



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

August 20, 2010

# Too Long Ignored

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

**A tragic crisis of enormous magnitude is facing black boys and men in America.**

**Parental neglect, racial discrimination and an orgy of self-destructive behavior have left an extraordinary portion of the black male population in an ever-deepening pit of social and economic degradation.**

**The Schott Foundation for Public Education tells us in a new report that the on-time high school graduation rate for black males in 2008 was an abysmal 47 percent, and even worse in several major urban areas — for example, 28 percent in New York City.**

**The astronomical jobless rates for black men in inner-city neighborhoods are both mind-boggling and heartbreaking. There are many areas where virtually no one has a legitimate job.**

**More than 70 percent of black children are born to unwed mothers. And I've been hearing more and more lately from community leaders in poor areas that moms are absent for one reason or another and the children are being raised by a grandparent or some other relative — or they end up in foster care.**

**That the black community has not been mobilized en masse to turn this crisis around is a screaming shame. Black men, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, have nearly a one-third chance of**

being incarcerated at some point in their lives. By the time they hit their mid-30s, a solid majority of black men without a high school diploma have spent time in prison.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for young black men, with the murderous wounds in most cases inflicted by other young black men.

This is a cancer that has been allowed to metastasize for decades. Not only is it not being treated, most people don't even want to talk about it. In virtually every facet of life in the United States, black people — and especially black boys and men — are coming up short. White families are typically five times as wealthy as black families. More than a third of all black children are growing up in poverty. In Ohio, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty, the percentage is more than half.

There are myriad reasons for this awful state of affairs. As with so many other problems in American society, a lack of gainful employment has been a huge contributor to the problems faced by blacks. Chronic unemployment is hardly a plus-factor for marriage and family stability. And the absence of strong family units with mature parental guidance is at the very root of the chaotic environment that so many black youngsters grow up in.

The abominable incarceration rates among blacks are the result of two overwhelming factors: the persistence of criminal behavior by a significant percentage of the black population, and a criminal justice system that in many respects is racially discriminatory and out of control. Both of these factors need to be engaged head-on, and both will require a staggeringly heavy lift.

Education in the broadest sense is the key to stopping this socioeconomic slide that is taking such a horrific toll in the black community. People have to understand what is happening to them before they can really do much about it. Young blacks who have taken a wrong road, or are at risk of taking a wrong road, have to be shown a feasible legitimate alternative.

The aspect of this crisis that is probably the most important and simultaneously the most difficult to recognize is that the heroic efforts needed to alleviate it will not come from the government or the

wider American society. This is a job that will require a campaign on the scale of the civil rights movement, and it will have to be initiated by the black community.

Whether this is fair or not is irrelevant. There is very little sentiment in the wider population for tackling the extensive problems faced by poor and poorly educated black Americans. What is needed is a dramatic mobilization of the black community to demand justice on a wide front — think employment, education and the criminal justice system — while establishing a new set of norms, higher standards, for struggling blacks to live by.

For many, this is a fight for survival. And it is an awesomely difficult fight. But the alternative is to continue the terrible devastation that has befallen so many families and communities: the premature and often violent deaths, the inadequate preparation for an increasingly competitive workplace, the widespread failure to exercise one's intellectual capacity, the insecurity that becomes ingrained from being so long at the bottom of the heap.

Terrible injustices have been visited on black people in the United States, but there is never a good reason to collaborate in one's own destruction. Blacks in America have a long and proud history of overcoming hardship and injustice. It's time to do it again.



More in Opinion (1 of 25 articles)

OPEN

## **Editorial: Questions About the Gulf**

[Read More »](#)