

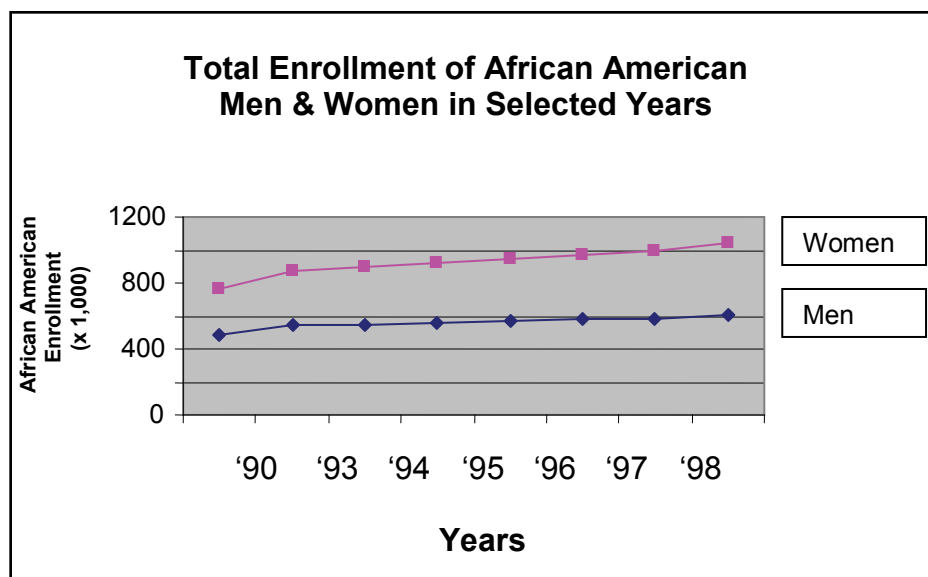
Why Are There Fewer African American Men in College Than African American Women?

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Introduction

The right to equal education has always been a critical issue in the African American community. However, although the number of African Americans seeking to obtain higher levels of education has risen in the past several decades, African American men are lagging behind African American women, whose number is increasing on college campuses while the number of African American men is decreasing (Figure 1).

Between 1984 and 1994, African American women had an enrollment rate that was 24% higher than that of their male counterparts. Moreover, between 1977 and 1994, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded



to African American women increased by 55.4% (from 33,489-52,179) versus only 19.6% for African American men (from 25,147-30,086).¹ This presents serious problems for the African American community. The lack of African American men with college degrees can lead to instability in the African American community and hinders African Americans from closing the economic gap between African Americans and Caucasians. Despite progress made

Figure 1¹⁶

during the civil rights movements in creating an educational system to provide equal opportunities for all Americans, there are still major obstacles that are preventing African American men from pursuing higher levels of education.

Role Models & Academic Success

African American men are not sufficiently encouraged to achieve in school. The low expectations that teachers, parents, and authority figures have for African American men is one obstacle that hinders African American men from attending institutions of higher education.² Communities, teachers, and schools are not investing enough time and effort in preparing African American men for college. Teachers are praising boys less frequently and criticizing them more.³ Additionally, cultural differences can create misunderstandings between students and teachers. Because of these cultural differences, a teacher may misdiagnose a student as having a learning disability and subsequently place him or her in remedial classes, which will stifle his or her academic success.²⁻⁴ Thus, schools are creating environments that no longer nurture young African American men, but hinder them.⁵⁻⁷

It should be noted that such repressive forces as family disruption, chaotic schools, drug abuse, crime, violence, premature parenthood, and lack of role models affect all people who live in inner cities, regardless of race and gender. However, African American men appear to be far more vulnerable to these forces.⁸ The low expectations that teacher often have for African American boys could foster an anti-achievement attitude and a lack of respect for school, which makes gang participation an appealing alternative to school.

African American men lack role models in both home and school environments to encourage them to succeed academically.^{1,2,4} The lack of African American male role models at home and at school leaves many young African American men with a limited idea of what success means. The media portrays a stereotype of a successful African American man by highlighting the images of successful African American men such as athletes, musicians, actors, comedians, and other African American men in professions that require little or no formal education.^{9,10} These images lead young African American boys to associate wealth, prestige, and success as achievable without academic success. The problem with this way of thinking is that it fosters the idea that African American men can only be successful in fields that do not require formal education.^{8,11}

Acting White & Stereotype Threats

An African American child who does well in school may be accused of “acting white.” Some researchers theorize that African American children discourage academic success or the idea of “acting white.”^{10,11} However, the “acting white” theory does not hold to be true, as there is no evidence of underperformance attributable to beliefs that working hard would betray group identity or would be considered “acting white.”¹² There is evidence of stereotype threat wherein minority students disengaged from schoolwork for fear of living up to expectations of failure.¹³

Academic & Financial Constraints

The lack of academically qualified African American men could be used to explain why there are so few African American men in college. Research indicates that African American women have had consistently higher rates of

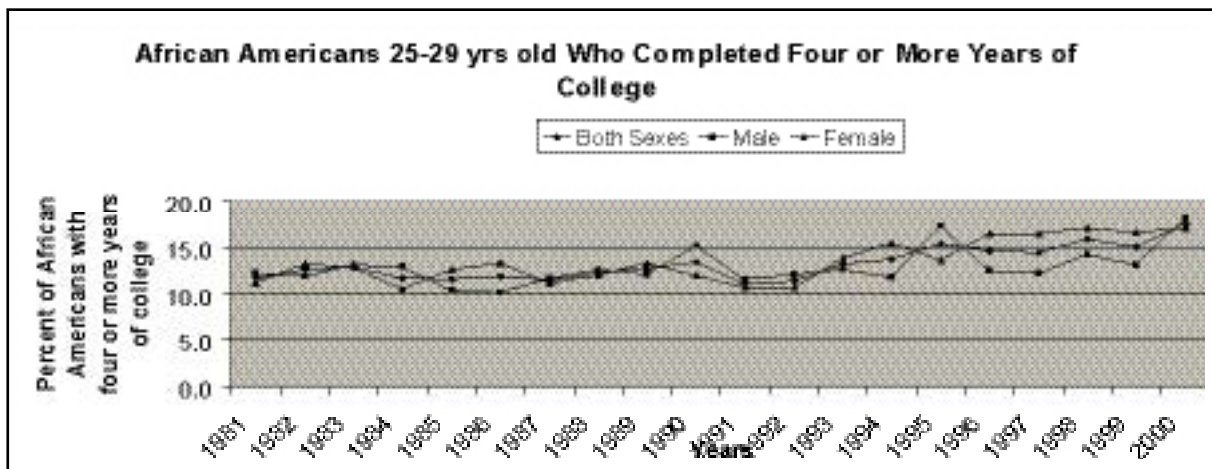


Figure 2¹⁶

high school completion than their African American male peers. However, although many African American men drop out of high school, the gap in high

school completion rates is getting smaller and the number of male dropouts is not significant enough to explain the growing gender gap in higher education.¹⁴

Those African American men who do graduate from high school may not have had a proper preparation for college. Often the schools that serve urban communities lack the resources to prepare their students adequately. Thus, African Americans often are not academically prepared for college.^{1,2} This problem affects both African American men and women. However, young African American women seem to have an academic edge over their male peers. Young women, regardless of race, tend to have higher grade point averages and are more likely to take

AP classes.^{7,15} Because young women are taking more AP courses than young men, young women are being better prepared for college than young men.

Another factor affecting the discrepancy is that African American men do not always have the necessary resources to pursue higher education. The rising costs of attending college along with increasingly constrained amounts of financial assistance available from federal, state, and local sources may impede the entry of African Americans, and possibly the entry of African American men in particular, into postsecondary institutions. African American men receive little financial aid compared to African American women. One of the reasons that African American women are more likely to receive financial aid is that they are more likely than their male counterparts to declare themselves financially independent and responsible for dependants. This is because more African American women than men comprise the 24-years old and over student population.¹⁴

Alternatives to Higher Education

If African American men are not in college, where are they? One of the most common answers is prison. In fact, only 1/3 of the African American male population between ages 20-29 is in jail or on probation/parole.¹⁴ There are college-aged African American men in jail, but not every African American man who is not attending a university is in prison. Furthermore, there are high numbers of both African American men and women in jail, so the incarceration rates do not explain the gender gap in higher education.

Another answer to this question is that African American men are choosing an alternative to college such as the military. In the past 15 years, there has been a decline in the number of total Americans on active duty and there has been a stagnation of growth in the representation of African American men in the armed forces.¹⁴ African American men do enlist in the military, but the number of African American men in the military does not sufficiently explain the lack of African American men in college.

Another factor is that some African American men are choosing not to attend college and instead, to enter the workforce directly after high school, because they do not feel that a college degree will provide them with better job opportunities. This is because African American men are aware of the perceived racism and discrimination that occurs in the workplace and this knowledge deters them from deciding to go to college.^{10,11} They assume that it would be pointless to go to college since they could suffer from discrimination and not get hired or promoted due to racist and discriminatory policies. African American men are aware that Caucasians might perceive African American

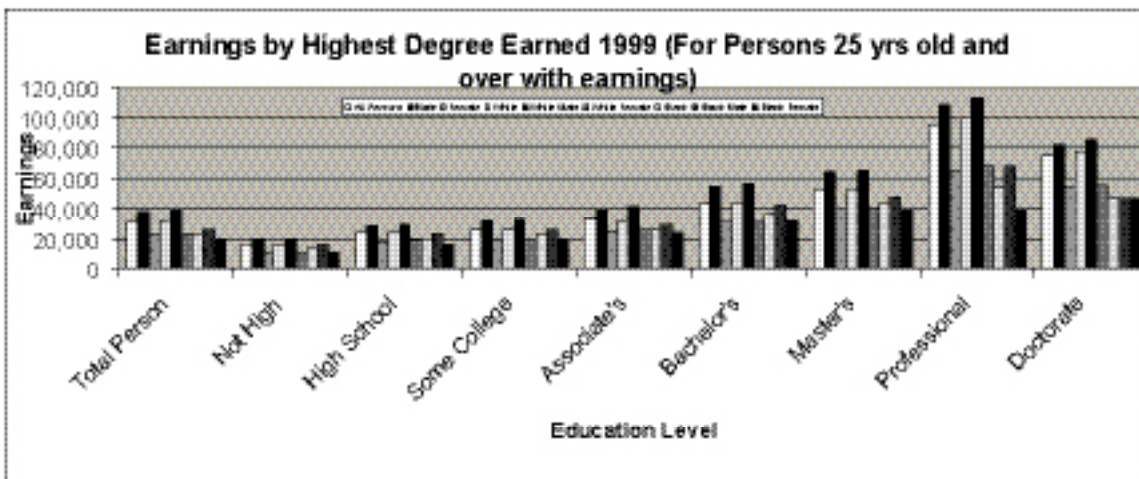


Figure 3¹⁷

women as less threatening. Some Caucasians may feel that an African American man would increase the level of competition for jobs at the higher levels within the workplace, but that an African American woman would not want to advance to higher levels. Some African

American men believe that because African American women are a double minority an employer will choose an African American woman to get the “twofer,” and thereby meet racial and gender hiring quotas.^{8,10}

Therefore, while African American men are entering the workforce, they are doing this because they feel that a college degree would not make a difference in the type of job or salary that they are able to obtain, nor would it change the level of advancement that they can achieve within their place of business.^{10,11}

Conclusion

Young African American men might drop out of school and/or disengage from work due to fear of stereotype threats and they are often not academically prepared for college. Some African American men cannot afford to pay for college. Perceptions of racism in the labor force can cause African American men to decide not to continue their education since they feel it would not be beneficial.

The gender gap in higher education has an indirect effect on the African American household. Marriages between spouses with significantly different levels of education may be more prone to divorce and spousal abuse than marriages in which the spouses have similar education.⁴ The gender gap has a direct effect on African American wealth. Many African American men are earning less than their Caucasian counterparts due to the lack of education that they have (Figure 3). The income gap between African American and Caucasian women is not as great as the gap between African American and Caucasian men; however, the overall gap between African American wealth and Caucasian wealth is tremendous.

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