



REDUCING POVERTY AND INCREASING MARRIAGE RATES AMONG LATINOS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

BY ALGERNON AUSTIN

High poverty rates have been a persistent problem for Latinos and African Americans. The problem is a jobs and employment problem, not a marriage problem, as some commentators have suggested. This Issue Brief identifies the real causes of high Latino and black poverty rates and offers some solutions. The good news? Solutions to the high poverty rates in Latino and African American communities are also solutions to the declining marriage rates (occurring among all racial groups) because some of the same factors that contribute to a rise in poverty lead to a decline in marriage rates.

This brief details the following key findings:

- Latino married-couple families have higher poverty rates than families headed by unmarried white men.
- A major factor behind the high Latino poverty rate is the low share of good jobs in the American economy. A good job is one that would allow a Latino worker to support a family above the poverty level, have health insurance, and have a retirement plan. While the American economy has been generating proportionally fewer good jobs over time, Latinos experienced the largest drop in the share of workers with good jobs from 1979 to 2008. Latino workers have also had the lowest rates of employment in good jobs for decades. Conversely, Latinos have the largest share of workers earning poverty-level wages.
- The high poverty rate for African Americans stems, in part, from their high unemployment rate. In 2010, if blacks had the same unemployment rate as whites, there would have been an additional 1.3 million blacks working.
- Even in “good” economic times, African Americans suffer from high levels of unemployment. The black unemployment rate has been twice the white unemployment rate since 1960. When white America is at full employment, black America is still suffering from recessionary levels of unemployment. Only by creating an economy where every African American who wants to work can find a job will we see significant declines in the black poverty rate.

- High unemployment, the decline in good jobs, and the increasing incarceration rate have been important factors behind the decline in marriage.
- A majority of whites, Latinos, and blacks expect that a man will be able to support a family before he gets married, but about half of American men are earning less in wages than men did a generation ago. Latinos and blacks are over-represented among these low-wage men.
- Law enforcement policies that contribute to higher black incarceration rates deflate the size of the black workforce and the pool of marriage-eligible men. If the black incarceration rate were the same as the white incarceration rate, there would be over 700,000 additional black adults available to work.
- Whites, Latinos, and blacks all want to marry at fairly high rates, but, in a country that has seen rising economic inequality and a strong decline in good

jobs for men, they increasingly feel like they cannot afford to marry.

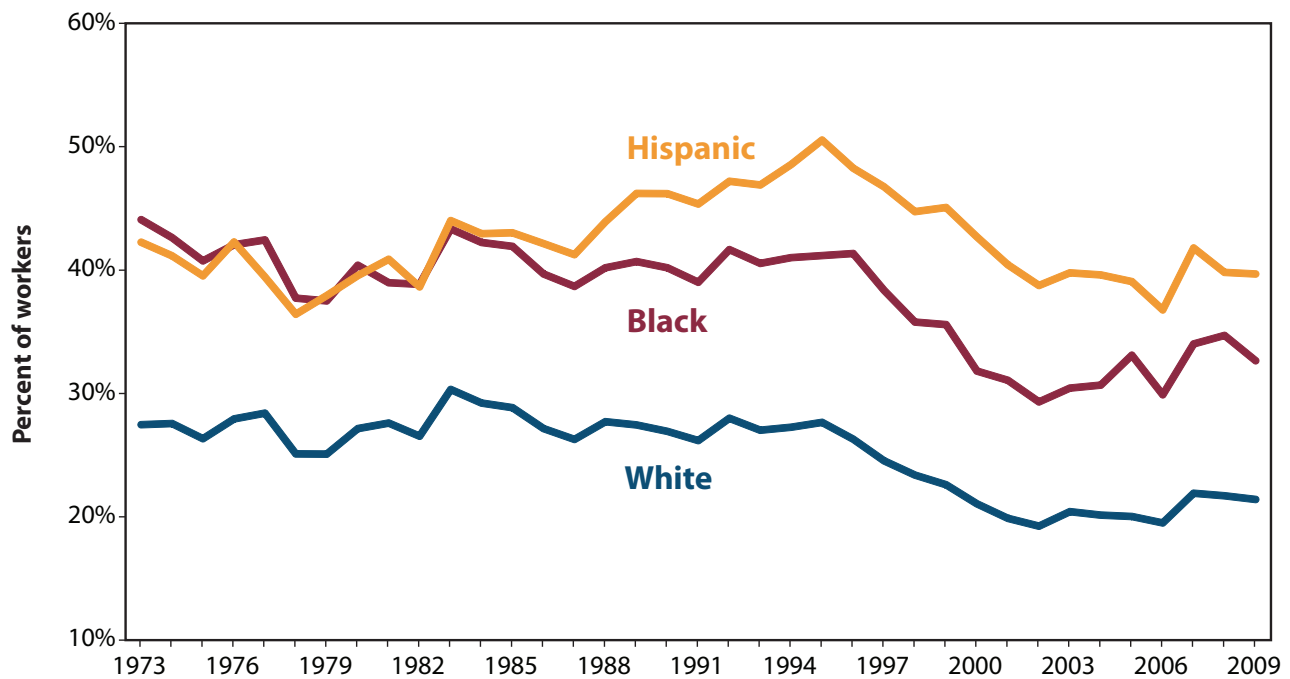
- Ultimately, the best anti-poverty program for both Latinos and blacks is a national good jobs agenda that provides a good job to everyone who wants to work. This agenda would be a tremendous benefit to workers of all races, not just Latinos and blacks. As an added benefit, this agenda would likely produce increases in the marriage rates for all groups.

Latinos need good jobs and improved educational attainment

Latino families experience high rates of poverty because Latino workers earn very low wages. **Figure A** shows that since the mid-1980s, Hispanics have had a larger share of workers earning poverty-level wages (i.e., wages not sufficient to keep a family of four out of poverty) than both blacks and whites.¹ In 2009, the share of Hispanics

FIGURE A

Share of workers earning poverty-level wages by race, 1973–2009

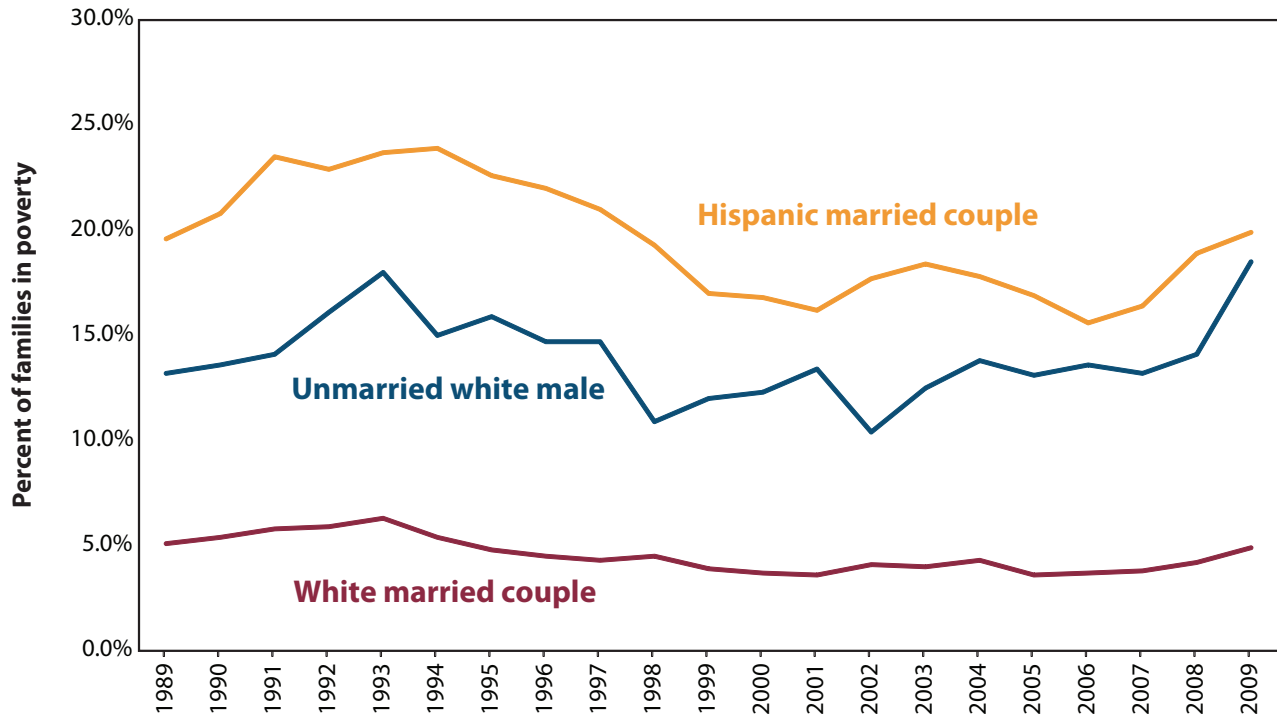


NOTE: The poverty-level wage is the wage that a full-time, full-year worker would have to earn to live above the federally defined poverty threshold for a family of four. In 2009, this wage was \$10.55 an hour.

SOURCE: EPI analysis of Current Population Survey, Outgoing Rotations Group. Adapted from EPI's online State of Working America series, <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/charts/views/235>.

FIGURE B

Poverty rates for families with children younger than 18 years old, by type of family head, 1989–2009



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (2010b).

earning poverty-level wages was 18.3 percentage points above the white share.

Given these facts, it is not surprising that families headed by a Hispanic married couple have higher poverty rates than families headed by a white married couple (Figure B). But even unmarried white men with children have lower poverty rates than married Hispanics with children. Thus, increasing the wages of Latino workers is absolutely necessary for bringing the Latino poverty rate down to the white poverty rate.

For economic well-being, a worker needs not only a good wage, but also health insurance in case he or she becomes sick or is injured, and a retirement plan that will keep the worker out of poverty after retirement. This means that for lifelong economic security, workers need good jobs which provide all of these things.

Unfortunately, the United States has undergone a long period of decline in good jobs. If we define a “good job” as a job that provides a wage at 60 percent of the median household income for a full-time worker, health insurance, and retirement benefits, the share of good jobs in the American economy has been shrinking (Table 1).

Male workers have seen sharp declines in good jobs. From 1979 to 2008, the share of males in good jobs declined by 15.2 percentage points. For Hispanic males the decline was 15.5 percentage points. For white males, it was 12.8 percentage points.

From 1979 to 2008, female workers saw a slight increase (up 3.1 percentage points) in their share of good jobs, likely due to the opening of formerly closed occupations to women over that period. This increase was concentrated among white women, whose share of

TABLE 1

Share of good jobs by race/ethnicity 1979 and 2008

	1979	2008	Percentage-point change
<i>All</i>	34.5%	27.6%	-6.9
<i>Whites</i>	36.3	31.5	-4.7
<i>Hispanics</i>	24.1	14.4	-9.7
<i>Blacks</i>	26.9	21.8	-5.2
<i>Other</i>	29.0	26.8	-2.1
Males			
<i>All</i>	46.5%	31.3%	-15.2
<i>Whites</i>	49.3	36.5	-12.8
<i>Hispanics</i>	30.8	15.3	-15.5
<i>Blacks</i>	33.4	24.1	-9.3
<i>Other</i>	37.1	29.5	-7.6
Females			
<i>All</i>	20.6%	23.7%	3.1
<i>Whites</i>	21.0	26.4	5.4
<i>Hispanics</i>	14.6	13.2	-1.4
<i>Blacks</i>	20.4	19.8	-0.6
<i>Other</i>	20.3	24.0	3.7

NOTE: Asian American data for 1979 is not available.

SOURCE: Author's analysis of Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009).

good jobs grew 5.4 percentage points. Hispanic women, on the other hand, experienced a slight decline (1.4 percentage points) in their share of good jobs from 1979 to 2008.

But even for white women, the growth in good jobs has stalled over the past decade. In 2000, 26.2 percent of white women were in good jobs. In 2008, 26.4 percent of white women were in good jobs.²

Hispanics have been at the leading edge of the decline in good jobs. Hispanic males and females experienced the largest drops by gender in the share of good jobs from 1979 to 2008. In 1979, only 24.1 percent of Hispanics were in good jobs—the lowest share among the races/ethnicities studied. By 2008, only 14.4 percent of Hispanic workers had a good job.

To lift Latino families out of poverty and to provide them with economic security, the United States needs to

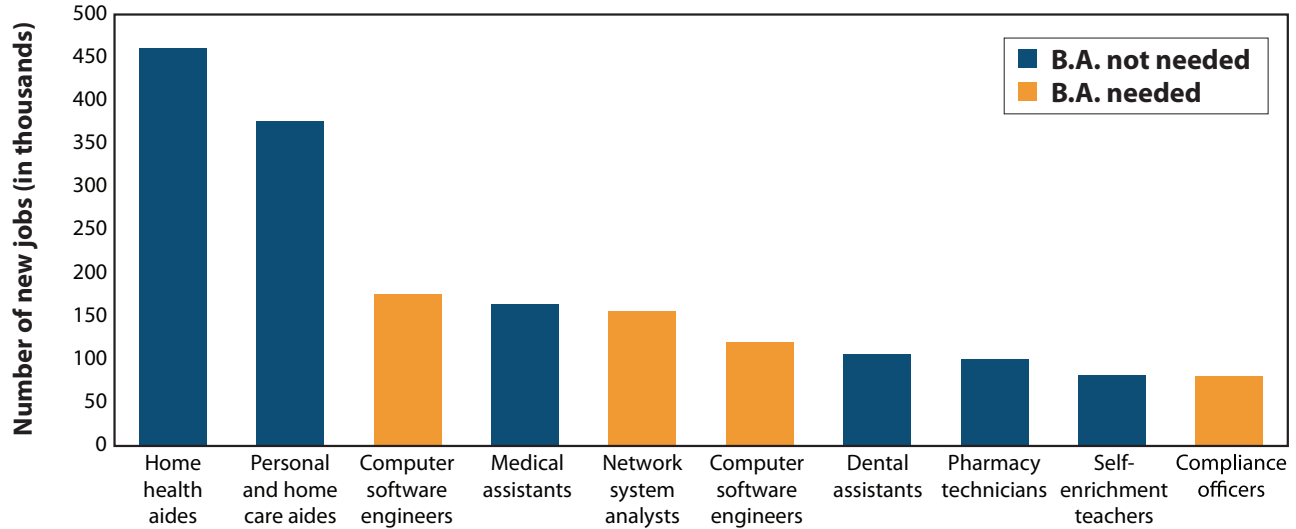
implement the good jobs agenda outlined in “Getting good jobs to America’s people of color” (Austin 2009). While Latinos are hurt the most by the decline in good jobs, the problem affects the American economy as a whole. As discussed earlier, white men are also experiencing sharp declines in good jobs. All racial groups will benefit from a national “good jobs agenda.”

Improving the educational attainment of Latino workers would also help enlarge the share of them in good jobs and reduce their poverty rates. Only 13.5 percent of Latinos 25-to-29 years old had bachelor’s degrees in 2010, compared with 38.6 percent of whites (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). Higher educational attainment is correlated with higher wages and higher rates of employment in good jobs (Austin 2009).

While improving educational outcomes is important, it alone will not address the decline in good jobs as the

FIGURE C

Ten fastest-growing occupations with the largest projected net increase in jobs from 2008 to 2018



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010).

U.S. economy increasingly churns out low-wage jobs. **Figure C** shows that many of the fastest-growing occupations are those that do not require a bachelor's degree. Most of these low-credential occupations are also low-wage occupations. Therefore we need a good jobs agenda that will transform these jobs into good jobs by increasing their wages and benefits.

African Americans need full employment and criminal justice reform

There is a strong correlation between the black unemployment and poverty rates. In 2000, the black unemployment rate fell to its lowest rate on record.³ Also in 2000, the black poverty rate fell to its lowest rate on record (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). Although those historically low rates were still very high, they illustrate an important truth: For African Americans, as for Latinos, a good job is the best route out of poverty. The problem is that African Americans consistently have the highest unemployment rates among the major racial groups.

While there are likely multiple factors behind high unemployment among African Americans, one important

factor is the continuing presence of discrimination in the labor market. Studies show that employers are significantly less likely to hire blacks than to hire equally qualified whites (Pager 2003; Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Morris, Sumner, and Borja 2008; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009; Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York 2009). Even among foreign-born workers, it is black immigrant workers who have the highest unemployment rate (Austin 2011a).

Joblessness is a deep and persistent problem for African Americans. From as early as 1960, the black unemployment rate has been twice the white rate (Fairlie and Sundstrom 1999). In 2010, if blacks had the same unemployment rate as whites, there would have been an additional 1.3 million blacks working.⁴ The additional income from 1.3 million black workers would have helped reduce the black poverty rate.

Every American who wants to work should be able to find work. We regularly achieve full employment for whites,⁵ but, in the past 50 years, we have never achieved full employment for blacks. The federal government should support three separate policies for increasing

employment in high-unemployment areas, where low-income blacks are concentrated: (1) direct public-sector employment, (2) job training *with job placement*, and (3) wage subsidies for hiring unemployed workers. This jobs program is explained more fully in “A jobs-centered approach to African American community development” (Austin forthcoming).

Targeting high-unemployment communities would disproportionately benefit African Americans because African Americans are more likely to live in these communities. But this jobs program would benefit Americans of all races facing persistently high unemployment. Some Native American and Latino communities, and even a few white communities, have experienced long periods of high unemployment.

In addition to people who are not in prison or other institutions who are jobless, black America also suffers economically from the relatively large share of its members who are incarcerated and without income. If the black incarceration rate were the same as the white incarceration rate, more than 700,000 additional black adults would be available to work and to help lower the black poverty rate.

The high incarceration rate among blacks is, to a degree, a product of black economic disadvantage and marginalization. The crime rates that lead to higher incarceration rates are influenced by multiple factors, and while there is much that criminologists still do not understand about criminal offending, they do know that economic conditions are related to crime rates. A growing body of research shows that low wages, high unemployment, high poverty, and high economic inequality lead to higher crime rates (Kelly 2000; Ludwig, Duncan, and Hirschfield 2001; Gould, Weinberg, and Mustard 2002; Machin and Meghir 2004; Lin 2008). Thus, a more economically equitable society would likely have lower black crime rates.

Criminal justice policies, and not just criminal offending, also affect incarceration rates. The U.S. prison population quadrupled over the past three decades (Patillo, Weiman, and Western 2004, 1). According to the Pew Center on the States (2008, 3) “current prison growth is not driven primarily by a parallel increase in crime, or a corresponding surge in the population at large. Rather, it flows principally

from a wave of policy choices that are sending more law-breakers to prison and, through popular ‘three-strikes’ measures and other sentencing enhancements, keeping them there longer.”

These policies have not been constructed or implemented in a race-neutral manner. Many criminal-justice policies increase the black incarceration rate and reduce the white incarceration rate, the most notorious of which has been the much harsher treatment of crack cocaine than powder cocaine possession. One can find practices that lead to higher incarceration rates for blacks at every step in the criminal justice process (Walker, Spohn, and DeLone 1996; Mauer 2006; Alexander 2010).

These criminal justice policies mean that a relatively large share of the potential black workforce is in prison. When these individuals are released from jail, it is more difficult for them to find work with a criminal record than if they did not have a record (Pager 2003; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009). If they find work, they will likely earn less than if they did not have a criminal record (Western 2007). Thus, even after incarceration, criminal justice policies put upward pressure on the black poverty rate.

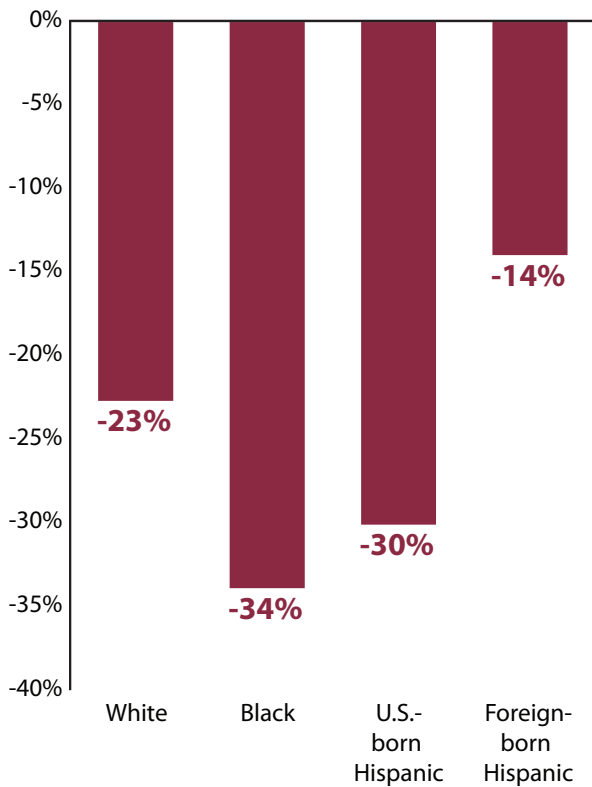
If the black unemployment rate in 2010 had been the same as the white unemployment rate, there would have been an additional 1.3 million blacks working. If the black and white incarceration rates had been the same, there would have been an additional 700,000 blacks available to work. Thus, as of 2010, there are 2 million “missing” black workers.

To put these 2 million missing black workers back to work, we need full employment policies targeted to high unemployment areas, and we need to adopt smart-on-crime policies that work to reduce crime and incarceration rates (see The Smart on Crime Coalition 2011; Austin forthcoming). With an additional 2 million blacks in good jobs, we would see significant reductions in the black poverty rate.

This discussion has emphasized the impact of high unemployment and criminal justice policies on African Americans, but it is also relevant for Latinos. While the black unemployment rate tends to be twice the white unemployment rate, the Latino unemployment rate tends to be 1.5 times the white rate.⁶ Latino males are imprisoned at 2.5 times the rate of white males.⁷ Full employment and

FIGURE D

Percentage-point change in share of adults who are married, by race and Hispanic nativity, 1960–2007 (30- to 44-year-olds)



NOTE: White and black data are for U.S.-born, non-Hispanic, alone populations.

SOURCE: Author's analysis of U.S. Census and American Community Survey data from Ruggles et al. (2010).

criminal justice reform would provide significant benefits to Latinos.

Reducing poverty will increase marriage rates

The problems discussed above—high unemployment, the decline in good jobs, and increasing incarceration rates, particularly as they affect men—have contributed to the decline in heterosexual marriage. As Smock, Manning, and Porter (2005, 681) state, “Quantitative studies in demography, sociology, and economics have generally demonstrated that the occurrence and stability of marriage are linked to good economic circumstances. People with

higher education and better economic prospects are more likely to become married, to stay married, and to have children within marriage.”

However, economic prospects for the average male have worsened because of increasing economic inequality in America since the 1970s (Economic Policy Institute 2011). The anti-poverty agenda outlined earlier, if implemented, likely will increase marriage rates because it will significantly improve the economic prospects of a very broad section of men from all racial groups.

Marriage rates for adults 30-to-44 years old⁸ have declined for whites, Hispanics (especially the U.S.-born) and African Americans, as shown in **Figure D**. The share of black adults who are married declined 34 percentage points from 1960 to 2007 (an end year chosen to exclude any possible effects of the Great Recession on marriage). The share of U.S.-born Hispanic adults who are married declined almost as much—30 percentage points. For whites, the decline was less but a still-large 23 percentage points. The decline of marriage, therefore, is not unique to any racial group.

TABLE 2

Percent of 30- to 44-year-olds who are married, by race and Hispanic nativity, 1960 and 2007

	White	Black	U.S.-born Hispanic	Foreign-born Hispanic
1960	87%	71%	84%	81%
2007	65	37	54	67
Percentage-point change	-23	-34	-30	-14

NOTE: White and black data are for U.S.-born, non-Hispanic, alone populations.

SOURCE: Author's analysis of U.S. Census and American Community Survey data from Ruggles et al. (2010).

As depicted in **Table 2**, the share of adults who are married is lowest among African Americans (37 percent). The share is 65 percent for whites and 54 percent for U.S.-born Hispanics. Even in 1960, the share of African American adults who were married was more than 10 percentage

points lower than the share for whites and Hispanics. Thus, while the percentage-point decline in African American adults who were married was not much greater than the decline for U.S.-born Hispanics from 1960 to 2007, African Americans started with a significantly lower share in marriage than did U.S.-born Hispanics.

Marriage among African Americans suffers from a shortage of black males (a shortage felt primarily among African Americans because the vast majority of marriages are still intra-racial⁹). **Figure E** shows that among whites and U.S.-born Hispanics who are not in prison or other institutions, there is a nearly equal number of males and females who are 30 to 44 years old. For blacks, the male-to-female ratio in that age range is only 0.79, indicating

that there are 21 percent fewer black males than black females. In contrast, among foreign-born Hispanics, there are 22 percent more males than females (although a significant share of the men are likely have a spouse outside of the United States).

Smart-on-crime policies (see *The Smart on Crime Coalition 2011*; Austin forthcoming) would provide direct economic benefits to African American communities *and* likely increase the share of blacks who are married. The male-to-female ratio for blacks is skewed, in part, by high incarceration and homicide rates for black males (Kaiser Family Foundation 2006). Charles and Luoh (2010) demonstrate that high incarceration rates reduce the likelihood that women will marry. By reducing black incarceration and homicide rates, effective smart-on-crime policies, would help rebalance the black male-to-female ratio and increase black marriage rates.

Although the share of married adults has declined for whites, Latinos, and blacks, a majority of single adults still would like to get married. Pew Social and Demographic Trends reports that 58 percent of singletons and 64 percent of cohabitators would like to get married (Taylor et al. 2010a). Marriage intent is high even among African Americans, who have a low rate of marriage: 72.5 percent reported in the National Survey of American Life that they will likely get married (Lincoln, Taylor, and Jackson 2008).¹⁰ Although female single-parent families are fairly common among African American and Latinos, “72% of Hispanics and 65% of African Americans say a child needs a home with both a mother and a father to grow up happily, compared with 57% of whites,” according to Pew (Taylor et al. 2010a, 55). The decline in marriage, therefore, is not the result of a devaluing of marriage.

Whites, Latinos, and blacks all want to marry at fairly high rates, but, in a country with rising inequality (Economic Policy Institute 2011) and a strong decline in good jobs for men (Austin 2009), they increasingly feel like they cannot afford to marry. While there have been changes in gender norms, there is still an expectation that men should provide the majority of the earnings necessary to support a family.

Pew reports that 88 percent of blacks, 77 percent of Hispanics, and 62 percent of whites “say that in order to be ready for marriage, a man must be able to support

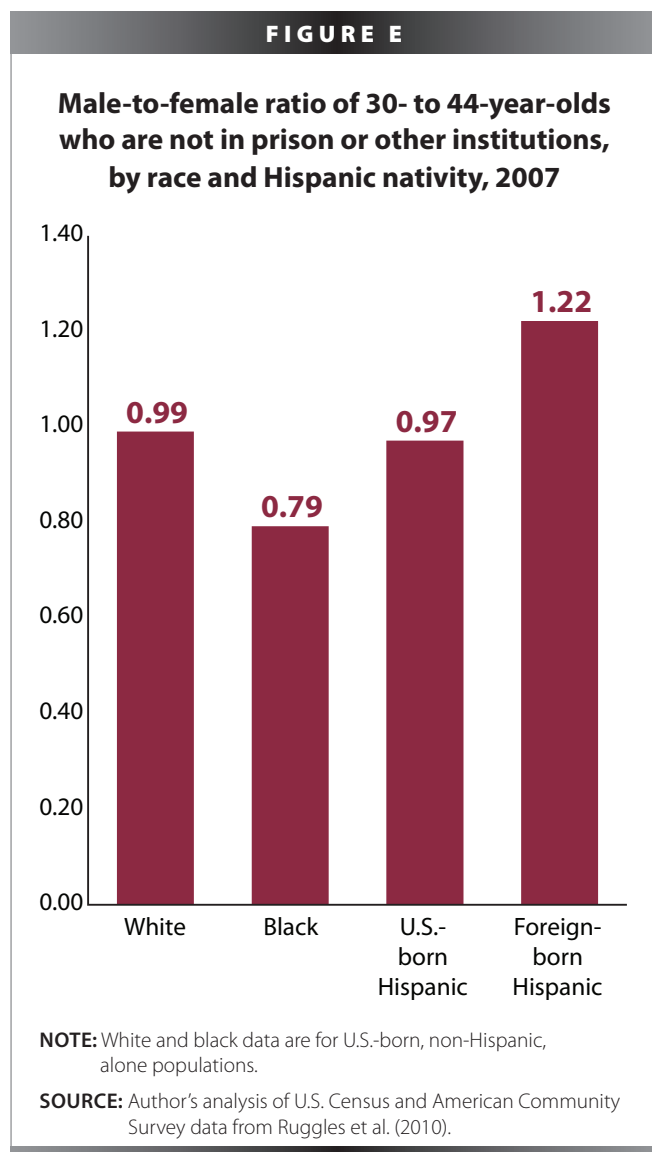
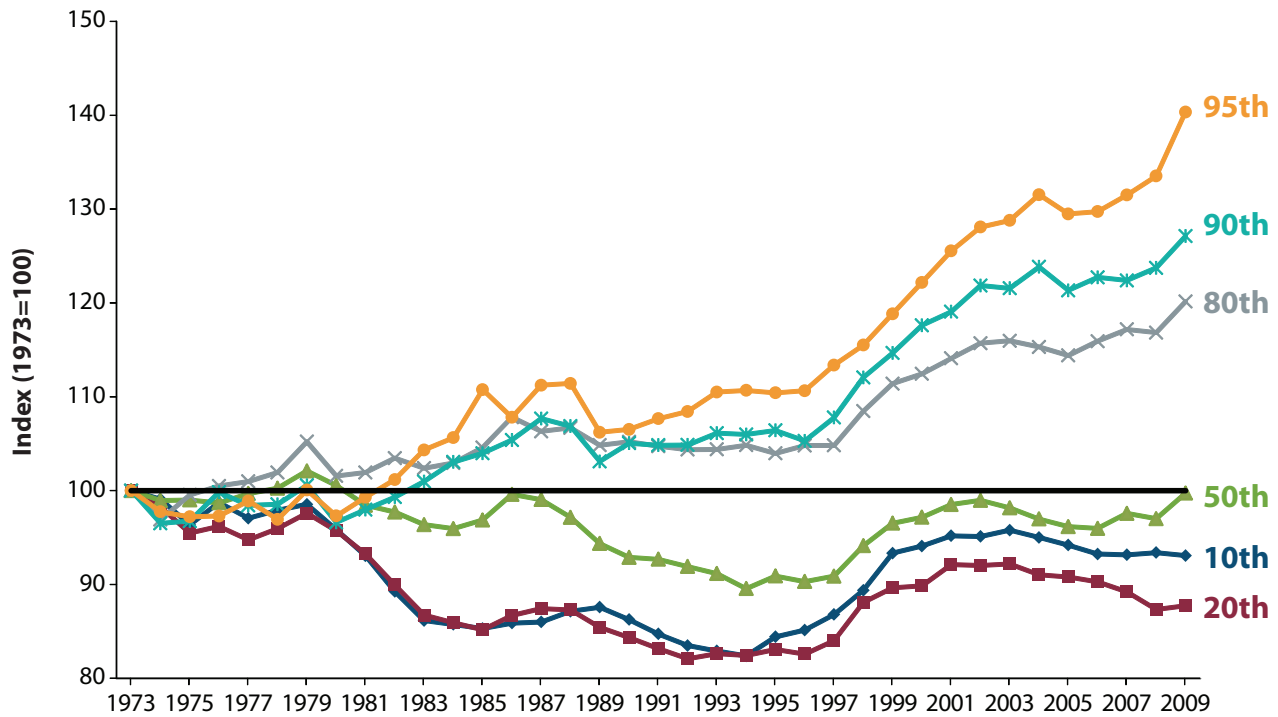


FIGURE F

Change in real hourly wages for men by wage percentile, 1973–2009



SOURCE: EPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Outgoing rotations group. Adapted from EPI's online State of Working America series, <http://www.stateofworkingamerica.org/charts/views/235>.

a family financially” (Taylor et al. 2010a, 28). But over time, men at the bottom half of the wage scale have found it increasingly difficult to support a family because their real wages have declined or stagnated for a generation (Figure F). Latino and black men are disproportionately in the bottom half of the wage distribution.¹¹

Qualitative research captures the experiences of working-class couples who would like to marry but feel that they cannot afford to marry (Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005, 687-690). For example, a respondent, Russell, states, “For us to get married . . . we’d have to both have good jobs, money, and a place to stay.”

“I don’t have a car [and] I want a good job,” states another respondent, Malcolm, listing what he needs before he marries.

Candace says, “we have certain things that we want to do before we get married. We both want very

good jobs, and we both want a house, we both want reliable transportation.”

When explaining why she did not marry her prior partner, Holly says, “Money. . . I don’t want to struggle, if I’m in a partnership, then there’s no more struggling, and income-wise we were still both struggling.”

Leroy sums up the problem common among many of these couples: “The love is there . . . the trust is there. Everything’s there except money.”

Researchers with Pew Social and Demographic Trends confirm these findings with nationally representative data. Taylor et al. (2010a, i) find “those with a high school diploma or less are just as likely as those with a college degree to say they want to marry. But they place a higher premium than college graduates (38% versus 21%) on financial stability as a very important reason to marry.” While whites, blacks, and Latinos were fairly similar in

saying that love was the most important reason for marrying, about half of blacks and Latinos also see marriage as a step toward financial security, while only one-fourth of whites feel the same (Taylor et al. 2010a, 32).

As long as the country continues to have increasing economic inequality and a declining share of good jobs, we should expect continued declines in marriage. On the other hand, if we reduce the incarceration rate and the homicide rate for blacks, there will be more black males available for marriage. If we increase the share of good jobs in the economy and achieve full employment for people of all races, then we will provide Americans of all races the financial security that they need to get married.

Conclusion

Continually high poverty rates among blacks and Latinos are the result of high unemployment and incarceration rates and declining shares of good jobs in the American economy. The decline in marriage among these groups is a collateral consequence of these negative economic conditions. We can address these problems with full-employment in good jobs and comprehensive criminal justice reform. These policies would not only lift large numbers of Latinos and blacks out of poverty, they would also provide significant benefits to all other racial groups. Additionally, these policies would provide more white, Latino, and black men with the economic security they need to get married.

Endnotes

1. In this paper, “whites” refers to non-Hispanic whites and “blacks” to non-Hispanic blacks.
2. Author’s analysis of the “good jobs” rates (Austin 2009).
3. Author’s calculations based on annual unemployment rates from the Current Population Survey data of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
4. Author’s calculations based on annual unemployment rate and labor force size from the Current Population Survey data of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
5. “Full employment” is defined here as an unemployment rate of 4 percent (Bernstein and Baker 2003: 6). Examining annual unemployment rates of whites from 1960 to 1978 and non-Hispanic whites from 1979-2010 (data from the Current Population Survey data of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), one finds that the white unemployment rate was below 4.5 percent 20 times in the last 50 years.
6. From 2000 to 2010, the Hispanic unemployment rate averaged 1.5 times the white rate. Author’s analysis of Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
7. From 2000 to 2009, the Hispanic male incarceration rate averaged 2.5 times the white rate. Author’s analysis of data in West (2010).
8. This age bracket follows some of the work of Pew Social and Demographic Trends (see, for example, Taylor et al. 2010b). While over time the age of first marriage has increased, 30 years old is old enough that contemporary statistics would not be too distorted by this trend.
9. Less than 9 percent of marriages in 2009 were interracial or interethnic (*New York Times* 2011). Most of the interethnic marriages were of white Hispanics marrying white non-Hispanics (Austin 2011b).
10. Taylor et al. (2010a) report that in the Pew Social and Demographic Trends survey “unmarried blacks are just as likely as unmarried whites to say they would like to get married in the future.” However, they do not provide the specific percentage.
11. For example, in 2007, the median hourly wage for men was \$16.85. The medians for Hispanic and black men were below this amount which indicates that more than half of these men earn less than the median. For Hispanic men the median was \$12.20, and for black men it was \$13.47. White men earned \$18.75, above the overall median (Mishel, Berstein, and Shierholz 2009, 136 and 177).

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