CASE PRESENTATION
Good News and Bad News

Financially speaking, the 1980s turned out to be a good decade for at least one group of young Americans – black women who were recent college graduates. But for black men who recently graduated from college, the decade left much to be desired. This combination of good news and bad news comes from two analyses of U.S. census data conducted for The New York Times.

One analysis was conducted by a Washington, D.C. research group, the Economic Policy Institute, which looked at the change in hourly pay between 1979 and 1991 for recent college graduates who had one to five years on the job. For black women in that category, average hourly pay rose from $10.39 to $11.41. Though the 1991 figure still leaves them well behind white men ($12.85 an hour), it also puts them slightly ahead of white women ($11.38). But for black men who recently graduated from college, average hourly pay fell – from $11.93 to $11.26. (All figures are in 1993 dollars.)

The other analysis, by Queens College, looked at median annual income in 1991 for college graduates twenty-five years old and younger. Again, white males led the field, at about $18,000. Black females again came in second, at about $17,000, with white females third ($16,800) and black males again fourth ($16,400).

The New York Times reported these results October 31, 1994, in an article by Sam Roberts. Why the disparity between black men and black women? The report offers three possible explanations. For one, there are the prevalent stereotypes of young black men. So racism against them may be more powerful than racism against black women. For another possible explanation, black women outnumber black men among recent college graduates. The other proposed explanation refers to affirmative action programs. By hiring a black woman, the employer manages to meet two hiring goals. So employers may be more inclined to hire them than to hire black men.

Questions for Analysis

1. Has affirmative action helped black women but hurt black men? If so, what needs to be done for black men?

2. Has affirmative action helped black women more than white women? If so, why?

3. Given the pervasiveness of affirmative action programs, why do white men still enjoy such an advantage over other recent college graduates?

4. Social scientists quoted in The New York Times expressed concern that the income disparity between black men and women might be a threat to black marriages. Is their concern justified? Why or why not? If it is, what should be done about the problem?

5. What do The New York Times analyses show about the pluses and minuses of affirmative action?