

define corporate social responsibilities on “major questions”: should they contract with “sweatshops” in Asia and Latin America? Should profitable companies lay off unneeded employees or retrain them for new jobs? These are not only ethical questions, Reich maintains, but issues of public policy, involving the weighing of competing social costs.

But corporations must not be allowed to subvert the process by political means—

through lobbying, campaign contributions, and advertising. “It is not possible to have it both ways,” Reich maintains. “The modern corporation cannot simultaneously claim, as a matter of public morality and public policy, that its only legitimate societal mission is to maximize shareholder returns, while at the same time actively seek to influence social policies intended to achieve all the other things a society may wish to do.”

## *Caution: Economists at Work*

“Reassessing Trends in U.S. Earnings Inequality” by Robert I. Lerman, in *Monthly Labor Review* (Dec. 1997), Bureau of Labor Statistics, Washington, D.C. 20212.

That earnings inequality has been increasing in the United States is now conventional wisdom. But just what is “earnings inequality”? The answer is not as straightforward as one might think—and neither is the trend, argues Lerman, an economist at American University.

What data you measure, and how you measure them, goes a long way toward determining what answers you get, he says. Economists often measure inequality as the distribution of annual earnings among full-time, year-round workers, and even frequently further limit their sample to men or to workers within a certain age range. This may be fine when trying to gauge progress toward some ideal, Lerman says, but it is not the way to assess how large forces such as trade and technological change are altering the *overall* U.S. wage distribution.

Lerman examined census data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, as well as the more commonly used Current Population Survey. Defining “earnings” as compensation per hour for all hours worked by all workers in the economy, he got this result: wage inequality increased between 1980 and ’86 (as other researchers have found), but then

stayed more or less the same through 1995.

This finding is not necessarily at odds with other, seemingly contradictory trends. For example, the earnings gap between the educated and the less educated appears to have widened since the mid-1980s. But it has been offset by the narrowing wage gaps between men and women, and between blacks and whites.

“Trends in inequality turn out to be highly sensitive to the definition of earnings and the sample of workers used,” Lerman points out. An Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development publication shows that between 1979 and 1991, earnings inequality in the United States grew among full-time, year-round workers by nearly 18 percent, but decreased by one percent among all workers, and declined by 11 percent when measured against the working-age population.

Lerman’s conclusion: “Earnings inequality did increase for some groups of workers,” and certain forces, such as trade and technology, may have had an impact on the overall situation. But in the U.S. labor market as a whole, the net effect—contrary to the conventional wisdom—has not been higher wage inequality.

## SOCIETY

### *Johnny’s Grades Aren’t So Bad*

“Are U.S. Students Behind?” by Gerald W. Bracey, in *The American Prospect* (Mar.–Apr. 1998), P.O. Box 383080, Cambridge, Mass. 02238.

Ever since a federal government report 15 years ago warned about a rising tide of mediocrity in the nation’s public schools,

reformers have pointed with alarm to the poor performance of American students in international comparisons of test scores.

## *Did Blacks Fight for Dixie?*

Thousands of blacks served the Confederate Army in support roles, but how many enlisted as combat soldiers? Some estimates run as high as 30,000, but in an interview in *Southern Cultures* (1998: Vol. 4, No. 1), journalist Tony Horwitz, author of *Confederates in the Attic* (1998), says that, like leading Civil War historians, he believes the actual total was far lower.

*Apart from the lack of firm documentation, several things make me skeptical. If there were already thousands of blacks fighting for the South, why did the Confederate Congress engage in heated debate about enlisting them in 1865? And why, earlier in the war, was [Confederate general] Pat Cleburne vilified for proposing that blacks serve? And where are the accounts by Confederates themselves? Almost all the evidence from the southern side is negative: "We don't want black soldiers." . . .*

*Now, I do think we have to remain open to the possibility that new evidence might emerge. Talking to some academics, I sensed a knee-jerk reluctance to believe that any blacks at all served the South, and this seems wrong-headed to me. I agree with Ervin Jordan [author of *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (1995)] that it's simplistic and demeaning to regard wartime blacks as a monolithic group who somehow acted and thought in lock-step. We know there were black slaveholders. Why shouldn't there have been blacks who supported the Confederacy, out of personal loyalty to white soldiers they grew up with, out of fear of northerners, or for other reasons?*

*But nothing I've read or heard so far convinces me that more than a handful actually fought. I don't think we'll ever know the precise number, but I'd guess that there were maybe a few hundred who took up arms at one time or another as true soldiers for the Confederacy.*

Bracey, author of *Final Exam* (1995), contends that the picture painted is far worse than the general reality.

Take reading skills, for instance. In a major 31-nation study in 1992, American students finished second. Only students from Finland, a small, homogeneous country, did better. If only the top 10 percent of students are compared, young Americans come out the best in the world. Yet reformers are only interested in calling press conferences when there is bad news to report, Bracey notes.

What about math and science? A much-publicized finding from a 1992 study by University of Michigan psychologist Harold Stevenson and his colleagues is that only the top one percent of American students score as high in math as the average Japanese student. But that study was flawed, Bracey maintains: the samples were not representative. The American students, for instance, included a disproportionately large number of children from poor and non-English-speaking families.

There is a U.S.-Japan gap, Bracey says, "but Stevenson's data exaggerate" it.

Larger, more methodologically sophisticated multinational studies have provided a more reliable picture, Bracey contends. In a 1996 study, American eighth-graders got 53 percent of the math questions right, just two percentage points under the international average among 41 nations. They answered 58 percent of the science questions correctly, scoring two points above the international average. At the fourth-grade level, American students ranked 12th in math out of the 26 nations tested, and third in science. (It's true that only about 15 percent of American students scored as high on math as the average Japanese student. The difference, Bracey speculates, may be due to the extreme pressure put on Japanese youngsters from an early age to get into the right high school and college.)

"Aside from [Japan and three other] Asian nations at the top and a slightly larger number of developing countries at the

bottom,” Bracey points out, “the remaining roughly 30 countries (including all the developed countries of the West) look very much alike in their [1996 study] mathematics scores.” The story is much the same with the science grades.

In any event, Bracey argues, emphasizing *average* scores obscures the enormous differences among American students. In the 1992 international assessment, for instance, pupils from the top third of American schools had

average scores as high as those of the top two countries (Taiwan and South Korea), while the lowest third of U.S. schools did not even do as well as the lowest-ranking nation (Jordan).

Educational reformers talk as if the typical American school is in need of major repair, Bracey concludes, but the schools that really need it are those with the least resources and the worst social environments.

## *Where the Black Family Foundered*

“Migration Experience and Family Patterns in the ‘Promised Land’” by Stewart E. Tolnay, in *Journal of Family History* (Jan. 1998), Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

Did southern blacks who migrated north to Chicago and other cities earlier in this century bring with them a dysfunctional family culture—a legacy of slavery—that then played havoc with the urban black family? This thesis, popular in the 1950s and late ‘60s but then seemingly discredited by census studies, has been revived in recent years, notably by Nicholas Lemann in his 1991 bestseller, *The Promised Land*. Tolnay, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Albany, contends that southern migrants, in fact, “enjoyed *greater* family stability than native northerners.” The longer they stayed in the North, however, the more that advantage diminished.

In 1940, according to census data, 77 percent of the migrants’ children were living with two parents, compared with 72 percent of northern-born blacks’ children. Three decades later, the percentages had declined but the gap had widened: 69 percent of the families that had migrated during the pre-

ceding five years were intact, compared with 61 percent of their northern-born counterparts. The migrant “advantage,” significantly, was smaller for southern-born blacks whose migration had occurred earlier: 65 percent of their children were living with both parents. The next two decades saw a drastic decline in the figures—to 48 percent among “recent” migrants in 1990, 44 percent among “past” migrants, and 37 percent among northern-born blacks. Even so, the migrant “advantage” remained.

It is true, Tolnay notes, that the migrants’ edge is a bit exaggerated because migrant women whose marriages failed sometimes returned to the South, and so escaped being counted in the North. But that was a relatively small group. Even if they are included, the pattern—the greater stability of southern black migrant families—remains much the same. But this, Tolnay notes, only deepens the real mystery: what caused the erosion of that stability?

## PRESS & MEDIA

### *Big Bad Bird?*

“Educational Television Is Not an Oxymoron” by Daniel R. Anderson, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (May 1998), 3937 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

“The worst thing about *Sesame Street* is that people believe it is educationally valuable,” grumped Jane Healy about Big Bird and his friends in her 1990 jeremiad, *Endangered Minds*. She and other critics claim that the long-running, fast-paced

PBS television program mesmerizes youngsters, renders them intellectually passive, shortens their attention spans, and interferes with their language development. Extensive research cited by Anderson, a psychologist at the University of Massa-