

Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy
An Introduction to the Issues

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Abstract

This paper introduces the major themes associated with young disadvantaged men, including low educational achievement, joblessness, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and incarceration. By age 30, between 68 percent and 75 percent of young men with a high school degree or less are fathers (NLSY). Half of them are married when their first child is born and far fewer continue their education post-high school. The paper briefly reviews four major forces that help shape social and economic outcomes for young men who are fathers and for their partners and children: employment and earnings prospects; multiple-partner fertility; incarceration; and finally public policy, especially as it is reflected in the income support system and the child support system. The paper provides brief synopses of volume chapters to appear in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 2011. It ends with an exploration of policy solutions to the many challenges facing young disadvantaged men.

Keywords: Fathers, low education, unemployment, incarceration, multiple-partner fertility

Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy

An Introduction to the Issues

Introduction

This introductory essay opens the special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* on young disadvantaged men by setting the stage and purpose of the conference and its overall contribution to our understanding of poverty and disadvantage. We start by explaining how young men are doing in the face of low educational achievement, joblessness, out-of-wedlock childbearing, incarceration, and in the face of the Great Recession as a way to frame the problems that the volume addresses (see also Peck, 2010).

We begin with the fact that by age 30, between 68 percent and 75 percent of young men with a high school degree or less are fathers (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth [NLSY, various years] and National Survey of Family Growth [NSFG, 2002] estimates, respectively; see also Table 1). Becoming a teen father reduces the likelihood of a high school diploma and GED receipt instead of a normal degree, but has no positive effect on net earnings (Fletcher and Wolfe, 2010). Only 52 percent of all fathers (21 percent of black fathers) under age 25 were married at the birth of their first child (Langton, 2010). Older fathers are more likely to be married by age 30. Sixty-five percent of all first-time fathers were married when their first child was born (but only 31 percent of all black men under 30 who were first-time fathers were married at the time of the first birth; see Langton, 2010). In addition, far fewer young fathers continue their education post-high school (29 percent of fathers age 30 and under compared to 41 percent of all men age 30 and under according to the NSFG). Finally, 62 percent of fathers with a high school degree or less earned less than \$20,000 in 2002 (Table 1), suggesting that most

Table 1
Fatherhood: Percent of Young Men Who Are Fathers by Education and
Percent of Fathers Who Earn Less Than \$20,000

	By Age 22	By Age 30
All Men	21%	56%
Less than HS	38	73
High school degree only^a	32	64
BA+	3	38
Fathers earning less than \$20,000	NA	62

Source: Langton (2010) from 2002 NSFG.

NA: Not available.

^aIncludes GED holders.

young men with little education, low skills, and poor employment records have acquired family responsibilities that they find difficult to meet.

Another way to consider parenthood at young ages is to look at birth patterns for men and women by age, education, and for completed cohort fertility (Table 2). The estimates suggest that younger women and men who have less education are most likely to be parents. Less-educated mothers tend to give birth for the first time young in life, and the fathers of these children tend to be slightly older than their partners. Mothers with less than a high school degree are most likely to have the largest number of children (highest total fertility) over the mothers' lifetime, with 2.6 children per woman in the 1960–1964 birth cohort in Table 2. High school graduates with no additional education have a total of 1.9 children per woman and begin motherhood and fatherhood only a year or two later than dropouts. This is in contrast to the college educated, who have many fewer births (1.6 per woman) and at older ages, and a growing fraction (26 percent of this cohort) are likely not to parent children at all. Taking into account the number of women in each of these categories, we find that 48 percent of all births in the United States to this cohort were to mothers with a high school education or less by age 40. In the beginning of the twenty-first century economy then, almost half of all kids are being raised by at least one parent with a low educational background and a poor expected economic future.

Social and Economic Forces Facing Young Fathers: The Perfect Storm

At least four major forces help shape social and economic outcomes for young men who are fathers and for their partners and children: employment and earnings prospects; multiple-partner fertility; incarceration; and finally public policy, especially as it is reflected in the income support system and the child support system. We briefly review these factors in order to set the context for our volume, before moving to our introduction of the papers.

Table 2
Birth Patterns of Women and Men by Level of Education,
Women in 1960–1964 Cohort Observed in 2004

Level of Education	Percent with First Birth by Age 25 ^a	Percent with First Birth by Age 40 ^a	Average Number of Children Born by Age 40 ^a	Median Age at First Birth ^b		Completed Fertility: Percent of All Children Born ^a
				Women	Men	
Dropouts	78%	86%	2.6	19	22	16
HS Grads ^c	64	83	1.9	21	23	32
Some College	49	81	1.8	23	24	28
College Graduate	20	74	1.6	28	29	24

Notes:

^aEllwood, Wilde, and Batchelder (2009) using annual CPS files 1960–2004, plus total children born Wilde (2009).

^bLangton (2010) using 2002 NSFG.

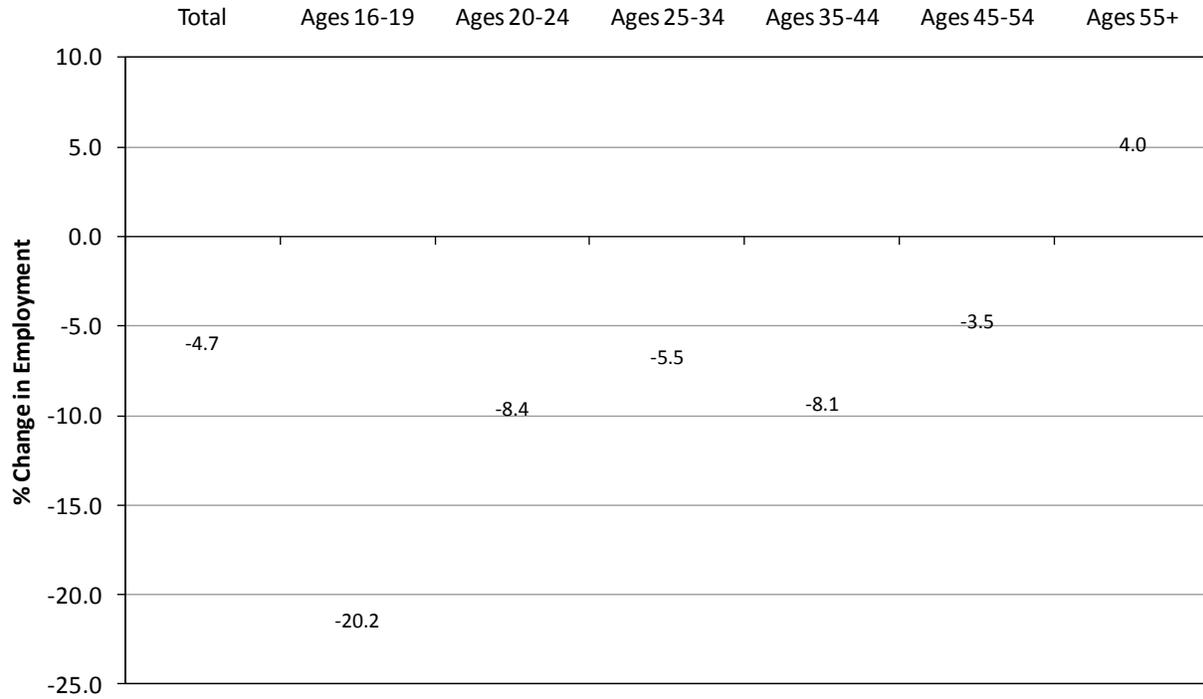
^cIncludes GED holders.

Undereducated Youth and the Labor Market

Even for men with full-time work, median earnings for 16- to 24-year-olds fell by 19 percent between 1979 and 2008, to \$461 a week; and for 25- to 34-year-olds, median earnings fell to under \$700 per week. But only about 20 percent of low-educated men had regular full-time work in 2008. If the poverty line for a family of three is considered the minimal amount needed to begin a family, a man needed a pre-tax income of \$17,400 in 2008 to support a partner (wife) and a baby. Far fewer than half of younger men in our target group earn that much by age 30. Indeed, poverty rates among workers grew between 2007 and 2008 as employment, wages, and hours slipped during the recession. For individuals who worked at all during the 2008 year, poverty rates grew from 5.7 percent to 6.4 percent. The number rose mainly because the share of all workers who could not work full time, year-round increased, and the rise in poverty among these workers was from 12.7 percent to 13.5 percent (Acs, 2009; Smeeding et al., 2010). Almost all analysts expect a significant increase in poverty once the 2009 data are available later this year (Monea and Sawhill, 2009).

The forces of the current recession and its effect on joblessness among young undereducated men are hard to overstate. The data shown in Figures 1 and 2 indicate changes in employment for various education and age groups from the fourth quarter of 2007 through the third quarter of 2009 (Engelmann and Wall, 2010). Overall employment fell by 4.7 percentage points over this period. Men, single persons, and minorities all lost employment to a much larger degree (6.3 to 7.0 percentage points). Employment fell most precipitously for the youngest workers (aged 16 to 24, the majority of whom were not in school), while employment actually *rose* by 4.0 percent for those over age 55 (no doubt a reaction to the capital market recession, see Figure 1). Employment also fell most for workers who were high school dropouts (7.5

Figure 1
Employment Changes by Age Groups
2007, Q4 to 2009, Q3

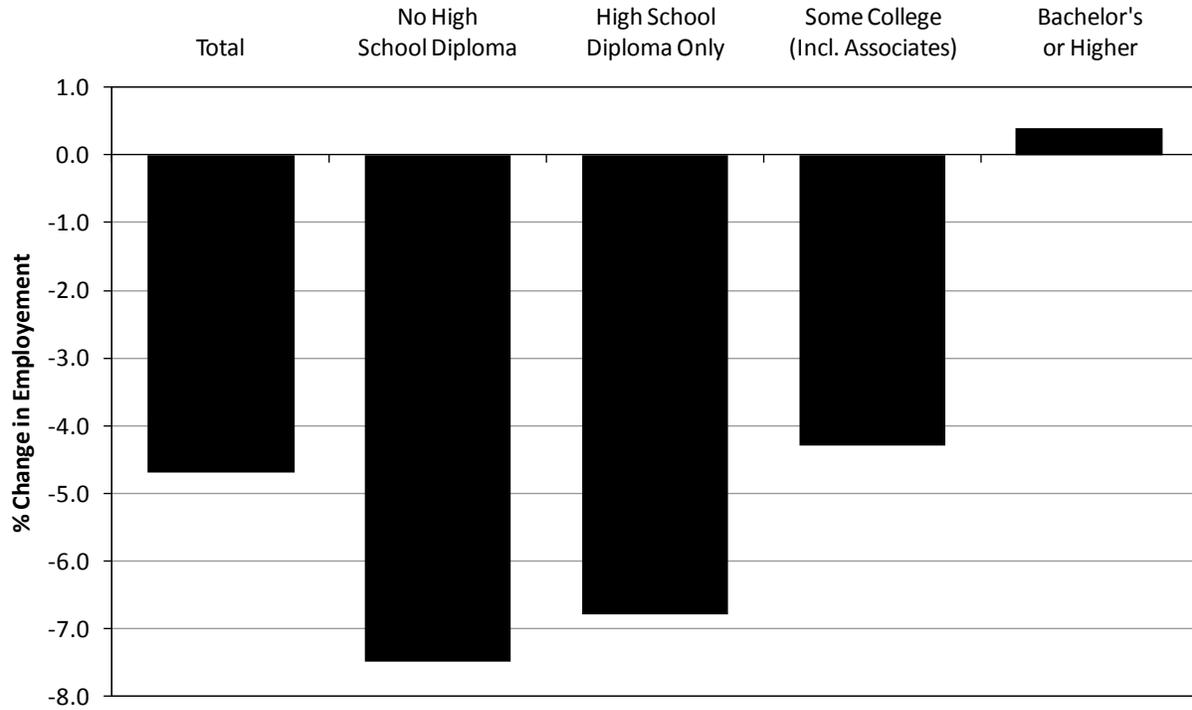


Source: Engemann and Wall, 2009.

percentage point drop) and those with a high school diploma only (6.8 percentage point drop). Employment for college graduates and those with higher degrees also actually ticked up by 0.4 percentage points over this period (Figure 2). The recession has therefore been hardest on young undereducated men, especially minorities. Over 40 percent of black teens and over 30 percent of young black men aged 16 to 24 were officially unemployed in 2009, and that doesn't count those who have given up on finding work and dropped out of the labor force (Sum, this volume; Peck, 2010). Unemployment rates for young undereducated men are higher now than they were in the Great Depression—the rates stood at nearly 30 percent in December 2009. Long-term unemployment is at an all-time high, with 46 percent of the unemployed out of work 6 months or longer, and has reached nearly every segment of the population, but some have been particularly hard-hit. The typical long-term unemployed worker is a white man with a high-school education or less (Murray, 2010).

In summary, young undereducated men face both long-term structural issues and cyclical recession-related losses. Structurally, the economy is changing and penalizing lower- and middle-skilled, less-educated male workers, especially younger ones who need training and retraining to be successful (Autor and Dorn, 2009a, 2009b; Autor, 2010; Goldin and Katz, 2008; Smeeding et al., 2010). These structural factors are further compounded by the current recession with excessively high unemployment and underemployment, especially high among low-educated younger men who are at the end of the labor market queue and whose job prospects are unlikely to improve greatly within the next 5 years, leading to fears of a new “disconnected” jobless underclass (Rampell, 2010; Bell and Blanchflower, 2010).

Figure 2
Employment Changes by Education Levels
2007, Q4 to 2009, Q3



Source: Engemann and Wall, 2009.

Incarceration

There exist no national estimates for fathers ever in prison by age and education, but the data we do have is very suggestive. The cumulative risk of imprisonment grows steadily for all types of men, and at all levels of education, for men observed in 1979, 1989, 1999, and 2004 (Pettit, 2009). By age 30 more than half of all black men, and more than 25 percent of other men, all of whom are high school drop outs, will have been in prison on parole or on probation at least one time. For all non college attendees (including HS grads and GEDs), the fractions ever in prison or jail are up to 30 percent of all black men (Western and Wildeman, 2010, Table 1).

More than half of state prisoners and almost two-thirds of prisoners in federal penitentiaries in 2007 had children under the age of 18 (Glaze and Maruschak, 2009). Many of these inmates (42 percent of male inmates with children and 60 percent of female inmates with children) lived with their minor children prior to their incarceration. Among those children born in 1990, 1 in 4 black children, compared with 1 in 25 white children, had a father in prison by the time the child was age 14. The risk is even more concentrated among black children whose parents are high school dropouts; fully half of those children had a father in prison, compared with 1 in 14 white children with dropout parents (Wildeman, 2009).

Looking at these three forces together is difficult, but again, the facts we do have are highly suggestive. If two-thirds to three-quarters of low-educated (i.e., high school degree or less, including GED) men are fathers by age 30, and if incarceration rates (ever incarcerated) are 28 percent overall, then at least a fifth of all young fathers will have been incarcerated, which means that they will face severe hurdles in the job market, in parenting, and in supporting their children. Further, most low-educated young men who have children with a young undereducated

mother do so outside of marriage, in unstable relationships, *and* with more than one partner by age 30 (see below). These numbers are much higher for black men.

Multiple-Partner Fertility (MPF)

Today, over 40 percent of all live births are out of wedlock (28 percent for non-Hispanic whites; 72 percent for non-Hispanic blacks; and 51 percent for Hispanics according to Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura, 2009). And the majority of first births before age 25 now occur outside of marriage (58 percent of all first births for men; higher for minorities, Langton, 2010). The chances an unmarried biological father and mother will go on to have a child with different partners, and thus give their child a half-sibling (one or more children with another partner), are 50 percent to 65 percent, and likely higher once completed fertility is observed (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook, 2010; Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006). Indeed, evidence from the Fragile Families Study (a sample of urban births in the late 1990s) indicates that in 59 percent of unmarried couples, either the mother or the father *already* has a child by another partner at the time of the focal birth; compared to 21 percent of married couples who were in such a situation (Carlson and Furstenberg, 2006). By the fifth year of the study, the number of couples who had at least one child with another partner was up to 75 percent (Carlson, 2010).

In the 2002 NSFG, which covers the entire population, nearly a third of all fathers under age 25, and 47 percent of black fathers in that group, had children with multiple partners (Langton, 2010). Moreover, these young men are very likely to have additional children with other partners as they age. Based on this same dataset, over one-third of poor black men aged 35 to 44 report having had children with two or more mothers, and 16 percent report children with three or more mothers (Guzzo and Furstenberg, 2007). And clearly these are underestimates as they are for men only (excluding multiple-partner fertility [MPF] amongst women). The results

for father relationships and involvement in their children's lives are very disheartening (Tach, Mincy, and Edin, 2010). Research also suggests that complex family structures are more likely for children of parents who are younger or have low earnings and for those in larger urban areas. Children who have half-siblings on their mothers' side are also more likely to have half-siblings on their fathers' side, and vice versa, contributing to very complex family structures—and potential child support arrangements—for some children (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook, 2010).

Raising a child early on in life, before finishing education and finding a job or a career, is difficult enough when one man and one woman are involved in a stable relationship and have one or more of their own children. But when the competing needs of other partners, parents, and children are thrown into the mix, the situation becomes even bleaker and far less stable. And our public policies have not yet adjusted to this phenomenon.

Policy

Public income support policy in the United States has more or less ignored young unmarried men and fathers for several decades. And when policy does touch their lives, it is usually in the form of a court-issued child support order announcing that they are in arrears for child support owed, rather than a hand up with earnings adequacy (e.g., a larger single-person EITC, as in Edelman et al., 2009). Moreover, child support arrears build up when unemployment or incarceration reduces earnings to zero. Absent young fathers (those not living with their children on a regular basis) are not eligible for the EITC even when they pay their child support. But up to 65 percent of their legal earnings or tax refunds can be garnished for child support (Haskins and Sawhill, 2009).

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 and further legislation has extended unemployment insurance (UI) to up to 99 weeks and beyond for the long-term

unemployed (with higher benefit levels, income tax breaks for UI, and generous health insurance subsidies to maintain the most recent employer's health insurance according to Burtless (2009). But unemployed men under age 30 are 39 percent of all men who are unemployed, but are only 20 percent of all UI recipients. Therefore, two-thirds of all young unemployed men missed out on over \$120 billion in UI aid in 2009 and a greater amount in 2010. Indeed, the only income support program generally available to help younger single men is SNAP (food stamps).

Summary

A perfect storm of adverse events is now being experienced by younger undereducated men, their children, and the mothers of their children. The Great Recession of 2008–2010 has severely limited legitimate work opportunities, reflecting longer-term structural as well as cyclical employment issues. High rates of incarceration further limit job opportunities and keep fathers from their children. Most men (and women) who have children early on in life out of wedlock have at least one more child with another partner, and marriage rates are low while divorce rates are subsequently high. Public policy allows child support obligations to build while dads are in jail or out of work. Few income maintenance programs serve this population. As a result of all of these forces, young men are suffering rising poverty, their families are very unstable, and these fathers, mothers, and children are in desperate economic and social situations. In this context, the papers in our volume deepen the description of these situations and offer hope for policy changes to help young men and their families.

Articles in the Volume

Descriptions of Young Fathers' Lives

The first four articles in our volume more clearly illustrate these themes by describing economic and family life for young fathers. They outline the economic status of low-income men and fathers, paying attention to the social context in which they live, as well as how they fare as fathers and in relationships with partners, children, and families. These articles help us to understand the intricacies of low-skill employment, low pay, and unstable families and how they, in total, affect fathers, partners, and children.

Andrew Sum and colleagues contribute the best-named article, entitled “No Country for Young Men,” where they carefully establish how the economic fortunes of the young have diverged substantially since the 1970s, especially for young adult men without postsecondary degrees who are not living with their families. In fact, a number of policy monographs on the deteriorating labor market and economic conditions of these workers were written in the 1980s and 1990s (for instance, the so-called “Forgotten Half,” W.T. Grant Foundation, 1988; and “When Work Disappears,” Wilson, 1996), warning the country of the need to invest in their education, training, and employment to help restore broad-based prosperity. It turns out these pronouncements were about 15 to 20 years too early according to this paper. Sum finds terrible labor market experiences for many groups of young inexperienced men in recent years. These labor market developments in turn have had a number of adverse impacts on young men’s criminal justice behavior, on marital behavior, on family formation, and on out-of-wedlock childbearing among young women, all topics addressed in detail later in this volume. A variety of actions on an array of macro- and microeconomic fronts will likely be needed to bolster the employment, wages, earnings, and marriage prospects of the nation’s young men. Without such

sustained improvements in their real earnings, the future outlook for these young workers, young families, and their children is quite bleak.

Lawrence Berger and Callie Langton then review the existing literature on young disadvantaged fathers' involvement with children from the fathers' point of view. They first outline the predominant theoretical perspectives regarding father involvement among resident (married and cohabiting) biological fathers, resident social fathers (unrelated romantic partners of children's mothers), and nonresident biological fathers. They also present a brief discussion of the ways in which fathers contribute to child rearing. Finally, they describe the socioeconomic characteristics of men who enter fatherhood at a young age, highlighting that they tend to be economically disadvantaged, and they review the empirical research on both antecedents of father involvement and patterns of involvement across father types. They find that younger, less advantaged, and unmarried fathers are less involved with their children than are older, more advantaged fathers and those who are (or had been) married to their children's mother. In addition, whereas most prior work has found that resident biological fathers are more involved with children than resident social fathers, recent evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a sample of relatively disadvantaged families, suggests considerable investments on the part of (particularly married) social fathers.

Laura Tach and Kathryn Edin provide insight into the romantic partnerships of disadvantaged men using recently available data, revealing still higher levels of instability and complexity, but also of commitment, than previously understood. Young disadvantaged men are often involved in casual romantic relationships that result in pregnancy. When this occurs, most men remain involved with the mother, are optimistic about the future of their relationships, and are committed to their children. Economic disadvantage, incarceration, conflict, and mistrust

undermine the stability of these commitments and relationships, however, and most end within several years after the birth. New romantic relationships begin shortly thereafter, creating complex family structures. We know less about the patterns of interaction between couples that produce unstable partnerships or about the nature of romantic relationships that do not involve children. With our growing understanding of the presence of fathers in nonmarital households, the authors argue that policymakers must adapt their policies to support, rather than undermine, these fragile unions.

Finally, Marcia Carlson and Katherine Magnuson review the literature on low-income fathers' influence on children. They argue that fathers ideally represent an important resource for children, by investing the time, money, and emotional support that contribute to healthy child development. As mothers are increasingly likely to be employed outside the home, fathers' roles have expanded from primarily that of a "breadwinner" who provides economic support to multiple other roles. These roles include provision of additional caregiving as well as emotional support; provision of moral guidance and discipline; protection to ensure the safety of the child; coordination of the child's care and activities; and guidance to connect the child to their extended family and community members. With the broadening of paternal roles, there has been growing attention to how fathers affect child well-being. The cumulative evidence these authors uncover points to the benefits of high-quality father-child interaction and authoritative parenting, but that this is more likely to occur within marriage and amongst middle-class parents.

In contrast, a number of other recent studies find that nonresident fathers' involvement (especially for those with infrequent of contact) has essentially no effect on children's outcomes. Indeed, it is unclear whether fatherhood programs that encouraged paternal involvement generally would, in fact, benefit children. Carlson and Magnuson conclude that interventions and

programs should strive to encourage nonresident fathers' positive and engaged parenting as opposed to merely increasing the quantity of time fathers spend with their children.

Commentaries

These four descriptive summaries of the evidence on young fathers are followed by three shorter, cross-cutting comments on culture (Al Young, Jr.); race (Devah Pager); and family functioning and longer-term relationships (Frank Furstenberg). Young reminds us that cultural differences across racial and ethnic lines help describe and define the patterns of partnering and fathering that we see amongst low-income men. Devah Pager notes that the social and economic progress of black men since the early 1980s has been relatively stagnant, and so poor prospects for low-income black men have consequences that extend well beyond the individuals themselves. These young men's fortunes affect the women they partner with and the children they father. She goes on to emphasize the relevance of race and incarceration in thinking through these important problems.

Frank Furstenberg writes on family life amongst low-income men and their partners and children, drawing on his more than 40 years of research on this topic. He first distills what we have learned during the past several decades, particularly about the role of men in family formation and child rearing, before turning to the consequences of paternal involvement in its myriad forms. He argues that these consequences have only become more varied and intricate as family production has become de-standardized and exceedingly complex. He contends that the micro-level effects in the descriptive papers, important as they are, pale in comparison to the macro-level impacts that changing labor markets, marriage, and kinship practices are having on stratification in American society. He concludes that the prospects of improving family life for such groups are challenging, to say the least, and have become more so with the passage of time.

Furstenberg also concludes that however difficult it is to increase human capital and reduce unplanned parenthood among disadvantaged children and youth, it is far more feasible to implement these policies than to accomplish the alternative approach of altering parenting practices within fragile families (see also Furstenberg, 2010).

Policy Papers

The five policy papers focus on child support policy; school-to-work transitions, dropouts, and work training; incarceration; family functioning, relationships, and parenting; and income-support policy. In the first paper, Maria Cancian, Daniel Meyer, and Eunhee Han write about child support when parents do not live together. The child support policy arena raises a complex set of questions about the relative rights and responsibilities of nonresident fathers and resident mothers, and the role of government in regulating, or substituting for, parents' contributions to their children's support. The formal child support system, largely regulated by family law, articulates the expectations for the private financial support expected of nonresident fathers. Public income support programs, especially welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF]), provide cash assistance, in-kind supports, and tax credits to poor children, primarily those living in single-mother homes. To a large extent, "private" and "public" child support have therefore been substitutes, rather than complements.

Recent public policy changes have both strengthened the private child support system and reduced access to public support—welfare. Cancian, Meyer, and Han conclude that the current work-focused safety net, which aims to require and help enable disadvantaged mothers to work, creates a context in which government should similarly require and help enable all fathers, even those who are disadvantaged, to work and pay child support. However, a series of reforms are

needed to make this a realistic expectation, given many fathers' limited employment options and the complex families of many disadvantaged parents.

Carolyn Heinrich and Harry Holzer write about how to improve education and employment prospects for disadvantaged young men. They begin with the phenomenon called “disconnection,” by which low high school graduation rates and sharply declining employment rates among disadvantaged youth have led to increasing numbers who are disconnected from both school and work. They ask: what programs and policies might prevent these disconnections and improve educational and employment outcomes, particularly among young men? They review the evidence base on youth development policies for adolescents and young teens; programs seeking to improve educational attainment and employment for in-school youth; and programs that try to “reconnect” those who are out of school and frequently out of work, including public employment programs. They identify a number of programmatic strategies that are promising or even proven, based on rigorous evaluations, for disadvantaged youth with different circumstances. They conclude that policy efforts need to promote a range of approaches targeted explicitly to engage and reconnect youth with jobs, along with ongoing evaluation efforts to improve our understanding of what works, including which program components, for whom.

Steven Raphael writes about incarceration and prison reentry issues. He observes that U.S. states and the federal government have increased the frequency with which incarceration is used to sanction criminal activity, as well as the length of the sentences imposed and ultimate time served for specific offenses. As a result of myriad sentencing policy changes and changes in post-release supervision, the nation's overall incarceration rate has increased to unprecedented levels. For less-educated men, and especially less-educated minority men, the likelihood of

serving prison time is extremely high and the challenges faced by former inmates attempting to reenter noninstitutionalized society are vast. Many have tenuous housing arrangements. Most former inmates have poor job skills and face stigma associated with their criminal records. Many of these reentrants fail and are sent back to prison, often for violating the conditions of their supervised release, but sometimes for the commission of new felony offenses.

Raphael discusses the reentry-policy challenges faced by increasing numbers of low-skilled men who are released from prison each year. Low formal levels of schooling, low levels of accumulated labor market experience (in part due to cycling in and out of correctional institutions), and employer reluctance to hire former inmates are among these barriers. He further reviews the research pertaining to how employers view criminal history records in screening job applicants. He reviews the existing evaluation literature on alternative models for aiding the reentry transition of former inmates. Transitional cash assistance, the use of reentry plans, traditional workforce development efforts, and transitional jobs for former inmates and their impacts on post-release employment and recidivism highlight potentially fruitful policy options.

Virginia Knox, Philip Cowan, and Carolyn Pape Cowan assess policies that strengthen fatherhood and family relationships, noting that children whose parents have higher income and education levels are more likely to grow up in stable two-parent households than their economically disadvantaged counterparts. These widening gaps in fathers' involvement in parenting and in the quality and stability of parents' relationships (including but not limited to marriage) may reinforce disparities in outcomes for the next generation. What can be done to level the playing field? Fatherhood programs have shown some efficacy at increasing child support payments, while relationship skills approaches have shown benefits for the couples' relationship quality, co-parenting skills, fathers' engagement in parenting, and children's well-

being. They conclude that the research evidence suggests that parents' relationship with each other should be a fundamental consideration in future programs aimed at increasing low-income fathers' involvement with their children.

Ron Mincy, Serena Klempin, and Heather Schmidt write the last chapter, on low-income men and noncustodial fathers, to highlight in four key income-security policy areas where changes are needed to meet the challenge of getting disadvantaged dads more involved with and supportive of their children. These include relaxation of payroll taxes, expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, revamping unemployment insurance, and most importantly, changing child support enforcement. Working together, these policies have contributed to increases in employment for young less-educated women and reductions in child poverty, but rarely have the joint implications for less-educated men been considered. They note that each strategy, including unemployment insurance, is predicated upon work and sometimes faces a world without work for these men. The provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) are being used in part to increase employment among less-educated men, including nonresident fathers; but they are not enough to change the employment and earnings of disadvantaged men. Finally, they indicate responses needed not only by government, but also by the independent sector—through targeted philanthropy for related research and programming. Engagement by these critical actors will be necessary in order to make any income-support policy reforms work for young men.

Overall Summary

Most of all, young undereducated and disconnected men need help acquiring skills as well as finding and keeping jobs. As we know from experience, a strong macroeconomic employment policy leading to an era such as that experienced in the late 1990s would allow these

men to more easily get and keep good jobs and support their families. Unfortunately, the length and depth of the Great Recession suggests that we will be a long way from full employment for many years to come, especially for undereducated younger men.

In the throes of such a poor economic situation, the policies we might adopt for young men are also tempered and shaped by the trade-offs they face. Our discussants, Martha Coven, Sheri Steisel, and David Pate, all pointed to difficult policy decisions by federal, state, and local actors whose fiscal resources are diminishing as needs rise. Policies that would extend income support to men may dull incentives to work. Greater public support for low-income women and children reduce the need for men to pay child support. Early-release programs may put public safety in danger. And, for those young men who actually pay child support, the question of reimbursing the public sector or passing through benefits to mother and children still arises. In many states, forgiveness of arrears, or “debt restructuring,” may increase the willingness of fathers to pay support, but it also may lead them to believe that future child support orders can be ignored when an irresponsible father goes into arrears. The discussants suggest that while fathers are a policy priority, additional support for their needs is likely to be both subjugated and deferred in the current policy environment. Because of space limitations, we were not able to focus on several additional important policy levers. These include broader-based education policies, including efforts to keep kids in school, and policies to avoid young fatherhood and motherhood (Carlson and Smeeding, 2010).

In the end, we believe that public policy toward disadvantaged young men and their families needs to be addressed directly and not neglected or subjugated. Such policies should emphasize increased employment, training, and education, and spur on a more progressive incarceration policy for young offenders. In addition, better efforts to support the incomes and

employment of young men would allow more of them to support their families, and meet their child support obligations. And finally, we need programs that are effective in preventing young and unintended out-of-wedlock births, as well as measures for dealing with consequences of bad decisions.

In this bleak fiscal environment, we must redouble our efforts to help young men who face difficult circumstances. Policy should provide more incentives and rewards for good behaviors, support the incomes of young men through employment and subsidies to make work pay, and most of all, it should try to maintain and strengthen relationships among fathers, mothers, and their children. The articles in this volume suggest both the desperate circumstances of young men and how far we are away from adequate social and economic support of the next generation of children, nearly half of whom are growing up in ever more desperate straits.

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