

Living With Poverty

by Yvonne Whaley

There was a time when all Black people understood what "class" meant. There was the upperclass "house folk" and the lowerclass "field folk." Next came the have and the have-nots. More recently we had the elite and the indigent. Currently, it's the buppies and the underclass. What does this new buzzword, "underclass" mean? What makes it more descriptive, more definitive, than any of the others? After all, the concept isn't new; even the Bible informed us that there would always be poor people.

We have to back up a bit to the beginning of this century.

Public debate about how to solve the problem of poverty and do away with labels had basically been colored by the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois took the collective stance that Blacks were the victims of seemingly unchangeable social, racial, and economic policies; while Washington felt that personal effort or self-help would improve one's life. When this happened, a ripple effect would therefore better the position of the entire race. DuBois' belief that the "talented tenth" would overcome, or at least lessen the political racism through legal means, fostered the birth of the NAACP.

Though Washington urged Blacks to "cast down your buckets where you are", it was the white race that embraced his plea. They felt less threatened by his desire to develop an economically stable but segregated artisan and working class, than they did by DuBois' demand for civil rights for Blacks. Even though, at the turn of the century, most Blacks lived in the rural south; without acceptance by the majority of urban Blacks, Washington's plan became suspect and even unrespectable. When the demographic structure of the U.S. was changed by the Great Migration, Washington's theme was doomed.

During the first World War, labor was sorely needed in the industrial north. Agents traveled throughout the south to encourage Blacks to participate in the war effort and make "big money." Sharecroppers became workers in industries that ranged from slaughterhouses to steel mills. The money was so good that almost entire towns moved north.

It wasn't easy for the migrants. Contrary to a belief strongly held by many whites, all of us didn't look alike, and more importantly, Blacks had no common culture. This was, and still is, a real barrier to both self-acceptance and assimilation into the main stream. In order to help the formerly rural worker to adapt to his new homeland, the Urban League was formed.

After World War I, the migration slowed to a trickle. Even so, the town or city fathers kept a watchful eye on the migrants. In the south, Blacks were kept within certain geographic areas through intimidation. Through careful orchestration of the realtors, bankers and others, nothern whites selectively set aside areas into which Blacks could move. Thirty or forty years ago, those Black areas in urban America demonstrated a deep pride in ownership. A strong commitment to service was held by Black entrepreneurs, and everyone knew and trusted each other. Unlike today, when the dollar doesn't complete one circuit in Black neighborhoods, in the forties, the dollar turned around five or six times! Growth within the urban

centers rose phenomally; and Chicago's Southside became the largest Black neighborhood in the USA, with some eight miles by four miles in area.

Now, some two generations later, those same areas that were bustling with commerce are filled with buildings that are boarded up or covered by heavy grating. What happened? It is a well-known story. "White flight means urban blight." "Urban renewal means Negro removal." Both rhymes are partially true.

After World War II, whites began to flee the cities for the suburbs; and those Blacks who could, moved into the "better" (i.e. white) neighborhoods. Unscrupulous realtors helped this new migration along through "block-busting." In addition, new civil rights legislation in the 60's saw the emergence of fair housing agencies. This enabled more middle-class Blacks to move to the suburbs and leave the center city to the lower-class or poor Black. Thus the under-class became more visible by being isolated in a section of a city renamed "the ghetto." This depopulation of the ghettos in the U.S. resulted in social and economic deterioration, for generally the only agency that remained in the city was the storefront church. Flight by the middle-class Black was a desire for safety, good schools, and a decent environment — something that was no longer available in the cities where the culture of the under-class had lost its countervailing force.



A look at the underclass Black.

Unemployment, poverty, and female headed families increased dramatically within the ghettos. However, before the migration to the suburbs middle or upper-class Blacks had successfully diluted the statistics.

Nevertheless, these statistics are quite startling. In the decade between 1970 and 1980, South Bronx in New York (called Fort Apache or Vietnam by the enforcement agencies) lost 37% of its population; Chicago experienced similar losses. Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. What this represents is brain and pocket drain. Role models that are left within the ghetto community represent the dregs of society; the true under-class for which many social scientists see no hope. All of the factors that need be present in the cities of despair are found in the ghetto.

When the middle-class fled to the suburbs, Chicago's population below the poverty line rose from 37% to 51%, unemployment from 9.5% to 24.5%, and female headed families increased from 40% to 72%. Babies

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