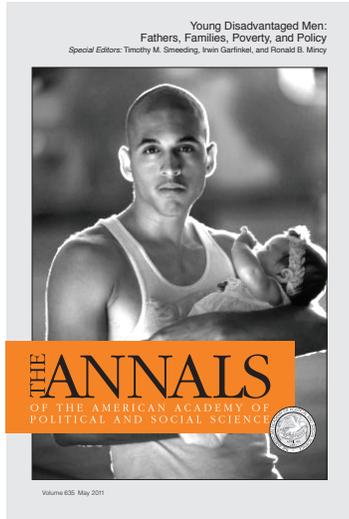


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Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy

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Timothy M. Smeeding, Irwin Garfinkel, and Ronald B. Mincy, Special Editors



Introduction:

Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy
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SUBSTANTIVE/DESCRIPTIVE SURVEYS OF FATHERHOOD

No Country for Young Men: Deteriorating Labor Market Prospects for Low-Skilled Men in the United States

Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, and Sheila Palma

Young Disadvantaged Men as Fathers

Lawrence M. Berger and Callie E. Langton

The Relationship Contexts of Young Disadvantaged Men

Laura Tach and Kathryn Edin

Low-Income Fathers' Influence on Children

Marcia J. Carlson and Katherine A. Magnuson

Comment: Reactions from the Perspective of Culture and Low-Income Fatherhood

Alford A. Young Jr.

Comment: Young Disadvantaged Men: Reactions from the Perspective of Race

Devah Pager

Comment: How Do Low-Income Men and Fathers Matter for Children and Family Life?

Frank F. Furstenberg Jr.

POLICY PAPERS

Child Support: Responsible Fatherhood and the Quid Pro Quo

Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer, and Eunhee Han

Improving Education and Employment for Disadvantaged Young Men: Proven and Promising Strategies

Carolyn J. Heinrich and Harry J. Holzer

Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry in the United States

Steven Raphael

Policies That Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?

Virginia Knox, Philip A. Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, and Elana Bildner

Income Support Policies for Low-Income Men and Noncustodial Fathers: Tax and Transfer Programs

Ronald B. Mincy, Serena Klempin, and Heather Schmidt

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Disadvantaged fathers and their families

Timothy M. Smeeding, Irwin Garfinkel, and Ronald B. Mincy

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Young undereducated men and their families are currently experiencing a confluence of unfavorable occurrences, providing a bleak outlook for their future.¹ The recession of 2008 to 2010 has made it very difficult for young men with little education to find jobs. Since nearly two-thirds of these men are parents, many are thus struggling to support their families. A high level of incarceration further restricts employment opportunities and greatly reduces fathers' time with their children. Most young men who become fathers are not married, and many go on to have at least one more child with another partner. Child support obligations may balloon when fathers are unemployed or in jail, and there are few public policies specifically designed to increase income for this population. As a result of all these forces, poverty rates are rising for young men, and their families are very unstable and struggling financially. An economic recovery sufficient to create enough jobs for these men to regain stable employment is currently forecast to be at least five years and more likely seven years away. By that time, these young parents and their children will have become a truly lost generation.

In September 2009, a conference at the University of Wisconsin–Madison brought together scholars and policymakers to examine strategies for reducing barriers to marriage and father involvement, designing child support and other public policies to encourage the involvement of fathers, and understanding the implications of fathers having multiple child support responsibilities. A special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* comprises papers from that conference. The volume, *Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy*, details the problems faced by a growing proportion of young men, and outlines some policy solutions that might help them recover from the deep economic and social hole in which they and their families now find themselves. This article provides a brief summary of that work.

Social and economic forces facing young fathers

Most men with a high school degree or less are fathers by age 30.² Teenage fathers are less likely to graduate from high school or to obtain their General Education Diploma (GED).³ Only about half of all fathers under 25 were married at the time their first child was born, while less than a quarter of young black fathers were married.⁴ Fathers are much less likely than other young men to continue their education after high school.⁵ Over 60 percent of fathers with a high school degree or less had earnings under \$20,000 in 2002.⁶ These statistics suggest that many young men with little education have family responsibilities but do not have the economic capacity to meet those commitments.

In summary, at least four major forces affect young fathers and their families: the labor market; incarceration; multiple-partner fertility; and public policy, particularly in regard to income support and child support. We examine each of these forces below.

Labor market

Over the past few decades, earnings for young men, even those with full-time work, have been falling, and few low-educated young men are able to obtain full-time work. In 2008, the poverty line for a family of three was \$17,400. Far less than half of low-educated men earn that much by age 30, so most young disadvantaged men do not make the minimum amount needed to support a partner and one child on their own. During the recent recession, the economic situation for these young men worsened, and most analysts predict a significant increase in the poverty rate for 2010 and beyond.⁷

Figure 1 shows employment changes over an eight-quarter period from late 2007 through 2009.⁸ The overall employment rate over this period fell by nearly 5 percentage points, with the largest drops experienced by the youngest workers. Looking at education levels, the employment rate declined most for workers who were high school dropouts or who had only a high school diploma.

The recession has been hardest on young undereducated men, especially minorities. Over 30 percent of young black men between the ages of 16 and 24 were unemployed during 2009 and 2010, not counting those who were not seeking work.⁹ Unemployment rates for young men with little education now exceed rates for comparable men during the Great Depression. Nearly half of the unemployed have been out of work for six or more months, an all-time high for long-term unemployment.

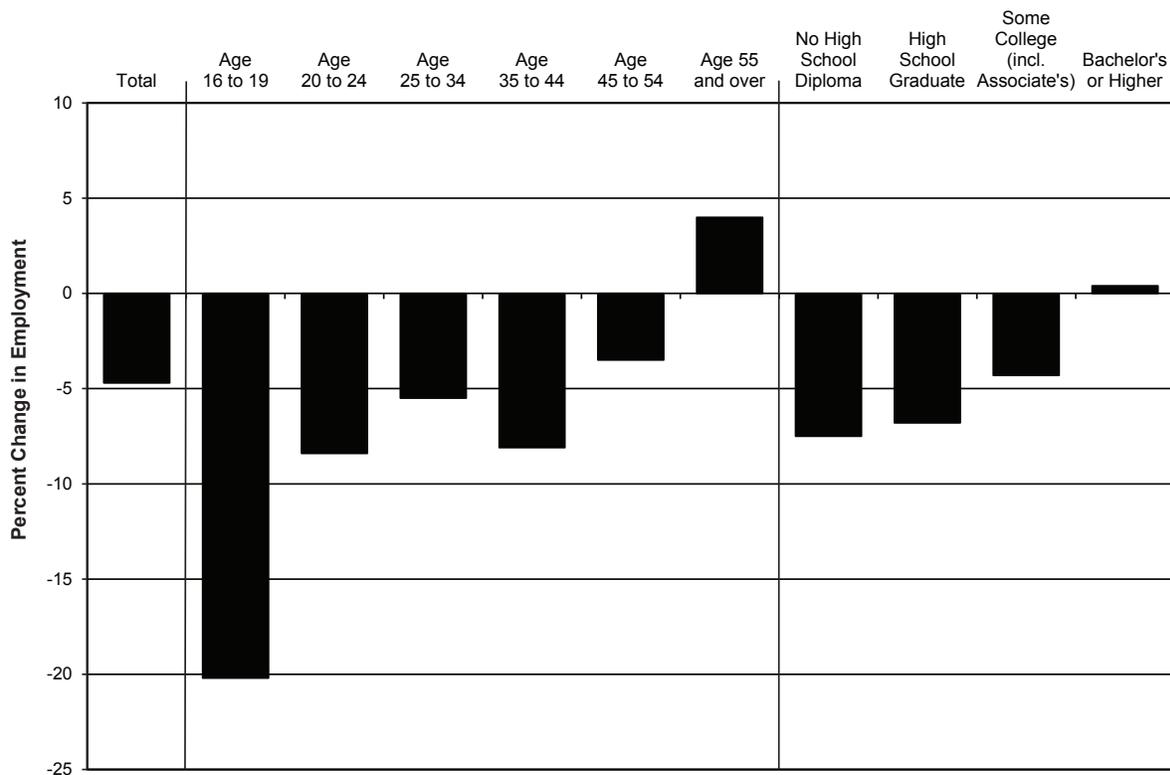


Figure 1. Employment changes by age group and education level, 2007 to 2009.

Source: K. M. Engemann and H. J. Wall, “The Effects of Recessions across Demographic Groups,” *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 92, No. 1 (2010): 1–26.

Note: The data cover the fourth quarter of 2007 through the third quarter of 2009.

Incarceration

In the United States, over half of black high school dropouts and one-quarter of all high school dropouts will have been incarcerated, paroled, or on probation at least once by the time they reach the age of 30.¹⁰ Many prisoners have minor children, and many lived with their children before being incarcerated.¹¹ Incarceration disproportionately affects black children; for children born in the United States in 1990, a quarter of black children had an incarcerated father by the time they turned 14, compared to only one in twenty-five for white children. Black children with parents who are high school dropouts are particularly affected; about half have an incarcerated father.¹² Evaluating the joint effects of age, race, and incarceration is challenging given limited data, but the facts that we do have suggest that incarceration is a factor for a high proportion of disadvantaged young fathers. We estimate that at least one in five young fathers will have been incarcerated by age 30, with an even higher rate for black men. These formerly incarcerated fathers face serious challenges in entering or returning to the labor market, as well as in parenting and financially supporting their children.

Multiple-partner fertility

Over half of men fathering a first child before age 25 are unmarried at the time of the birth; the rates are even higher

for minorities.¹³ Over half of unmarried parents have further children with a different partner.¹⁴ In a study of urban births in the late 1990s, in nearly two-thirds of unmarried couples, one or both parents already had a child with another partner at the time that the child in the study sample was born.¹⁵ This compares with only about 20 percent of comparable married couples. In a 2002 national survey, nearly a third of fathers under age 25, and almost half of black fathers in that group, had children with more than one partner.¹⁶ Children of young, poor, and urban parents are all more likely to have complex family structures. Children with half-siblings on one parent’s side are more likely to also have half-siblings on the other parent’s side, leading to very complicated families, and likely very complicated child support arrangements.

Public policy

Public income support policy in the United States in the past several decades has focused primarily on mothers and their children, largely excluding young unmarried men and young fathers. These same young men often come into contact with the child support system. Fathers with child support orders may build up large arrears when unemployed or incarcerated, while up to 65 percent of earnings or tax refunds may be garnished for unpaid child support.¹⁷ Fathers who do not live with their children are ineligible for the EITC even when they contribute to the support of their children.

Currently, the only income support program widely available to young single men is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps). The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 and other legislation have extended Unemployment Insurance (UI) for the long-term unemployed. However, young men are less likely to receive these benefits; men under 30 account for nearly 40 percent of unemployed men, but only 20 percent of UI benefit recipients.

Current work on these issues: Articles in the *Annals* volume

The first four articles in *Young Disadvantaged Men* provide more detail on the social and economic forces described above. These articles are followed by three commentaries. The final set of five articles present some possible policy options to reconnect disconnected fathers to their children and thereby improve child and family economic and emotional well-being. We describe this work next.

Descriptions of fatherhood

Four articles develop the issues outlined above by describing in greater detail the economic and family situations of young disadvantaged fathers, and how the realities of their lives affect themselves, their partners, and their children.

Labor market

Labor market outcomes for young men have gotten much worse in recent decades, particularly for those with the lowest levels of education. Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, and Sheila Palma find that young men are faring worse on a variety of employment and earnings measures, and that these poor labor market results are related to poor social outcomes as well.¹⁸ Undereducated men are more likely to be incarcerated, less likely to be married, and more likely to be absent fathers, compared to similar men in earlier decades. Marriage declines and growing earnings gaps have contributed to a widening of income and wealth disparities among young families. A variety of measures are likely necessary to improve employment, earnings, and marriage prospects for young men. Without real and sustained improvements in earnings, the future for young men and their children looks grim.

Fatherhood

Lawrence Berger and Callie Langton review current theory and existing evidence about young disadvantaged men's involvement with their children.¹⁹ They examine prevailing theories and existing evidence on factors that may affect father involvement, including biology, marriage, coresidence, and social selection. They briefly review the role of the father in raising children, and look at the socioeconomic characteristics of men who become young fathers. Finally, they discuss the limitations of existing research and the implications for future research and policy. They conclude that younger fathers tend to be both more disadvantaged and less involved

with their children than older fathers, and that unmarried biological fathers are similarly less involved compared to their married counterparts. With respect to biology, they find that while existing research does tend to indicate that resident biological fathers are more involved with their children than are resident social fathers, this difference may be less distinct among disadvantaged families, indicating a need for further research. They also point to the need for more research on involvement with children when fathers are incarcerated. Finally, they suggest that some families with nonresident fathers may be helped by programs and policies designed to assist those men to develop as supportive parents.

Relationships

Until recently, very little data were available on the romantic partnerships of young disadvantaged men. Laura Tach and Kathryn Edin review current survey evidence focusing on the relationship dynamics between these men and their romantic partners, why some romantic partnerships dissolve while others continue, and how families function after partnerships between unmarried parents end.²⁰ They conclude that young disadvantaged men are often involved in romantic relationships that result in pregnancy. When this occurs, most young men stay involved with the mother and, if the relationship survives that stressful period, express optimism about the future and a commitment to staying in their child's life. The future, however, holds numerous obstacles to fulfilling this optimism, and most of these partnerships end within the first few years after the child is born. Still, the relationship between the two parents does not end when the partnership breaks up, even as new romantic partnerships form and family structures become more complicated, and the quality of these relationships affects the ability of fathers to coparent and remain involved with their children. Finally, the authors contend that public policy should be supporting of rather than challenging to these fragile families. For example, household-income limits for programs such as the EITC or SNAP may discourage families from combining resources or marrying.

Child well-being

In the final article of this set, Marcia Carlson and Katherine Magnuson evaluate current knowledge on how low-income fathers matter for children.²¹ They review theoretical perspectives on expectations for parents, specifically fathers, in terms of influencing child development and well-being. While research has shown that more involvement by fathers is associated with better outcomes for children, the evidence specifically for low-income fathers is limited, and it is not clear that the results for this population are as positive as those for more advantaged populations. The authors identify several areas in need of more research, including how both biological and social fathers matter for children, how fathering effects differ by characteristics such as race and ethnicity and the age and gender of the child, and the implications of multiple-partner fertility for being a father. Although Carlson and Magnuson do not draw strong conclusions about public policy implications given the limited evidence

for low-income fathers, they do suggest that increasing the payment of child support appears to be a worthwhile goal, and that policy initiatives should be developed to encourage positive interactions between fathers and children, rather than simply increasing the amount of time spent parenting.

Commentaries

Following the four descriptive summaries of the evidence on young fathers are three commentaries, one each on culture, race, and family functioning and longer-term relationships.

Alford A. Young Jr. looks at how cultural differences across racial and ethnic lines help to describe and define the patterns of partnering and fathering that we see among low-income men.²² He explores fatherhood identity as well as the community context in which low-income fathering takes place. Young concludes that the evidence encourages some rethinking of the cultural aspects of low-income fathering, while also conclusively illustrating that low-income fathers do value the role of father and try to fulfill it in healthy and successful ways.

Devah Pager notes that the social and economic progress of black men since the early 1980s has been relatively stagnant, despite promising reforms following the civil rights movement of the 1960s.²³ The circumstances of low-income black men also affect their partners and children. Pager emphasizes the importance of race and incarceration in understanding the prospects of disadvantaged men. She raises the possibility of estimating the relative effects sizes of various approaches to solving the employment problems of young less-educated men as a way of moving towards more effective policies. She also notes that the cost-benefit analysis of any public policy interventions must also take into account any effects of such policies on families and children.

Frank Furstenberg notes that research on fatherhood is a relatively recent development.²⁴ Drawing on his own work and that of others, he summarizes the lessons from recent decades, particularly those on the role of men in forming families and raising children. He then looks at the consequences of paternal involvement in all its different forms. He concludes that while increasing the human capital of prospective parents and reducing unintended pregnancies early in life may be challenging, it is far more feasible to implement policies in these areas than to alter parenting practices within fragile families.

Policy articles

The last five articles in *Young Disadvantaged Men* focus on policy issues identified in the descriptive articles: child support; education and employment; incarceration; strengthening fatherhood and family relationships; and income-support policy. Brief summaries of each of these chapters follow.

Child support

In recent decades, the private child support system has been made stronger, while access to public support programs such

as welfare has been reduced. Maria Cancian, Daniel Meyer, and Eunhee Han review evidence on nonresident fathers' ability to pay child support, look at how current child support policies affect disadvantaged fathers, and suggest policy reforms to help all fathers be able to pay child support.²⁵ The authors argue that current policies both oblige and help disadvantaged mothers to work, and that similar requirements and assistance should apply to disadvantaged fathers. Cancian, Meyer, and Han highlight two issues fundamental to improving the child support system for low-income families, and thus making such equity between mothers and fathers possible. One issue is the need for child support policies to clearly focus on the needs of vulnerable children rather than on cutting public spending. This could include changes such as allowing families on public assistance to retain all child support paid on their behalf, and not asking nonresident fathers to reimburse Medicaid-covered birthing costs. A second issue is the need to complement child support enforcement policies with policies that help fathers meet those obligations. This could include job placement services and work supports such as subsidized health insurance and an EITC.

Education and employment

Low high school graduation rates for disadvantaged youths, combined with rapidly declining employment rates, have resulted in many young men being disconnected from both school and work. Carolyn Heinrich and Harry Holzer review the evidence on programs and policies designed to improve the education and employment prospects for young men.²⁶ They consider a number of specific proposals and discuss how to move forward with the most promising policy options. They conclude that investing in youth development and mentoring can be cost effective, although the results are modest and tend to diminish over time. Paid work experience can be successful for at-risk high school students, and programs that identify at-risk youths early and provide them with intensive services also seem promising. Programs that assist young people in obtaining an associate's degree or a certificate in a high-demand field can potentially improve labor market outcomes. It is more challenging to identify successful programs for high school dropouts and other disconnected youth, but even here some interventions have been modestly successful. Heinrich and Holzer argue that a range of policy approaches are needed and that these must be complemented with ongoing research to continue to identify which programs work best for which groups.

Incarceration

Incarceration is increasingly used to punish criminal activity in the United States, and the nation's incarceration rate is now the highest in the world. Steven Raphael reviews incarceration trends over the last 40 years and distinguishes incarceration changes attributable to policy adjustments from those attributable to changes in criminal behavior.²⁷ He also reviews how incarceration affects future employment prospects, and what can be done to ease reentry of former inmates to society and the workforce. Raphael presents research evidence showing that criminal activity

and incarceration may be reduced through educational and early childhood programs. He also identifies a number of potentially helpful interventions for former inmates, including temporary cash assistance, transitional employment, and wraparound services that begin while the individual is still incarcerated, and continue into parole or beyond. The author concludes that more rigorous research is needed to evaluate the responses of different types of former prisoners to various interventions. Given the extremely high costs of both crime and incarceration, even programs that produce modest effects are likely to be cost-effective.

Fatherhood and family relationships

Virginia Knox, Philip Cowan, Carolyn Pape Cowan, and Elana Bildner review evidence on the effectiveness of two specific strategies to strengthen fathers' involvement and family relationships.²⁸ These are responsible fatherhood programs targeted to disadvantaged noncustodial fathers and relationship skills programs for couples. The authors find that both approaches have had some success; fatherhood programs have resulted in higher child support payments, while relationship skills programs have strengthened relationships, improved coparenting, and increased child well-being. The authors also note that there is significantly more evidence on how to help couples improve their relationship quality, and what the effects of such an improvement might be, than there is on how to increase the quality and quantity of noncustodial fathers' involvement with their children. Thus, they offer a number of suggestions for creating more effective programs for young noncustodial fathers. The authors conclude that parents' relationship with each other should be a key concern in developing new programs to encourage low-income fathers' involvement with their children.

Income security

In recent decades, both real wages and labor force participation have decreased for young undereducated men. Ronald Mincy, Serena Klempin, and Heather Schmidt look at how important areas of income support policy affect these men.²⁹ These include UI, payroll taxes, the EITC, and child support enforcement. The authors make short- and long-term policy recommendations including using ARRA funds to meet the training needs of low-income workers, coordinating EITC and child support enforcement policies to increase work income, and making UI more responsive to the needs of this population. Transitional job programs that provide subsidized jobs could provide a key lever for allowing disadvantaged men to access work-based subsidies. The authors also conclude that effective income-support policy responses must include both government and private funds.

Conclusions

Given the evidence presented at the September 2009 conference and reflected in the contributions to this special issue of *The Annals*, it is apparent that public policy must address the needs of disadvantaged young men and their families.

Policies should be implemented to increase employment, education, and training, and incarceration policies for young offenders should be made more progressive. In addition, better efforts to support the incomes and employment of young men would allow more of them to support their families and meet their child support obligations. And finally, we need programs that are effective in preventing youth from unintended out-of-wedlock births.

Although a strong economy would itself go a long way to improving the financial situation of these men, such a development currently appears to be many years in the future. Instead, it is necessary to determine the best available policy options given dwindling fiscal resources. In all policy areas, trade-offs must be acknowledged. Improving income supports for men may create work disincentives, while increasing public support for low-income mothers and children may make men less likely to pay child support. Forgiveness of child support arrears may increase payment of current support, but may also lead men to believe that future orders can be disregarded. Programs that reduce incarceration levels may endanger public safety.

Nevertheless, under the current economic circumstances, efforts to help young men in trouble must be increased. Disadvantaged fathers are a low policy priority, so securing additional supports will be a serious challenge. Policy should encourage and reward positive behavior, and help to strengthen familial relationships. The information presented at the September 2009 conference and summarized in *Young Disadvantaged Men* illustrates both that the needs of young men are high and that adequate support for the next generation of children is still a long way off. ■

¹This article draws upon "Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy," in T. Smeeding, I. Garfinkel, and R. Mincy, eds., *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: Young Disadvantaged Men: Fathers, Families, Poverty, and Policy* 635 (May 2011).

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⁶Langton, 2002 NSFG data runs.

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⁸K. M. Engemann and H. J. Wall, "The Effects of Recessions Across Demographic Groups," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review* 92, No. 1 (2010): 1–26.

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¹⁵Carlson and Furstenberg, “The Prevalence and Correlates of Multipartnered Fertility.”

¹⁶Langton, 2002 NSFG and 1997 NLSY data runs.

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¹⁸Sum et al., “No Country for Young Men.”

¹⁹L. M. Berger and C. E. Langton, “Young Disadvantaged Men as Fathers,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²⁰L. Tach and K. Edin, “The Relationship Contexts of Young Disadvantaged Men,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²¹M. J. Carlson and K. A. Magnuson, “Low-Income Fathers’ Influence on Children,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²²A. A. Young Jr., “Comment: Reactions from the Perspective of Culture and Low-Income Fatherhood,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²³D. Pager, “Comment: Young Disadvantaged Men: Reactions from the Perspective of Race,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²⁴F. F. Furstenberg Jr., “Comment: How Do Low-Income Men and Fathers Matter for Children and Family Life?” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²⁵M. Cancian, D. R. Meyer, and E. Han, “Child Support: Responsible Fatherhood and the Quid Pro Quo,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²⁶C. J. Heinrich and H. J. Holzer, “Improving Education and Employment for Disadvantaged Young Men: Proven and Promising Strategies,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

²⁷S. Raphael, “Incarceration and Prisoner Reentry in the United States,” in *The Annals; Young Disadvantaged Men*.

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