Foreword to the 1993 Edition

by William Julius Wilson

Since the early twentieth century, the city of Chicago has been a laboratory for the scientific investigation of the social, economic, and historical forces that create and perpetuate economically desolated and isolated urban communities. Much of this research has been conducted by social scientists affiliated with the University of Chicago. The most distinctive phase of this research, referred to as the Chicago School of urban sociology, was completed prior to 1950.[1] The perspectives on urban processes that guided the Chicago School's approach to the study of race and class have undergone subtle changes down through the years. For Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess the immigrant slums and the social problems that characterized them were temporary conditions toward inevitable progress. Thus blacks represented the latest group of migrants involved in the "interaction cycle" that "led from conflict to accommodation to assimilation."[2]

The view that blacks fit the pattern of immigrant assimilation appeared in subsequent studies by E. Franklin Frazier. However, Frazier's awareness of the black urban condition in the 1930s led him to recognize and emphasize a problem ignored in the earlier work of Park and Burgess—namely the important link between the black family structure and the industrial economy. Frazier believed that upward mobility for African Americans and their eventual assimilation into American life would depend in large measure on the availability of employment opportunities in the industrial sector.

[1]Representative studies by those identified with the Chicago School include Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *The City* (1925); Frederic Thrasher, *The Gang* (1927); Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (1928); Harvey W. Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929); Robert E. L. Faris and Warren Dunham, *Mental Disorder in Urban America* (1931); and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932). (These were all published by the University of Chicago Press.)

[2]Alice O'Connor, "Race and Class in Chicago Sociology, 1920–1990," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association Meetings, November 8, 1992. I am indebted to O'Connor for much of the discussion to follow in this section.

In 1945 a fundamental revision in the Chicago framework appeared in the publication of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*. Drake and Cayton first examined black progress in employment, housing, and social integration, using census, survey, and archival data. Their analysis clearly revealed the existence of a color line that effectively blocked black occupational, residential, and social mobility. Thus any assumption about urban blacks duplicating the immigrant experience has to confront the issue of race. Moreover, as the historian Alice O'Connor puts it, "Drake and Cayton recognized that the racial configuration of Chicago was not the expression of an organic process of city growth but the product of human behavior, institutional practices and political decisions."[3]

Black Metropolis also deviated from the Chicago School in its inclusion of an ethnographic study of daily life in Bronzeville, based on W. Lloyd Warner's anthropological techniques. In the final analysis, the book represented an "uneasy hybrid of Chicago school and anthropological methods and, ultimately, a much less optimistic view of the prospects for black progress."[4] In the revised and enlarged edition in 1962, however, Drake and Cayton examined the changes that had occurred in Bronzeville since the publication of the first edition with a sense of optimism. They felt that America in the 1960s was "experiencing a period of prosperity" and that African Americans were "living in the Era of Integration" (p. xv). They, of course, had no way of anticipating the rapid social and economic deterioration of communities like Bronzeville since the early sixties.

THE INNER CITY TODAY

The most fundamental change in the inner city is that many neighborhoods are plagued by far greater levels of joblessness than when Drake and Cayton conducted their ethnographic research in the 1940s. As a case in point, let me take the three Chicago community areas that represent Bronzeville—Douglas, Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park. In all three areas, a majority of adults were gainfully employed in 1950, but by 1990 only four in ten in Douglas worked, one in three in Washington Park, and one in four in Grand Boulevard. These employment changes were accompanied by changes in other indicators of economic status. For example, in Grand Boulevard medium family income dropped from 62 percent of the city average in 1950 to less than 37 percent in 1980; and the

[3]Ibid., p. 22.
[4]Ibid., p. 18.

value of housing plummeted from 97 percent of the city average in 1950 to about half the city average in 1980, with the most rapid declines occurring after 1970.

When the first edition of *Black Metropolis* was published, there was much greater class integration in the black community. As Drake and Cayton pointed out, Bronzeville residents had limited success in "sorting themselves out into broad community areas which might be designated as 'lower class' and 'middle class'. . . . Instead of middle-class *areas* Bronzeville tends to have middle-class *buildings* in all areas, or a few middle-class blocks here and there" (pp. 658–660). Though they may have lived on different streets, blacks of all classes in inner-city areas such as Bronzeville lived in the same community and shopped at the same stores. Their children went to the same schools and played in the same parks. Although there was some degree of class antagonism, their neighborhoods were more stable than the inner-city neighborhoods of today.

Two factors largely account for the sharp decline in the social organization of inner-city neighborhoods.[5]

The first is the impact of changes in the economy. In the United States, historical discrimination and a migration to large metropolises that kept the urban minority population relatively young created a problem of weak labor force attachment among urban blacks and, especially after 1970, made them particularly vulnerable to the industrial and geographic changes in the economy. The shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, the increasing polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, innovations in technology, the relocation of manufacturing industries out of central cities, and periodic recessions have forced up the rate of black joblessness (unemployment and nonparticipation in the labor market), despite the passage of antidiscrimination legislation and the creation of affirmative action programs. The rise in joblessness has in turn helped trigger an increase in the concentrations of poor people, a growing number of poor single-parent families, and an increase in welfare dependency. These problems have been especially evident in the ghetto neighborhoods of large cities, not only because the most impoverished minority populations live there, but also because the neighborhoods have become less diversified in a way that has severely worsened the impact of the continuing economic changes.

This brings us to the second factor—changes in the class composition of

[5]William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

inner-city neighborhoods. Especially since 1970, inner-city neighborhoods have experienced an outmigration of working- and middle-class families previously confined to them by the restrictive covenants of higher-status city neighborhoods and suburbs. While Chicago lost one-fifth of its population between 1950 and 1980, Washington Park lost 44 percent, Grand Boulevard one-half, and Douglas 55 percent. And of those who departed, a disproportionate number were nonpoor. Many of these families took advantage of the housing vacancies in the rapidly racially changing city and suburban neighborhoods. The outward mobility for the black working and middle classes removed an important social buffer that could have deflected the full impact of the prolonged and high level of joblessness in these neighborhoods that has stemmed from uneven economic growth and periodic recessions.

Although these processes have had an adverse effect on all poor minorities, they have been especially devastating for the lower-class black male. For example, in 1950 in the two Bronzeville neighborhoods of Grand Boulevard and Washington Park there were 70 employed men for every 100 women.[6] That was close to the citywide figure at the time of 73 working men to every 100 women. By 1990, this proportion had plummeted to 26 working men for every 100 women inhabitants in Washington Park and 21 in Grand Boulevard.

Thirty and forty years ago, the overwhelming majority of black males were working. Most of them were poor, but they held regular jobs around which their daily family life was organized. When black men looked for work, employers were concerned about whether they had strong backs, because they would be working in a factory or in the back room of a shop doing heavy lifting and labor. The work was hard and they were hired. Now, economic restructuring has broken the figurative back of the black working class.

Data from our Urban Poverty and Family Life Study show that 51 percent of Chicago's employed inner-city black males born between 1941 and 1955 worked in manufacturing industries in 1969. By 1987 that figure fell to 29 percent. Of those born between 1956 and 1968, 45 percent worked in manufacturing industries as late as 1978. By 1987 that figure had declined to 25 percent.

These employment changes have recently accompanied the loss of tradi-

[6]Rates represent all males and females over fourteen years of age in 1950 and sixteen years of age in 1990.

tional manufacturing and other blue-collar jobs in Chicago. As a result, young black males have turned increasingly to the low-wage service sector and laboring jobs for employment, or have gone jobless.

Many young men in inner-city neighborhoods today have responded to these declining opportunities by resorting to crime, drugs, and violence. This in turn has fed the image of young black men as dangerous. So, when they look for work in competition with immigrants, women, or whites, employers prefer not to hire "trouble."

The employment prospects of black women in the inner city have also declined, because they have had to compete for service jobs with the growing number of white women and immigrants who have entered the labor market. All of these changes have resulted in accelerated jobless rates in the inner city.

The increase in joblessness combined with the exodus of higher-income families have resulted in declining levels of social organization in communities like Bronzeville. By "social organization" I mean the extent to which the residents of a neighborhood are able to maintain effective social control and realize their common values. The outmigration of higher-income families and increasing and prolonged joblessness make it considerably more difficult to sustain basic neighborhood institutions. In the face of increasing joblessness, stores, banks, credit institutions, restaurants, and professional services lose regular and potential patrons. Churches experience dwindling numbers of parishioners and shrinking resources; recreational facilities, block clubs, community groups, and other informal organizations also suffer. As these organizations decline, the means of formal and informal social control in the neighborhood become weaker. Levels of crime and street violence increase as a result, leading to further deterioration of the neighborhood.

In short, there has been a movement from what Allan Spear has called an institutional ghetto—in which the structure and activities of the larger society are duplicated, as portrayed in Drake and Cayton's description of Bronzeville—to a physical ghetto, which lacks the capability to provide basic opportunities and resources.[7]

For today's student of urban problems, one of the important benefits

[7]Allan Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Also see Loic J. D. Wacquant and William Julius Wilson, "Poverty, Joblessness, and the Social Transformation of the Inner City," in *Welfare Policy for the 1990s*, eds. Phoebe H. Cottingham and David T. Ellwood (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 70–102.

gained from reading *Black Metropolis* is that its comprehensive description and analysis of a large inner-city neighborhood at mid-twentieth century provides a good base for systematic comparisons with the inner-city ghetto today. In particular, it allows us to consider the significance of a segregated community heavily populated with *working* poor adults in contrast with a segregated community largely populated with *nonworking* poor adults.