

Minorities and poverty

A forthcoming Institute volume provides the most comprehensive assessment to date of the relative status of minority groups in the United States. Advancing beyond the black-white comparisons that have dominated the literature of the past, it compares the economic well-being of American Indians and specific Hispanic groups as well as of blacks and whites and evaluates the shifts that have occurred in their situation over the past quarter century.

Building on an Institute-sponsored conference on minorities and poverty which was held in November 1986 (a special issue of *Focus*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Summer 1987, summarized its proceedings), the chapters in this volume examine the changing economic status and family makeup of the various minority groups, assess the antipoverty effectiveness of public transfers, compare educational differences, and analyze the problems of the homeless, the jobless, and families in poverty. The difficult question of whether social programs should treat different groups uniformly or give them special consideration is addressed, and the past and possible future course of social policy toward minorities is discussed.

Almost twenty-five years ago Congress passed and President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, which would, it was hoped, counter the effects of disadvantage and discrimination and improve the lot of American minorities. In their Epilogue, the volume editors review events since that time and find mixed results. Opportunities have indeed been opened for some members of minority groups: the number of black and Hispanic elected officials has dramatically increased, and a black middle class is thriving. On the other hand, some members within the different groups have fallen even further behind: the circumstances of Puerto Ricans have worsened, as have those of American Indians on reservations. Conditions in central cities have deteriorated, and minority members are disproportionately represented among their residents.

In the 1960s policymakers had strong faith in the ability of economic growth to win the fight against poverty. But the prosperity of that decade was followed by stagnation and inflation in the 1970s and recessions in the early 1980s. Noting that "the struggle against poverty is far from over," Sandefur and Tienda emphasize "that the greatest challenges for policy to reduce poverty lie ahead" (p. 266).

The editors review policy developments since the 1960s. Several issues that were of particular interest a quarter century ago continue to dominate discussions today. One concerns the low labor force participation and high unemployment rates among minorities, documented by Charles Hirschman (Chapter 3). In contrast with the earlier consen-

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sus, however, the forces that result in high unemployment have now become the subject of debate. Disagreement exists over whether it is a lack of jobs or a preference for the rewards of an underground economy that account for the low work effort of black and Hispanic men in central cities. Although policy attention continues to focus on the problems of the inner city, Sandefur and Tienda caution that the condition of the minority poor in other areas must not be neglected—Indians on reservations, blacks in the rural South, Hispanics in the Southwest.

The circumstances of minority children remain a subject of concern. The volume demonstrates that increasingly large proportions of them are growing up with inadequate housing, clothing, health care, and educational opportunities. As adults they will scarcely be in a position to compete in modern society. The editors urge that policies to aid such children be placed high on the agenda.

New issues have emerged in recent years. William Julius Wilson (in Chapter 9) and Lawrence Mead (Chapter 10) argue different sides of the question of the obligations and responsibilities of the poor. Is the worsening situation of inner-city residents a result of their social isolation and the disappearance of jobs paying a decent wage, as Wilson suggests, or is the major impediment to improvement the failure of welfare programs to require work in return for assistance, as Mead asserts?

Contents: *Divided Opportunities*

Foreword, by Sheldon Danziger

1. Introduction: Social Policy and the Minority Experience
Gary D. Sandefur and Marta Tienda

Part I: The Economic Status of Minority Groups

2. Poverty and Minorities: A Quarter-Century Profile of Color and Socioeconomic Disadvantage
Marta Tienda and Leif Jensen
3. Minorities in the Labor Market: Cyclical Patterns and Secular Trends in Joblessness
Charles Hirschman
4. Minorities and Homelessness
Peter H. Rossi
5. Poverty and Immigration in the United States, 1960–1980
Leif Jensen

Part II: Family and Intergenerational Processes

6. Poverty and the Family
James P. Smith
7. Ethnic and Racial Patterns of Educational Attainment and School Enrollment
Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship

Comment: A Note on the Effect of Family Structure on School Enrollment, by Sara S. McLanahan and Larry Bumpass

Part III: Social Policy

8. The Duality in Federal Policy toward Minority Groups, 1787–1987
Gary D. Sandefur
9. Social Policy and Minority Groups: What Might Have Been and What Might We See in the Future?
William Julius Wilson
10. Social Responsibility and Minority Poverty: A Response to William Julius Wilson
Lawrence M. Mead
11. Epilogue
Gary D. Sandefur and Marta Tienda

Another new policy issue concerns the role of local, state, and federal governments in designing and administering social welfare policy. Whereas antipoverty policy in the 1960s tended to centralize such efforts, support has grown

from the mid-1970s onward for state and local control over welfare programs.

Finally, the issue of homelessness has recently been forced on public consciousness. Peter Rossi (Chapter 4) documents its extent among minority groups and the need to devise policies to combat it.

Sandefur and Tienda close their Epilogue with comments on the way in which research on minorities has altered since the 1960s. The creation of new data sets, both cross-sectional and longitudinal, means that we now have more information on, and consequently pay more research attention to, Hispanic groups, Asian groups, and American Indians in addition to blacks. This more comprehensive view enhances our understanding of the shared and the distinctive elements in the experience of various minorities.

The material assembled in this volume “brings the reader to the social science frontier,” in the words of Sheldon Danziger, outgoing Institute director, in his Foreword to the book. Only by continuing along the avenues it has laid out can we succeed in gaining the information required to inform social policy and improve the status of minority citizens who are at a disadvantage in U.S. society. ■

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