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# 9 Who Escapes? The Relation of Churchgoing and Other Background Factors to the Socioeconomic Performance of Black Male Youths from Inner-City Tracts

Richard B. Freeman

## 9.1 Introduction

The 1970s witnessed severe economic plight among inner-city black youths that went beyond the worst predictions of even pessimistic social scientists. Rates of unemployment among young black men rose to unprecedented levels; their labor-force participation rates fell; and as a consequence their ratio of employment to population plummeted to extraordinarily low levels. In 1980, even before the major recession of 1982–83, the unemployment rate stood at 39 percent for black men 16 to 19 years of age and at 24 percent for black men 20 to 24; the comparable rates for young white men in the same age groups were 16 percent and 11 percent, respectively. Civilian labor-force participation rates in the same year were 32, 56, and 79 percent, respectively, for black men aged 16 to 17, 18 to 19, and 20 to 24; they were 54, 74, and 87 percent, respectively, for white men in the same age brackets.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1970s, crime rates rose among black youths and problems of drug addiction and alcoholism worsened. Many observers, in both the academic community and the black community, expressed serious concern about the potential loss to the labor force and to the broader society of a large part of an entire generation of youths in the inner city.

Although the number of youths who lacked jobs was unprecedented, a significant number still managed to surmount the socioeconomic problems facing them to advance in the society. Some did well in high school and went on to college. Some obtained work and held down regular, well-paying jobs in the mainstream economy. Some escaped the often pathological environment of inner-city slums.

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What were the characteristics of these youths? How important were personal and family factors in their overcoming the burden of being raised in the worst slums in the country? What determines “who escapes”?

This paper examines these questions with data from the 1979–80 NBER-Mathematica Survey of Inner-City Black Youth, and from the 1979–81 National Longitudinal Surveys of young men (NLS). The NBER survey had the advantage of gathering information on youths’ allocation of time in a day and on socially deviant behavior (such as crime and drug use), in addition to standard school and work questions. The NLS data, on the other hand, permit comparisons of young blacks and whites not possible with the NBER data.

The primary finding of this study is that the measured backgrounds of inner-city youths, in particular their churchgoing behavior and the welfare status of their families, provide remarkably good predictions about “who escapes.” There is also some indication that at least part of the relationship between background and achievement among young black men represents a “true” causal link rather than a sorting of youths between “good” and “bad” kids.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section 9.2 describes the outcome and background variables analyzed, in particular the NBER survey data on the allocation of time of inner-city black youths. Section 9.3 presents the results of least-squares regressions linking the outcome variables to various measures of the youths’ background including churchgoing. Section 9.4 probes the possible ways in which churchgoing influences behavior, particularly, whether churchgoing operates through (or stands for) religious (and other) attitudes and general market factors. Section 9.5 discusses the possible causal significance of the estimated links, that is, whether the estimates reflect the “true” impact of the independent variables or whether they reflect sorting or selectivity of youths by background and outcome; and the last section summarizes the results of the study and presents some conclusions.

## **9.2 Outcome and Background Variables**

The first step in evaluating the socioeconomic success of inner-city black and other youths is to develop a set of outcome variables relevant to their position in life. Commonly used variables, such as school and work activity questions in the Current Population Survey (CPS), though useful, are far from adequate in judging the status of youth. Classifications like “out of the labor force” or “unemployed” provide little information on the actual activities of youth: they tell us what youths are not doing with their time, rather than what they are doing.<sup>2</sup> Even when youths report themselves employed at a given wage, the infor-

mation is potentially less valuable than comparable information for adults because of the high mobility and frequent changes in status early in the work life.

Accordingly, this paper will examine several unconventional measures of what youths do—namely, two measures of their allocation of time and several measures of socially deviant activity—as well as some standard outcome variables.

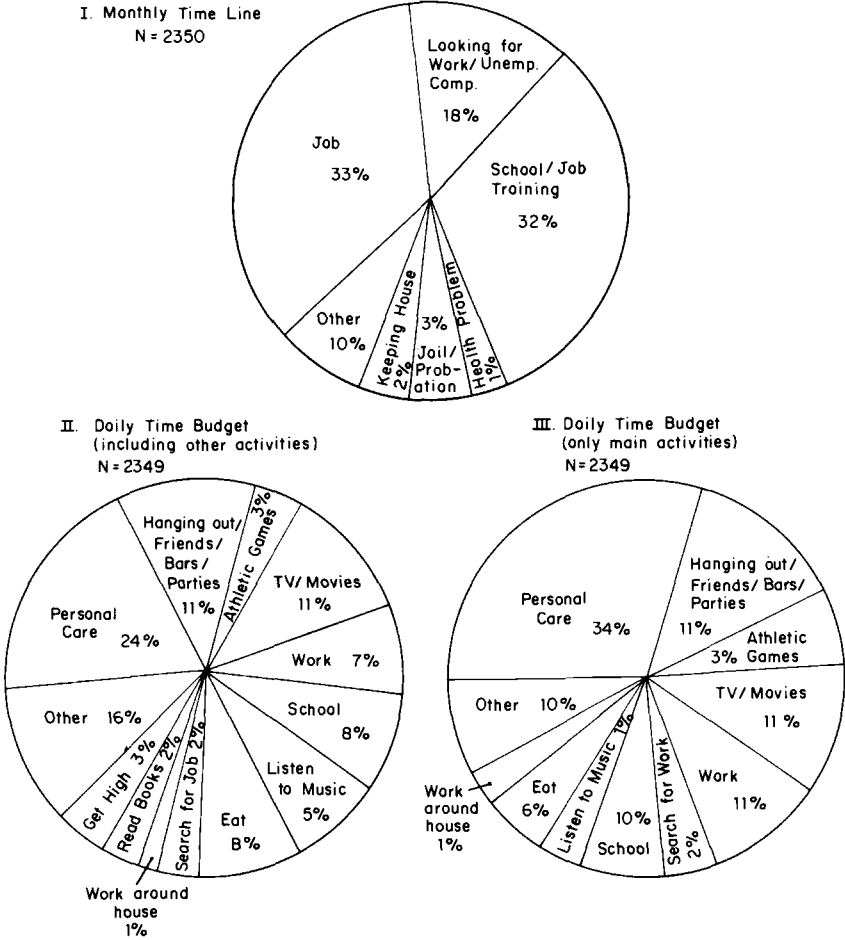
### 9.2.1 Time Allocation

Since, in principle, the allocation of a youths' time provides the most complete measure of his behavior, particular attention will be paid to the daily activity and monthly time-line questions in the NBER survey. The daily activity module of the questionnaire asked youths what their *main* and *other* activities were in a 24-hour weekday.<sup>3</sup> Responses to this question provide us with our best picture of what out-of-school nonemployed youths are doing with themselves. In the monthly time-line question the principal activity of youths in each month over the past year was organized on a monthly basis.<sup>4</sup> Responses to this question provide us with our best picture of the changing activities of youth over time.

Figure 9.1 summarizes the responses to the two time allocation questions for all youths, for youths out of school at the time of the survey, and for nonemployed out-of-school youths. Taking the average allocation of months first, parts 1 of panels A, B, and C show the division of main activities among employment, school, looking for work, and other activities for the sample as a whole. One-third of the months were spent at work, just about a third were spent in school or in training programs, and just over a third were spent in other activities, primarily looking for work. For the out-of-school youths (panel B) only 42 percent of months were spent at work and 9 percent at school or in training, leaving half of their time in other activities. Most disturbing of all, those out of school and not employed at the time of the survey (panel C) spent only 20 percent of their months in the past year at work and 35 percent in a fruitless search for work.

The daily time allocation questions asked youths their main activity during a 24-hour weekday and, also, as noted, other activities they did at the same time. There are several ways in which one might analyze the dual use of time. For descriptive purposes I have simply recorded allocation of time across main activities and supplementary activities in parts 2 of the panels and allocation of time across main activities only in parts 3 of the panels. Both sets of figures show that, on a daily basis, proportionately less time is spent on earning or learning or on searching for a job than was indicated in the monthly time line. This is because these activities, although they may be the major activity in

A: All Inner-City Male Youths



**Fig. 9.1** The Activities of Inner-City Black Male Youths in a Typical Day

a month, do not take up all of the youths' time. For the out-of-school, nonemployed youths, no more than two hours a day can be classified as likely to be socially productive. The major activities, outside of "personal care," are "hanging out/talking with friends" and "watching TV/movies." Although from one perspective these are consumption activities, the youth are not the idle rich. They are in the part of their life cycle where investments in human capital, either in school or on the job, are traditionally made for long-term economic advancement.

B: Out of School Male Youths

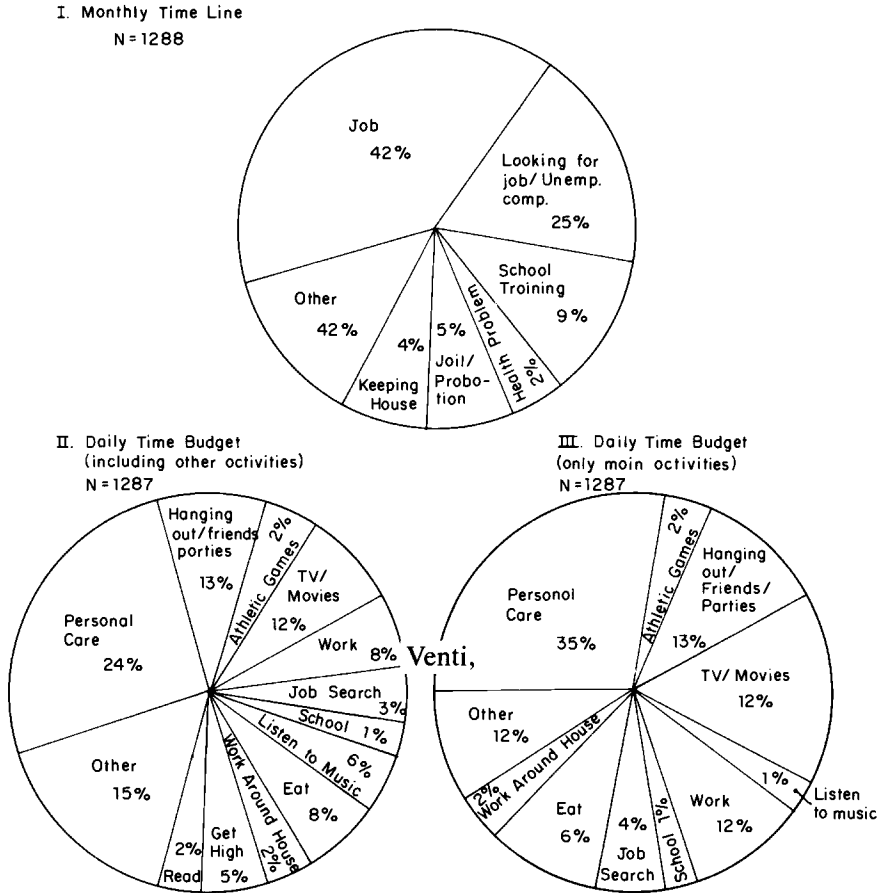


Fig. 9.1 (continued)

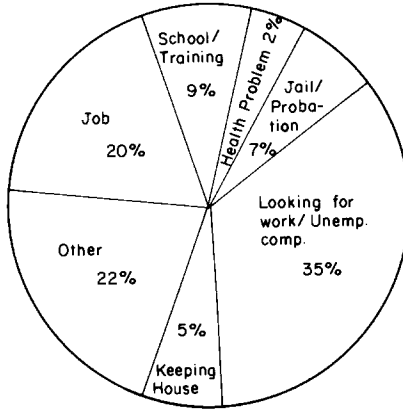
9.2.2 Other Outcome Measures

Table 9.1 records the mean values of some standard measures of socioeconomic outcomes, such as unemployment and wages, and of selected measures of socially deviant behavior, notably criminal activity and drug and excessive alcohol usage, in the NBER data on inner-city black male youths and, where available, in the NLS data on black and white young men nationwide.

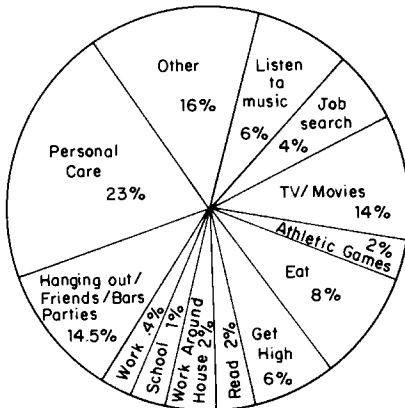
The data on labor-force status show, as one might expect, that the NBER youths are in a markedly worse position in the job market than both all black youths and all white youths. Thirty-eight percent of the

C: Out of School and Not Employed Male Youths

I. Monthly Time Line  
N = 681



II. Daily Time Budget  
(including other activities)  
N = 675



III. Daily Time Budget  
(only main activities)  
N = 675

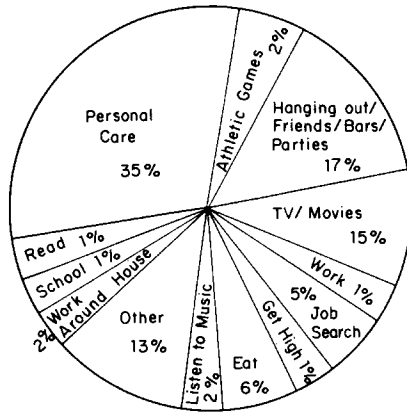


Fig. 9.1 (continued)

NBER sample were employed in the survey week, and only 48 percent of the out-of-school subsample were employed. Consistent with studies based on CPS data (for example, Freeman and Medoff 1982), the NBER data show that the low percentage of inner-city black youths who work is due as much to low labor-force participation as to high unemployment. By contrast, the wage figures for 1979–80 indicate that their wages differed only modestly from the wages paid other youths in 1980, with much of the observed difference due to the difference in periods

**Table 9.1 The Standard Socioeconomic Measures of Youth Activity**

Activity	All Youths			Out-of-School Youths			Out-of-School, Nonemployed Youths		
	NBER Blacks	NLS Blacks	NLS Whites	NBER Blacks	NLS Blacks	NLS Whites	NBER Blacks	NLS Blacks	NLS Whites
Labor-force/ school status									
1. Percentage in school	.451	.186	.155	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Percentage in labor force	.669	.735	.797	.804	.903	.942	.627	.749	.763
3. Percentage of labor force unemployed	.430	.320	.196	.410	.320	.196	—	—	—
4. Percentage of total employed	.382	.500	.640	.479	.614	.758	—	—	—
5. Wage rate	\$3.97	\$4.22	\$4.45	\$4.26	\$4.29	\$4.53	\$4.14	\$3.94	\$4.04

**Table 9.1** (continued)

Activity	All Youths			Out-of-School Youths			Out-of-School, Nonemployed Youths		
	NBER Blacks	NLS Blacks	NLS Whites	NBER Blacks	NLS Blacks	NLS Whites	NBER Blacks	NLS Blacks	NLS Whites
<b>Social Deviance</b>									
6. Involved in any crimes in the past 12 months (NBER) <sup>a</sup>	12%	21%	16%	29%	23%	18%	32%	32%	
7. Drugs	21%	14%	21%	26%	16%	23%	27%	15%	25%
8. Drink alcohol every day or almost every day (NBER) <sup>b</sup>	16%	11%	28%	20%	12%	31%	22%	11%	30%
<b>Annual Activity</b>									
9. Weeks worked <sup>c</sup>	21	26	34	26	29	37	13	15	22
10. Annual Income	\$4,025	\$3,014	\$4,973	\$5,374	\$3,591	\$5,657	\$3,409	\$1,265	\$2,521
11. Weekly Consumption Expenditures	\$85	—	—	\$110	—	—	\$86	—	—

Source: The NBER survey and the NLS.

Note: Sample sizes varied, depending on the activity and subsample examined. Sample sizes ranged as follows: (1) *all youths*, NBER, 1,161–2,358; NLS blacks, 872–1,332; NLS whites, 2,410–3,629; (2) *out-of-school*, NBER, 928–1,295; NLS blacks, 824–1,084; NLS whites, 2,262–3,067; and (3) *out-of-school, nonemployed*, NBER, 362–681; NLS blacks, 210–331; NLS whites, 427–596.

<sup>a</sup>NLS figures are based on the survey question, “Amount of total income in past year from illegal activities?”

<sup>b</sup>NLS data were available only for those younger than age 18. Also, the figures include those who drank at least once a week, as opposed to at least once a day, as in the NBER survey.

<sup>c</sup>NBER figures were calculated by taking the months worked multiplied by 4.

covered (late 1979 to early 1980 in the NBER sample versus late 1980 in the NLS sample).

Perhaps the most surprising statistics in the table are those on socially deviant behavior. Although the youths in the NBER survey show considerably high levels of illegal activity, drug use, and drinking, both black and white youths in the NLS exhibit levels just as high or even higher.<sup>5</sup> Some of this similarity is explicable (whites have more money to spend on drugs) but other differences are hard to understand and may reflect inexplicable self-reporting biases. Some studies of self-reporting of socially deviant activities find an underestimate by black youths (Hindelang, Hirschi, and Weis 1981), which might explain the results for the NBER sample but not the high proportions of crime reported by the NLS sample.

Finally, the evidence on income and work over the year shows some differences and similarities among the groups. For all youths, annual incomes are relatively similar, and the incomes are close to the weekly consumption expenditures reported in the NBER survey ( $\$4025 \approx 85 \times 52$ ). For all youths out of school and not employed, the main difference is between blacks and whites in the NLS, while the blacks in the NBER survey have earnings comparable to those of the NLS whites. For all youths out of school, the lack of employment among blacks in both the NBER survey and the NLS produces lower incomes than those of white youths in the NLS.

In judging the earnings and consumption data it is important to remember that the vast majority of the black youths in the NBER sample were living with their parent(s), so that their housing and at least some of their food and clothing costs were presumably paid for by the parent. From this perspective, the incomes and spending are of a magnitude comparable to that of college students (ignoring tuition charges). The problem of black youths is therefore less one of low income as one of unproductive allocation of time, as indicated earlier in figure 9.1

### 9.2.3 Measures of Background

Most studies of the impact of background factors on socioeconomic achievement focus on the education or occupation of the individuals' parents and on whether they grew up in a one-parent (female-headed) or two-parent family. Some look at family income. Others look at related measures of the position of the family: whether the family is on welfare or resides in a public housing project.<sup>6</sup> The NBER survey supplements these standard variables with information on two other background characteristics that may be particularly influential in the lives of poor inner-city youths: whether other members of the family are engaged in productive activity, notably working;<sup>7</sup> and whether the youth is involved with potentially supportive social institutions, in par-

ticular, organized religion in the form of the church. Churchgoing differs from the usual measures of family background because it reflects the individual's relation to a broader social institution.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, and because of the importance of the black church in the black community,<sup>9</sup> I will pay particular attention in this study to the impact of church going on the achievement of black youths.

Table 9.2 records the mean levels of the various background variables of interest in the NBER and NLS samples. By virtually all of the measures, the ordering of the groups of youths is the same: The inner-city black youths have the most disadvantaged background; the black youths in the NLS are at a somewhat lesser disadvantage; and the white youths in the NLS have the most advantaged background. For example, only 43 percent of the youths in the inner-city sample reported living with both parents at age 14, whereas the comparable figure for black youths in the NLS is 58 percent, and for white youths in the NLS, 84 percent. Nearly a third of the NBER group resided in public housing projects, whereas only 10 percent of all black youths and only 1 percent of all white youths in the NLS lived in public housing. Churchgoing follows a similar pattern, with proportionately more inner-city youths never attending church and fewer attending once a week or more than other youths. In short, there is no doubt that by these measures of background, the inner-city youths in the NBER survey were the most disadvantaged, and far more so than the average black youth.

The next question is: Do the background variables, particularly churchgoing, affect the outcomes described earlier?

### **9.3 The Impact of Background**

To determine whether or not background factors are important determinants of which young inner-city blacks escape from the pathologies endemic to inner-city slums, I estimated least-squares regressions linking the outcome variables to the background variables. It is important to recognize that such regressions do not tell us whether background factors cause outcomes or whether good (bad) background and good (bad) outcomes go together for other reasons, such as by sorting heterogeneous persons and families. In other words, the regression results do not imply that changes in a background variable will cause changes in an outcome. To draw such an inference requires both a structural model of causality and a treatment of possible sorting and other noncausal interpretations of the data. Least-squares regressions are, however, an essential first step toward accomplishing a more sophisticated analysis of the data.

**Table 9.2** The Proportions of Youths with Various Background Characteristics in the NBER and NLS Samples

Background Characteristic	NBER Blacks	NLS	
		Blacks	Whites
Both Parents Present at Age 14	.43	.58	.84
Men in Household	.28	.51	.69
Household Members Working or in School	.41	.56	.71
Family on Welfare	.45	—	—
Family in Public Housing Project	.32	.10	.01
Attendance at Church			
not at all	.40	.19	.24
several times a year	.27	.23	.29
once a month	.09	.11	.09
2 or 3 times a month	.09	.17	.10
once a week	.11	.21	.20
more than once a week	.05	.09	.08
Part of Church Group	.18	—	—

*Note:* Sample sizes differ depending on the number of respondents who answered the question. In the NBER survey, the sample sizes ranged from 2,170 to 2,358; in the NLS, the sample sizes ranged from 3,213 to 3,629 for whites and from 1,174 to 1,332 for blacks.

Because none of the background variables is categorical, the technique for measuring the responses can affect the results (see Grether 1974). If the variable is placed on a numeric scale (6 = highest response, 1 = lowest, and so on), monotonic transformations can, under some circumstances, alter regression results significantly. If the variable is entered as a set of dummy variables taking a value of one if the response is in the category and zero otherwise, the regression may yield a number of confusing coefficients. What I have done is to transform the categorical variables into Z-scores, on the assumption that they reflect an underlying normal distribution.<sup>10</sup> I use these Z-scores for the churchgoing variable in this section and for churchgoing and several other variables in section 9.4.

### 9.3.1 Time Allocation

Table 9.3 summarizes the results of regressions linking the percentage of daily time and the percentage of months spent on “socially productive” as opposed to “socially nonproductive” activities. In the daily calculations “productive time” includes the following activities: working, searching for work, traveling to work, going to school, doing housework, and reading. “Nonproductive time” includes “hanging out, playing games, watching TV/movies, going to parties, listening to music, and getting high.” In the monthly calculations, productive time includes

months spent on a job, in training, or in school, and nonproductive time includes months spent in jail, unemployed, and so forth.

The calculations reveal powerful and statistically significant effects of two of the background variables on youths' allocation of time. On the positive side, churchgoing invariably raises the amount of time a youth spends on productive activity, while on the negative side, coming from a family on welfare invariably reduces the amount of time spent on productive activity. The other background variables have more mixed influences on youths' time allocation, with the proportion of men in the household generally having a negative impact on time allocation, while the proportion of household members who work has in several cases a positive effect, due (as we shall see) in large measure to its impact on work activity.

Differences in time allocation between productive and nonproductive activities reflect specific outcomes, such as committing illegal acts, going to school, working, and so forth. By examining the effect of churchgoing and of other variables on specific outcomes, we will have a better picture of the routes by which the variables operate and some insight into their possible causal significance. Accordingly, I estimated the relationship between the various background variables and socially deviant activities, school-going, and, for out-of-school youths, labor market activity.

Table 9.4 presents the estimated coefficients, standard errors, and percentage effects of churchgoing on the various outcomes. The most salient result is that churchgoing has a powerful negative impact on socially deviant activity and a positive impact on school attendance, but only a modest positive impact on employment or time worked and relatively little impact on wage rates or annual income. The pattern of results is sufficiently comparable across the NBER and NLS samples to give us considerable confidence in these results. It suggests that the major effect of churchgoing is to influence or reinforce the youth's decision to allot his time to activities having a potential future reward without affecting his immediate labor market position. By increasing the time youths spend in school, churchgoing will ultimately raise their earnings and employment levels; but it does not have a strong effect on the employment and earnings of youths currently out of school.

Table 9.5 summarizes the estimated effects of the other background variables in terms of plus or minus signs for whether the variable has or does not have a reasonably significant impact ( $t > 1.5$ ) on the outcome measure. The pattern of signs reveals some interesting relationships. First, and most important, *the various background factors have differential effects on different variables*. Some, such as being a gang member, have a strong effect on deviant activity and may indeed be

**Table 9.3**      **Determinants of Time Allocation by Inner-City Black Youths**

Independent Variable	All Youths		Out-of-School Youths		Out-of-School Nonemployed Youths	
	Productive Hours	Productive Months	Productive Hours	Productive Months	Productive Hours	Productive Months
Intercept	.56 (.42)	.25 (.66)	-.19 (.45)	-.13 (.52)	-.09 (.19)	.32 (.30)
Both Parents Present at Age 14	-.00 (.16)	.02 (1.50)	.01 (.45)	-.04 (1.84)	-.01 (.54)	.06 (2.66)
Proportion of Men in Household	-.02 (.73)	-.04 (1.44)	-.07 (1.92)	-.06 (1.47)	-.03 (.69)	-.04 (.81)
Age	-.02 (5.96)	-.05 (15.39)	.01 (3.38)	-.06 (1.72)	.01 (2.67)	-.02 (3.92)
Married (1 = Yes)	.12 (3.53)	.13 (3.51)	.07 (2.00)	.11 (2.53)	.02 (.39)	.02 (.39)
Boston (1 = Yes)	-.02 (1.31)	.01 (.47)	.04 (2.10)	.01 (.85)	.01 (.29)	.07 (2.79)
Chicago (1 = Yes)	.08 (5.18)	.12 (7.13)	.03 (1.37)	.13 (5.00)	-.04 (1.27)	.17 (5.11)
Number of Persons in Household	-.002 (.68)	.005 (1.68)	-.003 (.72)	.006 (1.43)	-.01 (2.92)	-.004 (.89)
Public Housing (1 = Yes)	-.01 (.99)	-.03 (2.29)	-.02 (1.09)	-.04 (1.96)	.02 (.77)	-.00 (.11)
Proportion of Household Working	.02 (.60)	.08 (2.85)	.02 (.47)	.13 (3.25)	-.09 (2.27)	.03 (.66)
Household on Welfare (1 = Yes)	-.07 (4.09)	-.06 (4.14)	-.11 (5.51)	-.11 (4.64)	-.05 (2.33)	-.04 (1.49)
Gang Member (1 = Yes)	-.07 (1.64)	-.03 (.69)	-.10 (1.49)	-.04 (.56)	-.03 (.37)	.05 (.54)
Churchgoing (Z-score)	.04 (5.21)	.04 (4.80)	.03 (2.74)	.04 (3.33)	.01 (1.25)	.03 (2.47)
Years of School Completed	.02 (4.35)	.06 (11.06)	.03 (4.24)	.06 (8.06)	.01 (1.83)	.04 (4.32)
	<i>N</i> = 2,119	<i>N</i> = 2,047	<i>N</i> = 1,145	<i>N</i> = 1,166	<i>N</i> = 609	<i>N</i> = 620
	R <sup>2</sup> = .09	R <sup>2</sup> = .19	R <sup>2</sup> = .12	R <sup>2</sup> = .17	R <sup>2</sup> = .06	R <sup>2</sup> = .13

*Note:* t-statistics in parentheses. *Productive hours* defined as work, search for job, work travel, in school, study/do homework, watch children/keep house, read books/magazines/etc. *Productive months* defined as regular work, casual work, training, and school. (*Hours* includes secondary activity hours.)

**Table 9.4 The Effect of Churchgoing on Socioeconomic Outcomes**

Outcome	NBER Blacks		NLS Blacks		NLS Whites	
	Coefficient (t)	% Impact	Coefficient (t)	% Impact	Coefficient (t)	% Impact
<b>All Youths</b>						
Illegal Activities <sup>a</sup>	-.024 (3.10)	-20	-.029 (1.98)	-10	-.039 (5.10)	-19
Drug Use	-.050 (5.21)	-23	-.038 (3.54)	-27	-.07 (9.84)	-33
Alcohol Use <sup>b</sup>	-.022 (1.90)	-15	-.035 (2.18)	-31	-.046 (3.55)	-17
In School	.042 (4.41)	9	-.002 (.17)	-1	.019 (3.00)	12
Grades in School	.117 (3.52)	—	—		—	
Consumption	-5.73 (1.85)	-7	—		—	
<b>Out-of-School Youths</b>						
Employment	.028 (1.75)	6	.025 (1.62)	4	.023 (2.89)	3
Wage	.098 (.80)	2	.04 (.96)	1	-.131 (1.23)	-3
Months Worked/ Weeks Worked	.26 (1.49)	4	.50 (.79)	2	1.23 (3.73)	3
Annual Income	164 (1.20)	4	-57 (.41)	-2	63 (.68)	1

*Note:* Sample sizes ranged as follows: NBER, 836–2,358; NLS Blacks, 773–1,332; and NLS Whites, 2,191–3,428.

<sup>a</sup>NLS figures are based on the survey question, “Amount of total income in past year for illegal activities?”

<sup>b</sup>NLS data were available only for those younger than age 18. Also, the figures include those who drank at least once a week, as opposed to at least once a day, as in the NBER survey. Sample sizes were 501 for NLS blacks and 1,231 for NLS whites.

regarded as part and parcel of that activity, while others, notably the proportion of adults in the household who work, have rather mixed effects, increasing deviant activity while also improving the labor market position of the youths. Even the variable with the most consistent pattern, coming from a household on welfare, does not affect the wage rate. What these differential patterns suggest is that the results do *not* reflect a single background factor (“good” versus “bad” family background) but rather that the various background factors operate in distinct and sensible ways. For instance, a family with a high proportion of adults working is likely to provide less supervision of youth, permitting the increased socially deviant activity found here; but at the same time, that family is likely to provide the labor market contacts that help the youth in the job market (see Rees and Gray 1982).

In sum, the evidence shows that churchgoing and other background factors have generally substantial and plausible effects on the socioeconomic outcomes but that these effects are not uniform across outcome variables. Instead their effects are concentrated in some outcomes, giving plausibility to more complex causal analyses of the determinants of “who escapes.”

#### **9.4 What Are the Routes of Impact?**

Finding strong linkages between background variables and who escapes is just the first step in analyzing the impact of background on socioeconomic outcomes. An important issue that will help us interpret the findings is the routes by which the background factors affect behavior. Do they operate by influencing attitudes, as social psychologists suggest, or do they operate by altering market opportunities, through contacts, references, and the like? In this section I examine these questions by employing a simple intervening-variables path model. I introduce into the regressions of tables 9.3 and 9.4 two types of intervening variables: variables measuring attitudes or motivation (which can be interpreted as reflecting the utility function of economics); and variables measuring labor market opportunities. I then examine the changes in the coefficients of churchgoing and the other background factors. If these new variables are significant intervening variables, the coefficients on churchgoing and on the other factors will decline. Alternatively, however, it could be argued that declines in the coefficients imply that the previous regressions yielded spurious results, namely, the attitude and market variables were omitted factors that belonged in the equation in the first place. At the very least, entering a variety of attitude and market variables into the equation provides a further test of the conclusion that churchgoing and some of the other background factors have important connections to socioeconomic outcomes.

**Table 9.5**      **Effects of Background Variables in Regressions for Diverse Outcomes**

Background Variable	Illegal Activity	Drugs	Alcohol	School Grades	School Attendance	Employment	Wage	Months/ Weeks Working
NBER Blacks								
1. Proportion of Adults Working			+	+	+	+	+	+
2. Welfare Home	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
3. Public Housing					-	-	-	-
4. Proportion of Men in Household	-		-					
5. Gang Member	+	+	+					
6. Parents Present at Age 14	+	-	+					
7. Household Size	-							
8. Churchgoing	-	-	-	+	+	+		+
NLS Blacks								
1. Proportion of Adults Working	+	+	+		-	+		+
2. Public Housing			-					
3. Proportion of Men in Household						-		-
4. Parents Present at Age 14						+		
5. Household Size	+				-	-		+
6. Churchgoing								
NLS Whites								
1. Proportion of Adults Working		+	+		-			+
2. Public Housing	+		-					
3. Proportion of Men in Household					+	-		-
4. Parents Present at Age 14								-
5. Household Size		-				-		
6. Churchgoing	-	-	-			+		

Note: + or - indicates variable had a t-statistic of  $\geq 1.5$ .

To measure attitudes I have taken eight questions from the NBER survey.<sup>11</sup> The most important question is “How strong a role does religion play in your life?” because it represents a related but alternative variable to churchgoing. To the extent that churchgoing either operates through religious attitudes or is itself dependent on them, religious attitudes should enter significantly and greatly reduce the impact of churchgoing. To the extent that churchgoing reflects other forces, such as community connections or reinforcement of certain kinds of behavior, it should remain an important factor.

Measuring market opportunities is difficult because, exclusive of the city of residence (already in the calculations), the only information available in the NBER survey and the NLS is data on the individual’s views of the market; it is therefore necessary to assume that these views reflect the actual market rather than some mix of attitudes and reality. The two most important questions I use here are “How often do you have a chance to make money illegally?” which I have coded one if the respondent answered a few times a day or a few times a week and zero otherwise, and “What do you think are your chances of getting a job at this time?” which I have coded as a Z-score variable. In addition, I included three other measures of the market in the calculations.<sup>12</sup>

The effect of introducing the vectors of the intervening attitude and market variables on the estimated impact of churchgoing is shown in table 9.6, which records the coefficients of churchgoing with and without the intervening variables in the regressions and the coefficients of religious attitudes and the two major market variables. The regressions include all the other variables used in tables 9.3 and 9.4 and the full set of attitude and market variables indicated in the table note.

There are three notable findings. First is the general continued effect of churchgoing on outcomes in the presence of the additional variables. Except for illegal activities and months employed, both of which were reduced largely by the introduction of the market variables, the inclusion of additional variables barely affected the churchgoing coefficients. Similarly, the effect of other background variables was at most modestly reduced by the addition of the attitude and market variables, suggesting that the various sets of factors operate essentially orthogonally. The second finding is the general insignificance of religious attitudes in the equations, a result consistent with Datcher-Loury and Loury’s results (in this volume). It is the act of churchgoing, not religious attitudes, that affects behavior. This finding suggests that it is the role of the church as a social institution that underlies the statistical findings. Third, the market variables have extremely significant and powerful effects on the outcomes. Youths who have many chances to make money illegally spend fewer hours and months on socially pro-

**Table 9.6** Effects of Adding Attitude and Market Variables on Churchgoing in NBER Regressions

Outcome	Churchgoing		Religious Attitude <sup>a</sup>	Market: Can Find Job <sup>a</sup> Easily	Market: Chance to Make Money Illegally <sup>b</sup>
	Before	After			
Productive, All Hours	.04 (5.21)	.04 (4.45)	-.01 (.93)	.04 (5.19)	-.06 (4.61)
Productive, All Months	.04 (4.80)	.03 (3.71)	-.00 (.26)	.06 (7.79)	-.06 (4.45)
Committed Illegal Act (Yes = 1)	-.024 (3.10)	-.016 (1.88)	-.00 (.16)	.00 (.60)	.12 (8.34)
Takes Drugs (Yes = 1)	-.050 (5.21)	-.045 (4.25)	-.00 (.41)	.00 (.09)	.11 (6.09)
Alcohol Use	-.022 (1.90)	-.025 (2.06)	.01 (1.23)	.02 (2.21)	.06 (2.92)
Attends School	.042 (4.41)	.041 (3.95)	-.02 (1.53)	.01 (1.16)	-.07 (3.91)
Employed	.030 (1.75)	.030 (1.77)	-.02 (1.41)	.08 (5.34)	-.10 (3.39)
Months Employed	.26 (1.49)	.08 (.41)	.09 (.57)	.88 (5.72)	-.41 (1.30)

*Note:* Regressions include all other variables contained in table 9.3 and seven other attitude and three other market variables, as listed in notes 11 and 12. t-statistics in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup>As a Z-score.

<sup>b</sup>1 = a few times daily or weekly.

ductive activities, engage in more socially deviant activities, and work less, whereas youths who think jobs are easy to find spend more hours on productive activities, notably, working.

The continued impact of churchgoing and the other background variables after having added the intervening variables is in some ways encouraging and in other ways discouraging. Their consistent impact means the relationships persist despite changes in specification. But it also means we have not been able to pin down the routes by which the various background factors affect behavior.

### **9.5 Possible Causal Significance of the Estimated Links**

Those regressions impress me. Now I know what to do to improve the economic position of inner-city black youths. Force them to go to church. Kick their families off welfare. Get jobs for their family members.—Simple Activist

Those regressions tell us nothing about what to do. All they show is that there are good families and good kids and bad families and bad kids in the inner city. The good ones go to church. The bad ones live on welfare. The good ones will be good no matter what; the bad ones will be bad no matter what. Put a bad kid in church and he'll disrupt everything. There's nothing in the analysis that says what to do. —Simple Do-Nothingist

We must now ask to what extent, if at all, the estimated effects of the background variables reflect true causal influences as opposed to a sorting of individuals and their families by unobservable "good" and "bad" characteristics. To answer this question requires a genuine experiment in which one changes the relevant background variables and observes the ensuing behavior. For instance, one could provide money to black churches to expand their membership and see whether the youths attracted to the churches altered their behavior. In the absence of such experiments, it is difficult to draw more than tentative inferences about causality. Even longitudinal data, which are widely used to control for fixed unobservables, may not suffice because of the possible endogeneity of changes: a family that on its own accord leaves welfare, a youth who on his own accord starts going to church, are likely to behave differently from the randomly selected experimental family or youth in the ideal experiment. Difficult though the causal issue may be, it is incumbent upon us to address it, if only to highlight the shortcomings of causal inferences from survey data of the types used here.

In this section I probe, albeit tentatively, some aspects of the relationships among churchgoing and the other variables to see if it is possible "to wrest some intelligence from less than ideal information

and to cope with intrinsically refractory problems of conceptualization and model specification” (Duncan and Featherman 1973, 230).

One potential alternative to the analyses of churchgoing in sections 9.3 and 9.4 is to look at it as a dependent variable, causally determined by other background factors. If churchgoing is highly dependent on other factors in a manner similar to that of the outcome variables, one might prefer to view it as endogenous rather than exogenous. If there were plausible instrumental variables in the data set (which I do not believe there are), one might further seek to instrument churchgoing on those factors.

Table 9.7 presents the results of some calculations that relate churchgoing to various explanatory factors in the data sets. Although there are some definite links between churchgoing and other factors, the pattern of coefficients on the independent variables is different from that found in regressions of other “outcomes” on those variables. Having both parents present at age 14, for example, greatly raises churchgoing but has no significant effect on outcomes; living in a public housing project reduces churchgoing but has a generally negligible effect on outcomes. In the NBER survey, religious attitudes, which affected virtually no outcome, is, of course, closely related to churchgoing. These patterns of effects are not definitive, but they do illustrate once more that background factors have drastically different effects on different outcomes, including their effects on churchgoing as an outcome.

## 9.6 Summary and Conclusions

All told, although we cannot reject the possibility that the effects of churchgoing are noncausal, the patterns of regression coefficients are clearly inconsistent with relatively simple single-factor “omitted heterogeneity” explanations of its impact. At the very least, more complex factor models are needed; and here, as elsewhere, reliance on increasing numbers of omitted factors to explain results calls into question the noncausal explanation.

Even if one rejects the causal interpretation of the relationships found in this paper, however, it is important to recognize that the analysis has identified an important set of variables that separate successful from unsuccessful young men in the inner city. More specifically, the empirical analysis shows, first, that the principal variable on which the paper focuses, churchgoing, is associated with substantial differences in the behavior of youths, and thus in their chances to “escape” from inner-city poverty. Churchgoing affects allocation of time, school attendance, work activity, and the frequency of socially deviant activity. Although it is difficult to determine the causal links by which churchgoing affects behavior—in particular, whether churchgoing is simply

**Table 9.7** Estimates of the Effects of Background and Other Factors on Churchgoing

Independent Variables	NBER Blacks		NLS Blacks	NLS Whites
	(1)	(2)		
Intercept	1.06	1.11	1.45	.41
Both Parents Present at Age 14	.21 (5.09)	.17 (4.54)	.19 (3.65)	.16 (3.63)
Proportion of Men in Household	.02 (.19)	-.02 (.24)	-.24 (1.76)	.14 (2.10)
Percent Adults Working	-.01 (.12)	-.01 (.08)	.14 (1.37)	-.08 (.91)
Age	-.08 (8.88)	-.07 (7.90)	-.11 (8.04)	-.11 (11.86)
Marital Status	.26 (2.45)	.25 (2.50)	.17 (1.08)	.09 (1.36)
Household Size	-.01 (1.19)	-.01 (.85)	-.04 (3.39)	.06 (5.39)
Public Housing	-.19 (4.36)	-.19 (4.65)	-.21 (2.55)	-.28 (2.07)
Welfare	-.09 (2.13)	-.07 (1.81)		
Gang	-.06 (.47)	-.05 (.45)		
Education Completed	.05 (3.15)	.03 (1.56)	.06 (3.71)	.11 (10.47)
Boston	.07 (1.41)	.09 (1.97)		
Chicago	.02 (.39)	.06 (1.30)		
South			.26 (4.93)	
Urban			.04 (.58)	.18 (5.03)
Attitude Variables				-.04 (1.16)
Religious		.38 (19.84)		
Other Attitude		✓		
Market Variables		✓		
R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.23	.09	.08

Note: t-statistics in parentheses.

an indication that youths are “good kids” or whether it truly alters behavior—the pattern of statistical results suggests that at least some part of the churchgoing effect is the result of an actual causal impact. At the least, the effect of churchgoing is not the result of churchgoing youths having “good attitudes” or having better market opportunities than others.

Second, the diverse background factors examined in this study do *not* have comparable effects on the various outcomes. Some significantly influence certain outcomes and not others, thereby rejecting the possibility that the background factors measure simply a single, unobserved, family-person heterogeneity factor. Indeed, the differential effects of the background factors suggest true causal impacts, with, for example, the proportion of a youth’s family who work having positive effects on his labor market activity but not on his other activities.

Third, in addition to churchgoing, the background factors that most influence “who escapes” are whether other members of the family

work and whether the family is on welfare. By contrast, youths from homes in which both parents were present at age 14 do only marginally better than those from homes in which only one parent was present at that age, implying that, by itself, the female-headed home is not a major deterrent to socioeconomic success. In addition, having some men in the household who are *not* employed appears to have negative effects on some outcomes.

Finally, youths' allocation of time and other activities are significantly influenced by market opportunities (or the youths' perceptions thereof), with those who believe it would be easy to find a job if they had to find one more likely to engage in socially productive activities than others, and youths who see many opportunities to make illegal money less likely to engage in socially productive activities than other youths.

## Notes

1. These data are from U.S. Department of Labor (1981, table A-5).
2. In addition, there are substantial "errors of measurement" when adults report about the activity of their children in the standard government surveys. See Freeman and Medoff 1982a.
3. For the specifics, see Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
4. See Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (1979).
5. In fact, the socially deviant behaviors reported in the NLS are even more serious than those elicited by the NBER questionnaire. If one takes all the reported acts of crime by NLS youth (some of which are minor), it turns out that upward of 50% of all youths in the NLS reported committing at least one.
6. See Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan (1972).
7. This variable has been found to be important in whether youths work in Rees and Gray (1982).
8. Churchgoing has not been studied in previous research. To my knowledge the most comparable work is that of Duncan and Featherman (1973) on the effect of religion on achievement.
9. There is an extensive literature on the black church in America, beginning with the early work of Franklin Frazier (1963).
10. In this technique each regression is given a different numeric value approximately equal to its standard deviation in a normal distribution with zero mean and unit standard deviation.
11. These questions are:  
[Are the following statements] true, somewhat true, or not at all true?  
(a) "Knowing the right people is the key to finding a job."  
(b) "If you work hard and get a good education you'll get ahead in America."  
(c) "Having a good education is very important, somewhat important, not at all important to you in your life right now."  
(d) "Working at a job is very important, somewhat important, not at all important to you in your life right now."  
Would you say [each of the following statements] depends a lot, somewhat, a little, or not at all on your having a job?  
(e) "Your being respected by other people."  
(f) "Your being able to afford the things you want."  
(g) "How strong a role does religion play in your life?"

12. The questions used for the variable described in the text are:

(a) "Say that for some reason you had to get (a job/another job) right now. Keeping in mind your past experiences, your education and your training . . . what do you think are your chances of getting that kind of job (best job you think you can get) at this time?"

(b) "Suppose you were really desperate for money. How easy would you say it would be for you to find a job working at a minimum wage?"

The other three measures are:

(a) "If a friend comes to you and says he desperately needs to make some money, what would you tell him to do?" A dummy variable equals zero if the respondent suggested an illegal job or giving up and one if he suggested a legal job.

(b) "How often do you have a chance to make money illegally?" Two dummy variables: one for a few times a week or a few times a day; and the second for less than a few times a week or no chance at all.

(c) "How much do you think you could make on the street doing something illegal compared to on a straight job you could get?" A dummy variable equals one if more on the street or about same on each and zero if more on a job.

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