

BLACK MEN MAKING IT IN AMERICA:

**The Engines of Economic
Success for Black Men
in America**

*W. Bradford Wilcox,
Wendy R. Wang,
and Ronald B. Mincy*





Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: <i>Introduction</i>	4
CHAPTER 2: <i>Black Men Who Have Made It</i>	7
CHAPTER 3: <i>Assessing Conventional Accounts of Black Men's Success</i>	12
CHAPTER 4: <i>Other Engines of Opportunity for Black Men</i>	16
CHAPTER 5: <i>Conclusion</i>	20
APPENDICES	24

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last decade, much of the racial news and academic research on black men in America has been sobering, if not downright depressing. But negative news isn't the only story about race or even about black males in the United States. In *Black Men Making It in America*, we report some good news:

- **Black men's economic standing.** More than one-in-two black men (57%) have made it into the middle class or higher as adults today, up from 38% in 1960, according to a new analysis of Census data. And the share of black men who are poor has fallen from 41% in 1960 to 18% in 2016. So, a substantial share of black men in America are realizing the American Dream—at least financially—and a clear majority are not poor.
- **The institutional engines of black men's success.** As expected, higher education and full-time work look like engines of success for black men in America. But three other institutions that tend to get less attention in our current discussions of race—the U.S. military, the black church, and marriage—also appear to play significant roles in black men's success. For instance, black men who served in the military are more likely than those who did not to be in the middle class when they reach mid-life (54% vs. 45%), according to our new analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). Black men who frequently attended church services at a young age are also more likely to reach the middle class or higher when they are in their fifties: 53% of those men who attended church as young men made it, compared to 43% who did not. Finally, about 70% of married black men are in the middle class, compared to only 20% of never-married black men and 44% of divorced black men.
- **The importance of individual agency.** Black men who score above average in their sense of agency—measured by reports that they feel like they are determining the course of their own lives versus feeling like they do not have control over the direction of their lives—as young men or teenagers in the late 1970s are more likely to be prosperous later in life. Specifically, 52% of black men who had a higher sense of agency as young men made it into at least the middle class when they reached age 50, compared to 44% of their peers who did not have that sense of agency.

At the same time, we find that another institution—the criminal justice system—stands as an obstacle to success for black men in America.

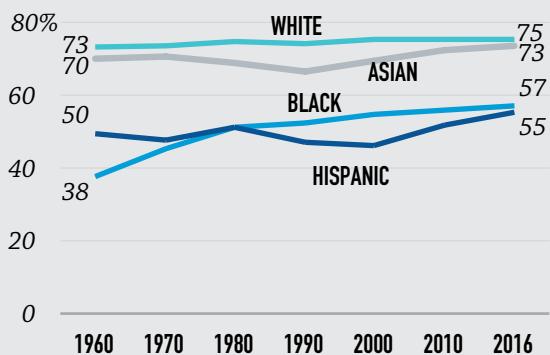
- **Contact with the criminal justice system.** By midlife, only 28% of black men who had contact with the criminal justice system when they were young have moved into the middle or upper class, compared to 52% of black men who had no contact with the criminal justice system at a younger age.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Share in middle or higher income among men by race/ethnicity, 1960-2016

% of men in the middle or upper-third income brackets



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 64. Income refers to total family income adjusted by family size.

Source: Decennial censuses 1960-2000 and American Community Surveys 2010, 2016 (IPUMS).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

Over the last decade, much of the racial news in America has been sobering, if not downright depressing. Trayvon Martin. Tamir Rice. Walter Scott. Ferguson. Baltimore. Charleston. And, of course, Charlottesville. Writers and scholars like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Michelle Alexander have underlined the enduring character of racial inequality and racism in America, and the ways in which America's racial divide has exacted a particular kind of toll on black men¹ and black boys.²

Recent research from the Equality of Opportunity Project, "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective," only reinforces the seemingly negative news about black men and black boys. This new research shows that black boys experience markedly lower economic mobility—not only compared to white boys, but also black girls.³

But negative news is not the only story about race in America or even about black males. There are also signs of progress. Barack Obama's rise to the presidency is one example of the ways in which the United States has made racial progress. There are other examples—such as declines in self-reported racial prejudice, the growing share of Americans who marry across racial lines, and declines in the racial gap and the number of African American men in prison.⁴

In this report, we seek specifically to answer two important sets of questions that bear on the *economic fortunes of black men in America*:

1. **What share of black men have reached the middle class or higher as adults? What share are in poverty?**
2. **What are the key institutional and cultural engines of economic success for black men in America today?**

¹ In this report, the terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably. White, blacks, and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Asians include Pacific Islanders.

² Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) and Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

³ Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective," The Equality of Opportunity Project, March 2018.

⁴ Gretchen Livingston and Anna Brown, *Interracism in the U.S.: 50 Years After Loving v. Virginia*, Topline Report (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017); John Gramlich, "The gap between the number of blacks and whites in prison is shrinking," Fact Tank, (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018).

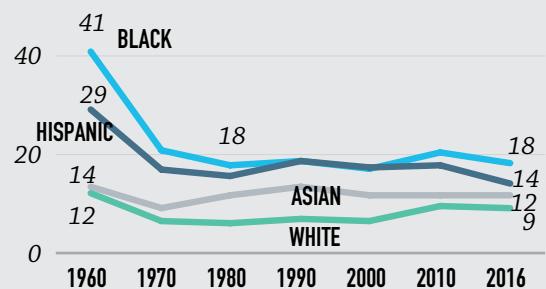
The answers to these questions provide some good news about the economic standing of African American men. In particular, *Black Men Making It in America* offers four key sets of findings worth noting:

- 1. Black men's economic standing.** The share of black men who have made it into the middle class or higher as adults stands at 57%—that is, more than one-in-two black men. This is up from 38% in 1960, according to a new analysis of Census data. At the same time, the share of black men who are poor has fallen from 41% in 1960 to 18% in 2016. When we focus on the economic welfare of black men in middle age via the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), we see similar trends playing out for black men in their fifties today. In other words, a substantial share of black men in America are realizing the American Dream—at least financially—and a clear majority of them are not poor.
- 2. Education and work as engines of black men's success.** Standard accounts of black men's economic fortunes focus on three key institutions: education, work, and contact with the criminal justice system. Not surprisingly, higher education and full-time work stand out as engines of success for black men in America. Black men who get at least some college education or are employed full time are much more likely than those who are not to have reached at least the middle class in their fifties. And by midlife, only 28% of black men who had contact with the criminal justice system when they were young have moved into the middle or upper class by midlife, compared with 52% of black men who avoided contact with the system. These three institutions are also linked in predictable ways to the odds that fifty-something black men are poor.
- 3. The military, marriage, and the Black Church as engines of black men's success.** But other institutions also appear to lift black men's economic fortunes. Black men who served in the military are more likely than those who didn't to be in the middle class when they reach midlife (54% vs. 45%). Black men who frequently attended church or other religious services at a young age are also more likely to reach the middle class or higher when they are in their fifties: 53% of those men who attended church as young men made it, compared to 43% who did not. Finally, black men's marital status is strongly associated with their economic status at midlife. About 70% of married black men are in the middle class, compared with only 20% of never-married black men and 44% of divorced black men.

Share in poverty among men by race/ethnicity, 1960-2016

% of men in poverty

60%



Notes: Based on adults ages 18 to 64. Poverty status is determined by total family income as a percentage of the federal poverty thresholds.

Source: Decennial censuses 1960–2000 and American Community Surveys 2010, 2016 (IPUMS)

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

4. **The importance of individual agency.** Black men who score above average in their sense of agency—measured by reports that they are directing the course of their lives versus feeling like they are not in control of their lives—as young men or teenagers in the late 1970s are more likely to be prosperous as fifty-something men in the 2010s. Specifically, 52% of black men who had a higher sense of agency as young men succeeded, compared to 44% of their peers who did not have that sense of agency. This agency may reflect advantages they experienced growing up, expectations of future success, underlying personality traits, or an orientation to life they adopted.⁵ Young black men who see themselves as captains of their fate are more likely to be financially successful in their fifties, even after controlling for factors like their education, employment history, and marital status.

The public conversation about race in America, and the fortunes of black men in particular, has been sobering of late, and for reasons that are all too understandable. But there are also reasons for hope and models of success worth dwelling upon when it comes to thinking about race in America. In particular, in examining the economic fortunes of American black men, we find that almost one-in-two have made it to the middle class or higher by midlife. Here is their story.

⁵ John S. Carton and Erin E.R. Carton, "Nonverbal Maternal Warmth and Children's Locus of Control of Reinforcement," *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 22, no. 1 (March 1998): 77-86; Margo Coleman and Thomas DeLeire, "An Economic Model of Locus of Control and the Human Capital Investment Decision," *The Journal of Human Resources* 38, no. 3 (Summer, 2003): 701-721; James Heckman, Jora Stixrud, and Sergio Urzua, "The Effects of Cognitive and Noncognitive Abilities on Labor Market Outcomes and Social Behavior," *Journal of Labor Economics* 24, no. 3 (2006): 411-482.

CHAPTER 2

Black Men Who Have Made It

To understand black men who have made it into the middle class or higher income brackets in midlife, we track a cohort of men born between 1957 and 1964 from their early years to ages 50 and older, using data from the NLSY79.⁶ The data indicates that almost half of black men (48%) are at least in the middle class by the time they reach their fifties, judging by their total family income (adjusted for their family size).

Compared with white men in this cohort, black men overall are less likely to be in the middle or upper-third of the income distribution by age 50. But the economic gap between these two groups of men varies across different life stages. White men's economic standing is fairly stable at three life stages—ages 14 to 22, the mid-thirties and mid-fifties—but black men experience more upward and downward mobility. And the economic gap between black men and white men is bigger when they are in their fifties than when they are in their thirties.

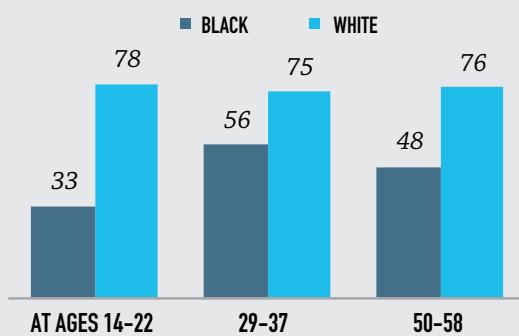
At ages 14 to 22, when these men were surveyed for the first time in the NLSY79, only 33% of black men were in the middle- or upper-third income brackets, compared with 78% of their peers who were white. This income ranking is based on the family income reported in the previous year, adjusted by family size. The income sources can be either from parents or from these men themselves if they lived independently at the time.

Black men did much better when they were in their thirties, when over half of them (56%) were in the middle- or upper-income brackets. However, the share dropped to 48% when these men reached their fifties. In contrast, white men's overall economic status hardly changed over time: 75% of white men were in the middle- or higher-income brackets in their thirties. And the share remained about the same 20 years later, when these men were in their fifties.

Black and white men's economic fortunes follow a similar pattern when it comes to the other end of the economic ladder. As teenagers and

Share of black and white men in middle or higher income, at three life stages

% of men in the middle or upper-third income brackets



Notes: Based on men born between 1957 and 1964, surveyed in 1979, 1994, and 2014. Income refers to total family income adjusted by family size.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

⁶ Based on respondents surveyed in 2014, the most recent wave of NLSY79.

Poverty rate of black vs. white men at three life stages

% of men in poverty



Notes: Based on men born between 1957 and 1964, surveyed in 1979, 1994, and 2014.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

young adults in the late 1970s, more than one-third of black men lived in poverty, compared with 8% of white men of the same age. The share of black men in poverty dropped by half when these men were in their thirties but went up to 27% in their fifties. By comparison, the poverty rate of white men was much lower overall. White men's poverty rate dropped slightly in their thirties but went up again when they reached their fifties; however, the change was on a much smaller scale.

By their fifties, slightly more than one-quarter of black men lived in a household that was poor, compared with 9% of white men in the same cohort.

The higher volatility in black men's economic standing over time may reflect the differences in employment status and health between black men and white men when they reach midlife. In the NLSY79 cohort, slightly over half of black men (55%) were working full time in their fifties, compared with 76% of white men of the same age group. On the other hand, black men are more likely than white men to have health conditions that limit the kind of work or other activities they can do when they reach their fifties (17% vs. 12%).

A portrait of financially successful black men

By age 50, about half of black men (48%) in the NLSY79 cohort have made it to the middle or upper-third of the income distribution.

Compared with the other half of black men who didn't make it, these financially successful black men are different from their peers on an array of characteristics.

First of all, they are much more likely to have graduated from college or community college, to be working full time, and to be married. Compared with their peers who didn't make it to the middle class, these middle-aged black men are also more likely to come from middle- or upper-income households when they were teenagers and young adults. Despite this, a majority of these successful black men are still from lower-income homes (59%).

If we could look back in time, we might spot these successful black men serving in the military or attending church as teenagers or young adults. And at a young age, they were also much less likely to be charged with a crime than their peers.

About the Data and Methodology

Findings in this report are mainly based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 cohort (NLSY79). When relevant, data from the Census and American Community Survey are also analyzed.

NLSY79 follows the lives of a national representative sample of American youth (with black and Hispanic youth oversamples) born between 1957 to 1964. The survey started in 1979 when the respondents (N=12,686) were ages 14 to 22. These young adults were interviewed annually between 1979 and 1994 and on a biennial basis afterwards. The latest wave (Round 26) was surveyed in 2014, when the cohort were ages 49 to 58. Overall, 3,405 men ages 50 to 58 were surveyed in the most recent wave in 2014. Black men who stayed in the latest wave (n=933) are the adults spotlighted in this report. The findings are weighted to reflect the characteristics of the overall population of this cohort.

Middle-class or higher-income brackets: The economic status of men in this study is measured by their total family income in the previous year, adjusted by family size. Based on the overall income distribution, men's family income falls into three income categories: lower (bottom 1/3 of the income distribution), middle (middle 1/3), and higher incomes (top 1/3 of the distribution).

Poverty status: Men's poverty status is measured by the ratio of gross family income to the federal poverty level in the previous year for their family size.

There are also things about these black men that are less easy to observe: These men scored higher on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT), a test measuring their general knowledge. And when it comes to what is driving their lives, themselves, or their environment, these teenagers or young men scored higher on an agency scale that tapped whether they believed they had control over their lives rather than being driven by fate or their environment.

Health is another factor that differentiates black men who made it at least to the middle class by their fifties, compared to those who did not. The vast majority of middle-class black men (93%) are free of health issues in their fifties, yet about three-in-ten of the same-age black men in poverty have health issues that limit the type of work and other activities they can do.

A note on agency

The Rotter Locus of Control Scale is used to measure the sense of agency in this study. The scale was designed to measure the extent to which individuals think they have personal control over their lives (a sense of internal control) as opposed to the extent that they do not believe they have control and are subject to chance, fate, or the environment (external control). The scale used in NLSY79 is a shorter version of a questionnaire adapted from the 60-item Rotter Adult I-E scale by Rotter (1966). See Appendix for more details.

Characteristics of black men who are in poverty and in the middle class

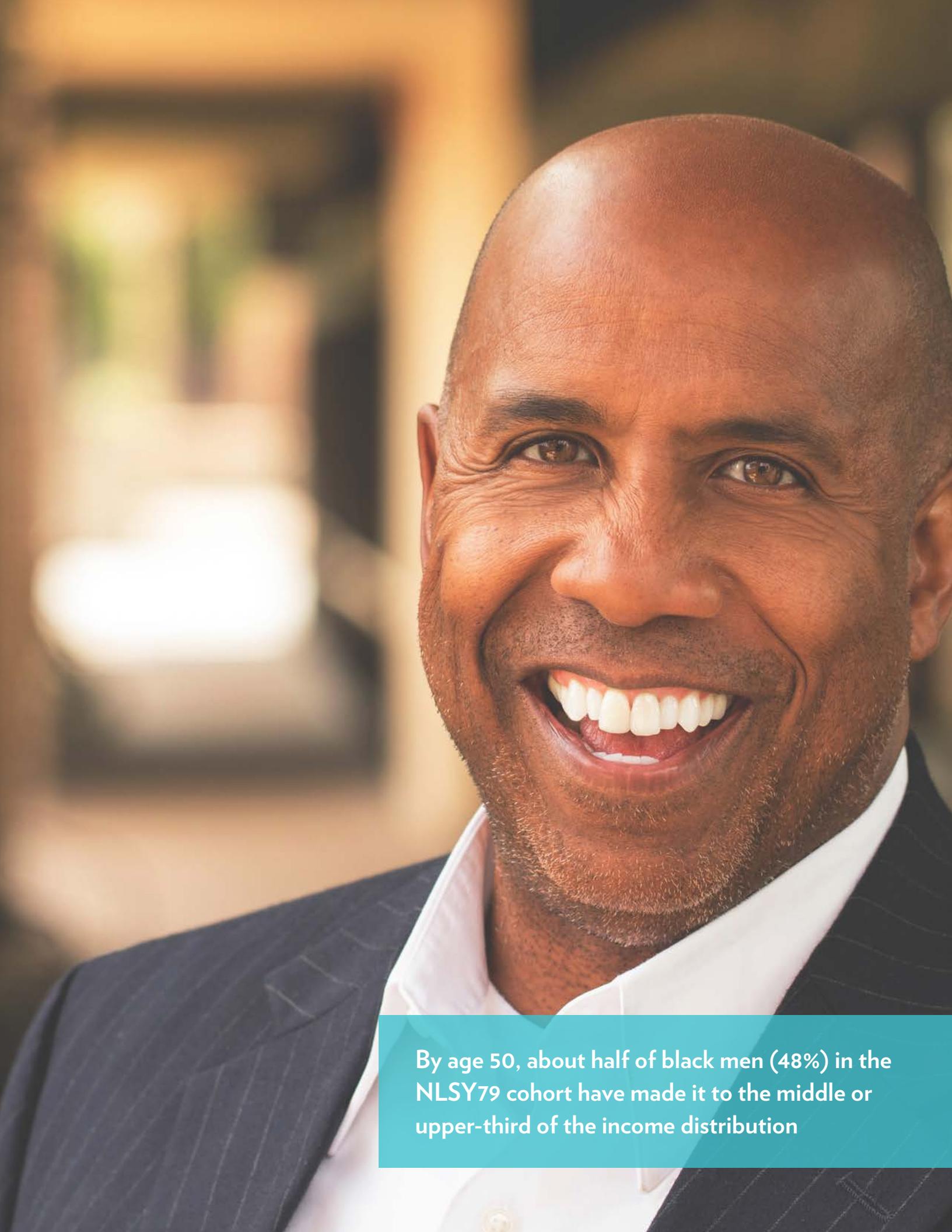
%	IN POVERTY	MIDDLE OR UPPER	ALL (BLACK MEN)	ALL (WHITE MEN)
EDUCATION				
College educated	2	29	15	32
Some college	15	24	21	21
High school	65	44	54	40
LT high school	18	3	10	6
WORK STATUS AT AGES 50-58				
Working full time	20	82	55	76
Part time	7	4	7	4
Not working	73	14	38	19
MARITAL STATUS AT AGES 50-58				
Married once, still married	8	31	20	45
Remarried	8	30	21	22
Divorced/Separated/Widowed	29	27	29	22
Never-married	54	12	29	10
FAMILY INCOME AT AGES 14-22				
Higher	4	14	9	42
Middle	19	27	25	35
Lower	77	59	67	22
ABOVE MEDIAN AFQT SCORE (1981)	6	22	14	62
ABOVE MEDIAN LOCUS OF CONTROL SCORE (1979)	44	47	43	53
RELIGIOUS SERVICE ATTENDANCE (1979)				
Several times a month or more	39	52	46	39
Less often than that	61	48	54	61
EVER BEEN CHARGED WITH A CRIME (1980)	24	9	16	14
SERVED IN THE MILITARY AS OF AGE 22	19	33	27	16
HEALTH ISSUES AT AGE 50 AND OLDER	30	7	17	12

Notes: Based on black men and white men surveyed in the 2014 wave of NLSY79.

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

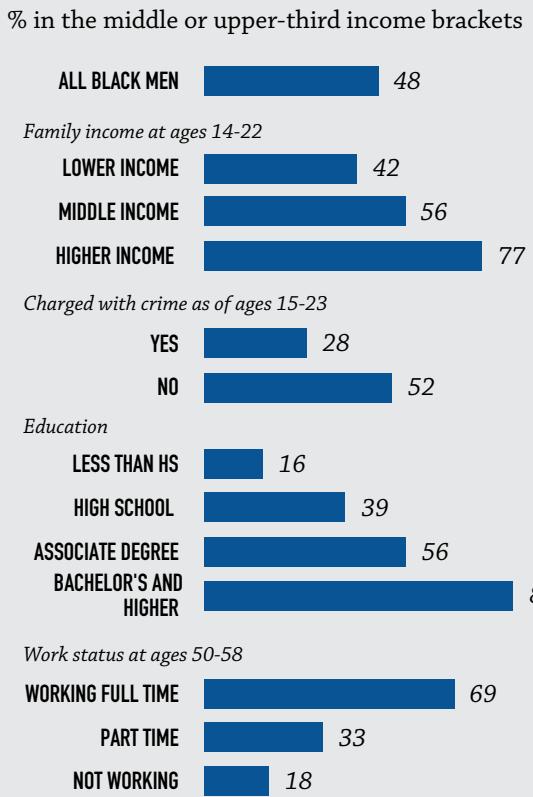


By age 50, about half of black men (48%) in the NLSY79 cohort have made it to the middle or upper-third of the income distribution

CHAPTER 3

Assessing Conventional Accounts of Black Men's Success

Black men's economic status at ages 50-58, by structural factors: income, education, work, and crime



Notes: Based on black men born between 1957 and 1964. Income refers to total family income adjusted by family size.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

Recent accounts of black men's economic well-being in America have focused on the role of education, work, the criminal justice system, and racism in accounting for African American men's economic fortunes. Many of these factors also reflect social structural barriers that disproportionately affect black men when it comes to their economic opportunities.

The role that human capital formation—in the form of education and test scores—plays in black men's success looms large in the work of economists such as Bhashkar Mazumder, June O'Neill, Derek Neal, and William Johnson.⁷ David Autor and Larry Katz have spotlighted the impact of changing labor market conditions—for instance, the polarization of job opportunities in the U.S.—in understanding black men's income.⁸ Sociologists Becky Pettit and Bruce Western have explored how contact with the criminal justice system negatively impacts the employment and career trajectories of black men.⁹ Devah Pager and her colleagues have shown how racial discrimination is a major obstacle when it comes to employment for African Americans, with their research indicating that black job applicants are about half as likely to receive a callback or job offer compared to equally-qualified white applicants.¹⁰

Most of our findings are in line with these conventional accounts of black men's economic welfare. When it comes to human capital accumulation, black men who have more of it are more likely to be flourishing financially in their fifties. Two important measures of human capital—the AFQT score, which measures general knowledge,

⁷ Bhashkar Mazumder, "Black-White Differences in Intergenerational Economic Mobility in the United States," *Center for Economic Perspectives*, Working Papers 11-40 (2014): 1-18; June O'Neill, "The Role of Human Capital in Earnings Differences Between Black and White Men," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 4, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 25-45; and Derek Neal and William Johnson, "The Role of Pre-market Factors in Black-White Wage Differences," *Journal of Political Economy* 104, no. 5 (1996): 869-895.

⁸ David Autor, *The Polarization of Job Opportunities in the US Labor Market: Implications for employment and earnings* (Center for American Progress and The Hamilton Project, 2010). David Autor, L.F. Katz, and Melissa Kearney, "Trends in US wage inequality: Revising the revisionists," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 90, no. 2 (2008): 300-323.

⁹ Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, "Incarceration and Racial Inequality in Men's Employment," *ILR Review* 54, no. 1 (2000): 3-16; Bruce Western, "The Impact of Incarceration on Wage Mobility and Inequality," *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 4 (2002): 526-546.

¹⁰ Devah Pager, Bruce Western, and Bart Bonikowski, "Discrimination in a Low-Wage Labor Market: A Field Experiment," *American Sociological Review* 74, no. 5 (2009): 777-799.

and education—are closely linked to black men’s success in midlife. For example, 75% of black men who scored in the top 50th percentile of the AFQT are in the middle class or higher-income brackets when they reach midlife, compared with 43% of their peers who scored in the bottom 50th percentile. And a clear majority of black men with at least some college education have made it to the middle- or upper-third of the income distribution when they are in their fifties. By contrast, the share of black men who didn’t finish high school but made it to middle- or upper-third of the income distribution is only 16%.

It is not surprising to see that black men’s employment status plays a role in their economic standing. Nearly 70% of black men who work full time at ages 50 to 58 are at least in the middle class. And the share is much lower among those who work part time (33%) or who are not working for pay (18%). On the flip side, only 10% of middle-aged black men who work full time are in poverty, compared with half of their peers who are not employed (53%).¹¹

Consistent with previous research, black men who had contact with law enforcement as teenagers and young adults are less likely to be in the middle class later in life. Only 28% of black men who were charged with a crime earlier in life have made it to the middle class when they reach midlife. And a much larger share of these black men (44%) are in poverty at ages 50 to 58. Our findings about contact with the criminal justice system can partly be taken as a measure of racism, given that research indicates that black men are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and incarcerated than white men for similar offenses.¹²

In a comprehensive multivariate context where black men’s characteristics at three different life stages are included, these socioeconomic factors are highly predictive of the attainment of middle- or upper-income status for black men in their fifties. As shown on page 15, to test the various factors potentially predicting black men’s economic standing at midlife, we included early characteristics of these black men, such as their family economic background, religious attendance, crime, and military service in Model 1, added education, work status, and marital status measured in their thirties in Model 2, and again in their fifties in Model 3.

Model 3 suggests that black men who lived in upper-income families when they were teenagers and young adults or who had at least some college education are more than three times more likely to be in the middle class or higher. Full-time employment in one’s fifties is associated with a six-fold increase in the odds of reaching the middle or upper class for black men in their fifties.

Having an above median AFQT score more than doubles the odds of making it, whereas having contact with the criminal justice system reduces it by about 60% (Model 1), though the effect of these two factors appears to be mediated by their impact on education, work, and marriage in black men’s life in their thirties and beyond. Indeed, a path analysis of the NLSY79 (see Appendix, Table A2) indicates that the effect of a criminal charge as a young man on the fifty-something incomes of black men is mediated by its relationship with work and

¹¹ See Appendix Figure A3 for details.

¹² Alfred Blumstein, “Racial Disproportionality of US Prison Populations Revisited,” *U. Colo. L. Rev.* 64 (1993): 743-760; Robert D. Crutchfield, George S. Bridges, and Susan R. Pitchford, “Analytical and Aggregation Biases in Analyses of Imprisonment: Reconciling Discrepancies in Studies of Racial Disparity,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 31, no. 2 (1994): 166-182; David. B. Mustard, “Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Disparities in Sentencing: Evidence from the U.S. Federal Courts,” *The Journal of Law and Economics* 44, no. 1 (April 2001): 285-314; Sonja B. Starr and M. Marit Rehavi, “Racial Disparity in Federal Criminal Sentences,” *Journal of Political Economics* 122, no. 6 (2014): 1320-54.

especially marriage in their thirties. In other words, black men who have contact with the criminal justice system are less likely to work full time and to marry, both of which help explain the link between contact with the criminal justice system and less income in midlife. Note also that among black men, we found no association between childhood family structure and their odds of being in the middle- or higher-income brackets by midlife in our multivariate models.

Many of these factors are also linked to the odds that fifty-something black men are poor. For instance, contact with the criminal justice system more than doubles men's odds of being poor in their fifties, although this effect seems to be mediated by its impact on their work and marital status (see [Appendix, Table A3](#)). A college education and full-time work also dramatically reduce the odds that black men experience poverty in midlife. And, again, we find no evidence that childhood family structure affects black men's odds of being poor as middle-aged adults.

In general, then, education and work boost the fortunes of black men in America in significant and important ways. Coming from a more affluent home as a young man also helps, while contact with the criminal justice system hurts the chances that black men are flourishing financially in their fifties. Insofar as many of these factors are influenced by structural factors—residential segregation, educational inequality, and racial disparities in the criminal justice system, for instance¹³—the findings in this section also suggest that structural factors play an important role in helping to shape which black men in America make it.

¹³ Scott Winship, Richard Reeves, and Katherine Guyot, “The Inheritance of Black Poverty: It’s All About the Men,” (Washington, D.C., Brookings Institution, 2018).

Logistic regression models predicting the odds of black men being in the middle/higher income brackets at ages 50-58

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
FAMILY INCOME AT AGES 14 TO 22 (vs. lower income)						
Middle	1.59*	0.22	1.23	0.24	1.49	0.27
Higher	3.97***	0.39	3.43***	0.43	4.8**	0.49
ABOVE MEDIAN AFQT SCORE	2.72***	0.39	1.14	0.37	1.14	0.42
ATTENDING RELIGIOUS SERVICE REGULARLY AT AGES 14 TO 22 (vs. not)	1.77**	0.19	1.73*	0.21	1.76*	0.23
LOCUS OF CONTROL SCALE AT AGES 14 TO 22	1.09*	0.04	1.10*	0.04	1.13*	0.05
CHARGED WITH CRIME AS OF AGES 15 TO 23	0.38***	0.27	0.62	0.31	0.52	0.33
MILITARY SERVICE AS OF AGE 22	1.72**	0.21	1.40	0.24	1.22	0.26
EDUCATION (MODEL 2 AT AGES 29 TO 37, MODEL 3 AT AGES 50-58) (vs. less than HS)						
HS or GED	1.49	0.32	1.91	0.44		
Associate degree	4.54***	0.38	3.86**	0.49		
Bachelor's or higher	11.67***	0.54	13.14***	0.59		
WORK STATUS (MODEL 2 AT AGES 29 TO 37, MODEL 3 AT AGES 50-58) (vs. not working)						
Full time	1.51	0.25	6.46***	0.27		
Part time	0.53	0.37	1.18	0.48		
MARITAL STATUS (MODEL 2 AT AGES 29 TO 37, MODEL 3 AT AGES 50-58) (vs. never married)						
Married once, still married	4.05***	0.25	7.3***	0.34		
Remarried	5.09***	0.37	5.5***	0.34		
Divorced, Separated, Widowed	1.61	0.30	3.2***	0.31		
N	585		582		581	

Notes: *** p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05. Based on black men surveyed in 2014. All models control for mothers' education, family structure at age 14. Model 2 and 3 also control for region of residence and whether respondents live in a central city, and Model 3 also controls for health conditions at age 50 and older.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

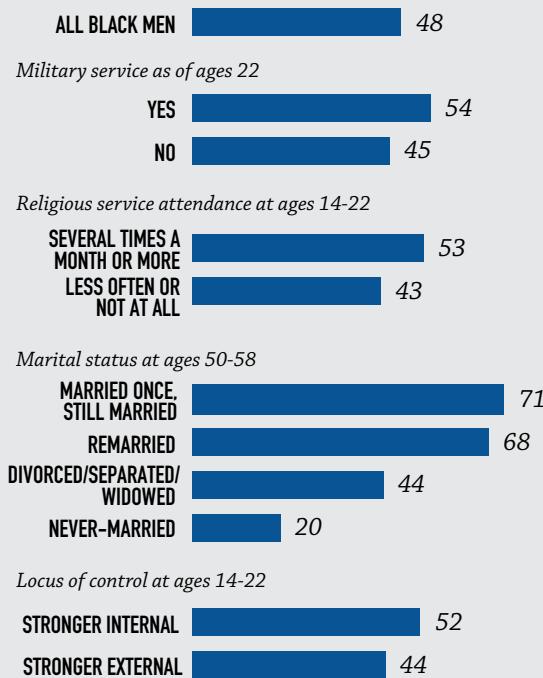
Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

CHAPTER 4

Other Engines of Opportunity for Black Men

Black men's economic status at ages 50-58, by institutional and agency factors

% in the middle or upper third income brackets



Notes: Based on black men born between 1957 and 1964.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

It looks like education and work are important avenues of success for black men, while contact with the criminal justice system is an important barrier. But other institutions, and orientations, also appear to matter when it comes to understanding why some black men make it in America. In this chapter, we explore the role that three institutions—military service, marriage, and churchgoing—seem to play in lifting the odds that African American men reach the middle-class or higher-income levels. We focus on these institutions in part because they tend to get less attention in contemporary discussions of the economic welfare of black men.

Especially since black men were fully integrated into the United States military in 1948, the armed services have been an important engine of opportunity for African American men. By providing stable work, good healthcare, housing, and opportunities for advancement, by championing virtues such as duty, responsibility, loyalty, and perseverance, and by pushing racial integration, the U.S. military has served as an important route into the middle class for many black men.¹⁴ The military's role as an engine of opportunity has been particularly important because a comparatively small share of black men have any college education. In the cohort of NLSY79, only 15% had a college education (and even today, only 18% of black men have a college education, compared to about 36% of white men).¹⁵

Military service has also proved critical because it increases the odds that African American men marry.¹⁶ The income, benefits, and marriage-oriented culture of the U.S. military—which does not offer benefits to cohabiting partners—would seem to help explain why one study found that the military is the one place where there is no racial gap in marriage rates in America.¹⁷

¹⁴ Glen H. Elder, "Military Times and Turning Points in Men's Lives," *Developmental Psychology* 22, no. 2 (1986): 233-245; Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub, "Socioeconomic Achievement in the Life Course of Disadvantaged Men: Military Service as a Turning Point, circa 1940-1965," *American Sociological Review* 22, no. 2 (1986): 347-367. But see: Joshua Angrist and Alan B. Krueger, "Why Do World War II Veterans Earn More than Nonveterans?" *Journal of Labor Economics* 12, no. 1(1994): 74-97.

¹⁵ Richard Reeves and Katherine Guyot, "Black Women are Earning More College Degrees, But That Alone Won't Close Race Gaps," *Social Mobility Memos*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018).

¹⁶ Jay Teachman, "Race, Military Service, and Marital Timing: Evidence from the NLSY-79," *Demography* 44, no. 2 (2007): 389-404.

¹⁷ Jennifer H. Lundquist, "When Race Makes No Difference: Marriage and the Military," *Social Forces* 83, no. 2 (2004): 731-757.

Among men born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, black men were most likely to serve in the military, according to our analysis of NLSY79. As of age 22, 27% of black men in this cohort had served in the military, compared with 16% of white men, and 20% of Hispanic men. Such service is associated with higher odds of flourishing financially: 54% of black men with military experience made it into the middle class or higher, compared to 45% with no such experience.

The institution of marriage has lost ground over the last half century, but the economic gap between men who are married and those who are not endures.¹⁸ Marriage is associated with greater work hours, more strategic work choices, fewer firings, and higher individual and family incomes for men.¹⁹ In other words, marriage seems to make men work harder and more strategically, to their personal financial benefit.²⁰ Today, men also benefit financially, in most families, from having a partner who is also in the workplace. Black men are no exception.²¹ Indeed, among middle-aged black men who are currently married, seven-in-ten are in the middle- or upper-third income brackets when it comes to their household income. On the other hand, only 20% of never-married black men made it to the same income brackets as fifty-something men. Clearly, black men who are married are markedly more likely to make it in America.

Churchgoing is also linked to greater odds that black men reach the middle-class or higher-income brackets in midlife. Research suggests that churchgoing reduces the odds that black men have contact with the criminal justice system and increases the odds that they are employed or in school.²² The economist Richard Freeman found that religious attendance “affects allocation of time, school-going, work activity, and the frequency of socially deviant activity” in ways that tend to benefit young black men.²³ Likewise, sociologist Elijah Anderson’s work indicates that religious attendance is associated with adherence to a “code of decency”—encompassing personal responsibility, gainful employment, and a “positive view of the future”—on the part of black men.²⁴ This research suggests that churchgoing may lift black men’s income by reinforcing prosocial behavior. Indeed, we find 53% of black men who attended church or religious services regularly as young men made it into the middle or upper class as fifty-something men, compared to 43% who rarely or never attended as a young man.

Finally, having a sense of agency increases the odds that black men make it financially in midlife. Black men who believed that they had more control over the lives as young men are more likely to be flourishing financially, compared to black men who thought that they did not have much control over their lives as young men—that is, who thought their lives were mostly driven by fate, chance, or the environment. In fact, 52% of

¹⁸ Robert Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, *For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America* (Washington, DC: AEI and Institute for Family Studies, 2014). W. Bradford Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears* (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project/Institute for American Values, 2010).

¹⁹ Lerman and Wilcox, 2014; Kate Antonovics and Robert Town, “Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the sources of the marital wage premium,” *The American Economic Review* 94, no. 2 (2004): 317-321; Elizabeth H. Gorman, “Bringing Home the Bacon: Marital Allocation of Income-Earning Responsibility, Job Shifts, and Men’s Wages,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 110-122.

²⁰ See also: Alexandra Killewald and Ian Lundberg, “New Evidence Against a Causal Marriage Premium,” *Demography* 54, no. 3 (June 2017): 1007-1028; and Ronald B. Mincy, Jennifer Hill, and Marilyn Sankewitz, “Marriage: Cause or Mere Indicator of Future Earnings Growth?” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 417-439.

²¹ Lerman and Wilcox 2014; Steven L. Nock, “Marriage and Fatherhood in the Lives of African American Men,” in *Black Fathers in Contemporary Society*, eds., Obie Clayton, Ronald B. Mincy, and David Blankenhorn (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

²² Richard B. Freeman, “Who Escapes? The Relation of Church-Going & Other Background Factors to the Socio-Economic Performance of Black Male Youths from the Inner City,” *The Black Youth Employment Crisis*, eds. Richard B. Freeman and Harry J. Holzer (Chicago: UCP, 1986); Byron Johnson, “The ‘Invisible Institution’ and Black Youth Crime: The Church as an Agency of Local Social Control,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 29, no. 4 (August 2000): 479-498; W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Soul Mates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²³ Richard Freeman, 1986: 2.

²⁴ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street* (New York: Norton, 1999): 144. See also: Wilcox and Wolfinger, 2016.

fifty-something men who reported a strong internal sense of control as young men are flourishing financially in their fifties, compared to just 44% of their peers who reported that they felt like they did have much control over the direction of their lives. In other words, black men who felt like they were captains of their own lives as young men are more likely to be doing well financially 35 years later, in their fifties.

In the multivariate models, religious attendance as a young man boosts the odds that black men make it financially by 76%, even after controlling for education, work status, and marital status later in life (see [Model 3 on page 15](#)). Black men who are married or stay married in their fifties are more than five times more likely to be in the middle or upper class, compared with their peers who are never married—even after controlling for factors like education and work status. Having a stronger sense of internal control as a young man is also associated with a significant increase in the odds of financial success 35 years later, even after controlling for a range of other sociodemographic factors. And the odds of black men who served in the military are about 72% higher for reaching the middle or upper class as fifty-something men, though this association is mediated through its association with work and marriage (see [Appendix, Table A2](#)). In other words, black men who served in the U.S. military ended up being more likely to work full time and, especially, to marry—both of which boosted their income in midlife.

When it comes to poverty, our multivariate model suggests many of these same factors are in play. Military service halved black men's odds of being poor in midlife, whereas churchgoing was not associated with less poverty. The effect of military service appears to be mediated by its association with work and marital status (see [Appendix, Table A3](#)). In other words, military men are less likely to be poor because they worked more and married more. The odds of being poor for black men who were married or stayed married are about 75% lower, compared to their peers who were never married.

In sum, the institutions of the U.S. military and marriage seem to boost the odds that black men make it in America. A similar story applies to the Black Church: black men who attended church regularly as young men are more likely to be in the middle or upper class as middle-aged men. Finally, African American men who have a strong sense of their own agency, for whatever reason, are more likely to be flourishing financially in midlife.

Logistic regression models predicting the odds of black men being in poverty at ages 50-58

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
IN POVERTY AT AGES 14 TO 22 (vs. not)	1.13	0.21	0.91	0.23	0.93	0.26
ABOVE MEDIAN AFQT SCORE	0.37*	0.40	0.93	0.47	0.98	0.54
ATTENDING RELIGIOUS SERVICE REGULARLY AT AGES 14 TO 22 (vs. not)	0.72	0.21	0.79	0.23	0.83	0.26
LOCUS OF CONTROL SCALE AT AGES 14 TO 22	1.02	0.04	1.03	0.05	1.03	0.05
CHARGED WITH CRIME AS OF AGES 15 TO 23	2.34**	0.26	1.54	0.29	1.59	0.32
MILITARY SERVICE AS OF AGE 22	0.42***	0.25	0.48**	0.28	0.51*	0.31
EDUCATION (MODEL 2 AT AGES 29 TO 37, MODEL 3 AT AGES 50-58) (vs. less than HS)						
HS or GED			1.04	0.28	1.26	0.36
Associate degree			0.42*	0.38	0.72	0.45
Bachelor's or higher			0.02**	1.40	0.08**	0.88
WORK STATUS (MODEL 2 AT AGES 29 TO 37, MODEL 3 AT AGES 50-58) (vs. not working)						
Full time			0.59*	0.25	0.11***	0.27
Part time			1.09	0.33	0.48	0.44
MARITAL STATUS (MODEL 2 AT AGES 29 TO 37, MODEL 3 AT AGES 50-58) (vs. never married)						
Married once, still married			0.30***	0.29	0.22***	0.39
Remarried			0.28**	0.43	0.24***	0.38
Divorced, Separated, Widowed			0.60	0.30	0.41**	0.29
N	585		582		581	

Notes: *** p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05. Based on black men surveyed in 2014. All models control for mothers' education, family structure at age 14, Model 2 and 3 also control for region of residence and whether respondents live in a central city, and Model 3 also controls for health conditions at age 50 and older.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)



CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This report suggests that about one-in-two black men in the U.S. today have made it to the middle class or higher. As expected, education and work clearly help black men attain this status, whereas contact with the criminal justice system hinders it. For the cohort of black men that we track from the late 1970s to the present, we also find that military service, churchgoing, marriage, and a strong sense of personal agency increase the odds that they have made it in America.

For decades, researchers, policymakers, and journalists have been sounding the alarm about the dismal life prospects of black males in America. One influential book declared the cohort of black males coming of age in the 1980s “an endangered species.”²⁵ This report follows a cohort of black men who came of age about the same time into their prime working years and beyond, asking how many attained a middle-class status or higher, how many fell into poverty, and why.

By the time they reached their thirties, in the midst of the 1990s economic boom, a clear majority of black males in this cohort had attained middle-class status or higher and only 18% were poor. In 2014, when they reached their fifties, nearly half (48%) had a middle-class or higher status and over a quarter (27%) were poor, even though the unemployment rate had just fallen to pre-recession levels. To be sure, white men in this cohort outperformed black men. Despite living through the same turbulent economic times, nearly three-quarters of whites attained and sustained middle-class status or more and less than 10% fell into poverty as adults. This is but one sign of important racial gaps in income, economic mobility, and poverty that continue to mar the American experience.²⁶ Still, the economic successes we document here for black men belie the dire predictions forecast for this cohort as teenagers and qualify many of the negative stories about black men that often can be found in academic and media coverage of race in America.

²⁵ Jewelle Taylor Gibb, *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species* (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1988).

²⁶ Chetty, Hendren, Jones, and Porter. 2018; Reeves, Winship, and Guyot. 2018.

Not surprisingly, the accumulation of human capital in the form of a two- or four-year college degree as young men, and full-time work experience more than tripled the odds that black men attained middle-class status or more in their pre-retirement years. Black men who scored higher than the median on the AFQT had double the odds of making it into the middle class or higher, though this effect appears to be mediated by education and marriage. Moreover, coming from a higher-income family more than quadrupled black men's odds of occupying a middle-class or higher position in their fifties. And contact with the criminal justice system reduced the odds of making it by about 60%, though this was mediated by the negative effect of such contact on their work and marriage. Most of these factors, which are often covered in conventional accounts of black men's economic status, were also associated with poverty in predictable ways.

These findings indicate that more should be done to boost the human capital of black males across the life course. Specifically:

- 1. Since cognitive skills begin to develop in early childhood, public efforts to improve and expand early education programs focusing on disadvantaged children, from programs modeled on earlier efforts like the Perry Preschool Project to today's Nurse-Family Partnerships, could prove particularly helpful to black boys, who hail disproportionately from lower-income families.²⁷**
- 2. When it comes to college, which is clearly of benefit to black males, more needs to be done to increase the pipeline of black men into higher education and to increase their graduation rates.** This should involve targeting students from lower-income backgrounds, including black men, with efforts—such as summer bridge programs—that boost their odds of attending college and graduating from college.²⁸
- 3. Efforts are also needed to reduce racial profiling and over-incarceration in the criminal justice system**—from scaling back mandatory sentences to increasing funding for public defenders—in light of our findings.²⁹ Given that the effects of contact with the

²⁷ Deborah Phillips et al., *Puzzling it Out: The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects: A Consensus Statement* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution and Duke Center for Child and Family Policy, 2017); Katharine B. Stevens and Elizabeth English, *Does Pre-K Work? The Research on Ten Early Childhood Programs—And What It Tells Us* (Washington, DC: AEI, 2016).

²⁸ Mark Schneider and Kim Clark, *Completion Reforms That Work: How Leading Colleges Are Improving the Attainment of High-Value Degrees* (Washington, DC: AEI/Third Way, 2018); Terrell L. Strayhorn, "Bridging the Pipeline: Increasing Underrepresented Students' Preparation for College Through a Summer Bridge Program," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 2 (2010): 142-159; R. A. Williams (Ed.), *Men of Color in Higher Education: New Foundations for Developing Models for Success* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2014): 116-143.

²⁹ John F. Pfaff, *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Vikrant P. Reddy, *A New Agenda for Criminal Justice* (Washington, DC: Conservative Reform Network, 2017).

criminal justice system appear to be mediated by factors such as work and marital status, more needs to be done to make sure that black men preparing to leave prison receive adequate vocational training and the job placement they need to get a firm financial footing. For instance, a year of transitional employment coupled with optional drug treatment would be a step in the right direction, as would efforts to expand tax incentives to hire ex-prisoners.³⁰

Besides education and work, *Black Men Making It in America* also shows that other institutions help black men achieve economic success and avoid poverty. Black men who regularly attended religious services at a young age were 76% more likely than those who did not to attain at least middle-class status 35 years later. And the odds of married black men making it in the middle class by age 50 is more than four times higher than for their never-married peers, when marital status is measured in their thirties. Married or even divorced black men were also much less likely than those who had never married to be poor in their fifties. We also find that serving in the U.S. military boosts the odds of making it financially by about 70% and reduces the odds of poverty by about 50% for black men by their fifties, though the effect of military service is mediated by its positive impact on work and marriage. Finally, even after accounting for all these institutional factors, black males who had a stronger sense that they were in control of their own lives were more likely to move into the middle class or higher.

These findings suggest that we also need to move beyond conventional thinking in considering public and private efforts to help black men achieve financial success and close the racial gap in men's income. In particular, we should consider public policy, civic, and cultural efforts designed to:

1. **Extend lessons about racial equity in workplace opportunity and marriage from the U.S. military to other key institutions in America;** for instance, what can American colleges and universities learn from the military's success in lifting up black men?
2. **Minimize or eliminate marriage penalties in means-tested tax and transfer programs³¹** that have a disproportionate impact on African American families;

³⁰ Bruce Western, *From Prison to Work: A Proposal for a National Prisoner Reentry Program* (Washington: DC: Brookings, 2008); Adam Looney and Nicholas Turner, *Work and Opportunity Before and After Incarceration* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018).

³¹ W. Bradford Wilcox, Joseph Price, and Angela Rachidi, *Marriage Penalized: Does Social Welfare Affect Family Formation?* (Washington, DC: AEI and IFS, 2016).

- 3. Enable the Black Church to reach more black men, who are often less engaged in the life of the church than are black women** (for example, sports-related ministries might be particularly successful in this regard),³² and
- 4. Encourage all young adults—including African American men—to lock in a committed partnership, especially marriage, before having children;** here, lessons learned from national, state, and local campaigns to reduce teen pregnancy could be applied to the cause of reducing non-marital childbearing.³³

Finally, in light of our findings about agency, it's worth noting that doing more to explicitly foster the virtue of hope among black men and to spotlight black men who have made it in America may also be strategies worth trying for schools, churches, and other civic organizations working with black boys and young men. As this report shows, young black men who believe they are captains of their own lives are more likely to do well as they reach midlife.

³² Wilcox and Wolfinger, 2016.

³³ Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levin, *Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of MTV's "16 and Pregnant" on Teen Childbearing*. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014); Douglas Kirby, "Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy (Summary)," *American Journal of Health Education* 32 (2013): 348-355.

APPENDICES:

I. Methodology

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 cohort (NLSY79) is the main data source for this report. The NLSY79 is one of the National Longitudinal Surveys that the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) sponsored to gather information about significant life events of several cohorts of men and women over time. The NLSY79 started with a nationally representative sample of 12,686 adolescents and young adults who were ages 14-22 in 1979 when the first interview took place (with oversamples of black and Hispanics, and those who served in the military). In 1985, when interviewing of the full military sample ended, the total NLSY79 sample size dropped to 11,607. These young adults were interviewed annually between 1979 and 1994 and on a biennial basis afterwards. The most recent wave with available data was completed in 2014 when the respondents were 49 to 58 years old.

The earlier interviews are conducted in person, through a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) instrument. As more respondents move and prefer telephone interviews over time, the telephone interviews are now the main mode of interviewing.

The overall retention rate for the most recent wave is 71%. As of 2014, 7,071 original young adults are still in the sample, and 790 respondents had been reported as deceased. Overall, 3,405 men ages 50 to 58 were surveyed in the most recent wave. Black men who stayed in the latest wave (n=933) are the focus of this report. The findings were weighted to reflect the characteristics of the overall population of this cohort.

Trend analyses comparing the economic status of black men and men of other race/ethnicity are based on Decennial Census (1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000) and the American Community Surveys (2010, 2016). The dataset was obtained from the IPUMS-USA database.

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a household survey developed by the U.S. Census Bureau to replace the long form of the decennial census program. It is collected throughout the year using mailed questionnaires, telephone interviews, and visits from Census Bureau field representatives to about 3 million household addresses annually.

Analyses of men's economic status in the ACS are based on men ages 18 to 64. All estimates were weighted to reflect the actual population of the subgroup.

Income and poverty

Men's financial status in their fifties was measured by their total net family income in the most recent wave of NLSY79. Their family income at ages 14 to 22 was measured in 1979. Both incomes were asked of the previous

¹ Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 7.0* [dataset] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017).

calendar year. The total family income in NLSY79 was calculated using the combination of several income questions, such as wages, salary, tips, military income, net business income, child support, interest and dividends from stocks or mutual funds, rental income, and income from government programs and from other household members.²

For analyses in this report, the total family income of respondents was adjusted by family size and then converted into three categories depending on its standing in the overall income distribution. The lower-income group represents respondents whose incomes fall in the bottom one-third of the income distribution; the middle-income group includes those with incomes standing in the middle one-third of the distribution, and the higher-income group has family income in the top one-third of the distribution.

Following the Congressional Budget Office methodology, we have adjusted the income by dividing the total family income by the square root of the family size.

The share of men in poverty was measured by the ratio of net family income to the federal poverty level in the previous year. This measure has been adjusted by family size.

Rotter Locus of Control Scale

The Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale was measured in Round 1 (1979) and Round 26 (2014) of the NLSY79. The scale is a shorter version of a 23-item forced choice questionnaire adapted from the 60-item Rotter Adult I-E scale developed by Rotter (1966). The scale was designed to measure the degree to which individuals believe they have control over their lives (internal control), as opposed to outside forces, such as chance, fate, luck control their lives (external control). A lower score indicates an internal control and a higher score suggests external control.

The Rotter Locus of Control Scale in the NLSY79 includes the following four pairs of statements. Respondents were asked to select the statement that is closer to their opinion in each pair, and then asked a follow-up question about whether their selected statement was much closer or slightly closer to their opinion.

- 1A: "What happens to me is my own doing." (internal control item)
- 1B: "Sometimes I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking." (external control item)
- 2A: "When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work." (internal control item)
- 2B: "It is not always wise to plan too far ahead, because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow." (external control item)
- 3A: "In my case, getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck." (internal control item)
- 3B: "Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin." (external control item)
- 4A: "Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me." (external control item)
- 4B: "It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck plays an important role in my life." (internal control item)

² Between 1979 and 1982, respondents who didn't meet certain criteria, such as being ages 18 and older and living outside their parents' home, were asked a short form of income questions. Beginning in 1993, all respondents used the same set of income questions.

For the analyses in this report, the four-point scale for each of the paired items were generated and the scores were summed. The total score was also reversely coded so that the higher the score, the more internal control an individual has.

Weighting

All analyses, descriptive and regression included, have been weighted to reflect the characteristics of the overall population of this cohort of men.³ However, because of sample attribution over time and the missing values (especially in the income and poverty measure), the weighted estimates may or may not be in line with other national representative surveys.

Table A1. Estimates from NLSY79 vs. American Community Survey

% based on men ages 50 to 58

	All men		Black men	
	NLSY 79, 2014	ACS, 2014	NLSY 79, 2014	ACS, 2014
RACE				
White	71	70		
Black	12	11		
Hispanic	5	12		
Asian	--	5		
EDUCATION				
Less than HS	8	13	10	17
High school	43	31	54	37
Some college	21	28	21	30
Bachelor's or higher	28	28	15	16
% IN MIDDLE/HIGHER INCOME BRACKETS				
	70	68	48	52
% IN POVERTY				
	12	10	27	20
% EVER MARRIED				
	86	85	71	73

Notes: Whites, blacks, and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Asians include Pacific islanders. The number of Asian men in NLSY79 was too small to report. Education in NLSY79 was asked about the highest grade completed. In ACS, education was measured by the highest year of school or degree completed.

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

³ For regression analyses, adjusted weights were used to prevent the significance level inflated by the weighted Ns.

To understand how well our sample of men, as well as black men in the NLSY79, represent the national account of adult men in this age group, we did a comparison of the NLSY79 sample (men ages 50 to 58 in 2014) with men of the same age group in the 2014 American Community Survey. We find that the estimates from the NLSY79 sample are very close to the estimates from the ACS on men's economic status and marital status. However, the NLSY estimates have a lower proportion of Hispanic adults than that of the ACS estimates (5% vs. 12%), which is probably due to the growth of the immigrant population during the period after the NLSY79 respondents were first surveyed in 1979. In addition, the share of men who had at least some college education is slightly lower in the NLSY79 sample than in the ACS (49% vs. 56%), but the share of high school dropouts is also lower in the NLSY79 sample (8% vs. 13%).

Estimates from the black men sample in NLSY79 are identical to those from the ACS on marital status, but somewhat different on education and economic status. For example, the share of black men with at least some college education is lower in NLSY79 than it is in ACS (36% vs. 46%), and the share of black men in poverty is higher in NLSY79 than it is in ACS (27% vs. 20%).

II. Path Analysis

In addition to the binary logistic regression models shown in Chapter 3, we also used a more efficient statistical tool, called path analysis, that lets us explicitly test whether the effects of four key variables measured in young adulthood—military service, church attendance, contact with the criminal justice system, and above-median knowledge (the 50th percentile AFQT score)—on black men's economic status in their fifties could be explained by whether one was married, gained an education, and/or was gainfully employed. In other words, does a rigorous statistical test suggest that the effects of these variables measured in young adulthood on midlife economic outcomes are mediated by marital status, education, or employment?

The results, shown in [Table A2](#), suggest that the influence of military service (+), contact with the criminal justice system (-), and above median knowledge (+) on one's chances of being middle or upper income can be, at least partially, explained by marriage, each path being significant. Additionally, employment mediated or helped explain the link between military service and contact with the criminal justice system and being middle/upper income, while education mediated the path between above-median knowledge and the same outcome. We found no evidence that the positive influence of church attendance was mediated by any of the three early adulthood outcomes. The results suggest that these outcomes are very likely real rather than due to chance. This is after accounting for plausible alternative explanations, including maternal education, locus of control (Rotter), and their family of origin's household income and family structure (intact/step/single/other family arrangement).

**Table A2. Path Model Predicting Being Middle/
Upper Income During One's Fifties**

	Value (Indirect Effect)	Statistically Significant?
MILITARY - MARRIAGE - HIGH INCOME	1.092	***
MILITARY - EDUCATION - HIGH INCOME	0.622	N.S.
MILITARY - EMPLOYMENT - HIGH INCOME	0.870	*
CHURCH - MARRIAGE - HIGH INCOME	0.131	N.S.
CHURCH - EDUCATION - HIGH INCOME	0.401	N.S.
CHURCH - EMPLOYMENT - HIGH INCOME	0.508	N.S.
CRIME - MARRIAGE - HIGH INCOME	-1.460	***
CRIME - EDUCATION - HIGH INCOME	-0.740	N.S.
CRIME - EMPLOYMENT - HIGH INCOME	-0.832	*
KNOWLEDGE - MARRIAGE - HIGH INCOME	0.998	**
KNOWLEDGE - EDUCATION - HIGH INCOME	2.778	***
KNOWLEDGE - EMPLOYMENT - HIGH INCOME	0.961	N.S.

**Table A3. Path Model Predicting Being in
Poverty During One's Fifties**

	Value (Indirect Effect)	Statistically Significant?
MILITARY - MARRIAGE - POVERTY	-0.811	**
MILITARY - EDUCATION - POVERTY	-0.508	N.S.
MILITARY - EMPLOYMENT - POVERTY	-0.782	*
CHURCH - MARRIAGE - POVERTY	-0.097	N.S.
CHURCH - EDUCATION - POVERTY	-0.325	N.S.
CHURCH - EMPLOYMENT - POVERTY	-0.455	N.S.
CRIME - MARRIAGE - POVERTY	1.084	*
CRIME - EDUCATION - POVERTY	0.603	N.S.
CRIME - EMPLOYMENT - POVERTY	0.744	*
KNOWLEDGE - MARRIAGE - POVERTY	-0.741	*
KNOWLEDGE - EDUCATION - POVERTY	-2.264	**
KNOWLEDGE - EMPLOYMENT - POVERTY	-0.857	N.S.

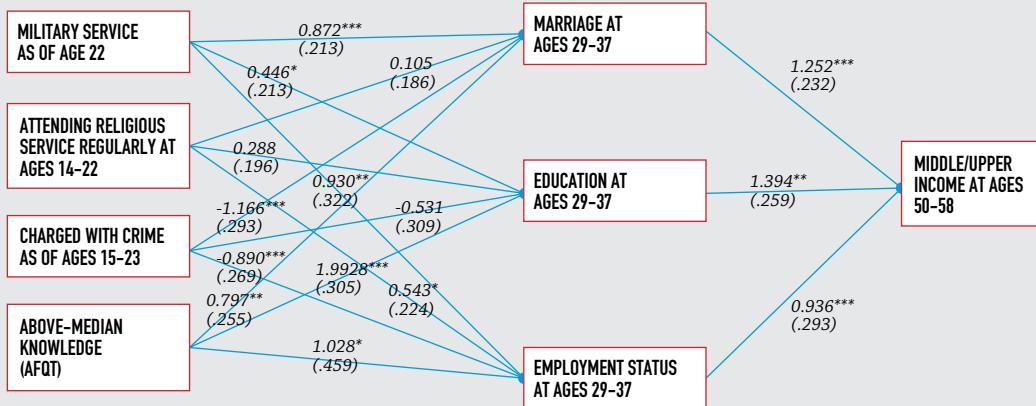
Notes: *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; n.s. = not significant. Based on black men surveyed in 2014. Model includes controls for maternal education, knowledge (AFQT Percentile Score), locus of control (Rotter), and family of origin's household income and family structure (intact/step/single/ other family arrangement). Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

We repeated our analyses to address the probability of being in poverty during one's fifties with the same set of analyses. These results mirror those found earlier (see Table A3). We found a nearly identical pattern to that observed previously, except in the opposite direction (since we're now predicting being in poverty instead of being middle/upper income). The influence of military service (-), contact with the criminal justice system (+), and above median knowledge on poverty was again partially explained by whether individuals had married or not by early adulthood. Additionally, we found that employment once again mediated or helped explain the link between military service and contact with the criminal justice system and being in poverty during one's fifties. We further found that education mediated the path between above-median knowledge and being in poverty. However, we also found no evidence that either marriage, education, or employment mediated the positive influence of church attendance in one's late teens or early twenties on financial outcomes later in life.

To summarize, these findings provide good evidence that marriage especially is a key factor in understanding why early military service, contact with the criminal justice system, and above median knowledge are linked to financial success or poverty in one's fifties. Being employed full time in one's late twenties or early thirties also helps explain the same links for military service and contact with the criminal justice system, whereas education helps explain why above median knowledge is linked to both being middle/upper income or in poverty later on. We found no evidence that church attendance is linked to or explained by either marriage, education, or employment.

For readers further interested in the results of our path analysis, we've provided [Figures A1 and A2](#), which present the direct paths discussed. Readers are reminded that all models control for maternal education, locus of control (Rotter), and family of origin's household income and family structure (intact/step/single/ other family arrangement), though these paths are not displayed.

Figure A1. Path Model Predicting Black Men Being in Middle/Upper Income at Ages 50-58



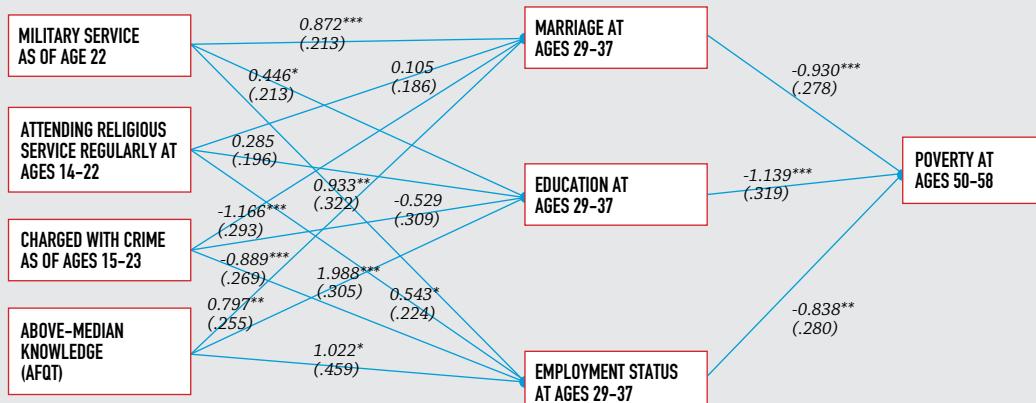
Notes: *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; n.s. = no significant. Based on black men surveyed in 2014. Direct paths from independent variables to outcome not shown. Model also includes controls for maternal education, locus of control (Rotter), and family of origin's household income and family structure (intact/step/single/other family arrangement).

Source: AEI/IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

Figure A2. Path Model Predicting Black Men Being in Poverty at Ages 50-58



Notes: *** p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; n.s. = no significant. Based on black men surveyed in 2014. Direct paths from independent variables to outcome not shown. Model also includes controls for maternal education, locus of control (Rotter), and family of origin's household income and family structure (intact/step/single/other family arrangement).

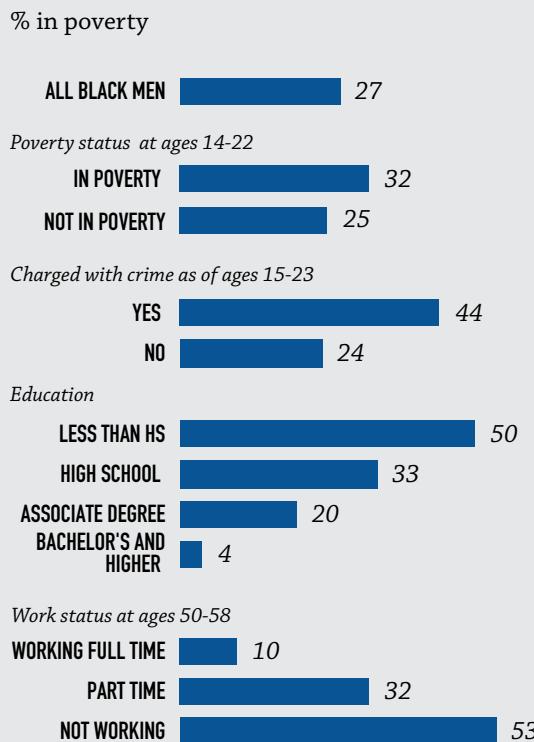
Source: AEI/IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

II. Additional Figures

Figure A3. Black men in poverty at ages 50-58, by structural factors

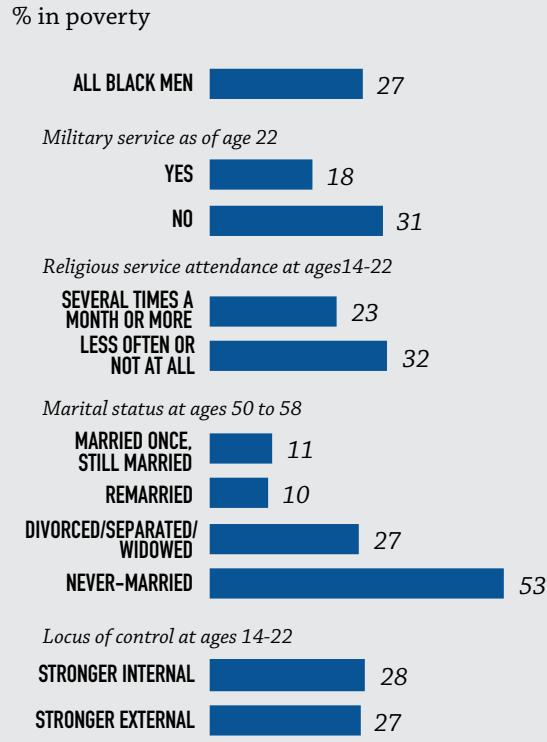


Notes: Based on black men interviewed in 2014.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

Figure A4. Black men in poverty at ages 50-58, by institutional and agency factors



Notes: Based on black men interviewed in 2014.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

AEI/Institute for Family Studies

Table A4: Logistic regression models predicting the odds of white men being in the middle/higher income brackets at ages 50-58

	Base model		Full model	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
FAMILY INCOME AT AGES 14 TO 2 (vs. lower income)				
Middle	1.60*	0.20	1.60*	0.24
Higher	2.01***	0.21	2.02**	0.26
ABOVE MEDIAN AFQT SCORE	3.86***	0.17	2.42***	0.21
ATTENDING RELIGIOUS SERVICE REGULARLY AT AGES 14 TO 22 (vs. not)	1.03	0.17	0.79	0.20
LOCUS OF CONTROL SCALE AT AGES 14 TO 22	1.02	0.03	0.99	0.04
CHARGED WITH CRIME AS OF AGES 15 TO 23	0.46***	0.21	0.84	0.26
MILITARY SERVICE AS OF AGE 22	1.27	0.21	2.01**	0.26
EDUCATION AT AGES 50 TO 58 (vs. less than HS)				
HS or GED	1.12	0.37		
Associate degree	1.40	0.42		
Bachelor's or higher	2.94*	0.47		
WORK STATUS AT AGES 50 TO 58 (vs. not working)				
Full time	9.18***	0.22		
Part time	1.35	0.39		
MARITAL STATUS AT AGES 50 TO 58 (vs. never married)				
Married once, still married	3.04***	0.30		
Remarried	2.74**	0.33		
Divorced, Separated, Widowed	0.93	0.31		
N	1,523		1,523	

Notes: *** p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05. Based on black men surveyed in 2014. Both models control for mothers' education, family structure at age 14 and full model also controls for black men's health conditions at age 50 and older, region of residence and whether respondents live in a central city.

Source: IFS analysis of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).

American Enterprise Institute (AEI)

Institute for Family Studies (IFS)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

W. Bradford Wilcox (Ph.D., Princeton University) is a senior fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. Wilcox has published widely on marriage, cohabitation, fatherhood, and the welfare of children.

Wendy R. Wang (Ph.D., University of Maryland) is director of research at the Institute for Family Studies. Dr. Wang is a former senior researcher at Pew Research Center, where she conducted research on marriage, gender, work, and family life in the United States. She was the lead author of the Pew Research Center report, *Breadwinner Moms*, among other Pew reports.

Ronald B. Mincy (Ph.D., Massachusetts Institute of Technology) is Maurice V. Russell Professor of Social Policy and Social Work Practice at Columbia University. He directs the Center for Research on Fathers, Children, and Family Well-Being at Columbia University and is also a co-principal investigator of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. He has published widely on fatherhood, poverty, and social policy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report benefited from the programmatic leadership of Richard Brake, Tal Fortgang, and Nicole Noyes, the editorial assistance of Alysse ElHage, and the design work of Brad Uhl and Brandon Wooten at ID Company. Spencer James provided methodological assistance. Joseph Price, Samuel Sturgeon, and Scott Winship provided substantive feedback. Nicholas Leaver provided research help. Finally, we thank Robert Doar for his counsel regarding this report. Needless to say, they do not necessarily agree with our conclusions and any errors are our own.

This report is part of the Home Economics Project, a research effort of the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for Family Studies that explores whether and how strong and stable families advance the economic welfare of children, adults, and the nation as a whole. The project also examines the role, if any, that marriage and family play in increasing individual opportunity and strengthening free enterprise at home and abroad, as well as their implications for public policy.