



Summary of an Urban Ethnographers' Symposium on Low-Income Men

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An estimated 16.5 million civilian men age 18 to 44 were living in families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Many of these low-income men 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 (ASPE), US Department of Health and Human Services, convened the Race, Place, and Poverty symposium to better understand the experiences of low-income men, and particularly men of color, who were disengaged or at high risk of disengagement from mainstream economic and social systems. The participants included 14 ethnographers and other qualitative researchers and 9 social service providers from different regions of the country who have studied or worked with low-income men. Other participants and observers included foundation program officers and Urban Institute and federal government staff. The symposium explored the state of knowledge on disconnected low-income men and discussed promising strategies for improving their well-being.

The symposium was the first-ever ASPE meeting of qualitative researchers and social service providers convened to discuss these issues. Although Department of Health and Human Services programs have traditionally focused on vulnerable women and children in families, it has become increasingly clear that it is not possible to understand or ameliorate poverty at either the family or the community level without also understanding and addressing the needs and circumstances of low-income men connected to these families.

Public and private programs targeting low-income men have experienced many difficulties that have reduced their effectiveness in improving long-term well-being. Therefore, one goal of the two-day meeting was to better understand how low-income men's situations vary across race, ethnicity, and location and the factors that contribute to those

variations. It is hoped that such knowledge will inform further research and policy development, leading to solutions that enable public and private institutions to create opportunities that move disconnected low-income men into the mainstream.

Symposium Design

"Race, place, and poverty" was chosen as the symposium theme because poverty and associated issues are magnified at the intersection of race and place. A number of factors contribute to the likelihood of being or becoming low income: low educational attainment, lack of steady employment, a record of incarceration, and poor health. These factors have even more significance for racial and ethnic minorities, partly due to 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.

The symposium was a participatory event, with attendees actively discussing five domains that impact the lives of low-income men: education, employment, family formation, contact with the criminal justice system, and health. The conversation centered on both the conditions and the social services that may or may not address the needs of low-income men. Although participants were invited because of their expertise in a particular domain, the domains are clearly overlapping and interconnected.

A researcher and a practitioner introduced each domain, raising critical issues and key questions. Discussions on each topic were moderated to help focus on the major points and deepen understanding of the issues. In addition to the five domains, discussions focused on the interconnections across the domains and some strategies for change, including systems change.

Education

Nationally, low-income men are almost three times as likely as higher-income men to lack a high school degree or equivalent education (28 versus 10 percent). Among low-income men, half of Hispanics and a quarter of African American men do not have high school degrees or GEDs.

Taken from “Education and Employment of Disconnected Low-Income Men” (Simms, Fortuny, et al. 2013)¹

The literature on educational attainment, literacy, and English language proficiency among low-income men powerfully demonstrates the constellation of risks a weak educational foundation can produce in men’s lives. Moreover, it is within the educational system, arguably, that boys and youth first become disconnected. Some symposium participants noted that despite the importance of education and the proliferation of reforms underway, we know very little about how the formal educational process works at the system level. We also know very little about how to keep young boys engaged in schools or re-engage them after they have become disconnected.

Other participants pointed out that we might be able to deduce the answer to the question of engagement by thinking about how schools look to those being served. Participants observed that schools are not inviting to parents, and they provide few male role models that help boys see schools as a place to thrive. Some argued that the behaviors expected of students require more docile behavior than is usually found in boys. According to the participants who have studied these issues, boys—particularly African American boys—are subject to higher rates of expulsion, at least in part because their behavior does not conform to expectations.

A substantial portion of the discussion focused on what does work to re-engage adolescents and young adults in the educational process. Males have not been the focus of school reform efforts precisely because many are not in school, having dropped out or disengaged long before. But many successful educational programs could serve this population. Based on the experience and research of those in the discussion, several key features were identified. First, the educational experience needs to be seen as meaningful and useful for helping boys and young men achieve other goals. This could be through the nature of the educational experience or through its connection to employment. Second, the educational experience has to deal with the distractions and anger that many of these young men bring with them. Several symposium participants spoke about the benefits of a “restorative justice” approach, a concept that originated within the criminal justice system but has now spread into other domains (see text box). Others noted the

importance of leveraging the value of non-academic members of the school team (such as coaches) and identifying ways to bring out the natural leadership skills of the young men themselves.

Another participant emphasized the importance of holding programs in “safe places” that don’t require participants to cross neighborhoods or communities that they perceive as dangerous. One example highlighted the engagement of the entire family by offering programs that draw the parents to the institution and strengthen the school’s connection to the community. Several participants emphasized the need to enhance the dignity of the individuals involved and instill pride and honor in a job well done. Another suggestion was to hold for-profit educational institutions accountable for practices that take advantage of young men who want to bolster their educational credentials but end up in debt without credentials.

The idea of using apprenticeship programs to provide education and training in context—and in conjunction with actual private sector employment—provoked strong reactions among some. Vocational education has been seen as a way to track minority students into paths that hamper their chances of going to college and consign them to inferior jobs. But it was noted that not every high school student is going to college, and a good quality apprenticeship program could lead to a career with family-sustaining wages.

Restorative justice is an alternative to retributive justice, where the main objective is to punish the offender or perpetrator of a crime. Restorative justice is “a process of deliberation that places emphasis on healing rather than punishing: healing the victim and undoing the hurt; healing the offender by rebuilding his or her moral and social selves; healing communities and mending social relationships” (Wenzel et al. 2008, 376). This approach was used in the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa after apartheid. The restorative justice process is also used in schools and other youth organizations where individuals are expected to take responsibility for their antisocial actions and ask for forgiveness from their victims, either individuals or the community as a whole. The community can be the school or the neighborhood in which individuals live (DeVore and Gentilcore 1999).

Employment

Low-income men have higher unemployment rates than higher-income men in the same age group. Among low-income men, African American men are the most likely to be unemployed (35 percent). Their unemployment rate is one and a half times as high as the rate for white men (21 percent) and more than twice as high as the rate for Hispanic men (14 percent).

Taken from “Education and Employment of Disconnected Low-Income Men” (Simms, Fortuny, et al. 2013)

The Great Recession has significantly increased the number of men struggling with joblessness and underemployment. But for many low-income men, joblessness and its related struggles are chronic concerns. Research and knowledge about low-income men and employment leave unanswered questions about how to reconcile men’s desires for well-paying jobs and stable incomes with the realities of weak job opportunities, sketchy employment histories, and racial discrimination. Can low-income men find jobs to support themselves, much less a family?

The symposium discussion about employment covered a range of issues, including, what are the real and perceived constraints that keep low-income men without college educations from working consistently? Do these constraints stem from a lack of job opportunities in their communities, employers unwilling to hire low-income men, a lack of skills, or other factors?

In considering how low-income men think about work, one participant dismissed the notion that low-income men don’t think about work, asserting that they “think about work all the time—how to get it, how to keep it.” But a principal issue that arose in the discussion was what low income men understand about the workforce and their place in it. The question was framed, “How do they imagine legitimate work for themselves?” Participants offered various perspectives. Many low-income men are engaged in both the low-wage economy and the informal-sector economy, but they may not completely understand the full array of work opportunities and the possibilities that might exist for them. Low-income men may not have been indoctrinated into the world of work by someone familiar with a broad range of occupations and the skills or experience required to hold these jobs. This role could be undertaken by mentors who could help men understand the world of work and how to navigate it. However, men may be uncomfortable sharing the fact that they don’t know these things.

What employment strategies work? Some participants pointed to the importance of subsidized jobs for facilitating the entrance of some disconnected men, especially young adults, into the labor market. A subsidized job, linked with

educational requirements, could get young men back into the classroom. On the other hand, another participant said that the subsidized job approach could be too comfortable, and might not push men out of their comfort zone. Another said that the unemployment and under-employment problem was too widespread to be solved by subsidized jobs. Instead, ways of engaging private sector

employers in hiring people at competitive wages need to be found. Some of this might be by training, but other pathways should be pursued.

Other participants pointed out that many of these men “don’t live in a vacuum where all they need is a job—there are other issues to consider and policy and programs should reflect this.” How do you get low-income men beyond the “survival job” onto a career path that would enable them to support a family? How do you help them deal with the fact that child support arrears “can siphon off their earnings?”

Many of these employment problems are particularly severe for low-income men with criminal records. Participants suggested that simple things like “banning the box” (i.e., not asking about criminal records on job applications) can help people exiting incarceration find jobs. But returning prisoners will likely need more: housing assistance, supports for understanding how the workplace may have changed since they were imprisoned, and health care to ensure they are fit to work, among other services.

Aside from the problems of re-entrants, another major issue or obstacle to meaningful employment is the weak job market. Several practitioners who train and find jobs for low-income men pointed to the need to understand the local job market. As one said, “Every community has pockets of growth, and we need to mine the data to find the pockets of employability to create pathways in each community.” Even in labor markets with high unemployment, some industries can be growing. If these men can get training for the jobs in those industries, they can find employment. Other symposium participants were skeptical that jobs existed in every metropolitan and rural area at this time of high national unemployment.

Several people raised self-employment as an alternative to working for someone else. Both the economic times and the individual’s personality and preferences might make entrepreneurship a valid option. However, few public or private programs or services currently assist low-income men with the self-employment approach to gainful employment.

Family

More than half (59 percent) of low-income men in the United States have never been married. Hispanic men are more likely to be married than white or African American men. African American men are the least likely to be married.

Taken from "A Demographic Snapshot of Disconnected Low-Income Men" (McDaniel, Simms, Fortuny, et al. 2013)

When talking about men and families, it is important to make several distinctions. One family is an individual's family of origin, which might well be a safety net for a man who is otherwise disconnected. A second may be one of procreation, where the man is the father of one or more children with a woman to whom he may or may not be married. Families of procreation can be further complicated when a man has children in multiple households.

Symposium discussion focused on several aspects of families of procreation. Ethnographers in the group who have interacted with these men noted that they want to be fathers, but they may not be ready because they are not bread winners, which they and/or the mothers of their children view as an important part of being a father. It also was noted that many of the men lacked good role models of fathering, either in their families of origin or in their surrounding communities. Parenting is even more difficult if the man is incarcerated. Separation while in prison makes it difficult to form or maintain bonds with children, especially if there is a new man in the household. Since many men are incarcerated far from their home communities, even family visits are likely infrequent.

The role of fathers as bread winners and providers came up in the discussion in several ways. Men often resent being seen as "only a paycheck" because they value the softer side of fatherhood. At the same time, some men feel that because they are unable to contribute financially they can't contribute to the family in other ways. A question raised by several participants was how to use family engagement as a lever to engage low-income men in consistent participation in the labor market. Men may feel that if they don't fulfill their economic role, their relationship with their partner and children is at risk. Participants theorized that if low-income men don't maintain their family ties, they will find it particularly difficult "to have the wherewithal to invest in low-wage, dirty work."

Several participants noted that disadvantaged women have done better than their male counterparts in a number of ways. In the past, policy focused on women because they

were not doing well economically and they were increasingly responsible for their children's economic well-being. Participants considered how this recent focus on helping disadvantaged women succeed in the workplace could be turned to develop policies that also help men become more successful. Participants were clearly interested in supporting a positive conversation about fatherhood.

Beyond a relationship with children is the issue of marriage to the mother of those children. Several participants raised the question of how to encourage low-income men to commit to marriage when they are less connected to the institutions that place high value on marriage, such as the church. Moreover, society as a whole appears to place a lower value on marriage now than in the past, with high rates of unmarried parenting throughout American society. Others cautioned that one should not equate "unmarried" with "uninvolved" or "uncommitted." At the most basic level, programs should focus on the uncommitted because of the impact on children. One symposium participant noted that "a child has a right to emotional engagement of a father," but there is little in the current discourse or research about this. Participants questioned whether a policy solution could address the need to help individuals who lack supportive families build positive familial relationships.

"Policy is behind in understanding what families are becoming. I think low-income men sit at the center of the growing complexity of families."

Symposium participant

Criminal Justice

Among all US male residents in 2011, 932 per 100,000 were imprisoned. Among non-Hispanic whites, the incarceration rate was 478 per 100,000; among African Americans, it was 3,023 per 100,000; among Hispanics, it was 1,238 per 100,000. If present trends continue, the lifetime likelihood of going to prison for men born in 2001 will be triple the likelihood of those born in 1974 (11.3 versus 3.6 percent).

Taken from “Imprisonment and Disenfranchisement of Disconnected Low-Income Men” (McDaniel, Simms, Fortuny, et al. 2013)

Symposium participants’ focus on criminal justice revolved primarily around the impact of incarceration on low-income men, their families, and their communities. One symposium participant noted that the increases in the incarceration rates over the past two decades have created a new kind of hard work: staying free. Low-income men, especially African Americans and Hispanics, are at greater risk of being stopped by the authorities and are more likely to be the victims of crime and violence (Simms, McDaniel, et al. 2013b). Also, despite frequent interactions with the criminal justice system, the biggest negative effects come from incarceration and its impact on the life course of low-income men.

On the basis of their research and observations, participants discussed the negative impacts of incarceration on low-income men. Some described how it separates men from their families, and that men learn little inside prisons about how to reestablish relationships when they are released. Participants also said that prison does not prepare inmates for life after imprisonment. Participants who work with prisoners or recently incarcerated men said that few inmates further their education or receive GEDs while incarcerated. As several participants pointed out, once released from custody, former inmates’ criminal records preclude them from many jobs, especially those that require certain types of certifications. A criminal record also bars them from public housing. If the men had child support orders before incarceration, they leave prison with a debt that often reduces their incentive to find employment. If they overcome these obstacles and disincentives, they are still required to “check the box” on job applications (Simms, McDaniel, et al. 2013b). For many employers, that means the applications go straight to the “do not consider” pile, even if the job requirements are not related to the applicant’s past criminal activity. One participant whose social service organization served ex-offenders noted that many, even those with otherwise good prospects, could not get hired even to clean bathrooms because of prior misdemeanors. Another symposium participant pointed out that the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation regulation (12 USC section 1829) preventing the employment of contractors or individuals with criminal records (except with written permission from the FDIC) could preclude a catering service

from using someone who was formerly incarcerated for an event at a bank. Finally, in many states, ex-felons lose the right to vote for limited periods or for life. This further disengages them from society.

High incarceration rates among low-income men, particularly low-income men of color, profoundly affect communities, not just individual families within them. Rates of incarceration

are considerably higher for some communities than others, and the men’s absence has negative effects. Once these men are released, however, their return to these same communities can have negative effects on both the community and the reentrant. Individuals who go back to where they first became engaged in criminal activity may be easily caught up in it again. This assumption led one symposium participant to suggest that individuals leaving prison might be better off going to another community. However, while going to another community may reduce recidivism, reentrants often want to return to the community where they have family as a support system.² Symposium participants speculated that certain communities could be affected as a whole by the return of large numbers of men with mental health problems and possible criminal tendencies, with resultant public safety implications.

Participants recommended several strategies for preventing and reducing recidivism. Alternatives to prison, especially for youth and first offenders, were also discussed. Diverting resources from punishment to policies that promote positive outcomes, such as education and skills training, were seen as a better investment of public funds. Strategies to reduce recidivism focused on ways of making reentry more positive, taking advantage of the point of reentry to link former prisoners to mentors and public health resources. Many health issues that reentrants bring back to the community with them, both physical and mental, will affect their ability to reconnect and could affect their families. New York City was noted for its numerous initiatives designed to reduce the likelihood of incarceration and its long-term impacts. One that was discussed in some detail was their “ban the box” regulation, which means that a criminal record cannot be considered in the initial screening process for job openings with the city.

“The point at which they [prisoners] leave to go home presents a significant public health opportunity to address some of the issues that disproportionately affect [these] men ... and ... their families.”
Symposium participant

Health

Less than half (49 percent) of low-income men age 18–44 in the United States have any health insurance coverage. The insured rate for low-income men is significantly lower than the rate for all men age 18–44, which is 71 percent. Among low-income men nationally, Hispanics are the most likely to lack health insurance coverage (66 percent), followed by African American men (48 percent). Almost one in five low-income men report being in fair or poor health, versus one in 20 upper-income men age 18–44.

Taken from “The Health of Disconnected Low-Income Men” (Simms, McDaniel, et al. 2013a)

Symposium participants asserted that health is just a manifestation of underlying inequality. Men, especially single men without a firm attachment to the labor force, lack access to health care. Their engagement with the health care system is episodic and only in response to acute health problems. As one participant noted, “The idea of preventive health is foreign to them.” It was hypothesized that men that are generally less trusting of medical organizations, and that those with lower incomes are even more likely to be fearful. In particular, men who fear contact with the criminal justice system may avoid clinics or hospitals where police are on alert for individuals with outstanding warrants. In general, symposium participants thought that men were more likely to seek and get medical care if there was a clinic in their community.

Participants commented that minority men’s health, particularly their mental health, can be adversely affected by the discrimination and regular hassle of trying to make a way in a world that does not support them. Job hunting, negotiating housing, and struggling to overcome other obstacles can lead to anger and depression. Some may turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism. Even suppression of anger or anxiety over chronic health problems can contribute to physical and mental problems. Finding ways to help men deal with anger and distress is important.

One way of getting men to view health and health care more positively could be by making them see it as a social responsibility—something they owe to their families and communities. In some community studies that participants discussed, this was an effective strategy. One approach for engaging men on the community front is “family cooking nights,” where families are invited to schools for an evening meal. This approach provides an opportunity for people to raise health issues in the context of healthy eating, which might be less threatening for men. It was also noted that if communities want men to be more proactive, then health care needs to be better tailored to their age, employment status, and family situation.

Another approach to getting men more actively managing their health is by engaging the institutions they trust in the process. For example, although it would be outside their purview, organizations helping low-income men find employment could, with the help of a “road map,” become the focal point of such discussions. Participants felt that some training on how to approach the subject and a list of health services organizations could be one way of enabling these trusted organi-

zations to assist low-income men with their health care issues. A community health initiative in the Chicago area is currently using and maintaining up-to-date lists of community resources for referral purposes. For example, a patient being treated for diabetes might get information on where to find healthy foods or places to exercise.

Looking ahead to the expansion of health care coverage under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), symposium participants saw it as an opportunity to promote stronger engagement in and attachment to the health care system by low-income men. They identified two challenges to maximizing that potential: getting men to understand that they are eligible for coverage, and having accessible institutions where they can get care. Even in communities where subsidized health care was available pre-ACA, young men didn’t seem to be aware that it was there. Participants attributed part of this lack of awareness to the pre-ACA marketing of care, which seemed designed to appeal to older men. Since other marketing campaigns successfully target young men, this problem is not insurmountable. Using social media is one possible approach. In addition, new web-based technology that incorporates the expertise of a physician who is not physically in the community in diagnosing and treating patients can make it possible to receive care through local clinics. However, symposium participants believed that limitations in access to care outside regular work hours and access to care for undocumented immigrants will continue to negatively affect low-income men.

“Many things that have been mentioned today point to the severity of the problems low-income men face, but nothing helps you understand the urgency better than walking across the yard of San Quentin, where there are 5,000 mostly brown and black men, mostly 18 to 50 years of age, doing nothing.”

Symposium participant

Reflections and Next Steps

One recurring theme voiced throughout the symposium was the need to alter or adapt existing systems in a way “that is more conducive to helping low-income men stop being low-income men.” Some programs are reaching these men, and efforts could be made to capitalize on their success across domains. For example, job training programs are sometimes used to connect individuals to financial and health services as well as jobs. New York City followed this systems integration approach in consolidating related services under the deputy mayor for health and human services.³ These efforts were intended to produce a more holistic system and make it easier for people to get the information and services they need.

This systems approach is a different perspective for many ethnographers. One symposium participant said: “We’ve been great at studying the [individual], we all have stories about the guy on the street corner, in the bar. We haven’t done that much good ethnographic work on the organizations [that serve them]. We need to know what makes it really possible for an organization to stop saying ‘that’s not my problem’ or ‘now that you’ve got him, it’s off my list.’”

Many systems have changed over the past two decades, leading qualitative researchers to ask why their work isn’t more reflective of the changes within some of these institutions that affect low-income men. A case in point is the child support system, which has changed substantially and, in the view of symposium participants, improved in the past 15 years.

Even as researchers and practitioners are better understanding how to change the systems that impact low income men, it was recommended that the networks that these men are currently accessing—training programs, community centers, immigrant work centers—be used to reach them around various issues. Participants also felt those engaged with this population should be focusing on the kind of relationships that should be developed and the connections that should be fostered—to employment, teachers, mentors, and others—to help low-income men along the path to manhood. Even if men are not married to the mothers of their children, they need to develop nondestructive relationships. In the short run, participants concluded that policies should focus on improving the interconnectedness of the organizations that are or should be serving this population: schools, health care providers, and prisons.

The symposium afforded ASPE, participants, and observers alike an opportunity to learn from qualitative researchers and social service providers across the country who have studied or worked with low-income men. The candid insights enriched understanding of the complex problems faced by low-income men, the programs currently serving their needs, and some of the issues about which more study is needed. Future research and policy formulation on behalf of low-income men will be informed by the observations shared at the meeting.

“Bad systems trump good programs. We can have great, impactful programs, but they will go nowhere if we place them in ineffective systems.”

Symposium participant

Notes

1. African American refers to non-Hispanic African American or black and includes those who identified themselves in the decennial census as black or African American only. White refers to non-Hispanic white and includes those who identified themselves in the census as white only. People of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Respondents who identified as other or two or more races in the census are grouped under “other non-Hispanic.”
2. See, for example, La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus-Sherrill (2009).
3. Some of the services that relate to low-income men are the merger of children’s services and juvenile services and the development of family services for the incarcerated. More information is available on New York City’s web site (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/hra/nycdads/html/about/doc.shtml>).

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About the Series

A large number of US 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, US 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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