

# FORUM

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2008 | SECTION G

THE PLAIN DEALER

## The two sides of employment's trap door

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As part of my job at Lakeland Community College, it is not uncommon for me to meet with a middle-aged white male who just lost an \$80,000 a year job and, in my next appointment, meet with a black male ex-offender who is looking for an \$8 per hour job. It took a while for me to realize that they have, amazingly, something in common: They both share the same trap door.

For the white middle-aged salaried male, especially if he is over 50, the trap door works like this. His working life has seen a steady rise in income and responsibility. And then, the trap door opens: He is downsized. While a majority of men in his shoes likely will be employed in a similar position within nine months, he may join an increasing number (over the past 10 years) who will wander a scary new world of prolonged unemployment, underemployment or premature retirement.

For the black ex-offender, the trap door is not below his feet, but above his head. He wants it to open, to let him in.

Typically, his story goes like

this. While incarcerated, his child-support payments pile up so that, when he is released, he is tens of thousands of dollars in arrears. With his felony shadowing him, it will be difficult for him to find work. If he cannot obtain consistent work, he will fail on his support payments. His driver's license will be suspended, which, in turn, further limits his ability to find and hold a job. After a year of sporadic temp jobs, other ways of getting money may tempt him back to the street.

Although they come at it from opposite directions, the "fallen white male" and the "black male ex-offender" indeed have a striking amount in common.

As demographic subgroups, they are tied for last on the sympathy scale. The white male will never get sympathy as long as the rest of society believes white males still wield most of the power. The black male will never get sympathy because we don't feel sorry for men who commit crimes. Or for a father who is behind in child support.

Both are nervous about being at a community college. The white male, because he feels overeducated, and the black

male, because he feels undereducated. The former sees our educational programs as a last resort. The latter sees them as a last hope.

Both are wounded. The white man just had a wing shot off in mid-flight and feels that he is spinning downward. The black man's wounds are less recent and more complicated. In most cases, he came out of childhood wounded. Although the causes — poverty, absence of a father, poor education and so on — are well documented, they garner him little real support as an adult.

Both are demonstrably appreciative when I return their phone calls. The white male, because he fears he is turning invisible. The black male, because he is surprised to be visible.

Sometimes I don't know which one I feel most sorry for. The laid-off marketing director who, a year later, is a part-time cashier at a friend's Sunoco? Or the ex-drug dealer who would love that job, but won't ever get it? When I meet with them, the white male is often sadder. He is terrified, actually, wondering how — if he is the primary breadwinner — he will pay a mortgage, keep two children in college, keep his

spouse . . .

The black male, despite the staggering baggage he carries, often seems more hopeful. For a moment, when he glimpses the possibility of a college education, he sees the glimmer of a future.

Is help on the way? Last April, President Bush signed the Second Chance Act and Gov. Ted Strickland signed House Bill 113. Both propose to do a better job helping prisoners (men and women) re-enter society. When I mention these changes to the "black male ex-offender," he nods approvingly. But he is also wondering if, for him, they will be implemented too late.

For the "fallen white male," there will never be a second-chance act because it will always be perceived that he had the best first chances. But at least he won't be alone. He may find himself standing next to a black man, both of them looking up at the underside of a trap door. One, hoping that it will let him in; the other, hoping that it will let him back in.

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