



EDITORIAL/NATIONAL FORUM



To Be Equal

The Poverty Numbers Game

by John E. Jacob

Poverty in the United States is vastly understated, feeding the indifference that stands in the way of dealing with the problem.

According to the official statistics, about 13 percent of Americans are classified as poor—a big decrease over the past two decades.

But part of the drop in poverty was accomplished with smoke and mirrors. By manipulating definitions of poverty, government makes the very real improvement in the numbers look even better. And in the process it lulls people into thinking the problem isn't very urgent.

The official definition of poverty is based on 1963 estimates of the minimum amount of income a family must have to maintain the barest minimum living standards.

Those estimates, in turn, were based on data of family spending and consumption patterns made in a 1955 survey.

That survey showed the typical family spent about a third of its income on food, so the poverty line was calculated as a multiple of the Agriculture Department's lowest-cost food budget.

Each year, the Census Bureau updates the poverty line to account for inflation, but the outdated formula remains the same, even though the cost mix in the typical family's market basket of necessities has changed.

Housing costs, for example, are far higher than they were back in the 1950s. So are clothing, transportation and other basic costs.

Changing the poverty line isn't just an academic exercise. Eligibility for benefits under many means-tested programs are based on the poverty line. So an artificially low figure excludes millions of people from programs they need to survive.

Patricia Ruggles, an economist, has written a new book published by The Urban Institute about alternative ways

to define poverty titled, "Drawing the Line."

She says that calculating a new poverty line based on changes in food and housing costs would probably result in a poverty line about 50 percent higher than today's.

In one typical example, the poverty line for a family of three, now defined at \$9,435, would be at least \$14,200.

Currently, official Black poverty stands at about 30 percent. Under various alternative poverty line definitions, African-American poverty would range from about 34 percent to about 46 percent.

That's in line with what anyone can see in today's African-American communities, where poverty's growth is apparent even as the wider society pretends things are getting better.

Redefining poverty would result in a more honest picture of the extent of the nation's poverty, and hopefully, it would also result in a more enlightened public debate about the need for policies to help the poor.

Many families today are struggling to survive at the most minimal living standards—far below what most people would call "poor"—but are officially defined as being above the poverty line and ineligible for a variety of desperately needed benefits.

Despite the urgent need for a realistic poverty line, some are trying to redefine it downward to include various subsidies as income. So a poor person who gets a \$50,000 open-heart operation paid for by Medicaid, would no longer be considered poor since the value of the operation would be added to his income.

That typified the numbers game being played with the poor. The Administration could take a giant step forward to fairness and justice by establishing an updated poverty standard suited to our times.

Civil Rights Journal

by Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

Save The Children: The Greatest Challenge

by Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

The National Center for Children in Poverty based in New York City has released a chilling, controversial and challenging report on the poverty of children under the age of six in the United States. According to the latest federal government population data, there has been a slight decline in recent years of those living in poverty when the entire population is used as the basis of analysis. But, shockingly, for children under the age of six, the poverty rate is now increasing.

The future of any nation is dependent upon its ability to care for, nurture and to enhance the development of its children. This nation has its priorities misplaced. Not only are the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, but also tragically the youngest of the nation are having their futures destroyed. In particular, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American and Native American children under six are in a situation where they are twice as likely to be living in poverty than Anglo American children under six. This statistic is true even when both parents are present. There have been countless prior studies that have insinuated that the absence of one of the parents in racial and ethnic families is the major contributing factor to the impoverishment of these families.

The significance of the research by the National Center for Children in Poverty is that it provides the first national statistical profile of children under six living in poverty. The findings of this report point to the institutionalization of both racism and poverty in American society. The report stated, "Early childhood experiences contribute to poor children's rate of school failures, dropout, delinquency, early childbearing and adult poverty."

The report entitled, "A Statistical Profile of Our Poorest Young Citizens," found that nearly one of every four children under six in the nation is poor. How can the United States afford to have one-fourth of all children, regardless of race, born after 1984 to live in abject poverty?

We must remember that 1984 was the year that this nation re-elected Ronald Reagan as President. Rather than directing a war on poverty or drugs, the Reagan Administration went to war on

Grenada, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Angola. Now our children are reaping the whirlwind of ten years of misplaced Republican priorities and policies.

Another myth that this report exposed is that to have a job will prevent

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you from living in poverty. The study detailed examples of both parents working and yet their children are still being consigned to living beneath the poverty level. While the report did not point fingers at anyone in particular, we feel that we have a responsibility to demand that federal, state and municipal governments do substantially more to meet this challenge.

Our children are our future. Judith Jones, who is the director of the National Center for Children in Poverty stated that this nation's policy of reacting to crisis rather than preventing crisis is part of the problem. Now that there is considerable national debate on what to do with the so-called "peace dividend," which is actually money that is to be re-budgeted away from unnecessary military spending, we believe that the first priority should be our children. To our dismay, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney is opposed to the "peace dividend" being spent on domestic social programs. Cheney is advocating the traditional Reagan-Bush line that the first priority should be to reducing the national deficit.

The national deficit is important, but our children, particularly those under the age of six, are more important. The greatest challenge for this nation or for any nation is to "Save the Children!"

Perspectives

by Professor McKinley Burt

More Adventures In Learning: The Aluminum Plant

by Prof. McKinley Burt

Contrary to the experience of many African Americans, some of my most productive times were spent in small western towns where the population numbered under 10,000—even under 100. It is not difficult to select the one that stands out above them all; "The Dalles", Oregon where I lived from the fall of 1963 to the fall of 1969, employed in the accounting department of the Harvey Aluminum Company (later to become "Martin Marietta Inc.")

One thing I have discovered through the years is that, without exception, all of life's situations have an excellent learning/teaching potential. And this small (pop. 10,500) enclave of cherry orchards and aluminum reduction plant met all the criteria, and then some. Unlike the railroad gangs—where one was swept into a frenzy of activity, willing or not—here, where only 10 of us out of 10,000 were Black, it took some well-planned and perspicacious moves to gain a meaningful place in the mini-infrastructure. You are always recalling the old southern adage of Blacks, "They'll either lynch you or deify you—there is no in-between, it all depends on how you come on stage."

I had not come to this place with a plan to learn or teach; just wanted some breathing room after an unpleasant California divorce. Correspondence with a white friend who was manager of the radio station there led to an invitation to visit for a month and just "kick back and fish" before coming back to Portland. The month's "kick back" stretched into three and I found myself too broke to go farther. My answer to an ad offering a position with the aluminum company got no response at all. Fortunately I was being mailed copies of the "Los Angeles Sentinel", the major African American newspaper where I had lived. Noting that "Homer Harvey" the son of the company founder was chairman of some Democratic Committee or other—and a major philanthropist to the support of minority affairs—I got off a special delivery describing my state of suspense while

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Professor McKinley Burt

others not nearly so qualified were being interviewed daily.

For years later there were varying stories about what happened the next day when Homer Harvey opened up his private line from Los Angeles to the local plant. What I do know is that by noon the personnel manager was at my home in a company car to take me to meet the plant manager and the head of the accounting department. By one p.m. I was busy collecting workforce data and recording it. By the weekend, I had been invited to join "Toastmasters". By month's end I was a member of the chess club, and that year I was elected president and, being in charge of meetings, I was given the keys to the First National Bank meeting place—and the code to turn off the alarm! Somewhere along the line the old personnel manager was transferred to the "Virgin Islands" bauxite loading port facility.

Well, that was an education in itself, but it got even better. Surprising to many people is the fact that a lot of rural people are not "rustics" in the classic sense. I found among my new acquaintances, many former New Englanders, New Yorkers, and midwesterners, who, though high paid professionals in the other environs, had opted for a much lower paying but less stressful life in the "boonies." Consequently, I now found myself in a strange and unprecedented social/learning lifestyle of close relationship with fellow workers or club members who were former lawyers, engineers, architects, whatever—even a top New York surgeon. For them, the peace, fishing, skiing, mountain-climbing was the thing.

It was a summer of my third year in The Dalles, that I found myself listening to a tale of woe from a mathematics teacher who had a summer job at the plant as a guard. "My students can see no relationship between the dry texts and stylized algorithms of a boring classroom" and the "real world" which must soon be faced. This encounter gave rise to my idea of placing terminals right in the classroom and going on line with computers at the company and elsewhere to simulate many of the functions of computation and telecommunications that are performed each day in the "real world."

In designing and installing the sophisticated system I was able to draw that vast talent bank I've described. A local rancher footed the bill for computer lines into the schools. Telephone company and industry executives used a teletype component to communicate with the kids and to inspire them to further exploit the new learning mode (several years ago the Observer newspaper carried articles and pictures). This 1966 program won a National Science Foundation award. The participating mathematics teacher received a fellowship to an eastern university, and at the plant, I was promoted from transferring labor distribution data to distant computers, to powerhouse and electronic instrument technician (?). As I've said, there is no in-between. You'll either be lynched or deified.

In the community I was now a member of the Ham Radio Club, and growing crystals for other members. A local juke box distributor provided electronic goodies for my Kids Science Club. You can make any situation a learning machine—try it!

Catch the Neighborhood News Angle... In The Portland Observer

Responses By Black or African Americans To The 1990 Census Race Question

The Census Bureau has received numerous questions regarding how Black or African should answer question number 4, "Race". The 1990 Census form asks all persons to classify themselves as White, Black, or Negro, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, one of nine specific groups listed under Asian or Pacific Islander, or "Other", and fill in the circle next to their choice.

However, the bureau plans a special review/edit of all write-in entries to the race question. The procedure will allow tabulation of write-in responses, such as "African/Afro American", to-

gether with filled circle responses of Black or Negro, to ensure an accurate count for Blacks and African Americans.

In 1983, advice was sought from community leaders and experts on race and ethnicity on the most appropriate term to use in the 1990 census race item. At that time, the consensus was to use both "Black" and "Negro" on the 1990 form. The latter term was included because some segments of the population, especially older persons, do not identify with the word "Black."



VANTAGE POINT

Articles and Essays by Ron Daniels



Remember The Students Who Died At Jackson State

by Ron Daniels

On May 4, the eyes of the nation were fixed on Kent State University where a major observance was held to mark the 20th anniversary of the tragedy which occurred on that campus in 1970. Four Kent State University students were killed when Ohio National Guard troops fired on unarmed demonstrators. The nation was stunned. The tragedy seemed all the more shocking since the four students who were killed were white. From the bloody demonstrations in Chicago in the American State, with Richard Nixon at its helm, was sending a message that not even white kids were permitted to challenge the American power structure.

Death and brutality were not strangers to African Americans however. Black people who rebelled against slavery, segregation and racism have always been faced with violence and death. Murdering Black freedom fighters in America is commonplace. It is little wonder, therefore, that there is almost no mention of the Black resistance to the Vietnam War, and the fact that on May 15, 1970 two Black students were killed at Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi and nine others were wounded. The police fired into a group of Black anti-war and civil-rights demonstrators without provocation. The Jackson State protests were a part of a wider Black anti-war resistance movement which linked opposition to the Vietnam War to the questions of civil-rights and human rights for Africans in America.

In his "Beyond Vietnam" speech

on April 4, 1967 Martin Luther King had not only expressed his fervent opposition to the war, he also indicted the American system for its lack of concern for human rights. Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Imam Jamil Al-Amin (H. Rap Brown) and other leaders of SNCC openly called for African Americans not join the armed forces or support the war. "Hell no we won't go," was their battle cry. The movie "No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger" featuring Muhammad Ali also pointedly raised the question as to why the oppressed sons and daughters of Africa in a distant land against another oppressed people of color.

No doubt all of these influences permeated the consciousness of African American students across America who had to ask themselves why they as young Black people should fight for "freedom" abroad when Black people were being victimized by racism at home. Many African students were also keenly aware that Black people were disproportionately bearing the brunt of the casualties in America's immoral war against the Vietnamese people.

Though Black people were only 10% of the population, more than 30% of the battlefield casualties were African Americans. And when Blacks were killed in combat the families of the deceased soldiers often had to suffer the indignity of burying their love ones in segregated cemeteries. In Wetumpka, Alabama for instance, the Black community erupted in anger when an Afri-

can American soldier was refused burial rights in a "white" cemetery. Word of these kinds of indignities fed the Black opposition to the war and America.

The students at Jackson State took a stand against the war in Vietnam and the oppression of Black people in America and people of color in Vietnam and the world. In so doing they stood valiantly in the finest tradition of African American resistance to oppression. As they demonstrated on the evening of May 14 and into the early morning of May 15, they were faced by a police force which was accustomed to harassing Black students and the Black community. On this tragic night the police were determined to put the niggers back in their place. Two students died and nine were wounded.

To their credit, those who gathered at Kent State on May 4th did pay tribute to the students who died at Jackson State. However, May 15 will pass with little more than a whisper about the heroic stand of the students at Jackson State. That a whole nation could turn its attention to Kent State on May 4 and overlook Jackson State on May 15 says something profound about America; a Black life is not as precious as a white life. Racism is still deeply rooted in the very fabric of American culture and society.

America may have amnesia, but our duty to ourselves demands that we as African Americans remember the students who died at Jackson State, May 15, 1970.

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