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Trapped On the Treadmill Of Poverty

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THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: The Inner City, the Underclass And Public Policy By
William Julius Wilson. University of Chicago Press 254 pp. \$ 19.95

THE LAST two decades have witnessed a spiraling and ongoing economic decline in America's black inner-city neighborhoods. By virtually any social or economic yardstick -- employment, schools, crime or housing -- conditions today are dramatically worse than they were in the early 1960s.

Hence "the fundamental question," as William Julius Wilson asks in this bluntly honest and politically challenging book, is, "Why have the social conditions of the urban underclass deteriorated so rapidly since the mid-1960s and especially since 1970?"

Wilson emphasizes that there is no single, simple answer. In part the decline seems especially puzzling because it has occurred "during the very period in which the most sweeping antidiscrimination legislation and programs have been enacted and implemented." He accordingly stresses that present day racism -- as distinct from the ongoing legacy of past discrimination -- is not a significant part of the answer. Additionally, explaining and remedying this catastrophe has been and still is made more difficult by the extreme reluctance of many liberal scholars and politicians to acknowledge its full dimensions. Indeed, some political figures, such as Massachusetts governor and Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, reject the existence of any "underclass" and refuse even to use the word, a position Wilson views as both regrettable and harmful.

The shocking statistics cannot be ignored. In 1959, only 15 percent of black births were to single mothers. By 1982, 57 percent of black babies were born to unmarried women. In 1959, "only 30 percent of all poor black families were headed by women . . . but by 1978 the proportion reached 74 percent." Most strikingly, by 1983 "46 percent of black children under eighteen years of age resided in families whose incomes were below the poverty level."

In education the numbers are even more depressing. "Of the 39,500 students who enrolled in the ninth grade of Chicago's public schools in 1980 . . .," Wilson reports, "four years later in the spring of 1984, only 18,500 (or 47 percent) graduated; of these only 6,000 were capable of reading at or above the national twelfth-grade level."

Wilson offers a sophisticated and persuasive explanation of how and why these devastating conditions have developed. The crucial -- and greatly altered -- central element is the employment options for black men. Between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, the four largest

northern central cities (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit) lost more than one million unskilled or relatively low-skilled jobs -- the types of jobs to which previous generations of under-educated young men had access, and the types of jobs that could have offered appropriate employment to high school dropouts or poorly skilled graduates.

URBAN JOB growth instead has increasingly moved towards positions requiring better skills and advanced training, creating "a serious mismatch between the skills of inner-city blacks and the opportunities available to them." The results of this long-term structural change in America's employment market are powerful as well as dramatic: "the proportion of black men who are employed has dropped from 80 percent in 1930 to 56 percent in 1983," thus representing a tremendous decline "in the proportion of black men . . . who are in a position to support a family." Wilson hence concludes that "the increasing inability of black men to support a family" -- and not the supposed attractiveness of welfare benefits, as some conservative commentators have contended -- "is the driving force behind the rise of female-headed families."

It is from this devastatingly powerful interplay of poor education, minimal male employment opportunities, young mothers lacking "marriageable" (i.e. employed) men with whom to raise families, and children being reared in single-parent, poverty-stricken and often welfare-dependent households that the full panoply of urban underclass pathologies -- drug dealing and addiction, black-on-black crime, alcoholism -- emerges so extensively.

Wilson emphasizes that systemic economic changes, rather than individual characteristics or ghetto cultural values, account for the extensiveness of those self-destructive pathologies. He explicitly rejects any "culture of poverty" interpretation -- "that basic values and attitudes of the ghetto subculture have been internalized and thereby influence behavior" -- and instead highlights the importance of the underclass' "social isolation" -- "the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" -- and how ghetto culture "is a response to social structural constraints and opportunities."

That isolation, which has increased tremendously as middle-class and many working-class black families have left the original inner city neighborhoods for suburbia, is a reflection of the increasingly important class bifurcation that exists in black America: "income inequality is greater and has increased at a faster rate among black families than among white families from 1966 to 1981." Indeed Wilson, a prominent University of Chicago sociologist whose previous book, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), won widespread attention in part because of how it highlighted that increasing bifurcation, argues very convincingly that most present-day race-conscious public policies do little if any good for members of the black underclass, for most of the fruits of such policies -- college or graduate school admissions, job opportunities and minority contractor set-asides -- go almost exclusively to better-off members of the black community.

In fact, he suggests, affirmative action policies may increase the economic schism within black America, for if such benefits "are conceived not in terms of the actual disadvantages suffered by individuals but rather in terms of race or ethnic group membership, then these policies will further enhance the opportunities of the more advantaged without addressing the problems of the truly disadvantaged."

Wilson's foremost desire is to convince American political activists and policymakers that the devastating problems of the urban black underclass are not problems of blacks as blacks, and hence should not be addressed -- and cannot be solved -- by race-specific programs. If properly understood, Wilson's repeated emphasis on the growth and economic success of the black middle class ("The number of blacks in professional, technical, managerial, and administrative positions increased by 57 percent . . . from 1973 to 1982, while the number of whites in such positions increased by only 36 percent") is a central part of his argument for advocating such a policy agenda.

Wilson's advocacy of non-race-specific employment and labor market policies for really addressing the crisis of the black urban underclass follows clearly from his analysis of the underclass' distinct plight, and his admittedly brief detailing of a full employment policy agenda breaks no new ground. However, his clear understanding of the underclass' structurally dismal employment situation leads Wilson to a decidedly realistic evaluation of the prospects for any short-term progress. Even with the most successful of "workfare" programs, Wilson notes, the actual effectiveness "ultimately depends upon the availability of jobs in a given area" -- nothing more and nothing less.

Achieving the full employment economic policies that will aid the underclass will require "the support and commitment of a broad constituency" -- no easy achievement. More than 22 years ago, as Wilson notes, the late Bayard Rustin prophetically but unsuccessfully tried to convince the entire American civil rights community -- as he did persuade Martin Luther King, Jr. -- that the movement's future agenda would necessarily be an economic one, and that a broad-based electoral coalition, including the labor movement, was the strategic path that would have to be followed. Now, after two decades of dismal economic deterioration within much of black America, William Julius Wilson refocuses our attention on the importance of that agenda and the necessity of that strategy. His insightful and tough-minded book is required reading for anyone, presidential candidate or private citizen, who really wants to address the growing plight of the black urban underclass.

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