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William Julius Wilson

A leading scholar of urban poverty has a prescription for the ghetto: jobs

—By [Gerald Early](#)

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Q: Would it be fair to call your new book a defense of the welfare state?

A: If you mean a general term for a state that would approve national health insurance, earned income tax credits, social security, child support, and childcare programs, yes. If you're talking about the narrow issue of public assistance, I would like to see us move to a more healthy system. But until we come up with certain guarantees -- for example, guaranteed jobs where mothers move off welfare -- I support welfare very strongly. The worst thing we could do is impose time limits and then expect people to sink or swim once they move off welfare.

Q: But why does the government need to provide work? Why not rely on the private sector for jobs?

A: A lot of joblessness in the black community doesn't seem to be reachable through fiscal and monetary policies. People have not been drawn into the labor market even during periods of economic recovery. Our study clearly shows that employers would rather not hire a lot of workers from the inner city. They feel people from the inner city are not job-ready, that the kids have been poorly educated, that they can't read, they can't write, they can't speak.

The problems we see today are going to be a hell of a lot worse in 10 years if we're not willing to face up to them. These kids are just not going to be absorbed into the economy, so what are they going to be doing? Well, we know. They're going to be making life pretty miserable for a lot of people.

In the short term, we have to have public-sector employment to get people back to work. In the long term, we're going to have to have programs to ensure that our kids are ready to enter the private labor market.

Q: You argue for "flexible criteria" for evaluating jobs and school. But some conservatives say that, in the long run, it would be better for minorities to have objective, very standardized forms of measurement.

A: If we could come up with standardized testing that could really measure merit -- the potential to

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succeed -- that would be fine. But the person who scored well on an SAT will not necessarily be the best doctor or the best lawyer or the best businessman. These tests do not measure character, leadership, creativity, perseverance. Until we come up with standardized tests that can get at those important traits, then I'm for flexible criteria -- criteria that institutions over a period of years have developed and shown to be sufficient in helping to identify applicants with these traits.

Q: And this policy should apply to black middle-class kids as well?

A: A black, middle-class kid, even though his parents may be middle income -- maybe they're first-generation middle class -- has also been affected by race issues. The black kids are more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods. They're influenced by styles and habits and patterns of behavior that have racial restrictions that are also not conducive to learning.

If you're going to compare a middle-income black kid with a middle-income white kid, and, say, you control for family background, family education, and family income, and if this middle-income black kid doesn't score as well as the white kid on the test, then I say, look, you haven't taken into consideration the cumulative effect of living in a segregated neighborhood and going to a de facto segregated school. You're denying a position at Harvard or some other place to a kid that really could make it. That's why I support affirmative action that's based on both class and race.

Q: But in your book you argue that race-based or class-based affirmative action is necessary but not sufficient for the kind of social change you envision.

A: Affirmative action has to be combined with a broader program of social reform that would emphasize social rights: the right to employment, the right to education, the right to good health. Over the years, black leaders have been slow to recognize the need for a very, *very* progressive agenda. Anytime someone has talked about putting America back to work, blacks should have said yes, but they didn't. They were so preoccupied with affirmative action that they didn't provide the kind of leadership that would help some of the other progressive folks. Only now are black leaders beginning to realize the impact of economic issues.

Q: Your critics say your support of race-based affirmative action makes coalition politics difficult -- that it only sparks ethnic competition, especially in the Latino community that feels some resentment toward African-Americans for dominating civil rights policies.

A: Well, I think it is difficult to achieve a meaningful political coalition if you have race-based programs that divide members of the coalition. The problem I have, however, is that white people assume an either/or position: Either we have race-based programs or we don't. What I see is comprehensive social reform that includes race-based and race-neutral programs.

What kind of programs am I talking about? National health insurance. Full-employment policies. Training and education. Childcare programs. Reforms in public schools. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, I argued that the race-neutral programs should be highlighted in order to attract support. On the other hand, as long as we have problems that represent the legacy of previous racism -- problems that will not be addressed with race-neutral strategies -- affirmative action programs are necessary.

Q: Do you think racism is a permanent feature of the American system?

A: Racism should be viewed as an intervening variable. You give me a set of conditions and I can produce racism in any society. You give me a different set of conditions and I can reduce racism. You give me a situation where there are a sufficient number of social resources so people don't have to compete for those resources, and I will show you a society where racism is held in check. If we could create the conditions that make racism difficult, or discourage it, then there would be less stress and



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less need for affirmative action programs. One of those conditions would be an economic policy that would create tight labor markets over long periods of time.

Now does that mean that affirmative action is here only temporarily? I think the ultimate goal should be to remove it.

Q: Some black thinkers believe integration wrecked the community and helped produce the inner-city problems we have now. Do you agree? A: I can hardly see how anyone could support segregated confinement of black folks who have talent when they would do better in a broader society. To say that integration caused the current problems of the black community ignores a whole host of other factors, including the willingness of America to tolerate schools that cripple kids.

People talk about how busing exacerbated race relations without addressing the problems of black education. Busing has only affected a very small segment of the black population; the majority of blacks grew up in segregated neighborhoods. There *has* been a decline in the quality of teachers because of the opening of opportunities for black and white women in other areas -- gender integration, if you will, as well as race integration. There are few highly qualified teachers right now, and these teachers tend to be disproportionately concentrated in higher-income neighborhoods.

I don't know if you've been in any inner-city schools, but it's pretty demoralizing. The kids come to class bright-eyed, enthusiastic -- entering first grade really looking forward to school. By the fourth grade they're just completely turned off, and by the time they enter high school, they see little relationship between school and employment. It's bad enough you have incompetent teachers and schools that are poorly run, understaffed, and lack material resources. It's even worse when the kids themselves don't feel they have any stake in school. And joblessness triggers all kinds of other problems -- crime, drugs, family dislocations, neighborhood disorganization.

Q: Do you see any sign that these problems will be addressed politically?

A: Clinton wanted to revive the economy to provide a foundation for his social reforms. He wanted national health insurance. He expanded the earned income tax credit. He stated he wanted welfare reform -- welfare reform that would provide jobs for people to move off welfare. The guy has the vision; he just has to deal with all the political variables. I think in his second administration, if re-elected, he'll be able to.

Q: What is your next step in studying these issues?

A: Unemployment is higher in Europe than in the United States and primarily concentrated in immigrant minority populations, so people are worried about what's going to happen and if American-style ghettos are emerging in Europe. There are some of the problems there that America sees associated with the lack of economic inclusion -- family breakdown, gang behavior, and racial tensions. I get the sense that in Europe they are much more concerned about these issues than in the United States. So I see my research focusing on international problems of social and racial equality. And I think it will help inform a lot of the positions I take regarding domestic strategy issues.

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Submitted by *Joseph Hayden* (not verified) on November 14, 2008 - 9:43am.

this analysis is so apropo for the current situation in our Inner cities. Obama's playbook is amirror image of WjW's research and policy prescriptions.

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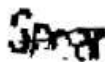
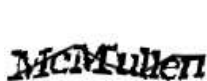
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