

Are Jobs the Solution?

WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS:

The World of the New Urban Poor

by William Julius Wilson. 322 pp. Knopf. \$26

by Glenn C. Loury

William J. Wilson is arguably the nation's leading urban sociologist. Two of his previous books, *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978) and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), exerted a profound influence on both the academic and the popular discussions of race and urban poverty in America. For 24 years a professor at the University of Chicago and now at Harvard University, Wilson has received just about every honor available to a scholar of modern society, including a recent invitation to join the prestigious National Academy of Sciences—a rare achievement among sociologists, whose work is often regarded by “hard” scientists as less than rigorous.

Wilson is therefore well positioned to bring the authority of science to bear upon that nagging question of public policy: what must be done about the ghettos? In his new book, he does not shrink from the task. He sets forth both a diagnosis of and a prescription for what ails our inner cities. The problem, he says, is that “the new urban poor” lack adequate employment opportunities. The cure, he thinks, would be a federally supported social policy agenda that includes greatly expanded public works to provide jobs of last resort, employment training for unskilled or displaced adult workers, universal and publicly provided health care, greater tax credits for low-income workers, and subsidized child care. Those who fail to see the *scientific* necessity for this agenda—the Republican congressional majority, for instance—are portrayed by Wilson as know-nothings, or worse.

Wilson's diagnosis and prescription are supported by the Urban Poverty and Family Life Study (UPFLS), a massive, decade-long, multimillion-dollar empirical inquiry into the economic and social

life of several impoverished Chicago neighborhoods (some practically in the shadow of the university). Assisted by an army of graduate students, Wilson and his colleagues have interviewed hundreds of housing project dwellers, community activists, employers, social service professionals, welfare recipients, and working-class residents. The result is a richly textured and revealing set of data, including both statistical and ethnographic materials, that will benefit scholars for years to come.

But what has Wilson made of these data, by way of a grand synthesis? Regrettably, despite his often intriguing use of the UPFLS materials, his new book does not represent a fundamental advance over his previous work. Moreover, it raises essential questions without answering them effectively. How do individual behavioral problems interact with pathological cultural patterns and impediments to economic opportunity to produce intractable, multigenerational poverty? For someone purporting to be a scientist, Wilson's views on this complex matter seem surprisingly dogmatic.

The most valuable feature of his book is its summary of the UPFLS data. Whether showing the impact of drug trafficking on social cohesion, the attitudes among men and women toward marriage and child-bearing, or the beliefs of employers about the work habits of various ethnic groups, Wilson's findings are invariably provocative and troubling. Many readers, convinced of the need for drastic action, will endorse his call for “social rights,” alongside economic and political rights, for every citizen of the United States. These rights have not been acknowledged, Wilson says, because, alone among Western democracies, America embraces an ideol-

ogy of individualism in which economic failure is attributed to individual shortcomings rather than to structural factors for which society should take responsibility. Hence Wilson advocates a political program intended to counter this ideology and (he believes) to benefit the majority of American workers, not only the poor.

Wilson's data and proposed solutions are linked by his central "scientific" claims: that the absence of "good jobs at good wages" has precipitated social collapse, and that until employment opportunities are restored in the central cities, the tragic disintegration to be observed there will continue apace. The disappearance of work is decidedly a structural result, driven by technological change and the globalization of economic competition, and it cannot be counteracted by individual action—as many middle-aged workers displaced by corporate downsizing can attest. To Wilson, the conclusion is compelling and obvious—so obvious as to need no defense.

Evidently, Wilson is still working through some of the controversies sparked by his previous books. *The Declining Significance of Race* was acclaimed by sociologists for its historical analysis of the relationship between race relations and the economic requirements of American society. But it was also denounced by many black intellectuals for minimizing the importance of racial discrimination (thereby undermining support for affirmative action policies) and for speaking too candidly of social pathologies in the underclass (thereby giving ammunition and comfort to conservatives). In both *The Truly Disadvantaged* and his present volume, Wilson tries to insulate himself from such criticism. It does no good, he notes, to ignore the all-too-visible behavioral problems of poor blacks. Yet, he insists, these problems must be understood as the natural consequences of limited economic opportunities. Moreover, while race continues to be an important fact of American social life, it turns out (by happy coincidence) that the instruments of policy most likely to improve the condition of the black poor will also benefit the white working class. The political implication is

clear: those concerned with advancing black interests should form transracial coalitions on behalf of expanded social programs universally applicable to all.

What is the *scientific* basis for these claims? How does Wilson know that the root cause of behavioral pathology in the ghettos is the disappearance of work? It is true that attachment to the work force is appallingly weak among the ghetto population. It is also true that attachments to marriage, education, and law-abidingness are just as weak. Which is cause, and which is effect? Even after nearly two decades of research, Wilson has yet to produce convincing evidence that his causal hypothesis is valid.

Wilson's contempt for the leading alternative explanations—the incentive effects of welfare and the autonomous influences of ghetto culture—is undisguised. I share his skepticism about the effects of welfare. But I cannot be so certain that patterns of self-destructive behavior among successive generations, reinforced by cultural changes throughout American society, have not assumed a life of their own. Here is the problem: too many ghetto dwellers are unfit for work. They have not been socialized within families to delay gratification, exercise self-control, communicate effectively, accept responsibility, and feel empathy for their fellows. These deficits are not genetic; they reflect the disadvantages of being born into the backwaters of a society marked by racial and class segregation, and they should elicit a sympathetic response. But they are deficits nonetheless—deep, severe deficits that may not be so easily reversible as Wilson assumes.

Distressingly, Wilson seems closed to argument on this point. As examples of wrong-headed analysis, he repeatedly cites Charles Murray's *Losing Ground* (1984) in the same breath as Lawrence Mead's *Beyond Entitlement* (1986). The former, of course, became the battle plan for the Reagan-era assault on the welfare state as fostering dependency and social pathology. But Mead's argument is altogether different. He explicitly rejects Murray's thesis and argues that, unlike the poor of generations past, today's hard-core

impoverished lack the skills, habits, and values that would enable them to become self-reliant. Therefore, says Mead, they need substantial, morally authoritative intervention. Instead of addressing Mead's point, Wilson simply asserts that "increasing the employment base would have an enormous positive impact on the social organization of ghetto neighborhoods. As more people become employed, crime—including violent crime—and drug use will subside; families will be strengthened and welfare receipt will decline significantly; ghetto-related culture and behavior, no longer sustained and nourished by persistent joblessness, will gradually fade."

This scenario is not entirely implausible. It may be that WPA-style public jobs, which Wilson strongly advocates, could reverse the disintegration of the black family, drive crack cocaine from the ghettos, and transform the negative attitudes toward work and responsibility expressed by the young black men in Wilson's urban laboratory. But I suspect that more, much more, will be needed. I suspect that even the most enlightened interventionist social policy will not be capable of changing the entrenched patterns of child rearing and social interaction by which personal incapacity—criminal violence, promiscuous sexuality, early unwed childbearing, academic failure—are passed from one generation to the next. I suspect that the moral life of the urban poor will have to be transformed before the most marginalized souls will be able to seize such opportunities as may exist. These suspicions of mine might have been allayed if Wilson had provided any direct proof that increased job opportunities reverse the tide of social pathology in an existing community. Regrettably, he has not.

Nor has he dealt effectively with some devastating criticism of his earlier theorizing on this matter. In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, he advanced his "marriageable pool" hypothesis, a bid to explain the high proportion of out-of-wedlock births and single-parent families among poor blacks as a function of declining employment opportunities among low-skilled men—a

factor that, in Wilson's view, makes them less marriageable in the eyes of prospective mates. In the same book Wilson offered his "spatial mismatch" hypothesis, speculating that the unprecedented concentration of poor people in today's inner cities contributes materially to the development of behavioral problems among them.

Both of these ideas have since been tested. A number of analysts have explored the possible relationship between male employability and the strength of marital ties among poor blacks. Their studies, based in nationally representative samples, have found no clear evidence supporting Wilson's "marriageable pool" hypothesis. Wilson does not dispute these findings, but neither does he let them affect him. Rather, he observes that in his Chicago-based sample, men with jobs are more likely than unemployed men to marry the women who have borne them children—as though this were refutation enough.

Likewise, there is mounting evidence that the location of jobs within a certain metropolitan area (either in the central city or the suburbs) is only weakly related to the level of employment among the area's ghetto residents. Yet here, too, Wilson is unmoved. He continues to cite the "spatial mismatch" hypothesis as if its validity had not been questioned, and to prescribe the development of mass transit systems (which may be desirable for other reasons) as a solution to the job woes of the urban poor. He makes the same kind of argument about child care. Because single mothers who work are more likely to have access to informal child-care arrangements than those who do not work, he concludes that the lack of child care is a major barrier to single mothers' finding jobs.

The problem, again, is that Wilson is not able to identify the precise causal mechanisms at work. Perhaps responsible men whose lives are already well organized are able to keep faith with both their employers and their families. Perhaps people who place a high value on being self-supporting are not deterred from a couple hours' commute on a bus. Perhaps women who are energetic and disciplined can hold down jobs while sustaining the kinds

of relationships with friends and relatives that make informal child care possible. The fact that most criminals are unemployed is not sufficient proof that unstable ghetto youths will prefer minimum-wage public employment to entry-level positions in the crack trade.

The irony is that Wilson's own ethnographic findings undermine his conclusions. For example, he has rich comparative data on the experience of poor, unskilled Mexican immigrants in Chicago. It turns out that neither the employment experience nor the familial attachments of Mexican immigrants are as weak as those of native-born black Americans. This contrast is not lost on employers, who report sharp differences in the reliability and trustworthiness of Mexican versus black labor. Wilson suggests that, because Mexican immigrants still bear the imprint of their rural, Catholic social origins, they are more likely than blacks to put up with grief on the job. But he predicts that, over time, the attitudes and behaviors of Mexicans will begin to resemble those of ghetto blacks. Maybe, maybe not. Wilson has no evidence for this prediction. What he does have is clear evidence that, in the exact same economic environment, some poorly educated people are much more able than others to seize the available opportunities. By itself, this fact entitles us to ask whether a mere expansion of job prospects will induce a cultural and social transformation among those who now languish.

Strikingly, Wilson's data reveal a convergence between the reports about young male ghetto dwellers provided by their prospective employers on the one hand, and by their prospective mates on the other. On the whole, neither of these parties has a terribly high opinion of the capacities and intentions of these young men. Perhaps that's because, on the whole, their capacities are minimal and their intentions unworthy. This state of affairs may be entirely a consequence of social and economic processes operating over decades and

lying beyond any individual's control. But the origin of the malady, if it be that, need not matter. The counterproductive values and behavior patterns of these young men must be reckoned with on their own terms. The issue is not "blaming the victim" or avoiding such blame. It is, rather, a question of affixing responsibility and prescribing a remedy.

Wilson has done both: the responsibility is public, and the remedy is an array of European-style social benefits. Yet this radical-sounding position may not be radical enough. I fear that, out of fealty to his own ideological commitments—which stress above all that structural arrangements are autonomous and individual behaviors derivative—Wilson has failed to ask the hard questions. Exactly what interventions can counteract the impact on early-childhood cognitive development of bad parenting by ignorant and depressed teenage girls? How can urban neighborhoods be rescued from criminally violent adolescents while also affording some prospect that the youths in question can be helped to construct—not reconstruct—decent lives? What specific reforms are needed in the educational system before the underclass can become minimally competitive in the modern economy? Can the seductive power of gangs, and more generally of degenerative ghetto culture, be neutralized? Is there any way to fire the ambition of ghetto youths without resorting to the burnt-out ideologies of racial revolution or the pipe dreams of athletic or entertainment superstardom? Is it possible to replace these fantasies with a healthier, more realistic assessment of individual life chances in this free and prosperous nation, which remains the leading destination of indigent people from around the world?

Wilson's sole answer to these questions—"jobs"—is just not good enough.

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