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# Puerto Rican and African-American Males: Current Challenges, Promising Strategies

By  
Sonia M. Pérez



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.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Census Bureau projects that Latinos will become the largest minority and, together with African Americans, will constitute one-fourth (25.5 percent) of the U.S. labor force by the year 2010. However, despite some gains, increases in population have not been proportionate to increases in voting and buying power—or to comparable increases in economic success or socioeconomic stability—for a significant proportion of either Latinos or African Americans.

Moreover, inaccurate perceptions have influenced public understanding of both groups. For example, despite the existence of factual information to the contrary, major opinion polls indicate that Americans perceive Latinos to be lazy, unpatriotic, and mostly recent immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, while recent research has documented factors that have contributed to the poor socioeconomic status of many African Americans, newspapers and other media continue to depict African Americans as unemployed, prone to violence, and/or on welfare.<sup>3</sup> The public image of Latino and African-American young males, in particular, is especially poor and has been adversely affected by the increases in both teenage pregnancy and female-headed households, high unemployment rates, and other social and economic problems affecting both groups.

## **Education and Employment: Key Issues and Findings**

The growing body of research on African-American males that has emerged in the past several years to document and address their economic and social status has not been accompanied by similar growth in research on Hispanic males.<sup>4</sup> This is probably because Hispanic males have the highest labor force participation rates of any major racial or ethnic group—including whites. However, when Latino subgroup data are examined, greater similarities are found between mainland Puerto Ricans and African Americans than between Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic subgroups. In particular, a review of education, employment, and related issues provides a better understanding of the current socioeconomic status of young Puerto Rican and African-American males.

First, education issues, including high school dropout, high school completion, college completion, and educational quality, are central to the examination of the socioeconomic status of Puerto Rican and African-American males. While Puerto Rican males have low levels of high school completion (58 percent have high school diplomas), African-American males tend to have high school completion rates close to those of whites (81.9 percent and 86.7 percent, respectively). Yet, both Puerto Ricans and African Americans face difficulties in the labor market. Moreover, the disparities in college completion among the three groups are wide, a factor that also affects employment opportunities. Quality of education for Puerto Ricans and African Americans is another salient issue since both groups are concentrated in the inner cities and tend to be segregated in poor schools that provide a less rigorous and competitive education.<sup>5</sup>

Second, both Puerto Rican and African-American males have low levels of participation in the labor force compared to white males and have disproportionately high unemployment rates. Recent data show that 69.5 percent of black, 66.4 percent of Puerto Rican, and 76.4 percent of white men are working or looking for work. The tenuous labor force status of Puerto Ricans and blacks has been compounded by changes in the labor force. Because of their limited education and skills, for example, they are not eligible for newly created jobs which require higher levels of education and pay more; meanwhile, jobs in manufacturing and other low-skill industries have declined over the past two decades. In some cities, this poor economic status and lack of opportunity have contributed to tension between blacks and Latinos. Recent media coverage has documented this in Miami, New York, Los Angeles, and other major cities.<sup>6</sup> In addition, some African Americans have expressed their concerns over being isolated in such

largely Hispanic cities as Los Angeles and Miami, and even in such cities as Detroit, Michigan, where the Hispanic population is smaller than the African-American population but growing rapidly.

This economic tension is heightened by the discriminatory practices of many employers. Research has shown that African Americans and Latinos face a higher likelihood of being discriminated against than white Americans.<sup>7</sup> For example, a study by the Fair Employment Council of Greater Washington, D.C., which monitored the job search successes and failures of Hispanic, African-American, and white job candidates with comparable education and training found that more than one in five Hispanic (22.4 percent) and nearly one in four African-American (24.2 percent) job seekers were likely to experience employment discrimination.<sup>8</sup> Promoting and implementing remedies to address discrimination are complicated by the negative perceptions that reinforce stereotypes of both groups. To illustrate, a study of Chicago employers indicated that they associated black men with inferior education, lack of job skills, and unreliable performance; some also characterized Puerto Rican men, but not Mexican men, this way.<sup>9</sup>

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*... poor economic status and lack of opportunity have contributed to tension between blacks and Latinos.*

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Taken together, lower educational levels, competition for low-skill jobs, and employment discrimination contribute to the concentration of Puerto Rican and African-American males in low-paying jobs and marginal, unstable employment. Labor Department data show that 11.8 percent of Puerto Ricans and 13.9 percent of African Americans held jobs in the professional or managerial area compared to 27.3 percent of white males in 1990. By contrast, 12 percent of Puerto Ricans and 12.2 percent of African Americans and 7.5 percent of whites were employed as operators and laborers.

Such segmentation of Puerto Rican and African-American young men in occupations that rely on unskilled labor or low skill levels decreases their economic viability and places their families in a precarious socioeconomic position, as illustrated by the high poverty rates among Puerto Rican and African-American individuals, families, and children. In 1990, more than two in five Puerto Ricans (40.4 percent), and more than three in ten African Americans were poor (31.9 percent), compared to one in ten whites (10.1 percent). Poverty and poor economic status have been shown to be associated with limited social and economic opportunities, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and other risky behaviors, including crime.<sup>10</sup>

While there are insufficient data and research to both document and explain the experiences of Puerto Rican and African-American men in the criminal justice system,

preliminary studies show that a significant proportion of both populations in some cities are not making a successful transition either from youth to adulthood or from school to work. In addition, both African Americans and Hispanics, in general, constitute a disproportionate segment of homicide victims. Without increases in higher educational attainment, job growth, and reduced employment discrimination, Puerto Rican and African-American males will continue to work in jobs that hold little, if any, promise of social and economic stability and will continue to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system, suggesting that poverty and limited life opportunities may be passed on to future generations of Puerto Ricans and African Americans.

### **Policy Implications and Community-Based Strategies**

Developing and implementing effective initiatives to improve the educational and economic status of Puerto Rican and African-American males—and their families—will require community-based activities and policy intervention on a number of different issues and levels. For example:

*Education.* Education levels, skills acquisition, and job training for both groups need to be improved since there is a direct relationship between educational attainment and socioeconomic status.

*Employment.* Employment status is determined by educational attainment, but other factors play a role as well. The current economy is not creating sufficient numbers of jobs, contributing to increases in tension between groups—including Puerto Ricans and African Americans—at the lower economic scales.

*Poverty.* High poverty rates of families and children have a direct effect on educational and economic opportunities. Young families are especially vulnerable to future poverty.

*Discrimination.* Discrimination against young Puerto Rican and African-American males, especially employment discrimination, contributes to lower socioeconomic status, occupational distribution, intergroup competition and tension, and low self-esteem.

Some community-based models provide both direction and optimism for improving the socioeconomic status and life options of young Puerto Rican and African-American men. Such strategies are especially promising because they can be flexible in their provision of services and provide focused, individualized efforts that will give these young men the attention and support they need. For example:

- In Brooklyn, New York, El Puente is a comprehensive community-based organization that focuses on youth development with a holistic approach. Young men can participate in a range of activities that help to strengthen their self-concept and offer alternatives to negative lifestyles.

- At the Black Male Youth Enhancement Program in Washington, D.C., young black males are guided in the transition from youth to manhood with the aid of mentors

who serve as role models and offer help with careers.

•In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, El Centro de la Comunidad Unida/the United Community Center (UCC) has been nationally recognized for its youth development work. UCC serves both Latino and black young men and offers services that range from gang and substance abuse prevention to sports and music, combining education with recreational activities.

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 African Americans will be the next generation of workers and leaders; they represent a major economic resource—or burden. If they remain undereducated, undertrained, and underemployed, the impact will not only be felt by Puerto Ricans and African Americans, but also by their communities in general. Both community-based strategies and strong youth development policies are essential to ensuring their improved socioeconomic status and increased life opportunities.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see the civil rights chapter of *State of Hispanic America 1991: An Overview* (Washington, D.C.: National Council of La Raza, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>See material presented at the Urban Institute conference, "Nurturing Young Black Males: Challenges to Agencies, Programs, and Social Policy" (Washington, D.C., July 1992).

<sup>4</sup>Research from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, the Urban Institute, and others, has begun to focus on the issues affecting African-American males as well as policy responses to these problems.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, *The State of America's Children: 1991* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1991); *Beyond Rhetoric, A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Children, 1991); and Sonia Pérez and Denise De La Rosa Salazar, "Economic, Labor Force, and Social Implications of Latino Educational and Population Trends," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15, No. 2 (May 1993): 188-229.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, "Job competition heightens tension," *USA Today*, 29 January 1993, and "As Hispanic presence grows, so does Black anger," *New York Times*, 20 June 1993.

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Cordelia Reimers, "A Comparative Analysis of Hispanics, Blacks, and Non-Hispanic Whites," in George Borjas and Marta Tienda, eds., *Hispanics in the U.S. Economy* (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985), 27-75; and Margery Austin Turner, Michael Fix, and Raymond J. Struyk, *Opportunities Denied, Opportunities Diminished: Discrimination in Hiring* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>Marc Bendick, Charles Jackson, and Victor Reinoso, *Measuring Employment Discrimination Through Controlled Experiments* (Washington, D.C.: Fair Employment Council of Greater Washington, January 1993).

<sup>9</sup>Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn M. Neckerman, "'We'd Love to Hire Them. But...': The Meaning of Race for Employers," in Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson, eds., *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 203-232.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Janet Belva Finlay Simons and Alice Yang, *The Adolescent and Young Adult Fact Book* (Washington, D.C.: Children's Defense Fund, 1991); Walter Stafford, Robert Major, and Dawn Davis, *Cause for Alarm: The Condition of Black and Latino Males in New York City* (New York: Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, Inc., September 1991); and Sarah Jones, *Structural Impediments to Success: A Look at Disadvantaged Young Men in Urban Areas* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, October 1990).

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