

## **AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF THE CULTURAL CAPITAL HYPOTHESIS**

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Using data from the Multi-City Survey of Urban Inequality, an exploratory, empirical analysis of the cultural capital hypothesis was conducted. The analyses indicate that, while the types of cultural influences cited by proponents of this thesis clearly have negative effects on employment when viewed in isolation from other factors, they are not significant when statistical controls for human capital variables are incorporated into the model. Our findings suggest the need to invest more resources in the public education system and in efforts to combat racial discrimination in the labor market.

### **INTRODUCTION AND CRITICAL BACKGROUND**

A wide range of theories have been advanced to explain the steadily deteriorating quality of life in U.S. inner-city communities. Yet one perspective—the so-called cultural capital hypothesis—has held sway in recent public policy debates. It holds “that a deterioration in individual responsibility and family morals and values, rooted primarily in liberal social welfare policies and programs of the 1960s, is principally responsible for rising rates of concentrated and persistent poverty, joblessness, family disruption, out-of-wedlock births, and gang- and drug-related lethal violence in urban America over the last two decades.”<sup>1</sup>

Based on this view, policymakers, with widespread public support, have instituted a set of, arguably, paternalistic and punitive public policies to “change welfare as we know it” and to foster normative behavior among the inner-city poor. In response to the high rates of lethal violence, for example, policymakers have instituted a series of “get tough, lock them up and throw away the key” crime policies. To reduce welfare dependency and to foster responsibility and strengthen family values and morals, policies designed to teach the inner-city disadvantaged the importance of staying in school (Learnfare), of not having children until

marriage (Wedfare and Bridefare), and of getting and maintaining a job (Workfare) have been implemented in many states and are currently being contemplated at the federal level.<sup>2</sup>

Some researchers and social policy analysts have argued that the foregoing assessment of the underlying causes of contemporary poverty is a misspecification of the problem and that the aforementioned policy prescriptions are aimed not at *reducing poverty* per se, but, rather, at *reducing dependency* on the government dole.<sup>3</sup> This argument seems highly plausible and may indeed be valid. But its proponents have failed to provide ample empirical evidence to support this view and thus have contributed to the political ideological quagmire in which the contemporary poverty debate is mired.

That the concept of “cultural capital” is difficult to operationalize and measure—in a statistical sense—is largely responsible for this state of affairs. It is clear from the recent writings of its proponents that cultural capital is a multi-dimensional concept not easily captured in a single variable or indicator. The issues of measurement and operationalization, therefore, must be resolved before the hypothesis can be subjected to rigorous empirical testing—both independent of and relative to alternative explanations of the contemporary poverty problem in urban America.<sup>4</sup>

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND DATA

In this article, we conduct an exploratory empirical analysis of the cultural capital hypothesis. We attempt first to operationalize this theoretical construct, and second to assess the statistical effects of a set of empirically derived dimensions of cultural capital on the labor market experiences of a sample of able-bodied, working-age men.

To address these issues, we utilize data from a new interdisciplinary research initiative, the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI). The theoretical underpinnings and research design of the MCSUI have been described in detail elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to note that the major goal was to gather primary data from a large sample of households and employers in four cities (Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles) that would enable researchers to determine the extent to which three sets of forces—changing labor market dynamics, racial attitudes and polarization, and racial residential segregation—contributed, singularly and in concert, to the growing schisms between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in urban America over the last two decades.

For the purpose of this study, we limit these exploratory analyses to data from the Los Angeles component of the MCSUI for two reasons. The first pertains to the demand-side and the supply-side features of the Los Angeles labor market.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, the Los Angeles labor pool is large and extremely diverse—nearly 60 percent of the population is non-white (black, Asian, or Hispanic); on the other, while there was substantial job growth during the 1980s—732,000 jobs were added to the Los Angeles economy—labor demand was insufficient to accommodate the burgeoning supply of labor. Moreover, the demand that did exist during the 1980s was highly concentrated in two economic sectors—producer services (high-wage jobs) and personal services (mainly low-wage jobs) (Table 1), which contributed to the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots in Los Angeles.<sup>7</sup>

Further, since 1990, the demand for labor in all sectors of the Los Angeles economy has been on a downward trajectory. This is due, in part, to major federal cuts in defense spending and partly to a more general trend in corporate America toward downsizing, re-engineering, and capital flight, especially from the state of California, in an effort to facilitate efficiency and competitiveness in the global marketplace. Mainly as a consequence of these forces, it has been estimated that the state of California lost 700,000 jobs at the outset of this decade.<sup>8</sup> Business failures and capital flight from the Los Angeles metropolitan area accounts for much of this job loss. Unfortunately, on the supply side, the number of job seekers arriving in Los Angeles, primarily from abroad, has not declined accordingly.<sup>9</sup>

When the foregoing demand-side and supply-side realities are juxtaposed, Los Angeles emerges as a labor surplus environment, a community in which there are far more job seekers than there are available jobs. In contrast to their counterparts in tight labor markets, where the number of job applicants roughly approximates job vacancies, employers in labor surplus environments can be far more selective in recruitment and hiring; that is, they can screen out job seekers whom they deem—rightly or wrongly—to possess inappropriate cultural capital attributes.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Los Angeles labor market context, where there is enormous competition for available positions,<sup>11</sup> is ideal for an empirical test of the cultural capital hypothesis.

The second reason relates to the unique features of the Los Angeles component of the MCSUI dataset.<sup>12</sup> It is a large sample that is highly representative not only of the dominant ethnic groups—Asians, blacks,

**TABLE 1**  
**Comparison of LASUI Data with 1990 Census**  
**of Population and Housing Data**

Race and Ethnicity				
Group	LASUI RAW	LASUI Weighted	LA County Eligibles*	LA County
White	21.4	43.2	49.4	47.0
Black	27.8	11.0	10.9	10.3
Asian	26.2	7.7	6.5	6.2
Latino	24.5	38.1	33.2	31.5
Other	-	-	-	5.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,025</b>	<b>3,133</b>	<b>5,787,991</b>	<b>6,090,712</b>

Neighborhood Poverty Status

Neighborhood Poverty Level	LASUI RAW Sample	LASUI Weighted Sample	LA County Eligibles*
<20%	52.7	75.2	72.6
20-40%	31.5	22.2	24.7
40+	15.8	2.6	2.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,025</b>	<b>3,133</b>	<b>6,108,478</b>

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census,  
 1990 Census of Population and Housing, STF3A

\* Population 21 years of age or older

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Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census,  
 1990 Census of Population and Housing, STF3A  
 \*Population 21 years of age or older

Hispanics, non-Hispanic whites—in the local labor market, but also of the population residing in both poor and nonpoor neighborhoods in Los Angeles (Table 2).<sup>13</sup>

Our decision to focus on males in the Los Angeles sample reflects our research interest in the steadily declining economic status of young black males nationally, and in urban America in particular. It has been argued elsewhere that the black male jobless problem must be critically evaluated within the context of the broader changes occurring on both the demand side and the supply side of the labor market.<sup>14</sup> The MCSUI data are ideal for such analyses.<sup>15</sup>

## ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

### *Unpacking the Cultural Capital Box*

Cultural capital theorists have specific explanations for the relative success or failure of the various ethnic minorities—Chinese Americans, Koreans, Japanese Americans, Hispanics and blacks—who are represented in the MCSUI data from Los Angeles. It is useful to briefly review these explanations.

Proponents argue that the poor performance of blacks in the labor market is due in large measure to the debilitating effects of slavery and, subsequently, of the southern sharecropper system. Writing about the effects of slavery, Sowell states, for example, that “As workers, blacks had little sense of personal responsibility under slavery. Lack of initiative, evasion of work, half done work, unpredictable absenteeism, and abuse of tools and equipment were pervasive under slavery, and these patterns did not suddenly disappear with emancipation.”<sup>16</sup> The slavery experience, according to cultural capital theorists, inculcated in blacks, “values that are impediments to work, savings, education, and upward mobility, impediments that operated with stultifying effects. . . .”<sup>17</sup> Further, Harrison contends that these values and behaviors persisted under Jim Crowism in the South,<sup>18</sup> and Lemann argues that blacks who migrated from the South brought these behavioral traits with them to the urban North, where they were once again reinforced by the liberal social-welfare policies of the 1960s.<sup>19</sup>

In a similar vein, Harrison argues that immigrants from Latin America lag behind in economic performance due to their traditional Iberian culture and values, which he characterizes as the direct opposite of the cultural values that European immigrants brought to this country. He

**TABLE 2**  
**Employment Change by Industry 1980-1990**

	Total Employment	INDUSTRY				
		Transformative Activities	Distributive Services	Producer Services	Personal Services	Social Services
<b>Los Angeles County</b>						
1980	3,471,764	1,038,751	948,524	492,278	254,320	694,150
1990	4,203,792	1,107,917	1,150,053	709,066	365,534	810,096
Change '80-'90	732,028	69,166	201,529	216,788	111,214	115,946
%	21.0%	16.6%	21.0%	44.0%	44.0%	16.7%
<b>Los Angeles City</b>						
1980	1,394,855	376,656	365,858	229,350	129,901	275,733
1990	1,670,488	405,447	437,548	315,409	184,850	302,367
Change '80-'90	275,633	28,791	71,690	86,059	59,949	26,634
%	19.7%	7.6%	19.6%	37.5%	42.3%	9.7%
<b>Balance of County</b>						
1980	2,076,909	662,095	582,666	262,928	124,419	408,417
1990	2,533,304	702,470	712,505	393,657	180,684	507,729
Change '80-'90	456,395	40,375	129,839	130,729	56,265	89,312

Source: Census of Population, 1980 and 1990. Note: Transformative activities include manufacturing and construction; distributive services include transportation, communication, wholesale and retail trade; producer services include finance, insurance, real estate, and business services; personal services include entertainment, repairs, eating and drinking; and social services include medical, education, and government.

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Source: Census of Population, 1980 and 1990. Note: Transformative activities include manufacturing and construction; distributive services include transportation, communication, wholesale and retail trade; producer services include finance, insurance, real estate, and business services; personal services include entertainment, repairs, eating and drinking; and social services include medical, education, and government.

states further that the "Mexicans who migrate to the United States bring with them a repressive culture that is disconcertingly persistent."<sup>20</sup> Sowell contends that the goals and values of Mexican-Americans have never been centered on education,<sup>21</sup> and Mead argues that they have less industrious work attitudes.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike blacks and Hispanics, who are perceived to possess the wrong set of cultural capital attributes, Harrison argues that "the Chinese, Japanese, and the Koreans who have migrated to the United States have injected a dose of the work ethic, excellence, and merit at a time when those values appear particularly beleaguered in the broader society."<sup>23</sup>

The success of these three groups, he contends, is rooted in a set of “culturally derived” characteristics flowing from their Confucian value system, which emphasizes education, hard work, excellence, risk taking, and frugality. Further, in contrast to blacks and Hispanics, these groups are perceived as having a strong future orientation and a sense of self as part of a collectivity that extends the radius of trust outside the family to the community.<sup>24</sup>

Specifically with respect to work or employment outcomes, then, cultural capital theorists argue that the high rate of joblessness in urban America is due neither to structural constraints in the labor market, as posited by Wilson,<sup>25</sup> nor to employer discrimination, as postulated by Kirschenman and Neckerman.<sup>26</sup> Rather, they contend that the joblessness problem reflects character deficiencies and deviant values of inner-city residents, especially males. They argue that inner-city residents actually choose not to work regularly and that this unwillingness to work is embedded in the nature and culture of the inner city. Negative attitudes toward work, cultural capital theorists assert, are rooted in:

*ghetto life* (the breakdown of authority and lack of disapproval of antisocial behavior); *ethnicity* (the lack of value placed on getting ahead by some ethnic groups); *culture* ( a history of slavery and dependence on Whites created a world view among Blacks that makes them uniquely prone to anti-hero attitudes); and the *Third World origins of immigrants* (less industrious work attitudes shaped by African and Latin rather than the European origins of today’s poor).<sup>27</sup>

The foregoing descriptions of “culturally derived” characteristics purportedly explain who prospers and who does not in American society. Based on this, we selected fifteen questions from the MCSUI, which were designed to capture the forces that shape an individual’s morals, values, and work orientation. These questions are grouped into five categories in Table 3, which also indicates how the responses to each question are coded.

The categories are: *geographical influences*, including the respondent’s place of birth and place of residence most of the time, up to age sixteen; *family background influences*, whether the respondent lived with both parents most of the time until age sixteen, the employment status of the respondent’s father and mother during his formative years (i.e., until age

**TABLE 3**  
**Cultural Capital Indicators**

CONCEPT	VARIABLES	SPECIFIC MEASURES
Geographic Influences	Where was your mother living when you were born?	Recoded: (1) Third World Country, (2) Other foreign country, (3) Southern U.S., (4) Elsewhere
	In what city and state did you live most of the time before you were age 16?	Recoded: (1) Third World Country, (2) Other foreign country, (3) Southern U.S., (4) Elsewhere
Family Background Influences	Did you live with both of your parents most of the time until you were 16 years old?	Coded: (1) yes (2) no
	What is the highest grade of school or year of schooling your father completed?	Coded: absolute years
	Did he usually work during the year when you were age 16?	Coded: (1) yes (0) no (B) DK
	What is the highest grade of school or year of schooling your mother completed?	Coded: absolute years
	Did she usually work during the year when you were age 16?	Coded: (1) yes (0) no (B) DK
	Most of the time when you were 16 years old did you and (SELECTED SIB) grow up in the same household?	Coded: (1) yes (0) no
	Does (SELECTED SIB) work?	Recoded: (1) yes (0) no
Religious Influences	Are you:	Coded: (1) Protestant, (2) Catholic, (3) Jewish, (4) Other, (5) No preference
	What category best describes how often you attend religious services?	Coded: (1) if attends church at least once a month or more, (0) else
Political Influences	Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as:	Coded: (1) Republican, (2) Democrat, (3) Independent, (4) Some other, (5) No preference, (6) No preference for religious reasons
	We hear a lot of talk about liberals and conservatives. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	Recoded: (1) Liberal, (2) Moderate, (3) Conservative, (4) Haven't thought about it
	Are you a U.S. citizen?	Recoded: (1) yes (0) no
	Are you registered to vote?	Coded: (1) yes (0) no
Race/Ethnic Identity	Please choose from this page the number that best describes your race:	(1) White, (2) Black/African American, (3) Asian American, (4) American Indian, (5) Other
	Are you of Spanish or Hispanic origin?	(1) yes (0) no
	Please look at the card and tell me which group you belong to.	(1) Mexican, (2) Mexican American, (3) Puerto Rican, (4) Cuban, (5) Salvadorian, (6) Dominican, (7) Guatemalan, (8) Nicaraguan, (9) Other
Language Skills	How would you rate the respondent's ability to understand English?	Coded: (1) Excellent, (2) Very Good, (3) Good, (4) Fair, (5) Poor
	How would you rate the respondent's ability to speak clearly in English?	Coded: (1) Excellent, (2) Very Good, (3) Good, (4) Fair, (5) Poor



sixteen), and whether the respondent's family ever received welfare or lived in public housing during his formative years; *educational influences*, years of school completed by the respondent's father and mother, and years of school completed by the respondent prior to coming to the United States; *religious influences*, church affiliation and frequency of church attendance; *political influences*, party affiliation, political leaning, citizenship status, whether the respondent was a green card holder, and whether the respondent was registered to vote. Table 3 also includes indicators of *ethnic identity* and *language skills*.

To identify the underlying structure in these data, we first transformed the responses to each of the items/questions in Table 3 to dummy variables. This re-coded dataset was then subjected to a principal component analysis that reduced the individual variables to a smaller, more manageable number of "principal components" representing the underlying structure of the original responses. Those principal components with eigenvalues greater than one—a total of fifteen—were considered to be significant and thus were rotated using the varimax solution to identify more clearly the cluster of variables loading on each component. Together these fifteen components accounted for 69 percent of the total variance in the original set of cultural capital indicators.

We shall describe only seven of the principal components here—those which proved to be highly correlated with the employment status of males in the Los Angeles labor market. They are reproduced in Table 4.

The first component, accounting for 16.1 percent of the variance, distinguishes U.S. citizens (–.869) who vote (–.769) and speak standard English (–.765) from individuals who were born in a Third World country (.861), who lived in a Third World country most of the time before they were sixteen years old (.852), and who have a green card (.753). Individuals with positive scores on this component are documented aliens from the Third World, while those with negative scores are U.S. citizens. Given this pattern of loadings, we labeled this component *Citizenship*.

The next two components tap into other dimensions of immigrant cultural influences in Los Angeles. One (Component 2) captures Mexicans (.864) whose primary language is Spanish (.801), and the other (Component 3) captures individuals who were born in a foreign country outside the Third World (.857) and who lived primarily in that region prior to age sixteen (.885). Component 2, labeled *Mexican Immigrants*, accounts for 6.4 percent of the total variance, and Component 3, labeled *Non-Third World Immigrants*, accounts for 5.8 percent of the total variance.

**TABLE 4**  
**Principal Components**

Variable	Loading	Communality
<b>Component 1: Citizenship</b> (16.1% of total variance)		
Born in Third World	0.861	0.899
Lived in Third World	0.852	0.855
Educated Outside of U.S.	0.867	0.857
Green Card	0.753	0.637
U.S. Citizen	-0.869	0.829
Voter	-0.769	0.679
Speak Standard English	-0.765	0.789
<b>Component 2: Mexican Immigrants</b> (6.4% of Total Variance)		
Mexican	0.525	0.864
Spanish Speaking	0.559	0.801
<b>Component 3: Non-Third World Immigrants</b> (5.8% of Total Variance)		
Born in Foreign Country	0.915	0.857
Lived in Foreign Country	0.920	0.885
<b>Component 4: Southern Roots</b> (4.8% of Total Variance)		
Born in South	0.905	0.862
Lived in South	0.905	0.847
<b>Component 5: English Proficiency</b> (3.4% of Total Variance)		
Understands English Well	0.898	0.906
Speaks English Well	0.883	0.888
<b>Component 6: Parental Education Influences</b> (3.1% of Total Variance)		
Mother's Education	0.792	0.705
Father's Education	0.772	0.650
<b>Component 7: Family Dependency</b> (3.0% of Total Variance)		
Lived in Public Housing as a child	0.563	0.931
Family Received AFDC when respondent was a child	0.619	0.505

Component 4, labeled *Southern Roots*, captures individuals who were born in the southern United States (.857) and who lived primarily in that region prior to age sixteen (.885). This factor taps those individuals who, according to cultural capital theorists, have poor attitudes toward work, especially if they are black.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Components 1 through 4 reflect geographic influences, Component 5 is a measure of *English Proficiency*. Accounting for 3.4 percent of the total variance, this component identifies individuals who, according to ratings by the interviewer, understand English well (.898) and are able to speak English clearly (.883).

Components 6 and 7 capture household and family influences. Years of school completed by the survey respondent's mother (.792) and years of school completed by the respondent's father (.772) loaded on Component 6. Two indicators of growing up in a household that received government assistance loaded on Component 7: whether the survey respondent lived in public housing as a child (.431) and whether the family received AFDC when the respondent was a child (.505). Component 6, labeled *Parental Educational Influences*, accounted for 3.1 percent of the variance in the original set of variables, and Component 7, labeled *Family Dependency*, accounted for 3.0 percent.

Together this subset of principal components capture several specific types of influences—including geographic, historical, and family background effects—that cultural capital theorists contend shape one's morals, values, and attitudes toward family, community, and work. The crucial empirical question here is: to what degree do these factors statistically influence an individual's employment status—that is, whether able-bodied men work or not?

#### *Cultural Capital and Employment: Is There a Link?*

To answer this question, we recoded the male responses to a question in the MCSUI regarding present work status as a dichotomous variable, after excluding individuals who were in school, disabled, or retired. Those who were employed part time or full time, or who were temporarily laid off, were classified as *working*, and those who were unemployed or not attached to the labor market were classified as *not working*. Using logistic regression analysis, we then tested the statistical effects of four sets of independent variables.

In addition to the empirically derived principal components of cultural capital, we also included several human capital, contextual, and social

status variables, which are defined in Table 5. The goal here is to determine the effects of cultural capital independent of, and controlling for, other factors that have been posited as determinants of employment status in urban labor markets.<sup>29</sup>

We entered the variables into the logit model in blocks beginning with the empirically derived cultural capital indicators, followed by the human capital variables, the contextual variables, and the social status variables. Within each block, we used the backward stepwise selection procedure to identify the statistically significant predictor variables. The results of the logistic regression analyses are summarized in Table 6.

As block one in Table 6 shows, three of the seven empirically derived components of cultural capital—Mexican immigrants, southern roots, and family dependency—emerged as statistically significant predictors of the employment status of our sample of Los Angeles men. Moreover, the signs of the corresponding beta values on each of these variables are consistent with the cultural capital hypothesis. Being a Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrant ( $b = -.147$ ), born in the South, and spending most of your formative years in this region ( $b = -.211$ ), and having lived either in publicly subsidized housing and/or in a family that received welfare as a child ( $b = -.175$ ) all have negative effects on the likelihood of working. Translating the exponentiated betas in Table 6 into odds or probabilities, the findings indicate that, in comparison to their male counterparts who do not share these traits, Mexican immigrants are 14 percent less likely to be working, males with southern roots are 19 percent less likely to be working, and those in the Los Angeles sample who grew up in publicly subsidized family situations are 17 percent less likely to be working.

Do these findings hold up when statistical controls for individual human capital attributes such as age, marital status, years of school completed, and job training are introduced into the model? Block two in Table 6 provides an answer to this question.

Two of the human capital variables, marital status ( $b = .672$ ) and years of school completed ( $b = .138$ ), emerged as statistically significant predictors of the employment status of men in our sample. Every additional year of school completed increased the odds or likelihood of working by 14 percent, and married men in our sample were 95 percent more likely to be working than were unmarried men.

What impact did these two variables have on the cultural capital components of the model? When these two human capital variables were introduced, two of the cultural capital variables, Mexican immigrants and family dependency, were rendered statistically insignificant. Only one of

**TABLE 5**  
**Variables Used in Analysis**

Type of Variable	Attributes	Variables	N	Working (%)	Not Working (%)	
Independent	Cultural Capital	Mexican Immigrants	218	89.0	11.0	
		Southern Roots	87	73.6	26.4	
		English Proficiency (low)	457	88.2	11.8	
		Parental Educational (father or mother 13+ yrs.)	685	85.1	14.9	
		Family Dependency	152	76.3	23.7	
		Citizenship (non-U.S. citizen)	564	88.1	11.9	
		Third World Immigrants	690	89.0	11.0	
		Non-Third World Immigrants	58	94.8	5.2	
		Control	Human Capital	Age (Mean)	1363	37.0
Marital Status (married)	1364			91.7	8.3	
Job Training (yes)	365			85.8	14.2	
Years of School Completed	1184			14.0	12.0	
Contextual	Neighborhood Poverty Rate		High (>40%)	223	88.3	11.7
			Medium (20-39%)	457	86.4	13.6
Social Status			Criminal Record (yes)	168	66.0	33.0
			Black (yes)	255	76.9	23.1
			Non-Hispanic White	306	88.6	11.4
			Asian-American	365	93.4	6.6
			Latino/Hispanic	438	85.8	14.2
			Skin Tone (dark)	233	79.0	21.0
	Skin Tone (med.-light)		1135	87.4	12.6	
Dependent	Employment Status		Working	1369	86.0	14.0

the empirically derived cultural capital attributes, southern roots ( $b = -.158$ ,  $p = .07$ ), maintained its statistical significance; however, its effect declined (see Table 6, block two).

The next set of variables that we entered into the model consisted of one social status variable (i.e., whether the respondent had a criminal record) and two contextual variables (i.e., neighborhood poverty status). As block three in Table 6 shows, neither of the poverty indices was significant, but the crime variable was highly significant ( $b = -1.24$ ). In fact, the effects of this variable were so strong that it rendered the influence of southern roots statistically insignificant. The results indicate that having a criminal record reduces the likelihood, or odds, of an individual's working by 72 percent, as compared to someone without a criminal record.

TABLE 6  
Logistic Regression Results

Variables	Block 1			Block 2			Block 3			Block 4		
	B	Sig	Exp(B)	B	Sig	Exp(B)	B	Sig	Exp(B)	B	Sig	Exp(B)
Constant	2.0338			-0.1165			0.2528			0.4598		
Mexican Immigrants	-0.1471 (0.0861)	0.0876	0.8632	0.1190 (0.1127)	0.2907	1.1264	0.0579 (0.1146)	0.6133	1.0596	0.0320 (0.1154)	0.7814	1.0325
Southern Roots	-0.2106 (0.0849)	0.0131	0.8101	-0.1579 (0.0866)	0.0684	0.8539	-0.0880 (0.0902)	0.3293	0.9158	-0.0360 (0.0951)	0.705	0.9646
Family Dependency	-0.1749 (0.0846)	0.0386	0.8396	-0.1110 (0.0869)	0.2014	0.8949	-0.0650 (0.0893)	0.4668	0.9371	-0.0182 (0.0943)	0.8473	0.982
Marital Status				0.6720 (0.2066)	0.0011	1.9581	0.5462 (0.2120)	0.0100	1.7267	0.5294 (0.2121)	0.0126	1.6979
Years of School Completed				0.1384 (0.0322)	0.0000	1.1485	0.1316 (0.0330)	0.0001	1.1407	0.1228 (0.0264)	0.0000	1.1307
Criminal Record							-1.2398 (0.2498)	0.0000	0.2894	-1.2304 (0.2456)	0.0000	0.2922
Black & Dark Skinned										-0.7307 (0.2963)	0.0136	0.4816

Standard errors appear in parentheses below each coefficient.

Given the enormous racial disparity in joblessness in our urban centers, we entered into the model, as the final set of independent variables (block 4 in Table 6), a measure of race (black) and skin tone (dark), both of which might be viewed as indicators of social status. Neither variable was statistically significant independent of the other, but the interaction effect between these two variables was statistically significant. Being dark in skin tone *and* black ( $b = -.731$ ) has a negative impact on the likelihood, or odds, of working.

Table 7 summarizes the findings of the logistic regression analyses. None of the empirically derived principal components of cultural capital, in the final analysis, were statistically significant predictor variables. The most influential variables in distinguishing who was working or not working in our Los Angeles sample included whether or not the individual had a criminal record, the years of school the individual completed, and his marital status. However, it is noteworthy that, after controlling for these and other cultural capital and contextual variables, being a dark skinned black male, rather than a light skinned non-black, reduced an individual's odds of working by 52 percent.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There are multiple and competing explanations, with varying degrees of plausibility, for the growing schism between the haves and the have-nots in urban America.<sup>30</sup> What we have characterized in this paper as the cultural capital hypothesis appears to be the most popular explanation among both the public and political and civic leaders: *the trend toward continued inequality in American society is due not to structural changes in the economy, employer discrimination, or increasing social isolation and economic marginalization of the most disadvantaged elements from the mainstream of the society, but, rather, to a deterioration in values, morals, and personal responsibility.*

It is this view that undergirds the sweeping changes in the U.S. Congress in the recent mid-term elections. These elections have enabled the new Republican majority to forge its "Contract With America."<sup>31</sup> And it was this view that served, throughout the 1980s, as the basis for the enactment, at both the federal and state levels, of a wide range of arguably paternalistic and punitive public policies as a means to deal with the seemingly intractable problems of drugs, crime, and long-term welfare dependency in our cities.<sup>32</sup>

Yet our exploratory analyses of the MCSUI data, based on the ethni-

**TABLE 7**  
**Summary Results of Logistic Regression Analysis**

	Working		Not Working	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp (B)
Statistically Significant	Marital Status	1 (70%)	Criminal Record	(1) (71%)
	Years of School Completed	.123 (13%)	Black & Dark Skinned	-.731 (52%)
Not Statistically Significant				
	Non Third World Immigrant	.152 (16%)	Parental Educational Influence	-.01 (1%)
	English Proficiency	.146 (15%)	Age	-.01 (2%)
	Citizenship	.146 (20%)	High Poverty Tract	-.02 (3%)
	Medium Poverty	.182 (20%)	Skin Tone	-.114 (11%)
	Black	.063 (6%)	Southern Roots	-.037 (4%)
	Mexican Immigrant	.034 (3%)	Family Dependency	-.018 (2%)

cally diverse Los Angeles sample, do not support the cultural capital hypothesis, and they question the attention that this school of thought has been receiving in the public policy arena. The types of cultural influences—geographical (e.g., being born in the South or in the Third World), historical (e.g., slavery and sharecropper system), and familial (e.g., growing up in a household dependent on government assistance)—cited by proponents of this thesis clearly have negative effects on employment *when viewed in isolation from other factors*. But the negative effects of the cultural capital variables disappeared once statistical controls for a range of human capital (education and marital status) and social status (race, skin tone, and criminal record) variables are incorporated into the model.

That the likelihood of working is positively influenced by years of school completed and marital status is not surprising. The crucial question is: what are the policy implications of these findings?

If, as Wilson and others suggest,<sup>33</sup> the key to marriage is having a good job which, in turn, enables one to form and maintain a stable family; and if the odds of securing employment increase with years of



school completed, then the policy implications are fairly straightforward: we need to invest far more resources in improving the public education system, especially school-to-work transition programs, for non-college-bound youth.

On the other hand, it is clear from our preliminary explorations of the MCSUI data that a criminal record is a major impediment to employment. And it is also clear from this research that a criminal record is not necessarily a function of one's package of cultural capital attributes, as some conservative policy analysts would lead us to believe.<sup>34</sup>

Rather, it reflects, we believe, this nation's obsession with punishment, as opposed to prevention and rehabilitation, not just for major crimes but for most minor offenses as well, especially if the offenses occur in economically distressed inner-city communities.<sup>35</sup> We believe the crime epidemic is related, in part, to the fact that the kinds of personal resources and so-called mediating institutions that once encouraged young men to pursue mainstream avenues of economic and social mobility, and that discouraged them from engaging in dysfunctional behavior, are no longer effective or available in inner-city communities.<sup>36</sup> Previous research indicates that such community-based institutions as the Boy's and Girl's Club and the YMCA and YWCA lost much of their financial support during the 1980s, and thus became less effective precisely at the time that the problems confronting disadvantaged youth were worsening.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, emerging evidence suggests that programs designed to mend the social fabric of economically distressed communities will go a long way toward resolving the urban crime problem. For example, a recent evaluation of a Midnight Basketball League in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, revealed that the program (1) created a safe haven in which the participants and the fans could engage in positive social activities, (2) channeled the energy of gang members in a positive direction, and (3) significantly improved the educational and career aspirations of program participants. In addition, according to Milwaukee Police Department statistics, crime rates in the target area decreased by 30 percent during the program's first year of operation.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, the program achieved these highly desirable outcomes with a modest investment of \$70,000—roughly the same amount required to maintain two inner-city males in prison for one year. One does not have to be an investment banker to realize that programs like Midnight Basketball will contribute far more to the revival of economically distressed inner-city communities than will any or all of the enormously popular

punitive and/or paternalistic policies currently advocated at all levels of government.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the preliminary results of this study suggest that discrimination is still alive and well in the Los Angeles labor market. Even after controlling for a range of cultural capital attributes, human capital attributes, and contextual variables, the results indicate that a dark-skinned black is 52 percent less likely to be employed.

This finding is consistent with the results of a recent study by Bluestone, Stevenson, and Tilly, which documents the disparity in employment for black and white males, controlling for age and education.<sup>40</sup> During the mid-1980s, according to their study, the jobless rate for twenty-year-old black men (21.6 percent) was almost five times higher than was the rate for their white counterparts (4.8 percent). And for twenty-year-old men with less than a high school education, the racial disparity in the jobless rate was even greater: 10.3 percent for white men and 36.1 percent for black men.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, the findings of this study suggest that, over the last twenty years, race-based discrimination has been increasing rather than decreasing in the U.S. labor market. Their data indicate that the disparity in the jobless rates of young black and white men, with and without a high school diploma, was not nearly as stark during the 1960s as it was in the 1980s.

Our findings with respect to the effect of race (black) and skin-tone (dark) on the odds of working in Los Angeles are also consistent with the results of recent public opinion surveys, face-to-face interviews with employers, and focus group discussions held with black, white, Latino, Korean, and Chinese residents of Los Angeles County.<sup>42</sup> These studies indicate that black males, in particular, are viewed negatively not only by whites but also by other non-white minority groups (especially Asians); they are perceived as being less intelligent, more prone to violence, and more likely to rely on the government dole than to prefer to work. The evidence indicates that black men are substantially disadvantaged in the labor market because these negative stereotypes are often applied categorically.<sup>43</sup>

These findings should give pause to those who, in the current debate about affirmative action, advocate class-based<sup>44</sup> as opposed to race-based<sup>45</sup> remedies for past discrimination, especially in the labor market. The Los Angeles data suggest that even if one has played by the rules—gone to school, avoided trouble with the law, and gotten married, etc.—race still matters,<sup>46</sup> and it matters a great deal if one is a dark-skinned black male.

## NOTES

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1. See Michael Darby (ed.), *Reducing Poverty in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

2. See *ibid.* Also see Walter C. Farrell, Jr., and James H. Johnson, Jr., "Access to Local Resources is Key to Problems in the Inner City," *Wisconsin Review* 2 (1994): 23; Joan Petersilia, "Crime and Punishment in California: Full Cells, Empty Pockets, and Questionable Benefits," in J.B. Steinberg, D.W. Lyon, and M.E. Vaiana (eds.), *Urban America: Policy Choices for Los Angeles and the Nation* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1992).

3. See James H. Johnson, Jr., "The Real Issue for Reducing Poverty," in M. Darby (ed.), *Reducing Poverty in America* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 374–96.

4. Bordieu, P. "Les Trois Etats du Capital Culture," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 30(19793–5); M.P. Fernandez-Kelley, "Towandas Triumph: Social and Cultural Capital in the Urban Ghetto," in A. Portes (ed.), *Economic Sociology of Immigration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995). Also see, Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Lawrence E. Harrison, *Who Prospers? How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

5. See James H. Johnson, Jr., Melvin L. Oliver, and Lawrence D. Bobo, "Unraveling the Paradox of Deepening Urban Inequality: Theoretical Underpinnings and Research Design of a Multi-City Study," *Urban Geography* 15 (1994): 77–89.

6. James H. Johnson, Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver, "Structural Changes in the U.S. Economy and Black Male Joblessness: A Reassessment," in G.E. Peterson and W. Vroman (eds.), *Urban Labor Markets and Job Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1992).

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9. William H. Frey, "Immigration and Internal Migration Flight: A California Case Study," *Population and Environment* 16 (1995): 351–75.

10. For a complete discussion of issues surrounding "tight" versus "slack" labor markets, see Richard B. Freeman, "Employment and Earnings of Disadvantaged Young Men in a Labor Shortage Economy," in C. Jencks and P. Peterson (eds.), *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991).

11. Melvin L. Oliver and James H. Johnson, Jr., "Interethnic Minority Conflict in an Urban Ghetto: The Case of Blacks and Latinos in Los Angeles," *Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change* 6(1984): 57–64; James H. Johnson, Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver, "Interethnic Minority Conflict in Urban America: The Effects of Economic and Social Dislocations," *Urban Geography* 10 (1989): 449–63; and James H. Johnson, Jr., Cloyzelle K. Jones, Walter C. Farrell, Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver, "The Los Angeles Rebellion: A Retrospective View," *Economic Development Quarterly* 6(1992): 356–72.

12. See Johnson, Oliver, and Bobo, "Unraveling the Paradox of Deepening Urban Inequality."

13. For a detailed discussion of the survey and sample procedures employed in

the LASUI, see James H. Johnson, Jr., Melvin L. Oliver, and Lawrence D. Bobo, *The Los Angeles Study of Urban Inequality: Theoretical Underpinnings, Research Design, and Preliminary Findings* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, 1995), Appendix A.

14. See Harry J. Holzer, "Black Employment Problems: New Evidence, Old Questions," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 13 (1994): 699–722.

15. Johnson, Oliver, and Bobo, "Unraveling the Paradox of Deepening Urban Inequality."

16. Thomas Sowell, *Ethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 200.

17. Harrison, *Who Prospers*, p. 194.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991).

20. Harrison, *Who Prospers*, p. 223.

21. Sowell, *Ethnic America*; and Sowell, *Race and Culture*.

22. Lawrence Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

23. Harrison, *Who Prospers*, p. 223.

24. Harrison, *ibid.*

25. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

26. Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn Neckerman, "We'd Love to Hire Them . . . But: The Meaning of Race for Employers," in C. Jencks and P. Peterson (eds.), *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991).

27. Mimi Abramovitz, "The New Paternalism," *The Nation* 225 (1992): 368–71 (emphasis added).

28. Lemann, *The Promised Land*; Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty*.

29. Holzer, "Black Employment Problems."

30. Johnson, Oliver, and Bobo, "Unraveling the Paradox of Deepening Urban Inequality."

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37. See David Grant and James H. Johnson, Jr., "Conservative Policymaking and Growing Urban Inequality in the 1980s," in R. Ratcliff, M. L. Oliver, and T. Shapiro (eds.), *Research in Politics and Society* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1995).

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ment of Milwaukee's Midnight Basketball League," *Journal of Community Practice* (1995: forthcoming).

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40. Barry Bluestone, Mary Huff Stevenson, and Chris Tilly, *An Assessment of the Impact of "Deindustrialization" and Spatial Mismatch in the Labor Market Outcomes of Young White, Black, and Latino Men and Women Who Have Limited Schooling* (Boston, MA: John McCormick Institute of Public Affairs, 1992).

41. Bluestone, Stevenson, and Tilly, *ibid.*

42. See Lawrence D. Bobo, Camille L. Zubrinsky, James H. Johnson, Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver, "Public Opinion Before and After the Spring of Discontent," in M. Baldassare (ed.), *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 103–133; Kirschenman and Neckerman, "We'd Love to Hire Them . . . But;" and Lawrence D. Bobo, Camille L. Zubrinsky, James H. Johnson, Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver, "Work Orientation, Job Discrimination, and Ethnicity: A Focus Group Perspective," in R.L. Simpson and I.H. Simpson (eds.), *Research in the Sociology of Work* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1995), pp. 45–85.

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