Beyond the safety net

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This essay was originally going to be about forty years of real, if uneven, progress against material poverty. But in writing it, I found myself excluding large numbers of African Americans from the general progress that has been made. For them, poverty is deeper, more persistent, and, I fear, more difficult to ameliorate. I want, therefore, to focus on just one aspect of poverty policy: poverty in the African American community, and what can be done about it. Although I will focus on the plight of low-skilled African Americans, all my policy recommendations, except one, apply to all poor Americans.

First, some good news. Between 1968 and 2005, the black poverty rate fell from 35 percent to about 25 percent.1 And as Table 1 shows, between 1974 (the first year such data are available) and 2004, the percentage of African Americans with any earnings at all grew over 20 percent faster than their increase in numbers; their mean earnings rose 57 percent; and their per capita earnings by 72 percent, to $12,696. At the same time, per capita earnings for whites (not shown) rose from $12,882 to $20,328, about a 58 percent rise.

At the same time, some African Americans are mired at the bottom. Figure 1 portrays just one dimension of their situation; it shows the income of males ages 25 to 34 by race. For present purposes, the most striking thing is the high portion of black men with zero reported income: about 18 percent for blacks, compared to about 7 percent for whites and Hispanics. Although some of these men are in school, this figure is a fair measure of how many black men are disconnected from the mainstream economy. Another issue, of course, is the relative absence of African Americans from the right side of this distribution.2

In 2005, blacks were more than three times as likely as whites to be in “deep poverty,” that is, to have incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line (11.7 percent versus 3.5 percent). Hispanics were about twice as likely as whites to be poor (8.6 percent versus 3.5 percent). These patterns have not changed for at least fifteen years.3 African Americans also have longer spells in poverty. According to the Survey of Income and Program Participation, from 1996 to 1999, African Americans were about 50 percent more likely than whites to have had spells lasting more than a year, about 80 percent more likely to have had spells lasting more than two years, and about 70 percent more likely to have had spells lasting more than three years. Hispanic spell rates, by contrast, were about a quarter higher than white rates.4

What lies behind these numbers? I have always believed that, beyond any structural problems in the economy that may have aggravated black poverty (and poverty in general), the 100-year history of Jim Crow oppression and exploitation (on top of a century and a half of slavery) left African Americans especially vulnerable to the economic and social shifts of the second half of the twentieth century. (Daniel Patrick Moynihan called it “the earthquake that shuddered through the American family.”5)

We tend to forget that Jim Crow was a reality for many African Americans as recently as the 1960s and early 1970s. As a civil rights worker in Mississippi in the late 1960s, I saw the conditions that Nicholas Lemann described in his book, The Promised Land.6 Tenant farmers lived in tar paper shacks and in perpetual debt to the

### Table 1
Black Earners and Earnings
1974 vs. 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Population (000s)</th>
<th>Number of Wage/Salary Earners (000s)</th>
<th>Earners as % of Total Population</th>
<th>Mean Earnings*</th>
<th>Per Capita Earnings*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>24,402</td>
<td>9,780</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>$18,262</td>
<td>$7,386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>39,229</td>
<td>17,382</td>
<td>44.3%</td>
<td>$428,652</td>
<td>$12,696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>+61%</td>
<td>+76%</td>
<td>+10%</td>
<td>+57%</td>
<td>+72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

landowner or local grocery store. Entire towns were denied water and sewer service because they were black. Diseased black children were refused admission to county hospitals. Separate schools for “colored” students made a mockery of the claim of “separate but equal.” In the black and white schools that I visited for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the differences were palpable and shocking. In one white school, an entire gymnasium wall was covered with the musical instruments for the marching band. The “equal” black school had only one beat-up trumpet, and nothing else. Mississippi welfare policy, when I was there, could have been called “move first” instead of “work first.” Black mothers signing up for assistance were told that there were jobs (and better welfare benefits) in the North. In Clarksdale, where I was located, the migration flow went to Chicago, so the black mothers were given bus tickets to Chicago.7

My main complaint, thus, about the last forty years of poverty policy is that it has not sufficiently appreciated the terrible impact of this experience on so many African Americans, and it has not mounted the kinds of programmatic interventions capable of undoing it.

The explosion of welfare recipiency is just one small example of what happened when an oppressed population was finally given access to welfare benefits. Figure 2 portrays the AFDC/TANF caseload from 1936 to 2003. During the period 1960 to 1970, the national welfare caseload more than tripled at the same time that the unemployment rate was cut in half, from almost 6.7 percent to under 3.5 percent.8 This sharp rise in the national caseload was the direct result of the liberalization of welfare policies that allowed an ever larger number of legally eligible African Americans to receive welfare, first in the North, then in the mid-South, and then in the deep South.9 It is concrete evidence of pent-up human need, finally addressed with the end of Jim Crow welfare rules.

I am less enthusiastic about income support programs (cash and noncash) than are many others engaged in welfare policy discussions. I worry that incentives and phase-out rates can discourage work, penalize marriage, and encourage unexpected and counterproductive patterns of behavior.10 Most important, income support is not designed to bring a large proportion of low-skilled African Americans, especially the men, into the labor force. And, an increase in work must be an essential component of any successful poverty reduction strategy.

Many researchers have inventoried the achievement deficits and behaviors that sharply constrict the job prospects of African Americans, especially men.11 In 2004, for example, black males between ages 25 and 29 were seven

Figure 1. Male earnings distribution, ages 25–34.

times more likely than their white counterparts to be in prison, 8.4 percent compared to 1.2 percent. A criminal record makes it even more difficult to be hired. Further reducing the job prospects of low-skilled blacks is the competition they now face from Hispanic immigrants. This is evident in Figure 3, the proportions of blacks and Hispanic workers in some skilled trades—mechanics and repairers, construction trades, and precision production occupations. Although the data for 1984 and 1999 are not completely compatible with the data for 2004, they are close enough to show the trend. During this fifteen-year period, the proportion of workers in these occupations who are Hispanic about doubled, but the proportion of blacks stayed about the same. The number employed in these occupations rose in this period (although at only half the rate of total employment), but this nevertheless suggests that Hispanic workers took the place of zero-income black men in the job queue.

And that is why analysts on the left and right—most recently Harry Holzer, Peter Edelman, and the late Paul Offner—have also focused their energies on those kinds of programs that might break the cycle of poverty that traps so many African Americans (and especially African American men). The track record for such efforts is disappointing. So, briefly, let me outline what I would try to do differently in three areas:

- Building human capital,
- Reducing unwanted pregnancies, and
- Undoing hidden racial discrimination.

### Building human capital

Despite the political rhetoric and the advocacy of interest groups, few policy analysts seem to be strong proponents of remedial job training and education, because of the disappointing results in so many studies. Perhaps job training and education programs have not been given a full and fair test, but it is difficult to see how we could ever mount a large enough and successful enough effort to put a significant dent in the problem. Instead, it is time to acknowledge that we have a serious and deep-seated problem that requires much more intensive and effective responses at various points in the lives of disadvantaged young people.

Recently, there have been claims, for which I believe the evidence is weak, that expanded preschool programs
(resembling Head Start) could eradicate the black/white achievement gap, reduce high school drop-out rates, cut teen parenthood rates, raise earnings, and prevent crime.\textsuperscript{17} Properly oriented, such programs might be the basis of an effort to improve the child-rearing and other skills of young mothers, but such an effort would take a generation to show real results. Even then it would probably not be enough to counter the other forces that conspire to hold back so many disadvantaged children.

We need a permanent, institutionalized platform from which to provide vastly more effective educational services to disadvantaged youth, starting in their early teen years. We have a name for that platform. It is called “school.” It is difficult to see how there can be a real improvement in the life prospects of disadvantaged children without better schools. The Department of Education’s rigorous research effort under Grover Whitehurst and Phoebe Cottingham is a good start.\textsuperscript{18} But the effort should be much larger, so that it can test many more approaches simultaneously. We need to gain knowledge about what works, and what does not work, at a much faster pace than in the past. Besides academic subjects, I would argue for a sustained and clear-eyed commitment to career and technical education, including for various craft trades. College is not a realistic goal for many disadvantaged young people, but a dignified and well-paying job is. As Table 2 shows, there will be a continuing demand for workers with less than a college education.\textsuperscript{19} There is evidence, most recently from MDRC, showing that career-type academies (and some versions of what used to be called “voc ed”) can raise school attendance and graduation rates, raise later earnings, and, in some cases, even increase college attendance.\textsuperscript{20}

Reducing unwanted pregnancies

Michael Novak was, I think, the first to say that the family was the original Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.\textsuperscript{21} Now that there is a separate Department of Education, the line does not work so well—but the underlying point is still as true as ever. I think all of us, even the skeptics, are eager to see the results of various evaluations of family-strengthening activities such as
Table 2
Employment and Job Openings
By Education or Training Category (2000–2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education or Training Category</th>
<th>Total Job Openings (2000–2010)</th>
<th>Employment (percent distribution)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number (thousands)</td>
<td>Percent Distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s or higher degree</td>
<td>12,130</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc. degree or postsec. vocational</td>
<td>5,383</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-related job training</td>
<td>40,419</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3
Cumulative Abortions for Women Ages 40–44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Pregnancy Outcomes as Teens</th>
<th>Total Number of Women*</th>
<th>Number of Abortions in Lifetime</th>
<th>Cumulative Abortions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of Abortions*</td>
<td>Percent Distribution</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Pregnancy Occurred in Teen Years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live teen birth</td>
<td>4,078</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen abortion</td>
<td>2,545</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other outcomes**</td>
<td>1,125</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Pregnancy Occurred at Age 20 and Over</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6,339</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10,417</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s calculation based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics, 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) (Washington, DC: National Center for Health Statistics, 2006), with public use data files downloaded from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm#Datadocpu (accessed October 16, 2006). We tabulate the cumulative number of lifetime abortions for women in this age group to minimize the age bias of asking younger women about their pregnancy history.

* In thousands
** Including miscarriage, stillbirth, and ectopic pregnancy
Such an effort would also involve protecting young girls from early sexual abuse and exploitation. According to Laumann and colleagues, in 1992: “A much larger percentage of black women report not wanting their first experience of vaginal intercourse to happen when it did than did women of other racial and ethnic groups, 41 percent compared to an average of 29 percent.”

**Undoing hidden racial discrimination**

The goal of erasing racial bias and discrimination is, I fear, a very long-term goal, and one that goes far beyond the confines of our discussion. What we should address immediately are those government policies—three of which I describe below—that discriminate against African Americans, I hope inadvertently.

**Federal college aid**

Put simply, current aid formulas are tilted in favor of the white middle class. The aid formula disregards all family assets when parental income is less than $49,999 and, regardless of family income, ignores the home equity (however great) in the family’s principal residence. As Figure 4 dramatically shows, disregarding assets and home equity obscures important wealth differences between whites and blacks. This might not be a problem if there were enough funds and more to go around, but there are not. Hence, the effect of these rules is to decrease the amount of aid available for the truly needy.

**Child support**

Current child support policies, designed to counter endemic nonsupport by middle-class fathers, create often substantial disincentives for low-income men to be in the formal economy—and criminalize many of them for their resulting anger and intransigence. This hits black men most heavily. Surely we can develop a system that makes more practical distinctions based on earnings potential and the social factors surrounding African American families. A full child support pass-through that would ensure that families receiving TANF benefits also receive all child support paid on their behalf would be an important step.

**Child welfare services and foster care placement**

I believe we have overreacted to the poor child-rearing practices prevalent in some low-income, black communities, when they are more accurately viewed as the result of social and community factors. By labeling cases of inadequate cognitive and social nurturing “child neglect” and even “child abuse,” and by using a quasi-law-enforcement intervention, we have inappropriately disrupted hundreds of thousands of families that would have benefited more from a supportive intervention based, for example, on a nurse home-visitor model.

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**Figure 4. Median household net worth, by race and ethnicity, 2000.**

This essay has been of necessity brief. But I hope that it has helped frame the many complicated issues we face. We have learned a great deal in the last forty years, and made real progress against poverty. I believe that pursuing the ideas described here would move us to further gains.


14Edelman, Holzer, and Offner, Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men.


27Edelman, Holzer, and Offner, Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men.


30See, for example, Besharov, “Child Abuse Realities.”