

# BLACK UNEMPLOYMENT IN A PROSPEROUS NATION

*the need for  
compensatory aid  
for the Negro*

The United States has just completed its seventh successive year of sustained prosperity. However, as paradoxical as it may seem, this prosperity has been coupled with an almost inflexible and adamant core of the unemployed. The majority of these unemployed people have two characteristics in common, they are Black and they live in the central city. More disturbing than this, is the growing awareness that not only do these Americans stand outside of the Nation's economic life and the opportunities it offers, but they lack the health, physical as well as mental, and the skills to participate as productive American citizens and human beings.

But what makes this American dream become more of an American nightmare, is the realization that for Blacks, this vicious cycle, which they inherited, will be passed on to the next generation of Blacks. An economy as prosperous as this one, can and must start a sincere and meaningful effort to reduce the large amounts of unemployment among this urban minority.

## INCOME SCALES

Negro life during the last fifty years has been characterized by numerous changes, but none so dramatic as the migration to urban areas. Upon arriving in the city, the rural Black discovers that Negro workers are concentrated in the lowest skilled and lowest paying occupations. These occupations are usually those of the most undesirable nature which provide substandard wages, have the greatest instability and uncertainty of tenure, and have no upward mobility. These factors are more important than unemployment as one looks at this hypothetical calculation in the Kerner Commission Report.

In 1966, there were about 702,000 unemployed non-whites in the United States on the average, including adults, teenagers and allowing for the Census Bureau's undercount of Negroes. If every one of these persons had been employed and had received the median amount earned by non-white males in 1966 (\$3,864), this would have added a total of \$2.7 billion to non-white income as a

whole. If only enough of these persons had been employed at that wage to reduce non-white unemployment from 7.3 to 3.3 percent - the rate among whites in 1966 - then the income gain for non-whites would have totaled about \$1.5 billion. *But if non-white men were upgraded so that they had the same occupational distribution and incomes as all men in the labor force considered together, this would have produced about \$4.8 billion in additional income, as noted above (using 1965 earnings for calculation) the potential income gains from upgrading the male non-white labor force are much larger than those from reducing non-white unemployment.*<sup>1</sup>

## BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Concentrated areas of unemployment have not only their base in a blighted physical environment, and an alien sociological relationship with the total urban community, but there are often racial overtones which at times obscure the basic issues and answers. The overt cause of unemployment given by employers to urban Blacks are as numerous as the people involved, but very often the obstacles are partly personal, partly environmental and partly institutional. A great many of the Blacks do not have the "basic" education and command of "standard" English which is generally required for employment. Many more lack the "work" skills essential for the jobs available. Police and bad debt records are further barriers to employment.

Many of the typical employed workers do not look like the hard to employ ghetto resident. Difference in dress, hairstyle and grooming makes them less likely to be employed. Undoubtedly the prospective employer sees by this personal appearance, a job performance of the same type. Untidiness, inattention to detail and unreliability can be interpreted from one's appearance or it could be that the Afro hairstyle, hot pink and burnt orange colored clothing, reminds many prospective employers of a member of a minority group who is

<sup>1</sup>U. S. Riot commission Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, New York Times Co., 1968, p. 255.

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not trying or has failed to assimilate into the mainstream of American life.

### COMPENSATORY AID

Why is the Negro looking for, demanding and expecting to receive compensatory aid in overcoming his disadvantages? Because he has not created nor can he by himself alter the situations which have caused him to be in this plight. It is useful to remember that even the latest scale of Negro migration is relatively small when compared to the earlier waves of European immigrants and this economy was able to absorb these 8.8 million immigrants who came to this country between 1911 and 1921. If this was done without compensatory federal legislation, why do we need it now?

The reasons the Blacks need compensatory federal aid to accomplish participation in the American economy are (1) specialization, (2) racial discrimination, (3) political sterilization, (4) cultural assimilation and (5) the length of time.<sup>2</sup>

### EUROPEAN IMMIGRANT ANALOGY

When the European immigrants were arriving in large numbers, America was becoming an urban-industrial society, and there was a great need for *unskilled* labor. The Negro immigrants who came to this country or were brought to it have found little opportunity in the city because he has arrived too late and the unskilled labor he had to offer is not essential to the economy.

If, after the Civil War, the Northern urban industrialist had not looked to Europe for sources of unskilled labor, there would not be this Black employment problem. It was not until World War II that Blacks were generally hired for industrial jobs, and by that time the decline in needs had already started.

European immigrants were quickly organized into machines for political purposes and economic and social advantages for themselves. But now because reform politics has made political pa-

tronage scarce, the European immigrant who preceded the Negro will not share the political positions with the Negro. (In the Northern urban areas, most political leaders are from minority groups).

### GREATER EXPECTATIONS

When the European immigrant came to America, most unskilled jobs were dirty and the pay was poor. So there was no great gap among themselves as there is between the Black jobless and the Black middle class. This causes a high level of aspiration to lead to frustration. The Negro was American and he spoke English and had spent 400 years assimilating. There was no need to sell cultural foods and artifacts of home to remind him of some far away place. Consequently, his European predecessor had moved from the ghetto but still owned the businesses and land. Furthermore, because of racial discrimination those Blacks who acquired enough money still could not move out of the central city.

Negroes have been concentrated in the city for only two generations and under very unfavorable conditions. Many of the European immigrants came from urban areas in Europe and escaped from the ghetto early. Those who, like the Negro, came from rural backgrounds, only escaped after the third and fourth generation.

As you can see, it took the Europeans with much more favorable economic and political advantages four generations to escape the ghetto and Black man has only been in the ghetto two generations. Moreover, his escape has been blocked in part by the resistance of the European immigrant who preceded him in politics, housing, unions and education.

### EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS

As a result of the lack of adequate communication, the slum resident does not have the information to properly search for a job. The jobs on the outlying areas, or even in the central city, are

likely to be beyond his reach. The ghetto dweller starts out with a disadvantage. What little job information he does receive from friends usually only pertains to low-level occupations. Because of the isolation of the urban unemployed from the specialized job markets in the outlying regions, the unemployed, both young and old, are unable to participate in the broader job market.

An overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the major employment programs operating at the present is difficult. Anyone attempting to determine whether they have been good or bad is open to the question: Compared to what? A small amount of money is being spent and there has been some action, but this array of programs has not emerged as any systematic effort. Nevertheless, one could conclude from observation data, and placing together pieces of hearsay, some success is at least moderately taking place. No program is an obvious failure, though in some cases the money could have been spent better elsewhere. The abstract objectives of reducing urban unemployment through insufficient federally-funded programs has little meaning to the ghetto-trapped Black resident. This lack of unemployment brings about frustrations which causes hostilities and aggressions. The symptoms of fear, suspicion, distrust and anger, found in the unemployed ghetto Black, can cause demoralization and confusion which if not checked can create a disruption of orderly thought and behavior patterns. So let's not fool ourselves into thinking that the current manpower programs have greatly excited hopes and aspirations in the slums and left the residents panting with satisfaction.

<sup>2</sup>Kerner Report, op. cit. pp. 278-281