

Senator Barack Obama

Statement for the Record Hearing of the Joint Economic Committee—March 8, 2007

I would like to commend Chairman Schumer and Members of the Committee for holding this hearing on the critical issue of joblessness among African American men. The data reveal that more than half of all African-American boys in some cities do not finish high school, and half of all black men in their 20s are jobless. The unemployment rate for young African American men is over twice the rate for other groups of men. One study a few years ago found more black men in prison than enrolled in college. This hearing is important to keep the spotlight on the issue, to continue the dialogue, and to fashion sound policy solutions to a problem that reflects the broader issue of poverty and racial inequality in America.

African American men and women have made significant strides in breaking down barriers that prevented full participating in the U.S. economy. African Americans have risen to some of the highest levels of corporate America, higher education, sports, medicine, and government service. Despite these gains, however, there remains a growing disparity, particularly concerning African-American men, with respect to educational achievement and labor force participation.

The crisis of the black male is our crisis whether we are black or white, male or female. We need a new ethic of compassion and a new commitment to break the cycle of educational failure, unemployment, absentee fatherhood, incarceration, and recidivism. The failure of government policies to recognize black men as husbands, fathers, sons and role models cannot be tolerated any longer. We need new policies that deal with the breakdown of families, close the educational achievement gap, promote high-wage employment, and reduce racial discrimination. We need to reauthorize effective early education and training programs and enact new legislation like the Second Chance Act and Responsible Fatherhood legislation that seek to close the enduring gaps.

Of course we need to expect and demand good choices and responsible behavior. We need to expect black fathers, for example, to be responsible fathers and we need to call them to account when they're not. All of us have a responsibility to instill in children the values of self-determination and self-sacrifice, dignity and discipline, honesty, accountability, and hard work. But let's support and reward good choices. Let's not degrade ourselves with divisive rhetoric or cynical neglect of vulnerable Americans. Let's not fail to give people the first chance they deserve, the support they may need, and the second chance that we all sometimes require.

I applaud the chairman for having this hearing, which I hope will be the first of many to examine the various issues, in addition to joblessness, that combine to limit the life choices and life chances of young African Americans. I want to work with the Chairman to assess additional employment training options including transitional jobs, public-private training partnerships, and career pathways. I want to work with my colleagues here as they evaluate African-American healthcare access and pathways to higher

education as well as reentry programs that help African American men, and all men and women, transition from periods of incarceration to the ability to make meaningful contributions to their families and communities. I want to work with you to consider tax law changes and programs that help young fathers to be effective parents, role models and members of their neighborhoods.

This is a very important topic that we all need to worry about as we seek to make the American dream, and the American ideals of opportunity and equality, real. This topic needs to be a major part of our national conversation.

Finally, let me acknowledge one of the witnesses here today, Prof. Ron Mincy, who has been extremely helpful to my office in developing legislation related to responsible fatherhood and healthy families. Ron's contributions and commitment to this area are extraordinary and we are lucky to have him with us today.

Thank you.