

HOW TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD FOR YOUNG BLACK MEN

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Just about 60 years ago, Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist who subsequently won the Nobel prize, published a highly influential book, *An American Dilemma*. The title referred to the conflict between America's belief in equality of opportunity for all and the widespread, often vicious, discrimination against descendants of African slaves. The recent Supreme Court ruling upholding affirmative action provides a convenient point to assess the uneven progress made toward solving this uniquely American dilemma and to consider possible measures -- including increased aid for education and a decriminalization of drugs -- to improve the situation of African Americans.

Myrdal showed that, as of the early 1940s, blacks were segregated in all regions of the U.S., especially in the South, where most lived. Blacks fell short of whites in education, income, health, housing, and opportunities. They were generally not fairly treated by the justice system and effectively could not vote in much of the South. Fortunately, in all these dimensions, African Americans have made enormous strides toward greater equality with white Americans.

The federal government abolished school and other segregation laws during the '50s, and the racial gap in years of schooling has narrowed a lot. Racial differences in life expectancy and other dimensions of health have also been greatly reduced. Half a century ago, most black women worked as servants, and black men were employed predominantly in unskilled occupations. Now, many men and women have advanced into clerical, skilled, and executive positions, including the first black Secretary of State, mayors of important cities, and chief executives of a few leading companies. The earnings of working black women almost equal those of white women, while the earnings shortfall of black men has shrunk.

But the news is not all good. For example, the male earnings gap is still about 25%, and the racial difference in earnings for both sexes has hardly contracted since the mid-1980s.

Moreover, in two disturbing respects the difference between the races has widened during the past few decades. Black families were quite stable until the '60s, if not quite as stable as those of whites. Although divorce and unmarried motherhood have increased throughout American society, they have exploded among blacks. Well under half of black children are in two-parent families, sharply down from about 75% in 1950, although there has been a little improvement since the mid-1990s.

The second concern is the huge increase in the number of black men in prison. They make up more than 40% of male prisoners, compared with about 12% of the overall population. For those incarcerated on drug-related charges, the black share is almost 60%. Only a slim majority of young black men are not in prison, on parole, bail, or probation, or have not been arrested at least once.

There's reason to believe this shortage of desirable male companions discourages black women from marrying or staying married for long. The downward spiral is self-perpetuating. Studies suggest that the decline in the presence of fathers in black families harms sons more than daughters. As a result, the rapid growth in the number of black men in prisons impairs the following generation of black males as well.

The challenge is to find effective ways to narrow the gap between the circumstances of young blacks and whites. Of course, increasing the stability of black families should have a high priority -- as the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan recognized several decades ago. Unfortunately, some states still make it difficult for two-parent families to collect welfare. Especially for poor families, the tax laws should provide an extra benefit to intact families, instead of punishing them as these welfare laws do.

A longer-run reform would be to improve the schooling of young blacks, since their earnings still trail those of whites, partly because of the growing economic advantage of a good education. That improvement will not be easy while so many black families are without two parents, but an expanded Head Start program and greater competition among schools in the inner city through vouchers and charter schools would help. Among other things, competition would produce more schools that cater to the special needs of black males.

Finally, the time has come to decriminalize drugs. Trafficking in drugs attracts young blacks mainly because it offers much better pay (provided they don't get caught) than do the legal alternatives, which tend to be low-wage jobs. Even conservatives and liberals who are reluctant to make drugs legal have to recognize that the present system does enormous damage to the black community, especially to the many black men who spend years in prison on drug charges.

The American racial dilemma of a half-century ago has been much eased, but a large inequality between young black and white males exists. That should become the main focus of public policies on racial questions.