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How the Church Helps Black Men Flourish in America

The structure it provides, along with the values it instills, strengthens employment prospects, family life, and more.



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W. BRADFORD WILCOX AND NICHOLAS H. WOLFINGER | FEB 28, 2016 | POLITICS

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From Barack Obama to Rand Paul, Ta-Nehisi Coates to Jason Riley: Across the ideological spectrum, scholars, pundits, and politicians seem to agree that black men are floundering. As the president [observed](#) in 2014, “by almost every measure, the group that is facing some of the most severe challenges in the 21st century in this country are boys and young men of color.”

In some ways, Obama is right. Rates of poverty, unemployment, and incarceration are higher among black men than among white men. Young African Americans are also far more likely than young white men to become victims of violent crime. But the conversation about black men often glosses over the fact that most African American men are not poor, out of work, or destined to spend time in prison.

LEAD STORY



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Why do some black men flourish while others struggle?

One answer is faith. African American men attend church at rates notably above the national average: 37 percent of those aged 18 to 60 attend several times a month or more, compared to 30 percent of non-black men, according to the 2008-2014 [General Social Survey](#). And compared to their less religious peers, these 6 million or so black men are significantly more likely to thrive. Our new book, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex,*

Love and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos, shows they are more likely to be working, avoid crime and incarceration, and get married.

Liberals and conservatives have different explanations for the racial divide in the United States. Conservatives like Jason Riley *argue* that dysfunctional values and norms have helped create America's racial disparities in crime, incarceration, and employment. Conversely, Ta-Nehisi Coates *contends* that unjust and racist structural forces—including poor job opportunities, unsafe neighborhoods, failing schools, and discriminatory housing and policing policies—have produced America's racial disparities.

These don't have to be mutually exclusive explanations. Our analyses of trends in work, crime, incarceration, and family indicate that both structural and cultural factors have shaped the differing life experiences of white and black men. But focusing on racial differences can obscure the fact that many African American men are doing well. One of the reasons why some black men flourish is their participation in the black church. (We focus on the black church because there are not enough black men in other traditions, such as Islam, to make statistical claims about in the surveys we analyzed for our book.)

The messages of the black church afford black men a sense of dignity, purpose, and inspiration.

Churchgoing black men are significantly less likely to participate in what the

sociologist Elijah Anderson has called the “[code of the street](#)”: an ethos marked by violence, criminal activity, a live-for-the-moment mentality, and a desire to protect oneself by projecting strength. This culture has emerged partly from the structural disadvantages black men face, including racism, concentrated poverty, police brutality, and fatherless households. Coates has written about the code in his reflections on his own life growing up in West Baltimore. Here, [in a letter to his son](#):

The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat-down, a shooting, or a pregnancy. No one survives unscathed. When I was your age, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with whom I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I smiled, whom or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not—all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body.

This culture, and the injustices from which it flows, helps explain why some young black men end up struggling in America.

Yet millions of black men in the U.S. live in communities with different norms, including industriousness, honesty, respect for the law, and temperance. For many of these men, faith is a defining feature.

Black Men, Aged 22–26, Who Reported Committing a Serious Crime in 2001 or 2002*

Analysis adjusts for religious affiliation, marital and cohabiting status, education, age, urban residence, region of residence, and whether respondents lived with their biological parents as teenagers.

Attends church frequently 20%

Doesn't attend church frequently 24%

**The effect of church attendance is statistically significant.*

Source: [Soul Mates and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) | [Embed](#)

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Take criminal activity. Twenty percent of young, church-going black men report having committed a crime, compared to 24 percent of their peers who were not regular attendees, even after controlling for demographic factors like education and family background. Likewise, only 4 percent of young black men aged 22 to 26 who attended church earlier in their 20s ended up in prison, compared to 6 percent who did not regularly attend church, again after controlling for a wide range of social and economic factors. This suggests that churchgoing young black men are about one-third less likely to be incarcerated than their peers who don't regularly attend church. Although these percentages may seem small, they represent tens of thousands of men.

One 32-year-old African American man from Harrisonburg, Virginia, who we interviewed said he became a Christian while in prison. “I only came to know Christ when I got locked up,” he said. “God met people like Paul on the Damascus road. He met other men on the crack pipe. He met me when I was selling drugs in prison. So, you know, that was a big thing for me, knowing that I have a relationship with God.” (We interviewed him while researching our book in 2006, and are withholding his name to comply with Institutional Review Board standards.)

Black Men, Aged 22–26, Who Were Incarcerated in 2001 or 2002*

Analysis adjusts for religious affiliation, marital and cohabiting status, education, age, urban residence, region of residence, and whether respondents lived with their biological parents as teenagers.

Attends church frequently 4%

Doesn't attend church frequently 6%

**The effect of church attendance is statistically significant.*

Source: [Soul Mates and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) | [Embed](#)

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This man hasn't broken the law or used drugs since getting out of prison, he says, and gives credit for his transformation to his local Baptist church. He goes every Sunday, helps lead the men's group at his church, and attends a Wednesday night Bible study. "I get a prayer in every day," he said. "I'm delivered on a daily basis and my delivery is like this: 'Lord, get me through the next 30 minutes. Lord, get me through the next hour. Lord, get me through this day.'"

Faith also seems to reinforce black men's connections to work and marriage. As this chart shows, young black men who regularly attended church were about eight percentage points less likely to be neither working nor attending school compared to their peers who didn't attend frequently. More recent data from the 2008–2014 General Social Survey show a similar trend: 15 percent of 18-to-40-year-old black men who don't attend church were unemployed and not attending college between 2008 and 2014, compared to just 9 percent of churchgoing black men. All of this probably translates into higher incomes for churchgoing black men later in life, as our research and the work of [others](#) suggests.

Black Men, Aged 22–26, Who Were Not Working or in School in 2001 or 2002*

Analysis adjusts for religious affiliation, marital and cohabiting status, education, age, urban residence, region of residence, and whether respondents lived with their biological parents as teenagers.

Attends church frequently 19%

Doesn't attend church frequently 27%

**The effect of church attendance is statistically significant.*

Source: [Soul Mates and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) | [Embed](#)

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Finally, regular religious practice helps make black men more **marriageable**—a term social scientists use to explain why some men are more likely to get married than others. Generally, employed men are more marriageable. African American men who attend church regularly are eight percentage points more likely to get married than their peers who rarely or never attend church. Why is this noteworthy? Social science has produced considerable evidence on the **benefits of marriage**. Compared to their single contemporaries, **married African American men** have more money and are happier and healthier.

Black Men Who Were Married by 35 in 2012 or 2013*

Analysis adjusts for religious affiliation, education, age, urban residence, region of residence, and whether respondents lived with their biological parents as teenagers.

Attends church frequently 36%

Doesn't attend church frequently 28%

**The effect of church attendance is statistically significant.*

Source: [Soul Mates and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) | [Embed](#)

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The comparative success that churchgoing black men enjoy, from employment

to marriage, is partly attributable to the work the black church does to emphasize certain values. As one pastor, Revered Calvin Butts III of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, put it one Sunday:

[Most civilizations] are destroyed from within. The outward manifestations of this inner decay have been threefold. Three things that you see outwardly. One is drunkenness. . . . [or] getting high. I don't mean a sip here and there; I mean getting high all the time. [Another is] idleness. . . . And finally, immorality. This means that strong civilizations, those that are able to endure, and withstand attacks from without [have] sobriety, industry, and clean moral living. . . .

Who among us would . . . eschew drunkenness, idleness, and immorality? Who would dare to stand in the face of the onslaught of the culture of sin that has enveloped our nation and say, "I refuse to succumb. I will not yield to the temptation"?

This is just one example of the rhetoric that's often heard from pulpits in primarily black churches. The ideals, images, and attitudes held up in services, Bible studies, and fellowship halls in congregations across the country have a [powerful effect on black men who regularly attend church](#).

But talking is not enough. Men need to be integrated into their church communities. Our research has led us to conclude that the men who are most active in their churches are those most likely to be employed, married, and out of jail. And this varies somewhat by denomination. Pentecostal churches have a

slight edge in fostering good outcomes for men compared to mainline black churches, perhaps because the men in those communities tend to participate more actively, according to data from the General Social Survey. In turn, churches that pay attention to men's employment—either through formal jobs ministries or informal efforts to connect members to existing work opportunities within their communities—seem to have the strongest communities of committed men.

The black church's success validates the cultural arguments made by conservatives and the structural arguments made by liberals regarding race in America. The messages of the black church afford black men a sense of dignity, purpose, and inspiration. Church life is an alternative to what Coates calls the culture of the streets. Likewise, the support the church offers to black men, from men's fellowship groups to employment ministries, is crucial to their success, whether in finding jobs or having a community to [support them](#) in the face of [racism](#) and other adversity.

Not surprisingly, most of the black pastors and churchgoers we spoke to believed the church's commitment to strong norms and values within the black community complements its equally strong commitment to social justice. As Thabiti Anyabwile, the pastor of Anacostia River Church in Washington, D.C., put it:

The men and families facing their brokenness and the world's brokenness don't have the luxury of pretending life can neatly be chalked up to either 'the man is trying to get me' or 'I need to pull myself up by my bootstraps.' They understand that some bootstrapping is necessarily precisely because of injustices . . . People

have to be strong enough personally to face the onslaught, but also have to have enough fair play and support to be strong enough. It's no surprise to me that both those needs get met in faithful Black churches with one eye on the souls of their members and one eye on the assaults of Caesar.

Conservative and liberal commentators, take note: making progress in the fight for racial justice in America may require acknowledging the other side has a point.

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