Minories 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-
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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