

Statement of Carolyn Maloney, Vice Chair
Joint Economic Committee Hearing
March 8, 2007

Thank you, Chairman Schumer. I am pleased to welcome our witnesses, Dr. Mincy and Mr. Carmona, to talk about the issue of African-American male unemployment and what we can do to successfully reconnect this group of men to work.

As Dr. Mincy points out, this is not a new problem, but if labor force trends among young black men continue to deteriorate, we run the unacceptable risk of losing a generation of them to the streets or prison.

More than four decades ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the experience of many blacks as languishing “in the corners of American society.” While progress has been made since the March on Washington, unfortunately Dr. King’s words still ring true today for too many young black men. Now, as then, it would be unwise to ignore the urgency of the moment.

An array of forces, such as poverty, lower educational attainment, discrimination, high incarceration rates, and the decline of manufacturing employment have all contributed to creating significant employment barriers for African-American men.

The problem is vividly illustrated when you consider Dr. Mincy’s point that even at the height of the economic expansion in 1999, only 35 percent of black male high school dropouts were working and that figure fell to just 28 percent by 2004. The comparable figures for white men were 81 percent in 1999 and 71 percent in 2004. It’s striking that an overwhelming majority of white male high school dropouts are working, even in the wake of a recession, but an overwhelming majority of black male high school dropouts are not working, even in a strong economy.

When robust economic growth and a tight labor market are not enough to move people into the workforce, we have to look at what policies might help build a bridge to work for these men. Dr. Mincy has a new twist on the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) that has worked well to help work pay for young black women. By following the lead of my home state of New York, increasing the federal EITC for non-custodial parents who are meeting their child support obligations would provide a strong incentive for men to enter the workforce and would strengthen families by encouraging men to stay current on their child support payments.

Mr. Carmona has a compelling personal story of success that makes his advice on this issue particularly relevant. The STRIVE model demonstrates the long-term commitment that we must make to personal development, job training, and career counseling in order to break the cycle of detachment from mainstream society for many young black men.

The ideas our witnesses put forth should be seriously considered, but the issue of reconnecting these youths to school must also be addressed. Our public schools need to equip all of our children with the education and skills needed to succeed in an increasingly technological and global economy. I hope we will be able to explore this issue in-depth at a future hearing.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses and their thoughts on policies that can help create a brighter future for young African-American men.