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The African-American Urban Milieu and Economic Development

by Lenneal J. Henderson

This article is adapted from "African Americans in the Urban Milieu: Conditions, Trends, and Developmental Needs," in The State of Black America 1994, edited by Billy J. Tidwell (New York: National Urban League, Inc., 1994), 11–29.

Economic disparity between urban white America and urban black America is becoming more pronounced, whether in central cities, suburbs, or edge cities. African-American employment prospects have declined in central cities, increased slightly in suburbs, and increased substantially for the few African Americans living and working in edge cities. William Julius Wilson cites the decline in stable, higher-paying, blue-collar employment in the industrial cities throughout America.¹ Others identify the changing structure of metropolitan employment as characterized by more rapid professional and white-collar employment growth in suburbs and edge cities and declining employment in central cities. In his book, *Cities Without Suburbs*, David Rusk argues that there is a distinction between the growth patterns of *elastic* and *inelastic* cities: elastic cities grow from within and are sufficiently flexible to transcend boundaries; inelastic cities experience declining demographic, economic, employment, and tax growth. Suburbs gain what the central cities lose.² These trends are manifested in the stark disparities in income, wealth, and poverty between African Americans and other Americans and among urban African Americans. The rise of young, African-American, female-headed households, the burgeoning employment in edge cities, and the lower incomes of African Americans with college educations and professional training contribute collectively to trends in the economic status of African Americans. Beyond differences in income of urban African Americans, William O'Hare identified critical differences, particularly in urban areas, between African-American and overall American net worth.³

Residential segregation and poor housing continue to define the living conditions of most urban African Americans. Given the historical role of cities as points of entry for American nonwhites; given the historical patterns of racial segregation of these nonwhites, particularly in industrial cities; given the discriminatory real estate practices and current patterns of inner-city disinvestment; and given the role of increasingly intense inner-city poverty in impeding the financial capacity of central-city residents to buy in the suburbs, sociologists

Massey and Kanaiaupuni combine these structural explanations for the rise in central-city poverty and racial segregation with the contributions of public housing policies. They argue that, since low-income housing projects use poverty as a criterion for entry, they build concentrated poverty structurally into any neighborhood that contains them.⁴ However, beyond public housing, patterns of residential segregation are evident in owner-occupied and rental housing in both inner-city and suburban African-American households.⁵

Environmental degradation is an increasingly alarming feature of urban life for African Americans. Although environmental issues are most often associated with endangered species of flora and fauna, the combination of exposure to increasing levels of lead poisoning, asbestos, and radon; the disproportionate siting of noxious facilities, such as sewer treatment plants, garbage dumps, landfills, incinerators, hazardous waste disposal sites, lead smelters, and other risky technologies;⁶ the location of large, urban, African-American communities in areas designated as "nonattainment" for air pollution by the 1992 Clean Air Act amendments; and, the severe health consequences of disproportionate exposure to water pollution, collectively create a deadly environment of risk in urban black America far in excess of the risks experienced by any animal species. Robert Bullard categorized these problems of environmental justice into procedural, geographical, and social inequities.⁷

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The urban African-American political dynamic is increasingly characterized by both continuing increases in the number and distribution of African-American elected officials at all levels of urban government and the tyranny of jurisdictional boundary between city and suburb. According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, there are currently more than eight thousand African-American elected officials. More than 90 percent of these elected officials serve in cities of varying sizes. Although increasing numbers of African-American elected officials are serving in office in cities with nonblack majorities like Seattle, Washington, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Rochester, New York, as well as suburban areas like Howard County, Maryland, Shelby County, Tennessee, and Broward County, Florida, most serve in cities with impoverished African-American populations. Three interrelated challenges face these elected officials: (a) the continued erosion of African-American political representation in central cities as the population of these cities declines; (b) the impact of poverty on the political behavior and opinions of African Americans. This represents a severe impediment to African-American political mobilization among the young and particularly among "the underclass." Cathy J. Cohen and

Michael C. Dawson indicate that social scientists “have neglected the one area that could lead to the empowerment and involvement of poor individuals in struggles to change their status, namely, politics (as distinguished from policy formation)”;⁸ and (c) the need for African-American elected officials to balance central-city, suburban, and edge-city visions. Business, industry, new housing, and public and private investment in infrastructure must proceed on a metro-regional basis. Consequently, African Americans must engineer self-development on a macro, metro, and micro (community) basis. As Neal Pierce indicates in his new book, *Citistates*, cities and suburbs need to make a deal for their mutual survival.⁹

Urban black America has a profound and continuing stake in a fledgling national urban policy. Recent attempts by the Clinton administration to promote “empowerment zones,” economic stimulus, and greater investment in infrastructure, particularly in the nation’s metropolitan areas, have met with both congressional opposition and intense lobbying by interest groups not as concerned with central-city development. The basic impact of these proposed policies is not only economic, but human: they represent an investment in the *human* infrastructure of central cities. The development of the urban African-American community is a joint venture of both public policy and the determined mobilization of African-American households and institutions.

Light in Deep Darkness: Self-Development Initiatives in Black America

The mere description of these trends wraps a cloak of apparent deep darkness around urban black America. Destruction, decay, and atrophy seem intractable. But, beneath these trends persist thousands of initiatives promoting the survival and development of households, neighborhoods, cities, and urban African-American communities. Despite sharp and devastating declines in federal assistance to cities in the last twelve years,¹⁰ many of these initiatives mobilize citizen resources: churches, corporations, foundations, and nonprofit institutions; they adamantly confront a range of complex and ominous challenges including violent crime, housing shortages and deterioration, environmental justice, education, employment development, business and commercial development, and the development of physical infrastructures. This light flows from a dynamic, restless, stirring, spiritual reservoir deep within those in the African-American community who care not only about African Americans, but, ultimately, themselves. Examples of self-development in urban black America illustrate this light in deep darkness. In Oakland, California, Safe Streets Now! is an innovative, low-cost, effective program that empowers neighborhood residents with a safe, fast, efficient, step-by-step program to eliminate drug houses in their neighborhoods and to prevent them from reforming. Its primary purpose is to provide citizens with the necessary tools to eliminate neighborhood nuisances house by house, street by street, and neighborhood by

neighborhood. Under the guidance of a community organizer, neighbors take control of drug trafficking by pursuing legal action against property owners who rent to drug dealers. Since 1989, Safe Streets Now! has trained over thirty-five hundred citizens to close over 250 drug houses. More than \$700,000 in judgments in small claims courts have been won for neighborhood residents. In 1992 alone, Safe Streets Now! provided thirty-three community workshops in Oakland and consultations to 385 volunteers who have closed down sixty-seven drug houses.¹¹

Urban black America has a profound and continuing stake in a fledgling national urban policy.

A huge, dynamic, multifaceted initiative in community development is also occurring in the Sandtown-Winchester community on the west side of Baltimore, Maryland, a twenty-block area that is home to twelve thousand five hundred of the city’s poorest residents. This initiative is the result of a dynamic, diverse coalition, including Mayor Kurt Schmoke and his administration, the Enterprise Foundation, founded by urban developer James Rouse, and the Community Building In Partnership, Inc. (CBP). A massive development of some three hundred new homes has been launched along with the development of diverse, intensive social service support systems to sustain neighborhood transformation. Community self-development is the prevailing norm animating much of the success of this nationally recognized project.¹²

Many initiatives in urban environmental justice are flourishing in urban black America. The first National Environmental Summit for People of Color convened in Washington, D.C., in October 1991, under the leadership of the Commission on Racial Justice and the Environmental Equity Task Force, along with urban environmental analysts and activists like Carl Anthony, Robert Bullard, and Charles Lee. During and since that summit, many urban environmental projects, programs, and coalitions proceeded in the midst of the worst urban conditions. In Maryland, a unique coalition has emerged between the Baltimore Urban League, under the leadership of Roger Lyons, and the eighty-thousand-member Chesapeake Bay Foundation, under the leadership of Will Baker. With the support of the Morris Goldseker Foundation, this inner-city environmental partnership will pursue environmental education, environmental employment development, urban revitalization through more balanced metropolitan growth strategies, and toxic waste reduction in Baltimore City. In addition, the work of African-American architect and planner Carl Anthony and his Earth Island Institute in San Francisco focuses on an effective, balanced approach to the development of energy-efficient, environmentally sound, urban transportation alternatives. Add to these examples hundreds of urban forestry, greenway, water

relief efforts, and public policy initiatives to reduce urban air pollution, and, clearly, the battle to reclaim and restore the ecology of urban African-American communities is escalating.

Toward a Concept of Urban Self-Development

These examples illustrate the essential, recurring elements of self-development in urban black America. These elements are inextricably intertwined and characterize most current urban initiatives.

- **Collective Community Resolve.** From deep within the spirit of those pursuing the social, economic, political, and cultural development of the African-American community is a collective resolve undaunted by the encroachments and setbacks of crime, reduced governmental support, or institutional atrophy. No effort succeeds without this faith and tenacity.
- **Pervasive Transformation.** No concept of self-development ultimately succeeds by benefiting only a fleeting segment of its community. Development initiatives should involve Du Bois's "talented tenth," the vital majority of the community, and the underclass. The engendering of class divisions or conflicts within the African-American community will retard and defeat development of the community's capacity to renew and sustain itself and to transact strategically with other communities and institutions.
- **Dynamic Coalitions.** As the current trade status of the United States indicates, no successful nation can thrive without diplomacy, trade, and alliance. Urban black America requires strategic coalitions to promote self-development. Those coalitions must proceed on the basis of mutual self-interest and maintenance of a community vision—even in the most intense bargaining with communities and institutions outside the African-American community. Coalitions proceed based on recognition of their vital interdependency.¹³
- **Developmental Entrepreneurship.** Much rhetoric about black business pervades public policy dialogue in the African-American community. However, urban African-American entrepreneurship is ultimately useless without making more than money. Constructive employment, quality services, physical infrastructure development, environmental consciousness, youth development, historic preservation, and institutional development must also animate business as communities become empowered through the efforts of urban entrepreneurs.¹⁴
- **Constructive, Creative, and Consistent Use of Public Policy.** The National Urban League's "Marshall Plan" calls for an annual investment of \$50 billion to revitalize and develop urban communities. That is an investment not just in black America, but, ultimately, in America itself. Public policy now invests nearly \$77 billion annually in public assistance, public housing, law enforcement, and correctional facilities. This investment is anti-self-development in black

America. The Urban League's Marshall Plan pursues a public policy agenda aimed at human and physical infrastructure development that is self-sustaining and results in an urban multiplier effect. Most importantly, the engines of self-renewal, spiritual dynamism, and growth are switched on in the architecture of the plan. No development can proceed without these engines.

Notes

¹William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12–43.

²David Rusk, *Cities Without Suburbs* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1993).

³William O'Hare, *Black Wealth in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: The Joint Center for Political Studies, 1988).

⁴Douglass S. Massey and Shawn M. Kanaiaupuni, "Public Housing and the Concentration of Poverty," *Social Science Quarterly* 74, No. 1 (March 1993): 110.

⁵See, for example, Dennis E. Gale, Washington, D.C.: Inner-City Revitalization and Minority Suburbanization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

⁶Robert Bullard, "Race and Environmental Justice in the United States," *The Yale Journal of International Law* 18, No. 1 (Winter 1993): 319.

⁷Robert Bullard, "Waste and Racism: A Stacked Deck?," *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy* (1993): 29; see also Robert Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990).

⁸Cathy J. Cohen and Michael C. Dawson, "Neighborhood Poverty and African-American Politics," *American Political Science Review* 87, No. 2 (June 1993): 286.

⁹Neal Pierce, *Citistates* (Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, 1993).

¹⁰Demetrios Caraley, "Washington Abandons the Cities," *Political Science Quarterly* 107, No. 1 (Spring 1992): 1–30.

¹¹Application of the City of Oakland, CA, to the National Civic League All-American City Competition (April 1993), 3.

¹²Lenneal J. Henderson, "Baltimore: Managing the Civics of a Turnaround Community," *National Civic Review* 82, No. 4 (Fall 1993): 4–12.

¹³Lenneal J. Henderson, "Looking at the Birds: Economics and the African-American Challenge," *The Good News Herald* 8, No. 5 (March 1993).

¹⁴On the concept of empowerment, see Lenneal J. Henderson, "Empowerment Through Enterprise: African-American Business Development," in *The State of Black America 1993*, edited by Billy J. Tidwell (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League, Inc., 1993), 91–108.

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