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The Quest for Better Housing

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Like every other area in our lives, health care will be affected by racial differences and racism and, secondly, the health care system itself will respond differently to the minority community (collectively and individually) than to the white community.

The Carter Administration fell prey to several phenomena which led to a different type of response than the minority community had expected. Because of the combined impact of sustained double digit inflation, high unemployment and a drain on national energy resources, Carter chose a policy of conservatism, which in the health sector translated into the rationing of health care resources.

Health resources for minority community residents have not been available in the types and amounts needed to impact their health care substantially. Blacks and minorities will need many more resources and services if they are to achieve parity with the health status levels of white Americans. However, Black parity can only come through a greater targeting of resources towards meeting the health needs of Black Americans.

A recent examination of access to health care professions shows that gains made in recruitment drives in the 1960s and early 1970s have either leveled off or have been eroded. Therefore, we don't have enough of the manpower resources with the needed sensitivity and willingness to serve in the minority communities.

There is ample information to document the existence of racism in the health care system. However, because of the central economic nature of the doctor/patient relationship, the health system is subject to economic bias as well. That is to say that those with more financial resources can buy more management of their illness.

Generally (in the 80s), we can predict a philosophical shift to the public policy position that health care is the respon-

sibility of the individual and not an automatic right. This public policy shift will parallel its counterpart in the private sector. What this will mean is that as future reductions in health services and expenditures are made, it will be the individual's responsibility to find alternatives within the system to manage his or her illness.

To impose on the consumer with few or no alternative, the responsibility for managing his illness is an unrealistic and immoral proposition. It's clear that the policymakers must either provide additional alternatives or change their assumptions if the poor and minority communities are not to be disenfranchised by future health policy initiatives.

The particular problem of children's health relates strongly to poverty. While American children today are healthier than at any time in the history of the country, those health problems that remain are related to the effects of poverty: bad health habits, poor nutrition and lack of available or accessible health services.

There is a need for the Black community and particularly Black health professionals to acquire the knowledge and perspectives to be able to see what lifestyle changes can occur in the individual for improved health and what initiatives must come from outside the individual and the Black community for improvements in health status.

Because of the financing of health services in America and increasing proportions paid by the federal government, the Black community can expect a flurry of federal attention and activity directed at health programs during the 1980s. Some of this attention may well result in decreasing the expenditures for several federal programs.

To respond to this possible scenario, the Black community will have to develop new strategies, or alter old ones to ensure that the status of health services delivered to it are not weakened, but strengthened. □

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The Quest for Better Housing

By Phillip Clay

While progress has been made in decreasing the number of Blacks who live in slum conditions, the proportion who face housing and neighborhood problems is still greater than it is for whites. Race continues to make a separate, strong and independent contribution to the uneven distribution of shelter status among Americans.

Recent trends in the economy show a major new twist to the problem. The cost of available housing joins the long-standing problems of discrimination and quality as major barriers to the achievement of housing goals. Even as the housing stock improves and prejudice (if not discrimination) lessens, rising costs along with other problems increasingly prevent Blacks from equal access to decent housing in neighborhoods of their choice.

Efforts to achieve fair housing by opening up the suburbs were met with increasingly more subtle discrimination if not outright resistance. More and more the result was two communities—one Black, central city and poor; and the other white, suburban, and able to benefit from expanding housing opportunities.

Blacks were not only denied access to improved housing opportunities, but were denied control over their own neighborhoods as public action (i.e., urban renewal and highway programs) and private redlining reduced the ability by lending institutions and/or the willingness of citizens to improve their housing and promoted an instability that often proved injurious to serious efforts by

¹² residents to retain the social fabric and improve the physical conditions of their communities.

Blacks in low and moderate-income households have been effectively excluded from new suburban areas by exclusionary zoning (which rules out apartments and less costly homes), higher costs (and interest rates), and reduced construction activity resulting from both economic conditions and restrictive controls. In short, while there has been some marginal suburban migration among well-off Blacks, the basic pattern established for decades of Blacks moving into cities and taking over neighborhoods abandoned by whites is still very much in evidence.

Recently, however, a combination of factors points to a selective but widespread reinvestment in urban neighborhoods. This reinvestment is of two types. The first type is the "gentrification" reflected in the middle-class rediscovery of urban neighborhoods. This process often involved large-scale speculative activity or individual reinvestment at costs (reflected in prices and rents) which led to the displacement of the existing residents, including in many cases Blacks from neighborhoods which became predominately white after gentrification.

The other type of reinvestment is that carried on by long-term residents of the neighborhoods—residents who for one reason or another feel that the potential for achieving a quality of life, as well as return on their investment, is substantially greater. This activity is more modest in scale and much less expensive. It causes little of the displacement precipitated by gentrification.

While none of the gentrification areas is a mainly Black community after rehabilitation, many of the neighborhoods experiencing revitalization by existing residents are Black or desegregated. The former observation explains the substantial concern about the impact of displacement on Blacks. The

latter observation points to the real possibility of making urban reinvestment meaningful for Black communities as well.

The current competition for older, inner-city housing reflected in reinvestment displacement is made worse for Blacks because of declining production of new housing and the increasing cost of that which is built. Moreover, alternative housing is often not available, having been ravaged by disinvestment and abandonment.

Most Blacks are renters (in 1970, 58 percent rented compared to 35 percent of whites). The problem for most Blacks, in the first instance, is the availability and affordability of rental housing. While rents have risen less steeply than housing prices in recent years, renters have lower and less rapidly growing incomes. The result of a more limited ability to charge rents that relate to steeply rising costs is that fewer apartments have come on the market in recent years and in some cities the number of rental houses available has actually decreased.

Racial discrimination has been widely documented as a major factor explaining different housing and neighborhood outcomes for Blacks. It still exists and is both strong and widespread. What is new is that more subtle and often institutional racism has largely replaced discriminatory individual behavior.

Efforts to fight discrimination have been limited by resources and by regulations which limit actions available to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and various state and local agencies. As a result, discrimination is only infrequently prosecuted. Timely and effective remedies are costly and uncertain.

There is a growing disinclination to provide special relief to housing. (In the past modest efforts were made to encourage construction when the economy experienced a serious downturn.) As a result of cyclical instability in the

housing area, it has been difficult to sustain efforts to achieve housing production goals. Nothing on the economic horizon to achieve housing production goals suggests there will soon be a change in this fact.

The housing price inflation is serious for everyone, but for the white middle-class, it may mean only a reduction in discretionary income, while for Blacks aspiring to improved housing, the increased cost is met at the expense of other needs, if met at all.

There appears to be no inclination on the part of the Congress to increase the regulatory authority associated with the enforcement of civil rights goals. Recent efforts to amend fair housing laws failed in the Senate. This occurred despite the acknowledged fact that discrimination still exists and in subtle ways that are difficult to fight.

The thrust of the changes in the housing regulatory climate to date is not altogether favorable to consumers generally or to Blacks in particular. They offer no breakthroughs on the problems discussed in this paper, and may even reduce leverage previously gained. Regulatory trends seem clearly to be headed toward increasing the discretion of private sector actors rather than the use of regulation as a tool for supporting or achieving social goals.

While economic status is clearly important, race still makes a significant, enduring and independent contribution to the different outcomes Blacks and whites experience. The enforcement of civil rights laws and affirmative action regulations as well as consciousness of racially different impacts of our public policies are important for closing the gap between the races.

While some very significant housing issues might best be articulated from a class or income group perspective (i.e., the cost of housing or the availability of rental stock) and there may be tactical reasons for highlighting class as opposed to race, it would be unwise to suggest or

to act on the notion that Blacks and whites of the same class will have similar experiences in the housing market.

The special concerns and problems of Blacks should continue to be given special attention and that appropriate remedies to deal with these different effects continue to be available. Blacks are still at a substantial disadvantage when it comes to housing opportunities and neighborhood environments. The panacea of the "strong economy" does not always filter down its benefits to the less well off. There is no basis for confidence that the experience in the 1980s will be different. □

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The Struggle for Better Schools

By Bernard C. Watson



Significant numbers of Black Americans continue to leave school prior to graduation, while an additional significant percentage graduate from high school without even the most rudimentary reading, writing and mathematical skills necessary to function in modern society.

The quality of education received by a significant percentage of Blacks, Hispanics and poor Americans is unacceptable. Concentrated in public schools located in the older cities and urban areas of this country, Blacks and other minorities are the victims of systems beset with the major problems of under-financing, violence, vandalism, teacher and administrator fear, hostility, and low expectations.

White parents continue to resist any attempt at desegregation and increasing numbers of Black parents, after years of seeing the burdens of desegregation placed disproportionately on Black children, are questioning the benefits of desegregation. Many Black parents, instead, argue for improving the quality of education their children receive wherever the children attend school.

State legislators, quickly seizing upon taxpayer and citizen discontent, introduced and passed minimum competency legislation requiring that tests be administered to high school students preparing to graduate and requiring that every student demonstrate a pre-determined level of competency as a prerequisite for graduation and receipt of a high school diploma. Thirty-eight of the 50 states have passed such legislation. The passage of this legislation represents an attempt to develop accountability. Although some efforts in this area have attempted to include teachers and, to a lesser degree, administrators, the major effort to date has been to develop educational accountability by placing the burden upon the student; e.g. to hold the student accountable.

It is apparent that the burden of minimum competency must not be borne entirely by students. To expect students

to produce and be held accountable for the educational process when teachers and administrators are not is foolish and unrealistic. At the very minimum, competency and accountability must include educators. Minimum competency testing programs must be seen for what they are: political responses which do not address the basic question of whether educators are educating. Black Americans cannot allow minimum competency to become the acceptable measure of education. By definition, education must be more than a minimum.

Studies of school desegregation show that Black children and youth were suspended and excluded more often than whites, and similar research on school violence and vandalism reveals the same patterns. For too many of these young people, suspension, exclusion or dropping-out is their introduction to membership in the urban underclass.

This existing and expanding underclass is not insignificant. Its members numbering in the hundreds of thousands are cast adrift in our cities and urban areas. The underclass represents not only an indictment of the American dream of equal opportunity and employment for all who want it, but also represents a clear and present danger of the harmony and civility which are absolutely necessary to human interaction in American life.

There are thousands of poor, Black parents who are doing a commendable, even herculean, job of rearing, encouraging, and motivating their children to succeed and achieve in school. There are thousands of disadvantaged Black children and youth who are willing to pay the price for scholastic achievement, for excellence. These young people work hard, study their lessons and, somehow, make it through the often stultifying, depressing and discouraging hurdles thrown in their path. The Black student achiever is almost totally ignored. Attention is showered on athletes, street gang leaders, unwed adolescent mothers,