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BLACK MEN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR WORK

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS PERSIST

Driven by deep dissatisfaction with the economic and social condition of the black family, Daniel Patrick Moynihan hoped, with the release of his 1965 report, to stimulate a national discussion linking economic disadvantage and family instability. Although Moynihan focused on the structural causes of the fragmentation of the black family, critics associated his report with the “culture of poverty” thesis, which implies that poverty is passed from one generation to the next through learned behavior.

A number of those critics emphasized Moynihan’s suggestion that the problem “may indeed have begun to feed on itself.” From 1948 to 1962, the unemployment rate among black males and the number of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) cases were positively correlated, but after 1962, the number of new AFDC cases continued to rise even as

black male unemployment declined. “With this one statistical correlation, by far the most highly publicized in the Report,” states historian Alice O’Connor, “Moynihan sealed the argument that the ‘pathology’ had become self-perpetuation.”

Still, Moynihan’s main concern in the report involved black exclusion from opportunities that fortify economic self-sufficiency. Unlike conservative analysts, he combined economic and cultural explanations for the persistence of poverty. Nevertheless, the controversy that surrounded the report undermined for decades serious research on the complexity of the problem.

A 1987 study by one of this article’s authors, William Julius Wilson’s *The Truly Disadvantaged*, rekindled the debate with its discussion of institutional and cultural dynamics in the social transformation of the inner city. Research undertaken

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since that time has reinforced the need for more coordinated, government-directed efforts to dismantle structures that reinforce racial and class-based biases and inequalities. To this end, Moynihan's call for an expansion of such things as youth employment opportunities, improvements in high-quality education programs, greater housing options, and a broadening of income supplements to combat inequality is as pertinent today as it was in 1965.

Concentrated Disadvantage and Socialization in the Inner City

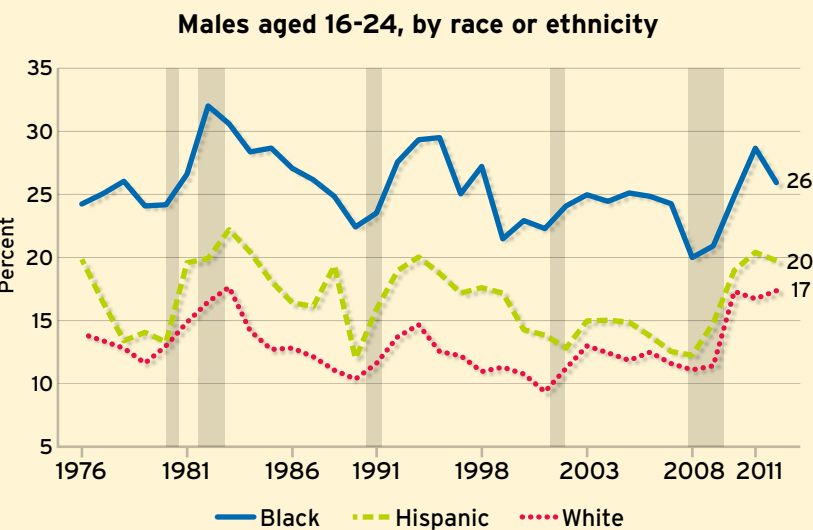
The Truly Disadvantaged chronicles the rise of poor black single women with children, the decline in marriage among the poor, the increase in concentrated urban black poverty, and escalating joblessness among young black males. It links sociodemographic changes in the inner city to shifts in the labor market, the outmigration of higher-income black

and white families, and the concomitant decline in services available to poor black families left behind. The analysis suggests that in such neighborhoods, many households lack the resources necessary to sustain stable family life, but it links that fact to structural factors such as persistent exclusion from employment opportunities, social networks, and institutions that are essential for economic mobility.

Both Moynihan and subsequent researchers have acknowledged the critical significance of the family as the primary socializing influence on children and youth. The data show that the percentage of children growing up in single-parent homes has continued to increase (see "Was Moynihan Right?" *features*, Spring 2015, Figure 1). Trends are similar for all races and classes, but the percentages remain highest among families in poor, minority neighborhoods. Indeed, the issue is so acute that law professors June Carbone of the University of Minnesota and Naomi Cahn of George Washington University have recently opined that "marriage has disappeared from the poorest communities" in the U.S.

Most Likely to Be Unemployed and Not in School or Training (Figure 1)

Rates are cyclical, increasing during recession periods, but have been higher throughout for young black men compared to young white and Hispanic men.



NOTES: Respondents reported being unemployed, part-time unemployed, or not in the labor force and also not enrolled in school or vocational training. Whites and blacks include respondents who reported their race as "white alone" or "black alone" and do not include Hispanics. Excludes non-civilians. Shaded areas indicate recession periods as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

SOURCE: Authors' tabulations from US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1976–2011

The numbers by themselves are stark, but when considered in isolation, they do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the major social and economic forces buffeting inner-city black families. In particular, the dramatic mismatch between skill level and employment opportunities among black males has further undermined marriageability in the inner-city black community. In these neighborhoods, poor black children are increasingly likely to grow up in family units whose dire financial circumstances affect every aspect of their physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Their caregivers' abilities to envision and execute a concerted strategy to ensure their children escape poverty is constrained by their own social location, economic circumstances, and restricted access to information.

The Role of Institutions

Many of society's intermediary institutions, whether intended to support social and economic advancement or punish antisocial behavior, have a disproportionate impact on poor black families. Such organizations include public schools, social service agencies, and juvenile and criminal justice systems. Even at the earliest stages in their cognitive development, inner-city black children are less likely to be enrolled in a high-quality child-care arrangement, which puts them at an enormous disadvantage compared to their white and better-off



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counterparts. Low-income caregivers do not have access to a broad range of choices among high-quality providers of this crucial service. Compared to their higher-income neighbors, caregivers in poorer communities have fewer options when it comes to the provision of regulated child care, and these programs are also disproportionately more likely to experience funding cuts during periods of austerity. Child-care choices among poor inner-city residents are also constrained by issues of trust and safety that often outweigh quality. Inadequate preschool education has important implications for the social and academic domains of child development, and the negative ramifications can last well into adulthood.

When they enter primary school, low-income, inner-city black youth are clustered in failing schools. They are more likely to be suspended or enrolled in special education classes, less likely to graduate from high school on time, and, indeed, more likely to drop out of school altogether.

Consequently, as they enter adulthood, many young blacks, particularly males, are less likely to enter the workforce or postsecondary educational institutions. As Figure 1 indicates, young black males have experienced unemployment and been disconnected from schools and vocational institutions at rates ranging from 20 to 32 percent. By 2011, after the end of the last recession, more than one-quarter of young black males were neither employed nor enrolled in school or vocational educational training. The rates for white and Hispanic young people were also very high, around 20 percent, but throughout most of the past few decades rates of disconnection among black youth have been higher than for the other two groups.

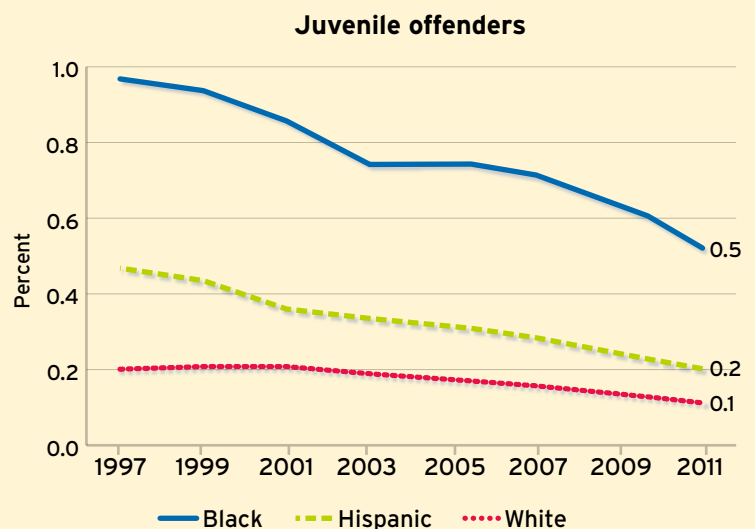
Furthermore, many government institutions that have an impact on the lives of poor black families focus more on regulating and controlling behavior than on improving skills and providing opportunity. Poor families who qualify for cash or noncash means-tested benefits are disproportionately exposed to rules that inhibit job seeking and discourage two-parent households.

Moreover, black youth are more likely than their peers to be confined in secure detention and correctional facilities. Admittedly, detention rates since

1977 have been steadily declining for all youth. There are a number of plausible explanations for the decline, including the downward shift in the violent-crime rate among youth in recent years. And the juvenile justice system is now more focused on prevention and rehabilitation as opposed to the harsh sentencing approach of prior decades. That said, black youth, in comparison to white youth, are still disproportionately more likely to be arrested. Furthermore, young black arrestees, compared to their white counterparts, are also more likely to have their case formally adjudicated by the courts,

Most Likely to Be Locked Up (Figure 2)

Detention rates have been steadily decreasing for all youth, but black youth are still disproportionately more likely to be confined in detention and correctional facilities.

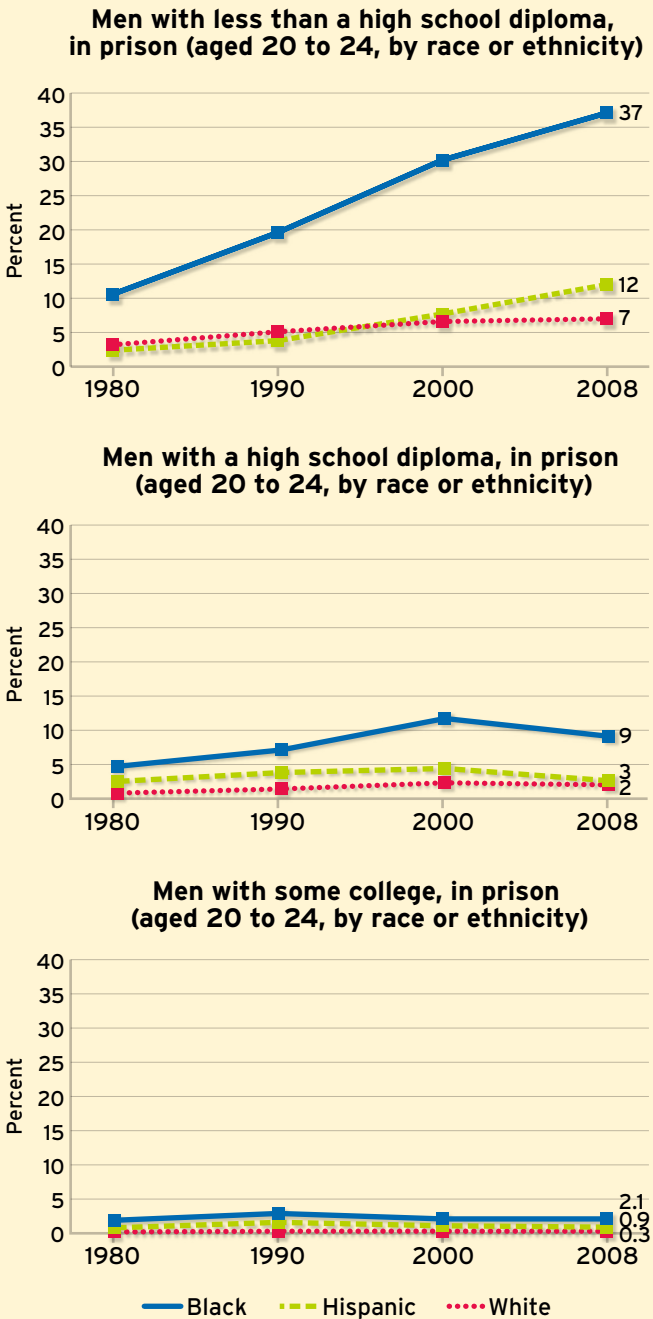


NOTES: Numbers are for juveniles ages 10 through the upper age of each state's juvenile court jurisdiction. Whites and blacks do not include Hispanics. Totals include 3,402 juvenile offenders in 1997, 2,646 in 1999, 2,436 in 2001, 1,398 in 2003, 1,467 in 2006, 1,749 in 2007, 2,568 in 2010, and 2,325 in private facilities for whom the state of offense was not reported. Data are only available for 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2010, and 2011.

SOURCE: Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, National Center for Juvenile Justice and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, 2013

Education and Incarceration (Figure 3)

Black men aged 20 to 24 with less than a high school diploma are far more likely than white or Hispanic men of the same age and education level to be in jail or prison.



NOTES: Population estimates combine the number of non-institutionalized civilians from the Current Population Survey March Supplement with inmate totals from Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data on penal populations from 1980 to 2008. Whites and blacks do not include Hispanics.

SOURCE: "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility," The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010

and, following a hearing, they are disproportionately more likely to be placed in an out-of-home detention facility. Black youth were nearly five times as likely to be in detention or correctional facilities in 2011 than white youth (see Figure 2).

Contact with school-based disciplinary committees and the juvenile justice system is just a harbinger of a much more ominous trend that is gutting low-income minority communities of their male residents. As a group, black men were six times more likely than white men to be incarcerated in 2010, and blacks constitute nearly half of all people jailed and imprisoned in the U.S. today. The difference between black and white incarceration rates for young men varies greatly by education level (see Figure 3). Research conducted by sociologists Bruce Western and Becky Pettit shows a dramatic rise in incarceration rates for young black male high-school dropouts over time. By 2008, approximately 37 percent, or three in eight, were behind bars. The one bit of good news is the noticeable drop—from 11 to 9 percent from 2000 to 2008—in the detention rate of young black males with a high school diploma. Among blacks with some college, the rate falls to around 2 percent, similar to that for young men from other racial and educational backgrounds.

As a result of the escalating incarceration rates among less-educated black males, poor black children are more likely than white or Hispanic children to experience a period when at least one of their parents is incarcerated. As seen in Figure 4, rates for black children with an incarcerated parent more than quadrupled from 1980 to 2008. It should also be noted that close to half of black children with fathers who were high school dropouts had an incarcerated father at some point. The overall implications, therefore, are that poor black children and youth in disadvantaged communities are embedded in family and institutional arrangements that result in socialization experiences that are fundamentally different from those of their peers.

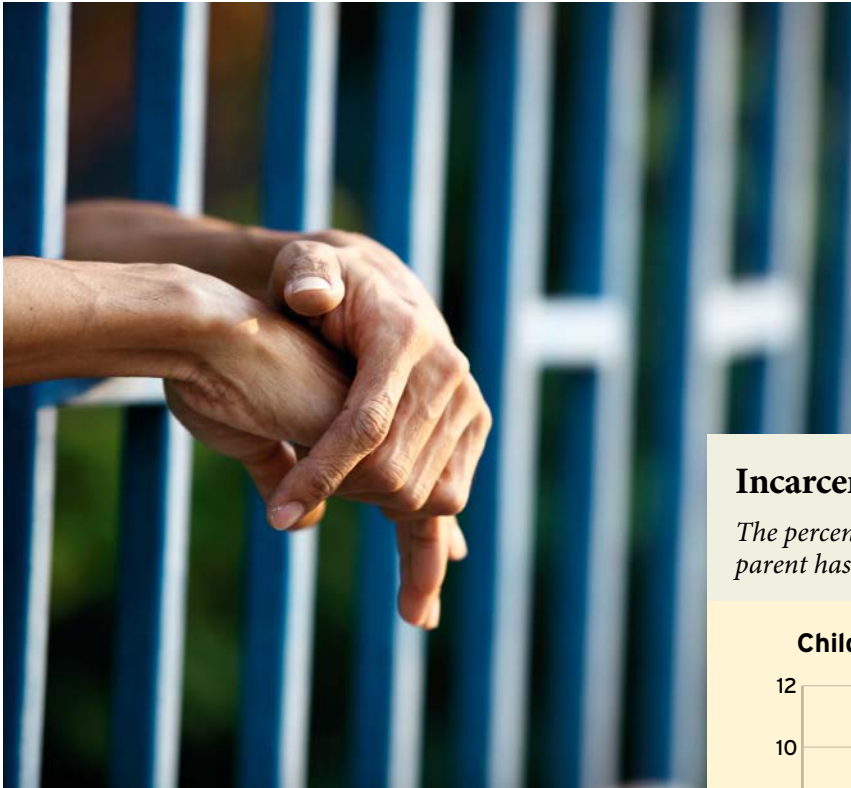
The Role of Neighborhoods

Inner-city neighborhoods are often where all of these dynamics collide, yet youth exposed to these influences are expected to share the aspirations and expectations of their counterparts in better-off communities and to acquire the capacity to make the choices necessary to realize them. Low-income parents are often severely constrained in their ability to help guide their children's engagement with critical facilitators of upward mobility, such as schools, and it is left to youth themselves to formulate and exercise strategic choices that might prove to be avenues out of poverty. These youth are seriously impeded, however, as a result of the gap between the knowledge they accumulate in the restrictive social environment in which they operate and the skills and know-how they need to transcend it.

In high-poverty neighborhoods, the effect on negative



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black children across all socioeconomic strata reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods compared to poor and nonpoor white children.

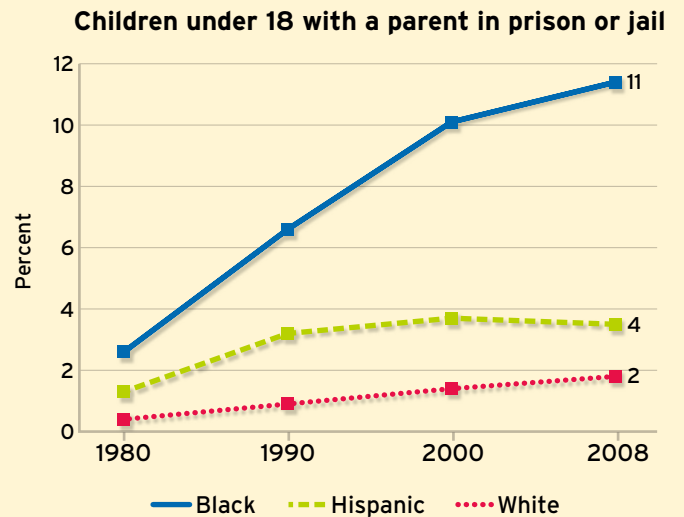
The residential distribution of poor (and nonpoor) Hispanic children followed a somewhat different pattern from that of blacks, influenced, in part, by a 29 percent growth in this population since 2000 and their subsequent migration to less blighted regions in the U.S. Like black children, however, Hispanic children of any socioeconomic background are disproportionately more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods than white children.

youth outcomes increases significantly. Chronically poor neighborhoods, those with poverty rates at or above 40 percent, have higher rates of school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and crime, and lower scores on cognitive and verbal skill tests and health indicators among school-age children. As Figure 5 reveals, many poor black and Hispanic children remain disproportionately exposed to conditions in high-poverty neighborhoods with all their deleterious impacts on family well-being.

Between 1990 and 2000—a period of economic growth, tight labor markets, and changes in government welfare policies—the percentage of poor black children living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty declined from 24 percent to 15 percent. The improvement was short-lived, however, and the concentration of poor black children in high-poverty neighborhoods began to increase again in the next decade. Although not as sharp, the trend line for all black children followed a similar pattern, showing the increased likelihood that

Incarceration and Children (Figure 4)

The percentage of black children with an incarcerated parent has more than quadrupled since 1980.



NOTES: Population estimates combine the number of non-institutionalized civilians from the Current Population Survey March Supplement with inmate totals from Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data on penal populations from 1980 to 2008. Whites and blacks do not include Hispanics.

SOURCE: "Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effect on Economic Mobility," The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010



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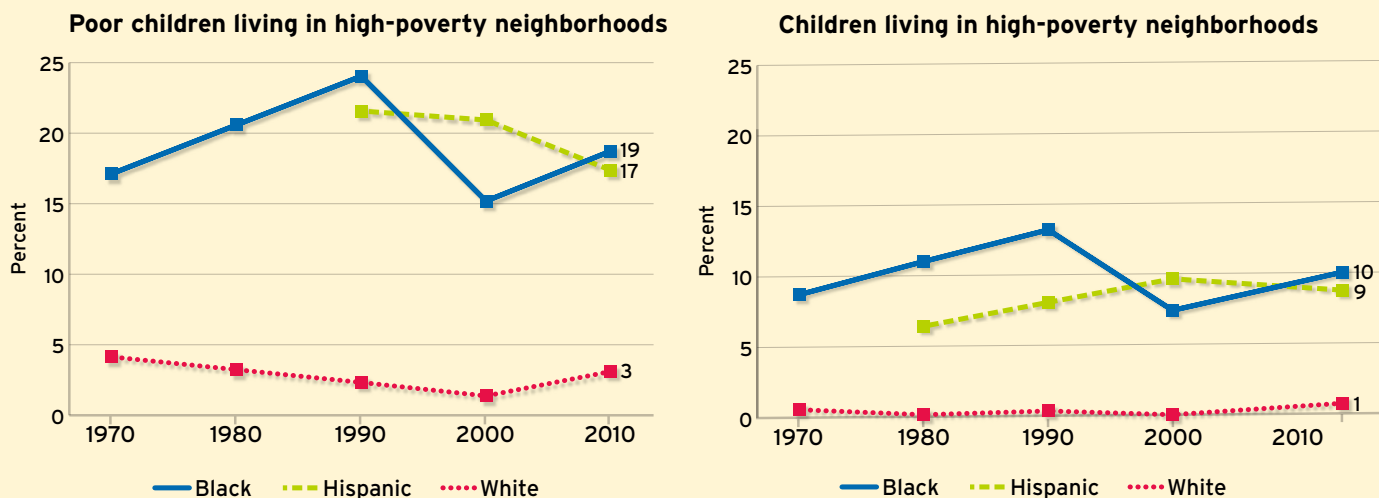
Addressing the Need

Confronting poverty and inequality in the inner city requires that we recognize the complex, interrelated problems facing poor black families. This necessitates an effective, sustained, and coordinated mission of government-funded institutions to support opportunities for economic self-sufficiency among the poor, which has yet to be realized. Recently, the Obama administration funded numerous efforts to revitalize poor, underresourced neighborhoods by expanding “ladders of opportunity” for youth of color. For example, Choice and Promise Neighborhoods, Promise

Zones, and the Strong Cities, Strong Communities initiatives seek to enhance family and community ties and better embed households in networks of institutional supports to improve the in-school and extracurricular experiences of school-age children. Building on neighborhood-empowerment efforts dating from the 1960s, these initiatives seek to create enhanced social contexts that extend choice-making capacity and practical opportunities to act on them. Just as importantly, this emphasis on coalition building has motivated the formation of new alliances among important service providers and community-based organizations that recognize the

Neighborhood Comparison (Figure 5)

Poor black and poor Hispanic children are disproportionately exposed to high-poverty neighborhoods.



NOTES: Poor children are residents under the age of 18 living in households reporting income below the poverty level. High-poverty neighborhoods are defined as census tracts where at least 40 percent of families report incomes below the poverty level. Whites and blacks include children whose race was reported as “white alone” and “black alone.” Because the available data do not separate Hispanics from whites and blacks in 1980 and 1990 by age, we estimated percentages for nonHispanic whites and blacks in 1980 and 1990 based on linear interpolations of the proportion of nonHispanic whites among total whites in each year. Hispanics are included in whites and blacks in 1970 due to limitations in reported data. Data for Hispanic families are only available beginning in 1980, and data for the poverty status of Hispanics by age are only available beginning in 1990.

SOURCE: Authors’ tabulations from 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Censuses and 2008–2012 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

feature

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enormous potential that such collaborations can realize.

Many of these initiatives represent innovative attempts by the federal government to bring the combined resources of inter-agency collaboration to bear on tackling intractable social problems. It is therefore surprising that a more concerted effort is not being made by the administration to tout its significant investments and advances in this regard, and articulate an overarching framework that integrates all of these initiatives and formulates a rationale for how they may complement and inform one another in a cohesive, long-range fashion.

Thus far, the Obama administration's efforts to address the social and physical isolation of disadvantaged and disenfranchised poor families of color lack the size and focus that Moynihan vigorously championed. Many of the administration's place-based strategies can best be considered as multisite demonstration programs, since they only reach a fraction of the beleaguered neighbor-



To confront poverty and inequality in the inner city, we must recognize the complex, interrelated problems facing poor black families.

rather than provide pathways to self-sufficiency and equality of opportunity. Increased efforts must be devoted to rectifying the large-scale fragmentation and lack of uniformity in the mission and practice of schools, social service agencies, and workforce development centers that are intended to support



Many societal institutions exacerbate the disadvantaged status of poor families rather than provide pathways to self-sufficiency and equality of opportunity.

hoods and disenfranchised children and youth that reside in them. Congress has seriously hampered the replication and expansion of these programs by refusing the administration's repeated requests for additional funds.

Fifty years ago, Moynihan worried that too much responsibility was being placed on community-action programs to address the problems of persistent family poverty. Moynihan implied that these initiatives only go part of the way toward influencing the choice sets available to the poor, as well as the actions such choices energize. Indeed, the combined effects of the multiple forces that we touched upon, ones that disproportionately prevail upon too many poor, urban children of color are not going to be solved by incremental approaches. Under current conditions, many societal institutions exacerbate the disadvantaged status of poor families

the social and economic mobility of disadvantaged families.

Regrettably, the misinterpretation and intense criticism of the implicit "culture of poverty" observations in Moynihan's report precluded a serious public discussion of the need to tackle these impediments to the progress of the poor. Even more regrettable, the need to acknowledge and address them is all the more urgent 50 years later.

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