 18, or 1 in every 28 children, have a parent behind bars in the United States. Among African American children, 1 in 9 has an incarcerated parent (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). A study by Rucker Johnson (2009), highlighted in Pew Charitable Trust's report on incarceration and economic mobility, finds that a parent's imprisonment has significant economic and social effects on the family. The average family's income falls 22 percent the first year a father is in prison. In addition, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) of children with a father who has served time in jail or prison have been expelled or suspended from school, compared with only 4 percent of children without incarcerated fathers (R. Johnson 2009).

Once low-income men have been incarcerated, they have a difficult time reentering society, often leaving the system at a greater disadvantage than when they entered. Returning men face the immediate challenge of finding a place to live, and access to affordable housing is limited by scarcity, legal barriers and regulations, prejudice, and strict requirements for federally subsidized housing. And, those without families and lacking stable housing are more likely to return to prison (Baer et al. 2006; Metraux and Culhane 2004). Most important, men's job prospects and opportunities for earnings growth and advancement are even more limited than before. This is especially true for African American men (Lyons and Pettit 2011; Pettit and Lyons 2007). Employers in one study were one-half to one-third as likely to consider ex-offenders for employment than those without criminal histories, and job prospects generally were far worse for men of color (Pager 2003).

The criminal justice system's grip on low-income men, especially men of color, has serious implications for their economic, educational, familial, and health outcomes. Men with low-level arrest warrants or who are out on bail are routinely searched, arrested, and questioned by police in their neighborhoods. Constant police presence has ramifications that do not show up in most incarceration statistics. Many men, out of fear of arrest or harassment, tend to act unpredictably and avoid social institutions and relations they may have relied on. For example, an individual might avoid hospitals or similar medical

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facilities for fear that the staff would observe an outstanding warrant or probation violation and alert authorities. Avoidance of these key institutions can have deleterious outcomes and drive men to become even more disconnected from the rest of society. Police presence can also undermine family relationships because men may grow suspicious of those close to them who could use their wanted status for coercion (Goffman 2009).

The extent of contact with the criminal justice system among low-income men of color has reached an all-time high and is nearly unparalleled in other developed nations (Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). The crisis affects all aspects of life, spilling into men's family, employment, health, and even education. How does constant police presence or threat of arrest influence men's behaviors? And how does the perpetual threat of violence and victimization in high-crime neighborhoods affect men, their families, and their communities? How can policymakers, service providers, and the criminal justice system foster successful reentry into society after incarceration and what are the effective ways to reform the prison system? Creative, effective solutions for combatting the crisis in criminal justice are needed.

## Health

In addition to risks related to education, employment, family, and the criminal justice system, low-income men have poorer health outcomes. Notable disparities in chronic diseases—including diabetes, hypertension, and cancer—as well as physical victimization, violence, and lower life expectancy, may be linked to factors disproportionately affecting low-income men and, particularly, men of color. These income and racial disparities are highlighted in the Healthy People initiative, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' decennial project that proposes numerous health goals, including the increase of health equity among all groups of people. The Healthy People 2010 report notes that, in general, "population groups that suffer the worst health status are also those that have the highest poverty rates and the least education" (HHS 2000, 12). Some scholars argue that social causes (e.g., concentrated poverty, residential segregation) are the main explanations for health disparities and the cumulative effect of poor health over the lifespan (Fiscella and Williams 2004). Related to the disadvantages outlined in previous sections, access to affordable health care is less likely for low-income men. They are more likely to be uninsured, to live in neighborhoods with few medical facilities or private physicians, and to have poor health-seeking behaviors (Rich 2000).

Nearly 50 million people, or 16.3 percent of the U.S. population, were uninsured in 2010.<sup>12</sup> Younger Americans are particularly likely to be uninsured; just over a quarter of people between the ages of 18 and 44 lacked coverage in 2010. Among low-income working-age men with no bachelor's degrees, this number jumped dramatically to 51 percent.<sup>13</sup> Among the national population, whites had the highest percentage of individuals with insurance coverage, with only 11.7 percent of the population lacking insurance. In contrast, African Americans and Hispanics were uninsured at rates of 20.8 and 30.7 percent, respectively.<sup>14</sup> The latter's high rate reflects the high number of immigrants in the Hispanic community, in particular undocumented immigrants who lack access to health care. In addition, in 2009 African American males had a lower life expectancy than white males, at 70.9 years compared with 76.2 years (Miniño 2011). This disparity in life expectancy between African American and white men has been true for the past century; African American men trailed by nearly 15 years in 1900 (Arias 2011). The consistency of this health gap likely indicates persistent environmental factors that have harmed African American males uniquely. Hispanic males in the United States, in contrast, have longer life expectancies than white males. In 2007, Hispanic males were expected to live to age 78.2, two-and-one-half years longer than white males (Arias 2011).

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## **Attitudes toward Health, Healthy Behavior and Health Care**

Ethnographic and other qualitative research provide insight into men's attitudes toward health and health care. One qualitative study asked African American men—including those with HIV/AIDS, trauma survivors, and the homeless—about their perceptions of health and what influences health. The men in the study emphasized complete well-being—physical, mental, social, and spiritual—not just illness or the absence of disease. The authors conclude that men may be more likely to engage with health providers who take a similarly comprehensive view toward health (Ravenell 2010). On the other hand, actual behavioral choices around physical activity, diet, safety, and substance use contribute to poor health (Leigh 2004). Finally, although not limited to those of low-income men, perceptions of health care discrimination in the United States are higher among immigrants than U.S.-born adults, and higher among African Americans and Hispanics than whites (Lauderdale et al. 2006). This could affect the health-seeking behavior of these men.

## **Stress**

Stress is an integral part of many low-income men's experiences. In one study, men identified four primary sources of stress that affected their health and overall well-being: lack of income, racism, unsafe unhealthy communities, and relationship conflicts (Ravenell, Johnson, and Whitaker 2010). Differences in the ways men and women cope with stress may contribute to men's high substance use, avoidance of health-protective behaviors, and increased behaviors harmful to health (Williams 2003). In research relevant to neighborhood and community stress, Rich and Grey (2005) examine factors precipitating victimization among 49 African American, Caribbean, and Puerto-Rican men hospitalized in Boston following an assault, stabbing, or shooting. The authors conclude that informal street rules centered around "respect" contribute to retributive violent acts, especially when coupled with disillusionment or distrust of the formal law enforcement system. As a result, many individuals feel that if they fail to retaliate against their attackers, they are putting themselves at future risk for additional injury—thus repeating a likely cycle of violence and victimization (Rich and Grey 2005).

## **Health, Economic Well-Being, and Family**

Studies show close links among health, income, and family. For instance, the high prevalence of drug use and abuse in many inner cities contributes to depressed economic well-being (individual and collective), poor health and risk of death at an early age, and weakened family relationships (B. Johnson et al. 1990). Links between health and social support have also been found. In one study, differences in hypertension between African Americans and whites were greater among those without social support than among those with support. Between Mexican Americans and whites, ethnic differences were only observed among those with social support: Mexican Americans with social support had a lower risk of hypertension than their white peers (Bell, Thorpe, and LaVeist 2010). Another study examined links between marriage and health. The authors found modest evidence that for children, their parents' marriage bestows health benefits that endure into young adulthood, although findings were somewhat stronger for females than for males (LaVeist, Zeno, and Fesahazion 2010).

Health's central role in men's lives and well-being, and its influence on family, education, employment, and even risk of contact with the criminal justice system, warrants further study. Likewise, how family, education, employment, and risk of contact with the criminal justice system influences health is important to understand. Several questions concern ways to improve men's access to health care and improve

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their health-seeking behaviors. To what extent would expanding health care access improve the health of low-income men? What strategies and approaches would help improve men's health-seeking behaviors?

### **Conclusion**

As this background report outlines, the problems that can disconnect low-income men from mainstream society are numerous and interconnected. As such, it is hard to know where to start to bring about change. If men cannot contribute economically, they may be less likely to form and maintain stable family relations. This can, in turn, expose their children to similar risk factors—poor neighborhoods with their associated weak educational institutions and high rates of violence. It also increases the likelihood of engagement with the criminal justice system for both fathers and sons. Identifying appropriate policy solutions to the problems these men and their families face requires knowing the underlying factors that lead to their disengagement.



## NOTES

1. “African American” refers to non-Hispanic African American or black, and includes those who identified themselves as black or African American only. “White” refers to non-Hispanic white, and includes those who identified themselves as white only. People of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Respondents who identified as other or two or more races are grouped under “Other non-Hispanic.”
2. “Poverty Thresholds by Size of Family and Number of Children, 2012,” U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/threshld/index.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).
3. Authors’ tabulations of the American Community Survey (ACS) (2008–10).
4. Authors’ tabulations of the ACS (2008–10).
5. Among low-income men age 18–44. Authors’ tabulations of the ACS (2008–10).
6. Authors’ tabulations of the ACS (2008–10).
7. The unemployment rate measures the ratio of people looking for work to the labor force (that is, people employed or looking for work). The employment-to-population ratio is the number of employed people over the total population.
8. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Table 5, Employment status of the civilian noninstitutional population by sex, age, and race, available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat05.htm>.
9. Authors’ tabulations of the ACS (2008–10).
10. Authors’ tabulations of the ACS (2008–10).
11. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, “Work-Oriented Programs for Noncustodial Parents with Active Child Support Agency Involvement,” [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/work\\_oriented.html#pa](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/work_oriented.html#pa) (accessed July 19, 2012).
12. U.S. Census Bureau, “People without Health Insurance Coverage by Selected Characteristics: 2009 and 2010,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/hlthins/data/incpovhlth/2010/table8.pdf>.

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13. Authors' tabulations of the ACS (2008–10).

14. U.S. Census Bureau, "People without Health Insurance Coverage by Selected Characteristics: 2009 and 2010."

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