Race and Opportunity

Robert Cherry

The great recession touched the life of every American. No demographic group was safe from the fallout, but black Americans seem to have lost more than most, and the fragile black middle-class most of all. In no small part because of historical discrimination, black families on average have less capital to fall back on during hard times. They held a disproportionately large number of subprime loans. Overrepresented on government employment rolls, black workers bore the brunt of the reduction in government jobs. Black-owned small businesses suffered more and grew less than the business of other minority groups. And, with lower college-graduation rates than other groups, black Americans were less likely to find high-paying jobs to recover from losses. This dramatic loss of economic stability contributed to a fast-growing sense of hopelessness in the black community.

The community is understandably shaken. Since the Great Recession, instead of the hopeful message of the Civil Rights leaders that black children would inherit a better world than the one their parents had, the messages coming from black leaders have increasingly been filled with frustration, anger and, more specifically, blame.

Recent high-profile events have added fuel to the fire. The controversy surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 showed America the power of social media as a tool for winning a certain kind of justice. Though the man who shot Martin was of Hispanic descent, the case primed the nation for racial conflict—especially after President Obama personalized the controversy by saying, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." More recently, the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson,

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Missouri, Eric Garner in New York City, and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, at the hands of primarily white police officers have sparked violent riots around the country. While the details of each case vary, the image of a white police officer killing a black man has revived racial tensions that had diminished since the Civil Rights era.

In this environment, Ta-Nehisi Coates, an author and essayist for the *Atlantic*, has become a thought leader, giving voice to the frustration and anger of the black community. In his new book, *Between the World and Me*, Coates examines American society through the lens of the recent killings of black men, painting a picture of a white culture driven by an insatiable need to control black bodies, as he puts it. His claim that white supremacy flourishes in the United States has been embraced by the Black Lives Matter movement. Coates is not the only one making these arguments, but he is one of the most prominent voices of the movement. He has put into words the frustration and rage of the communities rioting in New York, Baltimore, Ferguson, and elsewhere, providing a rhetoric of victimization that has been powerfully resonant in lower- and middle-class black communities.

The problem is that the rhetoric of victimization does nothing to help black men and women find well-paying work, and it does not help black families hold together in challenging circumstances. Indeed, it tends to focus attention away from real sources of trouble, including real consequences of racism.

"Deeply rooted social and cultural problems have been exacerbated by economic hardship" isn't a pithy slogan; it isn't inspiring, and it doesn't lend itself to a hashtag. It suggests there is no single, straightforward fix; not even wholesale reform of the criminal-justice system can address all these problems alone. But smart, incremental policies and economic half-steps stand ultimately to have a stronger and more lasting effect on disadvantaged black Americans than the politics and rhetoric of victimization. Such policies work slowly but steadily and together comprise the best chance of ensuring that this generation of black children is one of the last to grow up in a cycle of poverty, dysfunction, and violence.

But such practical incrementalism cannot succeed if the people who stand to benefit from it reject its premises — and thanks to Coates and others who advance a revived narrative of ineradicable race-based victimization, such rejectionism is now very much on the rise. It is therefore

worth considering what this narrative of victimization consists of, and what it rejects and forecloses.

COATES AND HIS WORLD

Coates frames *Between the World and Me* as a letter to his son, and he centers his rage on the victimization visited on black men. "You are human and you will make mistakes," Coates tells his son. "But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined — with Eric Garner's anger, with Trayvon Martin's mythical words ('You are gonna die tonite'), with Sean Bell's mistake of running with the wrong crowd."

White supremacy is central to the book's argument, and, as evidence of its pervasiveness, Coates highlights the 2000 killing of Prince Jones, a former Howard University student. The detective who shot Jones, Coates bitterly relates, was sent "back to his work, because he was not a killer at all. He was a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world's physical laws." Repeatedly, Coates comes back to Jones' murder and ends his book with a long interview with Jones' mother.

For Coates, this killing signals the impossibility of escaping the tragedies of race, even for well-off blacks. *Between the World and Me* suggests that things are thoroughly hopeless for black men. In an effort to refute this hopelessness, UCLA professor Melvin Rogers wrote a long letter to the *Atlantic*, pointing out that, for Coates, "white supremacy is not merely a historically emergent feature of the United States; it is an ontology. White supremacy, in other words, does not structure reality; it is reality." Rogers remarks on how so much of Coates's success reflects aid from others, particularly his parents, lamenting that "Coates seems unable to linger on the conditions that gave life to the Ta-Nehisi Coates who now occupies the public stage. His own engagement with the world — his very agency — received social support. . . . And yet the adult Coates seems to stand at a distance from the condition of the possibility suggested by those examples."

Coates has extensively documented his own life, in two books and many essays, and what emerges is an exception to his own rules. To his credit, he has often taken note of the people who have helped him achieve his prominent public stature by offering him opportunities, including a white editor, David Carr, who hired him and was instrumental

in his career. Even more central and important in making his success possible is, of course, his own family, and the efforts of his parents in particular: All six of Coates's siblings have graduated from college. That is not to say that Coates's argument about the hopeless condition of black Americans is proven wrong by his own success; it is only to say that his rhetoric about insuperable white supremacist racism must draw on something other than his own biography.

His focus on whites' efforts to control black bodies is in fact a recent development in his work. White supremacy played almost no role in Coates's 2009 memoir *The Beautiful Struggle*, which documented his coming of age amid the violence of West Baltimore. A comparison between the two books reveals a dramatically transformed worldview, from one that viewed the problems of the community as resulting from the desperate circumstances of the people involved and their need for respect, to one that now views the community as suffering under the active oppression of white people, who exclude and attempt to control blacks through government policies.

In the 1980s, Coates declared in the first pages of *The Beautiful Struggle*, 5% of the young people living in Baltimore's poorest sections ("1 in 21") were killed annually. The violence was as meaningless as it was terrifying. "When bored, [the hoppers] brought the ruckus, snatching bus tickets and issuing beat downs at random . . . This was how they got down. This was the ritual." Family dysfunction was rife: "Lexington Terrace was hot with gonorrhea. Teen pregnancy was the fashion. Husbands were outties. Fathers were ghosts." In discussing the normalcy of violence, Coates noted, "Conflicts bloomed from a minor remark or misstep, and once in motion everyone stayed cocked and on alert."

Coates lamented his neighbors' misplaced values: "Mostly what I saw around me was rank dishonor: cable and Atari plugged into every room, juvenile parenting. . . . " The era when he was enrolled in the neighborhood high school, he complained, "was the era of high schools fitted with nurseries. . . . I had a mother or an expecting mother in every class." The problems Coates and his peers faced were not caused by any *direct* manifestations of racism in the job market, the schools, or in law enforcement.

The vast majority of the threats to black bodies came from the black community. As a young man in his middle school "gifted" program,

Coates was vulnerable to his more brutal peers. For a time Coates avoided fights: "My style was to talk and duck." But eventually he could not talk his way out of trouble. When hit in the face, he "busted out crying." The news of this reverberated around the school. Coates recounted,

> From then on, I was the weakest of the marks, and my weakness was despised. By the gifted kids, most of all. Some of my whippings were just macho show, but mostly they were pure logic.... I didn't make many more friends on the Marshall Team that year. The few that I did could never understand why I would not fight.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates presents a riveting account of the time "a boy with small eyes" points a gun at him for no apparent reason: "I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like the fog."

Despite the chaos and violence, Coates identified with the black underclass, and at 15 he lashed out as his father for moving the family to the suburbs. In one striking passage of *The Beautiful Struggle*, he explains urban violence as an existential protest against dehumanizing circumstances:

> Nowadays, I cut on the tube and see the dumbfounded looks, when over some minor violation of name and respect, a black boy is found leaking on the street.... Politicians step up to the mic, claim the young have gone mad, their brains infected, and turned superpredator. Fuck you all who've ever spoken so foolishly... We know how we will die—with cousins in double murder suicides, in wars that are mere theory to you, convalescing in hospitals, slowly choked out by angina and cholesterol. We are the walking lowest rung, and all that stands between us and beast, between us and the local zoo, is respect, the respect you take as natural as sugar and shit.

Between the publication of the two books, Coates's analysis of the root cause of the violence and dysfunction he describes underwent a remarkable evolution. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates posits that this violence is the result of white "policy, the predictable upshot of people

forced for centuries to live under fear." In language befitting Malcolm X, he states,

> "White America" is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynchings) and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, "white people" would cease to exist for want of reason.

What is striking is not so much that Coates has changed his analysis, but that this new explanation for the violence has been taken up so enthusiastically in the black community. The analysis seems to explain the recent violence by police, certainly, but it also seems to provide a convenient explanation for a whole host of other social ills — and a place to lay the blame. It is therefore a way to avoid talking directly about both the social and familial disorder and the much related economic disadvantage that plagues black communities. But to get beyond hopelessness, both do need to be considered squarely.

marriage and family

Coates has recently taken up the subject of the black family in the *Atlantic*. Building on the work of Michelle Alexander, who argues that the incarceration of black men is the new Jim Crow — just the latest legal means that whites have divised to maintain their position of privilege and authority over blacks — Coates links this (strategic) mass incarceration to the breakdown of the black family. He is not wrong about jail time being a stumbling block on the way to the alter; indeed, there is little doubt that there is a link between incarceration and marriage rates. Kerwin Charles and Ming Luoh estimated for every percent increase in male incarceration, the number of women who ever get married decreases by 2.4%.

But his chain of causation is problematic. He argues that the Moynihan Report (which raised warning signs about the state of black families in 1965) and the need of whites to control black bodies led to the mass incarceration of black men, which then caused the black marriage rate to decline. In response, the Manhattan Institute's Kay Hymowitz has demonstrated that his link to the Moynihan Report is completely

unfounded and that the upsurge in arrests during the 1970s was a reaction to rising violent crime rates. Hymowitz also noted how unwilling Coates is to discuss the adverse ramifications of single parenthood:

> You might think that an article on the Moynihan report and the black family would mention *somewhere* that today 72 percent of black children, up from 24 percent when the report was written, are born to unmarried mothers. . . . You would expect him to show how one of the main reasons fathers fade out of their children's lives is "multi-partner fertility" — parents who have children by a series of partners — and that multi-partner fertility is particularly widespread among blacks . . . You would expect him to ponder all of this because there is abundant evidence that boys growing up under these conditions have less self-control than those growing up in more stable families, and most of all, because those boys are far more prone to commit crimes. You would think at least some of this would find its way into the pages of a 17,000-word piece called "The Black Family in an Age of Mass Incarceration," but you would be wrong.

(Interestingly, Coates is clearly not unaware of the importance of married parents in a child's life: In *The Beautiful Struggle*, he documented how growing up with his biological father in the house was crucial to keeping him and his siblings on the straight and narrow path.)

In addition to incarceration, government policies likely pose at least a modest impediment to black marriage rates — not because of an insidious plot to control black bodies, but because of poorly designed attempts to help struggling parents. Currently, if a single women earning between $10,000 and $20,000 has a child, she would become eligible for at least $2,800 in earned income tax credits. Other potential benefits include food stamps, housing vouchers, and college-tuition waivers. All of these benefits could disappear, however, if she married a partner with modest earnings. This creates a substantial marriage penalty for many working black couples. In this case, even if reduced incarceration and improved employment rates substantially increased the number of "marriageable" black men, marriage penalties might keep marriage rates low. Possible solutions to the problem of government incentives against marriage have been frequently discussed, by myself and others,

in these pages and elsewhere.

There are other factors that contribute to the low marriage rates among blacks: At least as important as incarceration is the link between marriage and male employment rates. Isabel Sawhill and Joanna Venator find that in 2012, among 25 to 34 year olds, the ratio of employed men to all women among white and black Americans was 1.03 and 0.51, respectively. Indeed, they contend that the lack of employed men can explain at least one quarter of the decline in the marriage rate — including the black marriage rate — between 1970 and 2010.

Recent employment data do not indicate a change in the marriage rate is coming anytime soon. In 2010, the employment rate was 78.8% for white men aged 25 to 29 year olds but only 57.1% for black men in that age group. Among those without a high-school degree, only 24.9% of black men were employed; among those with no more than a GED, only 30.7% were employed. These two less-educated groups comprised 23.0% of black men ages 25 to 29; among this cohort, more were in prison than in paid employment.

Joblessness undermines family stability as these men drift from one relationship to another, limiting the share of black children with a resident father. Among black women who have more than one child, 60% have them with different fathers. While these men may be attentive to their most recent children, they too often sever ties with children from previous relationships. Studies consistently find that absent a father, young boys tend to fall behind in school and exhibit substantial behavior problems. Indeed, this is the overriding lesson from *The Beautiful Struggle*.

As I documented in a previous *National Affairs* essay, unemployed men often bring their anger and hopelessness into the home. In the words of James Baldwin, "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law." It destroys their dependents as well. Maltreatment rates are three times higher for children living in single-mother households where a man who is not the child's father resides than in homes where the mother lives without a man. There is also evidence that rates of intimate violence are higher when male joblessness increases.

Shaping government policies to raise employment rates is not a straightforward task, of course, but it is certainly one goal on which our efforts should be focused. Educational and behavior deficits make

it likely that a sizeable share of at-risk youth cannot attain four-year degrees. As a result, most policymakers have begun focusing on two-year associate's degrees. This approach received attention when President Obama visited Brooklyn's P-Tech, a high school that allows students to get credits towards technical associate's degrees before they graduate.

P-Tech was one of the programs funded through President Obama's Brothers' Keeper Initiative. Under the direction of Michael Smith, this effort has explored a wide range of programs seeking to improve the skills and employment of at-risk young men. In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio has announced a Young Men's Initiative with similar goals. However, when the Partnership for New York City assessed New York City's College and Technical Education programs, the results were quite discouraging. Only a small share of high-school students enrolled in CTE programs completed the credits necessary to allow them to enter associate's programs at community colleges. It appeared that for many of these students, the academic and behavioral discipline necessary for success even in technical associate's degree programs was lacking.

Less demanding are certificate programs which provide recognition of completion of a course of study based on a specific field. They differ from industry-based certifications and licenses which typically involve passing an examination to prove a specific competency or completing an apprenticeship. By contrast, certificate programs involve work entirely in the classroom.

For students who matriculate in these certificate programs and complete them, the results are more promising. A comprehensive report from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University found that 39% of male certificate holders earn more than the average male associate's degree holder; the corresponding number for women was 34%. About a quarter of each even earn more than the average bachelor's degree holder.

While the certificates of less than one year typically have more limited value, this is not true in all cases. Police and protective-services certificates, for example, are predominantly short-term but exceed the average 27% wage premium for male certificate holders. Certificates in business and office management are also valuable.

Pathways to direct employment, however, may make the most sense. Historically, at-risk youth have been more likely to develop the interpersonal skills necessary for success in both their professional and personal

lives in workplaces rather than classrooms. Work experience allows them to develop ties to other employed youth that will provide them with a valuable social network. In some cases, they will gain mentoring that will help them make constructive future decisions. Finally, employment provides them with spending money so that they do not have to be involved with illegal and risky behavior to meet their basic needs. The collapse of teen employment in the last two decades, however, has limited this approach.

Making improvements in these areas requires a slow and steady approach. Unfortunately, Coates and many others cannot bring themselves to support such incrementalism. As a dear friend told me when I offered these proposals, "Society is on the verge of congenital heart failure. You propose exercise and a better diet when what is needed is radical surgery!" It's satisfying to vent one's outrage about the senseless loss of lives from police misbehavior or mistakes. But small steps — like increasing funding for initiatives along these lines, which will enable more black youth to become security guards, clerical assistants, or nurses' aides — will yield meaningful marginal gains that can be built upon, creating better opportunities for future generations and therefore giving cause for real hope.

The Black Middle Class

Hope for the future seems to be in short supply, given the success of *Between the World and Me*. For an older, more optimistic generation of Civil Rights leaders, the goal was to break down racial barriers in employment and education. Each year, they witnessed new firsts for black Americans that provided role models; each year they saw corporate America become more accommodating to black employment and prestigious universities becoming more welcoming toward black students. As a result of this progress, the numbers of middle-income and professional black families kept growing. The crowning triumph was the election of a black president in 2008 — ironically, just as the worst effects of the Great Recession were beginning to be felt in black middle-class communities.

But the first fissures in the progress of the black middle class had become visible even before the Great Recession. A 2007 Brookings Institution study by Julia Isaacs found that fewer than one-third of blacks born to middle-class parents went on to earn incomes greater

than their parents, compared with more than two-thirds of whites from the same income bracket. Part of the explanation lay in the precarious finances of black middle-class families, and these certainly have to do with our country's shameful history of racism and discrimination.

Black families have frequently lacked access to financial assets because an earlier black generation did not benefit from the postwar GI Bills or Roosevelt-era social legislation. When minimum-wage and Social Security legislation were enacted, they excluded agricultural and domestic workers — which meant they excluded almost 75% of southern black workers. When President Roosevelt wintered in Georgia, his maid earned less than 10 cents an hour even though the minimum wage he had helped get enacted was 25 cents an hour. Other New Deal programs did not have any sort of anti-discrimination provisions. As a consequence, while these programs provided white Americans with valuable tools to advance their social welfare, most black Americans were left behind.

After World War II, the GI Bill provided generous benefits that enabled millions of white veterans to attend colleges and training programs, to borrow funds to start businesses, and to obtain low-cost mortgages to become homeowners. But once more, these programs were administered locally and did not contain anti-discrimination provisions. In the South, where the majority of blacks continued to reside, the historically black colleges were the only ones available for black veterans and only one in twelve training programs were open to them. Virtually no southern black veteran had access to training for skilled employment. Discrimination also substantially reduced black access to Veterans Administration mortgages. Ira Katznelson reports that, "[b]y 1984 when GI Bill mortgages had mainly matured, the median white household had a net worth of $39,135; the comparable figure for black households was only $3,397, or just 9 percent of white holdings. Most of this difference was accounted for by the absence of black homeownership."

In the 1990s, educational and employment opportunities did enable a black middle class to grow. However, because of the discrimination their parents' generation had faced, their ability to obtain four-year degrees that would yield professional jobs was limited. As a result, many young black families rose from poverty on the basis of two government jobs that did not require four-year degrees. In 2008, when blacks made up just 14% of the overall workforce, 21% of lower wage government

transit and clerical workers and more than 25% of postal workers were black.

Given their parents' lack of assets, these black families could not borrow funds to purchase houses in well-off areas, so they were forced to buy homes in older inner-ring suburbs like Hempstead and Yonkers in the New York City area, Prince George's County outside Washington, D.C., and Ferguson outside St. Louis. But many of these areas had declining tax bases that forced cutbacks in government services, including education. As a result, while these families were able to escape the chaos and violence of the inner city, they still had to send their children to weak and underfunded schools. And as a recent St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank study found, black college graduates had dramatically higher debt-to-income ratios than white college graduates.

A comprehensive study by Harry Holzer and David Neumark found that, among firms that have affirmative-action policies, black workers have weaker educational credentials but perform at comparable levels to white workers. But weakening of affirmative-action programs has translated to fewer desirable employment positions for many of the children of black middle-income families.

Without vigorous diversity programs, black workers continue to be underrepresented in growing and higher-paying professions. In 2014, 11.4% of the workforce but only 7.5% of all managers were black. This, however, is deceiving since black managers are concentrated in a few lower-paying areas: food services, human resources, education, medical, and social services. Whereas one-fifth of all managers work in these areas, one-third of all black managers are. Among the other four-fifths of managers, black workers make up only 5.5%. Black workers are also underrepresented in the highest-paying occupations. They comprise around 6% of the professionals employed in engineering, life and social sciences, and the entertainment industries. Only in high-wage government positions did black professionals gain employment in proportion to their share of the population.

As a result of these employment barriers, a Brookings study noted that many black professionals have relocated from Midwest and East Coast metros to cities like Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, and Raleigh in search of better employment opportunities. "Blacks who have relocated tend to be . . . well-educated, well-off middle agers with children," said John Giggie, associate professor of history at the University of Alabama.

The downward mobility of so many of the children of black, middle-income, two-parent families is reflected in a Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago study. Using data through 2007, it "found supportive evidence that blacks raised in two-parent families throughout childhood experience significantly greater upward mobility. However, family structure does not seem to matter for . . . rates of downward mobility for either whites or blacks."

Finally, the lack of financial assets limited the ability of black Americans to own businesses that had sufficient revenues to support a family. In 2002, there was a fairly equal number of black, Hispanic, and Asian businesses: 1.2, 1.6, and 1.1 million, respectively. There were substantial differences, however, in their size. As measured by gross annual receipts, black businesses were much smaller than either Hispanic or Asian ones. Whereas close to 30% of Asian businesses had gross receipts of at least $100,000 in 2002, fewer than 8% of black businesses attained that sales level. Indeed, only about one quarter of black businesses attained gross sales of $25,000 in 2002, compared to 35% and 53%, respectively, of Hispanic and Asian businesses.

THE REAL CHALLENGE

The fragility of the black middle class was intensified by the Great Recession in a number of ways. Before the housing bubble burst, blacks were more likely than their white counterparts to be given "subprime" loans, with high (or increasing) interest rates and hidden fees.

According to a study in the *American Sociological Review* by Jacob Rugh and Douglas Massey, blacks with similar credit scores to whites were systematically given worse terms on their loans, suggesting that race clearly played a role in the way some lenders structured these deals. Blacks were three times more likely than whites to receive subprime loans from lenders that went bankrupt in 2007. "Hispanic and black home owners, not to mention entire Hispanic and black neighborhoods," Rugh and Massey declared, "bore the brunt of the foreclosure crisis."

The second adverse consequence of the Great Recession was the drop in government employment. In 2013, the Labor Department counted half a million fewer public sector jobs than in 2007. Factor in population growth, and there were 1.8 million fewer jobs in the public sector to fill if government employment per person had remained the same. This

further added to employment problems faced by middle-income black Americans and their children.

Third, while many workers shifted to self-employment, black Americans lagged behind — likely because of their lack of capital. In 2002, only 7.9% of black businesses had any paid employees compared to 12.7% and 28.9% for Latino-owned and Asian-owned businesses, respectively. But in 2012, the gaps were larger. Over this ten-year period, black-owned businesses with paid employees increased by only 17.2% compared to a 46.0% and 53.2% increase, respectively, for comparable Latino-owned and Asian-owned businesses.

Finally, the dramatic gender imbalance among blacks in four-year college attainment has had an adverse effect on black marriage rates. Specifically, in 2010, the ratio of female-to-male four year graduates was 1.27 and 1.93, respectively, among white and black Americans. Not surprisingly, just 49% of college-educated married black women were partnered with a man with at least some post-secondary education, compared with 84% of college-educated married white women. Complicating the problem further, many well-educated black women seem to have refused to marry down in terms of education. The proportion of black female college graduates aged 25 to 35 years old who have never married was 60%, compared with 38% for white female college graduates — making it even more difficult to maintain a firm foothold in the middle class.

The struggles of the black middle class go a long way toward explaining the enthusiastic embrace of the Coates worldview. If there were a growing and confident black middle class, attempts to gain more black employment in internet firms, in Hollywood behind the cameras, and in the executive suites of Fortune 500 companies would be center stage in strategies to move the black community forward. Given the setbacks that the black middle class has suffered, the few black voices promoting this traditional Civil Rights agenda have been drowned out by voices of outrage and hopelessness, like Coates and the Black Lives Matters movement.

Excessive police force against lower-income black citizens also diverts attention from the economic struggles of the black middle class and effective employment strategies for at-risk black men, of course. But this means in practice that it diverts attention from some of the most promising potential sources of solutions. When today's new activists do

turn to solutions (which is rare enough), they focus intensely on the incarceration question. Instead of constructive discussions of appropriate educational and employment strategies, instead of a search for ways to improve the home lives of disadvantaged black children, all we hear are angry cries to do something to improve criminal justice. As Coates' own life story attests, the violence of their peers has a much more pervasive effect on the lives of disadvantaged black boys than their adverse experiences with police and education personnel.

Claims of pervasive, profound, and utterly inexorable white racism can serve as channels for frustration (or, in some cases, merely to enable would-be activists to style themselves as champions of the underclass). But they do not serve as channels of meaningful, substantive improvement, and they deny black Americans the means to play a part in improving their circumstances. They demonize any attempt to link disruptive and sometimes abusive family situations to racial disparities in employment and education. When black students have much higher school suspension rates, today's activists demand the elimination of suspensions. When black students chronically perform poorly on standardized tests, they demand the elimination of those tests. When black youth are subject to more criminal charges, they demand the decriminalization of the offenses.

Sound cases can be made for reducing suspensions and the reliance on standardized tests, and for decriminalizing any number of offenses. Many of these policies are not just ineffective but counterproductive. But the case for change has to be grounded in the nature of the problems black Americans now confront. And while those problems are frequently connected to or rooted in some forms of racism, they are also closely tied to failures of family formation and personal responsibility. To acknowledge one kind of problem is not to deny the importance of the other.

But the rhetoric of inexorable white supremacy — of a white obsession with black bodies and of the denial of all meaningful progress in race relations in our country — makes it impossible to confront the serious problems that plague the black community. Such rhetoric may be succor for some but it derails the discourse that's needed if we are to actually, practically better the lives of black Americans, now and in the future.