

# Parenting practices, teenage lifestyles, and academic achievement among African American children

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I was asked to comment on why African Americans are where they are in the income distribution, and why poverty is so much higher among African Americans than among whites. A fully adequate response would recount a turbulent history of slavery, white supremacy, prejudice, and discrimination in the United States and a long list of policies past and present. It would critique our national culture and, within it, the roles that race, materialism, and social class continue to play as they interact across multiple spheres of our collective experience. My approach here is much more limited and is based on my own recent work. Specifically, I have been focusing on causes and consequences of achievement gaps, in search of strategies for raising achievement levels for all students while reducing racial disparities. The emphasis in this short article is on racial disparities in home-learning conditions and some aspects of youth culture, including for the nonpoor.

As a backdrop, the evidence is clear that academic achievement gaps are among the causes *and the consequences* of income inequality. Here, I address them only as a cause. Beginning during the 1970s, shifts in technology and intensification of competitive pressures increased the market value of academic skills.<sup>1</sup> Wage inequality between people with different skill levels grew. Over the next two decades, the purchasing power of non-college-educated workers actually fell for young men and was relatively stagnant (at a very low level) for young women. At the same time, real incomes rose for college-educated workers. The consequences for racial disparity became clearer around 1990, when researchers began discovering that reading and math test scores measured during the teen years predicted about half of the hourly wage gap between black and white young adults by the time they reached their middle twenties.<sup>2</sup> This led an increasing number of economists to focus more on child and youth development and on education. I was among them.

Further, there was a political implication. Strategically in the struggle for racial equality, we needed not to resist testing, but instead, to intensify efforts to raise performance. With regard to race in particular, the challenge was broad based—more than an issue of “social class” (at

least as “social class” is commonly understood). Comparing black and white twelfth graders across multiple years in the Nation’s Report Card, there were test score disparities at every level of parental education, with the largest gaps appearing between black and white children of college-educated parents.<sup>3</sup>

A preponderance of new evidence suggests that racial achievement gaps are largely attributable to life experiences, not immutable facts of nature. There is new evidence that the black-white gap in IQ scores shrunk by about a quarter between 1972 and 2002.<sup>4</sup> Although less precise than is the case for older children, current data from the Birth Cohort of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study show almost no racial or social-class differences just prior to the first birthday (though by kindergarten, racial and social class differences in skill levels are firmly established).<sup>5</sup> For older children and teenagers, the Long-Term Trend Assessment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the only consistent, nationally representative test score series we have for tracking progress. NAEP began tracking scores by racial group in the early 1970s. The reading-score gap between black and white 17-year-olds narrowed by over 60 percentage points between 1971 and 1988. Progress for teenagers stopped around 1990 (for reasons that are still debated), but my point here is that evidence abounds that great progress is possible.

The challenge now is to provide all children with supports, incentives, and experiences that propel them to thrive intellectually. There will always be individual-level differences within racial groups, but over time, the differences between groups should become small to non-existent. Again, our national experience over the past half century shows that progress in narrowing gaps between groups is possible. This article identifies some issues to address in order for progress to continue and accelerate.

My focus below is on racial differences in lifestyle and not only among the poor. My purpose is to highlight some levers that parents and communities can use in efforts to raise achievement and reduce disparities. Every person, family, organization and society has a lifestyle, including norms and routines of time use, consumption, and interpersonal relations that affect intellectual growth.

Before proceeding, let me emphasize that there are other major pieces to the racial inequality puzzle, aside from

lifestyle. For example, new research by George Borjas indicates that competition from immigrants has reduced employment and increased incarceration for blacks in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Further, recent audit studies of racial employment discrimination show that employers prefer whites to Hispanics, and Hispanics to blacks, even when they have the same resumes and employment histories.<sup>7</sup> Research using “implicit-bias” testing shows that people of all races harbor racial biases.<sup>8</sup> I am not dismissing any of these or other important structural features of our economy and national culture. Still, lifestyle matters in determining how effectively we cope with life stresses and respond to opportunities and how successfully we reach our individual and collective potentials.

Most of the data I discuss below come from a school intervention project that I founded in 2001 to address achievement gaps. Surveys of students and teachers inform the work in schools. In 2005, we began including a dozen items on the elementary school survey to measure home-learning conditions. Some of those items are addressed below.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am defining “advantaged” families as those with two parents and at least one computer, and “disadvantaged” families as those with either a single parent or no computer. Of the almost 7,000 first through fifth graders in this sample, 11 percent of whites, 13 percent of Asians, 34 percent of Hispanics, and 41 percent of blacks qualify as disadvantaged.<sup>9</sup> As context, it is worth noting that nationwide, household structure has been changing more rapidly for blacks than for whites. In 1960, 93 percent of white children and 68 percent of black children were in two-parent households. This dropped to 79 percent for whites (14 percentage points lower than 1960) and 33 percent for blacks (35 percentage points lower than 1960!) by the year 2000.<sup>10</sup>

## Parenting

Parents have a profound influence on whether a home provides intellectual stimulation, physical and psychological safety, an appropriate degree of structure, and supportive relationships. How homes measure up on these dimensions is often correlated with race and with socioeconomic status. In particular, within racial groups, parents with higher socioeconomic status provide children with more opportunities at home to build academic skills and tend to be better at integrating family, school, and community efforts.<sup>11</sup>

Can parenting practices be influenced? Evaluations have been carried out on a number of parenting interventions, including having parents listen to their children reading school books at home, having seventh graders participate in reading groups that included parents, and teaching parents tutoring skills in reading and mathematics.<sup>12</sup> Al-

though such programs have not been universally successful, some have produced moderately large achievement gains, even in rigorously conducted experimental trials.<sup>13</sup> As long as interventions are carried out with sensitivity and respect for families, improving the design and implementation of parenting interventions should remain among the methods we consider as ways of helping them raise achievement levels and narrow racial gaps.

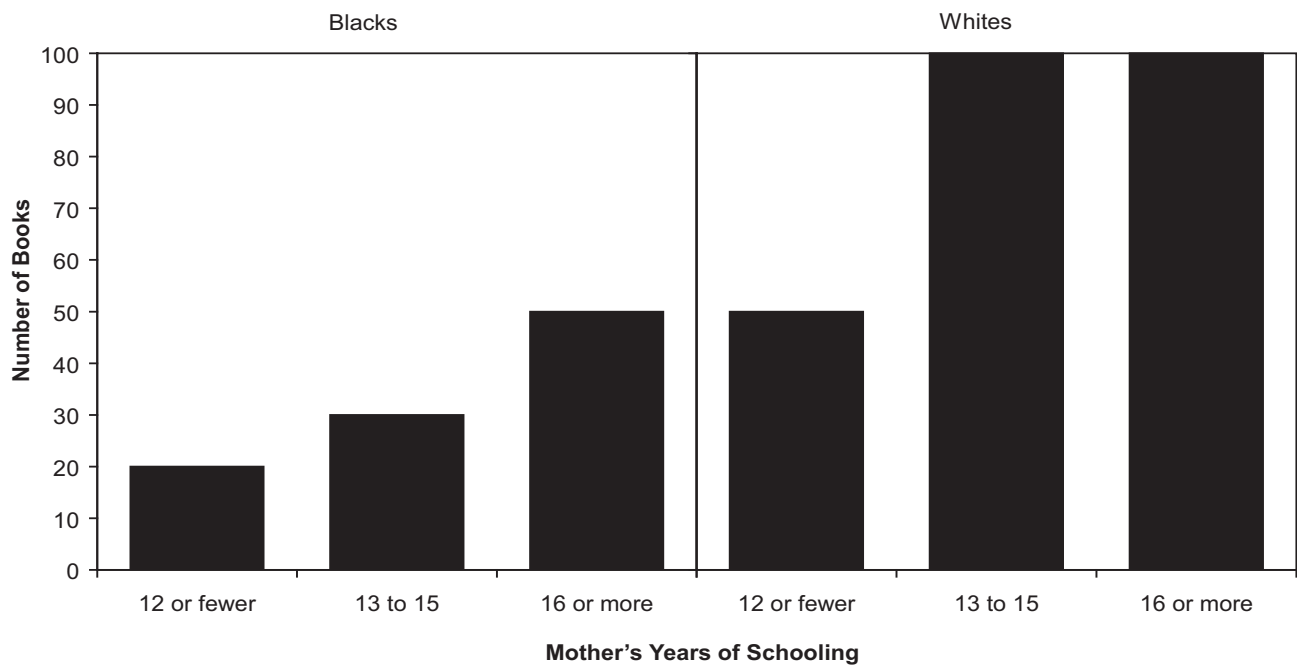
## Resources

Social- and material-resource disparities help to explain why parenting practices and opportunities for effective parenting differ among socioeconomic and racial or ethnic groups. Nonwhites and poor whites, on average, have lower incomes than typical white parents. They have fewer years of schooling and fewer academic skills for any given amount of schooling.<sup>14</sup> They work fewer weeks per year, at lower average wages, and have accumulated less wealth.<sup>15</sup> They are more stigmatized by assumptions of inferiority, and have fewer social networks tying them to people and institutions that control information or have the capacity to provide other forms of assistance.<sup>16</sup>

Resource disparities predict achievement gaps, and policies and programs that increase income for very poor households have been found to boost achievement among young children.<sup>17</sup> Many mechanisms have been suggested (though causation is not always proven) for why income and other socioeconomic resources are such strong predictors of student achievement. For example, parents with more resources may have access to safer neighborhoods with better schools and more studious peers. Teachers may be more likely to welcome input from those parents, and treat them respectfully. Parents with more resources can afford more learning tools and materials in the home, and may be less stressed by survival pressures and thus have more patience in helping their children. They may also have better and more reliable health services. To help address these inequities, policies and programs have included efforts intended to improve school quality in poor areas, increase access to better neighborhoods, improve parent-teacher communication, supplement home-learning resources, help parents to manage stress, and provide access to health care services. All of these things are expected to complement or substitute for parental resources.

## Learning-at-home disparities

Other researchers have argued that “learning at home” is associated with gains in achievement.<sup>18</sup> Learning-at-home gaps appear at all levels of parental education and for students at all grade levels, although most attention has focused on low-income and poorly educated parents. For example, in the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, Kindergarten Cohort, college-graduate African American mothers reported fewer children’s books in the home than did college-educated white mothers (Figure 1). The number of books



**Figure 1. Within-race median parental responses in 1998 to: How many children's books does your [kindergarten] child have in your home now, including library books? By mother's years of schooling.**

Source: Author's calculations from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study.

in the home matters, partly because the parent-child conversation when reading a new book is different from the conversation around a book that they have read many times already. One study found that books in the home predicted a significant share of the achievement gaps between young black and white children with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. When researchers took into account the number of children's books in the house, otherwise unexplained gaps between black and white children's scores were reduced by an amount equivalent to one fifth of the disparity in arithmetic scores and one third of the disparity in reading scores.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, this finding does not imply that buying more books per se will raise achievement. Nonetheless, it reminds us that the variety of reading materials and literary practices likely to be correlated with numbers of books, such as the ways that books are read and discussed, may often be associated with achievement.

The results of our own survey illustrate some interesting differences in learning-at-home environments.<sup>20</sup> Figure 2 suggests that Asians and whites may have the net advantage when it comes to home learning. Asian children were most likely to agree that "I read almost every day at home," and advantaged Asians were the only group more likely to have a computer than a television in their bedrooms. In other results not shown in the figure, Asian children, whether advantaged or disadvantaged, reported that they spent less time watching television (and far less time watching music videos) than did black and Hispanic children. Fewer Asian children reported becoming sleepy

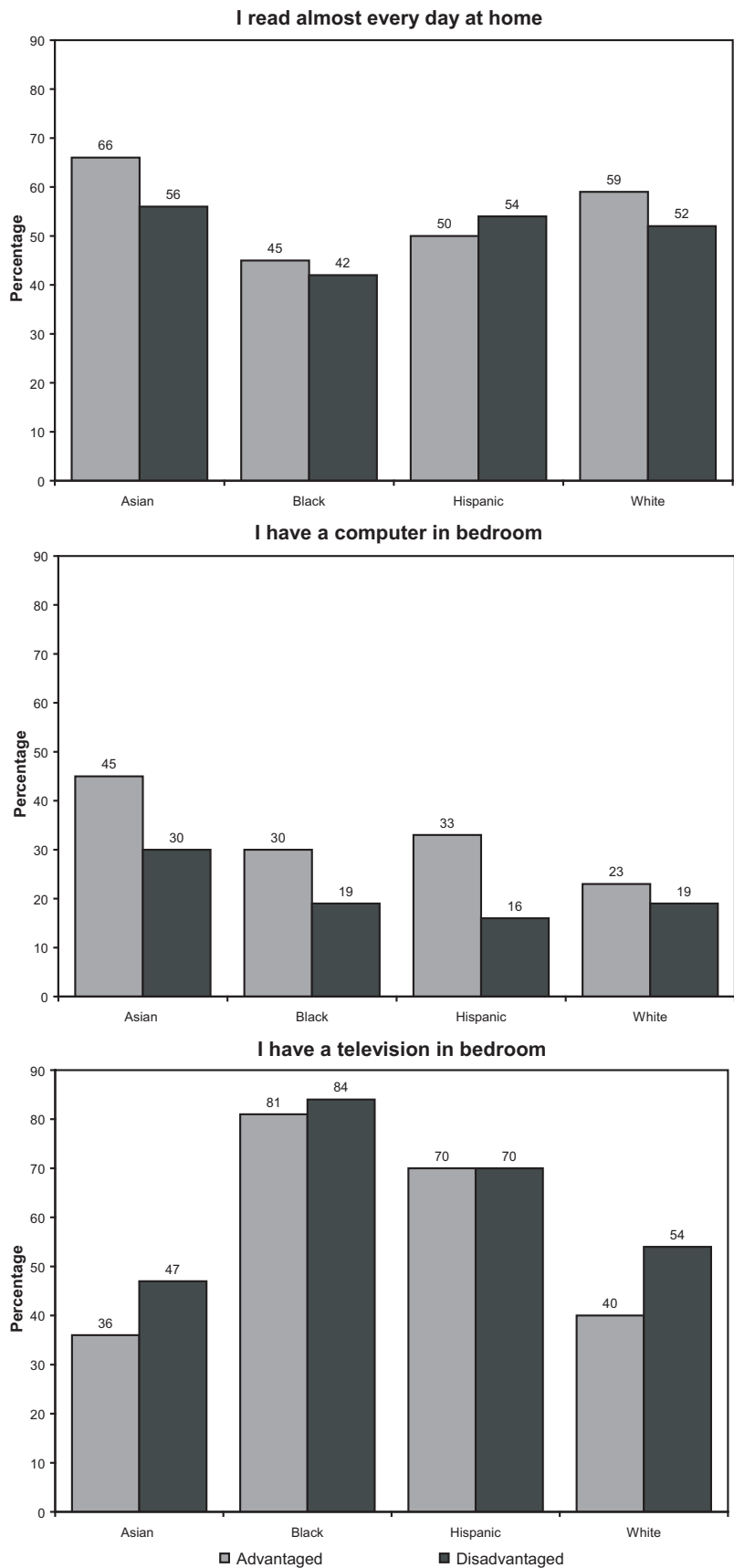
at school, and fewer agreed that "sometimes my teacher says I don't pay attention like I should."

Continued progress in raising achievement and closing gaps would likely accelerate if home lifestyle changes were to include things like requiring daily leisure reading, asking children to explain homework answers to parents, and substituting high-yield learning activities for high levels of television watching. Of course, we should not expect that children and youth (of any group) will accept such changes easily.

### Youth culture

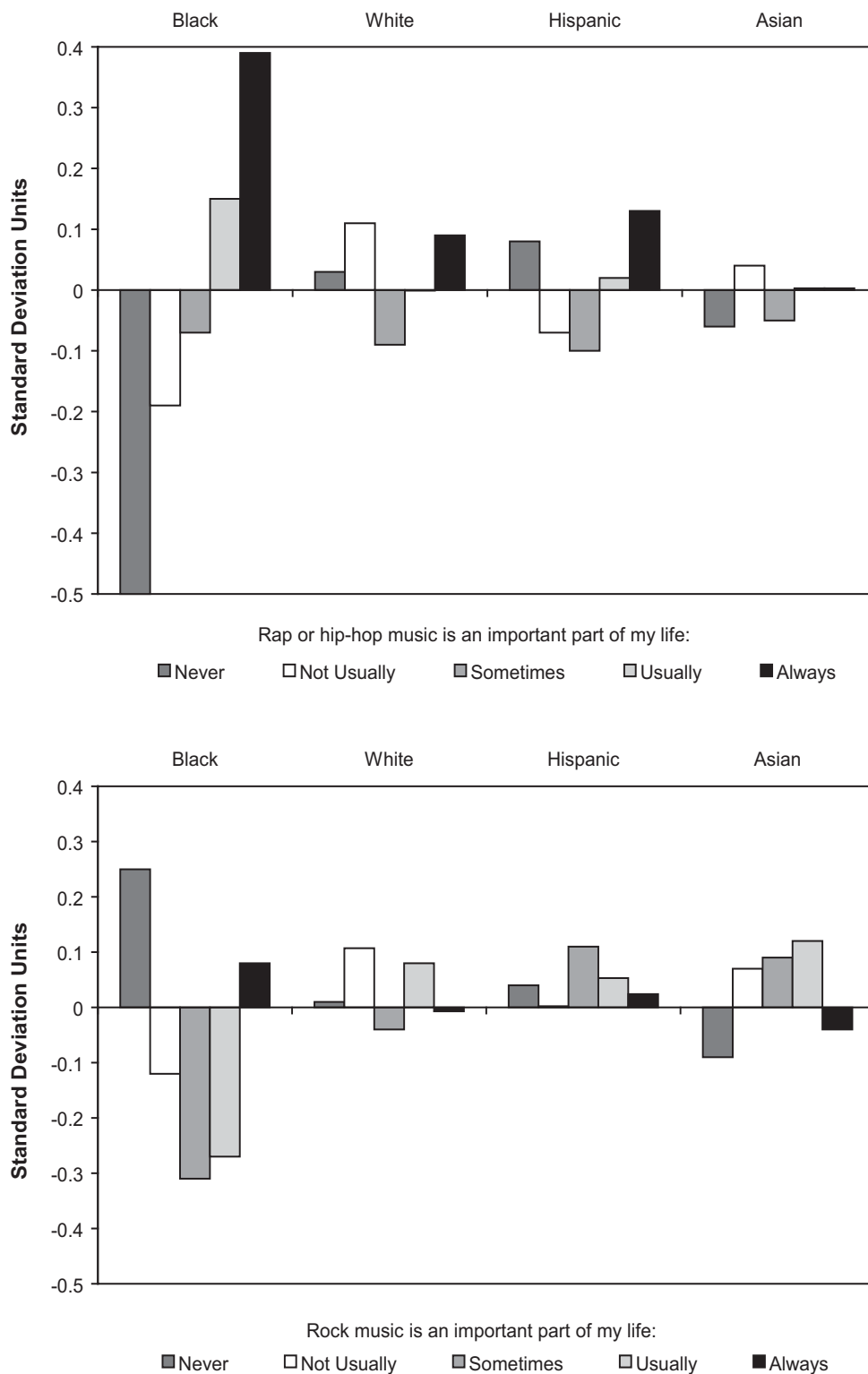
Our survey for secondary school students is focused on students' school engagement and their teachers' instructional practices. However, we also explore aspects of "youth culture," broadly defined to include self-esteem, the importance of particular music styles, and conditions under which teenagers think their peers perceive them as "acting white."

Humans gravitate toward activities that generate self-esteem. Teenagers' self-esteem is strongly related to their participation in popular youth lifestyles. For example, self-esteem among black teenagers is strongly and positively correlated with the importance of rap or hip-hop music in their lives (Figure 3). In contrast, there is a u-shaped relationship for black teenagers between self-esteem and how important rock music is in their



**Figure 2. Home-learning opportunities.**

**Source:** Author’s calculations using Tripod Project student surveys for 1st to 6th graders from Spring 2005. Answered “yes” rather than “maybe” or “no.” “Advantaged” students have at least one computer in the home and are not in single parent families; others are labeled “disadvantaged.”



**Figure 3. Self-esteem for teenagers, by whether hip-hop/rap or rock music is “an important part of my life.”**

**Source:** Author’s calculations using Tripod Project student surveys for 6th to 12th graders from spring 2005.

lives: blacks for whom rock music is “never” and “always” important tend to have higher self-esteem than those to whom the same music is “sometimes” important. If rock music is never important, black students fit well socially with other black students. Black teens for whom it is always important probably fit well with whites.

Those for whom it is “sometimes” important may be socially stranded, hence their low self-esteem. With more than four thousand black students in the data, these relationships are statistically significant. For the other racial groups, music is less strongly related to self-esteem; for whites, Hispanics and Asians, there are no strong rela-

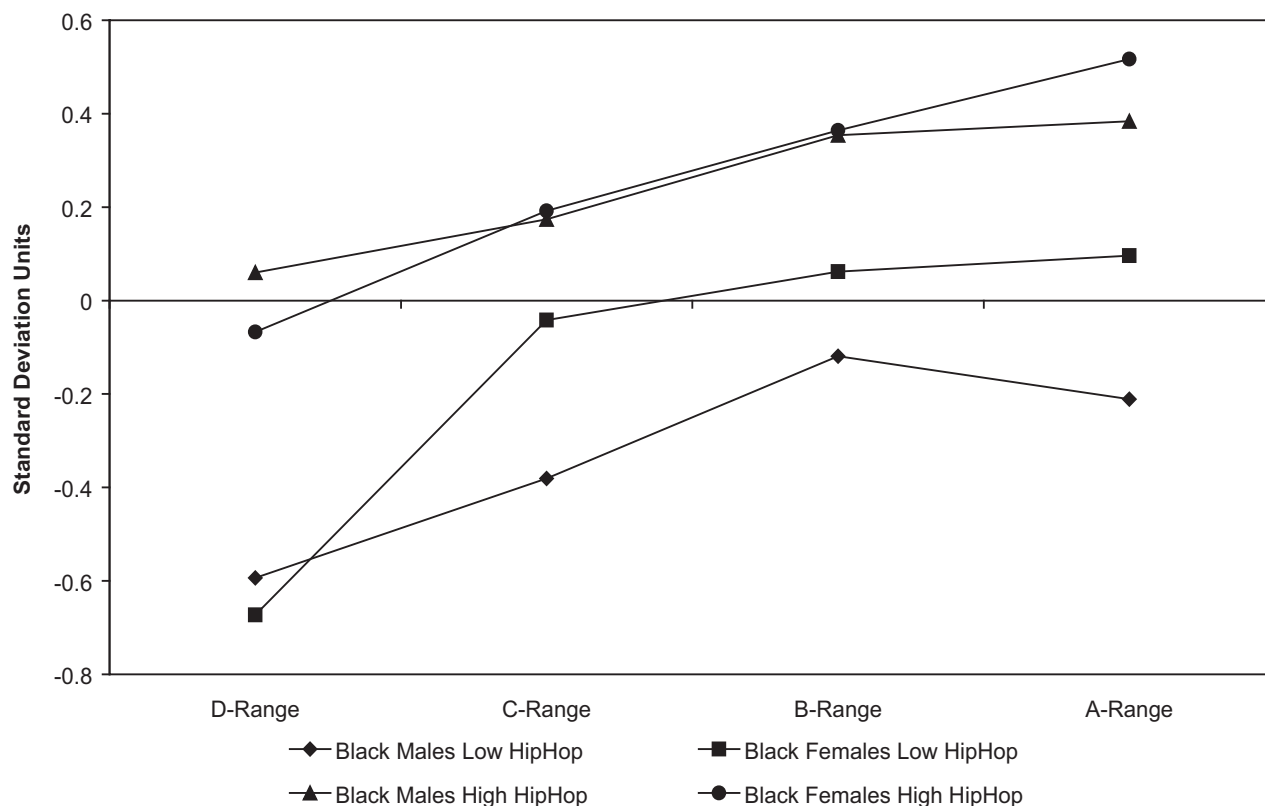


Figure 4. Self-esteem, by GPA and whether hip-hop music is “an important part of my life,” for black teenagers.

tionships between self-esteem and the importance of either rock or hip-hop music.<sup>21</sup>

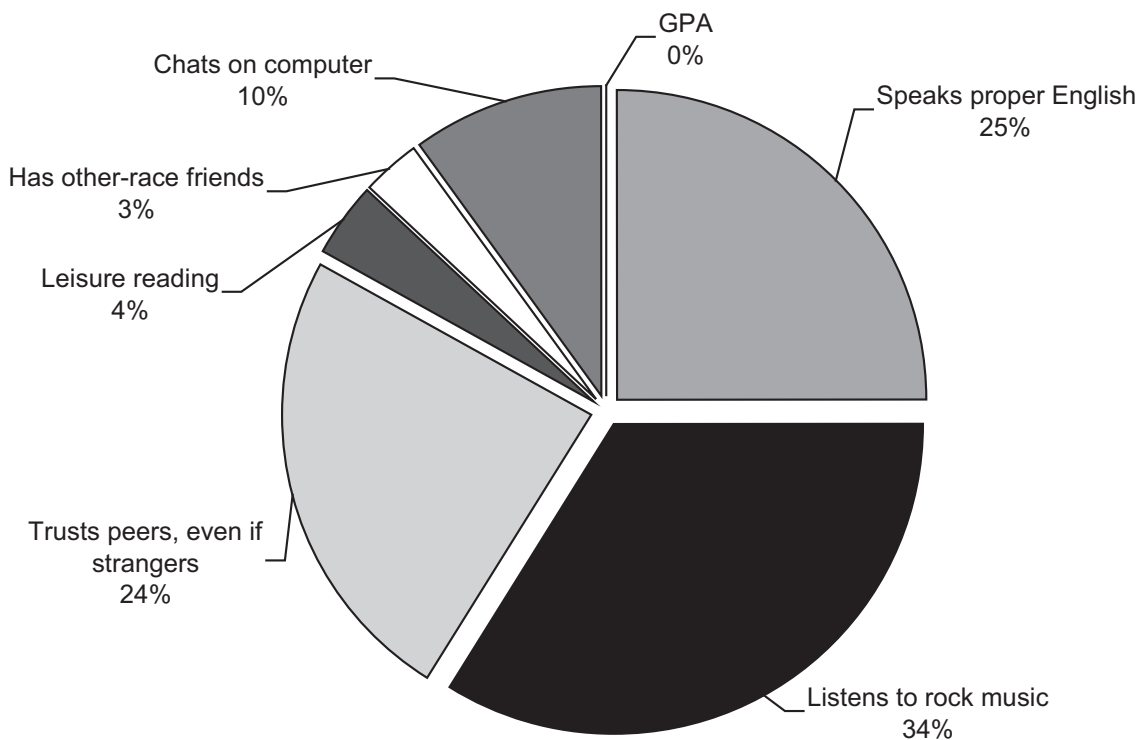
For black students, average self-esteem is usually higher for those with higher grades. Further, black students to whom hip-hop music is important have higher self-esteem at each grade range than those for whom the music is not important (Figure 4). The exception is that average self-esteem is lower for black males who get A-range grades than for those who get B-range grades, if hip-hop music is not important to them. Since there may be other social correlates related to both grades and music preferences, the reasons that self-esteem is lower for males who get A’s (than B’s), if hip-hop music is not important to them, remain to be explored in more detail.

We were also interested in understanding why some black students get accused of “acting white” and what impact the accusation might have on academic engagement. Black high school students with A-range grades were modestly more likely than those with C-range grades to agree with the statement, “At this school, students like me get accused of acting white.” But in general, grade-point average was not an important predictor of the “acting white” accusation, especially once other variables were controlled for (Figure 5).<sup>22</sup> Instead, survey-based predictors of the “acting white” accusation for black youth are related to personal style: for example, whether the student speaks proper English in informal

settings with friends, likes leisure reading, is interested in rock music, and has a trusting attitude toward peers who are strangers. Speaking proper English in informal settings and doing leisure reading correlate positively with grades, so youth who get accused of acting white may sometimes think it is because they seem too serious about their school work.

One consequence of the ambiguity is that those who experience (or fear) being accused of “acting white” report in our surveys that they sometimes hold back from doing their best, because of what others might say or think. Holding back is greatest among youth with the highest and the lowest grades. More than 40 percent of black high school males and females in these data who get D-range grades and think they might be accused of acting white agree that they at least sometimes hold back from doing their best because of what others might say or think. Among those who earn A-range grades and think they might be accused of acting white, almost half of black males but only 15 percent of black females report holding back from doing their best because of what others might say or think.<sup>23</sup> These are important patterns to understand. They warrant more attention from researchers, educators, parents, and youth workers.

Progress in narrowing achievement gaps between black and white teenagers stopped at the end of the 1980s. In 1988, black 13- and 17-year-olds in the National Assess-



**Figure 5. Why black students are considered to be acting white.**

**Note:** Black high school students with A-range GPAs agree somewhat more than black students with C-range grades with the statement that, “At this school, students like me get accused of acting white.” The chart shows percentages of the predicted difference attributable to each listed factor.

ment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Long Term Trend Assessment had the highest reading test scores that black youth ever had, but the scores dropped by 1992. In Figure 6, the vertical lines are for cohorts of black children born around the same time, while the trend lines show scores for students of a given age in different calendar years. So, for black children born around 1975, we see that their scores in 1988 at age 13 were higher than scores for all prior cohorts of black 13-year-olds, but in 1992 the same cohort at age 17 scored considerably lower than black 17-year-olds tested four years earlier. Reading gains were meager during the teenage years for black youth who were 13 in 1988. Scores for black teens have been basically flat since the early 1990s. There is no consensus on the reasons. Possible explanations for why progress stopped are the subject of a forthcoming volume from Russell Sage Press, edited by Jane Waldfogel and Katherine Magnuson. In the last chapter of the Waldfogel-Magnuson volume I review the other chapters and suggest some possibilities related to a shift in youth culture.

## Conclusions

Some aspects of the material above are unflattering. Further, some readers may cite these findings to rationalize neglectful public policies. For example, my friend and colleague Glenn Loury warns that a focus on ways that

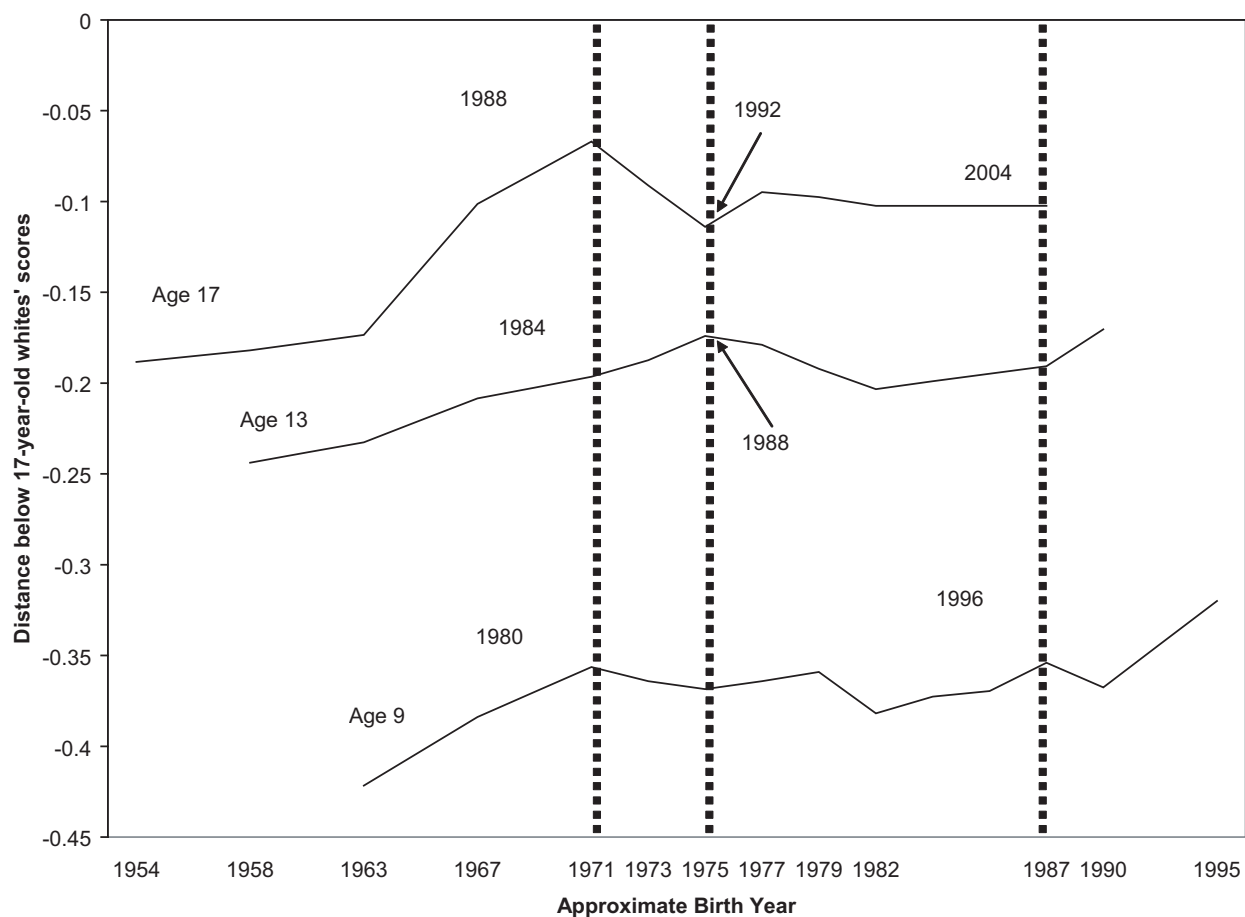
we as African Americans contribute to our own problems may diminish the degree to which the rest of society accepts responsibility for addressing more deeply rooted causes. He believes that placing black lifestyles near the center of an explanation for inequality reinforces stigmas and may help solidify what is already an abdication of responsibility by national leaders. With a special emphasis on high rates of incarceration, he writes:<sup>24</sup>

*“I am suggesting here that tacit association in the American public’s imagination of “blackness” with “unworthiness” or with “dangerousness” affects cognitive processes and promotes essentialist causal misattributions. . . . [O]bservers will have difficulty identifying with the plight of a group of people whom they (mistakenly) think are simply ‘reaping what they have sown.’”*

In the same paper, he proposes ways that society at large has a hand in producing a range of disparate conditions, including achievement gaps. I agree with Loury that many of the problems we face, especially but not only the plight of the poor and incarcerated, are due to racial stigmas and associated biases in the ways that our society includes or excludes, empowers or discourages, people of different racial and ethnic groups. Of this, there is no doubt.

However, the impact that any particular public discourse will have on societal support for the black poor or for





**Figure 6. Reading achievement: Disparities between black and white students.**

**Note:** Chart shows NAEP reading scores for black 9-, 13-, and 17-year-olds standardized as a fraction of white 17-year-olds' 1996 scores.

racial equality more generally is quite uncertain. I believe that notification and mobilization of black parents and communities to address parenting practices, youth culture, and other lifestyle issues can foster important progress, even as the struggle continues for a more just policy mix and a less racially biased collective consciousness. Indeed, these various efforts may be mutually reinforcing. There is no necessary contradiction between addressing the lifestyle issues that I have addressed here and larger efforts to enlist the nation-at-large in living out the full implications of the idea that there should be no "them" in the United States. ■

<sup>1</sup>E. Appelbaum, A. D. Bernhardt, and R. J. Murnane, eds., *Low Wage America: How Employers are Reshaping Opportunity in the Workplace* (New York: Russell Sage Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Most studies used the National Longitudinal Study of Youth in which participants took the Armed Forces Qualifications Test (measuring both verbal and math skills) in 1980. See for example, W. R. Johnson and D. Neal, "Basic Skills and the Black-White Earnings Gap," in C. Jencks and M. Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998). Also see R. F. Ferguson, "Shifting Challenges: 50 Years of Economic Change

Toward Black-White Earnings Equality," *Daedalus* 124, no. 1 (1995).

<sup>3</sup>See: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1990, 1992, 1996 and 2000 Mathematics Assessments. Also see: NAEP, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2005 Reading Assessments. Cross tabulations can be generated using the NAEP Data Explorer at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

<sup>4</sup>See W. T. Dickens and J. R. Flynn, "Black Americans Reduce the Racial IQ Gap: Evidence from Standardization Samples," (available from William T. Dickens at the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), Restricted-Use File (NCES 2004-093), previously unpublished tabulation (January 2005). Also see R. Fryer and S. Levitt, "Testing for Racial Differences in the Mental Ability of Young Children." Retrieved June 3, 2007, from [http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/fryer/papers/fryer\\_levittbabiesrevision.pdf](http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/fryer/papers/fryer_levittbabiesrevision.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>See e.g., G. J. Borjas, J. Grogger and G. H. Hanson, "Immigration and African-American Employment Opportunities: The Response of Wages, Employment, and Incarceration to Labor Supply Shocks," National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Working Paper no. 12518, September 2006.



<sup>7</sup>On discrimination, see: D. Pager and B. Western, "Race at Work: Realities of Race and Criminal Record in the NYC Job Market," report released as part of the NYC Commission on Human Rights conference: Race at Work—Realities of Race and Criminal Record in the NYC Job Market, held December 9, 2005, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Also see: D. Pager and L. Quillan, "Walking the Talk? What Employers Say Versus What they Do," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>8</sup>A. P. Gregg, B. Seibt, and M. R. Banaji, "Easier Done than Undone: Asymmetry in the Malleability of Implicit Preferences," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 1 (2006): 1–20.

<sup>9</sup>The data are from elementary schools across seven states: NJ, OH, MA, CN, MI, IA, and NM.

<sup>10</sup>Decennial Census IPUMS, 1960–2000, as tabulated in D. Neal, "Why Has Black-White Skill Convergence Stopped?" NBER Working Paper no. 11,090, 2005, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w11090>.

<sup>11</sup>J. Eccles and J. A. Gootman, eds., *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup>J. A. McKinney, "The Development and Implementation of a Tutorial Program for Parents to Improve the Reading and Mathematics Achievement of Their Children" (Ed. D. Practicum, Nova University, 1976) ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED113703. J. D. Rodick and S. W. Henggeler, "The Short-Term and Long-Term Amelioration of Academic and Motivational Deficiencies among Low-Achieving Inner-City Adolescents," *Child Development* 51 (1980): 1126–1132. J. Tizard, W. N. Schofield and J. Hewison, "Collaboration Between Teachers and Parents in Assisting Children's Reading," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 52 (1982): 1–15.

<sup>13</sup>See H. Turner, C. Nye, and J. Schwartz, "Assessing the Effects of Parent Involvement Interventions on Elementary School Student Achievement," *Harvard Family Research Project: The Evaluation Exchange*, Vol. X(2004/05). See also J. P. Shonkoff and D. A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup>M. Phillips, and colleagues, "Family Background, Parenting Practices, and the Black-White Test Score Gap," in C. Jencks and M. Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap*.

<sup>15</sup>D. Neal, "Why Has Black-White Skill Convergence Stopped?" NBER Working Paper, 2005.

<sup>16</sup>G. C. Loury, "The Anatomy of Racial Inequality," *The W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). W. T. Dickens, "Rebuilding Urban Labor Markets: What Community Development can Accomplish," in R. Ferguson and W. Dickens, eds., *Urban Problems and Community Development* (Washington DC: Brookings Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup>G. J. Duncan and K. A. Magnuson, "Can Family Socioeconomic Resources Account for Racial and Ethnic Test Score Gaps?" *The Future of Children* 15, no. 1 (2005): 35–54.

<sup>18</sup>See e.g. J. L. Epstein "School/Family/Community Partnerships: Caring for the Children We Share," *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1995, 701–713.

<sup>19</sup>R. Fryer and S. Levitt, "Understanding the Black-White Test Score Gap in the First Two Years of School," *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86 (2004): 447–464.

<sup>20</sup>Tripod Project data for 1st to 6th graders collected spring 2005 & '06 from 45 elementary schools in NJ, CT, OH, NM, IA, MA, MI and CA. Advantaged: Asian, N=687; Black, N=1,351; Hispanic, N=564; White, N=2,639. Disadvantaged: Asian, N=102; Black=940; Hispanic=281; White=331.

<sup>21</sup>There are 4,138 black, 10,206 white, 1,512 Hispanic, and 1,128 Asian students represented in the charts for hip-hop and rap music.

<sup>22</sup>Figure 5 is based on multiple regressions with school-level fixed effects, using survey responses from 1556 black high school students across 27 schools.

<sup>23</sup>I explore these issues in greater detail in a forthcoming paper.

<sup>24</sup>G. C. Loury, "Racial Stigma, Mass Incarceration and American Values," *Tanner Lectures in Human Values*, Stanford University, April 4 & 5, 2007, available at [http://www.econ.brown.edu/fac/Glenn\\_Loury/louryhomepage/](http://www.econ.brown.edu/fac/Glenn_Loury/louryhomepage/).

### ***Reshaping the American Workforce in a Changing Economy***

*Reshaping the American Workforce in a Changing Economy*, a new book edited by IRP Affiliate Harry J. Holzer, Georgetown University, and Demetra Smith Nightingale, Johns Hopkins University, examines how U.S. workforce policy should respond to the major labor market developments likely to occur in the next few decades. The book offers policy discussions that are rooted in research and that address the critical workforce issues of the coming years, including the retirements of baby boomers and continuing globalization.

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Like all children, African American children are born with the ability to learn, but require experiences to bring their potential to fruition. Too many African American children live in toxic environments. Given this, it is a testament to African American families that despite the challenges they face, so many find the resources to help their children avoid the more serious developmental and learning problems. They need supportive teachers to help them see how academics are related to these interests and will enhance what they already know. The capabilities developed in homes and communities can be used as springboards for learning in school if teachers recognize children's strengths (Adair 2015). Building on strengths, achievement can soar. Citation. Ferguson, Ronald. "Parenting Practices, Teenage Lifestyles, and Academic Achievement among African American Children." *Focus: University of Wisconsin-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty* 25.1 (Spring-Summer 2007): 18-26. 79 John F. Kennedy Street. Cambridge, MA 02138. 617-495-1100. Master's Programs. Executive Education.