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## Black men making it in America: The engines of economic success for black men in America

[Free Enterprise](#), [Poverty Studies](#), [Society and Culture](#)

Over the last decade, much of the racial news and academic research on black men in America has been sobering, if not downright depressing. But negative news isn't the only story about race or even about black males in the United States. In *Black Men Making it in America*, we report some good news:

- **Black men's economic standing.** More than one-in-two black men (57%) have made it into the middle class or higher as adults today, up from 38% in 1960, according to a new analysis of Census data. And the share of black men who are poor has fallen from 41% in 1960 to 18% in 2016. So, a substantial share of black men in America are realizing the American Dream—at least financially—and a clear majority are not poor.
- **The institutional engines of black men's success.** As expected, higher education and full-time work look like engines of success for black men in America. But three other institutions that tend to get less attention in our current discussions of race—the U.S. military, the black church, and

marriage—also appear to play significant roles in black men’s success. For instance, black men who served in the military are more likely than those who did not to be in the middle class when they reach mid-life (54% vs. 45%), according to our new analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). Black men who frequently attended church services at a young age are also more likely to reach the middle class or higher when they are in their fifties: 53% of those men who attended church as young men made it, compared to 43% who did not. Finally, about 70% of married black men are in the middle class, compared to only 20% of never-married black men and 44% of divorced black men.

- **The importance of individual agency.** Black men who score above average in their sense of agency—measured by reports that they feel like they are determining the course of their own lives versus feeling like they do not have control over the direction of their lives—as young men or teenagers in the late 1970s are more likely to be prosperous later in life. Specifically, 52% of black men who had a higher sense of agency as young men made it into at least the middle class when they reached age 50, compared to 44% of their peers who did not have that sense of agency.

At the same time, we find that another institution—the criminal justice system—stands as an obstacle to success for black men in America.

- **Contact with the criminal justice system.** By midlife, only 28% of black men who had contact with the criminal justice system when they were young have moved into the middle or upper class, compared to 52% of black men who had no contact with the criminal justice system at a younger age.

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