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**At the corner of progress and peril
Black men describe shared existence, dueling realities of success,
failure**

**By Michael A. Fletcher
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What does it mean to be a black man? Imagine three African American boys, kindergartners who are largely alike in intelligence, talent and character, whose potential seems limitless. According to a wealth of statistics and academic studies, in just over a decade one of the boys is likely to be locked up or headed to prison. The second boy — if he hasn't already dropped out — will seriously weigh leaving high school and be pointed toward an uncertain future. The third boy will be speeding toward success by most measures.

Being a black man in America can mean inhabiting a border area between possibility and peril, to feel connected to, defined by, even responsible for each of those boys — and for other black men. In dozens of interviews, black men described their shared existence, of sometimes wondering whether their accomplishments will be treated as anomalies, their individuality obscured by the narrow images that linger in the minds of others.

This unique bond, which National Urban League President Marc Morial calls "the kinship of the species," is driving many black men to focus renewed attention on the portrait of achievement and failure that hangs over the next generation. A recent spate of scholarly studies have brought urgency to the introspection, as the studies show the condition of poor, young black men has worsened in the past decade despite the generally strong economic conditions of the 1990s.

Black men now number 18 million, and many are pondering their roles in a country that is undergoing significant social and demographic changes.

In the coming weeks and months, The Washington Post will explore the lives of black men through their experiences — how they raise their sons, cope with wrongful imprisonment, navigate the perceived terrain between smart and cool, defy convention against

the backdrop of racial expectations. On Sunday, The Post will publish the findings of a major poll conducted jointly with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University. The nationwide survey measured the attitudes of black men on a variety of issues and asked others for their views of black men.

More than 50 years after the publication of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," black men appear more visible than ever — a freshman senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, is the American Idol of national politics, and Will Smith is perhaps the most bankable star in Hollywood. Yet black men who put their kids through college by mopping floors, who sit at home reading Tennyson at night, who wear dreadlocks but design spacecraft, say it sometimes seems as if the world doesn't believe they exist.

Dueling realities

The dueling realities of their history — steady progress and devastating setbacks — continue to burden many black men in ways that are sometimes difficult to explain.

"As a black man, you often think that things can go either way," says Todd Boyd, an African American who has carved out a niche exploring race and popular culture as a professor at the University of Southern California. "You could be that guy in the penitentiary, or you could be that guy on everybody's television screen."

You could be Gilbert Arenas, an NBA all-star who makes millions of dollars a year but still feels he relates to the "young brother" who catches the bus every day to fry burgers for a living. "We have an unspoken bond about life," he says.

The statistics that spell out the status of black men are often conflicting, sometimes perplexing.

The percentage of black men graduating from college has nearly quadrupled since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and yet more black men earn their high school equivalency diplomas in prison each year than graduate from college. Black families where men are in the home earn median incomes that approach those of white families. Yet more than half of the nation's 5.6 million black boys live in fatherless households, 40 percent of which are impoverished. The ranks of professional black men have exploded over four decades — there were 78,000 black male engineers in 2004, a 33 percent increase in 10 years. And yet 840,000 black men are incarcerated, and the chances of a black boy serving time has

nearly tripled in three decades, Justice Department projections show.

Pondering the future

So where does that leave 17-year-old Jonathan McMaster as he ponders his future? The statistics show that fewer than half of black boys graduate from high school four years after entering the ninth grade. And yet here he is, a junior at Baltimore's exclusive Gilman School, running track, playing the viola in the school orchestra, approaching fluency in French. He has visited nearly 30 countries and is spending a month studying in London. It used to be "a hindrance" to be a black man, McMaster says he's been told by his elders. "But with everybody trying to diversify now, I think it has become almost an advantage."

Where the nation was once largely segregated along a black-white divide, the country has become more racially and ethnically mixed, creating opportunities — and new sensibilities.

Erin Smith, 23, who recently graduated with a business degree from Howard University, once considered himself a militant. "You kind of get groomed, in a way, in that totally pro-black environment at Howard." But as he began to pursue his business dreams — a fledgling multimedia company he created his freshman year and a real estate venture with his father — Smith started to expand his thinking.

"I saw myself as potentially being kind of racist," he says "of closing myself off to people. I'm still pro-black, but we don't need to totally focus on race. We're all part of the human race. I kind of grew a little bit. I look at life as a puzzle — day by day, you get a new piece. Some young men think success is 20-inch rims, flat-screen TV. They only think of success as what they see — and that's what they see."

What does it mean to be a black man?

Marc Morial was leaving the downtown Madison Hotel when he got into an impromptu conversation with a doorman. The doorman, also black, wore a uniform and a whistle around his neck; Morial was dressed in an immaculate gray suit with a crisp white pocket scarf. When the chat concluded, the two locked arms and pulled each other close in a signature embrace that is common to black men across the country.

"Black men relate to each other in a special way," Morial says.

On the streets, strangers frequently give each other an uptick of the head when their eyes meet, a nod of black male acknowledgment. Black men have invented so many special handshakes that a recent McDonald's commercial turns on this fact. Their commonality is often defined by their style, their walk, their slang and even how they refer to each other ("Slim," "Shorty," "Dawg," "Mo," "Brother"). Wherever black men congregate, there is often a comfort level that crosses class and generational lines. There is even a universally acknowledged black men's club, the barbershop, where no subject is off limits.

"It's the cohesion that comes from knowing whatever your situation in life is you're carrying a special burden," says Morial, a former mayor of New Orleans. "But also that you're strong enough to do it. Whatever they put on you, you can handle it. You can knock me down, but I'm getting up. You can't knock me down with no love tap."

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Studied, analyzed and dissected

Over the past 100 years, perhaps no slice of the U.S. population has been more studied, analyzed and dissected than black males. Dozens of governmental boards and commissions have investigated their plight, scholars have researched and written papers on them, and black men have been the subject of at least 400 books.

In the early 20th century, researchers pioneered a still-evolving movement to pinpoint a biological link between black men and crime. After the social turmoil of the 1960s, experts spotlighted the rampant deprivation and lack of opportunity among black men that lent urgency to President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty.

Later, the focus became the diminishing opportunities in cities, where well-paying manufacturing work was vanishing, locking many unskilled black men out of the job market. That gave way to concerns about drugs and crime and the fraying of the family structure, as 70 percent of black babies were being born to unmarried mothers and incarceration rates soared.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund hosted a 1985 panel discussion that called young black men "an endangered species," a label that stuck even as some black men were making strides toward the middle class and a new level of social acceptance.

In 1995, the Million Man March, spearheaded by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, drew hundreds of thousands of black men to the Mall in an unrivaled show of unity and concern for one another. The gathering seemed to signal a watershed moment of self-reflection.

Since the march, black men have met in thousands of groups to address their problems, reinforce their progress and understand their lives with greater clarity. Perhaps the latest, most dramatic evidence of this involvement is "The Covenant," a book charting a plan for black self-improvement that was an outgrowth of commentator Tavis Smiley's State of the Black Union forums. The book has been a No. 1 seller on the New York Times nonfiction paperback list.

"What we have seen in the last 10 years is increasing concern among successful black men in terms of trying to help other African American men succeed," observed Courtland Lee, a University of Maryland professor and former editor of the Journal of African American Men. "Even successful black men are victims of this crisis. They know they walk around with a target on their backs."

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Out of work

For black men, being poor has grown more perilous with time — especially for the young. The 1960s sociological classic "Tally's Corner" charted the lives of what it called "Negro streetcorner men" in the Shaw neighborhood of Northwest Washington, painting a portrait of a group hobbled by weak education, dead-end jobs and fracturing families. Over four decades, wages and opportunities for uneducated workers have diminished, while the ranks of men disconnected from much of society have grown.

The path to the corner is set early for some black men. While school achievement has been a growing concern for boys of most every ethnicity, the problem is most acute among black boys, who are far more likely to be left back, be assigned to special education, score poorly on standardized tests, be suspended from school or eventually drop out than any other demographic group, numerous studies show.

Once they leave school, nearly three-quarters of black men in their twenties are jobless or incarcerated, an unemployment rate much

higher than that of similarly situated white and Hispanic youth, according to a report from the Urban Institute.

"There has been a big change in what is thought of as normal in poor black communities," says John H. McWhorter, a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, which is hosting a conference on black men this month. "Back in the old days, there were always black men who were not interested in working. They were called corner men. But years ago, if you were a black man and you didn't work, it was a shame. Now, the shame is gone."

A black man is more than six times as likely as a white man to be slain. The trend is most stark among black men 14 to 24 years old: They were implicated in a quarter of the nation's homicides and accounted for 15 percent of the homicide victims in 2002, although they were just 1.2 percent of the population, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Also, black men are nine times as likely as white men to die from AIDS, and life expectancy for black men is 69.2 years — more than six years shorter than that of white men.

Trying to reverse these trends through a broad public policy strategy is at the heart of the Dellums Commission, named after former congressman Ronald Dellums (D-Calif.). The commission will issue its report later this year. "This is beyond a crisis," says Gail Christopher, a vice president at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, who is overseeing the commission's study of the problems affecting young men of color. "It is a catastrophe."

It doesn't always start as a catastrophe.

Growing up in New York City and San Jose, Rahsaan Ferguson, 27, remembers his father's mantra: "You are a black boy. That's two things you will always have against you."

Now, Ferguson understands that his father, an employee of the Santa Clara County transit system, was merely trying to prepare him for a harsh world. But in his young mind, his father's message was confusing — and a little disabling. "It kind of brings you down," he says. "I know it is supposed to make you strive harder. But when you hear that over and over, it makes you believe you are not supposed to succeed."

After being left back in third grade, Ferguson says, he lost confidence. As he continued to struggle in school, he worried about

failing, as he had been taught so many black men do. Ultimately, he stopped trying, dropped out of school, fathered a son, now 7, and fell into crime. First, it was a few stolen cars. After a while, he sold crack cocaine, eventually serving a four-month jail term after authorities confiscated more than three grams of the drug from an apartment he shared with his girlfriend. Now, Ferguson is struggling to find stability, earning \$10 an hour working for a sign company in one of the nation's most expensive areas.

"I can't help but think about the white kids I know. They were raised to think they are going to succeed and be better than everyone," Ferguson says.

The Rev. Elwood Gray, chaplain at the Patuxent Institute in Jessup and president of the National Coalition of Prison Ministries, has been working with inmates and ex-offenders for nearly 30 years. Many of those black men feel left behind and stigmatized by their behavior, he says, and as a result are sometimes difficult to reach when they leave prison. It's almost like they are in "an intensive-care unit," Gray says. "The approach must be holistic because they need employment, food, shelter and mental health care."

Racial profiling

The plight of poor, young black men has fueled some attitudes and practices that affect all black men. In a 2001 article defending racial profiling as a rational police tactic, journalist John Derbyshire wrote in the National Review Online: "A policeman who concentrates a disproportionate amount of his limited time and resources on young black men is going to uncover far more crimes — and therefore be far more successful in his career than one who biases his attention to, say, middle-aged Asian women."

These images not only shape how others see black men but also can affect how black men see themselves. Warren Simmons, 55, executive director of Brown University's Annenberg Institute for School Reform, recalls waiting in his car at a stoplight in downtown Washington and locking his doors when he spotted a black man approaching. Incredulous, the man began yelling at Simmons.

"For a moment, I found myself caught in a cultural quandary," Simmons says. "I'm a black man, and I know what it is like to have people respond to me with fear. Yet I did this. He assumed my response was to him as an individual, but it was directed to him as part of a larger group."

If these images distort the rich complexity of the lives of black men, they also have been embraced by some of the nation's most prominent icons of popular culture. A long, lucrative stream of music videos and movies extol the "thug life" fantasy of fast money, fast women and fast living.

Rapper 50 Cent has built his chart-busting, multimedia career on his being shot nine times and left for dead during his days as a drug dealer in Queens. Similarly, rapper, actor and pitchman Snoop Dogg has ridden music referring to his gang-life past, and his playful public persona as a would-be pimp, to fame.

In some ways, black men have always stood on the leading edge of popular culture, often through the very imagery that offstage or off-screen inspires fear and contempt. Minstrel shows, widely regarded as the nation's first form of mass entertainment, burst on the scene in the decades after the American Revolution. The shows most often featured white performers in blackface mocking aspects of black life.

While the wide-eyed parodies are widely condemned as racist, in their heyday they helped shape society's perception of African Americans. Similarly, some scholars say, popular music — including hip-hop — and sports play an outsized role in forming contemporary notions of black men.

"When you look at American popular culture, it is really driven by hip-hop, and young, African American men are the face of hip-hop," says S. Craig Watkins, a University of Texas researcher. "It speaks to the fear-fascination relationship the nation has with black men."

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Survivors

The nation's most accomplished black men usually have a story to tell about what they overcame, who influenced them, how they survived.

Edward T. Welburn, chief of global design at General Motors Corp., says his interest in cars was stoked by observing his father operate a West Philadelphia auto repair service.

Guidance counselors at John B. Slaughter's high school in Topeka, Kan., laughed aloud, Slaughter said, when he told them he wanted to be an engineer. They had never heard of a black engineer, and

they told Slaughter he should pursue a trade. Slaughter ignored them and graduated from Kansas State University in 1956 with a degree in electrical engineering, launching a career that took him to the helms of the National Science Foundation, the University of Maryland and Occidental College in Los Angeles.

Colin L. Powell recalls that he had only a 78 average at Morris High School in the Bronx and was considered a late bloomer at City College of New York, but the Army's robust affirmative-action program accelerated his rise through the ranks.

"It doesn't bother me if people say I made it with affirmative action," says Powell, who joined the Army ROTC in 1954, just six years after President Harry S. Truman ended segregation in the armed forces, and eventually became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "All that matters is what you do afterwards. When I heard complaints, I'd say: 'It doesn't matter if it was affirmative action or not. I got it, you didn't.' "

Powell, who is now active in an array of mentoring programs, offers his own history to young black men who worry about the limitations others may place on them. Your achievements, he tells them, need not be accompanied by apology.

"Of course you're offended," he says. But "you can choke with something in your craw. I've seen too many people grind themselves to death worrying about what other people say about them. Frankly, we don't have time for that."

And yet even among the highest achievers, doubts sometimes intrude.

Curtis Symonds, 50, was one of the youngest African Americans to run a cable TV business in the nation in the early 1980s. He eventually wound up at Black Entertainment Television, where he helped expand the reach of the cable network from 18 million to 70 million homes over 14 years.

He left BET a multimillionaire and became chief operating officer of the Women's National Basketball Association's Washington Mystics. He also dreamed of opening Hoop Magic, a \$7 million, 65,000-square-foot gym in Chantilly.

Despite his wealth and business experience, the first five or six banks he talked to did not want to touch his idea — a reluctance that, rightly or wrongly, Symonds laid to the fact that he is a black

man. "A lot of those bankers could not see my dream," he says. "All they could see is this black guy who wanted to borrow X millions of dollars."

Symonds got his financing and opened his gym.

Several years ago, Franklin D. Gilliam Jr., a political scientist at UCLA, set out to understand more deeply the perceptions people have of black men. He chose a provocative topic for his experiment: crime. In his test, he showed groups of viewers a mock newscast, which included a short account of a robbery at an automated teller machine during which the victim was killed.

Gilliam manipulated the image of the "suspect" in the newscast, sometimes depicting him as black, sometimes as white and other times not at all. Afterward, the participants were asked to identify the suspect's race. Most of the viewers accurately recalled whether a black or white face was shown. But 60 percent of those shown no image remembered seeing one, and an overwhelming majority of those said they saw a black face. In fact, they had not seen a face at all. To Gilliam, that meant that when people saw crime, they often expected a black man to be linked to it — not necessarily because of blind racism but because of the images they had consumed their entire lives.

He sees evidence of that in his own life. As a vice chancellor, he is the highest-ranking black man on UCLA's campus. "Within 200 yards of my office, people genuflect when they see me," he says with a laugh. But a few blocks away on the street in Westwood, his colleagues often walk right by him, particularly when he is dressed casually.

"All they see," he says, "is a black male."

Staff writers Hamil R. Harris and Robert E. Pierre contributed to this report.

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