

Conflict, Consensus, and Coalition Around Workforce Development Strategies for African Americans and Latinos

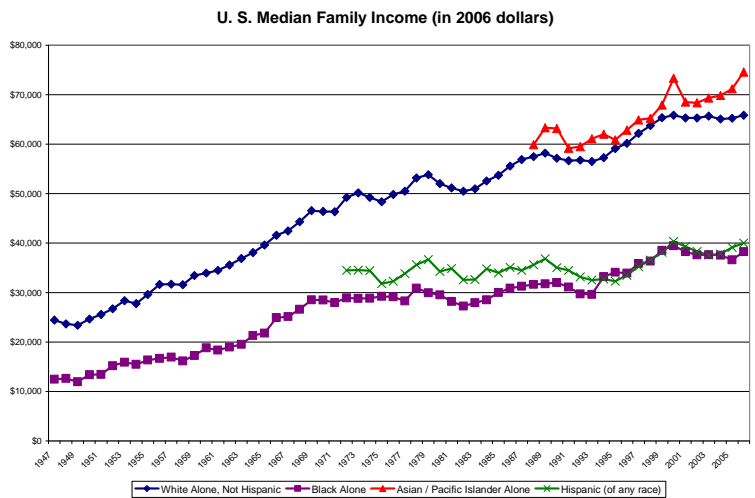
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In recent years, a flurry of media stories has focused on increasing tensions between African Americans and Latinos. While some reporters have focused on political struggles, such as sharp ethnic shifts in cities such as Compton or voter loyalties in presidential campaigns, others have stressed local conflicts, including student conflagrations in Los Angeles. Often, the subtext involves an underlying economic dynamic, with the storyline being that Latinos, particularly immigrants, "take" jobs and impair Black economic fortunes.

Is the economic competition real? In my view, it is demonstrable but exaggerated: on an aggregate level, the impacts of Latino immigrants on African Americans are negligible; the challenges African Americans face are more systemic, and both Latinos and Blacks would do better to focus on critical workforce needs such as better schools, public transit, and job training. But people do not live at the aggregate level; they reside, instead, in neighborhoods undergoing rapid transition and in workplaces where employment niches that were once characteristically Black are now increasingly Latino. And we will build an effective coalition only if we acknowledge the specificities in our experiences and engage in honest conversation to look for common ground.

Facts

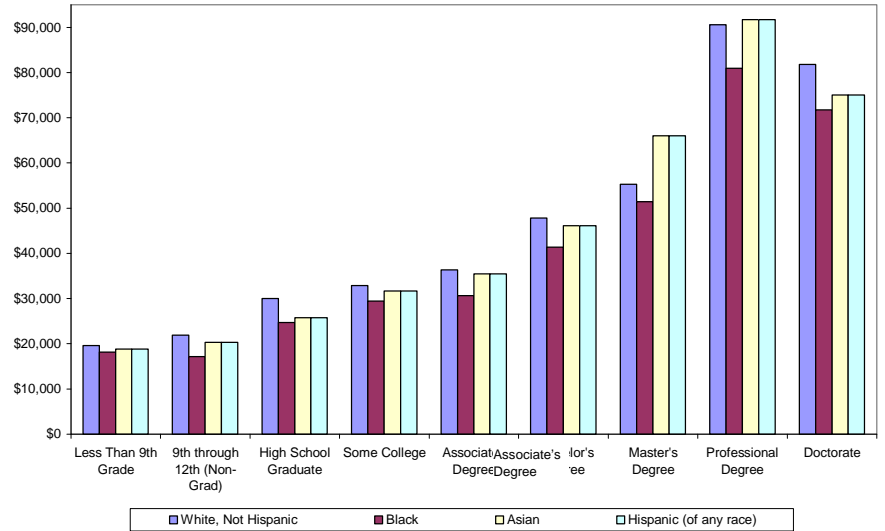
African Americans and Latinos both experience relatively low levels of family income, with almost no recent growth (and any progress is now threatened by financial meltdown and economic slowdown). Where they differ are the factors that drive their shared economic dilemma. For Latinos, both native-born and immigrant, a primary factor in lower incomes involves lower levels of education, particularly the high levels of adults (especially immigrants) who have not completed high school or gone on to college. For African Americans, educational attainment is a contributing factor to low wages, but attaining even higher levels of education does not seem to erase the gap with Whites.



This is revealed when we consider the median earnings of various ethnic groups at different levels of education. Note that African Americans suffer a wage penalty at each and every

level; the wage penalty for Latinos is there, but it is lower than it is for Blacks (and, in fact, is nonexistent at post-baccalaureate levels—master’s and above—although the sample sizes for Latinos in these categories are so small that the numbers are not reliable). The pattern also suggests that while discrimination against Latino job seekers certainly

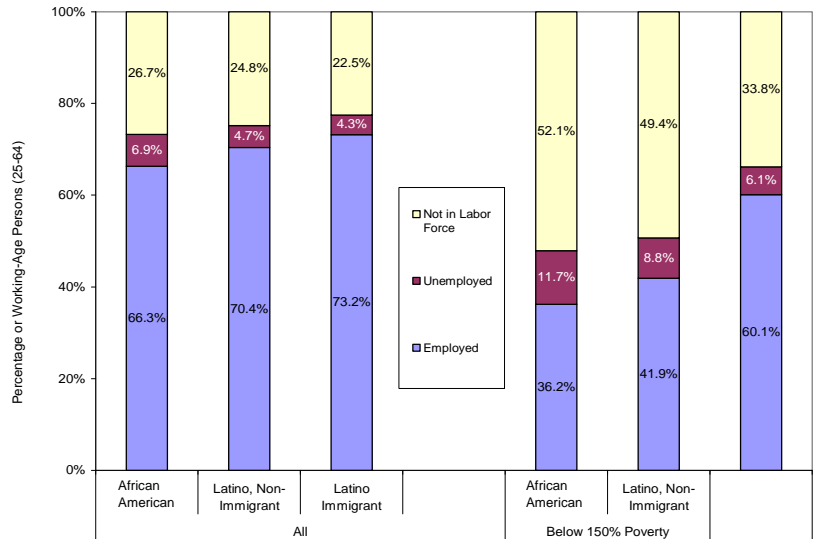
Median Earnings by Race by Educational Category, 2006



occurs, as indicated in other research that included paired matching of Latino and White job seekers, direct racism in hiring is particularly salient for African Americans. Feeding into that—and often indistinguishable empirically—are network effects: Latino immigrants are often able to refer other immigrants for employment, and evidence suggests that employers prefer immigrants and use of network references simply to lower job search costs. As economist Michael Stoll notes, these patterns lead Black men towards jobs where applicants do not need a network to be hired, including public-sector jobs.

In considering the labor market tensions and experience of Blacks and Latinos, it is useful to distinguish between U. S.-born and immigrant Latinos. Doing such breakouts, we find a complication of the usual story. For example, much has been made of the notion that African American poverty results mainly from joblessness, while Latino poverty is driven by low wages at steady jobs. Indeed, disconnection from the labor force is more profound for African Americans, yet second- and third-generation Latinos are also far less attached to

Black and Latino Labor Force Participation by Poverty Status, U. S., 2006



the labor market than immigrant Latinos. We need to be careful not to conflate

the immigrant and non-immigrant experiences and to realize some of the commonalities shared by U. S.-born Latino and Black workers.

A similar conflation has occurred in another explosive issue: public employment. Latinos have sometimes argued that their share of these jobs should reflect population parity, although given that this is public employment, a better measure might be the share of native-born who hold public-sector jobs. One way to look at this is the share of, say, Black and U. S.-born Latino workers who are public employees and compare that to other groups. Looking at the data below, we see that African Americans and U. S.-born Latinos are more reliant on public employment than Whites; over time, the gap between the two has shrunk, even as the percent of Whites with public-sector jobs has remained steady.

Rate of public (vs. private) employment				
	Non-Hispanic White	African American	Latino, not immigrant	Latino, immigrant
1990	16.6	26.9	21.9	6.7
2000	15.9	23.9	19.5	6.0
2006	16.0	22.6	18.2	4.4
PERE analysis of ACS and Census Data				

This does not end the issue, of course. Given the close proximity of the two populations in urban areas, immigrant Latinos have suggested that some traditionally African American public institutions should both become more sensitive to the needs of this burgeoning population and diversify their workforces. However, it is no small thing to ask African Americans to relinquish the exact jobs they fought for years ago and, instead, enter sectors with less formal hiring structures that enable discrimination.

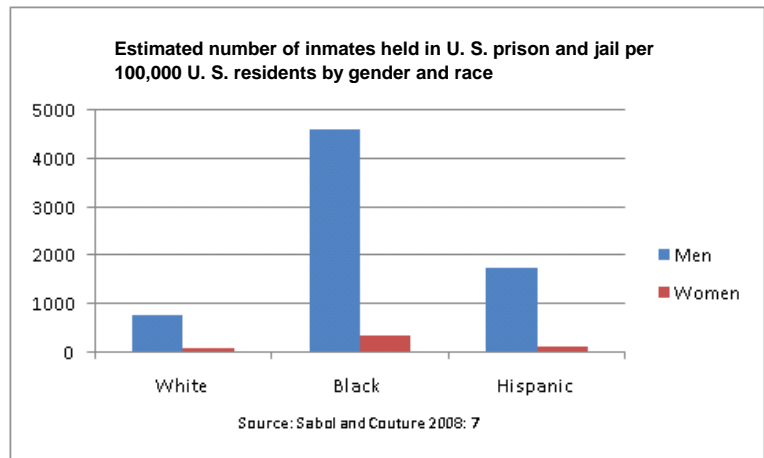
And what about one of the hottest topics: the economic effects of immigrant Latinos on other populations? At the macro-level, economists generally agree that immigrants provide both labor complements and substitutes and that the complementary effect—padding the U. S.-born labor market and keeping industries alive in the United States—dominates, yielding employment and income gains for the native-born. But we must also look at the effect on native subgroups, and many prominent economists, George Borjas and Larry Katz of Harvard among them, argue that immigrant labor has had “marked adverse impacts” on high-school dropouts. Borjas, for example, estimates an 8 percent decline in real wages for natives without diplomas over a 20-year period, a trend that has hit African Americans especially hard.

However, their analysis focuses entirely on the substitution effect; Borjas acknowledges that considering the impact on productivity and the mix of capital and labor, the negative wage effect declines to 5 percent. Giovanni Peri of the University of California at Davis suggests an even lower impact, on the order of 1 percent; David Card of UC Berkeley believes the overall impact on less-skilled workers is a wash when considering the regional or metropolitan effects. So let’s strike a balance and call it a 3 percent drag over 20 years—and let’s also acknowledge that U. S.-born Latinos, particularly those with lesser education, may most strongly feel the crowding created by their immigrant brethren. The question then becomes whether this constitutes evidence for highly restrictive immigration

policies or a clarion call to reduce high-school dropout rates among the native-born; or maybe even an effort to work together to raise the minimum wage by, say, one dollar, which would—using Borjas’ most pessimistic estimate—wipe out 40 or so years of wage depression by immigration.

Of course, the micro-effects are real, particularly in certain service professions and construction sectors where immigrant Latinos seem to have displaced African American workers. However, more detailed analyses of occupational change using the most recent American Community Survey suggest that the sharpest direct displacement effects may be on U. S.-born Latinos, a rarely discussed topic. Still, while immigration may not be the decisive factor in Black economic outcomes, some argue it is at least amenable to policy and therefore take to task Black leaders who avoid the issue.

Less politically popular but perhaps more pressing are the consequences for lower-skilled African Americans who have gotten entangled in the criminal justice system and who find that upon their release are effectively barred from some types of good employment. Across all categories, Black men and women are incarcerated far more than other groups. Among male inmates, the largest age



group (20 to 29-year-olds) represent more than one-third of the prison and jail population. Within their own groups, there are more Black (35.5 percent) and Latino (39.9 percent) men ages 20–29 than in any other age range. This share of the population is prime working age, and they encounter persistent discrimination and disadvantage once they leave the system and are now trying to reintegrate into their communities and labor markets.

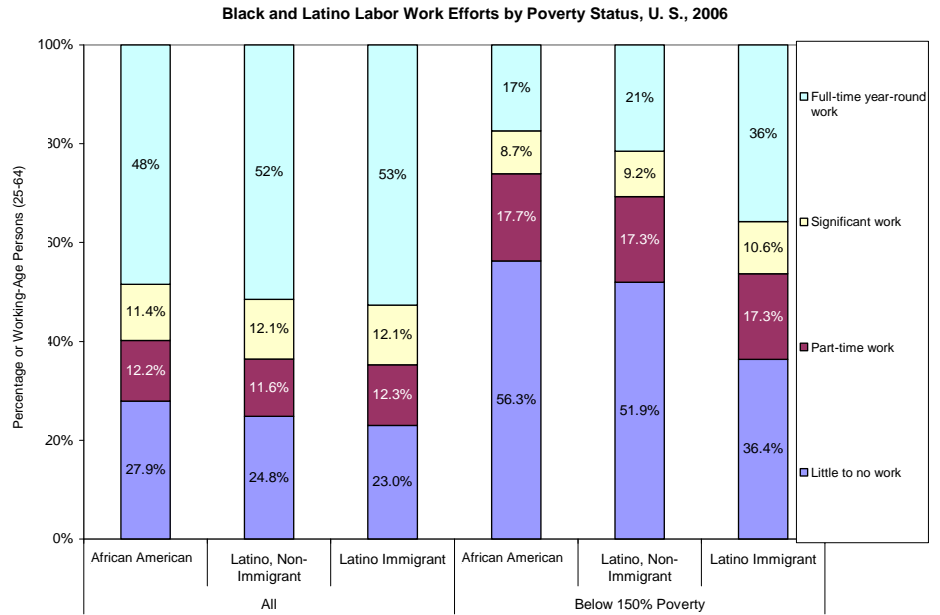
Finally, the economic fortunes of African Americans and Latinos is tied to their common physical turf. Across the United States in the 1990s, the dissimilarity index—a measure of neighborhood segregation—dropped more for Latino-Black interaction than for any other set of ethnic groups, such as Black-White. The new meeting grounds, however, are often the distressed parts of our central cities and older suburbs. Many of these neighborhoods lack sufficient access to work; and while most Americans have cars, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to share cars or rely on public transit. This presents a challenge since the low-skilled jobs they often seek are more decentralized than other jobs; while 60 percent of the low-skilled jobs are in the suburbs, slightly more than 40 percent of less-educated workers live there. Moreover, public transit poorly accommodates reverse commutes and the odd work schedules that are often part and parcel of low-wage work.

Implications

With a shared experience of economic distress but differing patterns and nuances, how can African Americans and Latinos come together? The key is to search for common but not identical ground.

Latinos and African Americans alike need better and more work. On the one hand, unemployment is an issue, especially for Black men. On the other, working poverty is an issue,

especially for Latino immigrants. Both need a better performing education system at all levels—but major investments in adult education are especially important for the advancement of immigrant Latinos. The criminal justice system needs rethinking so that correction does not become destruction; this is extraordinarily critical to African Americans.



Although coalitions involve transactions—the horse trading of “you back me on this, I back you on that”—transformational movements are not issue-based. They come together over a broad, common sense of destiny, and the groups involved ally over more than one issue and advocate for each other on all issues—effectively sharing each others’ burdens. To get to that broader goal requires that trust be built through honest conversation that may have little to do directly with policy *per se*.

Instead, conversations would focus on our respective histories of organizing for justice, including the civil rights struggle, the Chicano movement, and the leadership of immigrants in the revitalized labor movement. We would take seriously the sense of economic and social displacement felt by African Americans as immigrants make use of the hard-won language of civil rights. In my view, the big benefit of this Summit is to move forward this conversation, and the sorts of stark assessments I have offered here could be helpful. But since policy strategies will also be part of the picture, let me turn to that.

Policy Solutions

In *Searching for the Uncommon Common Ground*, Angela Glover Blackwell, Stewart Kwoh, and I call for adopting a combination of universalist and particularist strategies—something Theda Skocpol has called “targeting within universalism.” That mix is exactly what I recommend here.

Strategy one: Promote labor policies that increase wage floors and benefits.

Latinos and African Americans alike need policies that will support work that pays. The federal government can lead by continuing to increase and perhaps index the minimum wage and to expand the earned income tax credit. Unions are an important part of this; evidence suggests that the positive impact of unions on the income of Blacks and Latinos is even stronger than it is for Whites (although some unions clearly have a bad record on inclusivity). Passing the Employee Free Choice Act is critical. Moreover, given that Latinos, particularly immigrants, have become critical players in today’s growing unions, it is important to build trust by supporting organizing efforts that specifically target predominantly African American workforces, such as the recent effort to organize and secure contracts for security guards in Los Angeles.

Strategy two: Promote educational strategies that will reduce dropouts and train students for good jobs.

Our public education system needs new investments and a wave of experimentation. Multiracial coalitions in Los Angeles have come out to support a multiple pathways approach that blends career and technical education with college prep material, engaging students in hands-on learning and giving them the choice to enter the workforce or go to college after graduation. We also need to promote parent involvement, something that will require bilingual opportunities for immigrant parents. Finally, we need to boost the funding for community colleges, which are also a critical component of the workforce training system for both African Americans and Latinos.

Strategy three: Promote “second chance” strategies that focus on adult education, job training, and prisoner reentry.

Many of our education and training systems work against “life-long learning”; they focus on early education and assume that you will graduate and end education. Others are designed for training those who are already out of work. Yet the future will be one of continual retraining and, in this regard, adult education is critical. Especially important for immigrants is a massive expansion of English as Second Language courses, followed by technical courses that will allow for upgrades in the labor market. And we must both tackle an illogical criminal justice system that over-imprisons inner-city residents and under-delivers on rehabilitation and reentry opportunities. Both are integration strategies for working-age adults—immigrants in one case and former inmates in the other.

Strategy four: Promote comprehensive immigration reform with a path toward naturalization at its heart.

While there are debates about the particulars, immigration reform is integral to any Latino agenda. The elements are straightforward: offer higher levels for legal immigration, adopt some form of temporary worker program, and create more security at the borders. But key throughout is the development of a path

toward legal status for the large undocumented population that is already in this country. Legalization would drive up immigrant wages and reduce the competitive effects in key labor market niches—actually benefiting African Americans. And Black social service institutions, increasingly those situated in transitioning neighborhoods, play a role in the immigrant integration process, and Latinos should support them in terms of funding and leadership.

Strategy five: Rigorously enforce antidiscrimination laws to ensure best chances at the jobs that do exist.

As noted, both Latinos and African Americans face discrimination in the labor market, but the bite seems especially painful for Blacks. With public employment declining, the interview (and promotion) process for private-sector employment needs to be made less subjective, and this will require stepping up civil rights enforcement. Such enforcement will also help U. S.-born Latinos and should be accompanied by an equal concern to stop the human rights abuses currently occurring in the raids Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has launched across the country.

Strategy six: Pursue community development policies that connect to the region and build community.

Like roommates (who may or may not like each other), part of the African American-Latino challenge stems from sharing the same—and frequently disinvested—urban space (although to be accurate, it is almost entirely Latinos moving into traditionally Black neighborhoods and not the other way around). Because we share turf, however uneasily, we should also share a common agenda around transit availability, job access, and urban vitality (including the development of affordable housing, retail shopping, and proximate open space). Community benefits agreements, local hiring, and other strategies could very much help on the workforce side and would involve residents in new collaborations. Developing these programs, connecting to regional opportunities, and working together on an equitable development agenda offer a new way to build community.

This set of strategies and topics is not exhaustive. While I have focused mostly on the lower-wage components of our populations, there is much to be said about improving opportunities for the college-educated, assisting minority business owners (who do tend to hire minority workers), and generating new methods for asset accumulation by both Latinos and African Americans. In my view, Black-Latino tensions are frequently less sharp as we move up the income ladder, and so we should focus our attention on those conversations and policies that can best defuse conflicts and make shared progress at the grassroots.

Conclusion

In 2004, Nicolas Vaca gained fame with a book entitled *The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict between Latinos and Blacks and What it Means for America*. Vaca argues—as have African American analysts such as San Francisco State professor Robert Smith—that the era of the feel-good Third-Worldist “Rainbow Coalition” was over. Vaca suggests a tough struggle about public employment; Smith suggests a sharply restrictive immigration policy. While they may have a point about getting beyond a presumed alliance, it all feels a bit like turning on those who are most in your corner (and your neighborhood).

To get from a presumed alliance to a real alliance, we need to understand our common destiny but talk honestly about the nuances of our mutual needs. Such an approach would build trust by acknowledging our differences as well as our commonalities—and finding a workable balance. Policy solutions will be a part of this, but so too will be leadership development, community organizing, and grassroots conversation.

In the end, a coalition will have more power together than apart and will be able to push for broad civic protections for all disadvantaged groups. By doing so, we will lift up the best of America itself, delivering on the promise of opportunity that has lured immigrants, was secured by civil rights leaders, and continues to point the way for our collective future.