

**PUERTO RICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN
YOUNG MEN:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

**by
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Introduction

The rapid population growth of Hispanics and African Americans has drawn attention to their current socioeconomic status and their future impact on the economy.* Both groups have grown at faster rates than the white population over the past decade and will continue to do so throughout the twenty-first century; together, they currently constitute one-fifth of the total U.S. population, but by 2010 are expected to constitute one-fourth of the nation's total population. Both Latinos and blacks face social and economic difficulties relative to the white population. Puerto Ricans, in particular, have a socioeconomic profile more similar to that of African Americans than to other Hispanic subgroups.

In addition to increases in their populations, especially in large cities, Puerto Ricans and African Americans are concentrated in many of the same geographical areas—areas that have experienced economic decline over the past decades. Puerto Ricans and African Americans are, on average, younger than their white counterparts, which indicates increasing numbers of school-aged children and workers in the future. Moreover, both groups have experienced significant and disproportionate increases in the proportion of families headed by a single female. These and several other factors warrant a comparative examination of the socioeconomic status of Puerto Ricans and blacks. Both groups experience

* The term "Hispanic" is used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census to identify Americans of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, and other Spanish descent; throughout this paper, it is used interchangeably with "Latino." Similarly, the terms "African American" and "black" are used interchangeably.

educational difficulties, have a vulnerable attachment to the labor force, high poverty rates, poor health status, and are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system.

Such concerns call for the need to improve the economic status of Puerto Ricans and African Americans and enhance their education and employment opportunities. In particular, recent research has begun to identify and address the problems facing young black males but such efforts have not been complemented by research and analyses on Puerto Rican or Latino males. Similar social and economic experiences suggest that the development of effective public policy and community-based strategies to address the obstacles facing young Puerto Rican and African American men would benefit from further research.

This paper documents the current socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican and African American men between the ages of 16–24; identifies the major obstacles they face, especially in the areas of education and employment; and highlights common themes and differences between the two groups.* It presents the most current data on young Puerto Rican and African American males from various sources, including the Census Bureau, the Department of Justice, the National Center for Health Statistics, and the National Center for Education Statistics. However, there are important data gaps. Some data are compiled only by race, not ethnicity. If data are

* This article focuses on the U.S. mainland Puerto Rican population only. Although the issue of migration of Puerto Rican males between the United States and Puerto Rico is relevant, it requires a separate analysis because of the lack of data on migration and the scope of this paper.

collected and classified for Latinos, often the identifier used is “Hispanic” with no subgroup specified. In addition, Hispanic data are sometimes grouped into “nonwhite” or “other minority” data. Therefore, to the extent possible, this paper will present comparative data for Puerto Ricans. If those data are not available, Hispanic data will be provided for context and comparative purposes. When no data are available, this will be noted.

Finally, this paper discusses the implication of these issues and offers directions for addressing the needs of young Puerto Rican and African American males. It builds on the recent research on African American young men and encourages further study and analysis of the status of Puerto Rican and black men and their families to increase the understanding of their status and promote brighter options for their futures.

Overview

Before the beginning of the next century, the Hispanic, African American, and other “minority” populations in the United States are expected to increase at a faster rate than the white population. In fact, Latinos are expected to become the largest minority group and, with African Americans, will constitute one-fourth (25.5 percent) of the U.S. labor force by the year 2010.¹ With this growth has come some progress. According to the Census Bureau, aggregate Hispanic buying power increased by 70 percent over the past decade, indicating increases in the Hispanic population as a whole, in their participation in the labor force, and for some Hispanics, in socioeconomic status. Among African Americans, the increase in political participation over the previous decade suggests continued growth in economic and political decision-making; data from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies show there were 7,552 African American elected officials in 1992, an increase of 31.5 percent since 1984. Yet, these changes have not been accompanied by comparable increases in economic success or socioeconomic stability for a significant proportion of either group.

Moreover, inaccurate perceptions influence public understanding of both groups in the United States. For example, despite factual information, major opinion polls indicate that Americans perceive Latinos to be lazy, unpatriotic, and mostly recent immigrants.² Similarly, while recent research has documented the factors that contribute to the poor socioeconomic status of African Americans, newspapers and other media continue to depict African Americans as unemployed, prone to violence,

and/or on welfare.³ In particular, the public image of Latino and African American males is especially negative and has been adversely affected by the increases in teenage pregnancy, female-headed households, high unemployment, and other social and economic factors.

The growing body of research on African American males that has emerged in the past several years to document and address the economic and social status of African American young males has not been accompanied by a similar growth in research on Hispanic males.⁴ This is probably because Hispanic males have the highest labor-force participation rates of any major racial or ethnic group—including whites. Such work effort, however, masks the socioeconomic problems facing Hispanics, as well as the issues unique to each subgroup. For example, poverty in the Latino community continues to be more than twice as high as poverty among whites. In addition, when subgroup data are examined, greater similarities are found between mainland Puerto Ricans and African Americans than between Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic subgroups. In fact, although the status of Puerto Ricans—the poorest of all Hispanic subgroups—compares to that of African Americans, the socioeconomic status of Puerto Ricans and other Latino subgroups are not well understood.

Several facts underscore the need to focus attention on the disadvantaged socioeconomic status of mainland Puerto Rican and African American males, as well as to examine their experiences for similarities and differences. First, both are young populations. The median ages of Puerto Ricans (26.7 years) and African

Americans (28.1 years) are 7.2 and 5.8 years younger, respectively, compared to that of whites (33.9 years); they constitute, therefore, a significant portion of this country's future school population and work force. In urban areas especially, Hispanics and African Americans are already a critical segment of workers.* Second, data show that insufficient education, lack of adequate training, and employment discrimination present serious obstacles to the employability of young Puerto Rican and African American males. Both groups face substantial labor market difficulties; as with all young men, but to a greater degree, they have experienced declining earnings over the past decade, remain concentrated in low-wage jobs, and face high unemployment. Third, poverty rates for both Puerto Ricans and African Americans have been consistently higher over the past decade than those of whites and other Hispanics. In addition, both Puerto Rican and African American young males are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system.

Statistical Profile

Census data show that the Hispanic population in the United States grew by 53 percent between 1980 and 1990, and currently numbers 22.35 million (9

* For example, in New York City, Hispanics and African Americans aged 16-64 constitute almost half (47.9 percent) of the total population in New York City aged 16-64. In Chicago, Hispanics and African Americans account for just under one in three (32.9 percent) of Chicagoans aged 16-64. In Philadelphia, Hispanics and African Americans total over one in five (22.39 percent) of Philadelphians aged 16-64.

percent of the total population). Half of this growth was due to natural increase and the other half resulted from immigration; about two-thirds of Hispanics are native-born. Approximately 11.1 percent of Hispanics (2.7 million) on the U.S. mainland are of Puerto Rican descent. The Puerto Rican population grew 35.4 percent over the past decade.⁵ While the African American population did not grow as rapidly, the growth rate for the African American population was still almost twice that of the white population (14.2 percent vs. 7.2 percent). According to the Census Bureau, African Americans now constitute 12.3 percent of the population, or just under 31 million people. A snapshot of the Puerto Rican and African American populations in the United States indicates that the great majority live in urban areas.

As Table 1 shows, Puerto Ricans reside mostly in the Northeast, but have begun to settle in many other parts of the United States. Nearly one in three Puerto Ricans living in the mainland United States lives in New York City; in addition to these approximately 1 million Puerto Ricans, another 100,000 live across the Hudson River in Newark, Paterson, and Jersey City, N.J. Half of all Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States live in ten cities, nine of which are on the East Coast and one in the Midwest; approximately 120,000 Puerto Ricans live in Chicago. African Americans are found in large numbers in many of the same cities. For example, more than 2 million African Americans live in New York City and more than 1.5 million live in Illinois. The same reason that brought Puerto Ricans to the industrial centers of the Northeast and Midwest

brought millions of African Americans to the same areas—manufacturing jobs that were once abundant throughout those regions. One area of geographic contrast between Puerto Ricans and African Americans, however, is that a large number of African Americans live in the southern United States, many in rural areas. Although increases in population and gains in education and other areas have helped both groups, there still exists a wide socioeconomic gap between these populations and their white counterparts.

Puerto Rican		Rank	African American	
City	Number		City	Number
New York City	896,763	1	New York City	2,102,512
Chicago, IL	119,866	2	Chicago, IL	1,087,711
Philadelphia, PA	67,857	3	Detroit, MI	777,916
Newark, NJ	41,545	4	Philadelphia, PA	631,936
Hartford, CT	38,176	5	Los Angeles, CA	487,674
Jersey City, NJ	30,950	6	Houston, TX	457,990
Bridgeport, CT	30,250	7	Baltimore, MD	435,768
Paterson, NJ	27,580	8	Washington, D.C.	399,604
Boston, MA	25,767	9	Memphis, TN	334,737
Springfield, MA	23,729	10	New Orleans, LA	307,728
Total	1,302,483		Total	7,023,576

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, STF1, 1990; Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and National Puerto Rican Coalition.

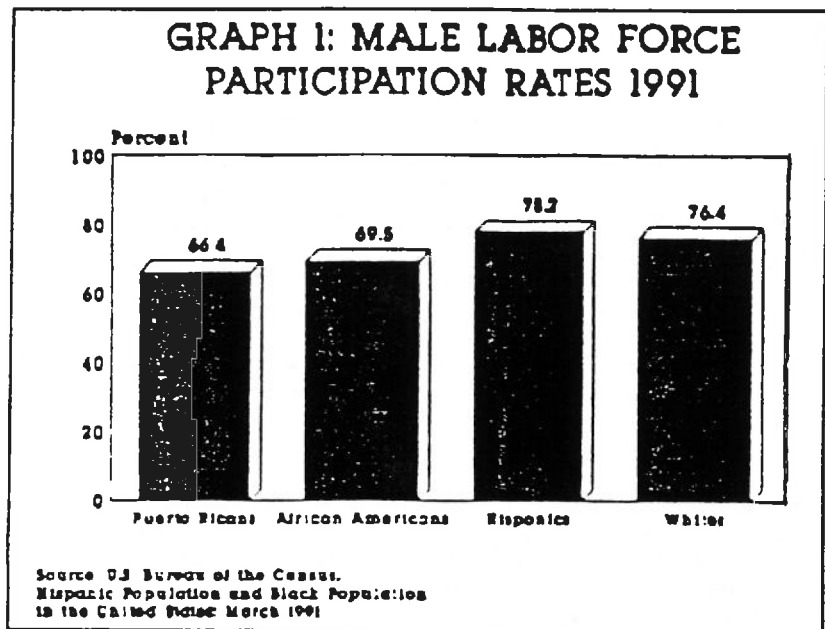
Trend data show that Puerto Ricans have made only modest gains in educational attainment relative to their population growth during the 1980s; for

example, according to the Census Bureau, in 1982 slightly more than four in ten Puerto Ricans 25 years of age and older (42.2 percent) had completed four years of high school or more; now, slightly less than six in ten are high school graduates (58 percent). Comparable data show that 81.9 percent of African Americans and 86.7 percent of whites 25 years of age and over are high school graduates. Higher education data show similarly low education levels; just over one in ten Puerto Ricans 25 years old and over (10.1 percent) had completed four or more years of college as of 1991, compared to one in twenty (5.1 percent) in 1982. By contrast, in 1991, nearly one in eight African Americans (12.2 percent) had completed college, compared to almost one in four whites (24.6 percent). Although African Americans have higher levels of educational attainment than Puerto Ricans and high school attainment rates closer to those of whites, they appear to face many of the same barriers to improved socioeconomic status that affect Puerto Ricans.

Another educational problem affecting Puerto Ricans and blacks is dropping out of high school. In fact, regardless of the measure used, Puerto Ricans continue to have among the highest dropout rates of any major population group.⁶ As a whole, Latinos have the highest dropout rates in the country.⁷ Moreover, data released by the Department of Education in September 1992 show that Hispanics 16–24 years old were three times as likely as non-Hispanics to drop out of school (31 percent vs. 10.3 percent).⁸ On average, about one in eight high school-aged students leave school before completing twelfth grade; in 1991, 12.5 percent of students aged 16–24 were dropouts.⁹ More than one-third of Puerto Ricans aged

16–24 years (37.7 percent) were high school dropouts, compared to almost one in seven African Americans (13.6 percent) and less than one in ten whites (8.9 percent) aged 16–24.¹⁰ This educational disparity is particularly troubling, not only for Puerto Rican and African American families, but for the nation as a whole. Such wide disparities negatively affect the employability of Puerto Ricans and African Americans.

Graph 1 shows that as of March 1991, about seven in ten African American males (69.5 percent) were working or looking for work, compared to about three in four white males (76.4 percent). Although



Hispanic males had the highest labor–force participation rates of any racial/ethnic group (78.2 percent), Puerto Rican males were the least likely of all Hispanic subgroups to be working or looking for work; less than seven in ten (66.4 percent) were in the labor force.

As groups, both Puerto Rican and African American males are concentrated in jobs that are low–paying and tend to be vulnerable to economic changes. As Table 2 illustrates, as of March 1991, more than one–fourth (27.3 percent) of white

males worked in the managerial and professional sectors of the labor force, compared to just over one in eight African American (13.9 percent) and more than one in ten Puerto Rican males (11.8 percent). Conversely, more than one in five Puerto Rican (21.2 percent) and more than one in four African American males (27.6 percent) worked in the service sector, compared to less than one in ten white males (9 percent). Service sector jobs include, for example, police officers, janitors, servants, and waiters.

Table 2. EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PUERTO RICAN, AFRICAN AMERICAN, WHITE, AND HISPANIC POPULATIONS—1991				
Occupational Category	Puerto Rican	African American	White	Hispanic
Managerial and Professional	11.8 percent	13.9 percent	27.3 percent	11.4 percent
Technical, Sales, & Administrative Support	21.2	17.4	20.2	15.1
Service	21.2	18.8	9.0	17.1
Farming, Forestry, & Fishing	2.2	3.5	4.7	8.6
Precision Production, Craft & Repair	17.2	15.2	19.5	18.7

Note: Hispanics may be of any race. Racial categories include Hispanics, therefore totals may not add up to 100 percent.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census—*The Hispanic Population in the United States: March 1991*, *The Black Population in the United States: March 1991*.

As a result of being concentrated in low-skill industries that are vulnerable to economic changes, Puerto Rican and African American males have experienced instability in the labor force. In 1992, both Puerto Rican and black males had unemployment rates that were more than twice that of white males; 15.6 percent of Puerto Rican and 15.2 percent of African American males were unemployed,

compared to 6.9 percent of white males. The unemployment rate for young Puerto Rican and African American males was especially high: 25.7 percent of Puerto Rican and 30.2 percent of African American males aged 16–24 were out of work, compared to 13 percent of their white counterparts.¹¹

Experience and status in the work force help to explain disparities in earnings among Puerto Rican, African American, and white males. Despite having lower educational attainment rates, Puerto Rican males in 1990 had median earnings among the highest for Hispanic subgroups: median earnings were \$18,193 for Puerto Rican males compared to \$14,414 for the total Hispanic male population, and \$22,185 for white males.¹² While individual earnings show less disparity between Puerto Rican and white males, Puerto Rican males still earned about four-fifths of white male earnings in 1990. By comparison, the median earnings of African American males (\$15,668) were more than two-thirds of what white males earned.¹³ Data on earnings by education level show that at most education levels, blacks earn less than whites, while Hispanics earn less than whites at the high school and college levels only.¹⁴

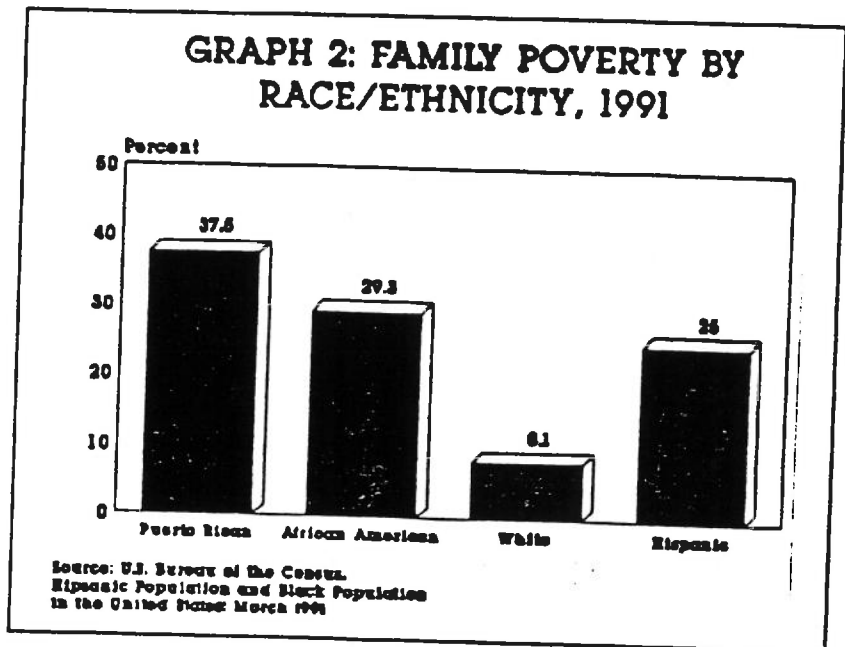
Male earnings data are significant to discussions of the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican and black families because research has suggested that, in the case of black families, male employability and the poor labor–market status of black males is a factor associated with the growth of black female–headed families; as William Julius Wilson hypothesized, the marked decrease in the pool of black employed men in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the decline in

marriage among African Americans and the increase in single-mother families.¹⁵ While there is no similar research to support this theory among Puerto Ricans, employment and employability status of both Puerto Rican and African American men are factors associated with the high poverty experienced by both groups. Moreover, low male earnings in two-parent Puerto Rican and black families contribute to low median family earnings and income. For example, in 1990 the median earnings of Puerto Rican families were less than half that of white families (\$18,008 compared to \$36,915) and African American families' median earnings (\$21,423) were almost two-thirds that of white families.¹⁶ These data suggest the need for an analysis of two-parent Puerto Rican and black family earnings to determine the extent to which African American women are contributing to family earnings through work at higher levels than Puerto Rican women.

Low earnings coupled with massive losses of jobs in the steel, auto, and other manufacturing sectors where Puerto Ricans and African Americans were concentrated have translated into economic instability and high poverty rates among both groups.¹⁷ Despite some social and economic gains over the past decade, poverty among Puerto Ricans and African Americans has been persistent for a significant portion of their populations. The most recent data, illustrated in Graph 2, show that almost four in ten Puerto Rican families (37.5 percent) compared to one in four Hispanic families (25 percent) and almost three in ten African American families (29.3 percent) were below the poverty line as of March

1991.¹⁸ In contrast, slightly more than in 12 white families (8.1 percent) were poor.¹⁹

Poverty among children and youth in these two communities is especially high. Child poverty rates for Puerto Ricans are higher than for Hispanics in general; in fact, Puerto Rican children under 18 years of



age are the poorest of any racial/ethnic group. The most current data from March 1991 show that more than half of Puerto Rican children (56.7 percent) live below the poverty level, compared with slightly less than two in five of all Hispanic children (38 percent).²⁰ The same data show that more than two in five African American children (44.8 percent) live in poverty, compared to less than one in six white children (15.9 percent).²¹

Similarly, young Hispanic and African American males face several problems with regard to health care. First, they are more likely than whites not to have health insurance. Data show that almost half of Hispanic males ages 18-24 (48.3 percent) and more than four in ten African American males ages 18-24 (41.1 percent) do not have health insurance.²²

Second, as a group, young Hispanic and African American males are at high risk of contracting diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and a host of other diseases.²³ In particular, data show that the threat of AIDS to both populations is serious. More than one in six known AIDS cases through March 1992 were Hispanic (16.3 percent), and African Americans accounted for almost three of every ten AIDS cases (29.3 percent). AIDS is the sixth leading cause of death among Hispanics, totaling 15 percent of all HIV-related deaths. By March 1992, Hispanics constituted 19 percent of U.S. adolescent (13–19 years old) cases and 20 percent of young adult AIDS cases (20–24 years old), while African American adolescents accounted for 37 percent and 34 percent, respectively. While data on AIDS cases are not disaggregated by Latino subgroup, the National Puerto Rican Coalition reports that “almost 60 percent of all Hispanic AIDS cases reported through the end of 1991 were from the island of Puerto Rico and from New York and New Jersey, states where the largest percentage of Hispanics are Puerto Ricans.”²⁴ Hispanics and African Americans together constituted slightly more than one-fifth of the total U.S. population (21.3 percent), yet they accounted for almost half (45.6 percent) of all AIDS cases as of March 1992.

In addition to high poverty and health risks, Puerto Ricans and blacks face additional problems because of their concentration in inner cities. Data show that crime in central cities and urban areas is higher than in rural areas.²⁵ According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1990, African Americans reported being victims of personal crimes (attempted and completed) at a rate of 127.1 per

thousand, compared to 97.2 per thousand for Hispanics and 102.1 per thousand for whites; these data are not disaggregated by Hispanic subgroup. Personal crimes include robbery and assault. However, data on crimes of violence, shown in Table 3, indicate that black and Hispanic males experience personal crimes of violence (attempted and completed personal robbery or assault) at similar rates; 53.3 percent of black and 49.5 percent of Hispanic males are victims of personal crimes of violence.²⁶ Moreover, of all homicides in 1989, 44.7 percent were African Americans and 16.7 percent were Hispanics, despite accounting for 12.3 percent and 8.4 percent of the population, respectively.²⁷

Table 3. CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION RATES FOR THE AFRICAN AMERICAN, WHITE, AND HISPANIC POPULATIONS — 1990			
Criminal Justice—Statistics per 1,000 (12 yrs. +)*	African American	White	Hispanic
Victimization Rates—Personal Crimes	127.1	102.1	97.2
Victimization Rates—Crimes of Violence (Males)	53.3	35.5	49.5
Percent of Victimization Reported to Police	50.0	47.9	49.5

Note: Hispanics may be of any race. Racial categories include Hispanics, therefore totals may not add up to 100 percent. No Hispanic subgroup data available.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice—*Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1990*.

*Statistics for both sexes

Key Factors Affecting the Socioeconomic Status of Puerto Rican and African American Males

The statistical information presented above shows the need to identify and understand some of the factors that may help explain the socioeconomic problems of Puerto Rican and African American young males. These include low

educational attainment, poor quality of education, vulnerable labor-force status, poor health status, and disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system.

Low Educational Attainment and Poor Quality of Education

Education is one of the most critical issues in examining the current socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican and African American young males, because it is the most significant predictor of future social and economic status. For Puerto Ricans, low educational attainment levels greatly increase the likelihood of limited employment options and adult poverty. Among African Americans, data show that high school completion rates are close to those of their white counterparts, yet African American socioeconomic status is comparable to that of Puerto Ricans. Therefore, educational attainment levels are only one measure that must be examined. Other factors related to education, including quality, dropout rates, and college completion rates also affect Puerto Rican and black socioeconomic status.

Low educational attainment levels among young Puerto Ricans greatly increase their chances of becoming poor adults, since employment opportunities are limited for persons with insufficient education and training. Statistics show that education and socioeconomic stability are strongly connected; as education increases, earnings increase.²⁸ Low parental education is another contributing factor, not only in terms of family socioeconomic status but also because it affects

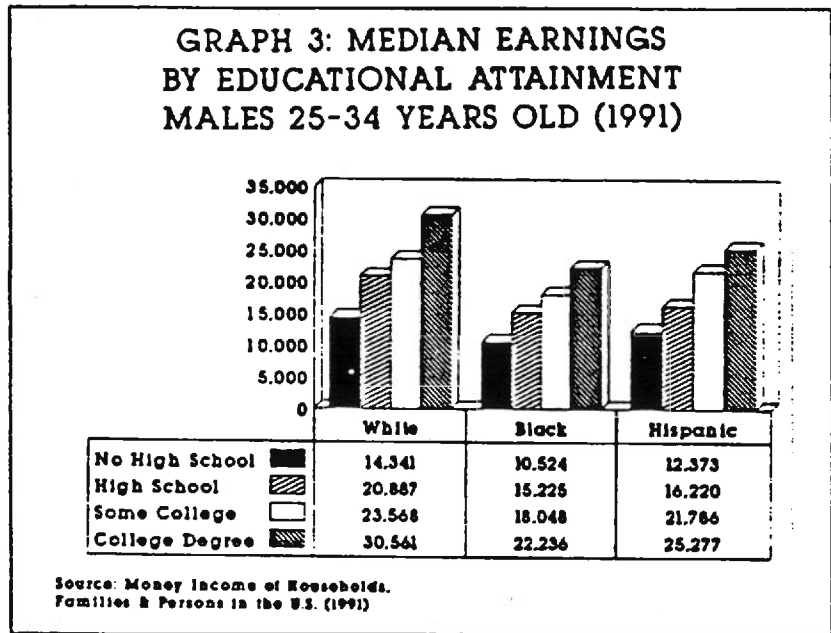
low educational outcomes for the children in these families.²⁹ Puerto Rican educational attainment levels help to explain why they are more concentrated in low-wage occupations than their white counterparts. One of the reasons Puerto Ricans have low levels of educational attainment is that they continue to have high dropout rates. As documented earlier, about one-third of Puerto Rican students drop out of high school. High dropout levels mean a significant proportion of Puerto Rican young males are decreasing their employment opportunities.

For African American males, education and employment problems appear to be associated with other issues besides high school attainment, since African American high school completion and high school dropout rates are comparable to those of whites, although data from the Children's Defense Fund show that blacks take longer than whites to complete high school.³⁰ However, completion of high school alone does not secure employment or improve socioeconomic status for blacks in the way it does for whites. One major area of concern is quality of education, which includes poor school facilities, limited resources, inadequately trained teachers, inequity in funding, and segregated environments. In particular, research has shown that segregated schools tend to lack the resources to provide students with a competitive education; that the curriculum in predominantly minority schools tends to lack advanced-level work and favors low-level work; and that teachers in such schools have less education and experience than their colleagues in predominantly white schools.³¹ Data show,

moreover, that Hispanics as a group—including Puerto Ricans—are more segregated than African Americans.³² Another area of concern is that college completion rates differ greatly between blacks and whites.

Low educational attainment and poor quality of education have two principal effects on both groups. First, it has a significant impact on their position in the labor market and results in their concentration in low-wage, unstable work and in disproportionately high rates of individual and family poverty. For example, as recent census data illustrated in Graph 3 show, young black and Hispanic males aged 25–34 without high school diplomas earned roughly \$4,000 less than their counterparts with high school diplomas. Median earnings for all groups were higher with increased educational attainment, although there continues to be an earnings gap among blacks, whites, and Hispanics at all education levels.

Second, because of the size and youthfulness of the Puerto Rican and African American populations, their educational status has long-term social and economic consequences that will affect the



development and stability of the economy in the cities where they are concentrated. Without proper education, training, and preparation, young Puerto Rican and African American males face overwhelming odds when entering the labor market. For African Americans males, additional issues need to be addressed since greater high school completion rates have not had the same effect on their employability as they have had on whites. Clearly, other factors affect their current socioeconomic status.

Vulnerable Labor Force Status

For all groups, especially for Puerto Ricans and African Americans, education is directly related to labor-market status. As the previous discussion has shown, employment opportunities and earnings are greater with higher levels of education. Puerto Rican and black males face difficulties in the labor market primarily because of their human capital characteristics—most have insufficient education and training for the current job market. In addition, their concentration in industries that are declining and in cities with declining manufacturing bases, as well as their lack of skills for sectors that are growing, contribute to poor economic opportunities and experiences. Finally, family socioeconomic status also affects job opportunities and economic status.

Insufficient education and training dramatically reduce job opportunities. Because of low education levels and/or inferior educational preparation, Puerto Rican and African American young males are often prepared only for low-skill

work. As a result, both groups have historically been concentrated in manufacturing and other low-skill occupations. But, these industries have experienced massive losses and a decline in jobs.³³ This change in the U.S. labor market over the past two decades has affected the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican and African American males; there has been a shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. This is troubling for both groups since they were attracted to regions of the United States precisely because of these types of jobs. An analysis of young men's earnings between 1973 and 1984 documents the impact of some of these economic changes; the research shows that annual earnings among males aged 20-24 fell by nearly 30 percent during this time period (from \$11,572 to \$8,072 in 1984 dollars).³⁴ While this drop affected all groups of young adult males, young black males suffered a nearly 50 percent drop in earnings. Young men with the least education experienced the worst declines. Among both Hispanic and black young men, the result was a marked decrease in their ability to earn above-poverty level wages to support a family.

Both groups have also experienced difficulties making the transition from low-skill manufacturing industries to service-sector jobs; their low skill levels and limited experience do not transfer to these jobs, which research shows require greater levels of literacy. The need to integrate Puerto Ricans and African Americans into these types of jobs must be fully addressed, otherwise both groups will face fewer job opportunities by the year 2000.³⁵ While service occupations, marketing, and sales will each experience job growth of more than 35 percent

between 1984 and 2000, handworkers, assemblers, machine operators, and fabricators will experience job losses of 7–8 percent. This is significant because studies have shown that Hispanics and blacks are far more likely to be employed in occupations that will lose the most employees.³⁶ In addition, although the service sector will experience significant growth in new jobs through the next century, these jobs are more likely than manufacturing jobs to be low-paying, low-benefit, and nonunion.³⁷

As a result of low skill levels, concentration in declining industries, and economic changes, unemployment continues to be a serious problem facing Puerto Rican and black workers. Double-digit unemployment rates have been experienced by black and Puerto Rican males for the last ten years. The unemployment for Puerto Rican males in 1982 was 20.8 percent, 13.3 percent for all Hispanics, and 20.1 percent for African Americans; by contrast, 8.8 percent of White males were unemployed. By 1989, the unemployment rate had dropped to 9.9 percent for Puerto Rican males, 7.6 percent for all Hispanics, and 11.5 percent for African American males, compared to 4.5 percent for white males. However, by 1992, unemployment rates had risen, largely because of the recession. Data show that 15.6 percent of Puerto Rican, 11.5 percent of Hispanics, 15.2 percent of African Americans, and 6.9 percent of whites were unemployed that year. There is an additional concern with unemployment among Puerto Rican and black young males; official unemployment data do not capture the complete picture as they fail to include discouraged workers, those working part time because they cannot find

full-time jobs, and homeless young men.

Poverty

As a result of their poor educational experiences and tenuous economic and labor market position, Puerto Rican and black males—and their families—are more likely than whites to be poor. Specifically, Puerto Rican and African American families have had poverty rates more than twice as high as the poverty rates of white families. Moreover, poverty is both a factor associated with and a consequence of several social and economic problems. While poverty does not “cause” school drop out, crime, or teenage pregnancy, research has shown that poor economic status is connected to limited opportunities and inferior environments that affect the aspirations of Puerto Rican and African American youth and the expectations others have of them.³⁸ Because of the disadvantage that comes with high rates of poverty, Puerto Rican and black males are vulnerable to engaging in a host of risky behaviors including unprotected sex, substance use and abuse, and delinquent activities.³⁹

With such large proportions of Puerto Rican and African American children living in poverty, the likelihood of a poor future for these children and their families is great. Moreover, providing for large and growing numbers of people living in poverty will have a negative impact on the future U.S. economy. Data from the recent recession indicate that poverty, especially child poverty, has contributed to record caseload growth in the number of poor Americans—including

Puerto Ricans and African Americans—who have turned to the public “safety net” of unemployment insurance, Food Stamps, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children.⁴⁰ Males, however, are the least likely to benefit from many of these programs; in most states, for example, they are not eligible for AFDC. Moreover, data from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities show that Hispanics are the least likely to benefit from unemployment insurance.⁴¹ Therefore, the use of the public safety net does not provide young Puerto Rican and African American males the services that are crucial for their and their families future.

Poor Health Status

Another factor that affects Puerto Rican and black males is poor health status, which includes health risks, limited access to health care, and lack of health insurance. As the previous discussion illustrated, these young men are likely to grow up poor, with limited education and employment opportunities. This also affects their knowledge about diseases and their access to preventive health services and care. As a result, both groups are at high risk of contracting several serious diseases including diabetes, heart disease, and AIDS.⁴² Preventive services, primarily educational services, can help reduce the potential health risks for Puerto Rican and African American males.

Puerto Ricans and African Americans are also more likely than whites to have limited access to health care and to receive inadequate services, since they are concentrated in urban, poor areas. The concentration of blacks in poor rural

areas is also a problem with respect to health care. Like many rural areas, inner cities often lack an adequate supply of doctors and health care facilities, including sources of preventive and primary care as well as emergency rooms. Moreover, the large number of inner-city residents lacking health insurance has led to serious financial problems for public hospitals required to serve the “medically indigent.” Many private hospitals refuse care to those who cannot pay.

For a significant proportion of Puerto Rican and African American young males, lack of health insurance contributes to both a lack of primary and preventive care, and increasing demand for publicly funded emergency and tertiary health services. The potential for the lack of health insurance, especially among growing populations, underscores the need for universal health-care coverage.

Disproportionate Involvement in the Criminal Justice System

Another serious issue facing young Puerto Rican and black men is their involvement in the criminal justice system. The disproportionately high incarceration rates of Puerto Rican and African American males in areas with large concentrations of their populations, such as New York City and Chicago, are a major factor in the socioeconomic status of both groups. Latino subgroup data on crime victimization and criminal justice activity are not available, precluding a direct comparison between Puerto Rican and African American males. However, as previously discussed, urban areas have higher crime rates than suburban areas

and large inner cities have the highest crime rates among urban areas. These data and their implications for Puerto Ricans and blacks must also be examined in the analysis of the current socioeconomic status of both groups; specific city research provides some context.

In a study of the socioeconomic status of Latino and black males in New York, Stafford, Major, and Davis found that 50 percent of the male inmate population in New York state's correctional system were black, 32 percent were Hispanic, and 17 percent were white. According to the study, 92 percent of male inmates in New York state prisons who came from New York City were Latino or black. This reflected a 146 percent increase in Latino arrests and a 95 percent increase in black arrests over the 1980s, compared to a 3 percent increase of white arrests. Furthermore, between 1987 and 1991, New York City's Latino male inmate population grew by 45 percent, a growth rate only slightly greater than the 39 percent increase in the black male inmate population. The research also revealed that for every 100,000 black men in New York City, there were 3,123 in prison, while for every 100,000 Latino males in New York City, there were 2,720 in prison. Comparative data show there were 218 white males in prison for every 100,000 white males in New York City. Finally, among the juvenile detention population, black males constituted 67 percent of the inmate population, Latino males 30 percent, and white males 3 percent.⁴³ While these data were not disaggregated by subgroup, it is likely that a high proportion of the Latino inmate population were Puerto Rican, since half of all Latinos in New York City are

Puerto Rican.⁴⁴

While the New York data cannot be generalized nationally, they do give some indication of the experiences of Puerto Rican and African American males in the criminal justice system and illustrate that they are overrepresented among inmates, both juvenile and adult.⁴⁵ As discussed in the previous section, data also show that they are likely to be victims of crime. In fact, recent data show that homicide is now the leading cause of death among black males aged 15–24 and the fifth leading cause of death among Puerto Ricans of the same age group.⁴⁶

There are insufficient data and research to document and explain the experiences of Puerto Rican and black men in the criminal justice system, but preliminary studies such as Stafford et. al show that a significant proportion of both populations in some cities is not making a successful transition either from youth to adulthood, or from school to work. Additional research has begun to document that involvement in illegal activity and residency in central-city, high-crime areas increases the risk that young black males will be arrested, incarcerated, and that they are likely to be victims—as well as perpetrators—of crime.⁴⁷ Moreover, such analyses show the need for greater research regarding the impact of criminal justice activities on the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican and Latino young men.

Such research is especially troubling because it suggests that Puerto Rican and black young men, who represent an important labor-market resource, may be unable to contribute to the economy if current trends continue. Moreover, such

trends have had and continue to have serious consequences for the families of these young men—or which they help to form but cannot maintain. The incarceration, family status, and poverty data strongly imply that if significant proportions of black and Puerto Rican men are not living in and productively contributing to their communities, their families and children suffer as a result.

Analysis

As the data presented have illustrated, there are some clear similarities between the social and economic experiences of young Puerto Rican and black men. First, both groups have low levels of labor force participation, high unemployment rates, and are concentrated in low-skill occupations. As previously discussed, higher levels of high school completion have not affected the employment and earnings experiences of black men in the same way as for whites. Puerto Rican men, on the other hand, seem to have greater returns on education than their black counterparts, but have lower levels of educational attainment. The result, however, for both Puerto Ricans and blacks is the same; both groups of men compete for low-skill jobs that are rapidly declining. In some cities, this poor economic status has contributed to tension between blacks and Latinos, in general.⁴⁸

Second, both are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system as well as among the AIDS population. The research and data on both AIDS and criminal justice activity among Puerto Ricans and black men are

disturbing and suggests that greater knowledge is needed in terms of documentation, explanations, implications, and responses.

Third, it is clear that additional external factors including labor-market changes and discrimination, are especially critical to understanding, discussing, and addressing the current social and economic position of young Puerto Rican and black men in the United States. Education, poverty, health status, and criminal justice activity are significant especially within the context of rapid minority population growth. Furthermore, the poor and deteriorating labor-market position of both groups has implications not only for their communities, but also for the areas in which they reside and constitute a significant part. Finally, these issues are central to formulating appropriate policy responses to address the impact of undereducated and underskilled young Puerto Rican and African American men on the economy in the next century.

Education is the most important determinant of any individual's future earnings. As the previous discussion has shown, income and earnings—and economic stability and mobility—vary substantially according to educational attainment. High school graduates have higher incomes and earnings, and are more likely to be employed than those who dropped out of school. Similarly, income and earnings for persons with college and professional degrees are higher than for those who are high school graduates only. In sum, there is a direct relationship between educational attainment and socioeconomic status.

As the preceding sections have illustrated, Puerto Ricans have lower levels

of educational attainment than whites or blacks. These attainment differences contribute to Puerto Rican concentration in low-wage, unsteady employment and high rates of unemployment and poverty among Puerto Rican workers and their families. An analysis of census data underscores the close association between low educational attainment, low incomes, and high poverty. In 1991, Puerto Rican households headed by a person 25 years of age or older with less than four years of high school were about one and one-half times more likely than all Puerto Rican families to be poor (54.4 percent vs. 37.5 percent, respectively).⁴⁹

Education is highly regarded as the social and economic equalizer, and as a prerequisite to improving the social and economic status of the Puerto Rican and black communities. Therefore, the effects of undereducation among Puerto Ricans and blacks—and the costs to their families and society as a result—are great. First, young minority adults with low levels of educational attainment face poor economic outcomes. They are limited to low-skilled work in occupations and industries that are rapidly declining as the U.S. economy shifts from a manufacturing to a service base. They are also limited to low-skill service sector jobs which are low-paying. The effects of this mismatch between worker skills and available employment will become more profound as the next century approaches. Moreover, as a result of inadequate human capital characteristics and a lack of skills that are easily transferable from one sector of the economy to another, Puerto Ricans and blacks suffer from higher unemployment levels than whites.

Second, the economic costs of dropping out of school for Puerto Ricans and blacks, and society as a whole, are immense due to higher unemployment rates and lower earnings of high school dropouts compared to high school graduates. For example, as of 1991, the unemployment rate was 22.7 percent for high school dropouts aged 20–24, compared to 11.4 percent for high school graduates of the same age group.⁵⁰ By comparison, 21.2 percent of blacks and 10.3 percent of Hispanics with a high school diploma were unemployed, compared to 40.2 percent of black high school dropouts and 16.3 percent of their Hispanic counterparts that same year. Further, the median income for male high school dropouts 25 years old and over in 1991 was about 29 percent lower (\$16,021) than for male high school graduates (\$22,482) of the same age cohort. Recent data estimate the economic costs of dropping out of school at more than \$200,000 per person over a lifetime and more than \$200 billion for a one-year cohort of dropouts.⁵¹ Additional research identifies seven social consequences of dropping out: foregone national income, foregone tax revenue for the support of government services, increased demand for social services, increased crime, reduced political participation, reduced intergenerational mobility, and poorer levels of health.⁵²

Yet, investments in education and increases in educational attainment alone would not proportionately reduce Puerto Rican or black poverty or improve their socioeconomic status because education is not the only factor that influences the economic position of these groups in the labor force. In addition to educational attainment and human capital characteristics, several other factors are associated

with the poor labor-market position of Puerto Rican and black workers: quality of education, discrimination, poverty and its consequences, family structure, and the lack of national response and attention to these issues.

Inequality and lower returns on education because of discrimination in the labor market remain a significant obstacle for Puerto Ricans and blacks. While questions remain about the extent to which discrimination explains earnings and occupational distribution, there is considerable evidence to support the finding that both groups suffer from substantial levels of discrimination in education and employment. For example, the General Accounting Office has reported very high rates of employment discrimination associated with the employer sanctions provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act.⁵³

Further research supports these findings. In a study discussed and documented by Reimers (1985), analyses showed that "discrimination in the labor market may be responsible for a wage differential, compared to non-Hispanic white men, of 18 percent for Puerto Rican men [and] 14 percent for black men."⁵⁴

Additional studies examining the disparity in earnings and income among Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites between 1982 and 1990 reveal that the percentage of the income gap between Hispanic males and non-Hispanic white males that is attributable to employment discrimination falls within a 10-18 percent range.⁵⁵ Additional research by Torres and De La Torre discuss the impact of Hispanic employment discrimination on labor force status.⁵⁶ Meléndez, Rodríguez, and Barry Figueroa underscore the role that discrimination plays in

accounting for wage discrepancies as well as occupational distribution.⁵⁷ Finally, Torres analyzes discrimination faced by U.S.-born and island-born Puerto Ricans. His findings are striking: The analysis shows that the dollar estimate of discrimination is approximately \$1,519 for U.S.-born Puerto Rican males.⁵⁸

Researchers have also documented the effect of employment discrimination on black males; while the literature is not extensive, the findings that support such discrimination are strong and convincing. For example, in a testing study by the Fair Employment Council of Greater Washington, a summary of research indicates that after accounting for differences in education, experience, and other job qualifications, blacks remain underrepresented in higher-level occupations and overrepresented in lower-level occupations; do not receive the same compensation as whites for performing the same work; receive lower returns to education than their white counterparts; and experience higher rates of job dismissal.⁵⁹ The same study found that discrimination adversely affected black job seekers in almost one in four employment applications. There is additional research to corroborate these findings. For instance, a recent survey of employers in Chicago found that most associated negative images with inner-city workers, particularly black men; specifically, the authors documented that these employers associated black men with inferior education, lack of job skills, and unreliable work performance.⁶⁰

Moreover, an Urban Institute audit study demonstrates that “despite extensive legislative and regulatory protections and incentives to hire minorities,

unfavorable treatment of young black men is widespread and pervasive” in the two sites where the testing was done, Washington, D.C., and Chicago.⁶¹ While these findings cannot be generalized for the nation as a whole, they do offer evidence that employment discrimination helps to explain the difference in employment status and earnings gap between black and white men. Finally, a summary of such literature suggests that racial discrimination in employment persists and is due in part to employer practices and employer attitudes.⁶² Other research has analyzed the costs of discrimination to African Americans and to society.⁶³

Educational quality is another factor that contributes to the labor-market position of Puerto Ricans and blacks in the United States; however, because of an exclusive focus on increasing educational attainment levels as the key to improving socioeconomic status, the issue of quality has been understated and often ignored. Yet, it is important and relevant to acknowledge that for many Puerto Rican and black students, completion of high school is not sufficient for employment. It is not even a guarantee of adequate literacy skills. Among the other factors and issues described above, increasing school segregation and disparities in school financing systems combine to produce a second-class education for many minority students who complete high school. Recent studies show that Hispanics, as a group, are now more segregated than blacks in inner-city schools. As discussed above, research has also shown that segregated schools—which a significant proportion of Puerto Rican and black students

attend—provide a less competitive education.

Moreover, studies have shown that Latinos and blacks complete fewer advanced math, science, computer, and English courses than white Americans, and are more often “tracked” into nonacademic courses that make access to college difficult.⁶⁴ While the data are not disaggregated by subgroup, poor quality of education is confirmed by research that shows Hispanics and blacks receive lower economic returns than whites for every year of school completed.⁶⁵

Another factor that is a consequence of and contributes to the unstable labor-market position of Puerto Ricans and blacks is poverty. Because of their educational and work force status, both groups are more likely than whites to be poor. This low socioeconomic status also translates into limited educational and economic opportunities, poor housing, and concentration in segregated and often unsafe neighborhoods. This leads, in part, to behavior and actions that may perpetuate this poverty. For example, adolescent pregnancy and unmarried parenthood, which are often seen only from the perspective of young women, are serious and growing problems in the Latino and black communities; research shows that the disadvantage that comes with high poverty, including lack of positive educational and social opportunities, often leads black and Latino youth to engage in risky behaviors such as unprotected sex.⁶⁶ A recent study shows that, regardless of race or ethnicity, concentrated poverty of the inner cities is associated with much higher rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing than in less disadvantaged communities; moreover, a poverty background greatly

increases the likelihood of becoming an absent father for whites, blacks, and Hispanics, although young black males at all income levels are more likely than others to become absent fathers.⁶⁷

Family structure and the poverty associated especially with single-parent families also contribute to the overall low socioeconomic status of the Puerto Rican and black communities. It is also a factor associated with poor educational experiences. In 1990, more than two-fifths (43.3 percent) of Puerto Rican and almost half (48.1 percent) of black families were female-headed and these families were especially likely to be poor; children who grow up in female-headed families often face high poverty, myriad social problems, and few educational or other opportunities. While the great majority of single-parent Puerto Rican and black families are headed by women, an increasing number are now maintained by men alone. As the number of single-parent families in all groups continues to rise, the educational and economic arenas will have to respond to help adequately prepare children from such families for future employment.

Finally, areas such as health and crime also need to be addressed. Young Puerto Rican and black men are more likely than their white counterparts to have no health insurance and have a higher risk of contracting AIDS. In addition, they are overrepresented in the prison population. The connections of these variables to socioeconomic status warrants more intensive research and analysis in order to develop appropriate public policy responses.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Developing and implementing effective initiatives to improve the economic status of Puerto Ricans and blacks will require action on many fronts. As demonstrated in this article, the undereducation of Puerto Rican and African American males and the poor employment prospects of both groups is directly and unequivocally linked to their labor force performance and economic status. But as the data cited also suggest, high school completion is not the only determinant of these communities' economic condition—and, for the changing economy and job market, high school attainment is not enough. Thus, improving the labor force performance and economic status of Puerto Ricans and blacks will require policy intervention on a number of different issues and levels.

Educational attainment is the single most important determinant of economic status. Notwithstanding the recognition that educational improvements alone will not result in equal economic status for Puerto Ricans and blacks, the data reveal that such improvements are a prerequisite for substantial progress in the labor market. In addition to documenting the problems, efforts are needed to identify specific solutions. Specifically, analyses of the impact of current education proposals and options on the Puerto Rican/Latino and black communities are needed. Further, policymakers must work toward more equitable school financing systems to narrow the gap that exists between white and nonwhite educational quality. While increases in resources may not automatically translate into improvements in educational or economic outcomes, improvements in educational

attainment and quality do not appear to be achievable in the absence of increased resources.

While a focus on education will have a direct impact on the human capital characteristics of Puerto Ricans and blacks and their ability to compete in the changing U.S. economy, improvements in educational outcomes alone cannot fully address the labor-market problems both groups experience. Several other issues also need to be addressed:

- **Specific programs and policies that reduce education and labor market discrimination against Puerto Ricans and blacks must be identified and promoted.**

The lower returns on education experienced by both groups in comparison to whites infers the existence of significant labor-market discrimination; this inference has been confirmed both by labor-market research and empirical testing studies. While civil rights enforcement programs and policies have had an impact on promoting equality of opportunity for blacks, much work remains to be done. Moreover, analyses have demonstrated that existing efforts are remarkably ineffective in protecting Hispanics from discrimination.⁶⁸

Additionally, with the exception of some recent work on employment testing studies, relatively little attention has been paid to protecting Hispanics and to identifying and developing more effective enforcement methods.⁶⁹ Latino research and analysis should help fill this gap and complement African American civil rights efforts.

- **Effective programs and policies to serve Puerto Rican and African American adult males and out-of-school youth must be identified, developed, and replicated.**

Data illustrate that significant proportions of the Puerto Rican and black male population are not connected to mainstream institutions, such as schools.

Moreover, high school completion for blacks has not translated into greater economic status for black families. Similarly, even if educational outcomes were immediately and substantially improved, the significant number of Puerto Rican adult males and out-of-school youth who have marginal skills would remain unaffected.

In some cases, increasing human capital skills is principally a question of targeting sufficient resources to the Puerto Rican and African American populations. In other cases, improvements will require greater resource investments and greater equity in resource allocations. In still other cases, such as integrating certain disadvantaged populations such as gang members into the labor force, effective interventions remain somewhat elusive or unclear. Significant improvements in Puerto Rican and African American economic status will require the development and implementation of effective policies and programs to serve these groups.

- **More data on Puerto Rican and African American males are needed in order to better document, understand, and address the issues facing these communities.**

As the above discussion has demonstrated, the lack of data in areas such as the criminal justice system, especially on Puerto Ricans and other Latino subgroups,

hampers attempts to disentangle and clearly explain the impact of social and economic issues on both populations. A related issue to data availability involves collection methods; more effective methods to count and obtain data from and about young minority males are needed. As the 1990 census showed, Latinos and blacks in cities had among the highest rate of undercount.⁷⁰

- **The special and critical role that Puerto Rican and African American community-based organizations play in improving socioeconomic status must be recognized and promoted by policymakers and others.**

Minority groups have traditionally relied on alternative institutions to help meet the challenges their communities face—as well as fill gaps resulting from the unresponsiveness of mainstream services. Yet, these organizations are often neglected when policies and programs are being developed. State education, employment, and other social policy development and implementation efforts must reflect and include—and be shaped by—community-based approaches and strategies.

- **The data and analysis point to a critical need for strong youth development efforts and policy at all levels—local, state, and federal.**

As research by the Children's Defense Fund and others has underscored, greater investments in preventive and developmental—not only remedial—approaches are needed. Many youth, especially poor and inner-city Puerto Rican and black youth, have limited opportunities for the supports that promote positive development. As Pittman and O'Brien have noted, all youth need opportunities for and access to high quality education, information about and access to a range of physical and mental health services, exposure to and opportunities for a variety

of work experiences and career planning, opportunities for social development and recreation, and family support.⁷¹ For a significant proportion of Puerto Rican and African American males, some or all of these elements are missing; in the absence of such opportunities and resources, some pursue only the negative options available to them.

As documented in a recent series of articles in the *New York Times*, many Puerto Rican and African American young men follow the path to adulthood that their environment shapes.⁷² Clearly, self-effort and responsibility are critical to the improved socioeconomic status of both the Puerto Rican and African American communities, but these cannot come in the absence of strategies and policies that address external factors, including economic changes, poverty, and discrimination.

Early in the next century, Latinos and African Americans together will constitute about one-fourth of the U.S. labor force. In urban areas, Puerto Ricans and blacks groups will represent a major economic resource—or burden. Undereducated, undertrained, and underemployed Puerto Rican and black males will not only affect the economic output of the areas where they reside, but will also increase the demand for public assistance while diminishing the tax base necessary to support essential government services. The effects of their socioeconomic status are not limited to the Puerto Rican and black communities. Reducing educational, economic, and social inequality between Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and the rest of society clearly serves the nation's interests.

NOTES

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