Being Poor, Black, and American

The Impact of Political, Economic, and Cultural Forces

When schools and communities are struggling, some students give up—but others get active. Critical Exposure helps by teaching advocacy through documentary photography. Students in neglected and crumbling schools across the country took the photos on pages 10–23. For more, go to **www.criticalexposure.org**.

By William Julius Wilson

Through the second half of the 1990s and into the early years of the 21st century, public attention to the plight of poor black Americans seemed to wane. There was scant media attention to the problem of concentrated urban poverty (neighborhoods in which a high percentage of the residents fall beneath the federally designated poverty line), little or no discussion of inner-city challenges by mainstream political leaders, and even an apparent quiescence on the part of ghetto residents themselves. This was dramatically different from the 1960s, when the transition from legal segregation to a more racially open society was punctuated by social unrest that sometimes expressed itself in violent terms, as seen in the riots that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

But in 2005, Hurricane Katrina exposed concentrated poverty in New Orleans. When television cameras focused on the flooding, the people trapped in houses and apartments, and the vast devastation, many Americans were shocked to see the squalid living conditions of the poor. Of course, the devastation of Katrina was broadly visited upon the residents of New Orleans, black and white, rich and poor, property owner and public housing tenant alike. But while many residents were able to flee, the very poor, lacking automobiles or money for transportation and lodging, stayed to wait out the storm with tragic results. And through Katrina, the nation's attention became riveted on these poor urban neighborhoods.

If television cameras had focused on the urban poor in New Orleans, or in any inner-city ghetto, before Katrina, I believe the initial reaction to descriptions of poverty and poverty concentration would have been unsympathetic. Public opinion polls in the United States routinely reflect the notion that people are poor and jobless because of their own shortcomings or inadequacies. In other words, few people would have reflected on how the larger forces in society—including segregation, discrimination, a lack of economic opportunity, and failing public schools—adversely affect the inner-city poor. However, because Katrina was clearly a natural disaster that was beyond the control of the inner-city poor, Americans were much more sympathetic. In a sense, Katrina turned out to be something of a

William Julius Wilson is the Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor at Harvard University. He is a former MacArthur Fellow, a National Medal of Science winner, a former president of the American Sociological Association, and the author of several award-winning books. His most recent book is More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City. *Portions of this article are adapted from two of Wilson's recent articles: "The Political and Economic Forces Shaping Concentrated Poverty," published in* Political Science Quarterly *(Volume 123, Number 4, Winter 2008–2009), and "Toward a Framework for Understanding Forces That Contribute to or Reinforce Racial Inequality," published in* Race and Social Problems *(Volume 1, Number 1, March 2009).*

cruel natural experiment, wherein better-off Americans could readily see the effects of racial isolation and chronic economic subordination.

Despite the lack of national public awareness of the problems of the urban poor prior to Katrina, social scientists have rightly devoted considerable attention to

concentrated poverty, because it magnifies the problems associated with poverty in general: joblessness, crime, delinquency, drug trafficking, broken families, and dysfunctional schools. Neighborhoods of highly concentrated poverty are seen as dangerous, and therefore they become isolated, socially and economically, as people go out of their way to avoid them.[1]

In this article, I provide a political, economic, and cultural framework for understanding the emergence and persistence of concentrated urban poverty. I pay particular attention to poor inner-city black neighborhoods, which have the highest levels of concentrated poverty. I conclude this article by suggesting a new agenda for America's ghetto poor, based on the analysis I put forth in the following sections.

Political Forces

Since 1934, with the establishment of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), a program necessitated by the massive mortgage foreclosures during the Great Depression, the U.S. government has sought to enable citizens to become homeowners by underwriting mortgages. In the years following World War II, however, the federal government contributed to the early decay of inner-city neighborhoods by withholding mortgage capital and making it difficult for these areas to retain or attract families who were able to purchase their own homes. The FHA selectively administered the mortgage program by formalizing a process that excluded certain urban neighborhoods using empirical data that suggested a probable

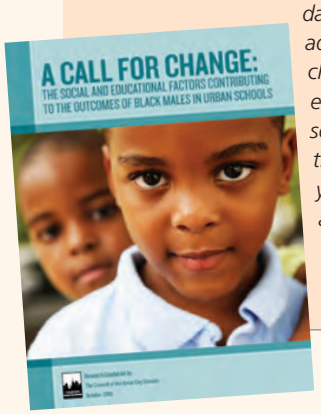
A Call for Change

"The nation's young black males are in a state of crisis. They do not have the same opportunities as their male or female counterparts across the country. Their infant mortality rates are higher, and their access to health care is more limited. They are more likely to live in single-parent homes and less likely to participate in early childcare programs. They are less likely to be raised in a household with a fully employed adult, and they are more likely to live in poverty. As adults, black males are less likely than their peers to be employed. At almost every juncture, the odds are stacked against these young men in ways that result in too much unfulfilled potential and too many fractured lives."

–Michael Casserly
The Council of the Great City Schools

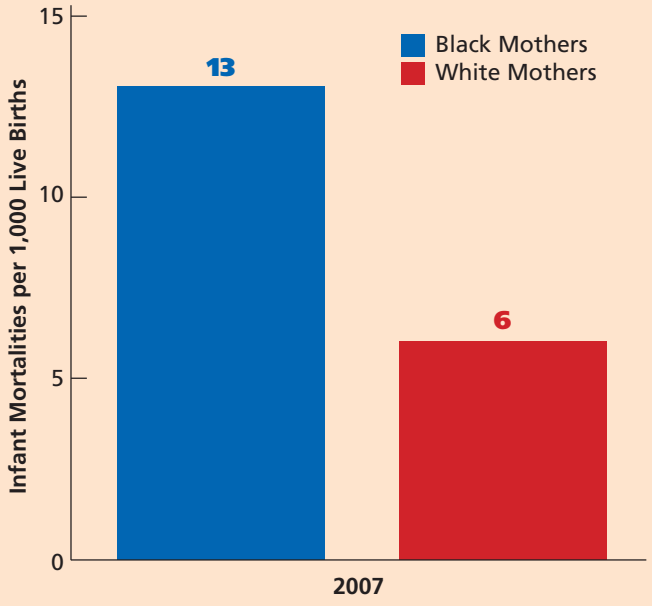
In October 2010, the Council of the Great City Schools published A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools, *in which it compiled data ranging from infant mortality rates to adult earnings to show the enormous challenges facing America's black children—especially black boys. Throughout this special section, we have reproduced a handful of the report's dozens of charts. We encourage you to read the full report, which is available online at* **www.cgcs.org/publications/achievement.aspx**.

–EDITORS



Calling for Change in the Infant Mortality Rate

In 2007, the infant mortality rate for black mothers was more than twice as high as for white mothers.



SOURCE: *A CALL FOR CHANGE*, FIGURE 1.1 (DATA FROM THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS).

loss of investment in these areas. "Redlining," as it came to be known, was assessed largely on racial composition. Although many neighborhoods with a considerable number of European immigrants were redlined, virtually all black neighborhoods were excluded. Homebuyers hoping to purchase a home in a redlined neighborhood were universally denied mortgages, regardless of their financial qualifications. This severely restricted opportunities for building or even maintaining quality housing in the inner city, which in many ways set the stage for the urban blight that many Americans now associate with black neighborhoods. This action was clearly motivated by racial bias, and it was not until the 1960s that the FHA discontinued mortgage restrictions based on the racial composition of the neighborhood.[2]

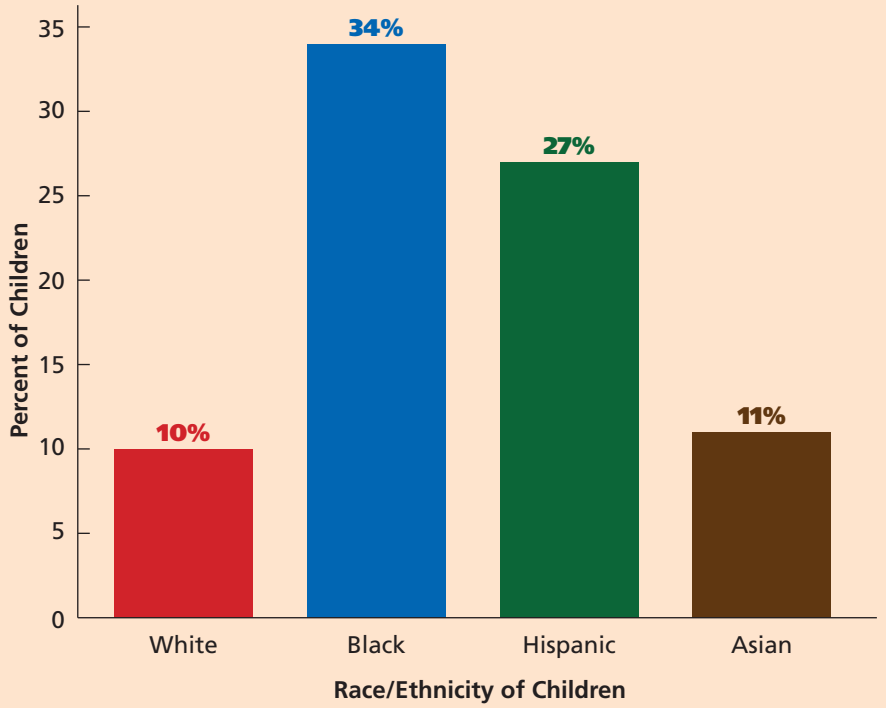
Subsequent policy decisions worked to trap blacks in these increasingly unattractive inner cities. Beginning in the 1950s, the suburbanization of the middle class, already under way with government-subsidized loans to veterans, was aided further by federal transportation and highway policies that included the building of freeway networks through the hearts of many cities, which had a devastating impact on the neighborhoods of black Americans. These developments not only spurred relocation from the cities to the suburbs among better-off residents, the freeways themselves also "created barriers between the sections of the cities, walling off poor and minority neighborhoods from central business districts."[3] For instance, a number of studies have revealed how Richard J. Daley, the former mayor of Chicago, used the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 to route expressways through impoverished African American neighborhoods, resulting in even greater segregation and isolation.[4] A lasting legacy of that policy is the 14-lane Dan Ryan Expressway, which created a barrier between black and white neighborhoods.[5]

Another particularly egregious example of the deleterious effects of highway construction is Birmingham, Alabama's interstate highway system, which curved and twisted to bisect several black neighborhoods rather than taking a more direct route through some predominantly white neighborhoods. The highway system essentially followed the boundaries that had been established in 1926 as part of the city's racial zoning law, although these boundaries were technically removed a few years before the highway construction began in 1956.[6]

At the same time, government policies such as mortgages for veterans and mortgage interest tax exemptions for developers enabled the quick, cheap production of massive amounts of tract housing[7] and drew middle-class whites into the suburbs.[8] A classic example of this effect of housing market incentives is the mass-produced suburban Levittown neighborhoods that were first erected in New York, and later in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico. The homes in these neighborhoods were manufactured on a large scale, using an assembly line model of production, and were arranged in carefully engineered suburban neighborhoods that included many public amenities, such as shopping centers and space for public schools. These neighborhoods represented an ideal alternative for people who were seeking to escape cramped city apartments, and were often touted as "utopian

Calling for Change in the Child Poverty Rate

In 2007, 34 percent of black children under age 18 lived in poverty, compared with 10 percent of white children and 27 percent of Hispanic children.



SOURCE: *A CALL FOR CHANGE*, FIGURE 1.9 (DATA FROM KIDSCOUNT; POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU, ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM THE U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2008 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY).

communities" that enabled people to live out the "suburban dream." Veterans were able to purchase a Levittown home for a few thousand dollars with no money down, financed with low-interest mortgages guaranteed by the Veterans Administration. However, the Levitts would not initially sell to African Americans. The first black family moved into Levittown, New York, in 1957, having purchased a home from a white family,[9] and they endured harassment, hate mail, and threats for several months after moving in. Levittown, New York, remains a predominantly white community today. Here, once again, we have a practice that denied African Americans the opportunity to move from segregated inner-city neighborhoods.

Explicit racial policies in the suburbs reinforced this segregation by allowing suburbs to separate their financial resources and municipal budgets from those of the cities. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, strong municipal services in cities were very attractive to residents of small towns and suburbs; as a result, cities tended to annex suburbs and surrounding areas. But the relations between cities and suburbs in the United States began to change following the Great Depression; the centurylong influx of poor migrants who required expensive services and paid relatively little in taxes could no longer be profitably absorbed into the city economy. Annexation largely ended in the mid-20th century as suburbs began to successfully resist incorporation. Suburban communities also drew tighter boundaries through the use of zoning laws, discriminatory land-use controls, and site selection practices that made it difficult for inner-city racial minorities to access these areas because these practices were effectively used to screen out residents on the basis of race.

As separate political jurisdictions, suburbs also exercised a great deal of autonomy through covenants and deed restrictions. In the face of mounting pressure for integration in the 1960s, "suburbs chose to diversify by race rather than class. They retained zoning and other restrictions that allowed only affluent blacks (and in some instances Jews) to enter, thereby intensifying the concentration and isolation of the urban poor."[10] Although these policies clearly had racial connotations, they also reflected class bias and helped reinforce the exodus of white working-class and middle-class families from urban neighborhoods and the growing segregation of low-income blacks in inner-city neighborhoods.

Federal public housing policy contributed to the gradual growth of segregated black ghettos as well. The federal public housing program's policies evolved in two stages that represented two distinct styles. The Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937 initiated the first stage. Concerned that the construction of public housing might depress private rent levels, groups such as the U.S. Building and Loan League and the National Association of Real Estate Boards successfully lobbied Congress to require, by law, that for each new unit of public housing erected, one "unsafe or unsanitary" unit of public housing must be destroyed.

The early years of the public housing program produced positive results. Initially, the program mainly served intact families temporarily displaced by the Depression or in need of housing after the end of World War II. For many of these families, public housing was the first step on the road toward economic recovery. Their stays in the projects were relatively brief because they were able to accumulate sufficient economic resources to move on to private housing.

The passage of the Housing Act of 1949 marked the beginning of the second policy stage. It instituted and funded the urban renewal program, designed to eradicate urban slums, and therefore was seemingly nonracial. However, the public housing that it created "was now meant to collect the ghetto residents left homeless by the urban renewal bulldozers."[11] A new, lower income ceiling for public housing residency was established by the Federal Public Housing Authority, and families with incomes above that ceiling were evicted, thereby restricting access to public housing to only the most economically disadvantaged segments of the population.

This change in federal housing policy coincided with the Second Great Migration* of African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the Northeast and Midwest, which lasted 30 years—from 1940 to 1970. As the black urban population in the North grew, pressure mounted in white communities to keep blacks out. Suburban communities, with their restrictive covenants and special zoning laws, refused to permit the construction of public housing. And the federal government acquiesced to opposition to the construction of public housing in the neighborhoods of organized white groups in the city. Thus, units were overwhelmingly concentrated in the overcrowded and deteriorating inner-city ghettos—the poorest and least-powerful

*This mass movement of African Americans was even larger and more sustained than the First Great Migration, which began at the turn of the 20th century and ended during the Great Depression, and had a more profound impact on the transformation of the inner city.

sections of cities and metropolitan areas. In short, public housing became a federally funded institution that isolated families by race and class, resulting in high concentrations of poor black families in inner-city ghettos.[12]

In the last quarter of the 20th century, one of the most significant changes in these neighborhoods was the outmigration of middle-income blacks. Before the 1970s, African American families faced extremely strong barriers when they considered moving into white neighborhoods. Not only did many experience overt discrimination in the housing market, some were violently attacked. Although even today fair-housing audits continue to reveal the existence of discrimination in the housing market, fair-housing legislation has reduced the strength of these barriers. At the same time, middle-income African Americans have increased their efforts to move from areas with concentrated black poverty to more desirable neighborhoods throughout metropolitan areas, including white neighborhoods.[13]

In addition, beginning in 1980, when Ronald Reagan became president, sharp spending cuts in direct aid to cities dramatically reduced budgets for general revenue sharing (unrestricted funds that can be used for any purpose), urban mass transit, economic development assistance, urban development action grants, social service block grants, local public works, compensatory education, public service jobs, and job training. Many of these programs were designed to help disadvantaged individuals gain some traction in attaining financial security.[14] It is telling that the federal contribution was 17.5 percent of the total city budgets in 1977, but only 5.4 percent by 2000.[15] These cuts were particularly acute for older cities in the East and Midwest that largely depended on federal and state aid to

Demanding and Supporting Success

Collective Memories of Great Teaching

BY CHARLES M. PAYNE

However ironic it may seem, there is considerable nostalgia just now among many Black Americans for the kind of education they had during the good old days of legal white supremacy. Nostalgia is necessarily selective. The first chapter of *Simple Justice*, a history of *Brown v. Board of Education* by social historian Richard Kluger, draws portraits of two South Carolina Black principals. One is the kind of dedicated, rooted-in-the-community educator around whom current nostalgia centers. The other is craven, incompetent, a servant of the white power structure, as corrupt as the day is long, stealing funds that should have been going to the children. The current longing for the good old days forgets the second type of Black educator—the people W. E. B. Du Bois called "ignorant placeholders."[1] Today's nostalgia also forgets that, at times and places, the sheer lack of resources must have overwhelmed good intent. The South, through the first half of the 20th century, generally spent on the education of Black children about one-third what it spent on whites. Some schools were theaters of class antagonisms, and in others the kind of treatment children got could depend on their complexion; many used a level of physical discipline that is discomfiting to read about, even now.[2]

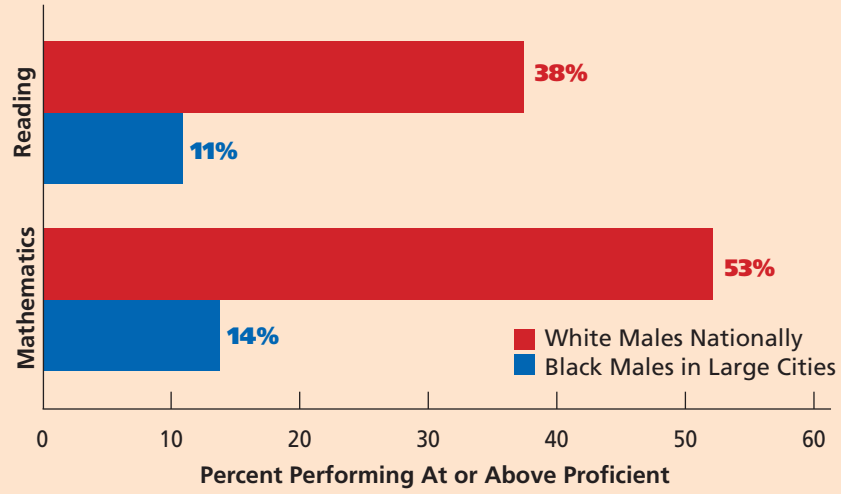
That said, there is still something about the education they received under these circumstances that many Black adults now wish they could give to their own children, and it clearly has to do largely with how they experienced teaching. Nostalgia should not be confused with history, but collective memories tell us much about how people understand the limits and possibilities in their environment, about what they think made a difference for them, and that can serve as the basis for hypothesizing, at least, about how teaching matters.

Vanessa Siddle Walker's rich and evocative portrait of North Carolina's Casswell County Training School reflects the themes one typically finds in these discussions.[3] Walker, a historian of African American education, sees the school as an example of institutionalized caring, caring that went beyond how any one individual felt about any other individual,

Charles M. Payne is the Frank P. Hixon Distinguished Service Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, and author of numerous books and articles. He was a founder of the Duke Curriculum Project, the John Hope Franklin Scholars, and the Education for Liberation Network, as well as the founding director of the Urban Education Project in Orange, New Jersey. This article is adapted with permission from his most recent book, So Much Reform, So Little Change, *published in 2008 by Harvard Education Press.*

Calling for Change in the Achievement Gaps

In 2009, among fourth-graders, the gaps between the percentage of black boys in large cities scoring at or above proficient and the percentage of white boys in public schools across the nation scoring at or above proficient were 27 percentage points in reading and 39 percentage points in math.



NOTE: LARGE CITIES DATA INCLUDE STUDENTS FROM ALL CITIES IN THE NATION WITH POPULATIONS OF 250,000 OR MORE. NATIONAL DATA INCLUDE STUDENTS ATTENDING PUBLIC SCHOOLS ACROSS THE NATION.
SOURCE: *A CALL FOR CHANGE*, FIGURES 2.5 AND 2.23 (DATA FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS 2009 READING AND MATHEMATICS ASSESSMENTS).

fund social services for their poor population and to maintain aging infrastructure.

The decline in federal support for cities since 1980 coincided with an increase in the immigration of people from poorer countries—mainly low-skilled workers from Mexico—and whites steadily moving to the suburbs. With minorities displacing whites as a growing share of the population, the implications for the urban tax base were profound. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, the median annual household income of Latinos was about $14,000 less than that of whites. With a declining tax base and the simultaneous loss of federal funds, municipalities had trouble raising enough revenue to cover basic services such as garbage collection, street cleaning, and police protection. Some even cut such services in order to avoid bankruptcy.[16]

This financial crisis left many cities ill-equipped to handle three devastating public health problems that emerged in the

caring that was reflected in high expectations and strict standards—teachers "didn't play," would "bless you out" if they caught you wrong. There was a heavy emphasis on extracurricular activity, with as much as 90 percent of the student body participating in something, as the school recognized students' need to "learn to speak, to think, to perform" as well as their need for explicit moral instruction. They were, as the principal liked to say, "building men and women."[4] Among other things, they took that to require implicitly and explicitly challenging notions of racial inferiority. For them, "Teaching could not be reduced to a job or an occupation; it was a mission."[5]

Teachers were seen as having a broad interest in children, in their character and in their future. Children felt pressure to succeed; whether or not they were going to take school seriously was a choice that had been made for them by adults. They felt pushed cognitively and socially. There is some disagreement about whether teachers were warm and friendly, but an overwhelming consensus that adults were all on the same page; teachers had the authority of the whole race behind them.

If we were to abstract a teaching model from this, we might arrive at something like the following:

Authoritative-Supportive Teaching
- High level of intellectual/academic demand
- High level of social demand
- Holistic concern for children and their future; sense of a larger mission
- Strong sense of teacher efficacy and legitimacy

Calling this model authoritative-supportive teaching would seem to capture its most salient aspects. If this is the kind of teaching that many Black people remember as having worked for them, is there any reason at all to think it would transfer to contemporary inner-city communities? Actually, there are several interesting lines of thinking in recent research to suggest that a model of teaching very close to this can have unusually large positive impacts, even among today's rowdy youth.

One very instructive study tried to assess the impact of social support and academic pressure.[6] Researchers with the Consortium on Chicago School Research surveyed 28,000 Chicago sixth- and eighth-graders and more than 5,000 teachers in 304 elementary and middle schools. To measure social support from teachers, students were asked whether their English and math teachers:

- relate the subject to their personal interests (which, of course, implies that teachers know what students are interested in)
- really listen to what they say
- know them very well
- believe they can do well in school

To assess support from parents, students were asked how often their parents or other adults in their household:

- discuss school events and/or events of interest to the student
- help with homework
- discuss with them things they had studied in class
- discuss homework with them

To assess social support from peers, students were asked whether most

1980s and disproportionately affected areas of concentrated poverty: first, the prevalence of drug trafficking and associated violent crime; second, the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic and its escalating public health costs; and third, the rise in the homeless population, including not only individuals, but entire families as well.[17] Although drug addiction, drug-related violence, AIDS, and homelessness are found in many American communities, their impact on the black ghetto is profound. A number of fiscally strapped cities have watched helplessly as these problems—aggravated by the reduction of citywide social services as well as high levels of neighborhood joblessness—have reinforced the perception that cities are dangerous places to live and have perpetuated the exodus of working- and middle-class residents. Thus, while poverty and joblessness, and the social problems they generate, remain prominent in ghetto neighborhoods, many cities have fewer and fewer resources with which to combat them.

Finally, policymakers have indirectly contributed to concentrated poverty in inner-city neighborhoods with decisions that have decreased the attractiveness of low-paying jobs and accelerated the relative decline in the wages of low-income workers. In particular, in the absence of an effective labor market policy, policymakers have tolerated industry practices that undermine worker security—including the erosion of benefits and the rise of involuntary part-time employment.

In sum, federal government policies, even those that are not explicitly racial, have had a profound impact on inner-city neighborhoods. These impacts have been felt in many cities across the country, but they perhaps have been felt more in the older central cities of the Midwest and Northeast—the traditional Rust Belt—where depopulated, high-poverty areas have experienced even greater problems.

Economic Forces

Older urban areas were once the hubs of economic growth and activity, and were therefore major destinations for people in search of economic opportunity. However, the economies of many of these cities have since been eroded by complex economic transformations and shifting patterns in metropolitan development. These economic forces are typically considered nonracial—in the sense that their origins are not the direct result of actions, processes, or ideologies that explicitly reflect racial bias. Nevertheless, they have accelerated neighborhood decline in the inner city and widened gaps in race and income between cities and suburbs.[18]

students in their classes:

- treat each other with respect
- work together to solve problems
- help each other learn

Academic pressure[7] was measured by both teacher and student reports. The questions asked of teachers included whether their schools:

- set high standards for academic performance
- organize the school day to maximize student learning
- focus on what is best for student learning when making important decisions

The questions for assessing student perception of academic pressure asked students whether their English and math teachers:

- expect them to do their best all the time
- expect them to complete their homework every night
- think it is very important that they do well in that class
- encourage them to do extra work when they don't understand something

This is very close to the authoritative-supportive model, capturing elements of social and intellectual demand, of holistic concern, of adults being on the same page. The main message from the study is that social support and academic pressure each independently make a meaningful difference, but when both are present at high levels, the results can be striking. In reading, children experiencing low levels of both support and pressure averaged a gain of 0.56 grade equivalents (GEs) a year in reading, but students exposed to high levels of both improved 1.82 GEs, *almost two years' growth in a year*. The numbers in math were even more pronounced. While low-support, low-pressure students improved 0.63 GEs, high-pressure, high-support students improved an eye-popping 2.39 GEs. The distribution of high-pressure, high-support schools is very much what one would expect. Racially integrated schools are three times more likely to exhibit both characteristics than predominantly minority schools; schools serving the highest-income-level students are four times as likely to exhibit both aspects than schools serving the poorest students.

These would be impressive numbers under any circumstances, but they are even more impressive considering the population under study—sixth- and eighth-graders. That's a tough crowd. By that age, many students have essentially given up on schools, and schools have

Since the mid-20th century, the mode of production in the United States has shifted dramatically from manufacturing to one increasingly fueled by finance, services, and technology. This shift has accompanied the technological revolution, which has transformed traditional industries and brought about changes that range from streamlined information technology to biomedical engineering.[19]

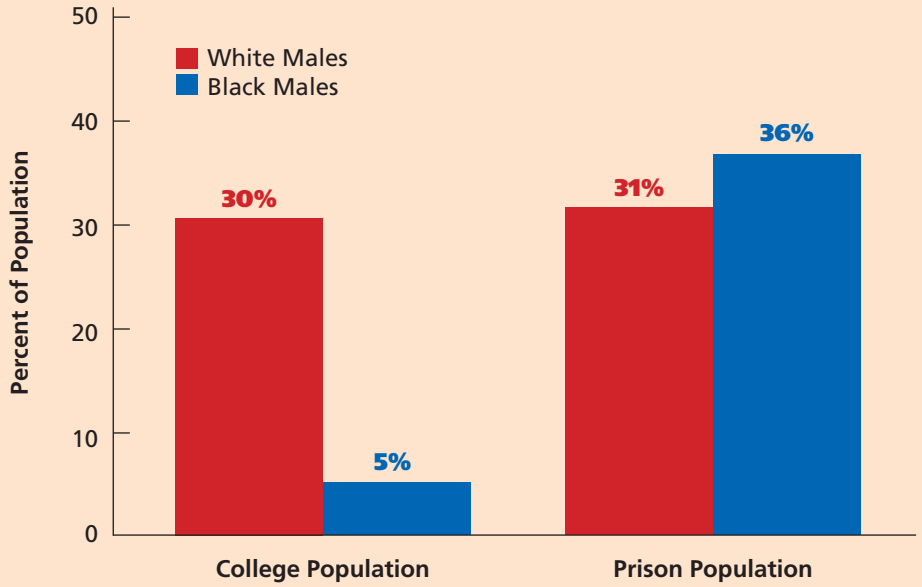
In the last several decades, almost all improvements in productivity have been associated with technology and human capital, thereby drastically reducing the importance of physical capital.[20] With the increased globalization of economic activity, firms have spread their operations around the world, often relocating their production facilities to developing nations that have dramatically lower labor costs.[21]

These global economic transformations have adversely affected the competitive position of many U.S. Rust Belt cities. For example, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh perform poorly on employment growth, an important traditional measure of economic performance. Nationally, employment increased by 25 percent between 1991 and 2001, yet job growth in these older central cities did not exceed 3 percent.[22]

With the decline in manufacturing employment in many of the nation's central cities, most of the jobs for lower-skilled workers are now in retail and service indus-

Calling for Change in the College and Prison Populations

In 2008, black males age 18 and older accounted for 5 percent of the college population, but 36 percent of the prison population.



SOURCE: *A CALL FOR CHANGE*, FIGURE 6.8 (DATA FROM THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, PRISON INMATES AT MIDYEAR, 2008; CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY 2009).

given up on many of them. Something like the traditional model of Black teaching—supportive but authoritative—still seems to work for a great many children. One might have expected that the sheer magnitude of the results would have attracted a great deal of attention, but this has actually been among the least requested of the studies done by the Chicago Consortium.

Still, there is a growing research base on various aspects of the supportive-authoritative balance problem. For one thing, it helps us understand more precisely the nature of African American educational disadvantage. In Chicago, students attending predominantly African American schools are much less likely than students in integrated schools to be in environments where teachers trust parents (about 42 percent of teachers in predominantly African American schools report strong trust, compared with 72 percent of teachers in integrated schools) and are less likely to be in places where teachers feel a strong sense of collective responsibility.[8] Another Chicago study shows that in high schools where student-teacher trust is high (taking that to be an analog for teacher support), students average 2.3 percent fewer absences per term, essentially one additional week of attendance over the school year. In schools with the highest levels of academic pressure, students averaged just under two fewer absences a year.[9]

At the elementary level, Ronald Ferguson, a scholar focused on racial achievement gaps, has found a relationship between how supportive the experience is for children and how they treat one another.[10] If children don't think the teacher both enjoys helping them and holds them to a high standard—what he calls a "high help/high perfectionism" classroom—their engagement and behavior deteriorate, which includes children treating one another poorly.

Clearly, we want to think of support and demand in tandem, but my guess would be that demands are especially important for Black students and for any others who have been branded intellectually inferior. More than 20 years ago, I studied Chicago's Westside High School, which for a very long time had been among Chicago's most disorganized and dangerous schools.[11] At various times, certain parts of the building were virtually ceded to some of the street gangs that infested the schools (and teachers in bad odor with the principal might find themselves regularly assigned to hall duty in those parts of the building). Relationships between the faculty and administration were so dysfunctional that kids could often do pretty much what they wanted. Talking to students who had been in more orderly environments, I found many who preferred more disciplined schools and worked harder in them, but once at Westside they found it hard not to yield to the temptations of being free. Nonetheless, there were individual teachers, teachers who had a "rep," who could clear the halls almost anytime they wanted. Many of these were black teachers and some were coaches, both groups thought to be less afraid of students.

Part of my work at Westside High

tries (for example, store cashiers, customer service representatives, fast-food servers, and custodial work). Whereas jobs in manufacturing industries typically were unionized, relatively stable, and carried higher wages, those for workers with low to modest levels of education in the retail and service industries tend to provide lower wages, be unstable, and lack the benefits and worker protections—such as workers' health insurance, medical leave, retirement benefits, and paid vacations—typically offered through unionization. This means that workers relegated to low-wage service and retail firms are more likely to experience hardships as they struggle to make ends meet. In addition, the local economy suffers when residents have fewer dollars to spend in their neighborhoods.[23]

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the employment balance between central cities and suburbs shifted markedly to the suburbs. Since 1980, over two-thirds of employment growth has occurred outside the central city: manufacturing is now over 70 percent suburban, and wholesale and retail trade is just under 70 percent.[24] The suburbs of many central cities, developed originally as bedroom localities for commuters to the central business and manufacturing districts, have become employment centers in themselves. For example, in Baltimore, Detroit, and Philadelphia, less than 20 percent of the jobs are now located within three miles of the city center.[25]

Accompanying the rise of suburban and exurban economies has been a change in commuting patterns. Increasingly, workers completely bypass the central city by commuting from one suburb to another. "In the Cleveland region, for example, less than one-third of workers commute to a job in the central city and over half (55 percent) begin and end in the suburbs."[26]

Sprawl and economic stagnation reduce inner-city residents' access to meaningful economic opportunities and thereby fuel the economic decline of their neighborhoods. For example, in Cleveland, although entry-level workers are concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods, 80 percent of the entry-level jobs are located in the suburbs,[27] and there is little public transportation between these neighborhoods and jobs.

In addition to the challenges in learning about and reaching jobs, there is persistent racial discrimination in hiring practices, especially for younger and less-experienced minority workers.[28] This racial factor affects black males especially seriously. Today, most of the new jobs for workers with limited education and experience are in the service sector, which includes jobs that tend to be held by women, such as waitstaff, sales clerks, and nurse's aides. Indeed, "employment rates of young black women now exceed those of young black men, even though many of these women must also care for children."[29] The shift to service jobs has resulted in a greater

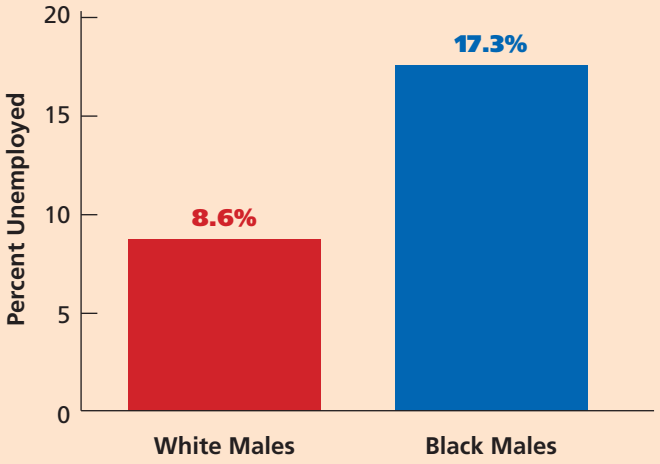
School involved trying to understand how students there understood their teachers and how that shaped student behavior. Thus, among other questions, I was asking, "What would a teacher have to be like before you said, 'That's a really good teacher'? How can you tell if a teacher is really concerned about students learning something in the course?" In response to the "really concerned" question, students stressed two things: *the really concerned teacher works hard to make the material clear, and, less intuitively, the really concerned teacher is demanding*. Clarity meant that the teacher should check notebooks, encourage questions, ask questions to see whether students understand, and provide students with some indication of their progress. This is again a conception of teaching reminiscent of our authoritative-supportive model; it sees the good teacher as aggressive, as actively making sure students are learning, not just leaving it up to the students. Pedro Noguera, an education professor and urban sociologist, found the same thinking among a group of students in Berkeley:[12]

> They look first for people who care.... Second, they respect teachers who are strict and hold students accountable. Third, they like teachers who teach them something. When they found a teacher who was caring, strict and challenging, they responded really well [despite the fact that] some of these students had criminal records or missed more days than they attended.

When students at Westside said that the concerned teacher is demanding, they meant that the serious teacher will make students walk the straight and narrow, stay on their backs about homework and attendance, stop them from fooling around and wasting time in class. Students talked in some detail about what made them think a teacher was "nice," but they clearly separated that from what made a teacher effec-

Calling for Change in the Unemployment Rate

In the second quarter of 2010, among adults age 20 and older, the unemployment rate of black males was twice as high as that of white males.



SOURCE: *A CALL FOR CHANGE*, FIGURE 6.2 (DATA FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS).

demand for workers who can effectively serve and relate to the consumer. In an extensive study in Chicago that my colleagues and I conducted, many employers indicated they felt that, unlike women and immigrants (who have recently expanded the labor pool for service-sector jobs), inner-city black males lack these qualities.[30] Instead, low-skilled black males are perceived as dangerous or threatening. In the past, all black men had to demonstrate was a strong back and muscles for heavy lifting and physical labor in a factory, at a construction site, or on an assembly line. They did not have to interact with customers. Today, they have to search for work in the service sector, and employers are less likely to hire them because they have to come into contact with the public. Consequently, black male job-seekers face rising rates of rejection. This may well account for the higher dropout rate and lower academic achievement of black males in comparison with black females. Black males are far less likely than black females to see a strong relationship between their schooling and postschool employment.

With the departure of higher-income families, the least upwardly mobile in society—mainly low-income people of color—are left behind in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty and deteriorating physical conditions. These neighborhoods offer few jobs and typically lack basic services and amenities, such as banks, grocery stores and other retail establishments, parks, and quality transit.[31] Typically, these communities also suffer from substandard schools, many with run-

tive. In fact, when it comes to misbehavior, students thought that the teachers who were "too nice" were going to catch more than their share of trouble.

Asked to explain why they cooperated more with some teachers than others—worked hard, paid attention in class, came to class—about half the students said they put out the same level of effort in all classes. The other students overwhelmingly saw themselves as working harder for those teachers who were both more serious about teaching and more insistent on appropriate behavior. It was clearly the perceived quality of teaching in combination with demanding behavior that had the most impact on student behavior. When demands were separated from good teaching (i.e., when poor teachers tried to put pressure on), that could be interpreted as a put-down. Students may respond to demanding teachers, but only if they have somehow legitimated their right to be demanding.

Theresa Perry, a professor who studies high achievement among African American youth, has provided what I think is the best context for thinking about this: "The task of achievement ... is distinctive for African Americans because doing school requires that you use your mind, and the ideology of the larger society has always been about questioning the mental capacity of African Americans, about questioning Black intellectual competence."[13]

Whatever intellectual demands mean to everyone else, they mean something more to Black kids and other stigmatized populations because they are in dialogue with a different history. Demanding behavior, properly couched, welcomes you to the table; it signifies your membership in the larger moral and intellectual community. Like the rest of us, kids may enjoy an undemanding environment if they can get it; once they get accustomed to it, it can be a real project to change their habits. At the same time, they can be sophisticated enough to understand, at some level, that it means somebody thinks they can't do better. □

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down physical plants. Two of the most visible indicators of neighborhood decline are abandoned buildings and vacant lots. According to one recent report, there are 60,000 abandoned and vacant properties in Philadelphia, 40,000 in Detroit, and 26,000 in Baltimore.[32]

Cultural Forces

In addition to racial and nonracial political and economic forces, cultural forces may also contribute to or reinforce racial inequality. Two types of cultural forces are in play: (1) national views and beliefs on race, and (2) cultural traits—shared outlooks, modes of behavior, traditions, belief systems, worldviews, values, skills, preferences, styles of self-presentation, etiquette, and linguistic patterns—that emerge from patterns of intragroup interaction in settings created by discrimination and segregation and that reflect collective experiences within those settings.

Racism has historically been one of the most prominent American cultural frames and has played a major role in determining how whites perceive and act toward blacks. At its core, racism is an ideology of racial domination with two key features: (1) beliefs that one race is either biologically or culturally inferior to another, and (2) the use of such beliefs to rationalize or prescribe the way members of the "inferior" race should be treated as well as to explain their social position as a group and their collective accomplishments. Today, there is no question that the more categorical forms of racist ideology—in particular, those that assert the biogenetic inferiority of blacks—have declined significantly, even though they still may be embedded in institutional norms and practices. For example, school tracking, the practice of grouping students of similar capability for instruction, not only tends to segregate African American students but often results in placing some black students in lower-level classes, even though they have the cultural capital—requisite skills for learning—to compete with students in higher-level classes.[33]

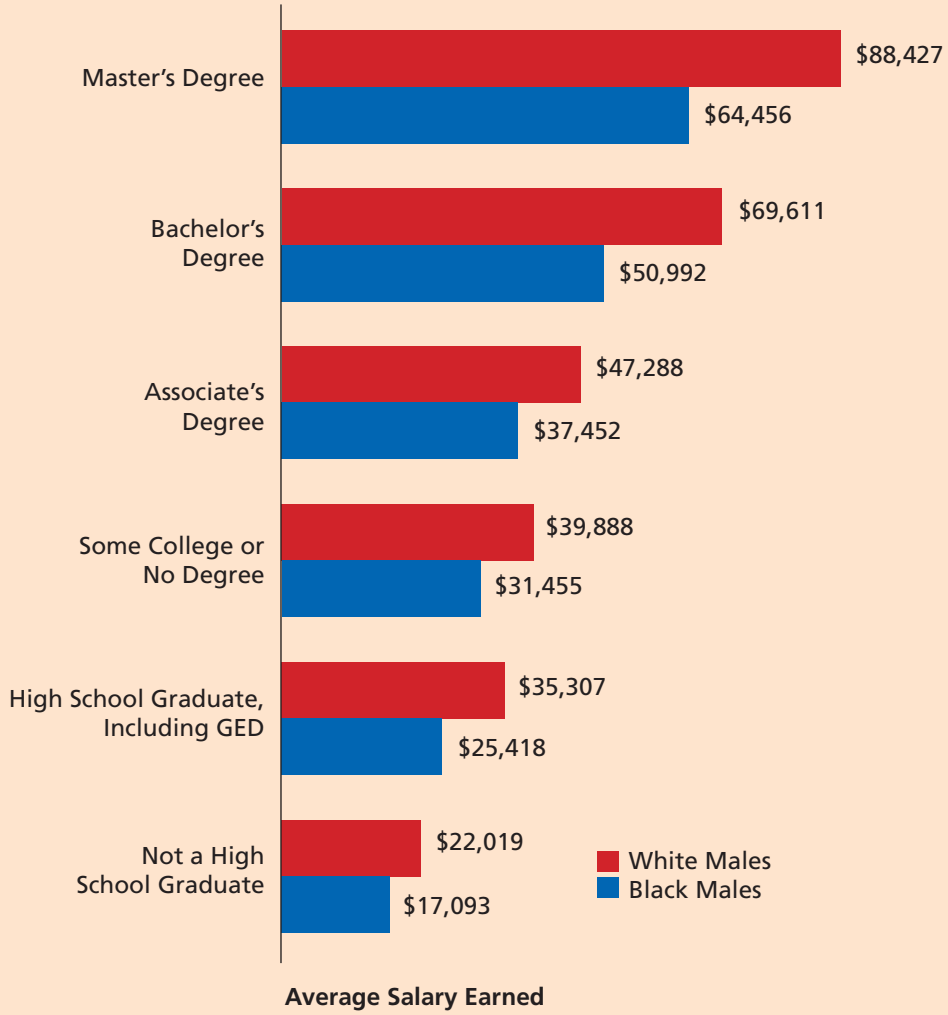
However, there has emerged a form of what some scholars refer to as "laissez faire racism," a perception that blacks are responsible for their own economic predicament and therefore are undeserving of special government support.[34] The idea that the federal government "has a special obligation to help improve the living standards of blacks" because they "have been discriminated against for so long" was supported by only one in five whites in 2001, and has not exceeded support by more than one in four since 1975. Significantly, the lack of white support for this idea is not related to background factors such as level of education or age.

The vast majority of social scientists agree that as a national cultural frame, racism, in its various forms, has had harmful effects on African Americans as a group. Indeed, considerable research has been devoted to the effects of racism in American society. However, there is little research and far less awareness of the impact of emerging cultural frames in the inner city on the social and economic outcomes of poor blacks. Note that distinct cultural frames in the inner city have not only been shaped by race and poverty, but in turn often shape responses to poverty, including responses that may contribute to the perpetuation of poverty. Moreover, an important research question for social scientists is the following: how much of the framing of racial beliefs at the national level is based on the actual observed cultural traits among the inner-city poor and how much of it is the result of biased media reports and racial stereotypes?

In my own earlier work, I have discussed at length how several factors determine the extent to which communities, as areas bounded by place, differ in outlook and behavior.[35] These factors include the degree to which the community is socially isolated

Calling for Change in the Income Gap

In 2006, black males age 18 and older earned, on average, lower incomes than white males with similar educational backgrounds.



SOURCE: *A CALL FOR CHANGE*, FIGURE 6.6 (DATA FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE, CENSUS BUREAU, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (CPS), OCTOBER, 1967 THROUGH 2008).

from the broader society; the material assets or resources controlled by members of the community; the benefits and privileges the community members derive from these resources; their accumulated cultural experiences from current as well as historical, political, and economic arrangements; and the influence members of the community wield because of these arrangements.

Culture is closely intertwined with social relations in the sense of providing tools (skills, habits, and styles) and creating constraints (restrictions on behavior or outlooks) in patterns of social interaction.[36] These constraints include cultural frames (shared visions of human behavior) developed over time through the processes of in-group meaning making (shared views on how the world works) and decision making (choices that reflect shared definitions of how the world works)—for example, in the inner-city ghetto cultural frames define issues of trust/street smarts and "acting black" or "acting white"—that lead to observable group characteristics.*

One of the effects of living in racially segregated neighborhoods is exposure to group-specific cultural traits (cultural frames, orientations, habits, and worldviews as well as styles of behavior and particular skills) that emerged from patterns of racial exclusion and that may not be conducive to social mobility. For example, research has found that some groups in the inner city put a high value on "street smarts," the behaviors and actions that keep them safe in areas of high crime.[38] Street smarts may be an adaptation to living in unsafe neighborhoods. In this environment, it is wise to avoid eye contact with strangers and keep to yourself. This mindset may also lead someone to approach new situations with a certain level of skepticism or mistrust. Although such an approach is logical and smart in an unsafe neighborhood, the same behavior can be interpreted as antisocial in another setting. Moreover, this street-smart behavior may, in some cases, prevent individuals from performing well on a job interview, creating a perception that they are not desirable job candidates.

Other concrete examples from the writings of sociologists Elijah Anderson and Sudhir Venkatesh on ghetto experiences might prove to be even more illuminating.[39] Each author reveals the existence of informal rules in the inner-city ghetto that govern interactions and shape how people engage one another and make decisions. This decision making is influenced partly by how people come to view their world over time—what we call "meaning making." It is important to remember that the processes of meaning making and decision making evolve in situations imposed by poverty and racial segregation—situations that place severe constraints on social mobility. Over time, these processes lead to the development of informal codes that regulate behavior.

First of all, Anderson talks about the "code of the street," an informal but explicit set of rules developed to govern interpersonal public behavior and regulate violence in Philadelphia's inner-city ghetto neighborhoods, where crime is high and police protection is low. Anderson argues that the issue of respect is at the root of the code. In a context of limited opportunities for success, some individuals in the community, most notably young black males, devise alternative ways to gain respect that emphasize manly pride, ranging from simply wearing brand-name clothing, to having the "right look" and talking the right way, to developing a predatory attitude toward neighbors. Anderson points out, however, that no one residing in these troubled neighborhoods is unaffected by the code of the street—especially young people, who are drawn into this negative culture both on the streets and in the schools, as they must frequently adopt "street" behavior as a form of self-defense. As Anderson puts it, "the code of the street is actually a cultural adaptation to a profound lack of faith in the police and the judicial system—and in others who would champion one's personal security."[40]

A related informal but regulated pattern of behavior was described by Venkatesh in his study of the underground economy in ghetto neighborhoods. Venkatesh points out that "the underground arena is not simply a place to buy goods and services. It is also a field of social relationships that enable off-the-books trading to occur in an ordered and predictable manner."[41] This trading often results in disagreements or breaches because there

*There is mixed evidence for the outcomes of "acting white" as it applies to education. One of the most well-known studies of this concept was published by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu in 1986. They studied African American students at a high school in Washington, DC, and concluded that the fear of acting white was one of the major factors undermining student achievement. In contrast, Prudence Carter's studies have not supported the idea that students who avoided "acting white" held lower educational aspirations. Roland Fryer presents yet another perspective. He found that a high grade point average (GPA) presents a social disadvantage for Hispanics and blacks in integrated schools and public schools, but he saw no such effect in schools that were segregated (80 percent or more black) or private. He also noticed a marked difference in this effect among black boys and black girls; black boys in public, integrated schools were particularly susceptible to social ostracism as their GPAs increased, and were penalized seven times more than black students (including both genders) overall.[37]

are no laws on the books, but "in situations ostensibly criminal and often threatening to personal security, there is still a structure in place that shapes how people make decisions and engage one another."[42] In other words, informal rules actually govern what would appear on the surface to be random underground activity. These rules stipulate what is expected of those involved in these informal exchanges and where they should meet. Just as Anderson describes a "code of the street," Venkatesh talks about a "code of shady dealings."

Like Anderson in his effort to explain the emergence of the code of the street, Venkatesh argues that the code of shady dealings is a response to circumstances in inner-city ghetto neighborhoods, where joblessness is high and opportunities for advancement are severely limited. Furthermore, both Anderson and Venkatesh clearly argue that these cultural codes ultimately hinder integration into the boarder society and are therefore dysfunctional. In other words, they contribute to the perpetuation of poverty.

Anderson finds that for some young men, the draw of the street is so powerful that they cannot avail themselves of legitimate employment opportunities when they become available. Likewise, Venkatesh maintains that adherence to the code of shady dealings impedes social mobility. The "underground economy enables people to survive but can lead to alienation from the wider world," he states.[43] For example, none of the work experience accrued in the informal economy can be listed on a resume for job searches in the formal labor market, and time invested in underground work reduces time devoted to accumulating skills or contacts for legitimate employment.

However, many liberal scholars are reluctant to discuss or research the role that culture plays in the negative outcomes found in the inner city. It is possible that they fear being criticized for reinforcing the popular view that negative social outcomes—poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, crime—are due to the shortcomings of the people themselves. Indeed, sociologist Orlando Patterson maintains that there is "a deep-seated dogma that has prevailed in social science and policy circles since the mid-1960s: the rejection of any explanation that invokes a group's cultural attributes—its distinctive attitudes, values and tendencies, and the resulting behavior of its members—and the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing."[44]

Patterson claims that social scientists have shied away from cultural explanations of race and poverty because of the widespread belief that such explanations are tantamount to blaming the victim; that is, they support the conclusion that the poor themselves, and not the social environment, are responsible for their own poverty and negative social outcomes. He colorfully contends that it is "utterly bogus" to argue, as do by many academics, that cultural explanations necessarily blame the victim for poor social outcomes. To hold an individual responsible for his behavior is not to rule out any consideration of the environmental factors that may have evoked the questionable behavior to begin with. "Many victims of child abuse end up behaving in self-destructive ways," Patterson states. "To point out the link between their behavior and the destructive acts is in no way to deny the causal role of their earlier victimization and the need to address it."[45] Patterson also contends that a cultural explanation of human behavior not only examines the immediate relationship between attitudes and behavior but also looks at the past to investigate the origins and changing nature of these attitudes.

I agree with Patterson that cultural explanations should be part of any attempt to fully account for such behavior and outcomes. And I think it is equally important to acknowledge that recognizing the important role of cultural influences in creating different racial group outcomes does not require us to ignore or play down the much greater role of social, political, and economic forces that are clearly racial, as well as those that are ostensibly nonracial.

I also strongly agree with Patterson that an adequate explanation of cultural attributes in the black community must explore the origins and changing nature of attitudes and practices going back decades, even centuries. Unfortunately such analyses are complex and difficult.[46] For example, sociologist Kathryn Neckerman had to conduct years of research to provide the historical evidence to explain why so many black youngsters and their parents lose faith in the public schools. She shows in her book, *Schools Betrayed*, that a century ago, when African American children in most northern cities attended schools alongside white children, the problems commonly associated with inner-city

schools—low achievement and dropping out—were not nearly as pervasive as they are today.[47]

Neckerman carefully documents how city officials responded to increases in the African American student population: by introducing and enforcing segregation between black and white children in the city schools. And she discusses at length how poor white immigrant children—whose family circumstances were at least as impoverished as their black counterparts—received more and better resources for their education. "The roots of classroom alienation, antagonism, and disorder can be found in school policy decisions made long before the problems of inner-city schools attracted public attention," states Neckerman.[48] Clearly, we can more fully understand the frustration and current cultural dynamics in inner-city neighborhoods, in this case with reference to public schools, if we understand the history that work like Neckerman's uncovers.

Finally, although culture "partly determines behavior, it also enables people to change behavior."[49] Culture provides a frame for individuals to understand their world. By ignoring or only investigating culture at a superficial level, social scientists miss an opportunity to help people understand and then reframe attitudes in a way that promotes desirable behavior and outcomes.[50] However, attitudes must be reframed in conjunction with programs that address structural inequities.

For those committed to fighting inequality, especially those involved in multiracial coalition politics, the lesson from this discussion of key social, political, economic, and cultural forces is to fashion a new agenda that gives more scrutiny to both racial and nonracial policies. Given our devastating recent recession and slow, jobless recovery, it is especially important to scrutinize fiscal, monetary, and trade policies that may have long-term consequences for our national and regional economies. *We must ameliorate the primary problem feeding concentrated poverty: inner-city joblessness*. The ideal solution would be economic policies that produce a tight labor market—that is, one in which there are ample jobs for all applicants. More than any other group, low-skilled workers depend upon a strong economy, particularly a sustained tight labor market.

This new agenda should also include an even sharper focus on traditional efforts to fight poverty, to ensure that the benefits from any economic upturn are widely shared among the poor and that they become less vulnerable to downward swings in the economy. I refer especially to the following:

- combating racial discrimination in employment, which is especially devastating during slack labor markets;
- revitalizing poor urban neighborhoods, including eliminating abandoned buildings and vacant lots to make them more attractive for economic investment that would help improve the quality of life and create jobs in the neighborhood;
- promoting job training programs to enhance employment opportunities for ghetto residents;
- improving public education to prepare inner-city youngsters for higher-paying and stable jobs in the new economy; and
- strengthening unions to provide the higher wages, worker protections, and benefits typically absent from low-skilled jobs in retail and service industries.

In short, this new agenda would reflect a multipronged approach that attacks inner-city poverty on various levels, an approach that recognizes the complex array of factors that have contributed to the crystallization of concentrated urban poverty and limited the life chances of so many inner-city residents. ❑

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(Continued on page 46)

Being Poor and Black

(Continued from page 23)

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