

RACE AT WORK

Realities of Race and Criminal Record in the NYC Job Market

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Racial progress since the 1960s has led some researchers and policy makers to proclaim the problem of discrimination solved. Despite low rates of employment among blacks compared to whites, many people are now skeptical that discrimination remains a significant cause of racial inequality in the U.S. labor market. Public opinion polls indicate that Americans today are much less likely to view discrimination as a major problem as were their counterparts in the 1970s. In fact, according to a recent Gallup poll, more than three-quarters of the general public believe that blacks are treated the same as whites in society.

In part, white Americans have turned their attention away from the problems of discrimination because it is difficult to observe. Contemporary forms of discrimination are often subtle and covert, making it difficult for the average observer to recognize their effects. In the present study, we adopt an experimental audit approach to more explicitly identify patterns of discrimination in the low-wage labor market of New York City. By using matched teams of individuals to apply for real entry-level jobs, it becomes possible to directly measure the extent to which race/ethnicity—in the absence of other disqualifying characteristics—reduce employment opportunities among equally qualified applicants.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research design involved sending matched teams of young men (called testers) to apply for 1470 real entry-level jobs throughout New York City over ten months in 2004. The testers were well-spoken young men, aged 22 to 26; most were college-educated, between 5 feet 10 inches and 6 feet in height, recruited in and around New York City. They were chosen on the basis of their similar verbal skills, interactional styles and physical attractiveness. Additionally, testers went through a common training program to ensure uniform style of self presentation in job interviews. Testers were assigned matched fictitious resumes representing comparable profiles with respect to educational attainment, quality of high school, work experience, and neighborhood of residence. Testers presented themselves as high school graduates with steady work experience in entry-level jobs. In some conditions, testers presented additional evidence of a felony conviction. [1]

RESULTS

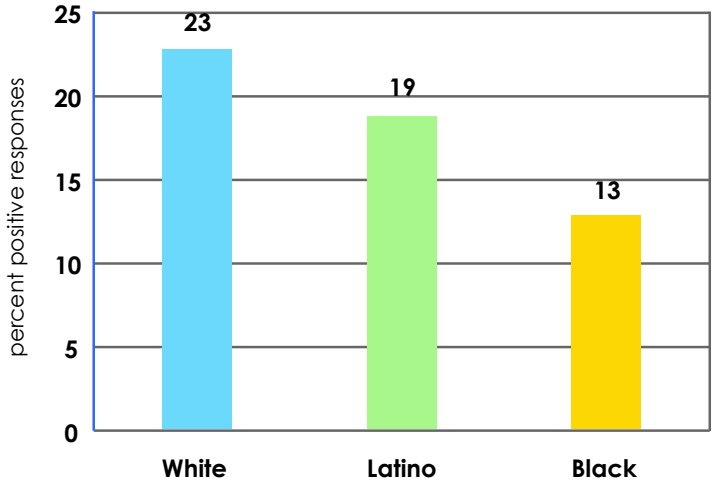
Our first set of results come from the three-person team in which a white, Hispanic, and black tester applied to the same set of employers presenting identical qualifications. For each set of visits, we recorded whether testers were offered the job on the spot, or, at some later point, called back for a second interview (which we refer to together as "positive responses.") As we can see in Figure 1, the proportion of positive responses depends strongly on the race of the job applicant. This comparison demonstrates a strong racial hierarchy, with whites in the

[1] In this report, we study racial and ethnic discrimination using data from two teams of testers. A total of 6 teams (and 13 testers) were included in this study, allowing us to study various combinations of race, criminal background, and educational attainment. The results from the other teams will be discussed in a companion paper.

lead, followed by Latinos, with blacks trailing far behind. These outcomes suggest that blacks are only slightly more than half as likely to receive consideration by employers relative to equally qualified white applicants. Latinos also pay a penalty for minority status, but they are clearly preferred relative to their black counterparts.

Beyond these numerical outcomes, the experiences reported by testers in the course of their interviews with employers were also revealing of the racial dynamics at work. In some cases, our minority testers received clear feedback that they were not welcome or appropriate for a particular work environment. On one occasion, for example, Dathan, an African American tester, reports his experience applying for a position at an upscale jewelry store's booth at a job fair. Waiting for the store representative to finish her conversation with another applicant, he watches her giggling with the blond female

Figure 1. Call-Backs or Job Offers by Race / Ethnicity



The total number of employers audited by this team = 252. Positive response rates for Whites and Latinos are signiflcantly different from Blacks (p<.05). Response rates for Latinos are marginally significantly different from Whites (p=.07).

applicant in front of him. Finally it's Dathan's turn to speak with the representative. He reports the following interaction:

"[When the rep saw me] her smiley face turned into a serious business face, and I said 'Hi, I'm interested in applying for a position at [your store].' She asked, 'To do what?' I said, 'I have customer service experience and sales experience.'

She said: 'I haven't been with [company X] for too long, but I imagine they want [company X] type of people, who can represent [company X]... '"

In this 30 second interaction, the rep had apparently been able to size up Dathan's potential and had decided that he was not "company X type of people." In the rep's view, the employer's status – a prestigious company in a prestigious retail trade – appeared to rule out the possibility of hiring a young black male.

These interactions in which race plays a role provide a small window into the process by which employers regard young African Americans as unsuitable employees. Most commonly, however, stereotyping and discrimination remain invisible to the job applicant. In fact, despite certain fairly striking examples of racial dynamics in testers' interactions with employers, the vast majority of disparate treatment occurred with little or no signs of trouble.

In one case, for example, the three test partners reported experiences that, in the absence of direct comparisons, would have revealed no evidence of discrimination. In recording his experience applying for this retail sales position, Joe, one of our African American testers, reports: *"[The employer] said the position was just filled and that she would be calling people in for an interview if the person doesn't work out."* Josue, his Latino test partner, was told something very similar: *"She*

informed me that the position was already filled, but did not know if the hired employee would work out. She told me to leave my resume with her." By contrast, when Simon, their white tester, applied last, his experience was notably different: "*...I asked what the hiring process was—if they're taking applications now, interviewing, etc. She looked at my application. 'You can start immediately?' Yes. 'Can you start tomorrow?' Yes. '10 a.m.' She was very friendly and introduced me to another woman (white, 28) at the cash register who will be training me."*

When evaluated individually, these interactions would not have raised any concern. All three testers were asked about their availability and about their sales experience. The employer appeared willing to consider each of them. But in the final analysis, it was the white applicant who walked out with the job. Incidents such as these illustrate the ease with which contemporary acts of discrimination can remain completely undetected. Without a white partner following in their footsteps, Joe and Josue would have had no indication of the degree to which their experiences, in cases like these, were being shaped by racial considerations. And yet, as the results of the study show, race remains highly consequential in determining the opportunities available for low wage work.

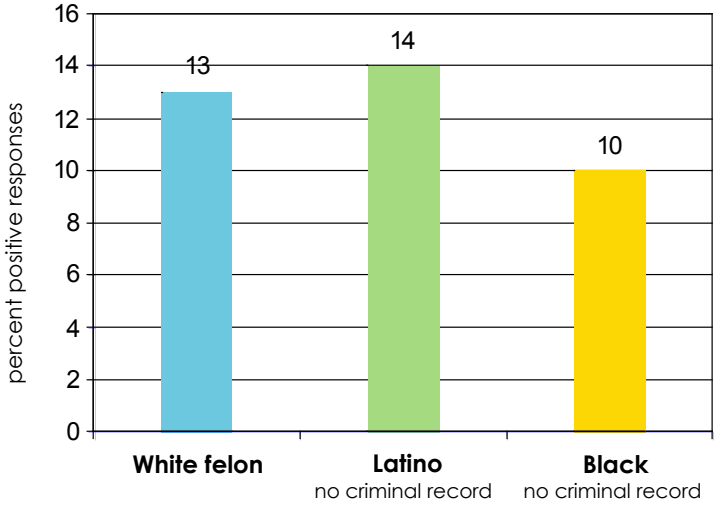
In a second set of analyses, we compare the magnitude of race/ethnic discrimination to another prevalent form of stigma among low-wage workers. Recent political discussions and media coverage have highlighted the plight of an increasing number of inmates being released from prison each year. We know that these men face substantial difficulties in securing employment as a result of their criminal background. Comparing the outcome of this group to minorities with no criminal background allows us to assess the relative magnitudes of criminal stigma and minority status.

Figure 2 shows the results from this second three-person team in which the white tester now presents evidence of a felony conviction. His test partners, black and Latino young men, present no criminal background. As we can see in this figure, the rate of positive responses for the white tester are substantially diminished relative to the white tester with no criminal background (from Figure 1). Nevertheless, this white applicant with a felony conviction appears to do just as well, if not better, than his black counterpart with no criminal background. These results suggest that employers view minority job applicants as essentially equivalent to whites just out of prison.

Despite the fact that these applicants presented equivalent credentials and applied for exactly the same jobs, race appears to overtake all else in determining employment opportunities.

Calibrating the magnitude of the race effects to the effects

Figure 2. Call-Backs or Job Offers by Race and Criminal Record



The total number of employers audited by this team = 255. Positive response rates for White felons are not significantly different from Latinos and Blacks. Response rates for Latinos are marginally significantly different from Blacks (p=.05).

of a felony conviction presents a disturbing picture. Blacks remain at the very end of the hiring queue, even in relation to (white) applicants who have just been released from prison. The results here point to the striking persistence of race in the allocation of employment opportunities. Employers faced with large numbers of applicants and little time to evaluate them seem to view race as an adequate means by which to weed out undesirable applicants upon first review.

As just one example, the following case records this team's experience applying for a position at a local auto dealership. Joe, the black tester, applied first and was informed at the outset that the only available positions were for those with direct auto sales experience. When Josue, his Latino partner, applied, the lack of direct auto sales experience was less of a problem. Josue reports: *"He asked me if I had any customer service experience and I said not really.... He then told me that he wanted to get rid of a few bad apples who were not performing well. He asked me when I could start...."* Josue was told to wait for a call back on Monday. Keith, their white ex-felon test partner, was first given a stern lecture regarding his criminal background. *"I have no problem with your conviction, it doesn't bother me. But if I find out money is missing or you're not clean or not showing up on time I have no problem ending the relationship."* Despite the employer's concerns, and despite Keith having no more sales experience than his test partners, Keith was offered the job on the spot.

This example illustrates the ways in which race can trump even known criminality in certain cases. Indeed, far from racial considerations in employment being a thing of the past, we see that they are alive and well and actively shaping the opportunities available to members of different racial/ethnic groups.

RACE-CODED CHANNELING

The basic outcome of "positive responses" measured in this study quantifies the employers' willingness to consider each applicant type for a job. But the simple distinction between getting a job or not captures only one piece of the employment puzzle. In many cases employers are hiring for more than one position at the same time. Examining how employers match applicants to job types can be further revealing of the assumptions employers hold about various groups of workers.

The testers' narratives, reporting their experiences at the conclusion of each audit, provide vivid illustrations of the kinds of the channeling that takes place. In an audit of a retail clothing company, for example, one of our Hispanic testers, Josue, encounters the following:

Josue describes the various young white 20-something women running the place. One of the women interviews him and asks about past work experience. She asks him what job he's applying for—"I told her sales associate.... [The last serious job listed on Josue's resume was as a sales assistant at a sporting goods store].

She then told me that there was a stock position and asked if I would be interested in that."

Josue ended up getting the stocker job, and was asked to start the next day.

In another case, one of our black testers, Zuri, applied for a sales position at a lighting store. He describes the following interaction:

When she asked what position I was looking for I said I was open, but that since they were looking for a salesperson I would be interested in that. She smiled, put her head in her hand and her elbow on the table and said, "I need a stock boy. Can you do stock boy?"

Zuri's white and Hispanic test

partners, by contrast, were each able to apply for the advertised sales position.

The job applications of Josue and Zuri are both coded as "positive responses" in the initial analyses. Indeed, our key concern is about access to employment of any kind. But this general focus masks some of the racial biases at play. Indeed, the experience of channeling was not limited to a handful of cases. A more systematic analysis of the testers' experiences provides support for these anecdotal experiences. A total of 96 cases of channeling were recorded by the testers. [2] These cases were then individually coded as downward channeling, upward channeling, lateral channeling, or unknown, by comparing the original job title to the suggested job type. Downward channeling is defined as (1) a move from a job involving contact with customers to a job without (e.g., server to busboy); (2) a move from a white collar position to a manual position (e.g., from dispatcher to driver); or (3) a move in which hierarchy can be clearly discerned (e.g., manager to server). Upward channeling is defined as a move in the opposite direction. We focus on these two types of channeling for our current analysis. Instances of channeling in which all members of the team were channeled similarly are eliminated (e.g., the original job was filled and all subsequent job applicants were invited to apply for a different position).

The analysis of these cases reveals fairly striking patterns of racial categorization. Black applicants were channeled into lower positions in 10 cases

2 In the present study, when an ad listed more than one job opening, members of the audit team would agree upon which job they would apply for. Testers were instructed to communicate their interest the target job, but to express openness to any position the employer may have available. After each visit, testers recorded whether or not they were encouraged to apply for a different position than the one they originally inquired about.

and never channeled upwards, Hispanics were channeled down in 4 cases and never channeled upwards, whereas whites experienced downward channeling in only 4 cases, and only when showing a criminal record (see Table 1).

A substantial number of these cases were restaurant jobs in which the tester applied for a position as server but was instead channeled into a position as busboy or dishwasher. Almost all were cases in which the original position required extensive customer contact while the suggested position did not (e.g., salesperson to stocker). While in some cases the limited work experiences reflected on our testers' resumes warranted movement into a lower-level position, the differential incidence by race suggests that these decisions were not based on qualifications alone.

In fact, a surprising degree of channeling among our white testers took place in the opposite direction. In at least five cases, white testers were encouraged to apply for jobs that were of a higher-level or required more customer contact than the initial position they inquired about. In one case, for example, a white tester applied for a position as a cleaner but was instead encouraged to apply for a clerical position. In another case the tester requested an application for the dishwasher position, but was instead channeled into applying for a job as waitstaff. In at least one case, a White tester was encouraged to apply for a management position, despite his paltry level of work experience.

It is not the case, then, that the resumes of testers in this study prevented them from consideration in a wide range of jobs, or left them on the borderline between job classes. In fact, the testers' resumes were constructed so that they would appear highly competitive for the kinds of low-wage jobs we were targeting. Rather, the testers'

Table 1. Job Channeling by Race, Ethnicity, & Criminal Background

Original Job Title		Suggested Job
Blacks channeled down		
Waiter	→	Busboy
Server	→	Busser
Manager / Assistant Manager	→	Entry fast food position
Server	→	Busboy/Runner
Server	→	Busser
Retail Salesperson	→	Maintenance
Sales	→	not specified (a)
Sales	→	Stockboy
Promoter	→	Delivery
Server	→	Phone orders
Hispanics channeled down		
Waitstaff	→	Delivery person
Server	→	Runner
Server	→	Delivery person
Salesperson	→	Stock person
Whites with record channeled down		
Waitstaff	→	Busser/food runner
Waitstaff	→	Busser
Waiter	→	Dishwasher, counter
Server	→	Busser/food runner
Whites (no record) channeled up		
Receptionist	→	Company
	→	Supervisor
Whites (with record) channeled up		
Line Cook	→	Waistaff
Mover	→	Office / Telesales
Dishwasher	→	Waitstaff
Driver	→	Auto detailing

(a) employer told tester: "sales might not be right for you..."

race or ethnicity appears to be associated with differential levels of skill, competence, or suitability for particular kinds of work. The critical relevance of customer contact in the channeling decisions likewise suggests that employers have assumptions about what their clients expect/prefer in the appearance of those serving them.

CONCLUSION

In contrast to public opinion that assumes little influence of discrimination on labor market inequality, we find that black job applicants are only two-thirds as successful as equally qualified Latinos, and little more than half as successful as equally qualified whites. Indeed, black job seekers fare no better than white men just released from prison. Discrimination continues to represent a major barrier to economic self-sufficiency for those at the low end of the labor market hierarchy. Blacks, and to a lesser extent Latinos, are routinely passed over in favor of whites for the most basic kinds of low-wage work. Indeed, discrimination has not been eliminated in the post-civil rights period as some contend, but remains a vital component of a complex pattern of racial inequality.

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