

# A Statistical Portrait That Puts Black America in a Hopeful Light

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According to recent reports:

A sharp drop in teen pregnancy in the Washington area has been especially steep among African American girls. The nation's black teens now have lower rates of tobacco, drug and alcohol use than their peers. The number of black students graduating from the nation's high schools and going on to college continues to rise.

And there's more good news. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that African Americans are making gains against heart disease, breast cancer and infant mortality. "Prevention" is once again becoming a watchword in health care among African Americans.

Nothing particularly earth-shattering. But it's progress -- a quiet, almost imperceptible transformation that is all too easily overlooked amid the more-sensational list of racial failures.

Each year, the National Urban League publishes a sad but statistically true "State of Black America" report that could well be subtitled: "Compared with whites, black people can't . . ."

Among the findings in the 2007 report: African American men are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white men, 9.5 percent compared with 4 percent. Among men 20 to 24 years old, 76.5 percent of whites were employed, compared with 68.8 percent of blacks. Among blacks 25 and older with less than a high school education, 60 percent are unemployed, compared with 53 percent of whites. Black males 15 to 34 are nine times as likely to die from homicide as white males the same age, and they are almost seven times as likely to contract HIV-AIDS. The average jail sentence for African American men is 10 months longer than for white men.

That's certainly one way of looking at black America: a place of hopelessness, forever in despair. Less familiar, but just as valid, is a recent portrait by the U.S. Census Bureau:

Among blacks 25 and older, 80 percent had at least a high school diploma in 2005, and about 1.1 million had advanced degrees, up from 677,000 in 1995. There were 2.3 million black college students in the fall of 2004, more than double the number in 1989. In 2005, there were 44,000 black physicians and surgeons, 79,400 postsecondary teachers, 45,200 lawyers and 49,300 chief executives. There were 1.2 million black-owned businesses in 2002, up 45 percent since 1997. Annual revenue: \$88.6 billion.

Turns out black people can read, write and count after all. Some actually get married, raise a family, keep a job and stay out of jail.

Does that mean life for black Americans is just one big jack-o'-lantern full of Hershey's Kisses? Of course not. Poverty, racism, crime and disease continue to have a devastating effect on black Americans.

But with the decline in teen pregnancy, black America is gearing up to overcome those obstacles.

"What we've been saying all along is that if you can get a handle on preventing teen pregnancy, it will go a long way toward improving the economic and social health of many communities," said Brenda Miller, executive director of the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

In 1996, the District had one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the nation, 164.5 per 1,000, but by 2005, the number had dropped to 64.4, according to the D.C. Department of Health. Self-discipline and self-respect are new watchwords for today's black teens.

Kristin Moore, a senior scholar at the District-based Child Trends research center, said, "One of the obvious reasons for the sharp decline in teen pregnancy among African Americans is a growing recognition that you need to finish high school, and having a child just gets in the way."

These are life-affirming decisions for which black teens will surely be rewarded. Imagine the future as they continue on this path: Educational achievement skyrockets. Stable black families become the norm again. Crime and poverty go down. Income and sense of well-being go up.

All because black teens decided that their lives mattered. Because they said yes to education and no to drugs. And because they waited until they were grown-ups to have kids.

What a treat that would be.

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