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The Black Poor Are Different

By Roger Wilkins

O F all the problems on the racial landscape, none seems harder than helping the people called the "black underclass." Some conservatives argue against policies aimed at a specific race and instead or programs targeted at the poor generally. This view is erroneous.

No matter how much more politically palatable general programs might be, the black poor need programs designed specifically for them because some of the black poor are different. I speak primarily of the poor in single-parent homes, particularly those in which the parents themselves are no more than children.

The most urgent task is to regenerate families deep in the inner cities. While employment, early-childhood education and child-care programs are critical parts of such an effort, it is essential that the public schools become the focus of specific remedies.

I do not mean that the black poor are different in the eyes of God or that they differ from other classes or races at birth in their innate potential. I do mean that the racially inflicted economic, cultural and psychological damage they suffer is unique and hideously destructive and requires specially tailored remedies.

The inner-city poor are poor because they have been scarred more deeply by the legacy of slavery than the rest of us. Racism has always hurt some blacks more than others. At the time of the Revolution, some blacks were free, literate and living in Boston; others were little better than beasts of burden and sexual chattel in South Carolina.

Some blacks came North before Emancipation and others were slammed back into semislavery during and especially after Reconstruction. Some of their descendants remained illiterate peasants in the South in the sixth and even seventh decades of this century. They were driven off the land by the mechanization of agriculture.

When they got to the major cities, millions of the unskilled jobs that the underclasses from Europe and earlier black émigrés from the South had used as ladders to the middle class were disappearing. Some survived this transition while others became disoriented and redundant in the cities' hard and dirty backwaters.

It is the children and grandchildren of these leftover Americans that Dr. Samuel D. Proctor, the retired pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, mentioned when I asked what the biggest lesson of his years in Harlem had been. He said, "Children without par-

They need special help.

ents," referring to babies born to mothers who are still children. "Being born without parents is like being born without skin."

Economically superfluous people engulfed by societal opprobrium, environmental ugliness and cultural desolation experience the same sense of futurelessness that people under wartime bombardment do. They live under constant stress. Many do not play by the rules generated by people for whom the society works. Not all of them can defer gratification, sexual or otherwise, for a good future that everything they know tells them will never come.

Drugs serve as an economic platform for some and psychological escape for others. So family, which connects generations to values, to discipline, to hope, disintegrates. Children born into this chaos are victims at birth and on their way to becoming societal burdens or menaces at 15.

If these children are to be saved, we must find ways to nurse health back into families in the inner cities, where family disintegration is ripping black culture apart, putting an enormous segment of the black future at risk.

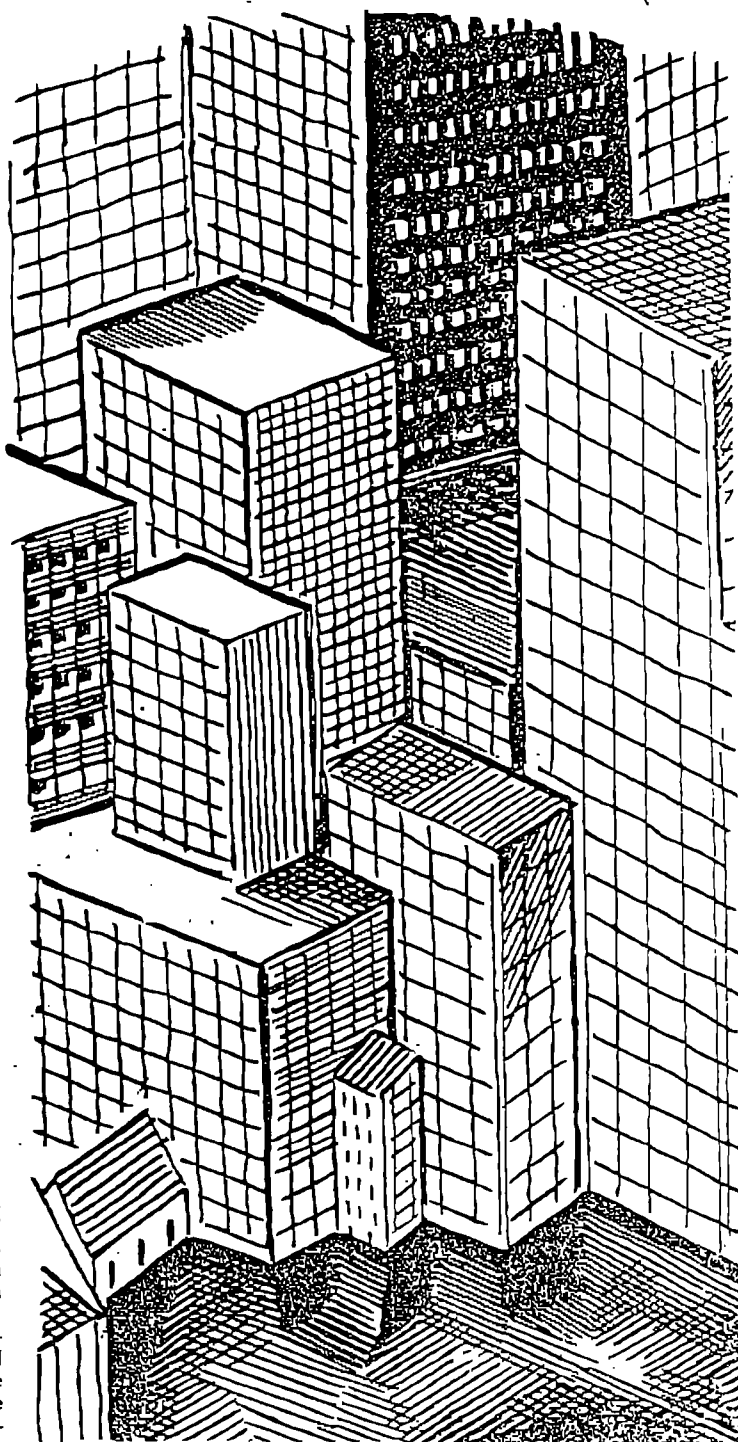
That means, in part, finding ways to reconstitute community resources, which have been severely weakened by middle-class emigration from the inner cities.

It is for this reason that I stress adding social-service programs to schools. This would enable schools, which would then have contact with parents, to teach better; in addition, the schools would also become centers of the community for the children they serve and their parents and grandparents.

Many inner-city children have a lone parent and need more stability and educational support from home. Their parents also need help in becoming capable adults who can provide help with education.

The elementary schools these children attend need to be augmented with multipurpose family service centers to help meet these needs. The parents could get substantial personal support from trained counselors, group therapy and the knowledge that in their barren neighborhood there was not only a place dispensing services but also providing a real source of communal life.

The essential element is to provide a focal point for family reconstruction at the critical juncture where children might be saved, parents strengthened and the downward rush of generations of damage reversed. □



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