

Beyond the Safety Net

A Brief Review Forty Years after the War on Poverty

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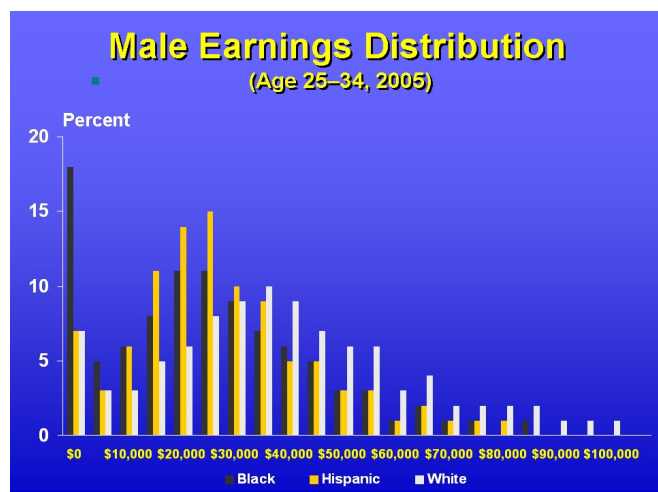
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This essay was originally going to be about forty years of real, if uneven, progress against material poverty. But in writing it, I found myself excluding large numbers of African Americans from the general progress that has been made. For them, poverty is deeper, more persistent, and, I fear, more difficult to ameliorate. I want, therefore, to focus on just one aspect of poverty policy: poverty in the African American community, and what can be done about it. Although I will focus on the plight of low-skilled African Americans, all my policy recommendations, except one, apply to all poor Americans.

First, some good news. Between 1968 and 2005, the black poverty rate fell from 35 percent to about 25 percent.¹ And as Table 1 shows, between 1974 (the first year such data are available) and 2004 the percentage of African Americans with any earnings at all grew over 20

percent faster than their increase in numbers, their mean earnings rose 57 percent, and their per capita earnings by 72 percent, to \$12,696. At the same time, per capita earnings for whites rose from \$12,882 to \$20,328, about a 58 percent rise.²

Figure 1



At the same time, some African Americans are mired at the bottom. Figure 1 portrays just one dimension of their situation; it shows the income of males ages 25 to 34 by race. For present purposes, the most striking thing is the high portion of black men with zero reported income: about 18 percent for blacks, compared to about 7 percent for whites and Hispanics.³ Although some of

these men are in school, this figure is a fair measure of how many black men are disconnected

¹U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Poverty Tables,” table 2, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/hstpov2.html> (accessed July 27, 2006).

²Author’s calculation from U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Population Estimates,” <http://www.census.gov/popest/estimates.php> (accessed July 27, 2006); and U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Income Tables—People, Table P-43, Workers (Both Sexes Combined) by Median Earnings and Mean Earnings,” <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/incpertoc.html> (accessed July 27, 2006).

³Author’s calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, “Detailed Income Tabulations from the CPS, 2006 ASEC (2005 Income),” table PINC-03, August 29, 2006, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/dinctabs.html> (accessed November 1, 2006).

from the mainstream economy. Another issue, of course, is the relative absence of African Americans from the right side of this distribution.⁴

In 2005, blacks were more than three times as likely as whites to be in “deep poverty,” that is, to have incomes below 50 percent of poverty (11.7 percent versus 3.5 percent). Hispanics were about twice as likely as whites to be poor (8.6 percent versus 3.5 percent).⁵ These patterns have not changed for at least fifteen years.⁶ African Americans also have longer spells in poverty. According to the Survey of Income and Program Participation, from 1996 to 1999, African Americans were about 50 percent more likely than whites to have had spells lasting more than a year, about 80 percent more likely to have had spells lasting more than two years, and about 70 percent more likely to have had spells lasting more than three years. Hispanic spell rates, by contrast, were about a quarter higher than white rates.⁷

What lies behind these numbers? I have always believed that, beyond any structural problems in the economy that may have aggravated black poverty (and poverty in general), the 100-year history of Jim Crow oppression and exploitation (on top of a century and a half of slavery) left African Americans especially vulnerable to the economic *and social* shifts of the second half of the twentieth century. (Daniel Patrick Moynihan called it “the earthquake that shuddered through the American family.”)⁸

We tend to forget that Jim Crow was a reality for many African Americans as recently as the 1960s and early 1970s. As a civil rights worker in Mississippi in the late 1960s, I saw the

⁴See, for example, Douglas J. Besharov, “The Economic Stagnation of the Black Middle Class (Relative to Whites)” (testimony, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington, DC, July 15, 2005), <http://www.welfareacademy.org/pubs/poverty/2005.0715.testimony/> (accessed December 4, 2006).

⁵Author’s calculation based on U.S. Census Bureau, “Poverty 2005, Poverty Highlights, Detailed Tables,” table POV01, August 29, 2006, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty05.html> (accessed November 1, 2006).

⁶Author’s calculation based on U.S. Census Bureau, “Poverty 2005, Poverty Highlights, Detailed Tables,” table POV01, August 29, 2006, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty05.html> (accessed November 1, 2006).

⁷Author’s calculation based on U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 4. Spells of Poverty for Persons Who Became Poor during the 1996 SIPP Panel, by Selected Characteristics: 1996–1999,” Detailed Tables, Survey of Income and Program Participation, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/sipp96/table04.html> (accessed November 14, 2006).

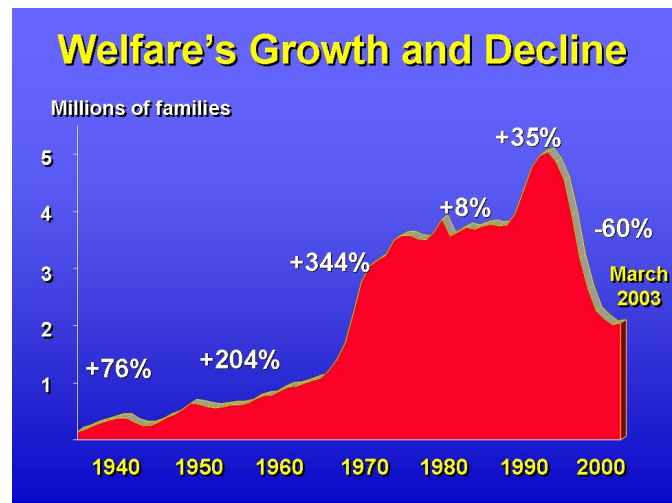
⁸Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Defining Deviancy Down,” *American Scholar* (1993): pp. 17–30, quoting Samuel H Preston, “Children and the Elderly: Divergent Paths for America’s Dependents” *Demography* 21, no. 4 (1984): 451; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Beyond Welfare,” Statement before the Senate Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, 100th Cong., 1st sess., January 23, 1987 (mimeo), p. 5, quoting Samuel H Preston, “Children and the Elderly: Divergent Paths for America’s Dependents” *Demography* 21, no. 4 (1984): 451.

conditions that Nicholas Lehman described in his book, *The Promised Land*.⁹ Tenant farmers lived in tar paper shacks and in perpetual debt to the landowner or local grocery store. Entire towns were denied water and sewer service because they were black. Diseased black children were refused admission to county hospitals. Separate schools for “colored” made a mockery of the claim of “separate but equal.” In the black and white schools that I visited for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the differences were palpable and shocking. In one white school, an entire gymnasium wall was covered with the musical instruments for the marching band. The “equal” black school had only one, beat-up trumpet, and nothing else. Mississippi welfare policy, when I was there, could have been called “move first” instead of “work first.” Black mothers signing up for assistance were told that there were jobs (and better welfare benefits) in the North. In Clarksdale, where I was located, the migration flow went to Chicago, so the black mothers were given bus tickets to Chicago.¹⁰

My main complaint, thus, about the last forty years of poverty policy is that it has not sufficiently appreciated the terrible impact of this experience on so many African Americans, and it has not mounted the kinds of programmatic interventions capable of undoing it.

The explosion of welfare reciprocity is just one small example of what happened when an oppressed, often illiterate, and predominantly rural population was finally given access to welfare benefits. Figure 2 portrays the AFDC/TANF caseload from 1936 to 2003. During the period 1960 to 1970, the national welfare caseload more

Figure 2



⁹Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

¹⁰See Fred Powledge, “The Great Migration,” *Transition*, no. 55 (1992), pp. 74–76, stating: “During the three decades ending in 1970, five million black Americans moved from the South to the North. It seemed easy and simple; the cost of a one-way train ticket from Clarksdale, Mississippi, to Chicago was \$11.50.” See also Stewart E. Tolnay, “Educational Selection in the Migration of Southern Blacks, 1880–1990,” *Social Forces* 77, no. 2 (1998), pp. 487–514.

than tripled¹¹ at the same time that the unemployment rate was cut in half, from almost 6.7 percent to under 3.5 percent.¹² This sharp rise in the national caseload was the direct result of the liberalization of welfare policies that allowed an ever larger number of *legally eligible* African Americans to receive welfare, first in the North, then in the mid-South, and then in the deep South.¹³ It is concrete evidence of pent-up human need, finally addressed with the end of Jim Crow welfare rules.

I am less enthusiastic about income support programs (cash and noncash) than are many others engaged in welfare policy discussions. I worry that incentives and phase-out rates can discourage work, penalize marriage, and encourage unexpected and counterproductive patterns of behavior.¹⁴ Most important, income support is not designed to bring a large proportion of low-skilled African Americans, especially the men, into the labor force. And, an increase in work must be an essential component of any successful poverty reduction strategy.

¹¹Author's calculation based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, "Average Monthly Families and Recipients for Calendar Years 1936–2001," May 25, 2002, <http://www.http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/news/stats/3697.htm> (accessed November 1, 2006).

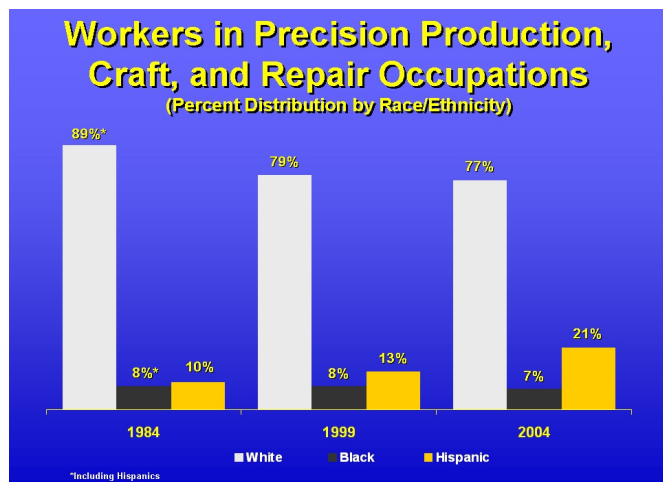
¹²See U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Unemployment Rate—Civilian Labor Force," <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/surveymost?ln> (accessed November 1, 2006).

¹³See generally R. Shep Melnick, *Between the Lines: Interpreting Welfare Rights* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994).

¹⁴See, for example, Robert Moffitt, "Incentive Effects of the U.S. Welfare System: A Review," *Journal of Economic Literature* 30, no. 1 (1992): p. 56, stating: "The literature on the incentive effects of the U.S. welfare system reviewed in this survey has shown unequivocal evidence of effects on labor supply, participation in the welfare system, and on some aspects of family structure. . . . The econometric studies show that labor supply is reduced by the AFDC and Food Stamp programs, that higher potential benefits induce greater participation in these programs, and that the programs affect family structure though usually weakly."

Many researchers have inventoried the achievement deficits and behaviors that sharply constrict the job prospects of African Americans, especially men.¹⁵ In 2004, for example, black males between ages 25 and 29 were seven times more likely than their white counterparts to be in

Figure 3



prison, 8.4 percent compared to 1.2 percent.¹⁶ A criminal record makes it even more difficult to be hired. Further reducing the job prospects of low-skilled blacks is the competition they now face from Hispanic immigrants.¹⁷ This is evident in Figure 3, the proportions of blacks and Hispanic workers in some skilled trades—mechanics and repairers, construction trades, and precision production occupations. Although the data for 1984 and 1999 are not completely compatible with the data for 2004,¹⁸ they are close enough to show the trend. During this fifteen-year period, the proportion of workers in these occupations who are Hispanic about doubled, but the proportion of blacks stayed about the same. The

¹⁵See generally Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer, and Paul Offner, *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006); and Ronald B. Mincy, ed., *Black Males Left Behind* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006).

¹⁶The U.S. Department of Justice, “The Nation’s Prison Population Continues Its Slow Growth,” press release, October 23, 2005, <http://www.ojp.gov/newsroom/2005/BJ06002.htm> (accessed October 31, 2006).

¹⁷See generally George J. Borjas, Jeffrey Grogger, and Gordon H. Hanson, “Immigration and African American Employment Opportunities: The Response of Wages, Employment, and Incarceration to Labor Supply Shocks” (Working Paper 12518, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12518> (accessed November 30, 2006); George J. Borjas, “Native Internal Migration and the Labor Market Impact of Immigration,” *Journal of Human Resources* 41 (Spring 2006): 221–258; and George J. Borjas, “Increasing the Supply of Labor through Immigration,” *Center for Immigration Studies Backgrounder* (May 2004), <http://www.cis.org/articles/2004/back504.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2006), estimating that immigration between 1980 and 2000 lowered the wages of high school dropouts by 7.4 percent, of college graduates by 3.6 percent, and of high school graduates and workers with some college by around 2 percent; and estimating that immigration lowered the wages of native-born white workers by 3.5 percent, of native-born blacks by 4.5 percent, and of native-born Hispanics by 5 percent.

¹⁸“Precision production, craft, and repair occupations” are shown in the figure for 1984 and 1999. For 2004, when a new occupational coding structure was used, precision production, craft, and repair occupations are approximated by the sum of construction and extraction occupations and installation, maintenance, and repair occupations.

number employed in these occupations rose in this period (although at only about half the rate of total employment), but this nevertheless suggests that Hispanic workers took the place of those zero-income black men in the job queue.

And that is why analysts on the left and right—most recently Harry Holzer, Peter Edelman, and the late Paul Offner¹⁹—have also focused their energies on those kinds of programs that might break the cycle of poverty that traps so many African Americans (and especially African American men). The track record for such efforts is disappointing. So, briefly, let me outline what I would try to do differently in three areas:

- Building human capital,
- Reducing unwanted pregnancies, and
- Undoing hidden racial discrimination.

Building human capital

Despite the political rhetoric and the advocacy of interest groups, few policy analysts seem to be strong proponents of remedial job training and education, because of the disappointing results in so many studies.²⁰ Perhaps job training and education programs have not been given a full and fair test, but it is difficult to see how we could ever mount a large enough and successful enough effort to put a significant dent in the problem. Instead, it is time to acknowledge that we have a serious and deep-seated problem that requires much more intensive and effective responses at various points in the lives of disadvantaged young people.²¹

Recently, there have been claims, for which I believe the evidence is weak, that expanded preschool programs (resembling Head Start) could eradicate the black/white achievement gap, reduce high school dropout rates, cut teen parenthood rates, raise earnings, and prevent crime.²²

¹⁹Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer, and Paul Offner, *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006).

²⁰See, for example, Daniel Friedlander, Gary Burtless, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, *Five Years After: The Long-Term Effects of Welfare-to-Work Programs* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 1995).

²¹See generally Douglas J. Besharov, *America's Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventive Strategy* (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, Inc., 1999).

²²See, for example, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, *Head Start Reduces Crime and Improves Achievement* (Washington, DC: Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006), <http://www.fightcrime.org/reports/headstartbrief.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2006), stating: “Head Start has narrowed the education achievement gap between low- and upper-income kids, increased high school graduation

Some of us find these to be wildly inflated claims based on weak research evidence. Properly oriented, such programs might be the basis of an effort to improve the child-rearing and other skills of young mothers, but such an effort would take a generation to show real results. Even then it would probably not be enough to counter the other forces that conspire to hold back so many disadvantaged children.

We need a permanent, institutionalized platform from which to provide vastly more effective educational services to disadvantaged youth, starting in their early teen years. We have a name for that platform. It is called “school.” It is difficult to see how there can be a real improvement in the life prospects of disadvantaged children without better schools. The Department of Education’s rigorous research effort under Grover Whitehurst and Phoebe Cottingham is a good start.²³ But the effort should be much larger, so that it can test many more approaches simultaneously. We need to gain knowledge about what works, and what does not work, at a much faster pace than in the past. And, besides academic subjects, I would argue for a sustained and clear-eyed commitment to career and technical education, including for those various craft trades mentioned earlier. College is not a realistic goal for many disadvantaged young people—but a dignified and well-paying job is.²⁴ As Table 2 shows, there will be a continuing demand for workers with less than a college education.²⁵

Table 2

Education/ training	Employment (percent distribution)		Total job openings (2000-2010)		Mean annual earnings (2000)
	2000	2010	Number (thousands)	Percent distribution	
Bachelor's or higher degree	20.7	21.8	12,130	20.9	\$56,553
Associate degree or postsec. voc.	8.1	8.7	5,383	9.3	\$35,701
Work-related job training	71.3	69.5	40,419	69.8	\$25,993

rates and reduced crime.”

²³The National Center for Education Research, “Education Research,” Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/programs/edresearch/index.html> (accessed November 21, 2006).

²⁴Robert I. Lerman, “Improving Links between High Schools and Careers,” in *America's Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventive Strategy*, ed. Douglas J. Besharov, pp. 185–212 (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, Inc., 1999); and Marie Cohen and Douglas J. Besharov, *The Important Role of Career and Technical Education: Implications for Federal Policy* (College Park, MD: University of Maryland Welfare Reform Academy, 2004), <http://www.welfareacademy.org/pubs/education/roleofcte.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2006).

²⁵Daniel E. Hecker, “Occupational Employment Projections to 2010,” *Monthly Labor Review* (November 2001), pp. 57–82, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2001/11/art4full.pdf> (accessed February 1, 2002); and Marie Cohen and Douglas J. Besharov, *The Important Role of Career and Technical Education: Implications for Federal Policy*

There is evidence, most recently from MDRC, showing that career-type academies (and some versions of what used to be called “voc ed”) can raise school attendance and graduation rates, raise later earnings, and, in some cases, even increase college attendance.²⁶

Reducing unwanted pregnancies

Michael Novak was, I think, the first to say that the family was the original Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.²⁷ Now that there is a separate Department of Education, the line does not work so well—but the underlying point is still as true as ever. I think all of us, even the skeptics, are eager to see the results of various evaluations of family strengthening activities such as those supported by the Bush administration.²⁸ But I would also like us to address more fundamental family formation issues. In many circumstances, especially for African Americans, the weakened family starts with unwed teen parenthood. There is, once again, an entire literature on this subject.²⁹ Here I will emphasize one point that is often lost in the rhetoric surrounding the issue and in program planning.

Many of the pregnancies that we bemoan are “unwanted.” But my research convinces me that although many disadvantaged women are poor contraceptors and face a host of forces that make it even more difficult to avoid pregnancy, many work hard to maintain control of their own fertility.

(College Park, MD: University of Maryland Welfare Reform Academy, 2004),
<http://www.welfareacademy.org/pubs/education/roleofcte.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2006).

²⁶See generally, Kemple, James J. and Judith Scott-Clayton, *Career Academies: Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes and Educational Attainment* (New York: MDRC, 2004); Kemple, James J. and Jason C. Snipes, *Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School* (New York: MDRC, 2000).

²⁷Michael Novak, “The Best Anti-Poverty Plan,” *Washington Times*, February 5, 1993, p. F1; Michael Novak, “The American Family, an Embattled Institution,” in *The Family: America's Hope*, ed. Harold M. Voth, James Hitchcock, Archbishop Nicholas T. Elko, Mayer Eisenstein, Leopold Tyrmand, Joe J. Christensen, Harold O.J. Brown, John A. Howard, chap. 1 (Rockford, Ill.: Rockford College Institute, 1979).

²⁸Compare Andrew J. Cherlin, “Should the Government Promote Marriage?” *Contexts* 2, no. 4 (2003): pp. 22–29, to Andrew J. Cherlin, e-mail message to Yael Levin, November 27, 2006, stating: “I have been saying recently in presentations that I think the random-assignment evaluations of relationship enhancement programs for low-income couples are worth doing but that I think much of the rest of the money will not be well spent.”

²⁹See, for example, Rebecca A. Maynard, ed., *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 1996).

To demonstrate my point, consider abortion rates. Table 3 is based on abortion data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The survey missed about 50 percent of all abortions, but most researchers think the patterns it reveals are essentially accurate.³⁰ Table 3 tallies the total number of reported abortions to women based on whether they also reported a teenage pregnancy. Among women interviewed at ages 40–44, 70 percent of all abortions were to women who had been pregnant as teenagers (resulting in either a birth, abortion, or miscarriage).³¹

Much could be done to help these women have better control over their own bodies—starting with the provision of more reliable contraceptives. (Condoms and even the pill have high failure rates for low-income women.)³² The practices of family planning clinics also need examination. Too many seem to provide little or no follow-up to women who have had pregnancy tests (and even abortions). Surely that would be a time to ask about whether the woman needed additional help with birth control.³³ Such an effort would also involve protecting young girls from early sexual abuse and exploitation. According to Laumann and colleagues, in 1992: “A much larger percentage of black women report not wanting their first experience of vaginal intercourse

Table 3

Cumulative Abortions for Women Ages 40–44
(2002 NSFG)

First pregnancy outcome as teens	Total number of women [†]	Number of abortions in lifetime				Cumulative abortions	
		0	1	2	≥ 3	Total number of abortions [‡]	Percent distribution
		Percent distribution					
First pregnancy occurred in teen years	4,078	31.1%	51.9%	77.4%	84.6%	2,895	69.0%
Live teen birth	2,545	27.2%	18.4%	6.7%	33.0%	690	16.4%
Teen abortion	1,125	-	26.9%	70.4%	50.1%	2,089	49.8%
Other outcomes**	409	3.9%	6.6%	0.4%	1.5%	116	2.8%
First pregnancy occurred at age 20 and over	6,339	68.9%	48.1%	22.6%	15.4%	1,301	31.0%
Total	10,417	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	4,196	100.0%

† In thousands.
** Including miscarriage, stillbirth and ectopic pregnancy.

³⁰ Author’s calculation based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, “National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle VI (2002),” <http://www.http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/da/index/techinfo/HI5061.HTM> (accessed November 27, 2006).

³¹ Author’s calculation from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, *2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)* (Washington, DC: National Center for Health Statistics, 2006), with public use data files downloaded from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm#Datadocpu> (accessed October 16, 2006).

³² Haishan Fu, Jacqueline E. Darroch, Taylor Haas, and Nalini Ranjit, “Contraceptive Failure Rates: New Estimates from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (1999): pp. 56–63.

³³ Douglas J. Besharov, Felicia H. Stewart, Karen H. Gardiner, and Molly L. Parker, ed., *Family Planning Services for Special Populations* (Menlo Park, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 1998).

to happen when it did than did women of other racial and ethnic groups, 41 percent compared to an average of 29 percent.”³⁴

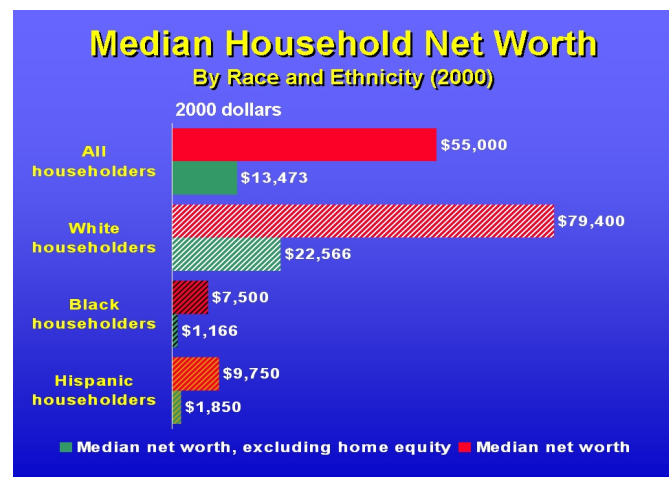
Undoing hidden racial discrimination

The goal of erasing racial bias and discrimination is, I fear, a very long-term goal—and goes far beyond the confines of our discussion. But what we should address immediately are those government policies that discriminate against African Americans, I hope, inadvertently.

First, *federal college aid*. Put simply, current aid formulas are tilted in favor of the white, middle class. The aid formula disregards all family assets when parental income is less than \$49,999 and, regardless of family income, ignores the home equity (however great) in the family’s principal residence. As Figure 4 dramatically shows, disregarding assets and home equity obscures important wealth differences between whites and blacks.³⁵ This might not be a problem if there were enough funds and more to go around, but there are not. Hence, the effect of these rules is to decrease the amount of aid available for the truly needy.

Second, *child support*. Current child support policies, designed to counter endemic nonsupport by middle-class fathers, create often substantial disincentives for low-income men to be in the formal economy—and criminalize many of them for their resulting anger and intransigence.³⁶ This hits black men most heavily. Surely, we can develop a system that makes more practical distinctions

Figure 4



³⁴Laumann, Edward O., John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 328–329.

³⁵Shawna Orzechowski and Peter Sepielli, “Net Worth and Asset Ownership of Households: 1998 and 2000,” *U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Reports P70–88* (2003), <http://www.http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/p70s/p70-88.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2006).

³⁶Harry J. Holzer, Paul Offner, and Elaine Sorenson, *Defining Employment among Young Black Less-Educated Men: The Role of Incarceration and Child Support* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2004), http://www.http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411035_declining_employment.pdf (accessed November 30, 2006); and Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer, and Paul Offner, *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006).

based on earnings potential and the social factors surrounding African Americans families. A full income pass-through would be an important step.

My last example is *child welfare services and foster care placement*. I believe we have overreacted to the poor child-rearing practices prevalent in some low-income, black communities, when they are more accurately viewed as the result of social and community factors.³⁷ By labeling cases of inadequate cognitive and social nurturing “child neglect” and even “child abuse,” and by using a quasi-law-enforcement intervention, we have inappropriately disrupted hundreds of thousands of families that would have benefitted more from a supportive intervention based, for example, on a nurse home-visitor model.

This essay has been of necessity brief. But I hope that it has helped frame the many complicated issues we face. We have learned a great deal in the last forty years, and made real progress against poverty. I believe that pursuing the ideas described here would move us to further gains.

³⁷Douglas J. Besharov, “Child Abuse Realities: Over-Reporting and Poverty,” *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2000): 165–203.