Beyond the Safety Net
A Brief Review Forty Years after the War on Poverty

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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 rose from $12,882 to $20,328, about a 58 percent rise.²

At the same time, some African Americans are mired at the bottom. Figure 1 portrays just one dimension of their

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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.

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 poverty (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. 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.

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.”)\(^8\)

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 Lehman described in his book, *The Promised Land*.\(^9\) Tenant farmers lived in tar paper shacks and in perpetual debt to the 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” 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.\(^10\)

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.

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The explosion of welfare recipiency is just one small example of what happened when an oppressed, often illiterate, and predominantly rural 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. 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. 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. 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. In 2004, for example, black males between ages 25 and 29 were seven 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

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18“Precision production, craft, and repair occupations” are shown in the figure for 1984 and 1999. For 2004, when a new occupational coding structure was used, precision production, craft, and repair occupations are approximated by the sum of construction and extraction occupations and installation, maintenance, and repair occupations.
rose in this period (although at only about half the rate of total employment), but this nevertheless suggests that Hispanic workers took the place of those 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 Offner19—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.20 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.21

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 dropout rates, cut teen parenthood rates, raise earnings, and prevent crime.22 Some of us find these to be wildly inflated claims based on weak research evidence. Properly

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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. 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. And, besides academic
subjects, I would argue for a sustained
and clear-eyed commitment to career and
technical education, including for those
various craft trades mentioned earlier.
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. There is evidence, most recently from
MDRC, showing that career-type academies (and some versions of what used to be called “voc

Table 2

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<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s or higher degree</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>12,120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate degree or postassoc. voc.</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>5,393</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work-related job training</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>40,415</td>
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Reducing unwanted pregnancies

Michael Novak was, I think, the first to say that the family was the original Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. 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 those supported by the Bush administration. But I would also like us to address more fundamental family formation issues. In many circumstances, especially for African Americans, the weakened family starts with unwed teen parenthood. There is, once again, an entire literature on this subject. Here I will emphasize one point that is often lost in the rhetoric surrounding the issue and in program planning.

Many of the pregnancies that we bemoan are “unwanted.” But my research convinces me that although many disadvantaged women are poor contraceptors and face a host of forces that make it even more difficult to avoid pregnancy, many work hard to maintain control of their own fertility.

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28Compare Andrew J. Cherlin, “Should the Government Promote Marriage?” Contexts 2, no. 4 (2003): pp. 22–29, to Andrew J. Cherlin, e-mail message to Yael Levin, November 27, 2006, stating: “I have been saying recently in presentations that I think the random-assignment evaluations of relationship enhancement programs for low-income couples are worth doing but that I think much of the rest of the money will not be well spent.”

To demonstrate my point, consider abortion rates. Table 3 is based on abortion data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The survey missed about 50 percent of all abortions, but most researchers think the patterns it reveals are essentially accurate. Table 3 tallies the total number of reported abortions to women based on whether they also reported a teenage pregnancy. Among women interviewed at ages 40–44, 70 percent of all abortions were to women who had been pregnant as teenagers (resulting in either a birth, abortion, or miscarriage).

Much could be done to help these women have better control over their own bodies—starting with the provision of more reliable contraceptives. (Condoms and even the pill have high failure rates for low-income women.) The practices of family planning clinics also need examination. Too many seem to provide little or no follow-up to women who have had pregnancy tests (and even abortions). Surely that would be a time to ask about whether the woman needed additional help with birth control. 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

### Table 3

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<th>Cumulative Abortions for Women Ages 40–44</th>
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<td>(NSFG)</td>
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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 goes far beyond the confines of our discussion. But what we should address immediately are those government policies that discriminate against African Americans, I hope, inadvertently.

First, 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.

Second, 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.

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based on earnings potential and the social factors surrounding African Americans families. A full income pass-through would be an important step.

My last example is 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 benefitted more from a supportive intervention based, for example, on a nurse home-visitor model.

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.